

Care leavers face 'acute challenges' in transition to adulthood

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Care leavers in England are more than 10 times more likely than their peers to not be working or studying in their 21st year, a new study has shown. (Care leavers are "any adult who spent time in care as a child," including "foster care, residential care, or other arrangements outside the immediate or extended family.")

Researchers from the Universities of York, Oxford and Exeter showed that almost one-third of care leavers were not working or studying compared to just 2.4% of comparable young people who had never had experience of the children's social care system.

The majority of these were defined as "economically inactive" due to disability (including [mental health issues](#)) or caring responsibilities. Among those care leavers who were working, over two-thirds were in precarious roles that were short-term, [part-time](#) or poorly paid.

Remove barriers

Jo Dixon, from the University of York's School of Business and Society, said, "More can be done to remove barriers and disincentives to work for care-experienced young people, including addressing the impact of low minimum wage rates for under 23s in employment and apprenticeships, who are without [parental support](#), and carry financial responsibility for rent and living costs.

"There is already scope to implement ring-fenced and supported work-related opportunities specifically for care-experienced young people. Guaranteed interviews, targeted and supported work-experience schemes and dedicated employment opportunities should be on offer.

"Utilizing corporate parenting and [corporate social responsibility](#) in this way will benefit care-experienced young people and the local labor market."

Level of need

Researchers used data, including the newly available Longitudinal Educational Outcomes, or LEO, dataset for young people born between 1st September 1995 and 31st August 1996.

A total of 3,850 out of the 530,440 individuals were care leavers and 28,810 had some experience of the children's social care system. They also interviewed 28 care leavers and 41 professionals across five [local authorities](#), including personal advisers, leaving care team members, virtual school staff and caregivers.

The research shows a strong link between economic inactivity and higher levels of special educational needs during Key Stage 4, including attending a special school. This was particularly marked for care leavers, of whom 62.4% were identified as having a high level of need.

Legacy

Neil Harrison, from the University of Exeter, said, "This is the first study of its kind to explore over time what happens to care leavers and other care-experienced young people in early adulthood. We have been able to document the acute challenges they face in making positive

transitions towards stability and well-being.

"What we clearly see in the data is that the legacy of earlier disadvantages, such as [childhood trauma](#) or disruptions to schooling, gets cemented in early adulthood. While around a quarter of care leavers were able to access [higher education](#) or stable work by their 21st year, the majority were reliant on benefits or precarious employment."

Social networks

Good GCSE grades—especially in English and mathematics—had a very strong role in determining which onward pathways were available. However, many care leavers were not able to attain as highly as they might due to what was going on in their lives.

Those interviewed said the support of extended family and other social networks was essential to them finding jobs and transitioning to adult life.

Care leavers and professionals reported practical barriers in accessing youth employment schemes like Kickstart. They supported care leavers being given preferential access to employment opportunities by councils as part of their "corporate parenting" responsibilities.

Recommendations from the study include:

- Providing strong routes for young people to go into (and back into) post-16 education and training
- National government should provide additional "top up" funding for care leavers to participate in apprenticeships and other schemes to ensure that they are not financially disadvantaged
- Young people leaving care between 14 and 16 should be considered as an "at risk" group with respect to complex

transitions into adulthood.

- Stronger links with local employers to improve young people's knowledge of the range of opportunities available to them.
- Targeted pre-employment and pre-apprenticeship support to prepare young people with the most complex needs to take steps towards work-related opportunities.
- Education providers and employers should have greater awareness of trauma and mental health needs for care leavers and other care-experienced [young people](#).

Provided by University of York

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