

Research protocol: A cluster-randomised study evaluating the effectiveness of a skill-training programme for social work professionals for improving the follow-up of low-income families within Norwegian welfare services.

Brief name

The Comprehensive Follow-up of Low-Income Families

Authors

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Abstract

This paper presents a protocol for a cluster-randomised study that evaluates the effectiveness of a skill-training programme for social work professionals with the aim of improving the follow-up of low-income families within Norwegian labour and welfare services. The protocol describes the programme as well as the research design of the trial. While the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration are responsible for developing and implementing the programme, researchers at Oslo and Akershus University College are conducting an independent evaluation of its effectiveness. The cluster-randomised field experiment will take place over a 40-month period, involving 29 labour and welfare offices, 58 family coordinators and, based on estimations, 650 families. The research is funded by the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, who has reviewed the protocol.

1 Introduction

Family-focused interventions have gained increasing attention within contemporary welfare services, as changing family patterns and weaker family ties have been identified as a part of new social risks (Bonoli, 2013; Churchill & Sen, 2016). The development also derives from recent trends within welfare policies, especially the social investment perspective, where the importance of preventative interventions is emphasised in order to improve the situation for children and young people (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Morel, Palme, & Palier, 2012). While family-focused interventions have been a common part of welfare policies in the UK and the US (White, Warrener, Reeves, & La Valle, 2008), they have been less common in the Nordic countries, where universal welfare services and income transfers have been the main political tools aimed at reducing poverty (Fløtten & Grødem, 2014).

Despite universal welfare services and rather generous income transfers, the amount of child poverty has increased in Norway over the past decade. In 2014, 9.4% of all children lived in a household with a persistent risk of low income. Lack of employment among parents, which is particularly prevalent among immigrants, is the main reason for child poverty; half of the children at risk of persistent low income have an immigrant background (Epland & Kirkeberg, 2016). Accordingly, the Norwegian Social Services Act and the Act of Norwegian Welfare Services state that vulnerable children, youth and their families ought to receive comprehensive and coordinated welfare services. Despite the centrality of the family perspective, there are no nationwide programmes specifying *how* the services for low-income families should be followed up and coordinated. In order to respond to this lack of attention, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration has developed a skill-training programme (HOLF¹) for social work professionals with the aim of improving the comprehensive follow-

¹ Norwegian acronym for Comprehensive follow-up of low-income families

up of low-income families. In 2016, the programme was developed and piloted in three labour and welfare offices (NAV offices). In addition to tools and methods for case-based counselling, seminars and supervision structures, the project also introduces family coordinators as a new position in labour and welfare services. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration has commissioned an independent evaluation conducted by researchers at Oslo and Akershus University College. A total of 29 NAV offices are taking part in this nationwide trial with a cluster-randomised design. The evaluation began on 1.1 2016 with a pilot phase and will run for 3.5 years. Of the 29 participating NAV offices, 15 have been randomised to the experimental group and 14 to the control group. While the experimental group offices implement the HOLF programme, offices that have been randomised to the control group work will follow up with families as they did previously.

2 The HOLF programme

2.1 The development of the programme

In 2014, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration commissioned a literature review summarising existing knowledge related to family projects in the Nordic countries and in the UK (Fløtten & Grødem, 2014). The review demonstrated that, although some family projects existed, most were locally developed and implemented and few of them had been evaluated. Although no single model of family intervention was identified as effective, there were some elements across models that were considered to be important. These include a comprehensive follow-up by a dedicated family coordinator, empowering follow-up processes, the level of qualifications and suitability of employees, and the coordination of inter-professional services. The project group at the Labour and Welfare Administration also studied previous national grants for projects with the aim of reducing child poverty, visited eight of these projects and discussed project plans with corresponding agencies within the

policy field. Thus, the literature review and the additional preparations demonstrated a need to develop a national programme for low-income families that would be suitable for the context of Norwegian labour and welfare services.

The project group at the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration began to develop the HOLF programme in 2015. In 2016, elements of the programme were piloted in three NAV offices. As a part of the piloting phase, two family coordinators were employed in each of the three pilot offices, and the experiences from the pilot were evaluated by researchers (Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2016).

2.2 The goals and objectives of the programme

The long-term goal of the HOLF programme is to prevent intergenerational transmission of poverty, while short-term objectives are to develop and implement a programme that can improve the follow-up of low-income families, enhance goal-focused follow-up skills for professionals and improve the coordination of existing services. In their work with the families, family coordinators should especially aim at improving parental employment, the housing situation, and the financial situation, and enhancing the social inclusion of the children.

2.3 Training and supervision of family coordinators and leaders within experimental group offices

The programme is described in two manuals. The *HOLF process manual* describes the work of the family coordinators as well as the model, tools and details in the work processes. The *HOLF implementation manual* describes the implementation of the model at local offices. The implementation manual also addresses responsibilities of office leaders and their tasks within the implementation of the programme (Arbeids- og velferdsdirektoratet, 2016a, 2016b).

During the project period, there will be six seminars for family coordinators and office leaders within the 15 offices randomised to the experimental group. Each seminar treats a specific perspective of the HOLF programme, such as the child perspective and the various forms coordinators use for follow-up, with home-based tasks in between seminars. The supervision of family coordinators follows a train-the-trainer principle, where the project group within the Labour and Welfare Administration supervises and trains six family coordinators from the pilot offices, who in turn supervise and train the 30 family coordinators from the 15 experimental group offices. Each office and family coordinator from experimental group offices will have two dedicated trainers from the pilot offices who will frequently follow up and supervise the implementation process. Supervision is partially conducted in face-to-face meetings and partially over the internet. Office leaders are seen as key persons when it comes to the implementation, thus they have defined tasks for establishing inter-professional collaboration, and also for supporting the work of family coordinators within the NAV offices. Office leaders are directly followed by the project group from the Labour and Welfare Administration to ensure that the plans for the implementation are followed.

Table 1 shows the work processes of the programme. The HOLF programme has two interacting intervention levels, of which the first is the follow-up work coordinators do directly with the families, while the second level is inter-professional collaboration aiming at improving the coordination of welfare services. A third work process of the HOLF programme is the administrative part of the work, aimed at ensuring proper documentation of the follow-up work. The procedures followed with families and collaborators are defined and supported by various schemes for charting, planning and following up on each family's activities.

Insert Table 1 here

As the focus of the programme is to improve parental employment, the housing situation, and the financial situation, and to enhance the social inclusion of the children, all follow-up activities with the families should support at least one of these four goals. The follow-up of the *whole family* is emphasised in the programme, although children's situation is mainly followed up through the parents rather than involving the children directly.

Related to the coordination of various services, the family coordinator should *not* take over tasks that are the responsibility of other welfare institutions (for instance, child welfare or social assistance) but should coordinate these services and assist the family and collaborators, for instance, with application procedures related to services the family need and are entitled to but have not applied for. In order to succeed with the coordination of services, an *action network* is established. The action network should involve family coordinators and relevant collaborators as well as leaders. The action network will solve problems that the family coordinators have not been able to solve.

There is no time limit for families' participation in the programme beyond the limit of the 3 year project period, however, the need for participation in the programme is continuously evaluated. If a family is considered not to be in need of the programme or they do not want to participate, their eventual service needs should be taken care of within ordinary welfare services.

2.4 Principles, forms and tools in the HOLF programme

The HOLF model includes five *principles* that family coordinators should follow in their work with families, as well as with collaborators and leaders. The principles are: 1) acknowledge the situation and needs of the family, 2) clarify roles and expectations, 3) give adequate and relevant information, 4) identify the family's resources and opportunities, and 5)

define support needed to achieve the goals. Additionally, three types of forms should be used for the follow-up work with families. The form for *charting the situation* is used for investigating the four follow-up areas of employment, housing, the financial situation and the social inclusion of children. This is done at initial meetings with the family. The '*family plan*' is used for planning the activities within the four follow-up areas. The coordinator and family members write down their goals and the activities needed to reach each of the goals. The '*PCE form*' is used in preparing for, conducting, and evaluating a meeting. The form ought to be used for meetings with families, collaborators and leaders.

There are also certain *tools* within the model that family coordinators should use. *Appreciative communication* should be used in all communication with families and collaborators. '*IIMR*' (Inform, involve, mobilise and make responsible) is a tool for informing and involving the family and collaborators and making them responsible for reaching their goals. '*Menu Agenda*' is a tool that family coordinators use in meetings with the family. The aim is to ensure that each family's wishes and needs are acknowledged. The family and family coordinator fill in important themes to work with, discuss them and agree on which themes should be prioritised at a specific meeting. '*IAI*' is a tool for investigating, adding information and re-investigating; the family coordinator makes inquiries into the information needs of the family, then gives the information to the family, whereafter the family coordinator investigates whether the family has understood the given information. '*SMART goals*' is another tool. It emphasises that goals set with the family should be specific, measurable, attractive (to the family members), realistic, time-limited and possible to evaluate.

2 Research plan: The cluster-randomised evaluation of the HOLF programme

2.1 Research questions, hypothesis and outcomes

The research questions are whether and to what extent the situation of participating families is improved within the follow-up areas of the HOLF programme: employment, housing, financial situation and the social inclusion of children. The hypothesis is that due to the skill training and supervision family coordinators receive through the HOLF programme and the systematic follow-up model, families within experimental group offices will do better than their counterparts within control group offices regarding the four follow-up areas. These outcomes are the primary outcomes of the study. However, due to the skill training and supervision family coordinators within the experimental group offices receive, we also expect them to report higher levels of professional competence compared to their counterparts within control group offices. Consequently, we measure professional competence and relational alliance for family coordinators as secondary outcomes of the study.

2.2 Sample size calculations

Before the evaluation project started we estimated the number of participating families based on power calculations, in which the clustered structure of the data was taken into account² (Murray, Varnell, & Blitstein, 2004). Based on the ICC levels from a previous C-RCT study conducted within Norwegian labour and welfare offices (Malmberg-Heimonen & Tøge, 2016), we estimated the ICC level to be 0.04. The power calculations in Table 2 demonstrate the effect size in a design with 15 offices in each arm (a total of 30 offices), when the power ($Z_{1-\beta}$) is 80%, level of significance is 95% and the proportion of families with a positive outcome within control group offices is 10%. The calculations are based on a dichotomous outcome (employment), which is one of the main follow-up areas. The power calculations include an estimated attrition rate of 30% between T1 (baseline) and T2 (follow up + 12 months).

² Cluster sample size calculator developed by University of Aberdeen.
Retrieved from <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/hsru/research/research-tools/study-design/>

Insert Table 2 here

The analyses show that each office needs to recruit between 21 and 22 families in order to detect an effect size of 20.4%, while 28 to 29 families will be needed in order to detect an effect size of 19.5%. We estimate that at least 21 families need to be recruited families when we estimate a drop-out rate of 30% at the T2 questionnaire. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that the power calculations are only estimations and depend on the assumptions made in the calculations (Hedges & Hedberg, 2007).

2.3 Research design

As Figure 1 shows, the 60 largest NAV offices were invited to take part in the project, with a possibility for 30 to participate. Among 45 offices that were willing to participate, 30 were randomly chosen. One office failed to participate, thus 29 offices were included in the project. All participating offices (regardless of later randomisation to experimental or control group) received a contract to be signed and funding from the Labour and Welfare Administration, including 1.5 family coordinators per office. Each office has to fund 0.5 family coordinators internally. A total of 58 family coordinators were employed within the project.

Before the randomisation of offices, T1 questionnaires were collected from 37 office leaders, of whom 100% responded to the questionnaire. In eight of the offices there were two leaders (one for municipal services and one for state-funded services), thus both filled out the questionnaire. In 21 of the offices there was only one leader. The questionnaire to leaders included educational background, leader's work experience and information about the office organisation, services and priorities as well as inter-professional collaboration with other service providers. Further, the leader questionnaire included questions about target groups of various services and previous experiences with projects involving low-income families. The

data from office leaders were collected between 4.10. 2016 and 13.10.2016, prior to the randomisation of offices.

All 58 (100%) family coordinators responded to the baseline questionnaire. The questionnaire included information about their education and work experience as well as prior experiences with the follow-up of families and children. Also, their competence and skills, relations to clients and experiences of inter-professional collaboration were important themes. The data for 56 family coordinators were collected between 6.10 and 13.10 2016. However, due to sick leave, two family coordinators filled out the T1 questionnaire between 15.10 2016 and 24.10 2016 (after randomisation of the offices). For the families, the baseline data (prior to randomisation) will consist of administrative data, measuring mainly labour market attachment, participation in activation programmes, welfare benefits and the level of self-sufficiency.

After T1 (14.10.2016), offices were randomised into experimental and control group offices; 15 offices were randomised to the experimental group and 14 to the control group. The randomisation was conducted by an administrative person neutral to the study and observed by researchers as well as representatives from the Labour and Welfare Administration.

2.4 Target groups and administrative data for families

Each of the 29 offices identified a target group of families prior to randomisation based on the following characteristics:

- reliance on social assistance as a main source of income at least for six of the latest 12 months, or
- received social assistance in addition to other types of welfare support at least for six of the latest 12 months, and
- have up to four children under the age of 16.

Based on these criteria offices identified a total of 3201 families.

Families were excluded from participation in the project if:

- they were participating in other comprehensive family projects,
- one or both parents/caregivers were under treatment because of heavy substance abuse and/or serious mental disorders,
- the child or the children were temporarily placed in child welfare institutions or living with relatives or other caregivers,
- the family was under investigation by child welfare authorities, due to suspected child neglect or because a placement to new caregivers was in process.

Based on these criteria, 320 families were excluded. Of these, 162 families were participating in another family project with comprehensive follow-up. In 41 families, caregivers were receiving ongoing treatment for substance abuse or/and mental disorder, 57 families had children within child welfare services or an ongoing case, and 60 families were excluded based on another reason, such as secret address, temporary residence permit, or they had emigrated or had moved away from the municipality.

All 2881 remaining families in the target group received information about the project and were given the opportunity to refuse participation in the follow-up based on administrative data. A total of 141 families refused, whereafter a final family list including 2740 families was created. This family list is used for recruitment into family projects; family coordinators in experimental and control group offices randomly pick participants from the list and invite them to participate in these projects. Each family chosen will be invited to attend an information meeting, and if they wish to participate, they give their written consent and fill out the baseline questionnaire.

Many of the recruited families so far have an immigrant background and weak Norwegian-language skills, which makes the use of professional translators necessary. In families with two parents/caregivers, both parties must fill out the questionnaires (baseline and follow-up), while in cases of separation or divorce, only the parent/caregiver who has the daily care of children needs to fill out the questionnaires.³ The questionnaires investigate the family's situation and contain questions about previous experiences with follow-up programmes, employment, the housing situation, the financial situation, and the social inclusion of the children. They also include information about parental health status and previous experiences with welfare services.

Insert Figure 1 here

2.5 Evaluation of implementation

Implementation processes will be studied using quantitative and qualitative data. Researchers will observe implementation and conduct interviews with leaders, family coordinators and families. Also, it is important to assess the quality of implementation, including measurements of the amount of follow-up each family has received and whether and to what degree the HOLF model has been followed. The main interest is in studying whether and to what extent the programme was implemented as planned, but also to measure the activities within control group offices. Four offices from the experimental group and four offices from the control group have been strategically chosen to be cases for qualitative data collection.

2.6 Analyses

³ If parents have a shared right to have daily care, both parents are invited to participate in the project.

Our analyses will be based on an intention-to-treat principle, reporting lower-bound conservative estimates of effects. This means that all offices randomised to the experimental and control condition will be included in analyses, regardless of the degree of implementation. Also, all family coordinators and families will be followed up and included in analyses, including any that eventually drop out of the project.

We will analyse differences in the situation for the families regarding primary outcomes: parental employment, housing, financial situation and the social inclusion of children, as well as the secondary outcomes involving family coordinators and their experience of professional competence and relational alliance. However, given the cluster-randomised research design, it is important that the nested structure of the data be acknowledged in the analyses (Malmberg-Heimonen & Tøge, 2017). The simplest alternative to control for the nested structure is to apply cluster-adjusted standard errors of regular OLS estimates. If there is enough statistical power, we can apply either a two-level model of welfare recipients within offices or a three-level model of welfare recipients within social workers within offices. Also, longitudinal models, that is, fixed effects or random models, can be applied where observations are nested within individuals. The choice of statistical method in this specific study will depend on the final number of families participating, and how equal the two groups are at baseline.

2.7 Tasks, responsibilities and timeline

All participating researchers are from Oslo and Akershus University College. Malmberg-Heimonen is the project leader and has the main responsibility for the research and works mostly with quantitative data. Tøge and Gyüre also work with quantitative data, that is, questionnaires and administrative data. Fossetøl, Rugkåsa, Bergheim and Liodden work with qualitative data: Rugkåsa and Bergheim mainly with data at the family and professional level, while Fossetøl and Liodden work with data at the system level (leaders and collaborators).

Insert Table 3 here

The project has a reference group of international scholars with expertise on randomised controlled trials within the social and educational fields. Participants in the reference group are Professor Bruce Thyer, Florida State University (US); Senior researcher Gayle Hamilton, MDRC (US); Professor Emeritus Richard Price, University of Michigan (US); and Professor Jukka Vuori, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (Finland).

Table 4 presents the timeline for the main tasks in the project, as well as the responsible researchers for each task.

Insert Table 4 here

2.8 Ethics

Project leaders from the Labour and Welfare Administration have reviewed the protocol. The protocol for the study has been registered at Clinical Trials.gov. Ethical permissions has been granted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (case no. 47483). Permits for including administrative data in the study have been granted by the Norwegian Data Protection Authority (case no. 48510) and the Norwegian Labour and Welfare

Administration (case no. 16/2598). It is important to stress that all participating families can withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. Researchers are under professional secrecy related to all data and analyses, data will be anonymised, and no families can be recognised in any publications or disseminations.

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Table 1

Work processes within the HOLF programme

Work process 1: Meetings with families	Work process 2: Coordination of services	Work process 3: Administrative part of the work
Information, consent and contract.	Clarify roles and expectations with internal and external collaborators.	Document family needs, goals and working capacity.
Chart the situation of the family; employment, housing, financial situation and children's situation.	Establish an action network.	Document and follow up the family plan.
Plan activities by using the family plan.	Meetings with collaborators to coordinate services based on each family's goals, needs and activities.	Administrative procedures (applications, decisions) to improve services families are entitled to.
Clarify and involve internal and external collaborators for the coordination of services.	Follow up and coordinate the inter-professional effort.	Document-based evaluation of follow-up activities and processes.
Implement the activities from the family plan.	Evaluate and adjust the inter-professional effort.	
Evaluate and adjust the family plan. If successful, end the follow-up.		

Table 2

Power calculations for dichotomous outcomes, 80% power, ICC=0.04 one-tailed test (p=0.05). Sample size after and before estimated T2 attrition.

N Offices	Families/ cluster	Sample size, after T2 attrition		Sample size, before T2 attrition		Effect size
		Total N families	Attrition T1-T2	N families/ cluster	Total N families	
30	15	450	30%	21.4	643	0.204
30	20	600	30%	28.6	857	0.195

Table 3

Names and responsibilities of researchers

Name of researcher	Main tasks and responsibilities
Ira Malmberg-Heimonen	Project leader; administrative tasks, contact with Labour and Welfare Administration, quantitative data collection and analyses.
Anne Grete Tøge	Researcher, quantitative data, especially administrative data and analyses of questionnaires and administrative data.
Knut Fossetøl	Researcher, responsibility for qualitative data collection, especially organisational perspectives, inter-professional collaboration and leaders.
Marianne Rugkåsa	Researcher, qualitative data, especially families and coordinators. Perspectives of ethnic minorities.
Krisztina Gyüre	Researcher, quantitative data. The administration of questionnaires to families and coordinators, day-to-day contact with family coordinators and offices.
Berit Bergheim	Researcher, qualitative data, especially families and family coordinators.
Tone Liodden	Researcher, qualitative data collection, especially inter-professional collaboration, leaders and organisational perspectives.

Table 4

Tasks and responsibilities within the project

Date	Task	Status	Main responsibility
1.1-31.3.2016	Programme theory development	Done	Fossestøl, Malmberg-Heimonen, Tøge
1.1-31.5.2016	Evaluation of piloting phase <i>Family level</i> <i>System level</i>	Done	Rugkåsa Fossestøl
1.6-15.9.2016	Preparation of questionnaires	Done	Malmberg-Heimonen, Tøge, Gyüre
1.6-15.9.2016	Preparation of interview guides	Done	Rugkåsa, Fossestøl, Bergheim, Liodden
1.10-24.10.2016	Carrying out T1 leaders and family coordinators	Done	Malmberg-Heimonen, Tøge, Gyüre
1.11.2016- 1.11.2017	Recruiting families. Carrying out T1 for families		Malmberg-Heimonen, Tøge, Gyüre
1.8.2016-31.12.2018	Implementation processes: interviews and observation <i>Family level</i> <i>System level</i>		Rugkåsa, Bergheim Fossestøl, Liodden
1.8.2016-31.12.2018	Fidelity measurements		Malmberg-Heimonen, Tøge
1.11.2016	T1 Administrative data		Tøge, Malmberg-Heimonen
1.11.2017-1.11.2018	Carrying out T2 questionnaire for families (+ 12 months)		Malmberg-Heimonen, Tøge, Gyüre
1.4-24.4.2018	Carrying out T2 follow-up for leaders and coordinators (+ 18 months)		Malmberg-Heimonen, Tøge, Gyüre
1.11.2019-1.11.2021	T3-T5 Administrative data families + 24, + 30, +36 months		Malmberg-Heimonen, Tøge, Gyüre

Figure 1

Flow chart for the low-income family project.

