

The experiences of young care leavers from different ethnic groups

The disproportionate representation in public care of children and young people from some minority ethnic groups has long been documented, but their subsequent life chances and experiences after leaving care have been largely neglected by researchers. This new study, based on a survey of 261 young people including 36 interviews, by Ravinder Barn, Linda Andrew and Nadia Mantovani at Royal Holloway, University of London, explored the post-care experiences of young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The main findings of the study are:

- Many young people experienced disruption and disadvantage during and after care; however white young people fared the worst in terms of placement instability, early departure from care, poor educational outcomes, homelessness, and risk taking behaviour including criminal activity and drug use.
- Caribbean and mixed-parentage young people were also at a high risk of disadvantage. However, placements in families which reflected their own ethnic background helped to instil stability and counter the effects of disruption for some Caribbean youngsters.
- School exclusion, placement instability, and lack of appropriate encouragement and support were key contributory influences in the poor educational outcomes for white, Caribbean and mixed-parentage young people.
- Lack of adequate consultation, poor planning and support, and the fast pace of change required of them by the social services proved to be disempowering for many young people leading to adverse after care experiences in housing, budgeting, and the job market.
- Asian and African young people arrived in care as adolescents, and experienced least instability in placement and education. Asian young people also reported highest levels of satisfaction with their social worker.
- Asylum-seeking young people demonstrated considerable resilience and determination and were reported to be doing particularly well in education.
- Many of the Caribbean, African and Asian young people were generally self-assured and secure in their individual and ethnic group identity. Living in a multi-racial locality was cited as an important factor.
- Many young people reported continued support from their foster carers.
- Help and support from social services after leaving care was described as variable, and lacking in focus and effect.
- Social services were also said to have played a minimal role in the development and maintenance of racial and ethnic identity; and in equipping young people to deal with racism.



Background

There is much research evidence documenting the marginalisation and social exclusion of care leavers in a range of areas concerning transition to adulthood and independence. However, due to a lack of focus on the needs and concerns of minority ethnic care leavers, there has been a serious gap in our knowledge and understanding about the situation of these youngsters. The impetus for this study, therefore, came from a serious paucity of research evidence into how care leavers from minority ethnic groups are prepared for leaving care and their experiences after care. The study reveals a complex picture of ethnicity and disadvantage.

This study documents the findings concerning the post-care experiences of 261 minority ethnic and white young people in England. The research comprised both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore a number of key areas including education, employment and training, housing and homelessness, crime and delinquency, identity, and preparation and after care support. The views and experiences of social work professionals provide a contrasting picture of the process of preparation for leaving care, and after care.

Disadvantaged transitions

Although many young people value the time spent in public care, there has been much concern about the role of the local authority as a 'corporate parent' in meeting the challenges of poor pre-care experiences and in providing sufficient post-care services to reduce social exclusion. It has been documented that, upon leaving care, many young people experience poor levels of educational attainment and high levels of unemployment, poverty and isolation.

The findings indicate that white young people experienced the worst outcomes, both during their time in care and after leaving care, in relation to placement disruption, educational attainment, homelessness, and risk taking behaviour including criminal activity, and drug use. Caribbean and mixed parentage young people were also amongst those who were at a higher risk of disadvantage. However, the study provides some useful insights into their particular experiences. For example, whilst both Caribbean and mixed parentage young people experienced lengthy periods in care, the former achieved greater levels of stable, same-race placements. They were also more likely to be living in multi-racial areas. Also, whilst young people from white, Caribbean

and mixed-parentage backgrounds experienced high rates of school exclusion, the Caribbean grouping were more likely to go on to college for further study to obtain educational qualifications. However, in spite of this, they still experienced high rates of unemployment. Mixed-parentage young people, on the other hand, not only spent lengthy periods in care, but also experienced severe disruption in placements and their education outcomes were poor.

African and Asian groups emerged as experiencing most stability in care and in education. Many of these young people entered care as adolescents and therefore spent a shorter period being looked after. Many of the African and Asian young people had had stable care placements. They were also least likely to report being excluded from school. Asian young people also reported the highest levels of satisfaction with their social worker.

The disparate outcomes of these groups are linked to length of time in care, placement and school disruption (including exclusion) and teenage parenthood. A quarter of the sample of 261 were young parents, and four out of ten young women (predominantly white) were mothers. Many of the young mothers reported a lack of educational qualifications. Compared to other groups, care leavers from white, Caribbean and mixed-parentage backgrounds are severely disadvantaged over a long period of time. By the age at which they leave care, the accumulation of such overwhelming and long-term disadvantages affects subsequent life-chances.

Racial disadvantage, prejudice and patterns of cultural support

The quantitative research undertaken helped highlight a number of issues concerning the experience of minority ethnic young people while being looked after, being prepared for leaving and eventually leaving care. The qualitative study focused on experiences after care. However, some respondents did comment on both prejudice and discrimination they had experienced when in care. More specifically they believed they were not always given appropriate cultural and racial support during placements in residential and foster care. For young people seeking asylum, especially, uncertainty about their legal status and their prospects left them unsettled and highly vulnerable to stereotyping and racism on a daily basis. Yet social work professionals commented favourably on the tenacity of asylum-seekers in trying to put trauma and adversity behind them and work towards a positive future for themselves.

The study also highlights particular issues around white and mixed-parentage identity. Those classified in these two categories came from a range of different cultural backgrounds. Those who identified as 'white' included some young people with an Irish/East European/Romany, and Indian/white family heritage. Several young people who, had classified themselves as having a 'mixed parentage' described how they had experienced the process of belonging to one or both/multiple ethnic groups. Others described how, much of the time they had been "passing for white". Many reported a lack of exposure to a positive framework around race and ethnicity that could have provided them with a secure base regarding individual and group ethnic identity. Nearly half had been placed in white families and a third with Caribbean families.

By contrast, Caribbean, African and Asian young people were generally self-assured and secure in their individual and ethnic group identity. Living in a multi-racial locality was cited as an important factor.

Perhaps surprisingly, only one of the local authorities had a specific policy for service provision for minority ethnic young people or had made a concerted attempt to make equal opportunities issues central to their pattern of provision and sensitive to the distinctive needs of children from minority ethnic groups. This is required by the 1989 Children Act and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000.

Agencies recognised the importance of matching young people with social workers from the same ethnic background. Many reported that, were the young person to request this, they would comply. Young people, on the other hand, seemed less concerned with ethnic matching than with the quality of the worker. However, young people did comment on the importance of appropriate matching with their after-care worker. They thought this increased the likelihood of them being given appropriate and sensitive preparation and support for independent living. Practitioners commented that some of the assessment and action records used, particularly in the transition planning process, were mechanistic and provided insufficient scope for a sophisticated exploration of race and ethnicity.

Preparation for leaving care

Preparation for leaving care and after-care support have been the subject of significant change under new guidance and regulations accompanying the Children (Leaving Care) Act (C(LC)A) 2000, which came into effect in September 2001. Many of the respondents to both the questionnaire survey and those interviewed would have undertaken 'pathway planning' and received support as covered by the Act. The aim of the reforms was to bring the process of moving 'looked after' children to independent living more in line with the experience of other children, where the main transitions between youth and adulthood are both protracted and later than in previous decades.

On some of the key areas concerning transitions, including housing, employment and finance, there were no observed differences between the different ethnic groups in reporting preparation and help. However, around half of all groups did not recall getting help and advice on some of the most basic issues, such as housing, careers, claiming benefits, budgeting skills and cooking. Despite the intention of the C(LC)A 2000, many of the sample felt swept along by the fast pace of change required of them after the age of 16. Many were required to live independently shortly thereafter with little time to adapt. Many young people reported finding their 'pathway plans' disappointing – although these are intended to empower young people by encouraging them to enter into dialogue with professional workers in identifying their needs. Many thought they were given no choice but to accept unsuitable accommodation or none at all. As well as being disempowering, these 'forced choices' resulted in young people feeling isolated and lonely, often in accommodation and communities in which they felt lost and afraid.

Over half the sample lived alone. This figure was even higher amongst African and Caribbean groups, where seven out of ten lived on their own. Very few respondents had integrated well into their local communities. Some expressed their uncertainty and lack of skill and knowledge about achieving this. Others were content to keep local people at a distance. Their sense of loneliness and isolation was palpable as they knew very few individuals in the neighbourhood. For some, the strategy of self-isolation seemed to be a defence mechanism to avoid getting in with the 'wrong crowd'.

Overall, young women were more critical of social worker support than young men. They were also less likely to report receiving help and support in claiming benefit and careers advice. There were some differences between the ways in which the different local authority areas arranged such support. The majority of professionals interviewed thought that young people leaving care were routinely appraised of their entitlements and that many of the anomalies which had existed prior to the implementation of the C(LC)A (such as very different allocations made through leaving care grants) had now been replaced by a more comprehensive needs assessment. Yet young people remained concerned. The accumulation of debt, threats to their tenancies and their inability to avoid this through careful budgeting were issues of continuing concern. On the positive side, many reported continued support from their foster carers, although this often depended upon an established good relationship between the young person and foster carer. In this sense it was based upon goodwill rather than being contractual.

Conclusion

At a time when the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 is being heralded as an important step to support care leavers, this research indicates that major challenges might still need to be acknowledged and met regarding the complexity of ethnicity and disadvantage. The research suggests that as 'corporate parents', local authority social services departments must actively seek to reduce disruption and instability to avoid social exclusion and accumulative disadvantage in the lives of young people.

About the project

The research study is based on a survey of 261 (16- to 21-year-old) young people including a significant number from minority ethnic groups (44 per cent). Six local authorities participated in the study - three London Boroughs and three local authorities in the North and Midlands. The London authorities were chosen to reflect a mix of different ethnic groups. One of the northern cities also had a sizable Pakistani population. Interviews were also conducted with 36 young people and 13 professional workers and their managers to explore their views and experiences.

For further information

The full report, **Life after care: The experiences of young people from different ethnic groups** by Ravinder Barn, Linda Andrew and Nadia Mantovani, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 191 3, price £13.95).

