

Public attitudes to children in care and care leavers

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March 2021

Summary

- We commissioned YouGov to carry out an online survey of around 2,000 UK adults in March 2021.
- We found that people's views towards children in care and care leavers were mostly sympathetic.
- A large majority thought that children in care are neither a good nor bad influence on other children.
- Respondents' written comments recognised the unique challenges of young adulthood for care leavers, as opposed to young adults in general.
- Majorities of respondents (62% to 76%) favoured a range of kinds of support for care leavers, such as apprenticeships, financial support, and housing support.
- A substantial minority (28%) said they knew someone who is care experienced, most often through work; about two thirds did not know anyone.

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1. Background and method

We surveyed around 2,000 UK adults in March 2021

Coram, the UK's first children's charity, has an ongoing commitment to raise and develop the public's understanding of children in care. Children and care leavers identify stigma and societal prejudice as a significant concern in their lives. Negative views about care impact on relationships and inclusion in communities (Independent Care Review, 2020).

We commissioned YouGov to carry out an online poll of 2,092 UK adults, who were asked our questions on the 8th and 9th of March 2021.

These individuals are members of the YouGov Plc UK panel of 800,000+ individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys. Emails are sent to panellists selected at random from the base sample.

Answers are weighted to the profile of UK adults (for example, respondents were 53% female, so responses from men were slightly inflated relative to those from women).

Some questions covered children in care and some covered care leavers.

YouGov provided a breakdown of responses by groups of respondents in terms of gender, age group, region or nation of the UK, social grade, working status, marital status, presence and age of children in household, and use of selected social media and messaging services in the last month. We report differences between groups in cases where the breakdown showed that a difference was statistically significant and substantively important.

YouGov did not carry out qualitative analysis of the written comments. Our own qualitative and quantitative analysis of the answers follows.

2. What first comes to mind when you think about the term 'children in care'?

We asked respondents for the first three words and phrases that they thought of when presented with the term 'children in care'. The question wording was:

Which THREE words, if any, come to your mind first when you think about the term 'children in care'? (Please type THREE words in the box below, separating each one with a semi-colon ';'. If you don't know please type "DK" into the box below)

Summary of responses: sympathetic or neutral in tone

Most (69%) respondents wrote something. Comments were generally factual and accurate (for example, 'fostering; children's home; adoption') or sympathetic in tone (for example, 'council, sad, unlucky'). Few respondents focused on others or were judgmental ('bad people', 'bad parents').

Most commonly written words

Looking at the *first word* written only, the 10 most common responses, in order, were: sad/sadness, foster/ed/ing, vulnerable, orphan/s/orphanage/s/d, abuse/d/sive, disadvantage/d, social, poor, child/ren/children's, poverty. 'Social' was most often followed by 'services' (17) then just 'social', (7), 'social worker/s' (4) and social care (2). These top 10 sets of words and concepts together accounted for 687 (a little over half) of the total 1,298 mentions of 214 different terms or concepts (after merging and spelling corrections).

This was in line with the findings of our previous survey of UK adults, carried out in 2017 (Coram, 2018). In 2017, some of the most common responses included: abused/abuse, lonely/loneliness, neglect/neglected, sad, vulnerable, foster/fostered, poverty/poor and troubled.

In 2021, looking at comments in their entirety (up to three words or expressions) adds detail to this overall picture. It should be noted that many words could be interpreted in more than one category. The largest category of words (about 45%) appeared sympathetic in tone, for example 'loveless' and 'concerned'. These included the most commonly written concept – sa/sadness/saddening.

About a third of words are factual ('LAC' [looked after child], 'council', 'fostering'). About 10% were more generically about children ('nursery', 'babysitter', 'teenager').¹

Only a small percentage of words (about 6%) were definitely unsympathetic. Of these, more appeared to relate to parents than children. Among these were comments such as 'drink', 'drugs', 'dysfunctional' and 'irresponsible', which a smaller number appeared to be thinking of children with comments such as 'expensive' and 'naughty'. These narratives come out more strongly in qualitative research (FrameWorks, 2018).

A small minority of respondents (about 2% of comments written) cited fictional characters or authors (Oliver, Tracy Beaker). It was interesting to see how many respondents wrote orphan, orphans, orphaned, orphanage or orphanages - around 3% of all comments written, in total.

Some examples of responses, illustrating the range of written comments, are shown below (Box 1).

¹ The small number of respondents who wrote comments referencing nurseries appear to have understood 'children in care' to mean 'childcare' as they provided words on the theme of childcare: 'Babysitter; nursery; family', 'Nursery:school: kindergarten', 'School, nursery, nanny' and 'Young; Nursery; Teachers'.

Box 1: Examples of comments written by respondents

“vulnerable; trauma; social services”

“Unloved; Underfunded; Abused”

“Troubled; disadvantaged; challenging”

“Tracy Beaker: escape: safety”

“social services; fostering; adoption”

“safe warm fed”

“Sad family problem”

“Poor wee souls”

“poor life chances”

“NEED; MORE; SUPPORT”

“Foster; adoption; orphan”

“forgotten by society”

The 50 most commonly written words are shown in a word cloud below (Box 2).

Box 2: Word cloud showing top 50 most commonly written words



Note: top 50 words among all written comments (not the first word provided); proper nouns removed

3. Do you think children in care are a good or bad influence on other children?

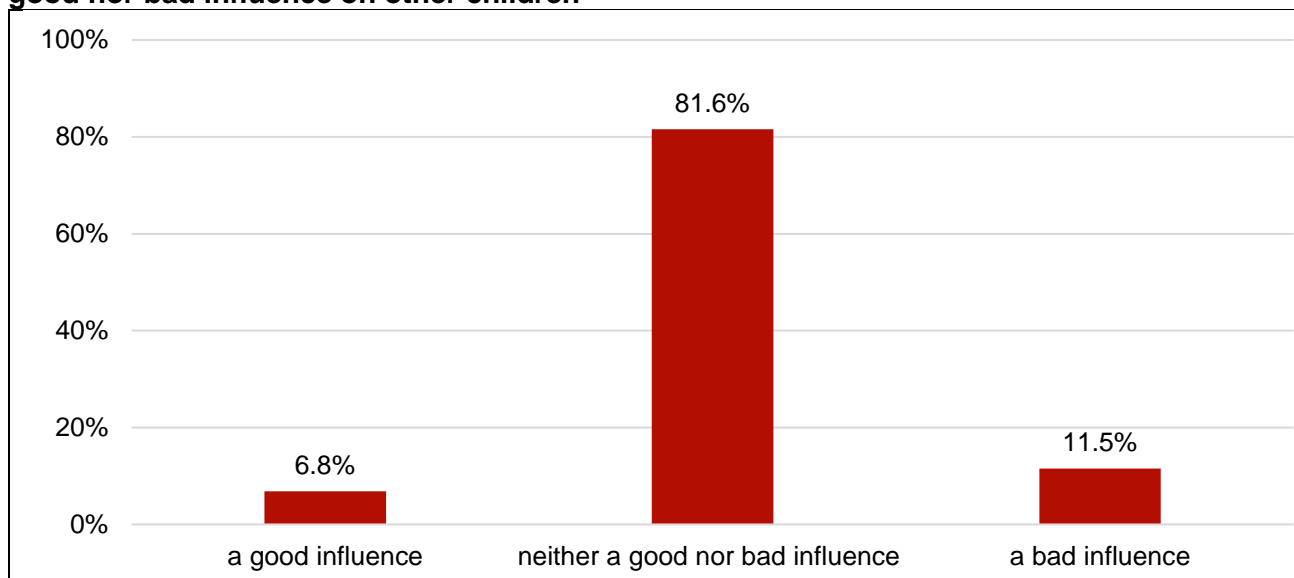
To assess levels of prejudice towards children in care, we asked a provocative question adapted from Bardsley et al (2018). The exact question wording was:

For the following question, by 'children in care', we mean children under the age of 18 who are looked after by a local authority. In general, do you think children in care are a good or bad influence on other children?

Children in care are a good influence on other children ; Children in care are neither a good nor bad influence on other children ; Children in care are a bad influence on other children ; Don't know

A large majority of respondents think they are neither a good nor bad influence (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents reporting that children in care are a good/bad/neither a good nor bad influence on other children



Source: YouGov poll for Coram of 2,092 UK adults, 8-9 March 2021. Respondents answering 'Don't know' excluded.

A substantial minority of respondents (26%) did not know whether they thought children in care were a good or bad influence on other children. Including these people, the percentages were 5% good influence, 9% bad influence, 61% neither a good nor bad influence, and 26% don't know.

While these responses appear superficially to show a lack of prejudicial attitudes, more in-depth research has found that members of the public do stigmatise individuals with care experience (FrameWorks, 2018).

Breakdown of responses by gender

On average women expressed more sympathetic views towards children in care on this question than men. Including respondents who did not provide a substantive answer (don't knows), 10% of men and 7% of women reported that children in care were a 'bad influence', and 67% of women but only 54% of men reported that children in care were 'neither a good nor bad influence'. Women were less likely to report that they did not know, with 20% clicking this answer compared to 31% of men.

Responses from parents and non-parents were similar.

4. What do you think are the biggest challenges facing young people leaving care?

We asked respondents what challenges they thought care leavers faced at age 18. The question wording was:

In your opinion, what do you think are the biggest challenges facing young people leaving care when they reach the age of 18 in the UK?

(Please type your answer(s) in the box below, giving as much detail as possible. If you do not think there are any challenges in particular, please select the "Not applicable" option)

Most respondents (76%) wrote something; others didn't know. Respondents appeared to understand the question and were generally able to provide a substantive answer. Only rarely did they write a comment along the lines of 'it depends'.²

Summary of key themes in comments

In general comments were sympathetic and recognised the unique challenges of young adulthood for care leavers, as opposed to young adults in general. The specific example or circumstances cited by respondents varied, but the tone was sympathetic or neutral. For example:

"Lack of ongoing support network" "I still enjoy the backup of my parents and I'm 40."

"tend to not have the ability to 'fail' as much as young people who have a 'traditional' family background."

"Finding a job or further education when they might have missed some education or opportunities that others have had."

Most young people in the general population rely on their families for emotional and practical support well into adulthood, with two-thirds of 16 to 24 year olds still living at home (ONS 2019).

Only rare exceptions were less sympathetic in their comments. One example of this was *"too shielded from the real world, very arrogant, no respect for others especially the elderly."*

Many comments were more practical or cited common challenges facing young people in general:

"Not having sufficient life skills" "finding work and a place in the world"

A common perception seemed to be that services completely stop at age 18:

"There is no transition or guidance, at 18 these children are expected to be adults with no life skills or support. This is a national disgrace."

"Suddenly have to fend for themselves" "No more support from government"

"Being left to fend for themselves with no support"

Some respondents perceived that care leavers experience stigma and prejudice, for example:

"Discrimination and poverty." "Finding a job [...] without being judged."

² One example of this was: *"Really don't know what to say, as it depends on each individuals circumstances at the time"*.

A key source of support for care leavers are Leaving Care Workers/Personal Advisers (PAs) (Briheim-Crookall et al, 2020). It was notable that this source of support was not mentioned. There were no references to Personal Advisers or PAs, and just one reference to leaving care workers. Our survey research with care leavers has found that many report having small support networks, no one providing emotional support, or only having support from a leaving care worker (Briheim-Crookall et al, 2020).

5. What more should be done to help young people as they leave care?

We presented respondents with a series of options for support which could be increased to help young people as they leave care. The options were: tutoring and education support; financial support; housing support; apprenticeships/ employment support; counselling and mental health support; help with building relationships to combat loneliness; other; and don't know. The question read:

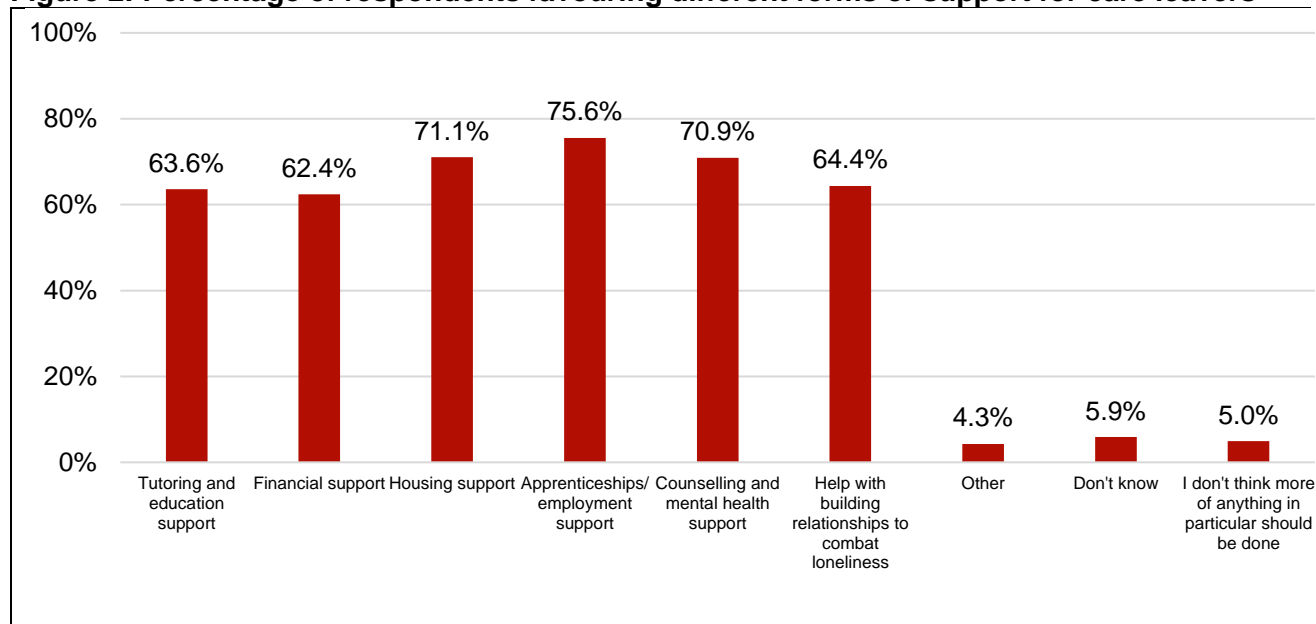
Which, if any, of the following do you think should be done more to help young people as they leave care in the UK?

(Please select all that apply. If you don't think more of anything in particular should be done to help young people as they leave care, please select the 'Not applicable' option)

Uniformly high support for the six options presented

The most popular form of support was 'apprenticeships/employment support' which 76% of respondents favoured. But support was uniformly high across the options (Figure 2). Only 5% said they thought nothing more should be done to help. We asked a similar question in 2017, and also found that 5% thought nothing more of anything in particular should be done to help children who have experienced abuse or neglect (Coram, 2018).

Figure 2: Percentage of respondents favouring different forms of support for care leavers



Source: YouGov poll for Coram of 2,092 UK adults, 8-9 March 2021.

We found widespread support for more being done to help care leavers, as support was high for all the substantive options, ranging 62% to 76%. However, there was a sizeable gender difference, with men 55% to 70% in favour of these forms of support, and women more supportive, at 68% to 81%. A small minority did not think anything more in particular should be done; 2% of women and 8% of men.

6. Do you know someone who has been taken into care?

We asked respondents if they had been in care themselves, or if they knew any care experienced friends, family members or colleagues, or anyone else who had been in care. The question read:

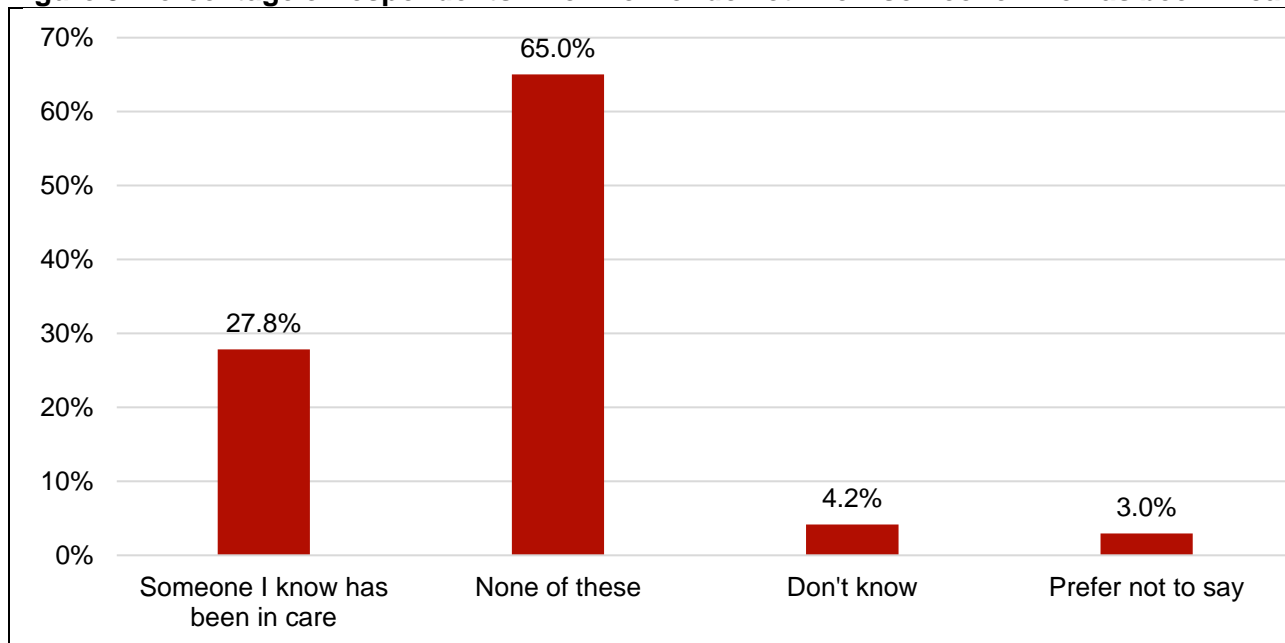
For the following question, please remember that your answers are always treated confidentially and are never analysed individually. We have provided you with a "Prefer not to say" option if you would rather not share your experiences. Which, if any, of the following statements apply to you? (Please select all that apply)

The 11 answer options were: I have been in care myself; A child of mine is/ has been in care; A member of my family is/ has been in care; A friend(s) of mine is/ has been in care; Someone at my work has been in care; I am/ have been a foster carer; My job involves/ involved working with people in care; Someone else I know has been in care; None of these; Don't know; and Prefer not to say.

A substantial minority know someone who is care experienced; about two thirds do not

In response, more than a quarter (28%) said they know someone who is care experienced (Figure 3).³ This is notable given the small numbers of children in care at any point in time (though a larger proportion of children experience being in care at least once in their childhood).

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents who know or do not know someone who has been in care



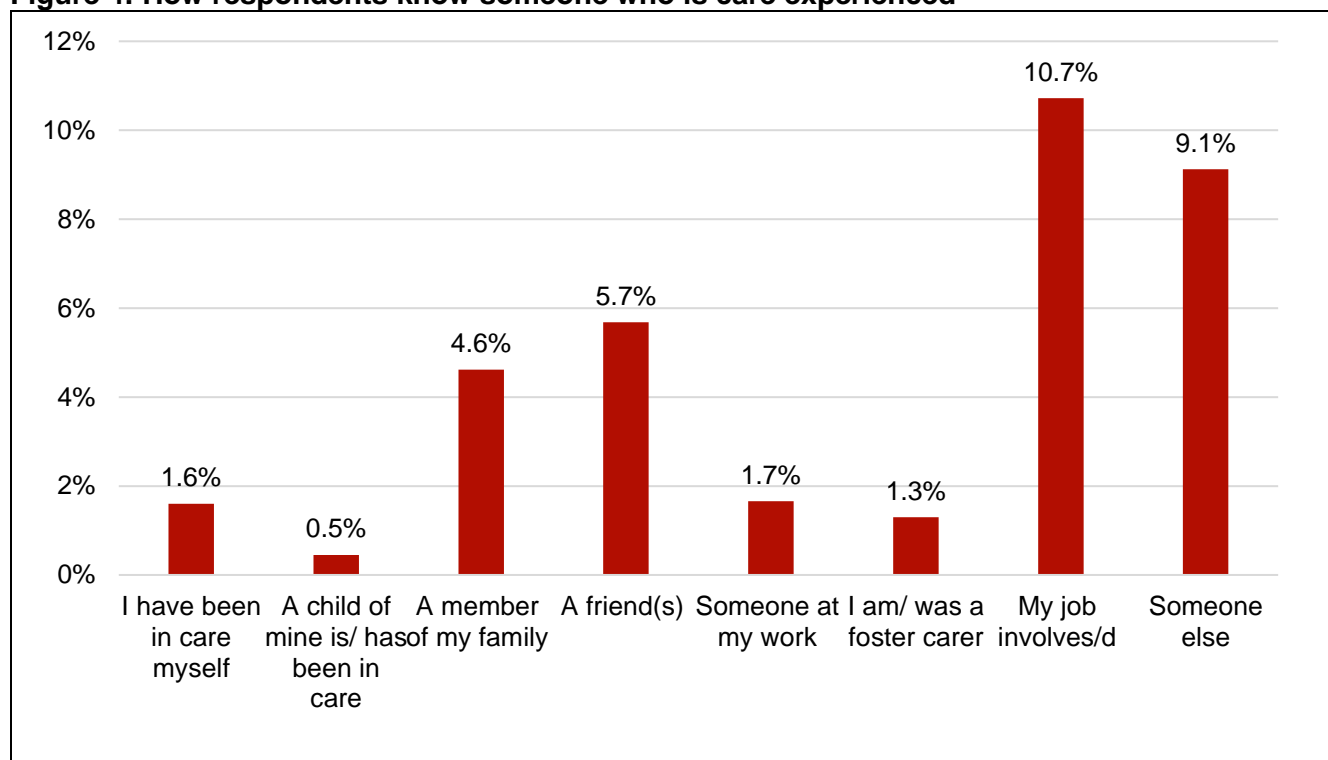
Source: YouGov poll for Coram of 2,092 UK adults, 8-9 March 2021.

³ 100% minus the 65% who replied 'none of these', the 4% who replied 'don't know' and the 3% who replied 'prefer not to say'.

Most commonly, respondents knew a care experienced person through their work (Figure 4). This is likely to include some respondents who work or have worked directly with care leavers or children in care. Unsurprisingly, respondents who were in work were more likely to know someone are experienced at their work than respondents with other labour market statuses.

Respondents could select more than one option (for example, if you have both friends and family members who are care experienced) so the total percentage across the first eight categories is 35%.

Figure 4: How respondents know someone who is care experienced



Source: YouGov poll for Coram of 2,092 UK adults, 8-9 March 2021. Subset of respondents not answering 'none of these', 'don't know', or 'prefer not to say'. Due to small numbers, these percentages should be viewed with caution.

7. Bibliography

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