The General Health, Social Networks and Lifestyle Behaviours of Young People Looked After by Local Authorities in Scotland

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Introduction

The survey of the mental health of young people looked after by local authorities in Scotland was the second major national survey focusing on the development and well-being of young people to be carried out by ONS. The first survey, carried out in 1999, obtained information about the mental health of nearly 900 young people living in private households in Scotland. (Meltzer, Gatward, Goodman & Ford, 2000). Both surveys were commissioned by the Scottish Executive Education Department and the Scottish Executive Health Department.

The primary purpose of the survey was to produce prevalence rates of three main categories of mental disorder (conduct disorder, hyperactivity and emotional disorders) by child and placement characteristics. The survey also covered service utilisation and the measurement of lifestyle behaviours. The results of the survey in Scotland were published in May 2004 (Meltzer, Lader, Corbin, Goodman & Ford, 2004a). The results of the surveys in England and in Wales were published in 2003 and 2004 respectively (Meltzer, Corbin, Gatward, Goodman and Ford, 2003; Meltzer, Lader, Corbin, Goodman & Ford, 2004b).

More information on the aims of the survey, the definitions, questionnaires and assessments used, the sample design and response rates, as well as findings on the mental health of young people looked after by local authorities in Scotland, can be found in the previous issue of this journal (Meltzer & Lader, 2004). This paper will focus on findings from the survey about the general health, social networks and lifestyle behaviours of the young people.

General health and physical complaints

This first section looks at general health and physical complaints among children and young people looked after by local authorities. The responses come from the interview with the carers of the children and young people.

'ENERAL HEALTH

The child's general health was rated by carers on a five point scale: 'very good', 'good', 'fair', 'bad' or 'very bad'. Children living with foster carers were more likely to have very good health (70 per cent) than children living in any other placement type, particularly those living in residential care (38 per cent).

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0HYSICAL COMPLAINTS

Two thirds of all looked after children were reported to have at least one physical complaint. The most commonly reported physical complaints among the sample were: eye and/or sight problems (19 per cent), bed wetting (14 per cent), speech or language problems (12 per cent), asthma (12 per cent) and difficulty with co-ordination (10 per cent), quite different to those found in the private household survey (Meltzer E T, 2000).

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-EDICATION

Only six per cent of the children surveyed were reported to be taking any of fourteen listed forms of medication and there was no difference in the prevalence of this drug use between children diagnosed as having any mental disorder and those children with no disorder.

Three per cent of the children were taking psycho-stimulants used in the control of attention and hyperactivity disorders (Methylphenidate/Equasym/ Ritalin), less than 1 per cent were taking anti-depressants (Fluoxetine/Prozac) and 1 per cent were taking anti-psychotic drugs, used in the treatment of conditions including autism, manic depression and severe anxiety (Riseridone/ Risperadal).

Around a fifth of children diagnosed as having hyperkinetic disorders were taking some form of medication used in the treatment of mental disorders. A seventh of those diagnosed as having hyperkinetic disorders were taking

psycho-stimulants (Methylphenidate, Equasym, Ritalin), a very common form of treatment for this type of disorder, and a further six per cent of this group were taking Dexamphetamine/ Dexedrine.

,IFE THREATENING ILLNESS

Carers were asked if the child had EVER been so ill that they thought s/he may die. Because many of the carers had no access to information about the child's history, they were given the option of answering that they did not know.

There was little difference in the responses between carers of children with a disorder and those without: six per cent of those with a disorder were reported to have been life-threateningly ill compared with ten per cent of those with no disorder.

!CCIDENTS AND INJURIES

The general health section of the questionnaire asked carers to say whether the child had ever had four types of accident or injury.

- +HDG LQMXU\ ZLWK ORVV RI FRQVFLRXVQH
- $FFLGHQW FDXVLQJ EURNHQ ERQH H[FOXC
- %XUQ UHTXLULQJ KRVSLWDOLVDWLRQ
- $FFLGHQWDO SRLVRQLQJ UHTXLULQJ KRVS

Not unexpectedly, a broken bone was the most frequently mentioned accident, reported for 22 per cent of children. Nine percent of children had suffered a head injury causing loss of consciousness at some time in their lives, six percent of children had received a burn requiring hospital admission and five percent of children had been accidentally poisoned to the extent that they required hospitalisation.

Service use

'ENERAL HEALTH CARE SERVICES

The child's recent contact with general health care providers was reported in relation to four services:

- *3V H[FOXGLQJ FRQVXOWDWLRQV IRU LPPXQLVDWLRQ GHYHORSPHQW WHVWV
- $FFLGHQW DQG (PHUJHQF\ GHSDUWPHQWV
- ,Q SDWLHQW GHSDUWPHQWV
- 2XW SDWLHQW RU GD\ SDWLHQW VHUYLFHV

Overall, 11 per cent of children reported that they had visited a GP in THE PAST TWO WEEKS. Nine per cent had seen their doctor once and two per cent had seen the doctor two or more times. Children living in residential care were nearly four times as likely as children in family placements to have made a GP visit within the past two weeks (27 percent compared with six per cent of those in foster care and eight per cent of those placed with their birth parents).

Thirteen per cent of all the children had visited an accident and emergency department IN THE PAST THREE MONTHS. Young people living in residential care were, again, the most likely to have used an emergency department: 22 per cent had done so in the past three months compared with 15 per cent of those living with their birth parents and only four per cent of those in foster care.

Carers were asked whether the child had had any inpatient stays in hospital, overnight or longer, in THE PAST THREE MONTHS. Only five per cent of the young people had been in hospital in this time and it was very rare for any child to have had more than one inpatient stay in the three month reference period. The percentage of children who had been in hospital over the past three months showed no marked difference by type of placement.

Carers were also asked whether the child had been to a hospital or clinic at all for treatment or check-ups in THE PAST THREE MONTHS, i.e. excluding any contact with their GP, visits to casualty departments or inpatient stays. Sixteen per cent of the children had attended an outpatient department or been a day patient. A quarter, 25 per cent, of the children in residential care had had at least one day patient stay or outpatient visit to hospital compared with between 12 and 16 per cent of children in the other placement types.

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)N TROUBLE WITH THE POLICE

Overall, 29 per cent of children had been in trouble with the police in the past 12 months.

Young people in residential care were the most likely to have been in trouble with the police (54 per cent) followed by those living with their birth parents (30 per cent). Those in residential care were also the most likely to have been in trouble three times or more.

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Carers who had indicated that the child had a significant mental health problem were additionally asked if the child had been seen by a youth justice worker. Overall, six per cent of these children had seen a youth justice worker.

Scholastic ability and education

The aim of this section is to describe the educational profile of children looked after by local authorities in Scotland and to examine the relationship between mental disorders and scholastic achievement. The data presented here mainly come from the postal questionnaire returned by the child's teacher and focus on five to 15-year olds.

2EADING MATHEMATICS AND SPELLING

Teachers were asked to rate each child in terms of whether they were above average, average, had some difficulty or experienced marked difficulty with reading, mathematics and spelling. Between 50 per cent and 60 per cent of all looked after children had some degree of difficulty with at least one of these three abilities.

The type of placement and the presence of a mental disorder, however, did not seem to be associated with the teachers' rating of reading, mathematics or spelling ability.

/VERALL SCHOLASTIC ABILITY

Teachers were asked to estimate at what age the child was at in terms of his/her scholastic and intellectual ability. For analytical purposes, the child's age was subtracted from his/her functioning age. Overall, 59 per cent of all children were reported to be at least one year behind in their intellectual development. This comprised 41 per cent of children who were one or two years behind and 19 per cent who were three or more years below the level expected for their age.

Children who were rated as furthest behind their contemporaries were 11-15 year olds and those living in residential care.

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3PECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Teachers were asked whether the child had any officially recognised special needs and, if so, to rate the level of special needs according to the five recognised stages:

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- 6WDJH ± VWDWXWRU\ DVVHVVPHQW E\ /
- 6WDJH ± 6(1 6WDWHPHQW LVVXHG E\ /($

About a third of children (32 per cent) had officially recognised special educational needs, and only a small number, 5 per cent, had a statement issued by the local education authority.

Children in residential placements were more likely to have officially recognised special educational needs, 51 per cent, than those living with foster carers, 29 per cent, or living with their birth parents, 29 per cent.

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!BSENTEEISM FROM SCHOOL

Teachers were asked how many days the child had been absent during the last term. Overall, 69 per cent of all children had been absent from school for a day or more during the previous term. Forty two per cent had been away from school for up to a week and 27 per cent had been away for more than a week

The presence of a mental disorder or a physical illness seemed to have little effect on absenteeism from school. Children placed with their own parents were more likely to be absent from school than those in foster care: 40 per cent of children living with their parents were absent for six days or more compared with 12 per cent and 20 per cent respectively of those in foster or residential care.

4RUANCY

All three types of respondent (young person, carer and teacher) were asked about truanting; however, because of differences in question wording, type of administration and routing, it is difficult to compare directly the information which was collected from the three sources.

4HE QUESTION DIRECTED AT CARERS WAS

'(In the past 12 months) Has the child often played truant ('bunked off') from school? This was only asked of carers of children who were more troublesome than average. According to carers, 27 per cent of the children had 'definitely' and 4 per cent had 'perhaps' often played truant in the past year. Carers were far more likely to say 'definitely' if the child was aged 11-15, placed in residential care or had been in the current placement for less than two years.

The wording of the truancy question for the 11- to 15-year olds was the same as that asked of carers. Twenty six per cent of the young people reported that they had 'definitely' and 17 per cent had 'perhaps' played truant in the past year. Young people living with their birth parents were the most likely to have said they played truant: 55 per cent said they had done so, compared with 48 per cent of those in residential care and only 20 per cent of those living in foster care. Whereas carers may have been unsure whether their children were playing truant, the young people themselves must have known. Therefore, those in the 'perhaps' category were probably in the 'definitely' category but were concerned about admitting it.

The question on truancy presented to teachers was different to those addressed to carers and children because teachers did not have a face-to-face interview but were sent a postal questionnaire. The questionnaire included the statement: '3LAYS 4RUANT' and the teacher was asked to respond by ticking one of three boxes labelled, not true, partly true or certainly true. According to the teachers,

19 per cent of children played truant. Following the pattern of the carer and young person data, the greatest percentage of children playing truant were aged 11 to 15 years old, in residential care or had been in their current placement for less than two years. Surprisingly, this percentage represents 12 per cent of children assessed as having a mental disorder but 27 per cent of those with no disorder.

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Social networks and lifestyle behaviours

&RIENDSHIPS

Seventy nine per cent of the children had a 'best' friend and children in each of the different placement types were equally likely to have a best friend. Children who reported having friends were asked how much of their time was spent with their friends. Around two fifths (42 per cent) of all children reported

that they spent some of their time with their friends and a further two fifths (38 per cent) spent all or most of their time with friends. One fifth of children spent only a little time or no time at all in the presence of their friends. This compares with just eight per cent of children living in private households in Scotland (Meltzer ET, 2001).

The two per cent of children reporting that they spent no time at all with their friends could be an indication that they do not have any friends but were too embarrassed to say so when asked; however, it was only the children in residential placements who reported spending no time at all with their friends, probably because they are friends with people who do not live in the same home.

Young people were also asked if they felt able to confide in any of their friends such as sharing secrets or telling them private things. Around a half of the children (52 per cent) reported that they could definitely confide in their friends but 16 per cent overall said they could not confide in their friends at all. This rate was similar to that found in England and in Wales (Meltzer ET 2003; Meltzer ET 2004) in contrast to only five per cent of children in the private household survey.

(ELP SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

All 11- to 17-year olds were asked if they had ever felt so unhappy or worried that they had asked someone for help. Around a third of all young people, 34 per cent, had sought help because they had felt unhappy or worried.

Over a quarter of the children in foster care, 28 per cent, sought help from their mother or foster mother and this was by far the most common source of help among this group. For children in residential care, the most common source of help was a member of staff at the residential care home, 18 per cent, suggesting that the children tended to seek help from the sources most easily accessible to them.