



What Works for
**Children's
Social Care**



UNLOCKING THE FACTS: **YOUNG PEOPLE REFERRED TO SECURE CHILDREN'S HOMES**

SUMMARY REPORT

CARDIFF
UNIVERSITY

PRIFYSGOL
CAERDYDD

DECEMBER 2020



CASCADE

Children's Social Care
Research and Development Centre
Canolfan Ymchwil a Datblygu
Gofal Cymdeithasol Plant

CONTENTS

Foreword	1
Unlocking the facts: Young people referred to Secure Children's Homes	3
Discussion	8
Recommendations	9
What are Secure Children's Homes?	10
How was the study designed?	10
References	11

SUMMARY REPORT BASED ON THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED BY

Williams, Annie, CASCADE, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University
 Wood, Sophie, CASCADE, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University
 Warner, Nell, CASCADE, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University
 Cummings, Aimee, CASCADE, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University
 Hodges, Helen, CASCADE, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University
 El-Banna, Asmaa, Warwick Clinical Trials Unit, University of Warwick
 Daher, Shahd, University of Oxford

Funded by the Department for Education, England

FOREWORD

SIR ALAN WOOD

The decision by the state to remove a child from the care of their parents will almost invariably have a monumental impact on the life of both child and parents, and will shape the rest of their lives - for good or for ill. A careful judgement of the child and family's circumstances informs the detail and nature of what is deemed to be the best placement for the child.

Not all of these decisions are equal, however. A special guardianship order or a foster care placement present a very different set of consequences and likely paths for a child than a residential care placement. At the most extreme end of the options available is to place a child in a secure children's home for welfare reasons. The decision to place a child in such a setting must be made with extreme care; not only is the placement among the most severe restrictions on the liberty of a child possible without a criminal conviction, but the children considered for these placements are likely to be among the most vulnerable that a social worker will work with in their career.

There is, however, a disjoint between the care with which this decision must be taken and the information available to social workers, judges, and others to make it. The broad strokes of the data on children 'in care' miss the small number of children in secure settings, and in the absence of hard evidence, there is a risk that anecdote dominates decision making.

This opacity is part of why I was so keen that What Works for Children's Social Care, and their research partner at the CASCADE centre at the University of Cardiff conduct the research contained within this report. For the first time, the Department for Education has made available data - not just on those young people who are accommodated in secure children's homes, but also those that are referred but are not able to find a place.

At this stage, the research helps to unlock an area of children's services that is too little known and understood. Large proportions of young people referred to secure homes are not placed in them, and must be accommodated elsewhere in the system - including in unregulated settings. We have no reliable information or evidence of outcomes for these placements. Those that do receive places in a secure children's homes often go through several cycles of referrals before finding a place.

We also have very little information about the effectiveness of placement in a secure children's home. There is some evidence to be drawn from inspection reports identifying a number of outstanding homes. Others have been judged to be inadequate. There are signs that secure children's homes are not accommodating those with the most challenging behaviours and complex needs; with older boys with a history of criminal activity less likely to end up accommodated.

There are important questions to be answered about the effectiveness of secure accommodation - both identifying good outcomes for children and improving resettlement in the community. This report doesn't look into the question of effectiveness, but the picture painted for outcomes of young people in this group pose many questions.

Every day many staff do their very best to help the most challenged children in our system. They deserve our loud applause. Unfortunately, the provision of secure care faces a real crisis. Much of the custodial secure provision is wanting. Too many children bounce between custodial, welfare and health secure settings. Across the spectrum, and despite a few notable exceptions, a catalogue of inspection reports and independent reviews have consistently pointed to failure. Against that backdrop secure children's homes have been looked at favourably in terms of their work.

This research casts some light on who is referred to secure children's homes, why they were referred, and what happens to them after. I hope it prompts a debate and further research into how we might do better by these young people and why there is a need now to radically reform the notion of, and provision made for, secure residential care.



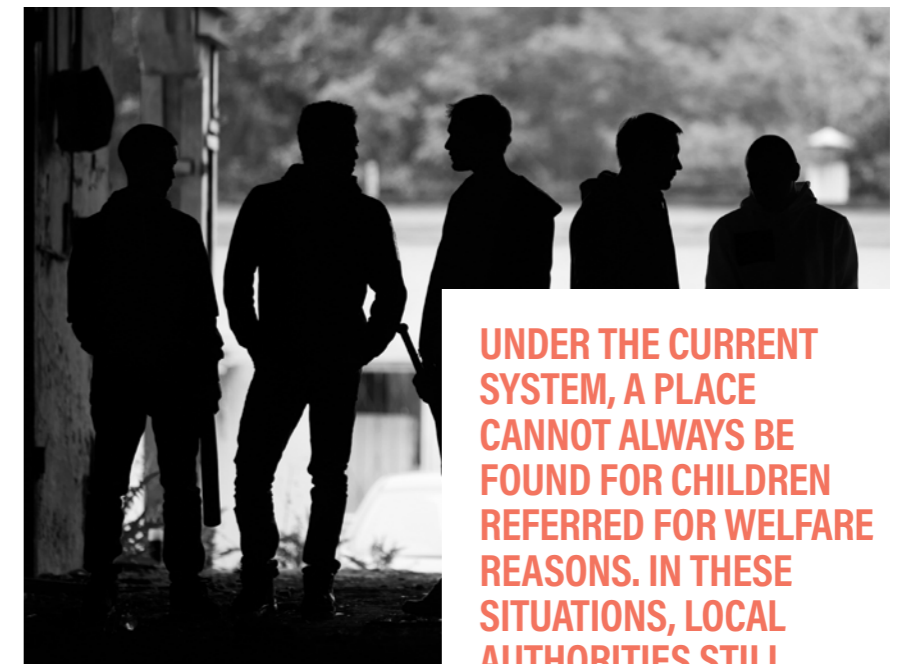
Sir Alan Wood
 Chair,
 What Works for
 Children's Social Care



UNLOCKING THE FACTS: YOUNG PEOPLE REFERRED TO SECURE CHILDREN'S HOMES

The most recent figures show there were 184 children and young people in Secure Children's Homes (SCHs) in England and Wales in February this year.¹ Whilst these homes provide care and accommodation to children and young people who have been detained or sentenced by the criminal courts and remanded to secure local authority accommodation, SCHs also accommodate and care for children who have been placed there on welfare grounds by local authorities and the courts. This report focuses on this latter group of vulnerable young people.

In these cases there are concerns that the young people are at serious risk of harm to themselves or others. Under the current system, a place cannot always be found for children referred for welfare reasons. In these situations, local authorities still need to find a placement to meet a young person's needs and keep them safe (commonly termed alternative accommodation). This study looks at the differences in the journeys and outcomes of those that are provided with a place in a SCH and those that are not and are placed in alternative accommodation.



CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S CHARACTERISTICS

Between 1st October 2016 and 31st March 2018, 527 young people (262 female, 265 male) from England were referred to SCHs for welfare reasons. Of this group, 319 young people were placed in a SCH and 208 in an alternative accommodation. The young people's ages ranged from 10-17, and while most were 14-16 years old, 19 were aged between 10 and 12 years. Approximately two thirds of the young people were white (67.2%), 15.2% were from mixed/multiple ethnic groups, 11.8%

UNDER THE CURRENT SYSTEM, A PLACE CANNOT ALWAYS BE FOUND FOR CHILDREN REFERRED FOR WELFARE REASONS. IN THESE SITUATIONS, LOCAL AUTHORITIES STILL NEED TO FIND A PLACEMENT TO MEET A YOUNG PERSON'S NEEDS AND KEEP THEM SAFE

were Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, and 4.0% were Asian/Asian British. While young people of Black and Mixed ethnicity were over-represented when compared to census figures,² this is consistent with previous studies that found that young people of these ethnicities are more likely to live in more deprived communities and thus be subject to increased intervention;³ a pattern of situation and events that has long been an issue of concern.⁴

LIFE AND CARE HISTORIES BEFORE REFERRAL TO SCHS

All young people for whom there was available data had been a 'child in need' at some point in the three years before their referral to SCHs for welfare reasons.⁵ Of these, the vast majority had entered residential or foster care over the same time period, and were in care when the application for a place in a SCH was made.

REASONS FOR REFERRALS FOR A SCHS PLACEMENT

Overall, less than a fifth of the young people were referred for a SCH placement because they were seen as a danger to others. Two fifths were referred as they were perceived to be a danger to themselves, and nearly half due to a risk of going missing at the point of referral. There were differences between young people placed in a SCH and those placed in alternative accommodation. Those in alternative accommodation were twice as likely to be classed as a danger to others and more likely to display challenging behaviours including sexually harming behaviours, offending behaviours and association with a gang. In contrast, two thirds (62.7%) of young people placed in SCHs were victims of sexual exploitation compared to under half (44.7%) of those placed in alternative accommodation.

Despite the vulnerability of young people referred to SCHs, there

were on average 4.23 attempts to find a placement. Reviews of 33 case files indicated that finding a placement tended to take, on average, three applications for those placed in a SCH, and six unsuccessful attempts for those subsequently placed in alternative accommodation. Common reasons for refusals for young people placed in

alternative accommodation included the young person's aggression. The odds of being refused also increased with age and having a history of challenging behaviours. Two in five of the young people referred were not given a placement at a SCH (319 young people were placed in a SCH and 208 in an alternative accommodation).

527
YOUNG PEOPLE FROM ENGLAND REFERRED TO SCHS FOR WELFARE REASONS

262
FEMALES

265
MALES

12%
BLACK/
AFRICAN/
CARIBBEAN/
BLACK
BRITISH

15%
MIXED/
MULTIPLE
ETHNIC
GROUP

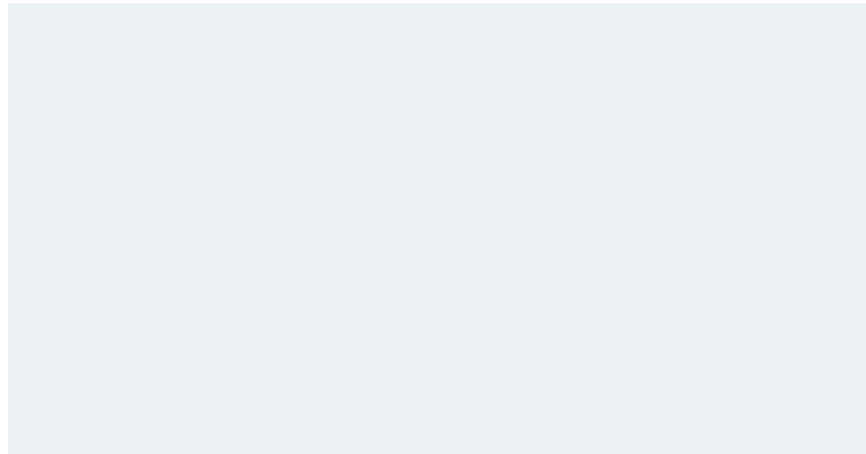
319
PLACED IN SCHS

208
PLACED IN ALTERNATIVE ACCOMMODATION

4%
ASIAN/
ASIAN
BRITISH

67%
WHITE

HALF OF CHILDREN WERE PLACED IN A CHILDREN'S HOME WHEN A SCH PLACE WAS NOT AVAILABLE



Of the young people for whom a placement in a SCH could not be found, nearly half were placed in a children's residential home, and a tenth in a Young Offenders Institution. However little information about the nature of alternative accommodation was available, meaning there is much more to find out about the nature and quality of these young people's experiences.



OUTCOMES AFTER SECURE ACCOMMODATION REFERRAL

The most common placement for all young people immediately after time in a SCH or alternative accommodation was a children's home subject to children's homes regulations. Such a placement was much more common for young people placed in SCH than those in alternative accommodation (41.2% vs 14.8%). In the year after referral to secure accommodation young people had an average of three placement moves. No difference between those from SCHs and alternative accommodation was found.

Children in the alternative accommodation group were more likely to go on to be placed



in a secure setting than those in the SCH group; they were twice as likely to go to a young offender institution, prison or a SCH at some point in the year after referral. Notably, 25.4% of young people in alternative accommodation were subsequently placed in a SCH (compared to 14.8% of the SCH group), and 22.2% were placed in a young offender institution or prison (compared to 6.3% of the SCH group).

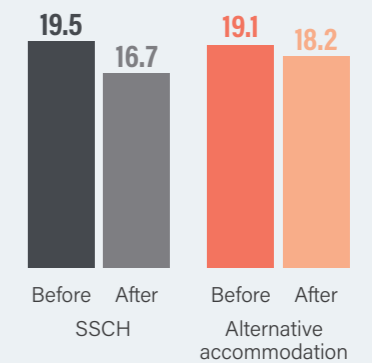
Substance use and social and emotional wellbeing were causes for concern across this group of young people before their referral. Substance use was higher among those placed in SCHs, and whilst use decreased across both groups the year after referral, the difference between the groups continued.

Social and emotional wellbeing was measured by the Strength and Difficulty Questionnaire (SDQ), where higher scores mean poorer mental health and scores over 17 are considered a cause for concern. The mean SDQ score for this group during the year of referral was 18.2

with little difference between scores for those placed in SCH and those placed in alternative

SDQ SCORES IMPROVED SLIGHTLY MORE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN SCHS

SDQ scores before and after referral to SCH



accommodation. Whilst these scores reduced slightly in the year after referral, those placed in alternative accommodation had a slightly higher score (18.2) than those placed in SCH (16.7). It must be noted that the number of children for whom this data was available was small and the results were not statistically significant.⁶

DISCUSSION

This report puts a spotlight on some of the most vulnerable children in England. That two of every five young people who are referred to a SCH cannot be found a place is a cause of deep concern, particularly given the lack of knowledge about the care provided to young people placed in alternative accommodation and how well this meets children's needs.

The findings suggest the current system is particularly failing older boys with challenging behaviours, who were significantly more likely to be placed in alternative accommodation rather than a SCH. This group was more likely to have been linked to previous offending, gang association and sexually harming behaviours in the years immediately before referral.

The difficulties with the system are reflected in the longer wait experienced by young people in the alternative accommodation group; some waiting over four months before it became evident that a place in a SCH was unlikely to be offered. During this time, the number of requests sent to SCHs for a bed

was far greater than those made for the SCH group.

This study was limited to analysing routinely collected administrative data to build a picture of young people's journeys and outcomes and did not attempt to look at the support provided during their time in a SCH or alternative accommodation. However, children's experiences in the year after referral suggests the need for further research looking at the support given to children in both SCH and alternative accommodation and when leaving these placements, particularly given the number of young people placed or re-placed in a secure setting (young offender institutions, prisons, SCHs).



RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the most vulnerable young people in society are referred to SCHs, but this study found that, for many, places were not provided. The forthcoming Care Review must examine current policy and practice related to the care offered to these young people. Specifically:

- The lack of knowledge of what alternative accommodation consists of demands further exploration to discover whether it is appropriate and if it can be viewed as a real alternative to a SCH. Local authorities should report to Ofsted when children who apply for a SCH cannot be placed and record what alternative accommodation is provided (including whether this involves the deprivation of their liberty or not).
- The number of applications required before a SCH place is provided, and the fact that many children initially rejected from SCH and placed in alternative accommodation are later given a SCH place, indicates that the current placement process and supply of placements is inadequate. This should be reviewed, to ensure children can get access to the support they need at the right time.
- Specific consideration should be given to what support and placements can be provided to older boys with a history of challenging behaviour who were more likely to be refused places in a SCH.
- The support provided to young people when they leave SCH or alternative accommodation should be reviewed, given the current situation where, on average, young people experience three new placements in the year after referral.
- Study analysis of outcomes was limited to the available measures within local authority records. Data linkage with justice, health and education databases should be taken forward to help build our understanding of the experiences of these young people.
- Further research is needed to look at the support provided for children and young people who are referred to SCHs, who have complex needs often related to substance misuse and offending. An evidence base should be developed to help identify which interventions should be provided to improve their outcomes.

WHAT ARE SECURE CHILDREN'S HOMES?

The Department for Education defines SCHs as "children's homes which provide a locked environment and restrict a child or young person's liberty."⁷ They provide care and accommodation to two groups of children and young people, those who have been detained, or sentenced by the criminal courts to secure local authority accommodation and those

referred there on welfare grounds by local authorities and the courts. This report focuses on children and young people who have been referred to SCHs on welfare grounds. These homes must follow Children's Homes Regulations. All SCH are specifically approved by the Secretary of State for Education to be able to restrict a child or young

person's liberty. Children aged 10-17 can be placed in a SCH through the provision of a secure order by the courts, but for children under 13 additional specific approval is required by the Secretary of State for Education. If a SCH is not able to offer a place, young people are placed in alternative accommodation found by their local authority.

HOW WAS THE STUDY DESIGNED?

The study is an analysis of routinely collected data sets that contain information about young people who were referred to SCHs for welfare reasons between 1st October 2016 and 31st March 2018. The data sources consist of:

- Children in Need returns
- Children Looked After returns
- Records of referral to and subsequent use of SCHs or alternative accommodation held by the Secure Welfare Coordination Unit (SWCU)

Drawing on these data sets, a series of statistical analyses was undertaken to identify similarities and differences between those placed in SCHs after a secure accommodation referral and those placed in alternative

accommodation. Thematic analysis was also carried out on the free text found in responses to specific questions within the SWCU data, relating to a randomly selected subsample of approximately 10% of the total study population. Specifically, the study looked at:

- Young people's life and care histories in the three years prior to referral
- Detail of the placement in a SCH or alternative accommodation
- Care, substance misuse, conviction, and mental health outcomes in the year after referral
- The comparative costs of SCH and alternative placements

Note: Study findings must be considered in knowledge of the project's limitations, many of which stemmed from the quality and nature of the data available. Due to the relatively recent existence of SCWU data, the sample size was low. Within Children in Need data, missing closure intervention dates may have affected the validity of some analysis as assumptions that cases had remained open had to be made. Moreover, lack of event dates in the Children Looked After outcome dataset meant that for analysis grouped under the year of referral, it was not possible to determine if the event happened before or after referral to secure accommodation.

REFERENCES AND END NOTES

1. Reporting year 2020: Children accommodated in secure children's homes. Accessed at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-accommodated-in-secure-childrens-homes>
2. ONS 2011
3. Bywaters, P., Bunting, L., Davidson, G., Hanratty, J., Mason, W., McCartan, C., & Steils, N. (2016). The relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect: An evidence review. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
4. Owen, C. & Statham, J. (2009) Disproportionality in child Welfare. London: Thomas Coram Research Unit.
5. All young people had been assessed as a 'child in need' as defined under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989.
6. It should be noted that in a sample size this small very few findings will be statistically significant.
7. Reporting year 2020: Children accommodated in secure children's homes. Accessed at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-accommodated-in-secure-childrens-homes>

ALL CHARTS

Source: Secure Welfare Coordination Unit, Child in Need Census, Child Looked After Returns, 1 October 2016 - 31 March 2018

ABOUT WWCSC

What Works for Children's Social Care seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector. We generate, collate and make accessible the best evidence for practitioners, policy makers and practice leaders to improve children's social care and the outcomes it generates for children and families

ABOUT CASCADE

CASCADE is concerned with all aspects of community responses to social need in children and families, including family support services, children in need services, child protection, looked after children and adoption. It is the only centre of its kind in Wales and has strong links with policy and practice. CASCADE's aim is to improve the well-being, safety and rights of children and their families.

If you would like this publication in an alternative format such as Braille, large print or audio, please contact [**info@whatworks-csc.org.uk**](mailto:info@whatworks-csc.org.uk)



What Works *for* Children's Social Care

CONTACT

info@whatworks-csc.org.uk

[@whatworksCSC](https://twitter.com/whatworksCSC)

whatworks-csc.org.uk

CARDIFF
UNIVERSITY

PRIFYSGOL
CAERDYDD



CASCADe
Children's Social Care
Research and Development Centre
Canolfan Ymchwil a Datblygu
Gofal Cymdeithasol Plant