



Nuffield Family Justice Observatory: commitment to evidence standards

Introduction

The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) is firmly committed to promoting high quality data and research. Not only is it important that the family justice system is informed by robust and independent evidence to achieve better outcomes for children and families, but poor quality evidence could lead to ineffective (and even harmful) decision-making and it makes it harder to persuade professionals to use to data and research evidence to inform their decision-making.

There is a wide variety of data and research evidence relevant to the family justice system, ranging from small-scale surveys and focus groups to large-scale randomised controlled trials. We recognise the value of a having a wide range of types of data and research evidence from which to draw learning, including insights from children, families and practitioners, as well as input from a spread of academic disciplines.

What matters is that data and research evidence is of a high quality. Many people are unfamiliar with research methods, so Nuffield FJO has a role to play in helping individuals to distinguish between high quality and low quality research. We do that by being clear about what can be derived from research and what cannot. We also ensure that the research we fund and publish is of high quality and we make clear when we believe other research does not meet these standards.

Nuffield FJO has been established to ensure that those working in the family justice system have access to high quality data and research evidence and we produce a wide range of outputs in order to make data and research accessible to its audiences. All our outputs seek to disseminate evidence—although not every output is an in-depth research report. Nevertheless, we strive to ensure that all information that we share derives from, and can be substantiated by, high quality data and research evidence. High quality data and research needs to be communicated accurately and effectively, so we are as concerned about the way that data and research is used, as we are about the quality of data and research itself.

How we ensure that we are promoting high quality research

Commissioning process

We only fund or commission research when we are confident that it will be carried out to an agreed standard. We do this by asking researchers to set out their methodological approach and exploring the strengths and limits of this at interview. We include one or more academic advisors on the interview panel to provide critical challenge.

Standards expected of research¹

We require all research we fund to be **transparent** about its methods, including the decisions and processes used. This means setting out what was done, (and why), throughout the whole process, including constructing research questions, research design and methods, and decisions relating to analysis and reporting.

All research studies funded by Nuffield FJO are expected to be **conducted with rigour**, which relates to the thoroughness and carefulness with which it is undertaken and the attention that is paid to nuance and complexity. In quantitative research, rigour is normally understood in relation to reliability and validity, whether the findings would be reproduced if the study was repeated in exactly the same way, avoiding subjectivity and bias. In qualitative research rigour involves recognising that the information generated within a research study is situated in context—in time and place, and in the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

All studies should pay attention to ethics, ensuring a self-critical, imaginative and responsible **ethical reflection** about issues that may arise during the course of the research,² as well as appropriate adherence to legal and governance processes in order to protect the dignity, rights, and welfare of research participants and researched populations.

All research funded by Nuffield FJO should show evidence of **critical reflection**, recognising and reflecting on things that might influence the construction of knowledge.

All researchers undertaking research funded by Nuffield FJO are provided with a set of questions and prompts to help them consider whether they are meeting these standards.

Adopting established evidence standards

To encourage high quality research, we share information about evidence standards with researchers and encourage them to adopt these standards.

When undertaking administrative data analysis, for example using the data held by the SAIL Databank, we ask researchers to commit to the [RECORD](#) statement, which builds on the [STROBE](#) standards, and underpins observational studies globally. In addition, access to the SAIL Databank requires research approval and disclosure control. The Family Justice Data Partnership—a collaboration between Lancaster University and Swansea University, funded by the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory—also produces technical guides to the family justice data held by the SAIL Databank, in order to bolster the scientific credibility of outputs using this data.

¹ We are grateful to Dr Ellie Ott (University of Oxford) and Professor Janet Boddy (University of Sussex) for their assistance in the formulation of these standards.

² Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Framework for Research Ethics.

There is a wide range of other evidence standards relating to systematic reviews, rapid evidence reviews, and qualitative and quantitative empirical research. Information about the range of evidence standards is available here: [Quality standards for qualitative research for the Family Justice Observatory](#); [Selection of evidence assessment standards \(PDF\)](#); [Selection of qualitative evidence assessment standards \(PDF\)](#); [Selection of reporting guideline checklist \(PDF\)](#).

Peer review

All substantive research reports will be independently peer reviewed. We select peer reviewers to ensure a mix of relevant academic, policy, and practice expertise. In addition, feedback is sought from individuals with first-hand experience of the family justice system (or organisations representing them).

The peer review process means that a draft report is shared with peer reviewers so that comments can be taken on board before a final draft is completed. Nuffield FJO has a peer review form that sets out the expectations of peer reviewers. Sufficient time is allocated for peer review and a record is kept of all peer review material. Peer reviewers are invited to comment on the peer review process, so that any necessary improvements can be made.

Continued improvement

We welcome feedback on our approach to promoting high quality data and research and commit to reviewing this approach on an annual basis.

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