

SCHOOL NON-ATTENDANCE BY CHILDREN WITH A SOCIAL WORKER IN THE UK

Young people's report

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Authors

This report was written by three young people who were recruited to review the report, provide feedback and produce their own responses to the research:

Bébert Longi
Shabnam Karim
Lyra Bellator Liam

About Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families

Foundations, the national What Works Centre for Children & Families, believes all children should have the foundational relationships they need to thrive in life. By researching and evaluating the effectiveness of family support services and interventions, we're generating the actionable evidence needed to improve them, so more vulnerable children can live safely and happily at home with the foundations they need to reach their full potential.

Foundations was formed through the merger of What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) in December 2022.

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SUMMARY

Background

While regular attendance at school by all children is a policy priority for government, poorer attendance is known to affect several vulnerable groups, including children with a social worker (CSW) – children and young people who likely stand most to benefit from education.

In order to further investigate this, University College London conducted a rapid review, aimed to appraise recent evidence on (1) the extent of absence among CSW, (2) risk factors for absence and (3) the effectiveness of interventions to improve attendance.

Searches for studies were conducted using 8 electronic social science, sociology, and education databases across 4 platforms: EBSCOhost, Ovid, ProQuest, and Social Care Online as well as for grey literature. The researchers sought studies relating to UK populations published in 2010 to provide the most up-to-date evidence. Following the searches, researchers independently screened each title and abstract, before screening full texts, extracting the data, and carrying out a global risk of bias assessment on each study that met the inclusion criteria.

The review found the CSW had higher rates of school non-attendance (absences, exclusions, and non-enrolment) compared to children without social workers. In particular those with short term social care interventions fared worse than those who had been in care or in need for longer. Risk factors for non-attendance among CSW included type of social work intervention, length of care placements, placement type, age when entering care, special educational needs and disabilities, behavioural, emotional, or social difficulties, school instability and male gender. Evidence as to the effectiveness of interventions was weak owing to methodological problems.

About this report

To ensure co-production of the report, three young people were recruited to review the report, provide feedback on accessibility and language, and to produce their own responses to the rapid review. This report contains their responses and reflections on the findings.



BÉBERT LONGI

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to begin by welcoming the findings of the report by Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families with the support of University College London on school non-attendance of children with social worker in the UK. The report highlights a critical issue that affects the social care system, which is the education of vulnerable groups, especially children in care.

Response to the report

The study found that children with a social worker (CSW) had higher rates of school non-attendance compared to children without children's social care intervention. Moreover, this group faces several risk factors that contribute to non-attendance, including type of social work intervention, length of care placements, placement type, age when entering care, special educational needs and disabilities, behavioural, emotional, or social difficulties, school instability, and gender. The report further revealed that children with a social worker have higher exclusion rates than those without and they are more likely to miss education due to becoming unenrolled from school before the school leaving age than those who do not have a social worker. I believe this report is significant for further research in this area and that there is work that can be done by all stakeholders in this field, be it the government, schools or social workers. The relationship between a social worker and young person should be examined in greater detail. Social workers have an important role to play in ensuring a child's wellbeing and their journey in the care system. However, this importance is overshadowed by the emerging fact that most children in care will change several social workers over the course of their time in care due to personal circumstances or/and staff retention in the care system. This means that a child's attachment to a social worker is compromised and young people are exposed to negative perceptions of their placement, which impacts on the effectiveness of communication between rotating social workers and the child, particularly on matters relating to education.

Improving the rapport between children and professionals in the care system is a crucial aspect of ensuring that children in care are able to receive the necessary advice on education and school attendance. These conversations need to be non-conflictual and should be a mutual exchange where the child can confide with the professional on issues that they are facing at school. It is important that the bond between children and social workers is strong and enduring, as this is the only way that the children will be able to trust and consider their advice. This bond is simply not possible if children are constantly changing social workers.

It is important to emphasise that no healthy relationship between social workers, foster carers and other care providers is enough to prevent school non-attendance and exclusion. There is also no simple solution to being able to foster good relationships and ensure greater communication on



matters relating to education and school due to a complex range of factors. Even if this solution existed, it does not guarantee that school truancy or absence can be avoided. Particularly as there are further external factors that will affect school attendance. It is true, however, that environments where the importance of education and school are not understood will be more likely to result in greater non-attendance.

A review of the education system in the UK should ensure that there are additional provisions that aim to prevent the arbitrary exclusion of children in care with social workers without consideration of the context of their circumstances. Schools must prioritise the enrolment of children in care and take into consideration their unique circumstances when making decisions that affect their education. There should be policies which aim to prevent the unnecessary moving of schools during GCSE preparation years, from year 9 to 11, in circumstances where their safety or the safety of others is not at risk. It is also important to recognise that schools can be a source of anxiety and stress for children in care as mentioned within the report. To mitigate this, there could be more provisions for hybrid lessons (where necessary) that allow children to study alternatively. This would help to reduce the social pressures that come with physically attending school and ensure that the child's education is not jeopardised. Bullying is another issue that affects children in care, and schools must take a stronger stance in tackling this problem. They need to recognise the specific issues associated with children in care and bullying, including social anxiety and self-esteem. By addressing these issues, schools can create a safe and supportive environment for all children to learn and grow.

Furthermore, more research is needed on the benefits of virtual schools as an intervention for non-attendance. This could be a viable solution for children in care who may have difficulty attending school due to their circumstances. Research in this area gives hope for a future where more is done to help ensure that those in the care system can attain the same educational outcomes as those who are not in care, and can go on to live successful lives.



SHABNAM KARIM

Summary and response

The researchers wanted to find out the extent of non-attendance amongst different groups of children with social workers as well as the risk factors for causing this non-attendance amongst the different groups. They also wanted to find out which intervention was the most effective when it came to improving school attendance.

To gather the evidence, the researchers used eight electronic databases across four different platforms including social care online. One of the main findings was that children with school workers tend to miss more school than those children who don't have a social worker. This is not a surprise as the research has shown that instability and constant care placement changes are a few of the reasons of why children with a social worker miss school more than those who don't.

One thing I think schools, social workers and the government can do to help with attendance at school is discuss attendance issues with the parents or foster families, especially if a trend is noticed, in order to help them understand what the problem is, listen to possible solutions that the family think will help, and agree to an action plan. Families should be given the support so that the child or young person does not continue to miss school. Schools should remove any obstacles from the classroom and help students and parents. It is very important for schools to build strong relationships with the families or foster families of the young person or child. Schools should also have an attendance support team who communicate with, advise and support families, as well as identify when a child's attendance starts to go down.

Language and terminology

Was the report's use of language appropriate? If not, which phrases would you prefer?

I think the new glossary of terms used by experts, such as social workers and researchers, is quite beneficial because some terms used in the care system can occasionally be very difficult to understand. Even at the age of 15, I struggled to understand professional jargon, since it seemed like everything spoken in my meetings was in some sort of social worker professional code.

Regarding the term "care leaver", I believe changing it is really beneficial since there is stigma associated with it because it implies that once you leave care, that is it for you and your life. It's challenging for me to convey that each care leaver experiences things differently, because when I tell people I was in care, they tend to just picture me via the typical notion of what someone in care looks like. I think "care experienced" is a better term to use.



I also think it's important to change "peers" to "friends". My social worker used to refer to my friends as peers when I was younger, but I had no idea what peers were and had never really heard the term used before.



LYRA BELLATOR LIAM

Summary

The researchers in the rapid review sought to find studies relating to school attendance of CSW in the UK, published from 2010 onwards, to answer three questions as outlined in the review.

The main findings of this review are as follows:

- CSW were 3 times more likely to miss 10% of possible school sessions
- Looked after children, particularly those who have been in a placement for less than 12 months, have higher school absences and permanent exclusions
- There is a particular lack of research around off rolling and risk factors for school attendance
- There has been no UK focused review of evidence on how to reduce school non-attendance for CSW.

Reflections

Drawing upon personal experience, it is critical that a holistic approach and attitude is adopted by schools, social workers, and government in tackling the issue of the lack of attendance amongst CSW. In most cases, there are very complex issues behind why this is the case, and each case is unique in nature. It is clear from the rapid review that more research is required around off rolling and risk factors for school attendance. More focus is required in understanding the risk factors, and to achieve this, voices of those who have first-hand experience of having a social worker need to be heard. Questionnaires or surveys amongst this particular group would be highly valuable in recognising the real issues at hand and helping to find a solution. This will also enable schools, social workers, and government to identify any overlapping issues that most or all CSW appear to have in common. Additionally, it is extremely important that schools and social workers alike are given training around trauma and attachment by government policy. This is an area of emotional wellbeing that has inevitable and tremendous effects on all CSW. Training around trauma and attachment will enable schools and social workers to have a better base line understanding of how to support children more effectively with the issues they face and understand why they may display behaviour or attitudes towards school that are undesirable. Therefore, it is vital that this training is implemented on a national scale.

Social workers and schools are the most involved with the child on a daily or weekly basis, so it is important that they adapt a holistic attitude. It is fundamental to recognise that these are children, in most cases, dealing with very adult situations. These situations cause a huge amount of negative emotion to surface; children are too young to understand how to navigate and express them in a healthy manner. Without a doubt all CSW will experience some form of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties; each of these children have individual needs and require a unique tailored



support system, solely for them. An empathetic attitude is required in building relationships with these children to ensure they feel safe and trust they can approach teachers or social workers with real issues or concerns they have. CSW are more likely to attend school if they feel heard and supported, as school may be the only place in which they can have a sense of stability, this being the most fundamental element in improving attendance.