

# Care leavers' transition into the labour market in England

## Research briefing for policymakers and representative organisations

### Headline messages

- Care leavers and other care-experienced young people are disproportionately likely to be NEET at 20 years and 7 months.
- Strong link between labour market transitions and KS4 outcomes, which can be undermined by disrupted schooling.
- Strong link between special educational needs, mental health, disability and economic inactivity in early adulthood.
- Important role for further education and 'second chance' routes for care leavers and other care-experienced young people.
- Important role for local authority leaving care teams and virtual schools in providing guidance and access to initiatives to support labour market transitions.
- Scope for increased support and targeted opportunities from corporate parents and other employment and training providers.

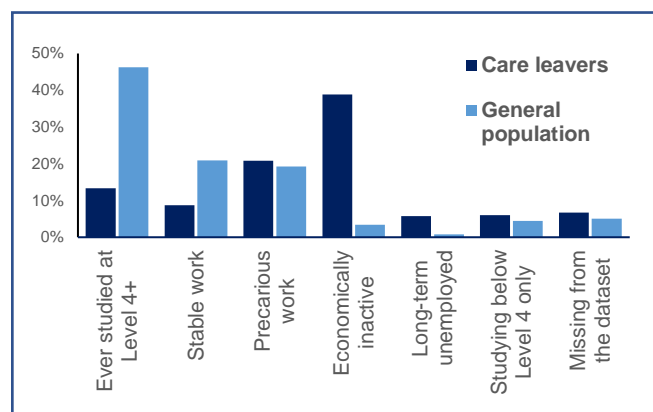
### The study

Our study, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, aimed to produce novel evidence to better understand transitions into early adulthood for care leavers and other care-experienced young people. There has been little research on this topic, although practitioners are keenly aware of the challenges faced.

We used two data sources. Firstly, we analysed national administrative data, including the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes dataset, to explore the whole cohort of 530,440 young people born in 1995/96 through to their 21<sup>st</sup> year. Secondly, we collected qualitative data from interviews and focus groups with 69 young people, carers and professionals across five contrasting local authority areas.

### Summary of findings

The report is wide-ranging and it is only possible to report outline findings here. The most notable finding was care leavers and other care-experienced young people had starkly different outcomes at the census point of 20 years and 7 months to their peers who had not had experience of the care system. We divided young people into seven outcome categories covering education, employment and various forms of unemployment.



Young people in the general population were most likely to have engaged in study at Level 4+ (mainly in higher education) or to be in stable work. Conversely, care leavers were most likely to be economically inactive (due to disability and/or caring responsibilities) or in precarious work. These outcomes were strongly linked to KS4 attainment and being identified as having special education needs in school – there were also trends by gender and ethnicity.

Young people often told us that they had not attained as well at KS4 as they might have done due to disruptions with their schooling linked with care, or challenges with their mental health or undiagnosed learning difficulties:

***'[School] never really found out I was dyslexic 'til I got into Year 11, so I used to underachieve... massively. They just like put it down to behaviour because of ... the stereotype of being in care.'* (Care leaver)**

Lower KS4 attainment, especially in English and maths, then impacted on their adult transition by limiting study or work options. As a result, care leavers and other care-experienced young people were more likely than other young people to make use of further education, with over two-thirds doing so. This also highlights the importance of 'second chance' study opportunities in adulthood.

Most care leavers and other care-experienced young people in work were in precarious roles. Care leavers and professionals reported that job opportunities were limited and often insecure and poorly paid. Fewer than one-in-ten care leavers was in a stable job and these often paid only minimum wage. Many therefore enter work that is unlikely to provide a sound platform for their long-term emotional and economic wellbeing, with no family 'safety net'.

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Some care leavers and professionals reported that pay levels for apprenticeships and employment in relation to the cost of maintaining independent or semi-independent living was a strong disincentive to engage with and sustain work or work-focused training:

***'[Having] zero-hour contracts as opposed to permanent contracts ... the impact of that on their benefits, which therefore impacts on their accommodation. It's that cycle of struggles.'* (Professional)**

Through our interviews, we identified elements of apparent good practice in local authorities that we concluded were having tangible positive impacts 'on the ground' in terms of providing access to employment, training or further study, including in-house apprenticeships and jobs. A full cost-benefit analysis of these was beyond the scope of our study.

Most care leavers and other care-experienced young people who were not working were economically inactive, including those assessed as unable to work due to disability. For many, this was linked to mental health issues arising from traumatic experiences before, during or after being in care. Young people discussed how mental health issues were an important barrier to securing and maintaining employment.

The economically inactive group also included those with caring responsibilities, primarily for children, reflecting substantially higher-than-average rates of early parenthood among care leavers and other care-experienced young people.

Finally, our quantitative analysis demonstrated that care-experienced young people who were not designated as care leavers often had outcomes in early adulthood that were similar to (or even less positive than) care leavers. This was particularly true of those leaving care after 14.

### Policy recommendations

1. Policy for care leavers who are NEET should have sufficient focus on those who are economically inactive due to disability or caring responsibilities.
2. There should be more focus on early intervention for care leavers, with adult outcomes mainly forming prior to the age of 16.
3. Young people should have strong routes into (and back into) post-16 education and training, reflecting the educational disruption that they experience during KS3/4.

4. Given the higher risk of being NEET, care-experienced young people should be a priority group for national initiatives designed to support transition into work, accounting for any additional barriers and support needs.
5. National government should provide additional 'top up' funding for care leavers to participate in apprenticeships and other schemes to ensure that they are not financially disadvantaged overall compared to other young people.
6. Young people leaving care between 14 and 16 should be considered as an 'at risk' group with respect to difficult transitions into adulthood.
7. National government should consider broadening the statutory definition of care leavers to include all young people in care after the age of 14, with additional funding to support positive transitions.
8. Practitioners should engage children in care in early discussions around careers to activate effective planning and support for those who are more likely to have a protracted journey into employment.
9. Leaving care services should have a dedicated specialist role focusing on EET for care leavers.
10. There should be stronger links with local employers to improve young people's knowledge of the range of opportunities available to them.
11. Targeted pre-employment and pre-apprenticeship support should be provided to prepare young people with the most complex needs to take steps towards work-related opportunities.
12. Education providers and employers should have greater awareness of trauma and other mental health needs for care leavers and other care-experienced young people.
13. Attention should be given to targeted approaches to support transitions for particular groups of care leavers, especially with respect to gender, ethnicity and disability.
14. Local authorities should further engage their corporate parenting responsibilities to provide preferential access to their own work opportunities for care leavers.

**A copy of the full report with executive summary can be found at:**

<https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CareLeaversLabourMarket.pdf>

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