

Anti-poverty strategies for care leavers: the same as prisoners?

David Graham proposes more positive opportunities for both groups

Every year there is an average of 70,000 young people in the care system with around 10,000 leaving care. In all of the work that we do at The Care Leavers Association we see young people who are struggling to make their way in adult life. Poverty is an issue that frequently presents itself. New strategies are required, but should these strategies be the same for care leavers as they are for prisoners? There are definitely some overlaps between the experiences of care leavers and prisoners as a group. Living in and leaving an institution is central to both, as is the lack of support received from each institution. There are particularly key issues surrounding transitions relevant to both groups. And often in our work with care leavers, both outside and inside the criminal justice system, we see people being abandoned both by professionals and the system. That being said both groups have distinct qualities that need to be fully understood for any strategy to be successful.

Listening to the experiences

The Care Leavers Association has been listening to the experiences of care leavers for 16 years. In summary some of the things they have told us related to poverty include:

- Most mention money being a problem
- Over 50 per cent are on benefits
- High numbers in low paid jobs
- Many living in deprived areas
- Difficulties in getting up the housing ladder
- Difficulties with fuel poverty – often going without heat and light

- Budgeting hard – often buying cheap and low quality food
- They were given limited support to budgeting at 14 but were not interested at that age
- Difficulties in getting benefits and surviving on them

The young people that we work with on a daily basis tell us that employment is a key issue. In the current climate it's difficult to get a job. But as a care leaver you have to face this challenge with an arm tied behind your back. There are often issues related to work readiness. For some it's a cliff edge change from one day being 'looked after' to suddenly living independently. It can be difficult to organise yourself to get up and out to a job when nobody has ever bothered to teach you how to do it.

All of the above issues relate to young people but we should remember that the term care leavers relates to any adult who was in care as a child. For some care leavers in middle age they still find themselves dealing with the same challenges of poverty, lack of education, isolation and poorer mental health. Others are able to develop better coping strategies and improve their life outcomes. In a study of 330 care leavers, the majority had achieved a degree and sometimes a second degree, by middle age, thus showing

that ability was not the issue – but a lack of opportunity (Duncalf, 2010).

So what might be some of the underlying causes of poverty amongst care leavers?

The first cause is the lack of family support networks which leads to isolation. When there is nobody to help it can only take for one thing to go wrong and it can be difficult to respond positively. There is no bank of mum and dad to go back to in times of need. It's a difficult environment in which to save and government-funded ISA schemes are a drop in the ocean. Leaving Care grants available to help set up a home are often restricted by the local authority.

The second issue is the early age of independence. We are asking 18 year-olds to leave care and go out on their own and set up house and live as fully functioning adults. Can anyone do this, never mind a young person who has been through a

traumatic experience of being in care?

Linked to this is a lack of preparation. Research from the Children's Rights Director (Morgan, 2006; 2008; 2011) consistently tells us that young people are not prepared for leaving care. In a

residential home they may get a few weeks of practice in a semi-independent training home. They may have some sessions, on budgeting and cooking. Foster parents may or may not pass on life skills. But it's not going to be enough.

The lack of skills is caused by a disrupted education. Schooling goes into the background as the trauma of separation takes effect. This is further compounded by the number of placement moves a young person has to experience.

Not enough consideration is given by professionals to how the emotional upheaval affects attainment. Young people are generally left to get on with it and residential staff and foster

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parents are inadequately trained to provide the right support. When do care leavers get the chance to sort this out? Leaving care support, as defined in the legislation, makes it quite clear that if a young person goes back to education for anything – even basic skills – their support services will be turned back on. But is it enough?

At the moment support is available up to 21 years of age but then you have to be in education or training to continue the support until you are 25. This disadvantages the vast majority of care leavers. But when you cease to qualify for support, the support that you receive suddenly stops. This is a key transition stage where you need extra support but actually get less. Too much of the support offered is based on age and not on actual need. There is a big issue about the quality and amount of support care leavers receive from local authorities. The government only lays down in legislation limits on a few areas of support – everything else is left to each local authorities. This creates a postcode lottery where even siblings can get different support in the same area. As the corporate parent, all departments and services in the local authority should be geared up to supporting care leavers.

What is it like for care leavers in the criminal justice system?

There is a big disconnect between social care and CJS policy – around age. In social care, a young person will be with Children's Services until they are 21 or even 25 but by then will have moved into the adult CJS. This often results in a confusion over who has responsibility. What we see is an effective abandonment of young people. The care system hands them over to the CJS. There is very little working together. Even though responsibility is outlined in legislation we see social workers who only knew a care leaver was in prison after they got out and told them. Assessments and visits often do not take place when they are supposed to.

There is also a reluctance by CJS staff – prisons or probation – to look at care experience. We often see cases where a young person doesn't know three or four days before leaving prison where they will be.

Sometimes criminal justice can provide a space for support and services to be offered. We have established peer support groups in some prisons. It also provides a space and structure to a chaotic life which can be beneficial.

So should anti-poverty strategies for care leavers and prisoners be the same?

Yes. Up to 44 per cent of the youth justice population have been in care (Murray, 2012). But only seven per cent of the care population end up in the CJS (Harker and Heath, 2014). There could be a danger of pathologising – 'everybody from care is bad mad and dangerous to know'. So anti-poverty interventions for the general population should work. But they need to address three main areas:

- Separation and trauma – why they went into care
- The care experience itself – its emotional impact
- Lack of support networks

These needs should be addressed for all care leavers as they will have a profound effect on how they get on in life.

Early criminalisation, particularly in residential, care is another issue. Young people in care should not be charged for breaking a window or incidents of bad behaviour. Residential care is seen as a public space and this needs to change.

There are some cross overs between care leavers and prisoners. They both face inequalities within a state system and within wider society. They experience discrimination and disadvantage. The need for social justice is strong in both camps.

The state also invests heavily in care leavers and prisoners. As such

both should get the support they need in order to achieve.

Government does not monitor or back up its investment. Money is spent and when they leave the system or are passed to another department, nobody cares.

So what would an anti-poverty strategy look like?

Any strategy needs to have elements outside of government control – as local authorities and government are part of the problem. At the CLA we believe in user-led and peer support. Care leavers can provide support and inspiration to each other. Whatever the solution is, care leavers need to be part of it.

Clearly there will be strength in numbers from working together with colleagues campaigning to improve outcomes for prisoners. Both are a social justice issue. We must provide prisoners with an opportunity for true rehabilitation. Both are entitled to a life free from discrimination.

Yet we must focus on the specific issues related to care leavers separately if any strategy is to be successful.

What is clear is that the vast majority of young people go into care because of abuse and neglect. It's not their fault. As a society we owe it to them to give them the best opportunities in life. We must do better. ■

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References

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