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Aims and Scope

The Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care will provide a forum for residential child care staff and other professionals to reflect on policy, practice, training and research in the field of residential child care. The journal will maintain a practice focus and all papers are encouraged to examine and discuss implications for practitioners and the dissemination of best practice. By emphasising the links between policy, practice and research, the journal intends to promote and enhance the development of positive practice in residential child care.

The journal particularly encourages papers from residential child care practitioners and also contributions from young people reflecting their experience of residential child care. It will be published twice a year and welcomes contributions in the form of research and practice papers, case studies, brief communications and correspondence from readers.

The views expressed in the papers in this volume are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care or the Advisory Board.

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Subscriptions

Cover image

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Introduction

> *Now I think that I did need to be in secure, to stop me getting into trouble, but I didn't think that then (Young person).*

This paper describes the findings of a three year study (November 2002 – 2005) aimed at developing an understanding of the use and effectiveness of secure accommodation in Scotland (Walker et al., 2006). The study was funded by the Scottish Executive.

Methodology

Data were collected on 53 young people (from a potential sample of 146) shortly after their admission to secure accommodation between October 2002 and 2003. The data were obtained from records and from interviews held with social workers, key workers and some young people.

A higher proportion of girls compared with boys agreed to take part (41 percent of girls and 26 percent of boys). As a result girls are slightly over-represented in the sample, accounting for 55 percent whereas they typically form less than half of young people admitted to the secure accommodation.

Findings

The sample comprised 28 young women and 25 young men, aged from 12 to 16.

Table 1: Secure Sample by Age and Gender

Age	Male	Female	Total	(%)
12	1	1	2	(4)
13	6	4	10	(19)
14	9	10	19	(36)
15	5	9	14	(26)
16	4	4	8	(15)
Total	**25**	**28**	**53**	**(100)**

Most of the young people had known significant disruption in their family life. Almost half (24) were living with a lone parent, mostly a single mother; and one-fifth (10) either did not have a main carer or the main carers were foster parents who were no longer offering the young people a placement but were expected to keep in close contact. A significant proportion of the young people had experienced the death of a parent or other close relative and for approximately half of these young people this was thought to have triggered deterioration in the young person's behaviour or well-being.

Table 2: Main Carer

Main Carer	Number	(%)
Mother	22	(41)
Both parents	9	(17)
Mother and stepfather	8	(15)
No main carer	8	(15)
Grandparent	2	(3)
Father	2	(3)
Foster carer	2	(3)
Total	**53**	**(100)**

Just over half (56 percent) the young people were aged ten or younger, when their families were first referred to social work services. As the children became older, reasons for first referral more often related to their behaviour such as offending, truancy or being beyond parental control. A number of the young people were known or suspected to have experienced abuse and neglect: sexual abuse (twelve girls and four boys); physical abuse (six girls and six boys); and neglect (eight girls and fourteen boys). These figures however are likely to be underestimates because detailed background information was not always available.

Social work involvement had often been lengthy. A third of young people (34 percent) had a social worker for one to two years; almost a quarter (23 percent) for three to five years; but over two-fifths (43 percent) for six years or more. All the young people on whom information was available (50) had had some kind of difficulty in relation to school prior to the secure placement. This information on the background of young people who took part in the study corresponds with profiles of the secure population obtained in previous surveys (Scottish Government, 2007).

Admission to secure accommodation

The research identified three principal routes into secure accommodation although it must be acknowledged that the diversity in the detail of the young people's care experience was striking. The largest number of young people entered secure accommodation from a residential unit (31); the next largest group entered from residential school (13) and nine entered from the community, either their own home or from foster care. Most young people had experienced more than one care placement in the year prior to being admitted to secure accommodation, so it had been possible to preserve little continuity or stability. Reasons for admission are outlined in table 3

Table 3: Reasons for admission to secure accommodation

Reasons for Admission	Male	Female	Total	(%)
Danger to self	20	27	47	(89)
Likely to abscond	17	22	39	(73)
Danger to others	13	5	18	(34)
Persistent offending	6	0	6	(11)
Serious offence(s)	2	0	2	(4)

Most admissions had been authorised because the young person was considered to be putting him or herself at risk. The most common situation was that young people were staying away from their placement and placing themselves in circumstances which were considered dangerous. Excessive drug and/or alcohol use was mentioned as a serious problem in relation to six young men and fourteen young women, whilst in relation to nine young women and one young man, specific concerns were mentioned about them being at risk of sexual exploitation. Eight of the young women and six young men had been engaging in self-harming behaviour such as cutting themselves or overdosing.

The decision that young people should be admitted to secure accommodation meant that a children's hearing and relevant professionals had taken the view that secure accommodation was needed to bring them under control.

Expectations of the secure placement

The expectation for most placements was that they would bring structure and stability to young people's lives and allow them to address the difficulties which were contributing to their self-destructive behaviour. Once the decision to admit to secure accommodation had been made, there was a view among social workers and key workers that this had been the correct decision. As more than one social worker put it, the expectation was the placement in secure accommodation would *'keep the young person alive'*.

There was also an expectation among social workers that the secure placement would provide an opportunity to co-ordinate future service delivery, allowing it to be based on thorough assessment of the young person's needs and providing an opportunity for service providers to engage with the young person.

Young people believed that their current placement in secure accommodation was intended to keep them safe, to keep other people safe, to control their behaviour, and to access resources to help them address problems. The following quotes from young people illustrate this.

> *Because I was putting myself at risk and smoking hash.*

> *I wanted to come into secure accommodation to stop me running away. I couldn't stop myself.*

The secure accommodation placement

In reviewing the year following admission to secure accommodation, the focus was on two different processes which operated concurrently: 1) the young person adapting to the secure environment; 2) identifying and addressing young people's needs and issues.

Adapting to the secure environment

While some young people knew someone who had previously been in a secure unit, for others there were many preconceptions about what secure accommodation would be like:

> *I thought you'd be locked in your room nearly all day and only get out for a wee while to the living room.*

> *Bars on the window. Bare rooms, like a cell.*

Most young people indicated that they had been very upset and distressed at the shock of finding themselves in secure accommodation. Some described being terrified and upset on arrival at the unit but noted that they were able to settle down in a short period of time. For one young person, arrival at the unit was a positive experience, which he remembered as:

> Warm, it was good to feel warm again because I had been outside a lot.

All of the young people said they were provided with information about the unit on their arrival, and were satisfied with this information. Almost all the young people were aware of the presence of a children's rights officer or 'Who Cares?' worker with many of the young people having some level of contact with the officer in their unit.

Within all of the units, there was a commitment to staff modelling pro-social behaviour, alongside the operation of some kind of reward-based system through which young people could gain additional privileges. This was partly because, as some unit staff pointed out, effective means of controlling behaviour were seen as crucial if the unit was to be made safe for all residents. Developing pro-social behaviour and reducing aggressive behaviours were aims for most young people. Rewards could also provide clear evidence of improvements in young people's behaviour.

Identifying and addressing young people's needs and issues

Plans for the placement were developed through a system of formal reviews and individual discussions which took place between the young person and key worker or social worker. An assessment was carried out, though the form this took varied. All the young people stated that they had been involved in the development of their care plan. Generally, they were satisfied with the plans made to help them move on from the unit. They had all attended review meetings, although some young people felt more able to participate in these discussions than others. For many, the main emphasis of the plan was to help develop relationships with their family, or to support the move from secure accommodation to their subsequent placement.

The importance attached to the key worker relationship varied across units. In some units, developing positive relationships with staff was viewed as central. Issues mentioned frequently as being addressed with key workers or other members of staff were: life-story work; self-esteem; keeping safe strategies; offending; anger management; relationships with peers/parents. Young people considered that their key workers in particular and unit staff in general, were aware of any problems they may be having as well as things they enjoyed doing. The majority described their relationships with staff as 'very good'. The skills

that young people considered important in a staff member included the ability to listen, someone who was easy to talk to and who had a sense of humour. Some young people indicated that they wanted someone who could just 'be normal' with them.

In some units, more emphasis was placed on the use of structured programmes. At the time of the research, Offending is not the Only Choice (Cognitive Centre Foundation, 2002) was offered in three units. In a unit for girls some head massage and aromatherapy sessions had been organised. In addition, the girls had had group sessions on personal issues, sexualised behaviour, moral dilemmas, personal health and contraception.

Arrangements for involving outside agencies varied across units. In some instances other agencies came in to help young people address specific issues during the placement, whilst others engaged with the young person to support their transition out of the unit. It was evidently more difficult to begin to engage during the secure placement if the young person had been placed some distance from home.

The kind of service young people received from their social worker also varied, depending on the distance between the unit and home area, social work staffing levels in the employing authority and the kind of relationship the worker had been able to establish with the young person. Some units required that social workers attend a weekly meeting, whilst distance meant that others relied primarily on phone contact.

In most instances the social worker's role was to co-ordinate services and ensure appropriate resources were in place when the young person was ready to move on. Some also focused on encouraging parents to resume contact with the young person. Young people felt that contact with social workers was generally 'very good' or 'good' and most young people saw their social worker once a week while in the unit, although this was not the case for all young people.

Virtually every young person received an education while in secure accommodation, though one young woman had managed to refuse to attend classes throughout. Individual assessment and relatively small classes enabled most young people to re-engage with education.

Benefits of the secure placement at the point when the placement ended

Placement length varied, and reflected the legal requirements for renewing supervision requirements with a secure condition: 3-5 months – 19 (36 percent); 6 months – 26 (49 percent); 7-11 months – 4 (7.5 percent); all year - 4 (7.5 percent). Differences in local authority practice were clear in that 14 of the

19 young people who had spent less than 6 months in placement were from the city authority where the majority of young people were admitted from a residential unit. This is evidently a distinctive use of secure accommodation which was not mirrored in other areas.

Overall, social workers considered that there had been benefits for young people in that all were considered to have been kept safe and to be healthier than they had been when admitted. Young people indicated that in some cases, secure accommodation had kept them 'safe' and reduced the likelihood of future risk-taking behaviour. Several young people indicated that their placement in secure accommodation had helped get them back to school or into college.

On other dimensions, signs of benefit were more ambiguous. Only in relation to 31 young people (58 percent) did social workers believe that there had been an improvement in the behaviour which had resulted in the secure placement. This was generally attributed to good relationships having been established with staff, the young person having appreciated the consequences of their problematic lifestyle and enough change in the young person's life circumstances to allow a less risky approach to life to be sustained. For the remaining 22 young people, acknowledged improvements were qualified by doubts about whether these reflected real changes or were simply a result of having been contained. With some young people, elements of the problematic behaviour had continued during the secure placement, for example, running away, committing offences when on home leave, or being destructive within the unit itself.

Some social workers were disappointed that the behaviours which resulted in the placement had not been more specifically addressed, especially in relation to drug use. In addition, some felt that the fit had not been good enough between the young person's specific needs and the programmes. Other social workers had not expected that the secure placement would effect a change in the young person's behaviour, because they recognised that these were rooted in deep seated difficulties, typically resulting from disrupted attachments and exposure to multiple traumatic events.

The latter point of view was reflected in assessments of whether the secure unit placement had had any positive effect on emotional difficulties which affected the young person. For just over half the young people (31) some benefits were identified which were attributed to productive relationships with staff. Where there had not been any emotional benefits or even a detrimental effect, a common comment was that young people had remained detached from the whole process, doing enough to get through it and move on, but not really being touched by the experience.

Specific improvements in relation to family difficulties were noted in respect of

only one young person. Social workers took the view that the placements had encouraged and supported contact with parents, but that little focused work had been carried out. In some instances, where the placement was some distance from the family home it had been difficult for parents to visit regularly.

Taking this range of considerations into account, 33 young people were considered to have clearly benefited from the placement, while for 20 young people there were some benefits but also some drawbacks. A higher proportion of girls than boys were thought to have clearly benefited (75 percent compared with 48 percent), but there was little difference across age groups

In general, young people were very positive about their key workers and staff in the secure units, and staff were seen as the best thing about secure accommodation. The following comments illustrate this:

> *It's hard being in secure, but when you need secure you have to go there. It does help you. The staff do all they can.*

> *Staff – they are what is helpful. Giving advice, talking to them. You get annoyed with the crabbit ones sometimes, but it is just for our own good.*

While relationships with staff were generally positive, relationships with other young people could be less predictable, although the mix of boys and girls (where this occurred) was seen as generally acceptable. Some of the girls interviewed indicated that it may be a good idea to have separate accommodation; however, the majority commented that they thought it was a good idea to mix boys and girls.

Some young people commented that they had not experienced any difficulties in the secure unit, but others indicated that it was hard not being able to see friends or family, being watched on a continual basis, not being able to go outside, and experiencing boredom. The hardest thing for most young people was the simple reality of being locked up. As one young person said: *It's hard not getting out.*

Life after the secure placement

Throughout the follow-up period it was clear that most young people went through good and bad patches and that some aspects of their lives could be going well and others causing some trouble. For these reasons assessment of outcomes can only ever be an approximate indication of how young people have fared.

Leaving secure accommodation

The importance of effectively managing the transition from secure accommodation has been stressed. In particular it was suggested that the return to the community or an open setting would be more effectively managed if the reduction in the level of structure and support to which young people had become accustomed could be gradual. One of the disadvantages of secure accommodation is the extent to which it disrupts continuity in the young person's life. Yet for some young people, a change in their circumstances prior to secure is considered helpful if risky behaviours are to be avoided. Thus returning to the pre-secure placement was not always considered desirable.

In light of these issues, there was particular value in examining the correspondence between placements before and after the secure episode. A third of young people (18) returned to the same type of placement, and for approximately half, this was the same place as before. Of the 49 young people who had moved back out of secure a year after admission, 15 moved to a more structured setting than they had been in prior to admission, 19 returned to a similar form of care and 13 moved to less structured environment. Two supported accommodation placements were not included in this classification as not enough detail was known about the nature of the placement.

The term 'step-down approach' was used by a number of social workers to refer to the practice of gradually returning young people to a more open and less supportive setting. When assessing whether a 'step-down approach' had applied to young people within the sample, account was taken of where the young person had moved to live and the extent to which a package of community supports had been put in place. Of the 49 young people who had left secure by the end of the first year, 17 were considered, on the basis of social workers' comments, to have had a suitably staged return. For a further seven young people, some elements of a 'step-down approach' were considered to have applied.   Of the four young people who remained in secure care at the end of 12 months, two were subsequently discharged to a new residential resource in their local area which provided intensive support and had education on site. This qualified as a 'step-down approach'.

The main sources of community support for young people leaving secure accommodation were workers from the Throughcare teams and Intensive Support projects such as Includem.   Projects concerned with drug use and offending were also much in evidence. The issue, however, was not just to make the service available, but to provide it through an individual or group of workers with whom the young person could effectively engage. There were particular benefits in a number of cases where the working relationship had been established while the young person was still in the secure setting.

Alongside placement and community support, the provision of suitable education or work experience was key to providing adequate structure and support when young people moved on. A number of difficulties meant this could often be the weakest link in the transition package and, in some cases, social workers believed that lack of a suitable educational placement had resulted in the young person not achieving his or her educational potential. Given the age of the young people in the sample, another common option was to take up a college placement linked to work experience. Where these arrangements worked out well, they were a very positive element of the transition, providing structure for the day, a normalising experience, opportunities to meet new friends and boosting the young person's self esteem. However , when work/college arrangements did not work out as planned, other elements of the transition package could be seriously undermined.

Circumstances and outcomes after two years

Information on the progress of the young people was collected approximately two years after their admission into secure care. A rating was made in relation to each young person in terms of whether the outcome had been Good, Medium or Poor. These ratings were based on the following variables: whether the young person was in a safe and stable placement; whether they were in work or education; whether the behaviour which resulted in their admission had been modified; social worker's rating of their general well-being compared with that on admission. Young people whose rating was positive on all four dimensions were considered to have had a good outcome. Where at least one was negative the rating was medium and where no aspects were positive, the outcome was considered to be poor. On this basis, outcomes were assessed as follows: 'good' – 14 (26 percent); 'medium' - 24 (45 percent); and 'poor' - 15 (28 percent).

The spread of ratings was similar across age, gender, placing local authorities, units where young people were held and placement prior to the secure admission. This is not surprising since young people's situations were too individual, complex and fluid to expect that any broad factors of this kind would directly influence the end result. Instead, good or poor outcomes emerged from how several elements of the situation came together.

Good or poor outcomes could not be attributed to single factors, but rather emerged from how several elements of the situation came together. There was a close correspondence between ratings of change in behaviour and well-being. Those whose problematic behaviour had increased were typically involved in drug use, often with associated offending.

In terms of moving on, most social workers preferred that there could be a

gradual 'step-down approach' from the structure and supervision of the secure setting.   Outcome data from the study supported this view in that half of the young people with good outcomes (7 of 14) had clearly had a full step down approach and for a further two some elements were incorporated, for example daily contact with an after-care worker. None of the 17 young people for whom a full step-down approach applied had had a poor outcome.

At the last update of information in the research young people were living in a range of settings: with parent or other relative – 21 (40 percent); residential or close support unit – 13 (25 percent); independent living – 8 (15 percent); prison or young offenders institution – 5 (9 percent); homeless hostel – 4 (8 percent); secure accommodation – 1 (2 percent); residential school – 1(2 percent); foster care – 1 (2 percent). Throughout the entire period since leaving secure accommodation the number of places young people had lived in varied from one to fifteen. Eight young people had remained in the place they were discharged to, 32 (60 percent) had had no more than two placements and 43 (80 percent) no more than three.

The patterns of moves and outcomes after secure placement shows that there was an on-going need to assess risk and protective factors and where possible boost the latter and reduce the former. Thus the risk management practice which had been prevalent prior to some admissions should apply equally during the after-care period.

Changes in Behaviour and Well-being

In order to assess change since the young person had been admitted to secure accommodation, social workers were asked to rate whether there had been any modification in the behaviour which had prompted the secure placement and the young person's general well-being. Improvements were identified in relation to 23 young people (43 percent), there had been no change in relation to 16 (30 percent) and for 11 (20 percent) the behaviour had deteriorated. It was difficult to give a rating for three young people because their behaviour was erratic, so sometimes seemed to be improving and sometimes to be worse.

The group whose problematic behaviour had increased were typically involved in drug use, often with associated offending. All of those whose problems were considered to have increased and were involved in the criminal justice system were rated as having had a poor outcome.

In relation to wellbeing, half of the young people (26) were considered to be in a better or much better position than they had been when admitted to secure accommodation. The situation was thought to be worse for eleven young

people and to be unchanged for the remaining 16. Not surprisingly there was a close correspondence between ratings of change in behaviour and change in well- being.

Conclusion

Good or poor outcomes are the result of a wide range of influences. This study has focused on the role of a placement in secure accommodation, but it is clear that the impact of these placements over a two year period owed much to how the young person was supported after leaving the placement. In addition it might be expected that the nature and level of the young person's difficulties would shape how the young person fared.

Social workers generally attributed a good outcome more to an appropriate placement and education being offered when the young person left secure accommodation rather than simply the placement itself. Nevertheless, it was considered highly beneficial if a young person was able to establish a good relationship with a key worker because this boosted self-esteem and could facilitate the establishment of good working relationships with other staff who would support the young person when he or she moved on. A good relationship with key workers was therefore viewed as a strong protective factor.

Continuing drug and offending predominated amongst the nine young men and five young women who had the poorest outcomes. In terms of their background and previous placements, the young people who had a poor outcome were no different from the sample as a whole. However prior to the secure admission, problematic drug and alcohol use was more prevalent among this group. Levels of offending were also higher than for the sample as a whole, with only two not having been charged with any offences. Another notable feature of this group was that their placements in secure accommodation had been viewed in a negative light from the point when they ended. The most common reason given for the lack of effectiveness was that the drug problems had not been effectively addressed. Some young people were thought to need a more therapeutic and specialised type of placement.

Approximately half of the young people who had poorest outcomes were aged 16 or over by the time they left the secure placement and six had moved home within a year of their admission. All were referred to at least one community-based support, in addition to the social worker, but this had evidently not been enough to promote a better outcome.

No particular approach can guarantee success, but the most salient theme is that young people respond well when offered continuity and the opportunity

to develop relationships with one or more reliable adults who can help with problems as they arise.

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