

Tackling the problem of self-harm among children in care

19 September 2013, by Emma Thorne



The problem of self-harm among young people in care is to be tackled as part of a new research project being led by The University of Nottingham.

The study will offer 11 to 18 year olds living in either [residential care](#) homes or with foster carers and care leavers the chance to speak out about why they self-harm and will attempt to identify any common themes which led them to this behaviour.

The project will also aim to highlight services or support which is particularly successful in helping looked-after young people who self-harm in their recovery. The research results will be used in the future to inform the development of [improved health](#) and [social services](#).

Dr Ellen Townsend, in the University's School of Psychology, is leading the research. She said: "Self-harm is a serious sign of [emotional distress](#) and is still relatively poorly understood by academics and clinicians. Significant NHS resources are required to deal with the assessment and management of self-harm.

"Each year approximately 200,000 episodes of self-harm are seen in general hospitals in England and Wales and many more hidden episodes occur in the community.

"This is very worrying because self-harm is the

strongest predictor of eventual suicide and each suicide significantly affects many other individuals. Looked-after young people are at particularly high-risk of self-harmful behaviour yet there is sparse research targeting this group.

Voice of experience

"The study is called the Listen-up! project because we know that many young people who self-harm do not feel listened to. This is why our advisory group will be made up of young people who have experience of self-harm and being in care. We want to give voice to their experiences using robust psychological methods which can increase our understanding of self-harm and inform the development of suitable supports and services for this behaviour. We would like to invite young people interested in being on our [advisory board](#) to get in touch with me via email for more information about this."

The young people—and their carers—will be interviewed about their experiences of self-harming and will also take part in a series of computer-based interviews which will allow researchers to track their self-harm and trends in their behaviour and recovery over a longer period of time. The computer-based interviews allow [young people](#) who struggle with reading to take part as they will hear the questions via headphones and indicate their response with a mouse click. This method also enhances privacy and increases disclosure about sensitive topics like self-harm.

The project, which will run until 2016 has been funded by the Department of Health Policy Research Programme research initiative to support the implementation of the new [Suicide Prevention Strategy for England](#).

Provided by University of Nottingham

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