

What Works: Research Impact and Homelessness

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Homelessness and Children's Social Care in England

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Abstract

Young people with a social worker have often experienced very difficult circumstances in their childhood, in many cases leading to a temporary or permanent removal from the care of their parents. In these cases, the State assumes parental responsibility. Unlike biological parenthood, the support afforded by the State is substantially reduced when a child turns 18, and still further when they turn 25. Although the law prevents a child from being made homeless, a young adult until recently in the care of the State does not enjoy such protection. In this paper, we review the incidence of homelessness among young people leaving care, the pathway that leads them there, and the evidence base on how this might be prevented. We conclude that, despite a substantial investment by government, we still know far too little about 'What Works' in this area.

Introduction

Young people with experience of children's social care, including those who are removed from their parents into the care of the State, as well as those who receive some state intervention into family life short of removal, may experience a variety of challenges in childhood.

The available data suggests that young people in care experience lower grades in their GCSEs (high stakes exams taken at age 16) and their subsequent education (Department for Education, 2020). They are more likely to be the victim of exploitation, either criminal or sexual, and more likely to be a perpetrator of crime (Department for Education, 2020). They are also more likely to experience mental illness in childhood (Department of Health, 2012; Meltzer et al., 2003). Many, but not all, will have experienced substantial trauma.

Much less is known about outcomes for young people who are known to children's services, but who are not removed from their parents. But if anything, the picture is less encouraging on some measures. Research has shown that while educational attainment is low for young people in care, it is lower for the wider cohort of young people with a social worker (Berridge et al., 2020; Department for Education, 2019). The National Child Safeguarding Panel's review of Serious Case Reviews (detailed documents that investigate the circumstances surrounding the death or serious injury of a young person with whom children's social workers are or have been involved), found that death of young people involved in exploitation, and sudden unexpected death in infancy are, at least in absolute terms, more common among those not in care than those in care.

The difficult lives of young people with a social worker, coupled with an anecdotal rise in societal risk aversion, and the scaling back of state intervention since 2010 in other areas of children's and families' lives, has seen a steady rise in the number of young people in care, from 64,400 in 2010 to 80,080 in 2020. We know much less about what happens to these young people when they enter adulthood.

In the year to 31 March 2020, for 17-year-old care leavers, 46% were living with parents, 6% were in semi-independent transitional accommodation, and 9% were in custody; accommodation was deemed suitable for 65% (however, for 24% the information was not known). For 18-year-old care leavers, 30% were in semi-independent transitional accommodation, 19% were with former foster carers, 11% were in independent living, and 11% were living with parents or relatives. For this cohort, 91% were in suitable accommodation. Information was not known for 5% of young people. For 19-to 21-year-old care leavers 35% were living independently, 15% were living in semi-independent transitional accommodation, 11% were living with parents or relatives, and 8% were living with former foster carers. Information was not known for 9% of young people. Where known, 85% of these young people were deemed to be in suitable accommodation. (Department for Education, 2020)

A survey of care leavers conducted by Centrepoin, a charity offering housing and support for young people, found that 26% of young people leaving have 'sofasurfed', while 14% had slept on the street (Gill and Daw, 2017). A review by Shelter (2005) found two studies which suggested that between a quarter and a third of people experiencing street homelessness had at some point been in local authority care as children. Although these surveys were historic (1999 and 2001), little more recent data are available. It should be noted that much has changed since these surveys were conducted, but short of a more than 90% fall in these figures, care leavers would be substantially over-represented in street based sleeping figures.

The decision to take a child into care is never taken lightly, and the benefits and harms of doing so must be weighed up carefully. The provision of section 31 of the Children Act says that a court may only make a care order or a supervision order if "the child concerns is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, and that harm, or likelihood of harm, is attributable to the care given to the child or likely to be given to him if the order were not made, not being what it would be reasonable to expect a parent to give him" (Children Act, S.31).

Although not explicitly ruling out harms occurring into the longer future, the language of the Children Act is focused around harm to a child, and the 'reasonable' expectation of parenting. Given that it is illegal, under section 20 of the same act, for a child to be made homeless, this focus on childhood means that the decision to remove a child from the care of their parents implicitly limits the amount of consideration given to whether the child is to become homeless later on – after leaving care, and after the support of the local authority as corporate parent is reduced or removed.

The prevalence of young people leaving care experiencing street based homelessness or in inappropriate or unknown accommodation (the same phenomenon, viewed through different ends of the telescope), suggests three things. First, that the weighing of the decisions to remove a child or not from the care of its parents, if it fails to properly account for this risk of homelessness, will tend to lead to more children being taken into care. Second, it suggests the need for greater, more effective action by children's services in particular and by the system in general in keeping these young people in good housing and off of the streets. Finally, social

workers and the courts cannot make the fine-grained calculation about a child's likely outcomes in the absence of better data on homelessness for young people leaving care and their peers who have a social worker but are not in care.

Leaving care in England

The Leaving Care Act in 2000 strengthened and expanded Local Authorities' (LA) responsibilities to young people leaving care, bringing in Pathway Plans and a duty to support and care for young people until the age of 21. A Pathway Plan is a plan drawn up between a young person in care and their LA which sets out how children's services are going to support the young person to transition to live independently. The Plan should include details about health; education, training, and employment; family and social network; identity; money; accommodation; the wishes and feelings of the young person; and practical skills. Local authorities have a duty to house all care leavers aged 16 and 17. Once aged 18, young people's accommodation needs are assessed under homelessness legislation and most will need to claim Housing Benefit. From 2014, all young people in Foster Placements are able (with agreement from their foster carers) to stay in those placements until the age of 21, as part of 'Staying Put' arrangements. Of 19 and 20-year-olds, 26% ceased being looked after on their 18th birthday and were taking advantage of 'Staying Put' opportunities and still living with their former foster carers in 2019 (Become Charity, 2016).

For those young people who have been on Child Protection Plans or Children in Need, there is no statutory support available for them. The Homelessness Reduction Act introduced in England in 2018 aimed to ensure housing support for vulnerable people, in particular, care leavers and those who have left 'youth detention accommodation', including Secure Children's Homes and Young Offender Institutions (YOIs).

In the recent 2021 Spring Budget, care leavers up to the age of 25 have been made exempt from the Shared Accommodation Rate. This means that they are able to claim the higher one-bedroom rate of Local Housing Allowance instead of receiving the rate for a room in a shared house, giving a greater chance of accessing the private rental sector.

What Do We Know?

Approximately 10% of people experiencing street homelessness in London in 2018 were in care as a child (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2018). However, the data available on homelessness among young people, and homelessness in general, does have some potential limitations. These include difficulties collecting data on groups of people experiencing homelessness as they are often transitory and have little contact with services, thus data may only be available for those who are in contact with services. More than one quarter of the young people Centrepoint work with have been in care. Their research conducted in 2017 found that 26% of young people leaving care had 'sofa surfed' and 14% had slept on the street (Gill and Daw, 2017). In 2019, the Office for National Statistics said that "leaving

institutions including prison, hospitals or care is a less common reason cited for homelessness” when compared to factors such as domestic violence, rent, or changes to relationships (Office for National Statistics, 2019, p.42).

In England, it was estimated that 2% of applicants to local authorities to request statutory relief were reported to have an institutionalised background from October to December 2018 (Office for National Statistics, 2019). There is evidence to suggest that the number of people who are homeless who are care experienced is much higher, for example as mentioned above, in London, observed by outreach workers, the proportion of people experiencing street based homelessness who had experience of the care system was 10% in 2019/20 (582 people) and 11% in 2018/19 (558 people) (CHAIN, 2020). The NAO reports that in 2010, 25% of people experiencing homelessness had been in care at some point in their lives (National Audit Office, 2015).

The differences in the available data illustrates the complexities of recording accurate data on prevalence of care experience among people experiencing homelessness. There are in particular likely to be important differences between the stocks and flows of homelessness across different groups. Care leavers, for example, might be more likely to experience short spells of homelessness than other groups, meaning that they will be more prevalent in ‘snapshot’ census surveys than in data which seeks to measure e.g. homeless incidents over the course of a year.

While there are difficulties in obtaining robust and reliable data on the prevalence of teenage or early pregnancy amongst those young women with care experience, what is available suggests that they are much more likely to become pregnant early or experience an unplanned pregnancy (Fallon and Broadhurst, 2015). In the year 2014, it was estimated that 22% of females leaving care became teenage parents (National Audit Office, 2015). Of relevance when considering these issues, people who are pregnant are entitled to emergency housing if they are homeless while the council carries out longer term housing assessments to ensure steps are taken to find a safe place to live.

In 2017, 32% of 18-34-year-olds were living with their parents, the youngest age at which more than 50% of young adults were not living with their parents was 23 (Centre for Ageing and Demography, 2019). However, for the majority of people leaving care this is not an option, with the “accelerated and compressed transitions” to adulthood that these young people are forced to make (Stein, 2016, p.vi). Indeed, Bramley and Fitzpatrick (2018), among others, suggest a key protective factor against homelessness appears to be availability of social support networks. They offer the pertinent example of an adult child being able to live ‘in the family home’, acting as a buffer against homelessness. The 2014 Homeless Link youth homelessness survey found that 36% of young people were homeless as parents/ caregivers were no longer able or willing to accommodate them, with a further 24% no longer able to stay with other relatives or friends (Watts et al., 2015).

Fitzpatrick et al. (2012), used the concept of multiple exclusion homelessness.

People have experienced MEH if they have been 'homeless' (including experience of temporary/unsuitable accommodation as well as sleeping rough) and have also experienced one or more of the following other 'domains' of deep social exclusion: 'institutional care' (prison, local authority care, mental health hospitals or wards); 'substance misuse' (drug, alcohol, solvent or gas misuse); or participation in 'street culture activities' (begging, street drinking, 'survival' shoplifting or sex work).

As we know, care experienced young people often experience multiple of these 'domains of deep exclusion', as well as the exclusionary nature, as highlighted already by Fitzpatrick, of state care or intervention, making them particularly vulnerable to homelessness and societal exclusion. This is reinforced by their finding that 16% of their sample of MEH service users had left local authority care (Department for Education, 2020).

Care leavers by whether their accommodation is suitable, 2018 to 2020

	Aged 17			Aged 18			Aged 19		
	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020	2018	2019	2020
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Accommodation considered suitable	68%	63%	65%	90%	90%	91%	84%	85%	85%
Accommodation considered unsuitable	11%	13%	10%	5%	5%	5%	7%	6%	6%
No Information	22%	24%	24%	5%	6%	5%	9%	9%	9%

Where young people under the age of 18 are made homeless, the LA has a duty to house them, but not to take them into care. Often this can mean being placed in 'unregulated accommodation'. Unregulated accommodation, tautologically, is unregulated, unlike Children's Homes they do not have to be registered with Ofsted (the independent body responsible for inspecting a range of institutions from schools to children's homes), and there are no National Minimum Standards, ~~for example,~~ to uphold. These provisions are therefore arguably less

suitable to provide 'care', but more suitable for 'support' – that is, for young people who are able to live more independently but need support around their living circumstances, rather than those that are in need of fuller time care such as that provided by a regulated residential setting or a foster placement. There is a mix of voluntary and private providers of unregulated accommodation. However, the majority (73%) is privately run, and the proportion is growing – up from two thirds in 2013. One in every eight children in care during 2018/19 spent some time in an unregulated placement during the year – a total of 12,800 children (Department for Education, 2020). Young people placed in unregulated accommodation tend to be older teens (aged 16-17). Commonly, young people in this provision have experienced a family breakdown and have either been 'thrown out' or have left (Children's Commissioner for England, 2020). Children and Young People living in unregulated provision can be targets for criminals because they are very vulnerable and often do not have anyone looking out for them. The gangs know where these properties are and they target children to criminally exploit them and to 'cuckoo' their properties, i.e. take them over for criminal activities (The Howard League, 2020). The Government has recently banned the use of unregulated provision for young people under the age of 16.

What Works?

So far, we have described the state of things, both in terms of the legal and policy framework for children's social care in England, and what we know about the relationship between homelessness and care leaving. In this section, we will consider what we know about how to prevent, or limit, homelessness among adults with experience of children's social care.

When comparing interventions and support for care leavers in transitioning to adulthood in England, the United States, and Australia, Mendes and Rogers (2020, p.1 525) found that the opportunity to have ongoing stability and continued emotional support from familiar adults offers an optimisation of "their chances for successful transitions including positive engagement with education and/or employment, and lower the prospects of negative outcomes such as homelessness". A number of policies have recently been implemented in England designed to improve outcomes and offer ongoing support and stability to young people leaving care. These are briefly described below.

The latest figures show that for 18-year-olds leaving care, 19% were accommodated with former foster carers, and for those aged 19-21 this figure is 8% (Department for Education, 2020).

The 'Staying Put' programme was introduced nationally in 2014, it requires all LAs in England to facilitate, monitor, and support young people remaining in their foster placements until they reach the age of 21, where this is appropriate and desired by the young person and the family. There are intended positive outcomes of these arrangements, including the continuation of supportive relationships and resulting emotional support, as well as housing stability. The goal therefore is to allow young people to make a more gradual transition to adulthood, more in the manner of their peers not in out of home care, and gives more of a chance to engage in

education, employment, or training. The evaluation of the pilot of the 'Staying Put' programme found indicative evidence that young people who stayed put were more than twice as likely to be in full time education at 19 compared to those that did not (55% and 22% respectively) (Munro et al., 2012). Since the evaluation of the pilot scheme, there has been no further formal evaluation, although other researchers have conducted analyses. Some of the analyses have highlighted concerns about the varied implementation of the 'Staying Put' offer, and the pressure some young people feel under to contribute financially to the household of the foster carers due to the reduction in allowance offered (Mendes and Rogers, 2020).

Eight 'Staying Close' projects were or are still being funded by the Department for Education Innovation Fund, specifically for care leavers leaving residential care. This series of projects is similar to the 'Staying Put' programme for young people in foster care. 'Staying Close' is designed to allow these children to live independently, nearby to the Children's Home they lived in before, and with ongoing support from the Home. The support on offer through the 'Staying Close' projects differed between the eight different sites. For example, in the service delivered by The Break charity in Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, and Peterborough, young people were allocated semi-independent accommodation in 'Staying Close' house-shares and access to off-site support via a project transition worker and housing support worker. The 'Staying Close' pilot in North Tyneside comprised of Elm House, a six bedroom, fully staffed house owned by children's services nearby two Children's Homes, a two bedroom local authority flat (with options to engage several other local authority flats for 'Staying Close'), and a range of 'floating' or 'outreach' services. A common methodology has been used across the evaluations for each of the 'Staying Close' projects.

Evaluation of The Break's project found that 74% of young people who were followed up with experienced accommodation stability, in fact one of the workers on the project noted that for some young people this period of stability was longer than any of their previous placements while in care (Dixon et al., 2020). Furthermore, findings suggested that independent living skills had improved after six months of entering the project. For example, young people were developing better cooking and housekeeping skills, with the support of their workers, and were aware of what skills they needed for living independently. As described by one young person, "Break project has helped me a lot but I know there's lots of things still to learn but it's getting there, it's great" (Dixon et al., 2020, p.10). The interviews conducted as part of the evaluation of the 'Staying Close' pilot in North Tyneside indicated that the support provided by Elm House was not previously available to young people who were transitioning out of care from Children's Homes. The qualitative evaluation found that overall the model was implemented successfully, and was able to offer flexible support to young people to support their transition to independence, the support was able to be adapted to more suit the needs of the young people. There was a suggestion that the physical proximity of Elm House to the Children's Home did lead to some confusion about the difference between being 'in care' and 'supported living' (Allen et al., 2020).

New Belongings, a pilot project in 28 LAs between 2013-2016, arose from the recognition that care leavers were not getting the support they needed from services. It involved a system redesign for leaving care services in participating LAs and included 10 'Gold Standard Areas', one of which was for care leavers 'Being in Safe and Settled Accommodation'. Over the course of the pilot some of the LAs introduced 'taster flats', or wider ranges of supported accommodation to smooth the transition to independent living for care leavers, this was in response to requests from young people as part of the project methodology. The evaluation of this project found that a key aspect of bringing the programme to its best was the strength of the voice of the young people. The evaluators further highlighted the clarity, and strength of desire, from the young people around having access to accommodation for 'trial runs' or 'taster flats' of living independently. They also strongly advocated for the need for better support to help young people adjust to living on their own (Dixon and Baker, 2016). This adds to the argument that a key pressure point for young people with care experience is the transition to living independently.

Much of the literature discussed identifies poverty, financial instability, and associated risks and burdens as factors in a person's risk or pathway to homelessness. In congruence with this, the Family Options Study, an American project looking at the impact of prioritising families' who are in a homeless shelter access to one of three interventions, found that providing these families with long-term rent subsidies led to a "large reduction in housing instability", along with wider ranging wellbeing benefits, when compared with 'usual care' (Gubitis et al., 2018, p.27). Therefore, financial burden could be a common factor when considering the prevalence of homelessness in people with care experience. From 2018, people leaving care aged 16-24 who embark on an apprenticeship are eligible for a £1,000 bursary to support transition into the workplace. In a similar vein, what began in 2016 with the Department for Education offering an internship in their Care Leaver Policy Team, has developed into a programme which in 2020 saw 145 care leavers successful in gaining a 12 month paid internship across 25 government departments and agencies (Jackson, 2020).

What's Next?

There is a dearth of evidence in this area, specifically around young people leaving care. It is understood in the literature that this population is at significant risk of becoming homeless. However, the majority of interventions that have thus far been evaluated have not focused on them, but on other at risk individuals or groups including, families, men, and youth in a broader sense. From this, there appears to be room for more programmes, interventions, and robust evaluations.

In a review of the evidence on preventing homelessness among young people, it was found that to be the most effective, policy makers should draw on the 'five strands of prevention': structural prevention, system prevention, early intervention, eviction prevention, and housing stabilisation (Schwan et al., 2018; Gaetz and Dej, 2017). Of particular relevance is 'system prevention' which

finds that “youth homelessness can be effectively reduced through interventions that improve housing stability for youth transitioning from public systems”, but that those systems around the young person can contribute and even act as factors that increase their risk of homelessness (Schwan et al., 2018, p.55). The review also highlighted the lack of robust evidence of effective prevention of homelessness for young people who have experienced state care, the authors suggest that a ‘cross-system’ approach is necessary, integrating the varied agencies, systems, and sectors to effectively meet the needs of those young people who are care experienced and are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The necessity of greater support for young people during transitions from out of home care to independent living is reflected in the programmes by the UK Government, ‘Staying Put’, ‘Staying Close’, and the pilot project New Belongings.

Conclusions and Reflections

It is clear that too many young people leaving care are afflicted at some point in their lives by homelessness. The figures, for all their flaws, make for sobering reading. Sobering too is how little we know about how to rectify this situation; either to lift these young people out of homelessness if they arrive in it, or, better still, to prevent it from occurring in the first place.

There are targeted interventions that show promise, like Family Options and ‘Staying Close’/‘Staying Put’, but these need to be rigorously evaluated to identify their impacts. There are other, less targeted approaches, such as basic income, or unconditional cash transfers, which show substantial promise, but with it carry significant risks.

Although a cliché, more research is clearly needed, and greater consideration of the risks of homelessness by professionals considering removal of a child from their parent(s) is needed. If we consider only the risk to the child, and not the adult they will become, then an important potential harm from removal is missed, and the State’s intervention, already finely balanced, could do more harm than good.

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