

Analysis of care and education pathways of refugee and asylum-seeking children in care in England: implications for social work

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Refugee and asylum-seeking children are defined as young people under the age of 18 who are outside of their country of origin, unaccompanied by a parent or customary caregiver and who have undertaken forced migration.

Recent events around the world have resulted in a renewed surge in asylum applications from children (European Commission, 2018). In 2015, over 95,200 asylum applications were recorded for unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children in European countries. Underlying these statistics is a constant change in the make-up and backgrounds of these children. In addition, these young people often have complex needs which require specialist services. The task for local authority children's services supporting these children is thus a challenging one and requires strategic and flexible planning and service implementation.

Objectives of this research:

1. To compare the care histories and educational outcomes of unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children to their peers in care, those in need and children in the general population
2. To determine what factors predict the educational outcomes of unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children

Call to Action

Policy and practice

- Issue all unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children in England with a Unique Pupil Number so their educational pathways and outcomes can be tracked by DfE and analysed by researchers
- Capitalise on young people's motivation for education, remove barriers to learning and provide adequate support
- Work more closely together with other professionals supporting unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children to minimize placement changes and, where these are inevitable, their impact
- Support young people's attendance and transition into mainstream schools

Research

- Examine care and educational pathways for all unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children in care using existing datasets in England
- Design more longitudinal research which provides greater detail on the unique experiences of unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children

What did we do?

Data on all unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children in care eligible for Key Stage 4 exams (KS4) aged 16 in 2013 and who were in care for a year or more were obtained from the National Pupil Database and Local Authority Returns. Socio-demographic, care and education data for unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children were compared to data on children in care, children in need and children in the general population. In the second part, multiple regression analysis was used to determine what factors predict the exam scores of unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children.

What did we find out?

Unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children had better KS4 scores than children in care and children in need, despite significant difficulties

Unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children scored more points at KS4 than children in care and children in need but fewer than children in the general population. Unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children had significantly fewer authorised and unauthorised absences than children in care or children in need, but attendance was not different than for children in the general population. The majority of unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children were enrolled in mainstream schools (85.3%), some in further education colleges in contrast with previous studies. Unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children in mainstream schools had better exam scores. Unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children changed school in year 10 or 11 at four times the rate of other children in care, in need or in the general population.

Special educational needs are under researched for this population

Unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children with SEN had similar KS4 scores than those without SEN, a surprising result given the effect of SEN on educational outcomes for other groups. This suggests that additional support as a result of identified SEN may be beneficial for unaccompanied refugee and asylum-seeking children. The data does not provide information about SEN provision type, but it may include language classes, which are critical to access the wider curriculum. Worryingly, young people who didn't have any recorded data about SEN had extremely low educational outcomes. More research is required to understand the prevalence and type of SEN in the refugee population.

Refugee and asylum-seeking children placed in care younger, living in foster or kinship care, with fewer behaviour problems, placed in mainstream school or with fewer school changes had higher exam scores

School changes may reflect arrival into the country and therefore entry into school, nevertheless this was particularly disruptive for refugee and asylum-seeking children. Prolonged periods outside of school may isolate these young people from peers and delay their learning, which might result in a loss of motivation and ultimately disengagement (Chase, Knight, & Statham, 2008; Wade, Mitchell, & Baylis, 2005). On average, behavioural problems were not severe but those who did have more problems fared worse in exams. Success in education is therefore more likely if accommodation and support needs are met. This may also decrease the need for specialist support, e.g. psychological interventions.

Further information

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