

Care leavers and their pathways in post compulsory education:

Key findings from the YIPPEE research study

Yippee is a three-year research project funded under the EU Framework 7 Program on Youth and Social Inclusion. Its aim is to encourage and enable young people who were in out-of-home care at 16 to remain in post-compulsory education. This is becoming an essential step towards achieving social integration in adulthood. Five European member states, representing different welfare regimes form the project partnership. They are England (coordinator), Denmark, Sweden, Hungary and Spain. National and comparative reports can be found on the website: <http://tcru.ioe.ac.uk/yippee>



Project objectives

- To track the educational pathways of young men and women in public care after the end of compulsory schooling
- To compare different systems and experiences in five European countries and make recommendations

Research methods

This is the first European study of young people from public care and their educational pathways after completing compulsory school. It uses a multi-method approach including literature review, study visits, examination of policy contexts, analysis of national and local statistics, surveys and local area case studies. Interviews have been conducted with 170 young men and women, 59 social service managers and educationists and 111 adults nominated by the young people. Cross-national meetings are held in each country to compare findings and develop theoretical perspectives.

Main findings

- In all countries the attainment of children in care falls far below that of others.
- Children in care are largely invisible because they make up only 1-2% of the population, and have not been identified as a marginalised group except in England.
- Most young people in care experience many disruptions in their educational pathways and fall progressively behind their age cohort.
- If there is no legal duty to provide social and economic support past 18 years, it is difficult for them to progress to higher levels of education.
- Administrative divisions between care and education create problems in all countries. England is the only one to have joined them up administratively, both centrally and locally.
- Social workers generally give low priority to educational matters and focus on placement and relationship issues.
- Professionals have low aspirations for young people in care and routinely steer them into basic vocational training or short-term jobs.
- Children in care do better initially in countries with more highly qualified and well educated carers, but fall behind later due to low expectations and lack of support.

Country comparisons

There are major differences between countries in care and education systems, often making direct comparisons difficult. In Hungary, the school leaving age is 18. In all other countries it is formally 16, but in practice almost all children living with their own families continue into upper secondary education. Higher education is free in Sweden and Denmark, but English universities charge high fees. In England, the 'normal' pathway is straight from school to university at 18, although some may take a 'gap' year in between. In Denmark and Sweden, students often enter

university later, as late as in their mid-twenties, so outcome comparisons at ages 19 or 20 can be misleading. In England, most young people in care leave school at 16 and move to further education colleges which offer both academic and vocational courses, but can be very anonymous and confusing to young people. Family foster care is the preferred form of substitute care in Sweden and England. In the other countries, around half of children are accommodated in group homes. Foster care in Spain is mainly with relatives. Care and school placements are least stable in England.

Many very resilient and highly motivated young people are defeated by the numerous obstacles they encounter. It is essential to give them equal opportunities if they are to achieve social integration in adulthood.

Leaving care

The official age of leaving care is 18 in all countries but arrangements for further support differ widely. Only England lays a legal duty on local authorities to maintain contact with young people they have looked after and support them, up to age 25 if they are in full time education. In Spain and Hungary young people can remain in residential accommodation until age 25 with conditions related to work or study. In Sweden and Denmark care leavers are considered to be just like anyone else, with access to universal welfare benefits. There is provision for support in Denmark but low take-up.

Only England has dedicated leaving care teams (since 2001), but it is much more common than in other countries for young people to leave care early (at 16 or 17) and to live independently in social or subsidized housing. The researchers found that it was difficult for them to stay in education with all the additional pressures involved in domestic responsibilities, and budgeting to pay rent and bills on a low income.

Before coming into care, they had usually attended school intermittently with many interruptions due to family crises, changes of placement and health or behaviour difficulties.

Young people and their experiences

The characteristics of the 170 young men and women interviewed in depth in the five countries were remarkably similar. Almost all came from complicated and chaotic families with mental health and/or addiction problems. Half had experienced the death of at least one parent by age 15 and nearly two-thirds had suffered severe abuse or neglect before entering care. They had entered care at different ages, about half at 14 or above.

Half of the Swedish young people had periods out of school for three months or more. Few (apart from some asylum-seekers in England) had parents who took an interest in their education or gave it high importance. Once in care their experiences were mixed, with some reporting supportive and encouraging social pedagogues and educators in residential homes, especially in Denmark, and foster carers who were highly supportive emotionally and educationally.

In Spain and Hungary, professionals were strongly focused on the need for young people to be able to support themselves financially after care and therefore usually advised them to undertake vocational training leading directly to employment. This was somewhat less likely in England where government initiatives after 1998 laid a strong emphasis on raising participation in higher education of disadvantaged groups, specifically targeting care leavers. This did not occur in other countries, partly due to the absence of published statistics highlighting the gap in attainment between young people in care and others.

Recommendations

- A Europe-wide policy is needed, highlighting the education of young people in and after public care as a key issue for social integration
- Statistics on attainment and participation should be collected and published to enable comparisons with the general population
- Care and education systems should be synchronised and work together to provide maximum support and encouragement
- Teachers and schools need to understand the special circumstances of children in care and social workers should give priority to education
- Foster and residential carers should play a central role in supporting and promoting educational progress

There were many accounts, especially in England, of foster and residential homes where little interest was taken in their school work and there was no incentive to try hard or do well.

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