

Girls in care more likely to report lower well-being than boys

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Credit: University of Bristol

About a quarter of girls in care have low well-being and feel the stigma of care more deeply than do boys according to a new study, announced today [8 Mar], which set out to understand what well-being means to looked after children. The study of 611 looked after children produced some positive results with 83 percent of children saying that being in care had improved their lives. Compared to the general population more looked after children felt safe at home, liked school and felt their carers were interested in their education. However, nearly one in five young people aged between 11-18 yrs had low well-being and needed much more support.

Recent figures¹ show there are over 70, 000 looked after [children](#) in England, the majority of whom are in care because of parental abuse and neglect. Children often enter care with physical, emotional and behavioural difficulties and generally do not achieve the same level of academic success as their peers and are more likely to have problems with crime, drugs and [mental health](#). The Department for Education publishes 'outcome' data on looked after children's educational achievements, offending, mental health, and number of teenage pregnancies but, there is no information collected on how children themselves feel about their well-being and their lives in care.

The Our Lives Our Care study was led by Professor Julie Selwyn at the University of Bristol's Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies and Linda Briheim-Crookall from the children's rights charity Coram Voice. It is part of the Bright Spots project² which aims to improve the care experiences of young people by enabling local authorities to find out directly from young people about how they are doing in the areas that are important to them and what needs to change for the better.

Three online surveys comprising 16 core questions were created for children aged between 4-7 yrs, 8-10 yrs (junior school) and 11-18 yrs (secondary school). The surveys were completed by children and young people across six local authorities and captured their subjective well-being—how children felt about their lives and care, including their relationships, opportunities and support they received.

Around 80 per cent of children said that they felt settled in their foster or residential placements. Children commented "want to stay where I am and not go home" (4-7 yrs) and "better than it was when I was not in care" (11-18 yrs). In comparison with children in the general population more looked after children, especially boys, wrote that they liked school.

However, while life had improved for most, half of young children (4-7 yrs) did not understand why they were in care and, although understanding increased with age, more than a quarter of teenagers did not fully understand why they were looked after.

One young person (11-18 yrs) wrote, 'I would like someone to talk to about my feelings and tell me about my past. I would like to see a picture of my dad so I know what he looks like. I would like to see a picture of me as a baby. I have never seen a picture of me. I have a lot of questions that no-one answers.'

Children highlighted the importance of having a trusted adult in their lives. But placements changed and nearly a third (31 percent) of the young people (11-18 yrs) reported that they had been allocated three or more different social workers in the year. One young person's response to a question asking 'What would make care better?' wrote 'By not having 14 social workers in three years'.

In 2016, the Good Childhood study³ reported a worrying finding that one in seven girls (10-15 yrs) in the general population reported feeling unhappy with their appearance. In this survey, 23 percent of girls in care were unhappy with the way they looked and were much more likely to have low well-being in comparison with boys. Girls were less positive about the future, less likely to say that life was worthwhile and less likely to record that life was improving. Girls also seemed to feel the stigma of care more deeply than did boys. They were more likely to comment on how being in care made them feel different. One girl (11-18 yrs) wrote she wanted to be 'A normal child. Not having to get permission to go on school trips, holidays and staying at friends' houses.'

Professor Julie Selwyn, CBE, Director of the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies and lead author of the study, said: "The results of the study raise important questions about the difference

in caring for girls and boys and supports the need for a more 'gender aware' approach to be taken. The findings highlight the need for more continuity of social workers and show that efforts to support children in care are having positive outcomes."

Dr Carol Homden CBE, CEO of Coram said: "Our Lives Our Care is a vital groundbreaking report which, if embedded in practice, can transform the lives of looked after children and young people. It is incredibly heartening that such large majority of looked after children feel that their lives have improved since coming into care and this is a testimony to the commitment of many local authorities to the children for whom they are the 'corporate parent'. However, while there are Bright Spots of practice, there is still much that we all need to do to improve the well-being and life chances of looked after children and ensure they have the support and reassurance they need to successfully make their way in the world."

The study also found that nearly one in five children aged between 11-18 yrs, one in ten children (8-10 yrs), and one in 14 very young children (4-7 yrs), described themselves as sad and needing much more support. This group of children with low well-being were more likely to not like their appearance, did not have a trusted adult in their lives, did not take part in activities or hobbies, worried about their feelings or behaviour, did not like their bedrooms, and did not feel settled in their placement.

More information: "Our lives, Our care": [www.bristol.ac.uk/media-librar ... BROCHURE ONLINE.pdf](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-librar..._BROCHURE_ONLINE.pdf)

Provided by University of Bristol

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