

RESEARCH BRIEFING

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND OFFENDING: REDUCING RISK AND PROMOTING RESILIENCE



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WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

The research was prompted by concerns about the relationship between the care system and the risk of offending. Although a small minority of looked after children aged 10-17 offend in any one year (7.9%), this is more than twice the rate of children in the community (3%). Also of concern is the fact that between a quarter and a half of children in youth custody (with the higher proportion for girls) have been looked after. Among adult prisoners, it is estimated that 27% have been looked after at some time. It is important to bear in mind that these adults may only have spent a brief period in care, and have come into care in adolescence, when they may already have committed offences. There are also concerns that children in care, especially residential care, are criminalised by being brought to court for behaviour that should be dealt with outside of court. Almost all children in care are from backgrounds of deprivation, poor parenting, abuse and neglect, factors that together create risk for a range of emotional, social and behavioural difficulties, including anti-social and offending behaviour. However, repairing harm and promoting resilience through high quality care can occur at all stages in a child's development, and especially in adolescence, thus providing windows of opportunity for change.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The project was designed to contribute to improving the life chances of looked after children at risk of offending and criminalisation through the following aims:

- To identify risk and protective / resilience factors which increase or decrease the likelihood of offending by young people in care.
- To identify features of the care and youth justice systems which may increase / reduce the likelihood of offending and criminalisation of looked after children.
- To identify the key transitional/turning points which are opportunities for interventions to divert children from offending or to support desistance from offending.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

The multidisciplinary research team used a multi-level, multi-method approach.

- A systematic review of the research literature.
- A survey in England and Wales of practice in local

authority services for looked after children (LAC) and Youth Offending Services (YOS).

- In four diverse local authorities, interviews and file searches were conducted for a sample of 100 young people aged 14-19, with three sub-samples: a) looked after young people who have been in contact with the youth justice system (referral order or above) and comparison groups of b) looked after children who have not been in contact with the youth justice system and c) children who have been in contact with the youth justice system and who are not looked after.
- Interviews with young people included narrative accounts, developmental measures and drew on social psychological frameworks for analysing attitudes and decision making.
- Interagency focus groups in each of the four local authorities explored local practice and protocols for supporting young people in care and at risk of offending.

KEY FINDINGS

Literature review

- Individual risk factors associated with offending include: anti-social behaviour at a young age, impulsivity, mental health issues, low self-worth and age (late identification). Family related risk factors include: family breakdown, few resources, parental mental health difficulties, negative parent influence, abuse and neglect and poor family relationships. Education risk factors include: learning difficulties (SEN); school exclusion; low IQ; low school achievement. Community risk factors include: poor housing, deprived neighbourhood, few community opportunities and association with delinquent peers
- Resilience is the ability to recover from negative events. Individuals who have experienced negative events have been found to have 'turning points' which can lead to recovery at any age, including in adulthood.
- Individual resilience/protective factors for offending include emotional intelligence, self-regulation, self-worth, hopefulness, self-efficacy, cognitive abilities. Family protective factors include positive attachment to caregiver, authoritative parenting and bonds with other positive adults, socio-economic advantages. Educational protective factors include school bonding, effective school, school attendance, learning and problem solving skills, opportunities to develop skills and talents.

Community protective factors include non-deprived, safe neighbourhoods, the presence of positive organisations and opportunities to mix with pro-social peers.

Survey and focus groups

- Local authority policy, targets and strategies for reducing offending by looked after children and preventing inappropriate criminalisation were widely but not universally in place. Some areas have multi-agency strategies established at senior management level, but many do not.
- Managers in both looked after children and youth offending services often lacked accurate and aggregated data on which to base their joint strategic planning and monitoring of practice. The placement of looked after children outside of local authority boundaries in particular could affect tracking and service provision, especially specialist services such as mental health and education support. Joint working requires much better information gathering and sharing.
- There was a high risk associated with leaving care, especially leaving residential care early, with services varying across the country.
- Criminalisation of children in residential care remains an important issue, even when protocols with the police are in place, and alternatives such as restorative justice were not always being used with young people in care who were sometimes said to lack the capacity to benefit.

Risk and resilience: quantitative findings from psychological measures and file data

- Risk factors: LAC offenders were exposed to more risk factors than LAC non-offenders and non-LAC offenders; risk factors for both offending groups were similar, except that LAC offenders were more likely to have been exposed to abuse and/or neglect, to be experiencing mental health problems and to have a statement of special educational needs than non-LAC offenders.
- Protective factors: LAC non-offenders have exposure to more protective factors than offenders but LAC non-offenders were more likely than LAC offenders to be in foster care placements, to have entered care before the age of 10 years, to have had less than 4 placements during their time in care. LAC non-offenders also had better emotion recognition scores and were more likely to show benign bias than either of the offending groups.

This reflects the findings from the wider literature regarding social cognition and offending.

Risk and resilience in the narratives of young people in care

- The themes of risk and resilience were used to provide an analytical framework for the interviews with the two sub-samples of young people in care, the LAC offender group (n33) and the LAC non-offender group (n32).
- Five interacting resilience dimensions were identified: 1. Trust in relationships 2. Mentalisation, affect regulation and moral reasoning 3. Self-esteem 4. Self-efficacy 5. Belonging, identity and values (linked to the UEA Secure Base model www.uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase).
- Three groups of young people were identified: Resilient; Coping with support; and Vulnerable / high risk. Across the three groups it was possible to use the five dimensions to demonstrate how individual risk and resilience factors interact with factors in the family, peer group, community and professional systems. Young people's capacity to tell a coherent life story was a mark of security and resilience and reflected good caregiving experience - but suggest that more support with making sense of the past in adolescence and leaving care would be of value.

Summary of findings

- The care system has proved to be effective in providing good care to children from backgrounds of abuse and neglect, promoting security, resilience and pro-social values.
- However, prior to care most looked after children have experienced many of the risk factors, such as adverse parenting and abuse, that also lead to offending. Thus, a correlation between care and offending is to a large extent a result of shared risk factors.
- Early entry to care followed by sensitive parenting in a stable placement with good professional support from a range of agencies, including education and health, minimises the risk of offending behaviour.
- However, late entry into care in adolescence can also reduce the risk of offending if it capitalises on the protective potential of relationships and involvement in constructive activities.

- If children in care from backgrounds of abuse have significant emotional and behavioural problems, do not have stable placements with sensitive caregivers and do not have appropriate professional support, they will be at risk of a range of poor outcomes, including being at risk of offending.
- Two of the most crucial periods are entry into care during adolescence and transitions from care to independence. These are windows of opportunity for positive change, but they also carry risk. When the system works effectively it builds resilience; if not there is a danger of the harm done before entry into care being exacerbated.
- An additional and serious risk factor for looked after children is criminalisation through police and court involvement as a response to challenging behaviour or minor offences in their placements. Policy commitments and practice protocols to prevent this were not working well enough.

Key recommendations for policy and practice

1. Preventative work with young people and families must tackle the range of risk factors that lead to offending and increase protective factors that lead to pro-social behaviour and resilience.
2. The care system: where children need to be in care, corporate parents need to ensure that placements are stable and high quality, with caregivers able to provide a secure base, promote resilience, provide authoritative parenting and reduce the risks of offending. Meeting children's developmental needs and promoting pro-social behaviour requires understanding the diverse needs of children in relation to other factors e.g. gender, ethnicity, culture, LGBTQ identities.
3. The youth justice system: both the courts and the youth offending service need to be familiar with the needs and challenges facing young people in care. Restorative justice has an important part to play but work needs to be done to support the capacity of young people in care to benefit e.g. developing social cognition, empathy and emotional regulation. Multi-agency working and protocols

must be implemented to reduce the criminalisation of children in care

4. Other agencies, in particular education and health, need to support young people in care whose academic progress and physical and mental well-being may require targeted help in order to promote achievement, well-being and pro-social pathways in adolescence and avoid risks of offending.

Strengths and limitations of the study

Strengths: The study combined mixed methods, drawing on psychological measures, survey, focus groups and narrative interviews with a large total sample of young people (N=100). The research team also worked closely with the range of agencies involved in managing care and youth justice systems. The study was able to demonstrate the complex interaction of diverse factors at the intersection between care and offending. In particular, it showed how individual and family risk factors relating to young people's history, e.g. of maltreatment and loss, interact with systems factors, e.g. around placement moves, education and mental health provision, and criminalisation in residential care.

Limitations: Although the total sample of young people was large, the three sub-groups were modest in size. The role of other factors (e.g. gender, ethnicity, LGBTQ) in the intersection of care and offending needs to be explored in further research. Further research is also needed on the pathways into custody and prison, to help explain the over-representation of young people and adults from care.

Where can I find out more?

Schofield, G., Biggart, L., Ward, E. and Larsson, B. (2015) Looked after children and offending: an exploration of risk, resilience and the role of social cognition Children and Youth Services Review 51, 125-134

Schofield, G, Biggart, L, Ward, E, Scaife, V, Dodsworth, J, Haynes, A, Larsson, B, (2014) Looked After Children and Offending: Reducing Risk and Promoting Resilience London: BAAF

FIND OUT MORE

FULL REPORT www.uea.ac.uk/documents/???

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY www.uea.ac.uk/documents/???

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