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Coverage
England
Theme
Health and Care

The mental health of young people looked after by local authorities

Among young people aged between 5 and 17 years who were looked after by local authorities in England, 45 per cent were assessed as having a mental disorder according to a survey report* from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) published today. The survey covered children who were in residential care, foster care, living with their birth parents and 16 to 17 year-olds living independently under local authority supervision.

Overall, thirty seven per cent had clinically significant conduct disorders; 12 per cent were assessed as having emotional disorders - anxiety and depression – and 7 per cent were rated as hyperactive.

This report presents data from the first national survey of the mental health of young people looked after by local authorities in England. The survey was carried out by the ONS for the Department of Health between October 2001 and June 2002.

The main purpose of the survey was to produce rates of three main categories of mental disorder: conduct disorder, hyperactivity and emotional disorders by the characteristics of the children and where they lived.

The survey also looked at the impact and burden of children's mental health problems and at their use of health, social and educational services.

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****The mental health of young people looked after by local authorities in England***

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Other key findings include:

Prevalence of mental disorders

Among 5- to 10-year-olds, the rates of disorders for children looked after by local authorities compared with those obtained from the 1999 ONS survey of the mental health of a representative sample of 10,500 children living in private households were:

- Emotional disorders: 11 per cent compared with 3 per cent.
- Conduct disorders: 36 per cent compared with 5 per cent.
- Hyperkinetic disorders: 11 per cent compared with 2 per cent.
- Any childhood mental disorder: 42 per cent compared with 8 per cent.

Among 11- to 15-year-olds, the prevalence of mental disorders for children looked after by local authorities compared with children from the private household survey were:

- Emotional disorders: 12 per cent compared with 6 per cent.
- Conduct disorders: 40 per cent compared with 6 per cent.
- Hyperkinetic disorders: 7 per cent compared with 1 per cent.
- Any childhood mental disorder: 49 per cent compared with 11 per cent.

About two-thirds of children living in residential care (68 per cent) were assessed as having a mental disorder and about four in ten of those placed with foster carers (39 per cent) or with their birth parents (42 per cent).

Children living with their birth parents or in residential care were at least twice as likely as those in foster care to have anxiety disorders (20 per cent and 16 per cent compared with 8 per cent).

- Children living with their birth parents or in residential care were about four times as likely as those in foster care to have depression (9 per cent and 8 per cent compared with 2 per cent).
- Children in residential care were far more likely than those in foster care or living with their birth parents to have conduct disorders (56 per cent compared with 33 per cent and 28 per cent).
- The prevalence of hyperkinetic disorders hardly varied by type of placement – between 7 and 8 per cent.

- Less common disorders, particularly autism, were far more common among children in residential care than in other placements (11 per cent compared with 2 per cent).

Among children in family placements, the prevalence of any childhood mental disorder among the children in foster placements provided by the local authority was 40 per cent. This rate was similar to that found among children living with their parents under local authority supervision, 42 per cent, and slightly higher than the 32 per cent for children in foster placements with family or friends.

Overall, nearly three quarters of the young people in residential care, 72 per cent, were clinically rated as having a mental disorder: 60 per cent had conduct disorders, 18 per cent were assessed as having emotional disorders, 8 per cent hyperkinetic disorders, and 13 per cent had less common disorders.

General health and physical complaints

Children living with foster carers were more likely to be rated by their carers as having very good health (69 per cent) compared with children living in any other placement type, particularly those living in residential care (41 per cent) or independently (31 per cent).

The general health of children seemed to improve as their placement became more secure. About two-thirds of children who had been in their current placement for a year or more (67 per cent) were assessed as having very good health, compared with just over half (55 per cent) of those who had been in their placement for less than a year.

Two-thirds of all looked after children were reported by their carers to have at least one physical complaint. The most commonly reported physical complaints were: eye and/or sight problems (16 per cent), speech or language problems (14 per cent), bed wetting (13 per cent), difficulty with co-ordination (10 per cent) and asthma (10 per cent).

Over three-quarters of children with a mental disorder had at least one physical complaint compared with just over half (57 per cent) of the children who were assessed as not having a mental disorder.

Four per cent of the children surveyed were reported to be taking one of 14 types of medication commonly used in the treatment of childhood mental disorders. However, a fifth of those diagnosed as having hyperkinetic disorders were taking psycho-stimulants (Methylphenidate, Equasym, Ritalin)

Use of services

Overall, 10 per cent of children looked after by local authorities were reported to have visited a GP in the *past two weeks*; a rate not significantly different from that of the general population.

Children with any mental disorder were one and a half times more likely to have visited their GP in *the past two weeks* than those with no disorder (12 per cent compared with 8 per cent). Children with emotional disorders were the most likely to have seen their doctor in this time, 15 per cent.

The use of specialist services was common. Over a third of all children looked after by local authorities had been in touch with a specialist in child mental health, 34 per cent, and 23 per cent had some contact with special education services (for example, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators and Education Welfare Officers).

Forty-four per cent of children with a mental disorder were in contact with child mental health specialists and a third accessed special education services.

Children with hyperkinetic disorders or their carers were the most likely group to have sought help from teachers, 68 per cent, or seen a specialist in child mental health, 62 per cent, and almost half (47 per cent) had been seen by professionals working in special education services.

Carers of children with a mental disorder were over five times more likely than carers of those with no disorder to report that the children had been in trouble with the police (26 per cent compared with 5 per cent). Children with a conduct disorder were the most likely to have had this experience (29 per cent) and this group were also most frequently reported as having been in trouble three or more times (14 per cent).

Scholastic achievement and education

About 60 per cent of all looked after children had some difficulty or experienced marked difficulty with reading, or mathematics or spelling, as assessed by their teachers.

Difficulties in reading, maths and spelling were more prevalent among children in residential care than in any other placement: 82 per cent had difficulties with maths, 78 per cent had problems spelling and 70 per cent had reading difficulties.

Children with a mental disorder looked after by local authorities were nearly twice as likely as children with no disorder to have marked difficulties with each of the three abilities: reading (37 per cent compared with 19 per cent); mathematics (35 per cent compared with 20 per cent) and spelling (41 per cent compared with 24 per cent).

Overall, 62 per cent of all children were reported to be at least one year behind in their intellectual development. This comprised 38 per cent of children who were one or two years behind and 24 per cent who were three or more years below the level expected for their age.

Among children with any mental disorder, about a third, 35 per cent, were three or more years behind; twice the rate among the no disorder group, 17 per cent.

About two-thirds of children had recognised special educational needs (SEN), and half of these, 30 per cent, had a statement issued by the local education authority. Among the children with a mental disorder, 42 per cent had a statement of SEN, twice the proportion found among the sample with no mental disorder.

Social networks and lifestyle behaviours

All findings presented below relate to 11- to 17-year-olds who agreed to fill in a self-completion questionnaire.

Children in residential care were more likely than those in foster care to report not spending any time with their friends (13 per cent compared with 3 per cent) and children who had been in their placement for less than a year were also the most likely to report spending no time at all with their friends (8 per cent compared with 2 per cent)

Children with any mental disorder were four times more likely than those with no disorder to report not spending any time with their friends.

Overall, almost a third, 32 per cent, of the young people aged 11–17 (27 per cent of 11-15 year-olds and 44 per cent of 16-17 year-olds) looked after by local authorities were current smokers and only 36 per cent had never tried smoking (41 per cent of 11-15 year-olds and 22 per cent of 16-17 year-olds). Sixty nine per cent of children in residential care were current smokers, reflecting the greater proportion of older children in these placements.

Forty-five per cent of children had never had an alcoholic drink (54 per cent of 11-15 year-olds and 22 per cent of 16-17 year-olds). Five per cent of children with a mental disorder reported that they drank alcohol almost every day compared with none of the children with no disorder. Six per cent of children with conduct disorder drank almost every day and a quarter of children with an emotional disorder drank at least once or twice a week.

The most commonly reported drug used by children looked after by local authorities was cannabis: 20 per cent of all 11-17 year-olds (14 per cent of 11-15 year-olds and 33 per cent of 16-17 year-olds) had used it at some point in their lives. Of these children about half, 11 per cent, (9 per cent of 11-15 year-olds and 16 per cent of 16-17 year-olds) had used it in the past month.

BACKGROUND NOTES

1. Although the *Mental health of young people looked after by local authorities in England* survey was commissioned by the Department of Health, follow-up action will now be the responsibility of the Department for Education and Skills.
2. This report uses the term, mental disorders, as defined by the ICD-10, to imply a clinically recognisable set of symptoms or behaviour associated in most cases with considerable distress and substantial interference with personal functions.

3. Emotional disorders includes separation anxiety, specific phobias, social phobia, panic, agoraphobia, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive disorder and Depression.
4. Conduct disorders are characterised by aggressive, disruptive or antisocial behaviour. Physical aggression (usually initiated by the child) can take the form of bullying or cruelty to animals. Destruction of other people's property (possibly including fire-setting) and covert stealing is common. This can range from "borrowing" others' possessions to shoplifting, forgery, car theft and burglary. Children with conduct disorder are more likely to truant from school, cheat at their school work or display callous behaviour.
5. Hyperkinetic disorder is a diagnosable condition recognised by health professionals as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). It is one of the most common mental disorders among children, characterised by being unable to sit still, plan ahead or finish tasks, being easily distracted or inattentive.
6. Less common disorders include autism, tic disorders and eating disorders.
7. Current smokers are those who answered "yes" to the question: "Do you smoke at all these days?"
8. A total sample of 2,500 child identifiers (approximately 1 in 18 of all looked after children) excluding those in short term placements, was drawn from the anonymised database of looked after children held by the Department of Health. The number of children selected was proportional to the number of children looked after in each authority. The sample was also selected to ensure representative proportions of boys and girls in each age band between 5 and 17 years. Local authorities were sent 2,315 Child Summary Forms, requesting consent and the child's details. After six months 1,796 (78 per cent) were returned. Of the 1,796 returned forms, 672 (37 per cent) were ineligible. Information was collected on 1,039 of the 1,134 children eligible for interview (91 per cent). An equivalent survey is taking place in Scotland and in Wales this year.
9. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available from the press office.
10. National Statistics are produced to high professional standards set out in the National Statistics Code of Practice. They undergo regular quality assurance reviews to ensure that they meet customer needs. They are produced free from any political interference. © Crown copyright 2003.