



Resources available to mothers who
experienced out-of-home care in
childhood

Evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort Study

Sam Parsons & Ingrid Schoon

Introduction

What are the socioeconomic and psychosocial resources available to female care-leavers who became mothers? It is well documented that the experience of out-of-home care (OHC) can lead to more problematic post-16 transitions and poorer adult outcomes. There is however little evidence on the experiences of care-leavers who become mothers.

A two-year research project funded by the Nuffield Foundation examines the factors and processes involved in the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage associated with OHC and how to break the vicious cycle

(<https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/long-term-outcomes-for-care-experienced-parents-and-children>)¹.

First findings focus on the experiences of mothers with care experience during the very early years of their child's life (Parsons & Schoon, 2022²). Using data collected for the UK Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) a sample of 305 (1.6%) mothers with OHC experience could be identified from among the 18,810 families in the study. These mothers were aged between 15-45 years, being born between 1955 and 1985 and experiencing care systems and policies covering the 1950s-2000.

The analysis addressed key areas of concern identified in the 2013 Care Leaver Strategy, including education, employment, finance, health, housing and ongoing support, with the aim to help inform strategies to assist agencies working with care-leavers and families who are struggling across domains.

We find that mothers who experienced OHC in their childhood have poorer socioeconomic and psychosocial resources available to them in adulthood. However, when their age, ethnicity and qualification levels are taken into account, many differences regarding their pregnancy, childbirth and parenting experiences were no longer significant. Key differences and similarities that remained of concern are summarised below.

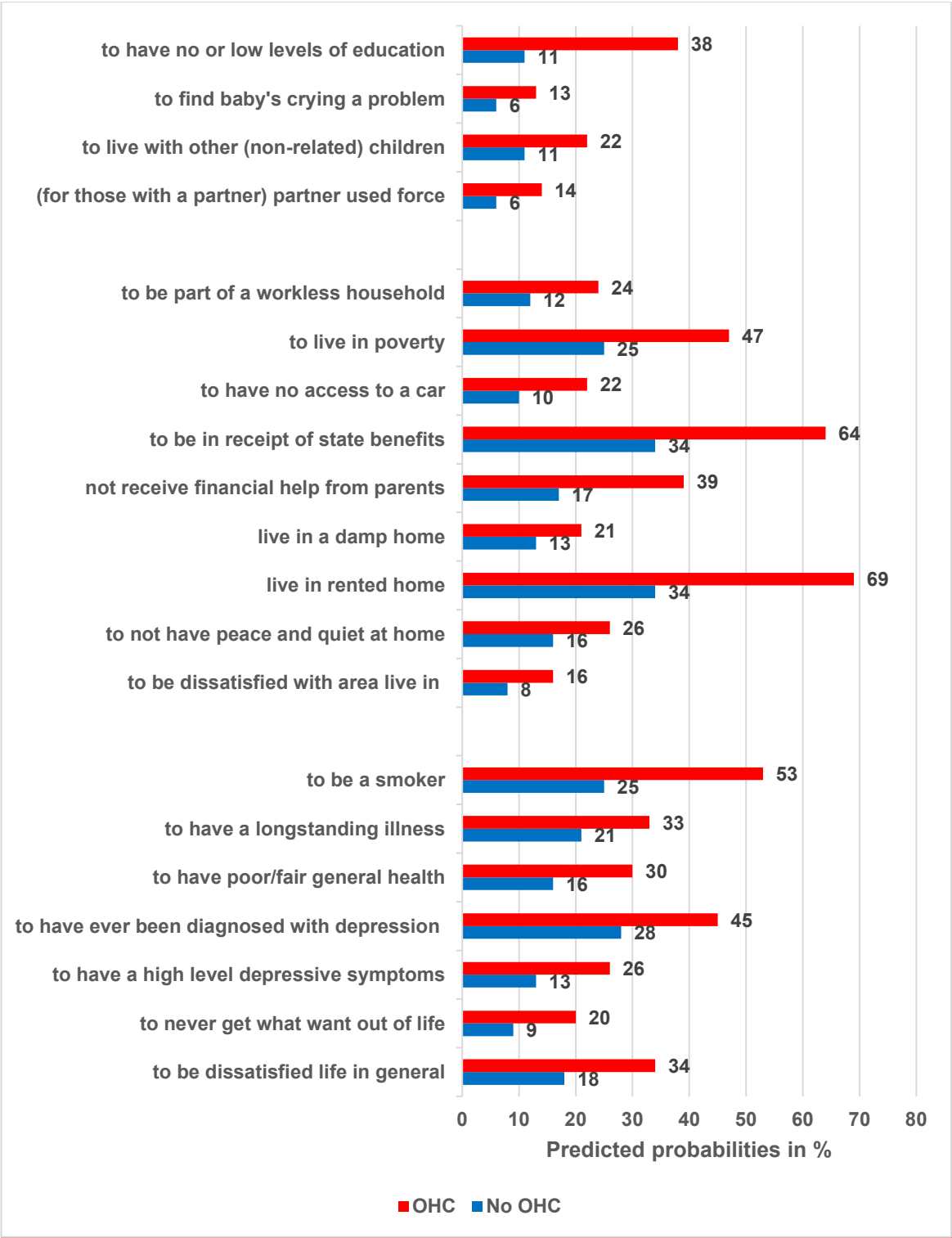
¹ The project has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Visit www.nuffieldfoundation.org.

² Parsons, S. & Schoon, I. (2021) Descriptive profile of mothers by their experience of out-of-home care in childhood: evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort Study. Quantitative Social Science Working Paper No. 21-34. <https://EconPapers.repec.org/RePEc:qss:dqsswp:2134> or <http://repec.ioe.ac.uk/REPEc/pdf/qsswp2134.pdf>

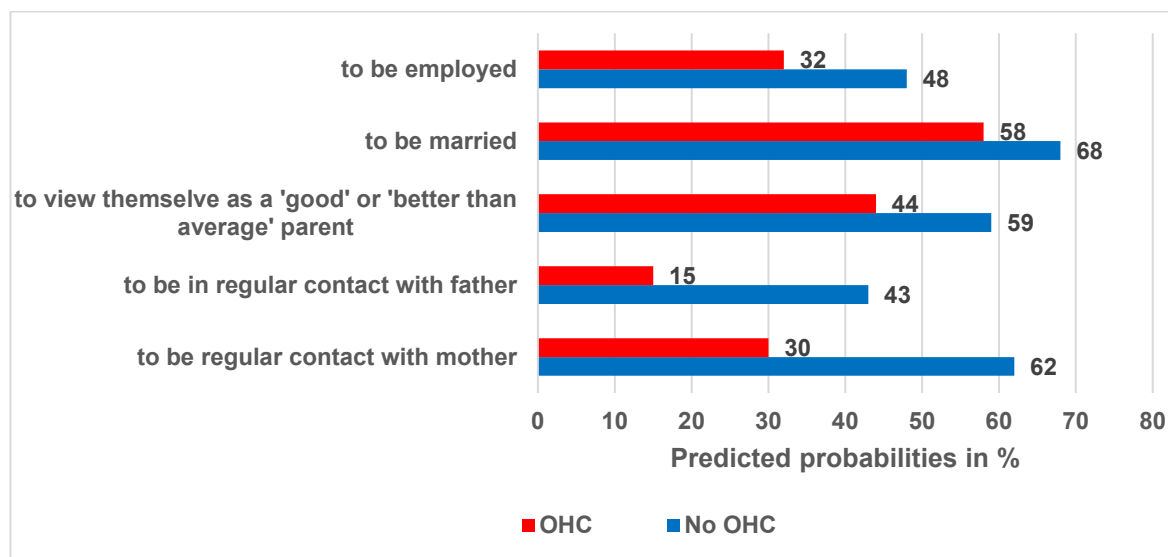
Characteristics of care leaver mothers

Compared to mothers without OHC experience, care leaver mothers were:

More likely



Less likely



No differences regarding

- use of recreational drugs and frequent consumption of alcohol
- living in an overcrowded home
- living in a disorganised home, or an atmosphere described as 'not calm'
- establishing family rules
- having regular bedtime or regular mealtime for the cohort child
- being a younger or teenage mother
- to have had an unplanned pregnancy that the mother was unhappy about
- to attend antenatal classes
- to have a low birthweight baby
- not breastfeeding

Key messages

This largely descriptive profile adds to previous evidence and confirms that female care-leavers who become mothers experience disadvantage in a myriad of ways during their child's earliest years. These disadvantages are highly likely to negatively impact the future development of their children, thereby perpetuating the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage associated with OHC.

The fact that many mothers with OHC experience, who grew up under the guardianship of the state, have not completed their basic education and left school with low levels of qualifications, is a key area policy can address. There should be support for lifelong education, enabling young people with care experience, and young mothers who had left school early due to their traumatic experiences at home, to

return to education, to acquire appropriate qualification, and facilitate their efforts for up- and reskilling.

The provision of adequate housing to young mothers who grew up under the guardianship of the state is also a vital support structure that must be put into place. The wider stresses associated with socioeconomic disadvantage and poor housing conditions are clear to see among these care-experienced mothers, who are more likely to live in a noisy, wrought, disorganised home where abuse (characterised here by use of force by a partner) is more likely to be reported. Add this toxic mix to prior experience of the care system, it is not surprising that poor physical and mental health and high levels of diagnosed depression exist among care-experienced mothers.

Low levels of education and poor maternal mental health can have lasting consequences for children's psychosocial and cognitive development. The current pandemic has highlighted the imbalance between demand and provision of mental health care, with estimates placing 1.6 million people on waiting lists for mental health services (NHS Confederation, 2021²; Newlove-Delgado, 2021³). The evaluation of the government initiative to better assess the mental health needs of children in care is welcomed, in particular the need for assessments to be consistently implemented and properly resourced if the wellbeing of the children is to be improved (DfE, 2021⁴).

Next steps

In future research we will examine developmental outcomes of children of care-experienced mothers to identify if there is any evidence of intergenerational transmission of the disadvantage associated with care experience and if so, what helps to stop or minimise the risk of transfer.

² NHS Confederation. (2021). Autumn Budget and Spending Review 2021. <https://www.nhsconfed.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Parliamentary-briefing-Autumn-Budget-Spending-Review-2021.pdf>

³ Newlove-Delgado, T., Williams, T., Robertson, K., McManus, S., Sadler, K., Vizard, T., Cartwright, C., Mathews, F., Norman, S., Marcheselli, F. and Ford, T. (2021). Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2021. NHS Digital, Leeds. https://files.digital.nhs.uk/97/B09EF8/mhcyp_2021_rep.pdf

⁴ DfE. (2021). Evaluation of the Mental Health Assessment Pilots for looked after children. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1035621/Evaluation_of_the_Mental_Health_Assessment_Pilots_for_looked_after_children.pdf