Substance use, wellbeing and interpersonal relationships among young people in foster care and private households: an analysis of the SHRN survey in Wales

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What is the School Health Research Network (SHRN)?

- WG, PHW, CU and CRUK

- Aims: improve young people’s health and wellbeing in the school setting by:
  - collecting and sharing health and wellbeing data
  - supporting new research into school health
  - facilitating evidence-informed practice in the school health community

- SHRN involves survey; 115 schools (52%); 11-18 year olds (~35,000)
What is the evidence on outcomes among looked after young people (LAYP)?

- In 2015: 1.8% (5,615) looked after young people (LAYP) in local authority care; higher than English prevalence (1.2%) ~75% in foster care

- LAYP have much poorer outcomes, but there is a lack of large-scale quantitative studies in Wales/UK

- Methods of analysis – risk and odds ratios
Sample, methods and results of analysis one

295 foster children; 28,534 children from private households...
What causes poorer outcomes among children in care?
What do we already know?

- **Care-related factors**: Placement type; placement stability; number of placements
- **Pre-care factors**
  - **Child** (low birth weight, prematurity, disability, mental health issues and attendance at A&E)
  - **Parental** (SES, maternal age at birth, learning difficulties, ethnicity, single parenthood, smoking in pregnancy, mental illness and alcohol misuse).

-Histories of maltreatment: domestic abuse (21%), parental substance use (18%) and parental mental health (15%). Primary needs: abuse and neglect (66%), family dysfunction (14%) and acute family stress (7%).

Early maltreatment and neglect is harmful for children’s social and emotional development...
Literature on the protective effect of social relationships

- Healthy social relationships – protective

- Maltreatment and neglect > poor outcomes – In addition, evidence that children who experience ACEs, and LAYP are more likely to present attachment disorders

In the second analysis, we accounted for the possible mediating role of relationships in the association between being in care and outcomes...

We hypothesised that having positive relationships would reduce the strength of the associations of living in foster care with substance use and poorer emotional wellbeing.
Results of analysis two

- Smoking: Before = 6, After = 4
- Cannabis Use: Before = 4, After = 5
- Binge Drinking: Before = 2, After = 3
- Multiple Substance Use Risk: Before = 3, After = 2
- Mephedrone: Before = 9, After = 6
- Poorer Well-being: Before = 1, After = 2
How can we explain this?

Early adversity and relationships

Abuse/maltreatment > Chronic fear and hyper-arousal > biochemical process > lasting effects on brain development

Stigma > relationship difficulties
Next steps

- Make next round of the SHRN survey more sensitive
- Intervention development/evaluation work
- Data linkage
when 'I' is replaced by 'WE'...
— even 'ILLNESS' —
becomes 'WELLNESS'