




Children of care leavers risk inheriting parents' emotional scars

February 7 2024

Birth 	School years 	Adult 
Household composition Parental social class Obstetric history Smoking in pregnancy Pregnancy (problems, antenatal care) Labour (length, pain relief, problems) Birthweight, length	Household composition Parental social class Parental employment Financial circumstances Housing Health Cognitive tests Emotions and behaviour School Views and expectations Attainment	Household composition Employment Social class Income Housing Health (including biomarkers) Well-being and mental health Health-related behaviour Training and qualifications Cognitive tests Views and expectations

Summary of information collected in the studies over the lifecourse. Credit: *Long-term outcomes for care leavers who became parents and experiences of their children – Evidence on the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage in two British cohort studies (2024)*

The trauma associated with care experience casts a long shadow on mothers' mental health and that of their children, finds new UCL research.

The researchers found that mothers who had lived in care were at greater

risk of mental health difficulties than their peers who hadn't experienced care, with their children also experiencing higher rates of psychological problems.

However, there was evidence of resilience among care leavers. Although they were more likely to experience multiple disadvantages in health, education, and employment, more than a quarter of mothers who grew up in care went on to gain educational qualifications and have stable employment.

The research, supported by the Nuffield Foundation, involved mothers and their children participating in the Millennium Cohort Study, which follows people born across the UK between 2000 and 2002. Of the more than 18,000 mothers included in the analysis, around 300 (1.7%) reported that they had lived in a children's home or in foster care during childhood.

Lead author Dr. Sam Parsons (UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies) said, "This is the first UK study to show that the emotional scars associated with growing up in care are passed down through generations."

"Care leavers and their children were at greater risk of mental health problems, including symptoms of depression and anxiety. Their children also experienced higher levels of behavioral problems, self-harm, and suicidal intent. But, with most care leavers suffering deep and persistent inequalities, more than a quarter beat the odds to succeed in school, at work, and in family life."

Mental health inequalities

Mothers who spent time in care were more likely to have [mental health problems](#) than those who hadn't grown up in care:

- 45% (of mothers with care experience) v 28% (of mothers without care experience) had been diagnosed with depression by the time their child was nine months old.

Their children were also more likely than their peers to experience poor mental health, especially during mid to late adolescence:

- 21% v 10% were diagnosed with depression or anxiety,
- 38% v 26% had reported self-harming; and,
- 16% v 7% had reported self-harming with suicidal intent.

Overcoming disadvantage

Mothers who grew up in care were at much greater risk than their peers of a range of negative experiences and disadvantaged circumstances in adulthood:

- 47% v 25% lived in poverty,
- 38% v 11% had no or low-level educational qualifications,
- 24% v 12% lived in a workless household,
- 14% v 6% lived with a violent partner.

However, 27% showed resilience; they had gained educational qualifications, were part of a working household, and were less likely to live in poverty than other care leavers.

Mothers with care experience who showed resilience were more likely to have had:

- more stable [foster care](#) than other mothers who had been in care (66% v 50%), and
- gained higher qualifications at school (79% v 30%).
- After leaving care, they tended to live in better housing and were

more likely to be employed.

The children of these resilient mothers were more likely to get good grades at school (five or more GCSEs at grade 4-9 at 16) than the children of other care leavers (53% v 29%), doing just as well as their peers whose parents had not experienced care. However, children of resilient mothers were still more likely to report poor mental health than children whose parents had not lived in care.

Outlook in adulthood

The researchers were also able to look at the experiences of the children of care leavers throughout adulthood by using data from the 1970 British Cohort Study, which follows more than 17,000 people born in Great Britain during one week in 1970. By their mid-40s, children of care leavers had spent less time in education and employment and tended to report worse mental health than their peers whose parents had not been in care.

However, compared to men, women whose mothers had lived in care showed some resilience, being just as likely to gain educational qualifications and be in stable employment as their counterparts whose parents had not been in care.

Dr. Parsons said, "Although many of the care leavers in the study suffered multiple socioeconomic disadvantages and were more likely to experience mental health issues and chaotic home lives, our new research shows that with the right support, care leavers can thrive as adults and parents,, leading healthy, productive lives.

"In 2001, 44 out of every 10,000 children in England and Wales were in care—today that figure is 70 in every 10,000 and it continues to rise. It is, therefore, imperative that the government acts upon our findings to

provide targeted and long-term integrated support to care leavers and their children."

"By extending the eligibility for state support beyond age 21, care leavers can stay with their foster family or in state care for longer. Mental health assessments and treatment should also recognize that psychological problems can be passed from one generation to the next."

"An enduring safety net of secure housing and supportive relationships can be a lever for building resilience among care leavers and their families. This is crucial to break the vicious cycle of disadvantage and care experience."

Ash Patel (Programme Head for Justice at the Nuffield Foundation) said, "This pioneering research paints a complicated picture of the vulnerability, disadvantage and resilience of care leavers. It highlights the persistence and inter-generational nature of the adversity they experience and demonstrates how disadvantage can be moderated through the provision of long-term care and support."

"The proposal that care experience should be considered a protected characteristic under equalities legislation, to give care leavers legal protections provided to other vulnerable groups, emerges as a clear recommendation from the research."

More information: Report: [cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploa ...
-research-report.pdf](https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/cls-research-report.pdf)

Provided by University College London

Citation: Children of care leavers risk inheriting parents' emotional scars (2024, February 7)

retrieved 29 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-02-children-leavers-inheriting-parents-emotional.html>

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