

# RESEARCH BRIEF

February 2007

## USING HEALTH, EDUCATION, HOUSING AND OTHER SERVICES: A STUDY OF CARE LEAVERS AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN DIFFICULTY

*Claire Cameron, Kristina Bennert, Antonia Simon and Valerie Wigfall  
Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London*

### Introduction

Young people who have left local authority care are known to be more likely than other young people to experience multiple disadvantages in adult life. Yet to what extent are their experiences similar to or different from those of other disadvantaged young people? This summary describes findings from a study of two groups of young people - the first with a background in public care, the second who had experienced difficulties in life but had no background in care. The study focused on their experiences of, and relationship to, services which are intended to help them, including general and specialist health and social services, counselling, careers and advisory services, employment, housing and education. The study took place shortly after implementation of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and included care leavers (aged 17 - 24), young people termed 'in difficulty' (aged 16 - 29) and key service personnel based in four 'case study' local authorities. It also included a literature review and secondary analysis of statistics about access to services for care leavers and other young people 'in difficulty'.

### Key findings

- Care leavers interviewed had benefited from the provisions of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 but the Act had not resolved issues such as financing to access further education while living independently.
- Care leavers were doing better than young people 'in difficulty' in terms of access to housing, educational participation, being in employment, and self-assessment of their health and well-being.
- The most helpful services for all young people interviewed were holistically oriented and combined practical and emotional support: leaving care services and 'one stop shops'.
- Across case study areas there was wide variation in the services available for care leavers both from leaving care teams and from the local network of health, education, employment and housing services available to support care leavers.
- Care leavers and young people 'in difficulty' reported high levels of need for health services, particularly mental health services. But service provision for them was not well developed.
- Care leavers had, at point of interview, better educational attainments than expected: 45 per cent of care leavers had five or more GCSEs. This compares with 59 per cent of young people 'in difficulty' having similar attainments.

## Background

Recent policy has aimed at alleviating the known disadvantages for young people leaving care. The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 sought to promote a more 'holistic' or multi-dimensional approach to the process of leaving care and to emphasise the continuing corporate parenting responsibilities of local authorities. In addition, the policy framework provided by the publication of Every Child Matters (DfES 2003) and the subsequent Children Act 2004 were beginning to have an impact during fieldwork for the interview study. The Green Paper Youth Matters (DfES 2005) had not been published. The Children (Leaving Care) Act was implemented after a long period during which local authorities had powers but not duties in relation to young people leaving care, which meant that wide differences in local authority provision for care leavers emerged (Allard 2002a; Broad 1998). It was intended that local authority variations in provision for care leavers would begin to disappear through the prescription of duties, which were to: delay young people's discharge from care until they were adequately prepared; improve assessment, preparation and planning for leaving care through 'pathway plans'; and secure the availability of financial and personal support to young people once they had left care. The 'normalising' aspect of the Children (Leaving Care) Act was in line with the objectives of Quality Protects (DH 1998), notably the requirement to ensure that young people in care derive maximum life chance benefits from education, health care and social care, and that those leaving care are not isolated and participate socially and economically as citizens.

In this project, young people leaving care were viewed as part of a continuum of all young people rather than as a discreet group with distinct service use patterns or needs. The comparison group, young people 'in difficulty', were seen as also part of the continuum, acknowledging that young people often move in and out of public care, with varying levels of need for support services. Although care leavers are known from previous studies to be highly disadvantaged, the project sought to highlight the broad spectrum of need for services: indeed the concentration of need was highest among those who were 'in difficulty' and more diffuse among those who had been in care, some of whom had had relatively stable childhoods with relatives or long-term foster carers.

## The Study's Aims

The principal aims of the study were to compare the experiences of care leavers with those of other young people who have had difficulties but not been in local authority care, in relation to their access to and use of health, education, housing, employment and other services, with a view to identifying features of young people's lives that facilitate service use.

In particular the project sought to identify the factors that make accessing health, education, employment and other services easy or difficult for care leavers and other young people, and to examine what factors might be associated with facilitating or impeding access.

The emphasis of the study was on documenting young people's perceptions of services: whether they thought the services they used had been helpful to them, in what ways they had been helpful or unhelpful, their reasons for seeking assistance, as well as their reasons for rejecting formal support.

## Methods

The study drew on three main data sources:

i) a literature review based on research into services for young people, particularly with regard to services for young care leavers; ii) secondary analysis of large scale national data sets: the Youth Cohort Study, the Young People's Social Attitudes Survey, the British Household Panel Study, the Health Survey for England, and the Youth Lifestyles Survey; and iii) interviews with 80 care leavers aged 17 - 24 (some of the older care leavers had not been eligible for resources under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000), 59 young people 'in difficulty' aged 16 - 29, and 29 managers and workers in key services including leaving care services, housing, health and employment.

Care leavers were recruited through 13 leaving care teams across England during 2002 - 4. Three additional authorities and a voluntary organisation were subsequently added to improve the geographical spread of recruits. Leaving care workers were asked to discuss participation in the project with care leavers, using materials prepared by the project team. Participants were asked to return a signed consent form indicating willingness for the research team to contact them. Updating postal questionnaires were then sent to participants at approximately six monthly intervals, with incentive vouchers for completion. This technique boosted recruitment and retention, while

also providing useful background data on care leavers prior to the interviews, which took place 18 - 24 months after the initial contact had been made. Four case study areas were selected from the local authorities producing the most care leaver recruits (54/80 came from these four areas).

The interviews with young people in 'difficulty' were sought from people attending advice and housing support services in each of the four areas. 'In difficulty' was defined as being homeless and/or having two or more of the following difficulties in their lives: living apart from family; pregnancy or parenthood; addiction problems such as those with alcohol or illicit drugs; a criminal record or offending behaviour; unemployed; learning or physical disabilities; belonging to a minority ethnic group and leaving school with no qualifications. The process of recruiting confirmed that there is considerable cross-over between the two groups: eight young people interviewed for the 'in difficulty' group were found to be care leavers and were transferred to that group.

The interview was structured into two parts. The first part focused on a self-evaluation of past and present conditions of life and activity, including some background on experience in care and with original family, current relationships and sources of support. The second part of the interview was about formal use and evaluation of services as a young person. Analysis focused on the factors that enable and hinder service use in particular service domains, and on the context for service use. Concepts such as trust, self-reliance, confiding and risk-taking, found to be of relevance in the general literature on young people and access to services, were explored in relation to care leavers, and to some extent among young people 'in difficulty'. Resource limitations meant that in-depth analysis focused on care leavers. Methodological limitations of the study primarily concerned the comparison of the two groups. The widely varying childhood experiences of care leavers, and their unique legal status, present difficulties in finding a meaningful comparison group. Young people 'in difficulty' as described here, share certain characteristics of care leavers' experience, but not all. In addition, obtaining samples of these two 'hard to reach' groups meant pragmatic choices had to be made. For example, three of the young people 'in difficulty' fell outside the care leavers' age range. However, checks on the comparability of the two groups in terms of service use showed that there were no real differences by age.

## Main Findings

In the final sample two thirds of study participants were female; just over two thirds were White British; and one quarter had a self-defined disability - all of which were slightly higher than might be expected either of care leavers or of young people generally. Over half of the study care leavers had entered care between the ages of 10 and 15 years, a slightly higher proportion than among care leavers in general.

The context for service use is defined by young people's perception of need for support, and the availability of informal support. Most respondents assessed themselves as having enough support - from all sources - for everyday life, and said that life was 'getting easier'. However, for around a quarter of care leavers there was not enough support and for the majority of young people 'in difficulty', life was perceived as being harder than a year ago. Around a third of each group said they preferred to sort out their own problems, while one half said they would feel OK about asking other people for help. These findings indicate that a significant minority of both groups found accessing support services problematic.

Looking at the type of formal support that was most highly rated, the closest key worker, or the one whom study respondents had seen most recently, tended to belong to a service offering all round support, either the leaving care service or housing project workers. However, nearly one fifth of study respondents did not have a current worker who they could ask for support or advice.

## Health

Study respondents had multiple health needs, which were above average for young people of their age. Care leavers and young people 'in difficulty' were more likely than young people in the general population to have had mental health problems, were more likely to be disabled in some way, to have had a pregnancy experience and to have substance misuse problems than young people in the general population. They used GP and A&E services extensively, as well as specialist services. Expectations of health services were not high, and they were unlikely to be rated as among the most helpful experienced. In fact, many respondents relied on their own resources to resolve health issues.

## Education

Two thirds of study respondents had one or more GCSEs at the point of interview, which was less than found in the general population of all young people. About a half of the care leavers were in, or were actively planning to be in education, a higher proportion than among young people 'in difficulty'.

Most respondents were 'educationally-oriented' in their current activity and plans for the immediate future. Young people reported receiving little explicit support from carers for educational goals, and gave frequent accounts of frustration at lack of financial and practical support for attending college and university. Age restrictions on accessing local authority support and welfare benefit restrictions for those in education were a particular source of difficulty, especially where there had been delays in acquiring the necessary school leaving qualifications due to disruptions in school attendance.

## Employment

Half of care leavers but few young people 'in difficulty' were in gainful employment. Only 16 percent of care leavers had full-time jobs. Jobs were mostly low paid, and helped to support educational participation.

The ethic of work was evident in that most respondents mentioned employment goals as part of their future plans. Many of those 'not in work' were actively looking for work. However, for a minority of young people, work was not possible because of illness or drug use problems, homelessness or family circumstances.

Employment services, particularly the benefits service, were rated very poorly, although some care leavers found the Connexions service to be helpful.

## Housing

Young people who have been looked after leave care much earlier than young people in general leave home. In this study care leavers were more likely than young people 'in difficulty' to be living in accommodation described as a 'social tenancy'. Half of care leavers were living in accommodation where they had some autonomy and could 'shut their own front door', and almost 60 percent of young people 'in difficulty' were living in a room or a flat in a housing project with some support on site. However, a quarter of care leavers and a third of the comparison group had precarious housing, such as relying on other people for a bed for the night, and were dependent on maintaining good relations with them.

Housing services were mostly accessed through an intermediary such as the leaving care team, and care leavers had few evaluative comments on housing providers. For young people 'in difficulty', the housing support services that offered a broader approach including advice and emotional support were highly praised.

## Leaving care services and one-stop shops

Leaving care teams and 'one-stop-shops' run by voluntary sector services were compared as two kinds of all-round services for young people. Local services offered on a non-judgemental basis and from a 'holistic perspective', which addressed a range of needs were those most likely to be favoured by respondents.

Leaving care workers and teams were generally viewed positively by care leavers. The multi-agency approach endorsed by the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 had been introduced with considerable energy in leaving care teams. Study leaving care teams were committed to forging local networks. They had put substantial effort into developing links with housing providers and employment and training providers, but links with health services were less common, and where they existed, they tended to be of recent origin.

Care leavers appreciated the support of individual leaving care workers when they offered practical help and emotional support that was reliably available, whatever crises erupted in their lives. Lack of a dedicated worker was seen as particularly unhelpful by care leavers, as was help provided at the wrong time or abruptly stopped.

Voluntary sector 'one-stop-shops' offered a wide and changing range of services, and were also highly praised by young people. The services were non-statutory, and available to service users by choice, on a non-judgemental and non-stigmatising basis.

While both kinds of service were seen as effective from the young person's point of view, having a good experience of a leaving care team tended to depend more on a good relationship with the individual worker. In contrast, voluntary sector services, albeit without statutory backing for their work, tended to be viewed as a whole, by service users. Study respondents felt able to trust and confide in a number of workers rather than a single key worker. Being able to offer emotional support and health services from the same premises was another distinct advantage of the one stop shops.

Service user involvement was being developed in various ways in both leaving care services and in 'one-stop-shops'. Some leaving care services were offering traineeships to care leavers to promote their active involvement in the service.

## Policy Considerations

Overall, care leavers seemed to be benefiting from the measures in the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, and doing rather better than young people who had not been in care. However, the difference between the two groups can be overstated. Some of the young people 'in difficulty' could have been in public care as a child if adverse events in their families had occurred earlier; they had ended up leaving the parental home too late to be looked after by local authorities and were ineligible for the benefits of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. In terms of a continuum of young people, a sizeable group of care leavers and the majority of young people 'in difficulty' tended to be concentrated among those who had high levels of need for formal support services, but within the care leaver group, there were also many who were making good use of services and/or developing self-reliant strategies. This suggests that resources, and policy, need to focus on developing the capacities of all disadvantaged young people, and not just those who have been in local authority care.

Despite care leavers' progress under the new legislation, there remained acute difficulties in accessing financial support for education, and in accessing health, particularly mental health services. Overall, four main areas of concern were noted:

- First, there existed much variation in quality of provision offered by the leaving care service. Care leavers may receive a radically different service from one area to the next. The Act had not yet addressed the unevenness of service access.
- Second, around one quarter of care leavers appeared to some extent to be struggling to cope. They felt they had insufficient support in daily life and found it difficult to ask for help. Regardless of the number of services they were using, these care leavers nevertheless stated they would like more support.
- Third, while care leavers had extensive needs for health services, there was a striking lack of

development of links between leaving care services and health services in general, and health services aimed specifically at care leavers in particular. Leaving care services had often made housing a priority, and had committed resources to supporting young people in education, training and employment, but very few practical steps had been taken to improve the health of care leavers.

- Fourth, relatively few care leavers were employed. When they were in jobs, this was often a necessity to help finance education, rather than an alternative path to education. Because of the type of low paid jobs undertaken, employment rarely improved financial independence. Policy initiatives to extend financial support for care leavers' education and training have yet to address the complexity of their lives, which might include holding down tenancies or taking on parenting responsibilities alongside attempts to study.

One of the beneficial effects of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 is that considerable energy has gone into finding suitable housing for care leavers. Although the housing situation is by no means resolved or universal, a good start has been made for care leavers. A similarly energetic approach is required to expand access to services that address emotional issues at different levels of specialisation, such as counselling, psychotherapy and psychiatry. Such services should be equally available to young people regardless of location. In addition, post-compulsory education services that have a specific focus on the learning styles of socially excluded young people should be encouraged. Interrogation of further and higher education policy and practice from the perspective of young people without family support would reveal the contradictions that prevent fulfilment of the education ethic that many appear to hold.

There are policy implications arising from the findings about local variation in leaving care, and other specialist services, and these are further complicated by the comparison between care leavers and young people 'in difficulty'. Steps to resolve local variation may require a national approach, and this in turn may require national standards for leaving care teams, although these may be difficult to accommodate within the highly diverse structure of leaving care services. An alternative strategy may be to legislate or provide statutory guidance on the specifics of care leavers'

rights as they become independent adults. However any focus on care leavers as adults exposes a continuing legacy of a childhood status and does not resolve the difficulties experienced by the comparison group of young people 'in difficulty'. A different approach might be to address the needs of disadvantaged young people as a whole.

Young people and key service personnel in this study repeatedly stressed the need for integrated services that adopted a holistic viewpoint, and worked collaboratively for young people's benefit. In this, the study is broadly in line with the message of Youth Matters (DfES 2005:5) which was to see 'services integrated around young people's needs'; and the conclusions of Transitions: Young Adults with Complex Needs (SEU 2005) which was the need to transcend age barriers and agency barriers to provide a coherent system of continuing support past the teenage years.

## Additional information

See also:

Wigfall, V. and Cameron, C. (2006) Promoting Young People's Participation in Research in E. Chase, A. Simon and S. Jackson (eds) *Young People in care and after: a positive perspective*. London, Routledge

Cameron, C. (forthcoming) Education and self-reliance among care leavers, *Adoption and Fostering*.

Simon, A. (in preparation) Early access and use of housing: comparing care leavers with young people 'in-difficulty'

Cameron, C. and Chase, E. (2006) Super Models, *Community Care*, 26 January

For further information about the study contact Claire Cameron, c.cameron@ioe.ac.uk Thomas Coram Research Unit, 27/28 Woburn Square, London WC1H 0AA. [www.ioe.ac.uk/tcru](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/tcru)

The views expressed in this report are the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills.

