

# Comments from the roundtable

On 17 November 2014, the Centre organised a roundtable based on the theme, 'Prisoners and looked after children: a common cause?'

We are grateful to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for supporting this event.

Here are some comments from participants:

## Judy Corlyon – Poverty and women: issues specific to women

There are often greater financial repercussions for the families of imprisoned women than for those of male prisoners. Children of women prisoners are often either taken into the care system – suffering the disadvantages already highlighted in evidence reviews – or looked after by kinship carers, most often grandmothers. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation evidence review (2014) provides details of their financial difficulties – some already existing and others brought about by their new role. Moreover, for re-partnered grandmothers, undertaking kinship care can damage relationships if the new partner finds the demands of the changed situation unacceptable. This can lead to the breakdown of that relationship, and a further drop in grandmothers' income.

Kinship care arrangements are often informal and the child is not recognised by the local authority as being 'a child in need'. Pressure groups call for kinship carers' greater equality with foster carers, including the payment of a national allowance. Statutory guidance on Family and Friends Care (Department for Education, 2011) requires only that carers are made aware of sources of financial support and that local authorities are transparent about their discretionary powers to offer financial support under section 17(6) of the *Children Act 1989*. However, some local authorities have been slow to introduce these changes.

Young women in and leaving care are at increased risk of becoming pregnant, intentionally or unintentionally, while young men don't face a similar risk. Parenthood reduces their chances of being in education or employment and can lead to subsequent years of poverty. ■

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Judy Corlyon is Professional Partner, Tavistock Institute of Human Relations

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## References

Department for Education (2011), *Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities*, London.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2014), *Reducing poverty in the UK: a collection of evidence reviews*, London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

## Aggrey Burke – Prisoners and looked-after children: ethnicity and inequality

Looked-after children are seen to be victims of troubled family environments whereas criminal offenders are seen to be worthy of punishment. Both groups' experiences arise from the poverty of money, housing, self-esteem, lack of relevant skills and isolation. The discussants did not reflect on the range of issues faced by traditionally excluded sectors of society; no explanation was offered regarding very high rates of being looked-after, arrest and imprisonment in the black population. Permanent exclusion from school is highly associated with poverty, being looked after, delinquency and crime. These findings would explain the over-representations of the African, Caribbean and mixed-race populations in statistical reports of these problems. It is unclear whether socio-economic disadvantage and racism are equally important in the causation and outcome of these problems.

Although the distribution of adverse experiences may well be the underlying factor leading to both reception into care and prison it is likely that these experiences occur during different periods in the life cycle (childhood and adulthood). This raises the possibility of a disorder associated with adversities throughout life and with a relatively poor outcome.

It will be important to examine closely the pathways followed by the looked-after population, in order to find out whether those not involved in criminal activity can be clearly distinguished from the criminal population with no history of being looked-after. ■

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Dr Aggrey Burke, George Padmore Institute

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### Harriet Ward – Challenging discrimination amongst looked after children

There is considerable overlap between the needs of the looked after population and those of people in prison, but the two groups are very different. At least 70 per cent of children and young people in care never offend, and those who do have usually begun to commit offences prior to entering care (Darker et al., 2008). Confusion arises because the same vulnerability factors that precipitate children and young people into the care system (for instance, family dysfunction, abusive or neglectful parenting, and the emotional or behavioural difficulties that are often the consequences of abuse) are also found in prison populations.

Childhood maltreatment is associated with adult mental health problems, deficits in communication and social skills, poor literacy and numeracy, and gaps in education, all of which increase the likelihood of poverty, homelessness, unemployment and (re)-offending. Neither prison nor care offers sufficient effective, specialist support that might help their populations overcome these problems. The retributive aspects of criminal justice policy have always impeded the development of programmes designed to help prisoners improve their employment prospects, however effective they might be in reducing offending, and current austerity measures make this task even harder.

Over the last 20 years, numerous policies have been introduced to improve the outcomes of care. The Care Matters programme was part of the wider Every Child Matters initiative that set out an outcomes framework for the whole child population and explored ways of reducing the gap between looked after children and their peers. This finally marked an explicit rejection of the pernicious *Poor Law* principle of less eligibility: that the state should never provide vulnerable children and families with a higher standard of care than the poorest labourer might be able to offer. This huge conceptual advance legitimised programmes designed to address the consequences of past adversity, and reduce the likelihood of care leavers encountering poverty, unemployment and homelessness and/or joining the prison population in adulthood.

It is therefore imperative to question a public discourse that increasingly vilifies vulnerability and attempts to reintroduce concepts of the deserving and undeserving poor (the strivers and skivers). Unless this is challenged, it may again appear acceptable to discriminate against looked after children by arguing that they deserve less than their peers. ■

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Professor Harriet Ward CBE is at the Centre for Child and Family Research, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University

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#### Reference

Darker, I., Ward, H. and Caulfield, L. (2008), 'An analysis of offending in young people looked after by local authorities', *Youth Justice* 8(2), pp. 134-148.

### Victoria Lowry – Outcomes for children in care

Listening to the discussions at the roundtable led me to consider the importance of the social capital of young people from care as a contributor to and indicator of poverty. As they can for people in prison, strong and supportive relationships for young people in care can make all the difference to surviving successfully beyond the world of institutions.

Outcomes for children in care, as a whole, remain poor but evidence from this and other reviews also shows that those who remain in care for longer and have fewer and more stable placements do much better. Stable, secure relationships with key individuals can ensure that children receive the support they need to address prior trauma, pursue education, find and hold down a job and gain the skills and experience they need to move into adult life in a positive way.

Of course material resources are vitally important and, in a world where the average cost of going to university in the UK is over £10,000 per year, appropriate financial support for young people in care is crucial. However, social capital encourages a young person to take the step to university in the first place, helps them figure out what they're entitled to if they do go, fights to make sure they get that support, works with them to figure out how to manage it, then picks up the phone in the night to lend a listening ear when they're struggling with an essay, stress or feeling lonely. ■

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Victoria Lowry is Head of Strategy and Delivery, Who Care's Trust

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