



Y RHWYDWAITH YMCHWIL  
IECHYD MEWN YSGOLION

SCHOOL HEALTH  
RESEARCH NETWORK

# Sexual Health Outcomes for Young People in State Care

School Health & Wellbeing Research Brief, April 2019

Wales has comparatively high rates of children and young people in state care; this places greater demand on local authority service provision of advice and support on issues relating to sexuality and sexual health. With no pre-existing statistics on sexual health in care-experienced people in Wales, how can their sexual health outcomes be determined and understood?

## What we already know...

Young people in state care are recognised as a population vulnerable to poor health outcomes. Previous studies have found that young people with care experience are more likely engage in risky sexual behaviours, including sexual activity at younger ages, early and repeat pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and transactional sex.

The risk of poor outcomes continues into parenthood, with care experienced parents more likely to experience compulsory state intervention.



## What we did...

- We brought together data from two studies. Quantitative data came from the 2015 School Health Research Network survey, which were used to investigate sexual health behaviours and outcomes of young people in foster care compared to those living in private households. The findings were contextualised with qualitative data from interviews with social care professionals.
- The survey data included information on current living arrangements, sexual health behaviours and socio-demographic characteristics.
- The qualitative data was from semi-structured interviews with 27 staff representatives from leaving care services from each of the 22 local authorities across Wales. The interviews explored professionals' experiences and local responses to pregnancy and parenthood for young people in and leaving state care.

## In a nutshell

- Young people in state care in Wales experience poorer sexual health outcomes compared to those not in care.
- Young people in foster care are significantly more likely to report ever having had sexual intercourse, to report an early age of first intercourse and to report not using a condom at last intercourse.
- Social care professionals offer a comprehensive range of support to young people in foster care, but may feel uncertain supporting sexual health in young people below the age of consent and teaching relationship skills and self-esteem.



@SHRNWales



SHRN@cardiff.ac.uk



SHRN.org.uk

### What we found...

#### Sexual health in young people in foster care

- Young people in foster care were significantly more likely to report ever having had sexual intercourse and to report an early age of first intercourse.
- Young people in foster care had three times higher odds of not reporting condom use at last intercourse and nearly five times higher odds of not reporting contraceptive pill use, compared to those with a different type of living arrangement.
- A higher proportion of young people in foster care reported sending a sexually explicit image of themselves or having one forwarded without their consent.

#### Insights from professionals

- Professionals were confident that the care system has the skills and experience to identify and respond to the needs of young people in foster care, but is compromised by lack of resources.

- Responsibility for supporting young people's sexual health was shared amongst professionals, but they did not perceive any risk that such sharing of responsibility might dilute the support.
- Professionals faced values-based dilemmas, notably in regard to when young people, who might be below the legal age of consent, should be provided with sexual health information and contraception.
- Professionals felt less confident about supporting healthy relationships and self-esteem than teaching young people about practising safe sex.



### Issues to consider

Whilst the interviews were conducted with a range of professionals with different roles and responsibilities in local authority services, they may not be representative of all practitioners across the sector.

The survey was cross-sectional (data were collected at one point in time), so causality cannot be assumed.

No care-experienced young people were interviewed for this study.

### What does this mean for my school?

- **Young people with experience of the care system are at elevated risk of high risk sexual health behaviours, such as having sex at an early age or without using contraception.**
- **Professionals within the state care system believe they are adept at identifying and responding to young people's sexual health needs, but may feel what they can offer is undermined by finite resources and limited professional capacity, as well as uncertainties about supporting young people below the age of consent.**
- **Schools may be able to supplement the work of social care professionals by teaching young people, including those in foster care, about healthy relationships and developing their self-esteem to enable them to enact their knowledge on sexual health.**

Read the research paper in full. Download for free here:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740917310939>

Roberts L et al (2018) Sexual health outcomes for young people in state care: cross-sectional analysis of a national survey and views of social care professionals in Wales. *Children and Youth Services Review* 89: 281-288