



Outcomes for care experienced children and young people

Many think care leavers get the same chances as all other young people to get a job, go to college, work towards their dreams. The truth is, the opportunities may be there, but young people can't always sustain them as they are still dealing with a lot of the emotional impact of being brought up in care and experiences they had before it. They need continued support to take advantage of these opportunities.

Young people in care are just like all other young people – except they also need to deal with being separated from their parents, being judged for living in a children's home and being viewed as 'different' because their families can't look after them. It is unsurprising that after these experiences, their outcomes in life can be much poorer than their non-care peers.

This paper identifies the main areas where looked after young people continue to face disadvantage and poorer outcomes overall. While these appalling outcomes continue to exist, if we have a care system built on long term, stable, loving relationships which listen to and continually support young people to take control of their care journey, looked-after young people can and will succeed.

Offending

While research looking at the link between offending and looked after experience is limited, it is widely acknowledged that care experienced young people can be vulnerable to offending behaviour. Lack of placement stability, poor educational attainment and negative social or family relationships are identified as some of the reasons for this link. Young people in living in residential homes are also more likely to be known to the police for minor incidences that children living with their family would deal with without police involvement. In Scotland, **a third of young offenders** identified as having been in care at some point in their life.¹ Nearly a third of adult prisoners, 31% also self-reported being in care as a child.² Other evidence suggests that this figure is even higher and it may be that 50% of Scottish prisoners have been in care.³ It was reported recently that in England and Wales **looked after teenagers are nearly 20 times more likely to be criminalised** than their non-looked after counterparts.⁴ We know that without supportive and stable relationships it can be difficult for young people to break away from long term offending career paths.

Mental Health

The trauma experienced by looked after children and young people early in life means that this population face complex and often long term mental ill health. This trauma can be found in pre-care life, yet is often compounded by the experience of living in local authority care rather than with their family. Additionally, a misunderstanding of mental ill health – especially for those who are not diagnosed – can result in excessively punitive responses such as restraint, used by workers in a misguided effort to control difficult behaviours. With **nearly half of 5-17 year**

¹ Scottish Prison Service. 2016. *Prisoner's Survey 2015 – Young People in Custody*. SPS: Edinburgh.

² Ibid.

³ HM Inspector of Prisons for Scotland. 2009. Annual Report: 2008-09. Scottish Government: Edinburgh.

⁴ The Howard League, 2016 *Criminal Care*. HLPR: London.

olds living in care being diagnosed as having a mental health disorder⁵, it is clear that our responses to mental ill health must improve for this vulnerable population.

While there is wide acknowledgment of the link between living in care and poor mental health, research looking specifically at rates of suicide and self-harm by looked-after young people across Scotland is poor. A study undertaken by Glasgow City Council in 2004 suggested that **just less than 50% of young people in their Children's Units had self-harmed** at some point⁶.

Education

The educational outcomes for looked after young people are unacceptably poor in comparison to their non-care peers. The Scottish Government statistics highlight that the exclusion rates for this group are unacceptable, with **218 formal exclusions per 1000** for looked after young people in comparison to only 27 per 1000 for their non-care peers⁷. We know anecdotally that the rate of informal exclusions is even higher. Trauma, mental ill health, stigma, frequent placement moves and chaotic living arrangements are all examples of how a looked after young person's experience of education can be a negative one. With such poor experiences it is unsurprising that **73% of looked after young people leave school before the age of 16** compared with 27% of all school leavers.⁸ Leaving school early usually means leaving with less qualifications; **only 35% of care experienced young people leave with 1 or more qualifications at SCQF level 5** or better, while 85% of all school leavers achieve this level.⁹ A lack of qualifications and belief in ability prevents the majority of care experienced young people from entering university, in fact, **only 4% of looked after young people went straight on to higher education**, compared to 39% of their non-looked after peers.¹⁰

Homelessness

Young people leaving care are vastly overrepresented in the homeless population and it is widely understood that for those leaving care, this period in time can be extremely unsettling, traumatic and difficult to resolve. Leaving care too soon is reality for so many looked after young people who go on to find themselves dealing with **inappropriate housing, lack of support and poor social and emotional development**.

Scottish Government statistics reveal that there is nearly a **50/50 chance of becoming homeless** for care experienced young people.¹¹ Unfortunately these statistics do not tell us the duration of homelessness or the previous circumstances. However, we know that many care leavers resort to rough sleeping or couch surfing for many years before officially registering as homeless. As a result this leaves them struggling long term with accessing the right housing options, sustaining a tenancy and ultimately making a home for themselves.

⁵ Office of National Statistics. 2004. *The mental health of young people looked after by local authorities in Scotland*. HMS; London.

⁶ Piggot, J, Williams, C, McLeod, S, and Barton, J. 2004. 'A Qualitative Study of Support for Young People who Self-Harm in Residential Care in Glasgow' in *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care*. Pg 45-54.

⁷ Scottish Government. 2016. Education outcomes: looked after children 2014/15. <http://scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children/EducOutcomesLAC>. Edinburgh.

⁸ Scottish Government. 2016. Education Outcomes for Scotland's Looked After Children, 2014/15. <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/06/6439>. Edinburgh.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Scottish Government. 2016. *Scottish Homelessness Statistics*. Scottish Government: Edinburgh

Unemployment

It is widely recognised that care leavers are in danger of experiencing **long term unemployment or fractured employment routes**¹² due to the issues discussed above. Government statistics reveal that after 9 months of leaving school, 30% of care experienced young people are classed as unemployed, compared to only 8% of their non care experienced peers.¹³ Young people leaving care face barriers in many aspects of life. A combination of these barriers, alongside the stigma often attached to the care identity results in low self-esteem and a lack of confidence or knowledge when entering the labour market. Without genuine relationships, love, understanding and opportunities, care leavers will continue to face disadvantage and social exclusion throughout their lives.

If you would like to discuss any of these issues or how we can improve the outcomes for looked after young people, please get in touch:

cedgar@whocaresscotland.org

egreen@whocaresscotland.org

¹² Scottish Government. 2013. *Staying Put Scotland: providing care leavers with connectedness and belonging*. Edinburgh

¹³ Scottish Government. 2016. Education Outcomes for Scotland's Looked After Children, 2014/15.

<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/06/6439>. Edinburgh.