The Children of Looked After Children

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Outcomes for parents in and leaving care: parenting ‘success’ and corporate parenting failure

Introduction and background

This chapter is concerned with outcomes for young parents in and leaving care. While the increased risk of early pregnancy for young people in and leaving care has been repeatedly evidenced in previous research (James et al. 2009), less attention has focused on what happens after young people become parents. This chapter will detail contributions made to this underdeveloped evidence base over the course of the Voices research. The chapter will examine outcomes for parents in and leaving care, and consider whether parents are at increased risk of experiencing compulsory Children’s Services intervention and/or separation from their children.

Official statistics in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, currently provide no information with respect to parents in and leaving care (respectively: Information Analysis Directorate 2018; Scottish Government 2018; StatsWales 2018). In England, the annual statistical release reports the number of mothers in care (under the age of 18), a figure which has remained relatively stable at 2 per cent in recent years (Department for Education 2018b). While the availability of such information is helpful when considered against the absence of any details from other UK countries, the English data nevertheless provides limited insights. First, the very low figure of 2 per cent may mask the need for policy and practice attention as it is calculated from the total number of females aged 12 and over. A more meaningful calculation, perhaps, would be to report the percentage of mothers aged between 15 and 17 (a computation not possible from the data released). Likewise, information regarding numbers of fathers does not feature in the reporting, nor is any information available regarding the numbers or proportions of young people who become parents up to the age of 25, while in the process of leaving care and still entitled to statutory support. While information is available in England regarding
the numbers of parents aged 17 and 18, not in education, training or employment as a result of pregnancy or parenting commitments (Department for Education 2018b), those who parent and engage with such activities remain unreported.

Considering the limited details with respect to numbers of parents, it is unsurprising that official statistics are unavailable regarding outcomes. Across each of the UK countries, it is unknown how many parents care for their children, with or without formal support, and how many have experienced separation whereby children are cared for by friends and family, local authority or adoptive carers.

Research evidence with respect to parenting outcomes for young people in and leaving care has also been relatively limited. In his review of the literature in 2009, Mendes concluded that “care leavers who became teenage parents are more likely than the general population to come to the attention of child protection authorities” (2009: 14). While Mendes’ review noted that studies involving care leaver parents often made fleeting references to parenting outcomes and were typically based on small sample sizes, more recent studies have strengthened the evidence base. Examples include analysis of social work records regarding 2,487 children born to young people in foster care in Illinois between 2000 and 2008. Dworsky’s (2015) study found that 39 per cent had been subject to at least one child protection investigation and 11 per cent had spent at least one period in care by age 5. Such outcomes were found to be more likely for younger parents, mothers rather than fathers, those with unstable care experiences and/or had been in care for a shorter time (Dworsky 2015). In Australia, a data linkage study captured 287 care-experienced mothers and their 513 children (Lima et al 2018). The study found almost three quarters of children had been the subject of a child protection notification and 24 per cent were in care. Related to this, findings from a large cohort study in the US, involving 742 care leaver parents aged between 20 and 49, revealed that 9 per cent reported having a child in foster care, compared to a foster care rate of 1.1 per cent in the general population (Foster Jackson et al 2015). In addition, the Midwest Study sought to follow the progress of over 700 young people leaving care across three US states, Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois. At age 21, 10 per cent of mothers reported as living apart from at least one biological child (Courtney et al 2007), a figure which increased to 17 per cent by age 23/24 (Courtney et al 2009). By age 25/26 19 per cent of mothers reported having at least one child who didn’t live with them – over six times the rate for their peers not leaving care. For fathers this figure was 66 per cent and 1.8 times more likely than their peers. Within this developing evidence
base, Courtney et al’s (2011) report is particularly helpful in providing more detailed insight into the outcomes experienced by parents in and leaving state care. Non-resident children of care leaver mothers were most likely to be living with foster or adoptive parents, whereas children born to care leaver fathers were most likely to be living with the biological mother (Courtney et al 2011).

Less evidence has been available from within the UK. An important text by Elaine Chase and colleagues (2009) which considered pregnancy and parenthood for young people in care highlighted insufficient evidence with respect to outcomes. Some welcome contributions since then include Botchway et al’s (2014) survey of 18,492 mothers whose children were part of the Millennium Cohort Study. Findings revealed that, in comparison with mothers who had not been cared for by the state, mothers with a history of care were significantly less likely to live in a high-income household or have achieved a high level of education. They were also more likely to have a baby of low birth weight, be a single parent and experience symptoms of depression. The authors concluded that women with a history of care experience ‘carry social disadvantage into motherhood, with the potential of continuing the cycle of deprivation’ (Botchway et al 2015: 1). In addition, Freedom of Information requests issued by the Centre for Social Justice (2015) found that 1 in 10 parents in or leaving care aged 16–21 had experienced their own child taken into care within the previous year. Furthermore, analysis of 354 court records for mothers who had experienced multiple care proceedings and removals of children to the care system, found 40 per cent of the women had previously been in care themselves (Broadhurst et al 2017).

Considered cumulatively, individual studies from within and outside of the UK consistently provide evidence of increased vulnerability of care-experienced parents and their risk of poorer outcomes with respect to parenting. While this is valuable in highlighting the importance of policy and practice considerations of pregnancy and parenting for young people in and leaving care, the evidence base remains somewhat piecemeal. At the outset of the Voices study, more evidence relevant to the UK context was needed, including that confirming or contradicting evidence of poorer outcomes, and providing insight into the range of outcomes experienced by parents. In order to do this, secondary analysis of data from the Wales Adoption Study was undertaken to examine the proportions of birth parents identified as care leavers. Adoption is a particularly important consideration in light of the extremity of the intervention and the severance of legal ties between parent and child. In addition, the Voices study collected survey data regarding
parents in Wales who were eligible for Children’s Services support as a young person ‘looked after’ or in the process of leaving care. This national ‘snapshot’ provided insight into the numbers of parents and children, support needs identified for parents as well as current living arrangements for children.

Methods and results

The Wales Adoption Study

Secondary analysis was conducted on data from the Wales Adoption Study. The Wales Adoption Study was concerned with every child placed for adoption by every local authority in Wales between the 1 July 2014 and the 31 July 2015. The Child Assessment Reports for Adoption (CARA) were reviewed by the research team for each of the 374 children captured within this period. For further details of the study and associated findings see Anthony et al (2016). The national data set provided a valuable opportunity to establish how many of the children placed for adoption in the study time period had birth parents who were care leavers. The data also enabled comparison of the information recorded for birth parents identified as care leavers, with that of other birth parents and, similarly, the information recorded about children born to care leaver parents, with that of other children placed for adoption.

Results

The results of the analysis are detailed in Table 3.1. Key findings included:

- Of the 374 CARA files reviewed for Welsh children placed for adoption during the study period, the care status for 356 birth mothers and 240 birth fathers was recorded. Of these, 96 birth mothers (27 per cent) and 45 of birth fathers (19 per cent) were identified as care leavers. Both birth parents were recorded as care leavers for 23 children (6 per cent of the sample).
- For just under a third of care leaver birth mothers (30 per cent) the adoption was with respect to their first child. In these cases, over half of the children were placed in care at birth (58 per cent). For non-care leaver birth mothers, the adoption was with respect to their first child for 51 of the 278 mothers (18 per cent).
- Children who were voluntarily relinquished for adoption accounted for very small numbers in both groups (3 per cent born to care
leaver mothers and 2 per cent born to non-care leaver mothers). However, care leaver mothers were statistically less likely to appeal the adoption than non-care leaver mothers, and low rates of appeal were evident for all care leaver parents (9 per cent of care leaver birth mothers and 9 per cent of care leaver birth fathers appealed compared with 20 per cent and 18 per cent of non-care leaver birth mothers and birth fathers respectively).

### Table 3.1: Descriptive statistics for study variables by care leaver status of birth parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Birth mother</th>
<th>Birth father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Care leaver</td>
<td>Non-care leaver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent characteristics and experiences of adversity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood physical abuse</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>47.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood emotional abuse</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood sexual abuse</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood neglect</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>74.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood experience of domestic violence</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning difficulties</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult mental illness</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>54.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult substance abuse</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult alcohol abuse</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal justice involvement</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental delay</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment concerns identified by child social worker</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning difficulties</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low birth weight (&lt;2.5 kg)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental appeal of adoption decision</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Birth parent experiences of childhood abuse and exposure to violence, including childhood physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, exposure to domestic violence in childhood (mothers only) and neglect provided an important distinction between the groups. Care leaver birth mothers were two to five times more likely to have experienced childhood abuse and neglect, while birth fathers who were care leavers were three to seven times more likely to have had such experiences.

• Aside from childhood adversity, relatively few differences were found when comparing the profiles of birth parents and children:
  • There were no significant differences in the age of parents when the child was born or when they were placed for adoption.
  • Two thirds (67 per cent) of birth mothers in the total sample had been known to Children’s Services when younger.
  • There were relatively high levels of difficulties for both groups of birth parents with respect to substance misuse, alcohol dependency and criminal behaviour. Analysis of educational achievement, and receipt of welfare benefits were also comparable.
  • Care leaver birth mothers were statistically more likely to be recorded as unemployed and suffer from mental illness.
  • Children born to care leaver parents spent less time on average with them before entering care, but this difference was only statistically significant for fathers.
  • Recordings of abuse or neglect and exposure to domestic violence was high for all children within the cohort, but children born to care leaver parents did not present as statistically more likely to have had suffered such experiences and there were no significant differences regarding birth weight, learning difficulties, development concerns and recorded attachment difficulties.

Survey of local authority leaving-care teams

The Voices study collected primary data from local authorities in Wales. This phase was designed to provide a ‘snapshot’ of parents who were currently in receipt of or eligible for support from the local authority as a young person in or in the process of leaving care. The design was intended to provide much-needed information regarding the numbers of pregnant and parenting young people in and leaving care in Wales, together with details regarding the range of outcomes experienced by these families.

Twenty out of the twenty-two local authorities participated in this phase of data collection (91 per cent response rate), which spanned
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twelve months between 2016 and 2017. At the time of data collection, leaving-care support was available to young people up to the age of 21, or 25 if in education, training or employment. While the Welsh government has since committed to supporting all care leavers up to the age of 25 (Welsh Government 2018b), at the time of data collection only a small numbers of parents were identified aged 22–25 (who were in education, training and employment and were parents). Similarly, data was unavailable for young people who were parents but who were not eligible for statutory support, as they were not in education, training or employment. As a result of the limited availability of data related to older young people leaving care, the analysis focuses only on parents up to the age of 21.

Local authorities were asked to complete a survey for each parent currently in receipt of statutory support while in care, or in the process of leaving care. Information that would identify the parent such as name, date of birth and address was not requested. Details of pregnancies and births were requested and the survey sought information about outcomes for children. This included details of living arrangements and whether children were subject to any legal orders or in receipt of any local authority support. Information was also sought with respect to recorded needs and risks in relation to parenting, as well as individual needs of the parent. For example, individuals completing the survey were asked to indicate whether young people had ongoing needs in areas including housing, finance, health, education, training and employment; categories informed by statutory guidance detailing key considerations for young people leaving care (Welsh Government 2018c). The survey also requested information about the support available to young people and the formal and informal sources with which they were engaged. An electronic survey tool was used and all data was inputted into SPSS data analysis software.

Results

The results of the analyses are detailed in Tables 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4. Key findings included:

• Surveys were completed with respect to 258 young people who were expecting and/or had at least one biological child. The surveys recorded 238 children, with an additional 44 ongoing pregnancies.
• Of the parents, 206 were female and 52 were male. Their ages ranged between 16 and 21 but the average age of having a baby was 19 years for both males and females.
Parents ranged in the age they came into care, the length of time spent in care and the stability experienced in terms of living arrangements. The majority of parents primarily lived in foster care (73 per cent), followed by residential care (10 per cent), a placement with family or friends (7 per cent) or supported accommodation (5 per cent).
• Around half of the sample (47 per cent) were in a relationship with the other biological parent, 36 per cent were single and 13 per cent were in a relationship with another partner. Of the 258 participants, 12 per cent were recorded as being in a relationship with a care-experienced partner.

• The surveys identified a wide range of support needs (excluding parenting-related needs) for parents. Over the course of data collection, a total of 823 needs were recorded in areas such as relationships, mental health and housing. At least 1 recorded need was identified for 86 per cent of the sample, 58 per cent had between 1 and 4 recorded needs and over a quarter had in excess of 5. The most cited needs for both mothers and fathers were difficulties with families and relationships. For mothers, this was followed by mental health, housing, financial and budgeting, and education, employment and training. For fathers, family and relationship difficulties was followed by education, employment and training, drug and alcohol misuse, independent living skills, and financial and budgeting.

• The majority of children were living with the parent identified in the survey (62 per cent). An additional 11 per cent of children were recorded as living with their other biological parent (see Table 3.4). Of the children living with the parent identified in the survey (n = 151), 15 per cent were subject to a child protection plan or investigation and 19 per cent were receiving some form of voluntary family support through the local authority.

• Over a quarter of children were not living with at least one biological parent. Of these children, 10 per cent were in local authority care, 9 per cent were living with adoptive parents and 7 per cent of children

### Table 3.4: Living arrangements of children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child living arrangement</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care leaver parent (subject of the survey)</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other biological parent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authority carers</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoptive carers</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends/family</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were being cared for by family or friends. Children separated from mothers were most likely to be living with local authority carers and adoptive parents. Children separated from fathers were most likely to be living with the biological mother followed by local authority and friends/family carers.

• When support needs were considered in relation to where children were living, 45 per cent (n = 342) of needs were experienced by young people living with their children. Nearly half of young people living with their children had physical health, mental health, education, employment and training, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol misuse, learning difficulty, financial/budgeting and family relationship needs. Lower levels of needs were noted for young people where their children were living with the other biological parent (14 per cent), local authority carers (14 per cent), friends or family members (14 per cent) and adoptive carers (13 per cent).

Discussion: resilience in spite of adversity and problematic corporate parent relationships

The findings outlined earlier provide valuable contributions to the evidence base with respect to young people in and leaving care who are parents. Secondary analysis of a national data set, together with survey data completed by all but two local authorities in Wales, enables a comprehensive consideration of needs and outcomes for parents in and leaving care.

It is important to note that the majority of children identified within the Voices study, were living with their care-experienced parent (62 per cent) or other biological parent (11 per cent). The fact is that the majority of parents were actively caring for their children, often in spite of multiple and multifaceted personal needs. In this way it is hoped the findings will be used to champion the parenting potential of young people in care and to recognise tenacity and resilience in the face of adversity of challenge.

Despite these hopes, the findings add further support to the evidence base demonstrating increased rates of intervention and separation for children born to care-experienced parents (Courtney et al 2011; Roberts et al 2017; Wall-Wieler et al 2018). Within the Voices sample, around one in four children (26 per cent) were separated from both parents at the time of data collection; 10 per cent of children were in the care of local authority carers, 9 per cent with adoptive carers and a further 7 per cent living with friends and family. Moreover, for children
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living with a care-experienced parent, around one in three (34 per cent) were in receipt of some form of statutory intervention. In 2017, official statistics in Wales showed 1 per cent of children in state care (Welsh Government 2018a) and 3 per cent in receipt of care and support (including those ‘looked after’, on the Child Protection Register and those with a Care and Support Plan) (Welsh Government 2018d). Considered alongside these figures, the stark disparity of outcomes for children born to young people in and leaving care are clear.

Further compounding reasons for concern, care leavers represented over a quarter of birth mothers and almost a fifth of birth fathers within the sample of birth parents whose children were being adopted. When considering outcomes for children born to parents in and leaving care, adoption is particularly important given that the intervention permanently severs the legal ties between a child and their birth family. Typically providing few if any guarantees of ongoing contact, adoption can induce intense feelings of grief and loss for parents (Neil 2006; Memarnia et al 2015; Broadhurst and Mason 2017). Findings that sizeable proportions of birth parents on the receiving end of the highest level of state intervention in family life, had themselves been parented by the state, should warrant immediate policy and practice attention. In addition, findings suggesting that sizeable proportions of care leavers experienced their first child being placed for adoption, including the removal of their child at birth, raises questions about the support and opportunities provided to them as parents. Related to this, it is noteworthy that non-care leaver mothers were statistically more likely to appeal the adoption orders than care leaver mothers. With a powerful and supportive state as parent, it could be argued that care leaver parents would be in the best position to appeal the adoption. However, if their relationship with the state as parent is problematic and access to the necessary resources limited, appeals may be considered futile. Viewed in this way, the findings necessitate further consideration of the relationship between the young person as parent and the state as parent.

As well as problematic outcomes, findings from both the Wales Adoption Study and the Voices survey data highlight multiple and wide-ranging support needs for parents in and leaving care. While high levels of needs and difficulties were present for all birth parents whose children were placed for adoption, care leavers were distinguishable by their childhood experiences of abuse and neglect. Such experiences warranted the admission of these individuals into the care system and, as such, they were visible to professionals; their vulnerabilities, histories
and needs were known. There were opportunities to influence their lives and future trajectories.

In addition, survey data encompassing parents both living with and separated from their children, showed only 14 per cent to have no additional needs. Most commonly, parents faced between 1 and 4 support challenges in areas such as relationships, health, housing and independent living skills: areas which fall within the realm of corporate parenting responsibility. Again, these young people have had and continue to have, contact with numerous carers and professionals, with their needs and progress routinely and formally considered. As such, it is deeply problematic that the findings suggest them to be in significant need and with sizeable proportions experiencing poor outcomes. Viewed in this way, it is hard to conceive of these findings as anything other than missed opportunities and corporate parenting failure.

Finally, it is somewhat puzzling that higher levels of support needs were recorded for parents who were caring for their children. Prior to the analysis, it had been anticipated that young people with higher levels of support needs would be those most likely to be separated from their children. In other words, the more parents were struggling with their own needs, the less able they would be to meet the needs of their children. Yet the analysis showed that almost half of young people living with their children had physical health, mental health, education, employment and training, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol misuse, learning difficulty, financial/budgeting and/or family relationship needs. In contrast to notions of ‘success’, the findings illuminate the potential for ongoing struggle and disadvantage.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, the findings from the book’s first section on outcomes, paint a damning picture of corporate parenting ‘success’ in ensuring positive trajectories and transitions to parenthood for young people in and leaving care. The findings of this chapter, combined with those presented in the previous chapter, suggest that care-experienced young people continue to face increased risk of early pregnancy compounded by increased risk of compulsory intervention and separation.

The results call into question the ability, capacity and commitment of the corporate parenting system to ward against early, unplanned pregnancy, but also to adequately support young people as parents. As noted in the previous chapter, the findings appear almost incomprehensible considering the range of connected professionals and agencies, and the wealth of resources at their disposal. Arguably,
the absence of official statistics has enabled this issue to escape much-needed policy and practice attention.

The following two chapters seek to contextualise findings of poor outcomes, with the reflections of professionals who support young people leaving care, as well as those of care-experienced parents. The next section is intended to personalise the statistics, exploring professionals’ perspectives of practice, as well as parents’ personal experiences and reflections on their parenting journeys.

**Acknowledgements**
