

Care Crisis Review

Care-experienced young people
and adults survey results

Developed by Family Rights Group
for the Care Crisis Review

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CARE CRISIS REVIEW

The Nuffield Foundation

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Family Rights Group

Family Rights Group is a charity that works with parents in England and Wales whose children are in need, at risk or are in the care system and with members of the wider family who are raising children unable to remain at home. The charity's overall objectives are to enable children to live safely within their family network, where possible, and to strengthen the positive family and community support networks of young people who cannot live with their parents. We advise parents, grandparents, other relatives and friends about their rights and options when social workers or courts make decisions about their children's welfare. We campaign for families to have a voice, be treated fairly and get help early to prevent problems escalating. We champion family group conferences and other policies and practices that keep children safe within their family network.

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INTRODUCTION

“We are facing a crisis and, truth be told, we have no very clear strategy for meeting the crisis.” - Sir James Munby, President of the Family Division of the High Court of England and Wales

“A review that considers changes that could be made nationally and locally to safely reduce the number of children coming into care is long overdue.” - Alison Michalska, President, Association of Directors of Children’s Services, 2017-18

The Care Crisis Review was established in response to the record numbers of children subject to care proceedings and the very high numbers of children in the care system. The Review is facilitated by Family Rights Group and funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

Survey Methods

The reflections set out in this paper are drawn from the results of a survey conducted by Family Rights Group on behalf of the Care Crisis Review. The Survey was promoted to care leavers by the youth organisation Foster Focus and via social media, FRG’s newsletter, organisations that sit on the Care Crisis Stakeholder Advisory Group as well as various professional and practice networks. People who had spent some or all of their childhood in care were asked to complete the survey (hosted by Survey Monkey) and 84 people responded. It is impossible to know how representative the respondents’ views are of the wider care experienced population, instead the value of the survey results are that they offered an insight into some experiences and perspectives. These responses were valuable for the Review including informing debates about what change may be needed.

Figure one summarises the regions that care leavers responded from, with the majority of the 84 responding coming from the Midlands or Northern England (although this may not have been where their care experiences occurred). Overall the respondents were largely from England, with six respondents from Wales and six from Scotland. (For the purposes the chart below Scotland and Wales and the different regions are collectively represented, whilst recognising that Scotland and Wales are nations rather than regions.)

Figure One: Respondents location (current)

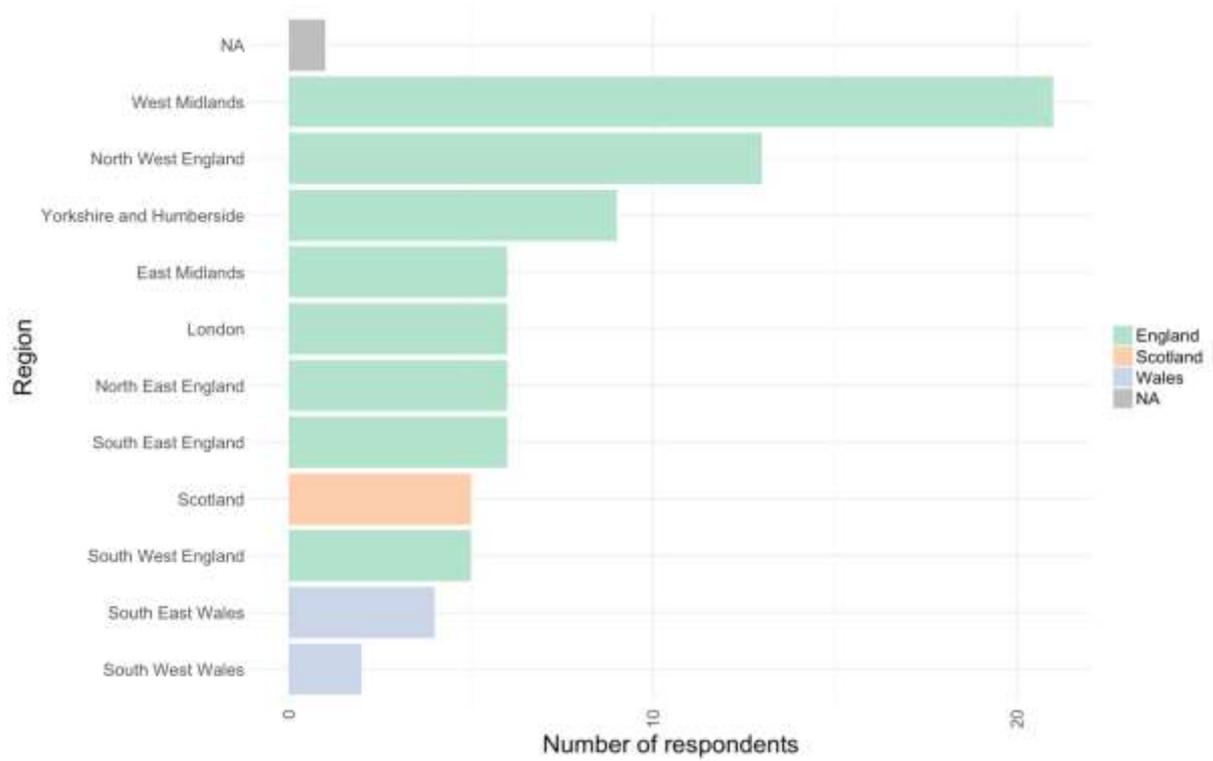
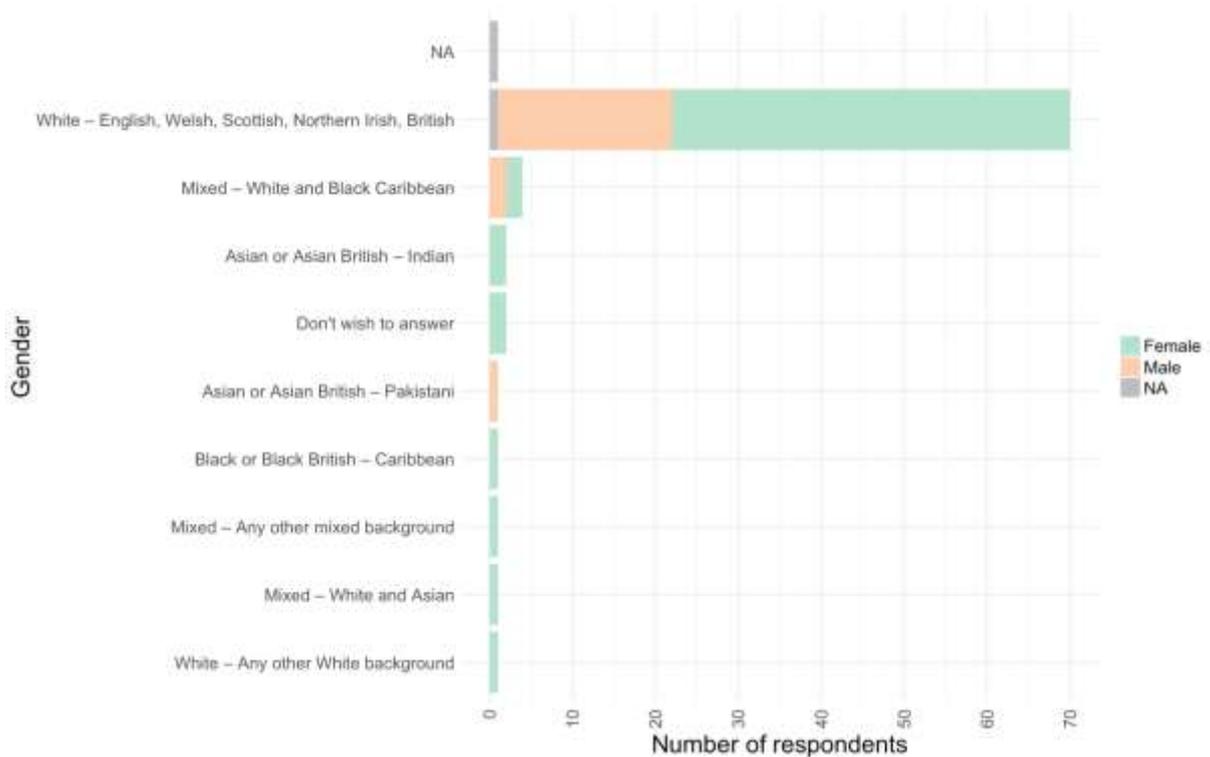


Figure two shows that 85 per cent of respondents identified as White British. 71 per cent of respondents identified as female, 29 per cent as male.

Figure two: Respondents ethnicity and gender

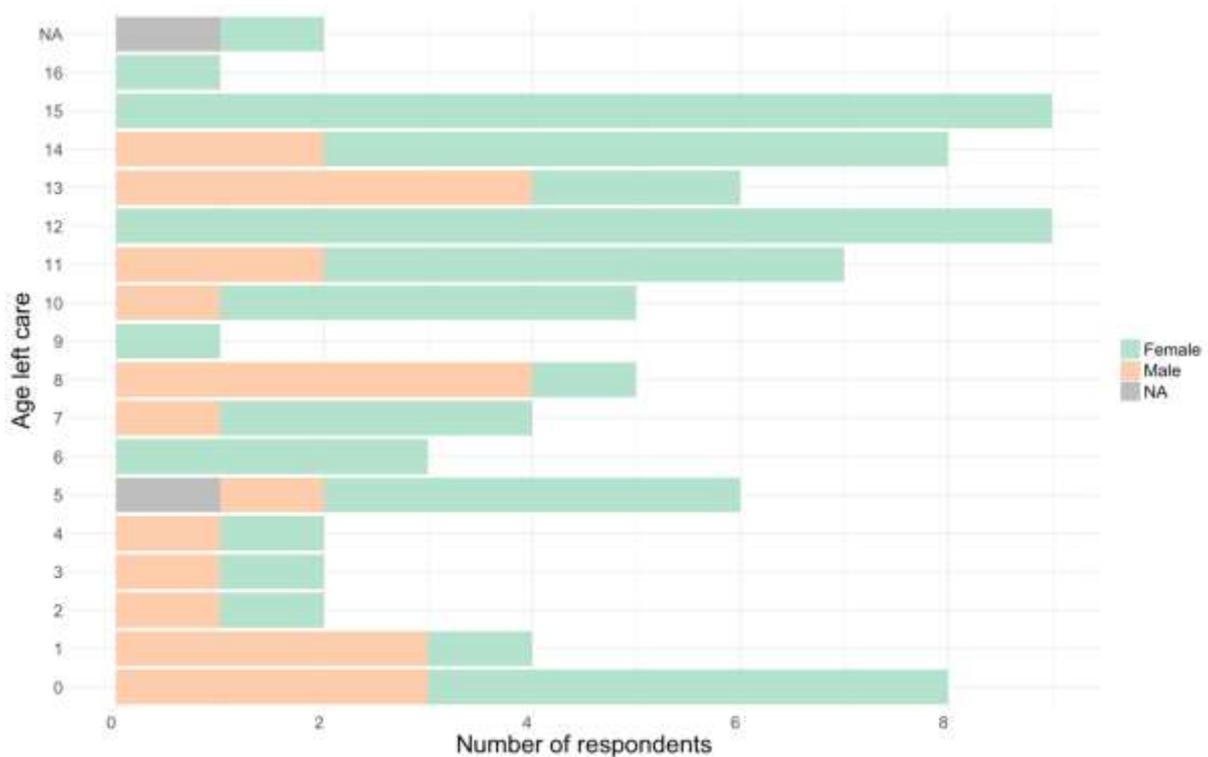


There was a wide range of people of different ages that responded to the survey, from aged 13 years old to 59 years old. Of those that responded, 15 per cent of respondents were aged under 18, 27 per cent were aged between 18 and 21 years old, with the second largest group being those aged between 23 and 27.

Most of these respondents left care between the ages of 10 and 15, with the second largest group having have left care aged between five and nine years old (see figure three). There were also around ten per cent of respondents who left care before their first birthday.

Most had been in care for either between five and ten years or for more than ten years, 20 respondents had been in care for between two and five years, and fewer had shorter time spent in care of less than two years.

Figure three: Age when leaving care



Most respondents felt that at the time a decision were made about them coming into care, they did not have the opportunity to share their views about whether they should come into care, where or who they should live with, or who they should see in their family and how often. Only around a fifth (at most) felt like they had been able to share these views. Only around ten per cent of respondents felt that their views, wishes or feelings were taking into account by the local authority or social worker when they were taken into care. Less than ten per cent reported feeling listened to by a judge(s) during care proceedings, although many reported that they did not know whether the judge took into account their views, wishes or feelings during proceedings.

Overall, care leavers felt they had too little contact with their family. For example, 66 per cent of respondents felt that they had too little contact with their siblings, compared to 8 per cent who felt they had too much. Only in the case of contact with mothers did more respondents state that they had too much rather than too little contact.

Of those who returned home from care, respondents were split between feeling that they returned home too soon (45 per cent) or too late (39 per cent). Only a few felt they returned home at the right time. Only five of the 38 care leavers who returned home felt they were adequately supported in preparing to return, and only three felt they were supported adequately after returning home. 19 of the respondents who returned home later were taken back into care, 19 did not return to care.

Themes emerging from responses:

It is worth noting that one of the key differences between respondents is the time span participants are reflecting upon and discussing. Some of the responses are from people who left care ten to fifteen years ago and therefore experienced a care system that might have been markedly different in places to the current systems. However, common themes do emerge and these are summarised below:

1. Information and communication

A recurring theme that emerged from the responses was the lack of clear information communicated to children from their initial contact with child welfare agencies. Some participants reported not knowing why they were going into care or when they would see their birth family. This lack of transparent clear information continued in many of the children and young people's lives, with fundamental decisions described as being taken without adequate explanation.

"I feel when I was in care that enough was not being done to explain what social work was in order for me to have an authentic view and share my wishes and feelings properly. Then whilst in care I felt that there was an attitude of 'regardless of my views, it would not make a difference in my care plan. Leaving care was slightly more open to my views but that was restricted based on what was assessed as risk or risky."

This lack of transparency was also encountered when leaving care and some respondents set out what would have made a difference:

"Regular visits by the social worker, someone listening to my views, someone explaining to me and explaining what was happening. Someone to explain to me my rights as a care-leaver"

A few respondents painted a less negative picture, with opportunities to feedback their experiences, but also opportunities to support others to do so:

"I had good relationships with some professionals within my local authority and was provided with good opportunities to promote others in care to have their voices heard"

2. Engaging and supporting their family

Some of the respondents felt that social workers did not make adequate attempts to get to know their family. This left them with a feeling that decisions were made without full knowledge of their situation or their wider family network. There was also a strong sense of the process not being explained clearly to families.

Many participants felt that more could have been done to support their families to help keep the children within the family network. When asked whether help was offered to remain safely at home, 20 per cent said yes lots of help, 14 per cent said yes but not enough, 51 per cent said no, with 14 per cent saying they didn't know.

Respondents were also asked their view whether more could have done to keep them at home and with their family. 41 per cent said yes, 36 per cent said no and 23 per cent didn't know.

The types of support respondents felt could have been provided included acknowledging families' starting points, in particular, the impact of poverty and disadvantage. Respondents said giving information about the legal process and providing the right information at the right time, as well as practical, emotional and educational support to their parents, may have helped them maintain contact with their birth families and, in some cases, may have avoided them going into care or being adopted:

"The social worker did not know me, or tell my parents and family about proceedings. Contact should be promoted and all family sought out before adoption is thought of. It's paramount that the same judge hears the case and not different ones, all reports should be observed carefully."

"There had never been any care procedures with my dad and he lived at home all his life. My mother went into care overnight but no care procedures only when my sister was adopted as my sister's dad was in care (we have different dads). My grandparents didn't know about care procedures or court case as was not given notice. My dad and the family never met the social worker and my guardian didn't know where I was. If they had met my dad and family I could have lived with my family and possibly my sister too. Extended family of 30+. My dad was not listened to or my mum as they were children too. I was a minor/infant."

Respondents wanted greater thought about, and attention to, their lives throughout their life course. While some wanted protection and removal from their family earlier, for others, it was wanting support in place to be able to stay with their birth families and know their families as they grew up:

"I successfully sued the social services for failure to protect earlier than they did. They didn't do enough to protect me or my siblings from the harm, abuse and neglect we suffered at the hands of our parents"

"They could have supported and educated my family. We were a large family from a poor community. My family were brought up on old fashioned values that children can be smacked if they are naughty, food was minimal because of lack of money. Had my parents been educated about the mental abuse they were subjecting their children to they may have changed their ways."

3. The role of the state: a revolving door

Some respondents reflected on care proceedings not adequately meeting their needs, due to the type of placements they were entered into.

Those who returned home from care (36 respondents) were asked their views about the experience. Some felt they had prematurely being placed back with birth family, sometimes against their wishes, others that they should have been allowed back sooner.

The majority of respondents felt that neither they nor their parents/family had received enough help in preparing to return home or once they were back home.

“Leaving care was a planned move. I decided to go back to my parents’ home so regular overnight stays were introduced to start with and after a few sleep overs I decided I didn’t want to move back in with my parents as they were the same as they were when I was younger, heavy drinkers and heavy handers (physical abuse) but my social worker said it was too late to change my mind and made me live with them anyway. I ended up homeless and pregnant. Eventually I was supported, and social services paid for me to live in a private rented house and supported me as a mother too”

“I was placed out of borough and sent back home with no real plan in place. All agencies withdrew support and I didn't even have a place at school. So I ended up falling back in with the wrong crowd and back to square one again.”

4. The voice of the child

While respondents felt children were asked their views, professionals were seen to need to give greater thought about the context and whether children were free to express their views. Respondents also wanted professionals to act on what they heard. Others felt they had developed a strong voice in care, but whether heard or not, an overarching theme was participants wanting to be respected and have meaningful engagement with professionals and services. There were numerous accounts of wanting clear information in an appropriate and timely manner about each stage of the process. This was not always provided, generating long term difficulties:

“I like you are asked your view ... but it was hard as my mum was there. I didn’t feel I could be completely honest. I also didn't know the panel members. For a long time I didn't understand why I was in the care system. The older I got my mum stopped coming to the meetings so I learnt to have my say. I now have a voice which I'm not shy to express.”

“Very rarely seen my social worker and my views were not taken seriously. I attempted suicide to be free from abusive foster carers. I told social workers and psychologists why, but I was returned to the same foster carers regardless.”

“.... In care I feel I should have been involved more in decisions that were made about me and where that wasn't possible the social should have supported me with the decisions they made. For instance, moving from foster carers were always a last-minute thing. I would be told on the morning of the move that I needed to pack my things (into black bin liners) and that I would be leaving. I believe they didn't forewarn me because I would have run away but I think they should have supported me more on the day and then to settle into my new placement. I was taken to the new home and just left there. The social workers were too busy to stay with me and settle me in. Leaving care was a mixture of receiving support when the social worker wasn't busy and that support was great but sometimes when I needed support there was nobody around to help me.”

“Never saw the judges on the multiple visits through family courts, wasn't listened to when I asked to be accommodated again when I was being exploited, wasn't informed or supported in appealing or complaining, wasn't recognised as a care leaver until I managed to complain at 19.”

However, for some respondents consistent efforts had been made by some services to listen carefully to their experiences and feelings and this had made a real difference:

“As a care leaver I have always been listened to by the leaving care team and they have responded in ways that have really benefited me and the support they have given me to make a successful transition into adult life has been so important. When things have got difficult, they really have worked so hard to help me out and listen to my feelings towards situations.”

Some young people had become pregnant when in care, and reported about the struggle they had to get their voice heard and secure support for themselves as well as their child. They also felt their own experience of being in care was used against them:

“As a child in care and pregnant it felt that it went from the focus to keep me safe and happy to immediately I was no longer a concern and that my unborn child was the focus. It also felt that there was no one expecting me to succeed as a parent based on the idea that I had spent all my life in care and hadn't received consistent adequate parenting. Pre-birth assessments were designed for me to fail and care proceedings following my son's birth were negative, in that my experiences out of my control as a looked after child were used against me in court. I ultimately won the case and kept my son free from social work intervention.”

5. Siblings and relationships

The participants shared their experiences of relationships with different people in their lives. A common theme was the lack of long-term relationships through their lives. Relationships were fractured with a perceived absence of regard for looked after children's relational needs with birth families and specifically with siblings. Some expressed sorrow at being separated from siblings and a sense of regret that they didn't see their siblings as often as they would like despite requesting this:

“Again, I asked to not go into care and remember crying most nights as I was only four years old and split up from my other siblings. I know because of the unsafe conditions at home we couldn't live there until things changed, but I wouldn't have wanted to not be with my siblings.”

6. Leaving care

There were mixed responses to support on leaving care with numerous statements about the lack of support once young person had left care. Where there were positive experiences this was usually reported as being down to individual relationships rather than the care system:

“I had support from an amazing leaving care work and team but not corporate parents”

“I received a letter just before I turned 18 informing me I was no longer in care and something about my records. I had lived and worked independently since mid-way through my last year of school”

“I am currently in leaving care services so still have a leaving care worker and I now have a baby. She is not under any social work etc. She is healthy and happy. I am only getting support because I am in full time education. I think care leavers need more emotional support.”

“Although I was let down when I left care at 16, my social worker eventually listened to me and found me my own home. After my child was born I was given a lot of support regular contact with workers etc but that didn't last too long and eventually workers stopped visiting me.”

“I am 30 years old I have no parents to support me. I don't have any parental guidance or anyone to help me when in hardship. There's just nothing to fall back on. The fear of homelessness is constant as too is the fear of my own security in life. I returned to education but the local authority didn't support me through this and they could have done more to help me.”

The overarching theme was of a careless system for vulnerable young people transitioning from difficult circumstances to uncertainty. Transition into adulthood is routinely understood to be a challenging time for young people and responses revealed an absence of support that exacerbated care leavers' vulnerabilities, causing further distress. Where support was provided this was often practical as opposed to emotional support and care, but good support made a real difference:

“As a care leaver I really have been supported by the local authority. With work, sitting exams, going to uni. They have offered me the chance to go back into supported lodgings when living independently wasn't working. Supported me emotionally to deal with issues regarding my childhood and financially supported me where possible with uni such as bursaries and covering book cost and summer accommodation costs.”

Respondents' recommendations for change

There were some clear ideas about what needed to change and what respondents would have wanted to be different. These responses were focused on maintaining relationships with birth family, being respected, and clear communication about decisions made about their lives:

“To have been told when and why I was going into care and explain what would happen. To be treated less like under a microscope when attending children's panels. To have been listened to and believed”

“I think the relationship between looked after child and state has evolved a bit but institutions are broken and there aren't institutions to represent parents or ex looked after children, we need to be recognised as vulnerable throughout our lives.”

“Don't use fellow care siblings or neighbours as cheap kinship carers to rid yourselves of responsibility - invest in our friendships so we can create our own social support networks - don't disregard children as some kind of commodity for profit - more attachment informed training for carers and wider community - more long term thinking for our futures instead of wasting our time/lives covering backs”

