UEA
University of East Anglia

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

RESEARCH BRIEFING

REUNIFICATION AS A PERMANENCY ROUTE FOR CHILDREN IN CARE

REUNION STABILITY AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Action for Children

crcf
Centre for Research on Children & Families

MANCHESTER
1824
The University of Manchester

REUNIFICATION AS A PERMANENCY ROUTE FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
REUNION STABILITY AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

- Returning home to family or 'reunification' is one type of permanency option described by government guidance on permanency planning for children in care, alongside friends and family care, special guardianship, adoption and long-term foster care (DfE, 2015).

- The Department for Education gathers information from all local authorities yearly on three types of reunification: planned return to a parent with parental responsibility, unplanned return to a parent with parental responsibility, and leaving care to live with parents, relatives or other person with no parental responsibility. While this last category is not clearly defined, it could include going to live with fathers without PR, step-parents, or partners, or a birth parent following an adoption disruption (as parents lose PR when their child is adopted). When these three types are combined, published figures demonstrate that approximately 1/3 of children leaving care return home, making this the most common way for a child to achieve permanence in England (DfE, 2015-2021). However, even though reunification is the main route to permanency, it has been given less focus in policy and research than other permanency routes such as adoption and special guardianship.

- There also remain gaps in knowledge about profiles, pathways and outcomes for children who return home. Published figures are not broken down by child characteristics and do not report care re-entry. While educational outcomes at key stage 4 (GCSEs) are reported for looked after children, the educational outcomes for reunified children have not previously been examined.

- This study contributes to the recent picture on reunification in England which has been emerging from quantitive analysis of administrative data routinely collected by local authorities on children looked after (CLA, SSDA 903) and/or child in need (CiN) and submitted to the Department of Education (DfE) annually (eg Hood et al, 2021; Larsson et al, 2021; Neil et al, 2020). It is also particularly significant given the recent publication of the Children's Social Care Review (2022).

AIMS OF THE STUDY

- The aims of the research were to use administrative datasets held by the Department for Education to create the first national picture of who reunified children are and to explore the stability of their reunifications (whether the children re-entered care after going home) and their educational outcomes (in terms of success in their GCSEs). The following research questions were used to address these aims:

- What are the numbers and characteristics of children who experienced reunification in 2015/16?

- How many of these children re-entered care by 2017/18 and what are the characteristics of children more likely to experience unstable reunification?

- What are the educational outcomes of reunified children at key stage 4 and what are the characteristics of children more likely to experience worse educational outcomes?

METHODS

- The research was based on analysis of national data on reunification from the Children Looked After Returns (CLA) and the Children in Need (CiN) returns from 2015/16 to 2018/19. Data from these datasets were linked to school census pupil level data and key stage 4 data, all of which are included in the National Pupil Data (NPD) datasets. The year 2015/16 was chosen as the focus of the research in order to allow for enough follow-up time to pass to identify whether a reunification was successful (2 years) and for a proportion of the children to sit their GCSEs at key stage 4 (3 years). The research looked at 7,250 children who were reunified in 2015/16 and followed them in

the dataset until they were old enough to sit their GCSEs within the 2018/19 academic year.

- Descriptive analysis was performed to describe the main characteristics of children who returned home in terms of their age, gender, ethnicity, disability, Strengths and Difficulties (SDQ), legal status on entry and exit, as well as their pathways into and through the care system (e.g. reason for care entry, mean number of placements, time in care, placement type prior to reunification, length of last placement in care).

- Logistic regression methods explored factors associated with 'stable' reunification and 'worse' GCSE performance. Covariates used in the analysis were: age, gender, ethnicity, disability, SDQ scores, free school meals eligibility, number of placements in care, primary need code, legal order, type of school. Analyses included local authority fixed effects to account for determinants of outcomes that differ across local authorities but are common to all children in that local authority.

- Children were only included in the data extract if they appeared in all three of these datasets (CiN, CLA, NPD) by 2018/19. this means that children who had not yet started in early years provision or primary school by 2018/19 were not included in the analysis. this was mostly children aged 0-2 who were reunified in 2015/16.

KEY FINDINGS

Who were the children returning home?

- Children who returned home in 2015/16 were more likely than non-reunified children to be female, from a minority ethnic group, not disabled, and not to have emotional and behavioural problems in the clinical range. They were also more likely to be accommodated under section 20 as opposed to on a legal order.

- Approximately 69% of reunified children had planned reunifications; circa 17% had unplanned reunifications; and circa 14% returned to someone with no parental responsibility.

- The analysis revealed differences in the profiles of children according to reunification type, with

children with unplanned reunifications emerging as a more vulnerable group. Compared to children with planned reunifications, children with unplanned reunifications were more likely to have a disability, more likely to have a SDQ score in the clinical range and were more likely to attend alternative education provision, e.g. Pupil Referral Units and Special schools. They were also more likely to be accommodated under section 20, they had spent a shorter amount of time in care and they were older when they returned home.

What proportions of reunifications were stable?

- The majority of children who returned home in 2015/16 stayed home for the remainder of the two-year observation period. 22% of the reunified children in our sample returned to care within 2 years (unstable reunification).

- There were differences in reunification stability by reunification type. Children who experienced unplanned reunification were the most likely to experience unstable reunifications (30%) within the two-year follow up period, followed by children who experienced planned reunifications (21%) and children who returned home to someone with no parental responsibility (14%).

What are the characteristics of children more likely to experience unstable reunification?

- Unstable reunifications were more likely for children with unplanned returns, for children who entered care due to parental illness or disability, family in acute stress, or due to their own socially unacceptable behaviour. Unstable reunifications were also more likely for children who had a higher number of placements in care, and for children accommodated under Section 20. In contrast, Asian children were less likely to have unstable reunifications.

REUNIFICATION AS A PERMANENCY ROUTE FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
REUNION STABILITY AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

What are the educational outcomes of reunified children at key stage 4?

- 2,450 reunified children (circa 1/3rd of our sample) had taken 5 or more GCSEs by the end of the observation period. 17% of these had 5 grades A*-C. This was similar to the results for children in care in the same year who did not go home, 18% of whom achieved 5 A*-Cs. As context, nationally, in 2015/16, between 55.8-59.3% of children achieved 5 A*-Cs at key stage 4 in all schools (DfE, 2017).

- Children with unplanned reunifications had the least successful educational attainment with 11% achieving 5 A*-Cs at key stage 4. Children with planned reunifications had the most successful educational outcomes with 19% achieving 5 A*-Cs.

What were the characteristics of reunified children more likely to experience worse educational outcomes at key stage 4?

- Worse educational attainment was more likely for boys, children with elevated SDQ scores, and children attending non-mainstream schools (in particular special schools or pupil referral units). Within the reunified group, factors predicting better educational outcomes included coming from an Asian background. These findings regarding children's characteristics and best/ worst educational attainment are similar to those of students in the general population.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Given that reunification is the most common route for children out of care, it is vital that children's returns home are well planned for. This study demonstrated higher rates of reunification instability for children with unplanned returns, even when other factors such as age, deprivation, legal status and child difficulty (SDQ) were controlled for. Local authorities should aim to minimise unplanned reunifications as far as possible. While unplanned reunifications cannot be entirely eliminated, support and planning for the young person and their family should still occur in these events even if it occurs after the unplanned return as suggested by Farmer (2018).

- Children who leave care through returning home, and their families, must be well supported to ensure that children's needs are appropriately

met. The rate of children returning to care identified in this and other studies is higher than reported return to care figures for kinship, special guardianship or adoption. This suggests more and improved support is needed for all reunified children, even when their return is stable in order to improve their outcomes. Successful support involves working collaboratively with parents and children before children return home, addressing parents and children's specific needs through multi- disciplinary support plans, not withdrawing support too soon, and considering socio-economic factors impacting the family (Hood et al, 2022).

- More attention needs to be paid to reunified children's education. This study showed that the educational outcomes for reunified children are much poorer than the general population and no better than for looked after children. Certain subgroups of reunified children, such as children with elevated SDQ scores, are even more at risk of poor educational outcomes. All reunified children should be provided with the same educational entitlements and support as for looked after and previously looked after children and particularly robust support plans are needed for the most vulnerable children.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

- The research contributes to the emerging quantitative knowledge base of reunification in England through analysis of CiN, CLA and NPD data. The descriptive analysis of the three groups of children who return home adds new information on who reunified children are and how they differ by group, particularly by needs and vulnerability. A key new feature is the knowledge of the educational outcomes of children who are reunified by how they performed at key stage 4 (GCSEs).

- Due to the requirement of being in the NPD, the sample did not contain all children across all age groups in the CiN or CLA datasets. This analysis, therefore, provides most insight into the experiences of slightly older children who return home and not the group who were aged 0-2 when returning home in 2015/16.

- Although a practice framework for reunification has been available from 2015 (Wilkins & Farmer, 2015), and governmental

guidance has emphasised the importance of planning for reunification when children are accommodated since 2015, these developments may not have yet impacted children reunified in the study year (2015/16).

- This research explored reunification of children from care prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, affecting the UK from March 2020. The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns drastically affected vulnerable children and families in a range of ways, and also impacted looked after children's contact with their parents, and the delivery of social work services (Copson et al, 2022). A lack of in-person contact between children and their parents, particularly young children, is likely to have impacted reunification practice (Singer & Brodzinsky, 2020).

- Finally, children from Asian families who are reunified do best in terms of stability and educational outcomes. More could be learned about improving stability and educational outcomes for all children who return home through further research with these families.

IMPACT

- Two peer-reviewed articles for academic and professional audiences are planned as outputs. Findings will also be disseminated at three virtual policy practice seminars, one hosted in Manchester, one in Norwich, and one by Action for Children.

FIND OUT MORE

Birgit Larsson, b.larsson@uea.ac.uk

HOW TO CITE THIS RESEARCH BRIEFING

Larsson, B., Neil, E., Morciano, M. and Lau, Y-S. (2022) Reunification as a permanency route for children in care: reunion stability and educational outcomes: research briefing UEA: Centre for Research on Children and Families.

Disclaimer: This work was produced using statistical data from ONS. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates.