

Extract from : Forrester, Donald et al. *What is the Impact of Public Care on Children's Welfare? A Review of Research Findings from England and Wales and their Policy Implications* **Journal of Social Policy, 38(3), July 2009, pp.439-456**

Five findings appear important from this review. The first is that there is a lack of research in a number of areas. Given this lack of evidence, it is important to be circumspect about findings. This is in itself an important policy issue. The government and major charities spend £25 per year on research for each person working in social care, compared to £1,613 for each person in the National Health Service (Marsh and Fisher, 2005). This extraordinary lack of investment in social work and social care research severely limits our ability to develop evidence-informed policies. The second key finding was that there was little evidence of the care system having a negative impact on children's welfare. Indeed, in almost all of the studies children's welfare improved, while there was none in which it deteriorated. As Stein said: 'The simplistic view of care as failing 60,000 young people should be confined to the dustbin' (2006). This is not to say that public care was resolving all of the problems that the children exhibit. The third finding was that, considered as a group, even after positive care experiences, the children in most of the studies had significantly more difficulties than might be expected in the general population. Indeed, resolving all of the problems children in care as a group have does not appear a realistic goal for the care system (although it is an important and achievable aim for many individual children). Even successful permanent placements in which parents adopted children and treated them as their own could not always undo the consequences of abuse and neglect when younger – particularly for children who were older when placed. Only adoption in early childhood offers a realistic prospect for most children of achieving welfare outcomes at a similar level to the general population. For other children, care needs to maximise the potential that children have and offer them the opportunity to be all that they can be. Yet it is not realistic to think that – taken as a group rather than for any individual child – this can result in equivalence between children in care and all other children. The fourth important finding was that this broadly positive picture of care did not extend to leaving care provision. The leaving care system tended not to work well for most children. In effect, it often undid the positive impact of care for many children.

Finally, the studies provide considerable insight into why the welfare of children in care tended to improve. There were many descriptions of concerning issues in the studies. High rates of turnover of social workers, multiple placement moves, descriptions of inadequate or even abusive carers can be found. However, children did comparatively well for two reasons. The first is that often the home circumstances that they left (whether temporarily or permanently) were extremely inadequate. Care therefore appears good in part because it stands in contrast to families which include the most abusive and neglectful in our society, and those in which parents are struggling with the most profound problems; its comparative success is likely to be in large part because of this. However, in addition the studies described many positive things about care. Most strikingly, in many studies there were descriptions of foster carers and social workers, residential carers and managers, who form relationships and work tirelessly to ensure that the children they are responsible for thrive. It is easy to miss these success stories in the general perception that care fails. Often the institutional arrangements that surround care are inadequate. The caring individuals who frequently make enormous sacrifices for the children in their care are in large part responsible for the broadly positive pattern of welfare outcomes identified in the research.