



Care-leavers and their children placed for adoption



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ABSTRACT

Young people in and leaving state care are more likely than the general population to become parents at a young age. Relatively little is known about the experiences and progress of care leaver parents and their children, but emerging evidence suggests an increased risk of intergenerational state intervention. Drawing on data from the Wales Adoption Study, this paper examines the prevalence and profiles of care leavers amongst birth parents whose children were placed for adoption. Findings showed that more than a quarter (27%) of birth mothers and a fifth (19%) of birth fathers with children placed for adoption were themselves care leavers. There were no significant differences between care leaver and non-care leaver birth parents in terms of involvement in crime or substance misuse, but carer leaver birth parents were distinguishable from other birth parents by their own experiences of abuse and neglect. Care leaver birth mothers were also more likely than their non-care leaver counterparts to have diagnosed mental health problems and were less likely to appeal the adoption plan. The profiles of children placed for adoption between care leaver and non-care leaver birth parents were similar. The findings presented in this paper strengthen the moral imperative to address the over-representation of care leavers amongst birth parents whose children are placed for adoption. There is an urgent need to revise how children and young people in state care are prepared for parenthood and supported as parents.

1. Introduction

Evidence suggests that young people in and leaving state care are more likely than the general population to become parents at a young age (Svoboda, Shaw, Barth, & Bright, 2012). Whilst often based on non-representative samples of varying size, the findings from studies in the UK and elsewhere that focus on pregnancy and parenthood whilst in care, and/or the initial years after leaving care, remain consistent. (Biehal & Wade, 1996; Cashmore & Paxman, 1996; Dixon, Wade, Byford, Weatherly, & Lee, 2006; Del Valle, Bravo, Alvarez, & Fernanz, 2008; Vinnerljung & Sallnäs, 2008; Roca, García, Biarnés, & Rodríguez, 2009; Oshima, Narendorf, & McMillen, 2013; Craine et al., 2014; King, Putnam-Hornstein, Cederbaum, & Needell, 2014; Courtney et al., 2011).

There is less consensus as to why young people with experience of state care are more likely than their peers to enter parenthood early. It may be a positive choice for some, who consider it an opportunity imbued with stability, purpose and love (Cashmore & Paxman, 2007; Haydon, 2003; Roca et al., 2009). However, the higher incidence of early pregnancy and parenthood has also been related to experiences during and prior to being cared for by the state. For example, an analysis of adolescent births in California showed that 9.7% of parents had

previously spent time in foster care, but 44.9% of the total sample had been reported as victims of abuse in the preceding decade (Putnam-Hornstein, Cederbaum, King, Cleveland, & Needell, 2013). In this way, the care system may be a protective factor for some young people (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010), a suggestion supported by findings of a US study which noted a 'graded relationship' between length of time in foster care and birth rate, in which girls were more likely to give birth the less time they had been in care (King et al., 2014). Yet in contrast, structured interviews with 325 US care leavers, showed few factors were significant and "simply being in the foster care system is a significant risk factor for pregnancy in and of itself." (Oshima, Narendorf, and McMillen, 2013: 1763). Adding to the complexity, the type of placement experienced by a young person has been highlighted as an important consideration, with higher incidences of pregnancy associated with kinship care and residential care (Sakai, Lin, & Flores, 2011; Svoboda et al., 2012). Likewise, Wade (2008) found parents leaving state care in England were more likely than their non-parenting counterparts to have experienced placement instability, been involved in offending and substance misuse, or run away frequently whilst looked after.

The evidence base is also under-developed in relation to what

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happens after young people who have been looked after by the state become parents. This includes the outcomes for young people who enter parenthood whilst in or officially leaving state care, as well as for those who become parents at a later age. [Bublitz et al. \(2014\)](#) investigated the relationship between maternal childhood experience of adoption or foster care and pre-term birth. Mothers with prior experience of state care were found to be four times as likely to give birth prematurely (prior to 37 weeks gestation). Whilst acknowledging the need for further research, the authors surmise that the findings may be related to difficulties with biopsychosocial regulation resulting from separation or trauma. In addition, findings from the Millennium Cohort Study suggest that women with experience of care can “carry social disadvantage into motherhood”, and are more likely to have a baby of low birth weight, be a single parent and experience symptoms of depression ([Botchway et al. 2015:1](#)).

Third sector organisations in Wales have collectively released a statement of concern in respect of discrimination and support available to parents in and leaving left state care ([Voices from Care, NYAS, Family Rights Group, Tros Gynnal Plant, 2016](#)). The disparity between the support needs of care-experienced parents and the available support provision has been noted ([Rutman, Strega, Callahan, & Dominelli, 2002](#)) as has a dearth of evidence capable of informing the development of effective interventions for this population ([Fallon & Broadhurst, 2015](#)). Such factors are compounded by research findings related to the relationships between professionals and parents with experience of state care. For example, [Rutman et al. \(2002\)](#) highlighted the potential for professionals to perceive intergenerational cycles of care as ‘inevitable’ whilst [Chase, Maxwell, Knight, and Aggleton, \(2006\)](#) found parents felt unhelpfully monitored rather than supported.

The inter-generational continuity of state intervention within families has attracted some research interest ([Bartlett & Easterbrooks, 2012](#); [Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013](#); [Dworsky, 2015](#)). In his review of the literature, [Mendes' \(2009\)](#) noted that studies often made only fleeting references to rates of child protection intervention and results were frequently based on small sample sizes. Nevertheless, he 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). In 2015, the Centre for Social Justice submitted freedom of information requests to local authorities in England. They highlighted a “worrying number of care leavers’ children ... being taken into care” with “at least one in 10 young care leavers aged 16–21 ... hav [ing] had a child taken into care in the last year” ([Centre for Social Justice, 2015: 72](#)). Such concern is supported by evidence from a longitudinal study of young people leaving care across three US states in which 10% of mothers, identified at age 21, reported as living apart from at least one biological child ([Courtney et al., 2007](#)). This figure increased to 17% by age 23/24 ([Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2009](#)), and to 19% by age 25/26 ([Courtney et al., 2011](#)). Similarly, findings from a large cohort study in the US (742 care leaver parents aged between 20 and 49) revealed that 9% reported having a child in foster care, compared to a foster care rate of 1.1% in the general population ([Foster Jackson, Beadnell, & Pecora, 2015](#)). [Broadhurst and Mason \(2013\)](#) have also raised concern about the over-representation of care-experienced parents in their English sample of women who have been subject to repeat care proceedings. Yet despite these insights, significant gaps in knowledge remain in respect of the outcomes for families where one or both parents has experience of state care. This includes a lack of evidence about the numbers of parents who retain care of their children and parent autonomously or with voluntary support, and the numbers who are subject to compulsory state intervention, including those who have children who become ‘looked after’ and those whose children go on to be adopted. Adoption is a particularly salient consideration, given that the intervention permanently severs the legal ties between a child and their birth family.

1.1. Adoption outcomes for children born to care leavers in Wales

The paper draws on data from the Wales Adoption Study to establish how many of the children placed for adoption in the study time period had birth parents who were care leavers. Birth mothers and fathers were identified as care leavers if they were recorded as ‘looked after’ as they turned sixteen in the Child Assessment Reports for Adoption (CARA) (see [Strengths and Limitations](#) for further discussion). The profiles of birth parents identified as care leavers (hereto referred to as care leaver parents) were compared with those of other birth parents, and the profiles of children born to care leaver parents were compared with those of other children placed for adoption. The purpose of this analysis was to see what, if any, insights the data provides in terms of the needs of care leaver parents and their children, social work practice for this group and/or the impact of state care.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The data derives from the Wales Adoption Study, a national research study that used a mixed-methods approach to examine the characteristics and experiences of a sample of children recently placed for adoption in Wales, to consider the early support needs of adoptive families into which these children were placed, and to better understand what helps these families to flourish. Detailed information about this mixed methods study can be found elsewhere ([Anthony et al., 2016](#)).

2.2. Ethical considerations

Ethical permission for the Wales Adoption Study was granted by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee and School of Psychology at Cardiff University. The university is registered with the Information Commissioner as a Data Controller, to process personal data for research purposes. In addition, permission from the Welsh Government was obtained to access the local authority data. Senior Adoption managers were also consulted and their approval obtained. A multi-disciplinary advisory group for the study provided valuable guidance for developing best practice with respect to the ethics pertaining to safeguarding and data protection.

2.3. Retrieval of social work records

The sample comprised the records of all children placed for adoption by every local authority (LA) in Wales between 01 July 2014 and 31 July 2015. Three hundred and seventy four CARA records were reviewed. The template for the CARA was developed by BAAF Cymru, in response to the Adoption Agencies (Wales) Regulations 2005, which set out the information that local authorities must include when reporting on children put forward for adoption. More than 250 discrete pieces of information were sought from each CARA record. The CARAs report on children’s experiences and needs within the domains of health, education, emotional/behavioural development, self-care skills, identity, family and social presentation. They also provide a record of the characteristics and experiences of the children’s birth parents, the given reasons children were placed for adoption and the actions taken by the LA. CARAs are completed by social workers, who record information based on their work with the birth parents, contact with foster carers, liaison with other professionals (such as police, health visitors and medical officers) and reviews of historical social services records. Under the Adoption Agencies (Wales) Regulations 2005, adoptive parents should be provided with the CARA when matched with a child, so that they have detailed information about the child and their pre adoption experiences.

About two-thirds of the CARAs reviewed were in electronic format,

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