Looked after children
by Courtney Hougham and Monica Dowling

Introduction
There were 27 quality studies on looked after children as determined by the project categorisation. Studies included children who were placed with non-related foster parents as well as those in kinship care; these are currently the placements of choice in Anglophone jurisdictions (Ainsworth and Thoburn 2014). Surveys have compared children’s material resources in different forms of care including foster and residential care (Janssens and Deboutte 2010; Sallnas et al., 2012). However the majority of highly rated studies in this review of poverty, institutional care and looked after children are concerned with kinship care and foster care and there is a serious lack of studies that evaluate the situation of looked after children in institutional care especially in Europe. The overwhelming majority of the studies were from North America, specifically the USA, which may not be easily generalisable to the UK or other European countries. Many studies within the USA are state-specific, with each state having its own welfare and social service rules and regulations. For example, federal welfare reform allows for someone to remain on government assistance for 60 months, while Ohio only allows 36 months. The average length of stay in foster care in the USA is two years, whereas in Illinois it is four years (Doyle Jr 2007).

Only Vinnerljung and Sallnas (2008) and Holtan et al. (2013) explored aspects of foster care in Nordic countries. Broad (2005) and Ward (2008) considered evidence of poverty risks from the UK. Two other studies, originally categorised as of lower quality, have also been included as they have a broad reach across Europe and revealed different findings in relation to children in institutional care and families in poverty (Unicef 2005; Unicef 2010). Despite the widespread research on the difficulties faced by children entering care, being in care, and then leaving care, there is very little research on anti-poverty interventions. This is perhaps because there have been limited policy interventions for looked after children. Of the studies that fulfilled the specifications of this review, only four included research that followed legislation. Of those studies, most referred to ‘welfare reform’ in the USA which, unfortunately, is a means of restricting access to government assistance: one referred to the Foster Care Independence Act 1999 in the USA, and one to the Children Leaving Care Act 2000 in the UK.

The majority of studies used administrative records; a small number used in-depth interviews and/or original surveys (Eurochild 2010; Pecora et al., 2005; Unicef 2005). Relying on administrative records does not allow for experimental design and can hardly give the whole picture in any
situation. Group comparisons based on administrative data only allow the authors to speculate regarding the reason for differences, but do not allow for causal inferences.

Pre-placement

Although poverty plays a role in diminishing parental ability to care, it is not the main reason children are placed in out-of-home care in most countries. However in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, an analysis of MONNE regional monitoring project data from 20 countries suggests that family poverty is a key factor in a family’s decision to place their children in institutional care (Unicef 2010). In the USA, the main reason is abuse and/or neglect, while in Sweden and other Nordic countries the main reason is behavioural problems (Vinnerljung and Sallnas 2008). However, in some Central and Eastern European countries, children were taken to orphanages because their parents could not afford to look after them, or because parents were informed that a child with a disability is better off in an institution where all his/her needs are catered for (Eurochild 2010; Unicef 2005).

Economic status is viewed as a potential pathway to maltreatment, which is one of the routes into public care (Fein and Lee 2003; Wells and Guo 2006). Although maltreatment is the reason for a removal, poverty and the stresses associated with low income may be at the root of the maltreatment. Many of the articles examined socioeconomic factors affecting the parent, usually the mother, prior to placement and also the socioeconomic factors involved in the speed of reunification (Kortenkamp et al., 2004; Wells et al., 2003; Wells and Guo 2006). However, the authors of those studies are quick to point out that even though socioeconomic factors reached statistical significance, there were other, non-economic factors also at play such as age of the child, race, and reason for removal. Assuming that low economic status is a direct cause of child care placement would be misleading, but it can be viewed as a part of the problem (Unicef 2010).

Wells et al. (2003), Wells and Guo (2006) and Kortenkamp et al. (2004) examined the role of welfare reform in the USA on speed of family reunification. Welfare reform eliminated entitlement to cash assistance and restricted cash assistance to 60 months. Welfare reform was expected to reduce family income. Kortenkamp et al. looked at data from 133 children of welfare recipients in California who had been removed from their family. In 92 per cent of cases, the family income was below the federal poverty line and 47 per cent of mothers had no high school diploma or equivalency degree. Wells and Guo (2006) used a multiple-cohort design with three cohorts: 1. Those who entered foster care prior to welfare reform, 2. Those who entered immediately after welfare reform, and 3. Those who entered foster care three years after welfare reform, which meant they could begin to lose cash assistance, since Ohio only allowed 36 months on cash assistance. Data was gathered from three county databases in Cayuga County, Ohio. The focus was on
mother-only households. Thirty nine per cent of the mothers had economic difficulties, 73 per cent received welfare benefits in the 18 months prior to placement, and 51 per cent had no income from wages during the study time period. Wells et al. found that those children who were placed prior to welfare reform were reunited faster than cohorts two and three.

Wells et al. (2003), Wells and Guo (2006) and Kortenkamp et al. (2004) each had an interesting finding – the speed in which families were reunited was slower when a family was on welfare benefits when the child was placed in foster care, but lost access to welfare during the child’s placement, compared to families who remained on welfare benefits both before and after placement. Wells et al. also found that the slowest reunification rates came when the mother lost income from welfare but gained income from employment. Although this finding seems surprising, the authors discussed how employment may actually impede a mother being reunited with a child who has been placed in foster care. Due to lower education levels, a single mother may be forced to take a job that has early morning or late night hours; they may be required to take on more than one job. Perhaps for these reasons, they are reunited more slowly. However, this is speculation as the authors did not interview any of the mothers and relied on secondary data sources.

In-placement
A national survey of 1,308 USA children entering out of home care (Sakai et al., 2011) found that when children were placed in kinship care, the household head was generally older, single, unemployed, and had lower levels of educational achievement than non-kinship caregivers. Kinship caregivers also received fewer support services such as care giver subsidies, parent training, peer support and respite care. Despite this, children in kinship care fared better with behavioural and social skills problems, although may be at higher risk of substance use and pregnancy in teenage years. Doyle (2007) suggests that his results show that foster children (especially older children) on the margins of placement tend to have better outcomes when they stay at home while McDaniel and Pergamit (2013) note that, compared to youth in the general population, education and employment rates for youth in foster care are low.

In a sample of 11,300 young people in care, Frerer et al. (2013) found that approximately one third were placed in kinship care. While in foster care, children are more likely to attend a school with a low academic rating. A sample of 4,000 foster children was compared to a sample of 4,000 disadvantaged non-foster children matched on characteristics such as gender, race, free lunch status, and disability. They found that while 14 per cent of the disadvantaged youth scored at the advanced level on a California Standard Test, only four per cent of foster children scored at the advanced level (Frerer et al., 2013). Frerer contends that the major difference between the foster
children and the sample of matched disadvantaged non-foster children is that the foster children were removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect – a trauma that adds an additional complication to school achievement. They also found that 69 per cent of the 11,300 sample had been in three or more home placements, with 38 per cent in more than five placements. The fact that foster children are more likely to attend a school with a low academic rating implies that they are being placed in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Additionally, the number of placements is disruptive to education, which affects achievement level and chances of post-secondary education.

**Post-placement**

Evidence from the studies indicates that children who have been looked after experience:

- Lower levels of education (Broad 2005; Courtney and Dworky 2006; Frerer et al., 2013; McDaniel and Pergamit 2013; Mersky and Janczewski 2013; Pecora et al., 2005; Pecora et al., 2006; Vinnerljung and Sallnas 2008)
- Lower income and lower levels of employment (Courtney and Dworky 2006; Doyle Jr 2007; McDaniel and Pergamit 2013; Mersky and Janczewski 2013; Pecora et al., 2005)
- Periods of homelessness (Berzin et al., 2011; Courtney and Dworky 2006; Doyle Jr 2007; Kushel et al., 2007; Pecora et al., 2005)
- Higher rates of early marriage, early parenting, and poverty (Southerland 2009)

Courtney and Dworsky (2006) looked at data from the *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth* longitudinal study completed in Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin. The study was conducted over three periods of time or ‘waves’. Courtney et al. compared young adults who were still in care at Wave Two to those who were out of care; they also compared both groups to a nationally representative group of 19 year olds from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health as a control peer group from the general population. It is interesting to note that Illinois allows foster youth to remain in care until age 21, so 75 per cent of the youth who were still in care at Wave Two were from Illinois. Thirty seven per cent had no high school diploma or equivalency degree compared to nine per cent in the general population peer group; this is different from Pecora et al. (2005) who found that 15 per cent had no high school diploma or equivalency. Although Pecora et al. found that 85 per cent had completed high school, 28.5 per cent had an equivalency degree and not a diploma compared to five per cent in the general population with an equivalency degree. Although an equivalency degree indicates a completion of high school criteria, it has been found that those with an equivalency degree are less likely to go on to higher education and will earn less than those with a diploma (Pecora et al., 2005).
Courtney et al. (2006) also found that only 18 per cent of foster youth were enrolled in a 4-year college programme compared to 62 per cent in the general population peer group. Those still in care at Wave Two were three times more likely to be enrolled in a 2 or 4-year college programme than those who were no longer in care. Vinnerljung and Sallnas (2008) found the same in Sweden; approximately two thirds of those who had been in out-of-home care had basic education compared to 8-10 per cent in the general population. The inference can be drawn that lower levels of education put former foster youth at a disadvantage in the job market.

Interestingly, Mersky and Janczewski (2013) found the same pattern of a reduced rate of attending secondary or post-secondary schooling in all children who had come into contact with Child Protective Services (CPS), not just those in foster care. Mersky and Janczewski (2013) raise the interesting notion that foster care is not the precipitant, but CPS involvement may predict the outcomes.

In terms of income and employment, Courtney and Dworksy (2006) found those who were out of care at Wave Two, were more likely to be employed than those still in care. This finding suggests that foster youth out of care forego education to take care of themselves. However, 90 per cent of the employed foster youth earned less than $10,000 a year. Pecora et al. (2006) found that 33 per cent of former foster youth were at or below the poverty line - three times the national poverty rate. Mersky and Janczewski (2013) noted that all groups who had CPS involvement averaged between 30-46 per cent less annual income than those who had no CPS involvement. Between 17 per cent (Pecora et al., 2005) and 49 per cent (Courtney and Dworksy 2006) had received or were receiving assistance at the time of the interviews.

Southerland et al. (2009) examined the young adult outcomes of a nationally representative cohort of 620 transition-age youth who were involved with the USA child welfare system (CWS) either at home or in out of home placements such as foster care, kinship care, group home and other residential treatment facilities. This fifth wave study found that these young people showed higher rates of poverty, early marriage and early parenting than Census statistics for USA transition age youth. They were twice as likely to be experiencing economic hardship as their counterparts in the general population. Of those actively parenting, 60 per cent of these young people were living in households at or below the poverty line.

Finally, periods of homelessness are prevalent among former foster children. Numbers ranged from 14 per cent (Courtney and Dworksy 2006) to 22 per cent (Pecora et al., 2005) (who had been homeless at least one day since leaving care). Despite the numbers, there is no indication in the
studies about the pathway to homelessness. The presumption is that it is a combination of lower education, reduced employment rates/lower income, and mental health issues. The outcomes of former foster youth reflect their beginnings. They generally come from families in which the parent is receiving government assistance and has a lower level of education.

**Anti-poverty interventions**

There were three significant anti-poverty interventions: supportive housing (Farrell et al., 2010), the *Children Leaving Care Act* (Broad 2005), and job preparedness for young people in foster care (McDaniel and Pergamit 2013). Insufficient detail was available about a fourth - the John H Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (Courtney and Dworky 2006).

The Supportive Housing for Families (SHF) initiative was a way of preventing children from entering foster care in the USA. As Farrell et al. (2010) discuss, housing issues are often a cause for a child being placed in foster care and can delay a child being reunited with their biological family. SHF was focused on families having difficulties with housing that were affecting family unity or reunification. The initiative involved providing the family with case management, permanent housing, mental health interventions, housing assistance, and help building connections in the community. The initiative was provided in collaboration with the Department of Social Services to assist in getting housing subsidies and assist in finding employment. Farrell et al. examined whether there was a change in employment status, housing status, and environment of care when the family was discharged from the programme. What they found were significant improvements in employment and housing for those who had completed the programme. Sixty eight per cent of families, who were in temporary housing at the start, were in permanent housing at the end. Thirty per cent who were not employed at the beginning were employed at the end. A paired sample t-test from beginning to end showed improvement in parenting capabilities.

The *Children Leaving Care Act* (CLCA) was implemented in 2000 in the UK. The Act delays a young person leaving care until they are ready, provides better personal support, and increases financial assistance for caregivers (Broad 2005). Broad distributed an 8-page questionnaire to 300 Local Authorities or Leaving Care Teams. Only 52 responded for a 17 per cent response rate. Due to the low response rate, it is unclear how representative the study is for the entire UK. Broad compared leaving care after the implementation of the CLCA to studies done in 1994 and 1998. The results were encouraging. After CLCA, 31 per cent of young people leaving care were in post-16 education compared to 18-19 per cent in the previous studies. Additionally, 29 per cent were unemployed post-CLCA compared to 49-52 per cent in the previous pre-CLCA studies. Broad also found that 68 per cent of the Leaving Care Teams who responded provide monetary incentives to