

**The potential impact of extensive privatisation in the UK upon the ‘life chances’ of young people in care**

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## **Introduction**

Private sector ownership and control of support services for looked after children (LAC) and young people in care (YPIC) within England, Wales, and most parts of the United Kingdom (UK), now dominates care provision. Among other outcomes, this has led to much more fragmentation of care alongside the transformation of previous roles for local authorities (LA’s), associate professionals, and key staff such as social workers (Harris, 2003; Jordan and Drakeford, 2012; Ray, 2019). The discursive privileging of business and contractual ideals has led also to embedded structural and geographical inconsistencies forming regarding the quality, efficacy, and relative value of care provision for LAC and YPIC. Some evidence also suggests that many young people are becoming ever more ‘invisible’ and vulnerable within largely bureaucratic, risk averse, and forensic care proceedings and networks of support (Ferguson, 2017; Green and Moran, 2021). This is particularly LAC and YPIC from more disadvantaged backgrounds: including disabled children, young people whose parents experience substance misuse and youths who seek asylum (for example, Morris, 2005; Petrie, 2015; Humphris and Sigona, 2019). This article seeks to briefly offer some context and analyse privatisation in relation to its potential negative impact upon the life chances of children and young people in care.

## **Privatisation and trends in young people’s care**

The 1980s initiated a neo-liberal inspired ideological switch to a mixed economy of social care in the UK, with competition and the supply-led commissioning of services ‘independent’ of local government control forcefully promoted. In principal, the Children Act (1989) had sought

to prioritise voluntary and third sector care for LAC and YPIC above business and profit-based support. Nevertheless, despite receding budgets, many LA's working to support children often emulated the NHS and Community Care Act's (1990) legal remit of extending private sector services for adults. Moreover, despite gaining access to ringfenced funding streams, the voluntary sector was not always able or willing to accommodate social care provision for children and young people. Indeed, during the 1990s and beyond larger charities especially moved away from providing services such as residential care for young people and instead focused much more upon supporting families (Petrie, 2015).

Other foundational services associated with younger children's support and care have also been extensively marketized. For example, 84 per cent of early years provision including nursery care in England is now led by business and for-profit service providers. This is unique in Europe, as the likes of Germany (3 per cent) and France (4 per cent) - among other examples - continue to restrict the role of 'for profit' care including for early years support (Williams, 2012; Hall and Stephens, 2020). In the most utilised service for children and young adults of foster care, there was a 342 per cent expansion in the proportion of foster care days purchased from the private sector from between 2000/01 to 2012/13 by LA's. Indeed, at present, an oligopoly of a few, large, independent fostering providers supplies more than three-quarters of foster care placements commissioned in England, and three of the largest single providers of such placements are owned by private equity firms. Together the three companies account for 45 per cent of the total spend on independent foster care by LA's in England. (Berg, 2019). Challenging the initial arguments by governments that competition and choice for service users remain central to marketization, monopolies have formed in residential care for LAC and YPIC. For example, ten companies own a third of children's residential homes in England whilst one company *Care Tech Holdings PLC* now owns a total of 185 homes (Jacobs, 2019). Meanwhile, between 2001 and 2017, state owned residential homes for children in England

reduced from 61 per cent to 20 per cent. Moreover, by 2017, over two-thirds (57 in total) of residential special schools were owned and run by the private sector, compared to just 3 LA owned homes (LaingBuisson, 2016; Department for Education, 2017).

Despite the expansion of private sector care services, the state through LA provision and central government legislation still carries most of the legal responsibilities for the care and protection of LAC and YPIC (Jones, 2015; 2019). The political alignment to consumer-based and contractual discourses has nevertheless curtailed welfare professional and public sector dominance in much strategic or 'street-level' decision making. An associated drive to promote the principles of accountability, performance management, economic efficiency (in theory at least), and behaviouralist-influenced evidence-based practice has ensued. In tandem, service users and families in need have been expected to engage with managerial dominated co-production and participation initiatives, and internalise the equally hegemonic principles of resilience, strengths, and autonomy (Rose, 1996; Cowden and Singh, 2007; Fenwick and McMillan, 2012). Despite some advocates, such market-based narratives and high expectations placed upon young people and families have been critically reinterpreted as symbolising various types of objectification, commodification, or abandonment by the market-state (for example, Jones and Novak, 1999; Petrie, 2015; Featherstone et al, 2018; Webb, 2020). For example, evidence indicates that numerous LA's have sought to move LAC and YPIC to other authorities, often leaving young people at a base out of reach from familial or other established social networks (Williams, 2012; Humphris and Sigona, 2019). Alongside the cost burden of austerity, the financial cost of property has remained another influence and has led to an abundance of children's residential care homes in some Northern areas and far fewer elsewhere, especially London and parts of the South (Williams, 2012). Whilst focusing much more on technical, bureaucratic, and scientific approaches to practice - including the commissioning of services and forensic evaluation of 'needs' - professionals such as social

workers have largely been forced to abandon the provision of direct care. This has often sat uncomfortably alongside intense safeguarding, investigative and risk management roles, almost entirely focused upon families living in high levels of poverty and social deprivation (Jones and Novak, 1999; Parton, 2008; Jordan and Drakeford, 2012; Bywaters et al, 2016).

### **Reduced ‘life chances’ of children and young people in care**

Historically LAC and YPIC have tended to suffer significant socio-economic and educational disadvantages, leading many to experience diminished ‘life chances’ throughout their life course. Such outcomes often merge with disadvantages already faced by many children from economic deprived backgrounds. Together this not uncommonly leads to a life beset with restricted educational and employment opportunities, impaired social mobility and long-term health, and elevated risks of crime, substance misuse and reduced life expectancy (Jackson, 2007; Prison Reform Trust 2017; Datta et al, 2017, among many more). Although the impact of pre-care neglect or trauma can influence outcomes such as those regarding learning for children and young people, even when these factors are controlled, evidence (including internationally) suggests that LAC and YPIC too often fall substantially behind the attainment levels of their peers not in care (Jackson, 2007; Sebba et al, 2015; Datta et al, 2017).

By age five, around 40 per cent of the total educational attainment gap of sixteen-year-olds from the most disadvantaged and least deprived fifth of families are set, and associated gaps in attainment, confidence and opportunities typically widen as LAC and YPIC grow older (Datta et al, 2017; Hall and Stephens, 2020). Only 14 per cent per cent of children in care secured five or more GCSE passes in England in 2015, for example, compared with 53 per cent of children in the general population. During 2014, 22 per cent of young women under

18 who left care become mothers, in comparison to a total conception rate of 2.3 per cent for under 18s in England and Wales. Young people who leave care represent just over a quarter of the adult prison population, despite the total proportion of under 18s entering care each year being less than 1 per cent in England and 2 per cent in Wales. Moreover, 49 per cent of young men in the criminal justice system in 2019 have previously been in care (Office for National Statistics, 2016; Prison Reform Trust 2017; Gov.uk, 2021).

### **Some market-related challenges in social care which can affect young peoples' life chances**

More studies continue to imply or detail a link between marketisation and reduced life chances for young people in care. The *Prison Reform Trust's* (2017: 1-4) co-produced study with YPIC who had fallen into the criminal justice system, for example, has emphasised the crucial role of the state in providing long-term stability, security, and emotional support, alongside an 'unyielding commitment to give the child the best start and hope for the future'. These ideals, however, can quickly become out of reach for many young people in a fragmented and bureaucratic care system in which residencies, foster carers, education facilities, teachers and support networks repeatedly alter. Exemplifying other case studies, one participant, a boy aged 15, detailed how his offending only began once he entered care. He went on to note how, so far, he had attended 16 different schools and 15 separate placements around England as part of his care. At the time of the study in March 2015 the report highlights how half of the 1,000 children in custody for offences were either in care or previously had been. This is despite only a small proportion (3% average) of children in England and Wales demonstrating 'socially unacceptable' behaviour prior to being brought into care.

Many of the young people interviewed in custodial institutions for the *Prison Reform Trust's* study articulated anger and frustration, whilst also often offering evidence to the researchers of impaired social and educational skills. Such traits had sometimes resulted from long-term neglect and trauma, at times initiated in their early years, and then continuing or intensifying once in care. As part of the conclusion the report highlights that change in where young people live and who looks after them, where they are educated, and who offers emotional or practical support will often have a potent impact on any potential to participate in crime.

In another report the *Howard League for Penal Reform* (2016: 3-8) underline that in England YPIC from between the ages of 13 to 15 years are now around 20 times more likely to have contact with the police than children not in care. Moreover, they underline that 'bad practices' are not being 'rooted out' and addressed in many of England's children residential homes run by private sector providers. There were, for example, 10,299 crime related incidents involving 16 different police forces in 2014-15 concerning young people in residential care. The report stresses that rather than receive support many children in such homes are instead being tipped into the criminal justice system.

Some studies examining the poor educational outcomes for children and young people have identified an almost disregard for YPIC's education among professionals and support staff. This can be articulated through low expectations and a wider stigma attached to any LAC or YPIC status. In addition, numerous associate influences can help to undermine their progress, including being managed by multiple social workers - many of whom are increasingly on short-term or 'employment agency' contracts - alongside poor information sharing and working relations between professionals, support staff and carers. Once again, frequent placement and school moves, alongside delayed enrolments at any new schools, can have a lasting impact and

magnify further longer established forms of exclusion (for example, Walker, 2017; O'Neill et al, 2018).

For some time, the pivotal role of support in the early years of a child's life has been documented, which potentially can play a central role in determining a child's opportunities in later life. However, as part of their critique of the prevailing dominance of markets and private sector provision within nursery care, Hall and Stephens (2020: 3-7) suggest that such evidence appears to be increasingly ignored in practice by policy makers. Alongside early years support now being dominated by the private sector – in addition to ever more diminishing pay made available for childcare professionals - nursery provision in England is now amongst the most expensive in the world. With increasing costs and reduced meaningful state support, Ofsted has indicated that more than 500 nurseries, pre-schools and childminders closed between April 2018 and March 2019. Poorer families and parents have tended to be the most effected by such reforms, and the authors maintain that early year's provision should become a Universal Basic Service, with a strong emphasis placed on the meeting of social goals.

## **Conclusions**

Private sector providers now dominate social care and associated supporting services for children and young people in England, Wales, and most other parts of the UK. This outcome is unique in Europe, and indeed many other parts of the world. Numerous related practical and ethical problems have been identified by a range of studies over many years. Among many other examples, these include the lack of accountability of many private sector providers within an increasingly Plutonic system of non-democratic care governance, alongside the limited experience of delivering social care of some such providers, and degrees of financial opportunism which can at least initially motivate any involvement in the provision of support. Moreover, factors such as the often inefficient and high relative financial cost of outsourcing



care and maintaining multiple suppliers have been identified (Williams, 2012; Jordan and Drakeford, 2012). Such outcomes co-exist alongside long-established problems linked to privatisation in social care. These include acute service fragmentation and practical difficulties associated with business-led and forensic approaches to professional ‘support’, which often now focus on short-term and risk-averse safeguarding needs for LAC and YPIC, rather than the provision of durable and meaningful altruistic care which can more likely lead to improved life chances. As well as become more prone to falling into a life typified by poverty and social deprivation, service users can often also face numerous other challenges whilst in care. For example, they may be targeted by gangs eager to take advantage of young people’s vulnerabilities, such as when YPIC are drawn into any expanding ‘county-line’ drugs network (BBC, 2018). Multiple factors, therefore, continue to now generate significant problems in attempts to offer consistent support to promote the life chances and well-becoming of children and young people in care.

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