



Unemployment, education and social exclusion:

the case of young people from public care¹

Sonia Jackson and Claire Cameron, Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, London UK

The EU Strategy for Youth, 'Investing and Empowering', announced in May 2009 and now adopted by the European Commission, recognised young people as one of the most vulnerable groups in society, especially in the current economic and financial crisis.

Figures for 2009 show a steep rise in youth unemployment in all EU countries. For example in Denmark there was an increase of 61 % compared with the same quarter in 2008, in Catalonia an increase of 44.5 on an already high level. In Hungary almost a third of those aged 20-24 are unemployed, compared with a national unemployment rate of 9.5%; in Sweden the unemployment rate for 20-24-year-olds is five times the rate for other age groups.

England reported the highest rate of increase in any European country, with 943,000 under 24 unemployed. The number of young people aged 16-18 not in education, employment or training (NEET) rose by 10,000 in the first two quarters of 2009. This caused such alarm that the government announced an emergency package of measures designed to tackle the problem².

Employment and education

Longitudinal research has shown that, of all the identifiable groups in society, young people who have been in state care are the most likely to experience poor outcomes in adult life. The incidence of homelessness, teenage pregnancy, health problems, depression, drug and alcohol misuse, domestic violence and criminality is much higher among those with a background in care. All these negative outcomes are mediated by their propensity to become long-term unemployed, linked in turn to their low level of education.

The experience of previous recessions is that unemployment hits young people first and they are the last to get back to work when things improve. Given a choice, employers prefer to hire older and more experienced workers. Among young people, those with higher levels of education are less likely to become unemployed and for shorter periods of time. Although much anxiety is generated when new graduates have difficulty in obtaining jobs, the evidence is that they rarely remain unemployed for long unless they have other problems. Moreover, it is estimated that 70% of the new jobs that will be created as economies recover will require graduate level skills.

Care leavers, with at best basic education, no family back-up and poor social networks are at the highest risk of long-term unemployment and social exclusion. This is literally a matter of life and death. A retrospective study in the north of England found that 15 per cent of those 'NEET' at 19 had died within the following ten years³. Children in care are much more likely to become

¹ This paper is based on a presentation given by the YIPPEE research team at a seminar in Brussels on November 2009, hosted by the DG Education and Culture, European Commission. The other presenters were Ingrid Hojer (Sweden), Ferran Casas and Carme Montferrat (Spain), Marta Korintus (Hungary), Inge Bryderup and Marlene Trentel (Denmark). Further information about the project can be found on the website: <http://tcru.ioe.ac.uk/yippee>

² The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act, November 2009

³ cited by Jon Coles, Director-General of Schools, reported in, *Times Educational Supplement* August 7, 2009

NEET than those growing up in their own families. Swedish studies have also found a greatly elevated rate of premature death among young people formerly in care even compared with other socially disadvantaged youth⁴.

Most children in public care come from impoverished families with acute social problems who have no tradition of engagement in formal education and may be doubtful of its value. As a result, they generally have low expectations, often shared by their carers and social workers, and limited aspirations. For example, among young people living with their families in Hungary, 50% want to go to university; for those in children's homes the comparable figure is only 14%.

The aim of the **YiPPEE** project is to change this picture by exploring ways in which more young people from severely disadvantaged backgrounds, especially those who have been in state care as children, can be encouraged and enabled to stay at school or college beyond the age of compulsory schooling and progress to higher levels of education. This is becoming the normal expectation for young people growing up in their own families. Across the EU in 2007, 82% of 15 -19 year olds and a quarter of 20-29 year olds were in education. Of the five countries participating in YiPPEE, only England has a lower proportion than this.

Recognising the problem

The first stage in tackling a social problem is always to raise awareness that it exists, secondly, to find out the facts, and then to put remedial measures in place. Our research has found that for young people in care this process is only just beginning. In most European countries; children in care have not yet been identified as a group at especially high risk of educational failure with much reduced chances of accessing higher secondary and tertiary education. The exception is England where this has been a matter of government concern for over ten years. Since 2002 detailed annual statistics have been published on the educational attainment of children in care, comparing them with the general population. These show that among 16-year-old children in care only 14% achieve the target standard (5 passes in the General Certificate of Education at grades A*-C) compared with 54% of all children. At 19 only 6% are in any form of higher education, compared with in the population as a whole.

Comparable figures are not available for other countries but there are clear indications that a similar problem exists. For example, in Denmark 66% of young people leave care with no post-compulsory qualifications; only 7% achieve the upper secondary level certificate. In Catalonia, twice the proportion of children from public care have to repeat a school year by the age of 16 (61% compared with 30%). In Hungary, being in education or work is a condition for after-care accommodation, but the great majority of care leavers are in routine jobs or low-level vocational training, with only an estimated 3-5% in higher education, contrasting with very high participation rates in the general population. Only 7% living in children's homes pass the national secondary school leaving examination, as compared with 13% in foster care. The lower attainment of children in residential care is a consistent finding in all countries.

The lack of reliable statistics

Attempts to establish a baseline of participation in further and higher education, as a step towards improvement, encounter major problems. Information gaps are common in all countries and in most there is no publicly available data at all on the attainment or participation of children in care. This clearly reflects the lack of attention to education by child protection agencies and local government bodies responsible for the well-being of children in care.

⁴ Vinnerljung, B & Sallnäs, M (2008) Into adulthood: a follow-up study of 718 young people who were placed in out-of-home care during their teens in *Journal of Child and Family Social Work*. 13, issue 2, pp 144 – 155.

However, cross-national comparisons highlight the complexity of the issue. Different welfare regimes influence outcomes before, in and after care. The English approach of identifying need and setting targets is quite distinct from the normative approach which exists in other countries. In Denmark and Sweden, once young people reach 18, they are assumed to be no different from others of their age and able to benefit like them from widely available access to educational opportunities and generous welfare provision. Moreover, in Sweden most young people can stay in their foster placement until the end of upper secondary education. Hungary and Spain provide after care support and accommodation to a proportion of care leavers but with little emphasis on education. The effects of gender and ethnicity are under-researched topics. Hungary is known to have a high proportion of Roma children in care and children from minority ethnic backgrounds and asylum-seekers form a significant proportion of the English care population but there is no statistical information on their educational attainment.

Emerging findings

From the research so far a clear picture is emerging of young people leaving care as an overlooked and neglected group with little chance of succeeding in education or accessing stable and rewarding employment.

Based on a comprehensive review of the literature and surveys of local authorities and child protection agencies, we suggest that three groups of factors contribute to the poor educational attainment of children in care. First there are structural features, notably the organizational division between care and education services which has been identified as a major factor in the disregard of education for children in out-of-home care. When responsibility is located within the social welfare service social work concerns, centred on placement, attachment issues, emotional well-being, relationships with birth families and behaviour problems always take precedence over promoting and safeguarding educational progress.

Similarly, schools usually do not recognise pupils living away from home in foster or residential care as in need of additional support and enhanced learning opportunities. Again, England is an exception, with every school obliged by law to appoint a 'designated teacher' with special responsibility to promote the educational attainment of pupils in out-of-home care and advocate for them when necessary.

England is the only country to bring the two services together, in Departments of Children's Services combining responsibility for schools and social care. A major reform initiative called 'Care Matters' was launched in 2007 and appears to be having some effect in raising attainment and opportunities, although the gap between children in care and others remains very wide.⁵

Another structural factor is the legal framework, especially concerning the transition from care to independence. Explicit legislation is needed to oblige local authorities or child protection agencies to support young people over 18, financially and practically, to stay in education. Otherwise workload and budgetary pressures are likely to mean that attention and resources shift to the next cohort entering the care system, with the older group left without the backup they need, and for which other children can usually turn to their families.

England has the most highly-developed after-care service, underpinned by the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, which lays a duty on local authorities to keep in touch with young people who have been in their care and to provide whatever support is needed, up to age 24 for those in full-time education. Every English local authority has a dedicated leaving care team, although there are significant variations in the services they provide. In the latest phase of the YIPPEE research a survey was conducted in which a quarter of leaving care managers and those with similar responsibilities in other countries were interviewed. There were indications that

⁵ *Care Matters Ministerial Stocktake 2009*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, England

some were beginning to prioritise investment in education in preference to pushing young people into low-paid unskilled jobs, which in any case are increasingly unavailable.

Barriers and facilitators to wider participation

The second set of factors constituting barriers to participation in further and higher education are characteristics of the care system itself. As yet the rhetoric of consulting children about decisions that concern them, in line with Article 12 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, is not matched by children's everyday experience, so that they feel very little control over their own lives and little incentive to plan ahead. Placement moves are often arranged at short notice and without concern for the educational implications. Irregular school attendance, especially in the early years when basic skills are established, mean that young people who have been in care often have serious gaps in their learning and are not ready to move on to higher levels at the expected age. The educational level of care providers and the extent to which they prioritise education in everyday living is another problem in many countries, especially the UK. In most countries local authorities have a great deal of autonomy in deciding what resources they will devote to the education of children in care, which results in the wide variations we have discovered.

Thirdly, there are the attitudes of social workers and teachers and the low expectations and aspirations which many of them hold for children in care. As we showed in the Hungarian case, these are often shared by the children themselves, sometimes reflecting the cultural background of their birth families. On the other hand many young people in care fully understand the importance of education and are frustrated by the obstacles they have to overcome.

So what helps these young people to stay in education when they are no longer legally obliged to do so? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most important facilitator is reliable and predictable financial support, together with encouragement and emotional support from a consistent adult. Without this security many young people do not have the confidence to commit themselves to a course of study.

Other facilitating factors are: carers who provide an educationally stimulating home environment, early intervention when children have literacy or numeracy problems or seem to be falling behind; outreach programmes from higher education institutions, with university students acting as mentors to individual children in care. Raising aspirations and expectations and supporting young people to achieve them was seen as crucial by the professionals we interviewed in our survey. This needs to happen from the time when children first enter the care system and be continuously reinforced.

The European Pact for Youth stated in 2005::

Integrating young people into society and working life can only be achieved if they are properly equipped with knowledge, skills and competence through high quality education and training.

This must be our aim for young people who have been in state care no less than for all young people. But the YIPPEE research shows that it will not be achieved without a much stronger focus on enabling them to achieve educational success in line with others of their age. Good intentions and good practice at an individual level have to be backed by legislation, clear government policies and incentives and resources for social workers and carers.

Website: <http://tcru.ioe.ac.uk/yippee>