



UNIVERSITY

of York

Care system not to blame for increased risk of mental health issues in children

Posted on 20 June 2017

Children in the care system – who are more likely to have mental health difficulties than others in the wider population – are not more at risk due to being in care, according to new research from the University of York.



The study, led by Professor Nina Biehal in York's Department of Social Policy and Social Care and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), suggests that mental health issues can also be down to a child's treatment before they entered local authority care.

The study analysed the mental health of nearly 400 children who had either been in foster care, or supported at home on a child protection plan but had never been in care.

All were aged under 10 and had experienced abuse or neglect, or were at high risk of these forms of harm in a minority of cases.

Researchers found that:

- More than a third (34 per cent) of those who had been in care were assessed as having emotional and behavioural difficulties. This compares with the one in ten (10 per cent) children in the general population

who have difficulties of this kind.

- The experience of being in care is not the main reason why 'looked after' children have these difficulties. More than a quarter (26 per cent) of those exposed to abuse or neglect who had not entered care were also assessed as having emotional and behavioural issues.
- Children who had previously experienced more types of abuse or neglect were more likely to show signs of mental health problems, compared to those who had experienced fewer types.
- Children were followed up on average four years after they were first referred to social workers. Researchers found that, at this point, the family context in which the children were living also had a bearing on their mental health.
- Children were more likely to have emotional or behavioural problems if their current caregivers had mental health difficulties. However, children who had a warm relationship with their caregivers were less likely to have these problems.

Professor Biehal said: "Our study shows that mental health issues in young children, who are looked after due to abuse and neglect, are likely to be at least partly due to their experiences before entering care. They are not solely a result of the time they have spent being looked after."

"It is vitally important to pay attention to the mental wellbeing of those who look after vulnerable young people. The quality of relationships these children experience, as well as those living with their families, should also be monitored."

0

Further information:

- 'Outcomes for Maltreated Children' was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and carried out by Professor Nina Biehal, Helen Baldwin, Dr Linda Cusworth and Jim Wade at the University of York's Department of Social Policy and Social Work.
- The project involved data from 390 children. A total of 216 were either in care or had been at some stage because of maltreatment (the care group), and 174 were on a child protection plan but had never been in care (the home group). The average age of the children was six years when the researchers interviewed them or their parents. Children's mental health was measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), which was administered with children's parents or foster carers, according to where they were living at the time of follow-up. Data on their histories was collected via a survey of their social workers. A standardised measure of maltreatment was used, the Modified Maltreatment Classification System (MMCS).
- The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the UK's largest organisation for funding research on economic and social issues. It supports independent, high quality research which has an impact on business, the public sector and the third sector. The ESRC's total budget for 2017/18 is £xxx

million. At any one time the ESRC supports over 4,000 researchers and postgraduate students in academic institutions and independent research institutes.

- For more information about the University of York's Department of Social Policy and Social Work, visit: <https://www.york.ac.uk/spsw/>

Contact details

Saskia Angenent
Press Officer

Tel: 01904 323918

saskia.angenent@york.ac.uk

Keep up to date

[Subscribe to news feeds](#)

[Follow us on Twitter](#)