The story of MARC E SMITH
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A good example of how broken the current system of investing in social services is well illustrated by the story of Marc E Smith (not his real name).

Many individual agencies have been involved in Marc's life and, the way things currently work, are all accountable for managing their own budgets, their Key Performance Indicators and delivering outputs within their respective silos. And I am sure they all do quite well with meeting those KPI's and budgets and "managing demand".

But what happens if we could share data from these silos and begin to look at Marc's story from Marc's perspective. What could we learn about Marc if we could link all the data in those agency silos?

Marc illustrates what things can look like when you look across services and across time (in this case, from 1991 to 2010) – longitudinally. This is an example of using shared data from Education, Child Protection, Youth Justice, Youth Transition Services, Work and Income, and Corrections to better understand outcomes.

CYF's data shows that Marc was first notified by the public for suspected abuse at age 3. An investigation didn't substantiate abuse but did find behavioral difficulties (purple X).
At age four another notification and investigation revealed physical abuse (red X). And that abuse carries on for over a decade. More behaviour problems that required state intervention at six and physical and sexual abuse (yellow X) recorded at 8. More physical abuse at 11 … and then at aged 12 he was taken away from the care of his parents for the first time and put into care.

Marc then bounced in and out of foster care when he was 14, 15 and 16.

Note: Example is de-identified and chosen to reflect "average" high needs profile.
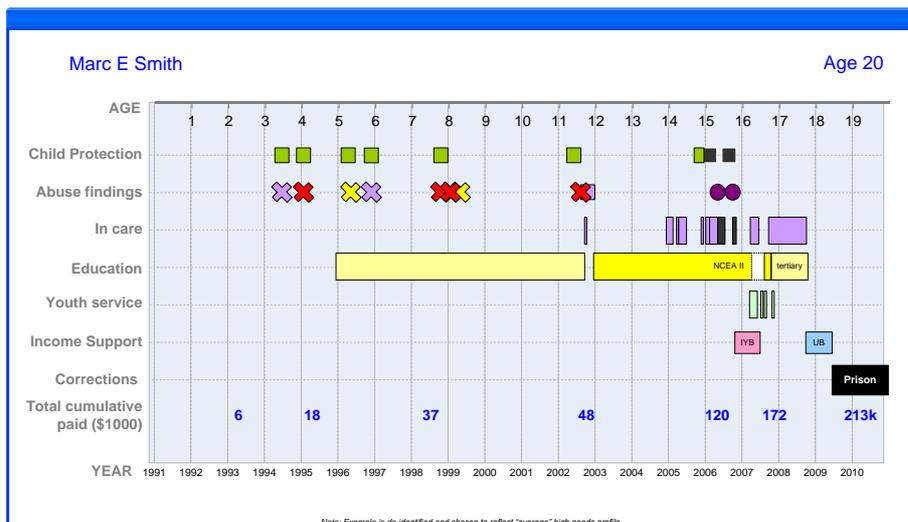
Adding Youth Justice data shows those behavioural difficulties as a three year-old turning up as a teenager in youth offending and referrals by the police, including time spent in a youth justice facility.

But it wasn't all negative. When we added Education data we see that Marc is an able student. He obtained some Level two NCEA papers and also had some tertiary training. That's pretty impressive given his background. He was however absent from school for a period when he was 16.

Linking the Youth Transition Services data shows that Marc finally got intensive support at age 16 and perhaps it was this that helped him complete some of that tertiary training.

Add in the Work and Income Support data and we learn that Marc was on the unemployment benefit for a short period, which on the face of it seems like a pretty good outcome.

We used to think that was a good result until we linked the corrections data and found Marc again, in prison.

The state sector has spent well over $200,000 on Marc by age 19, yet his outcome is poor. The outcomes for the community, for Marc's victims and for the taxpayer are also poor. Importantly, these outcomes are typically invisible and nobody is accountable for them. Because data are typically fragmented within service silos, nobody can track outcomes like this. Investment is in services and processes and accountability is for delivery of services. Everyone presumably met their KPIs in this case, but it didn't do much good for Marc or New Zealand. And presumably demand and spending was "well managed" within those silo's, only to be risk shifted into much bigger challenges for New Zealand in the future.

Nobody is accountable for the investment in Marc's needs and Marc's longer term pathway and outcome. Until we find a better way of investing in social outcomes, and one that makes the state accountable for longer term outcomes and pathways, and in ways that do not let agencies risk shift into the future, stories of Marc's will continue.

This is called social data sharing and we meet a lot of resistance about doing this across different Government agencies. About privacy of information. But by sharing the story of Marc E Smith I believe I can show why we should be motivated to think about careful collaboration – and why it could be good for New Zealand.

We need to solve the problem of how to invest better in social outcomes, at the start of the cliff and not the end. And we need to find safe, non-intrusive ways to let the data speak, to let stories like Marc's drive policy. We owe it to Marc and to the 5,000 other long term life time recidivist offenders who had a similar early CYF history. Children who were abused and went on to a similarly poor outcome, had multiple victims of their crimes and cost fiscal cost of over $2 billion. Most of it spent at the end of that journey where turning things around is tough and costly compared with helping a 3 year old with behavioural difficulties.