

Homelessness among young people leaving care in Northern Ireland

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Summary

This study used linked administrative data to examine the risk of homelessness among young people aging out of care (care leavers) in Northern Ireland (NI). Following a matched cohort of care leavers and young people with no social care history for up to ten years, findings show that care leavers face a substantially higher risk of homelessness. **Over six in ten young people leaving care went on to experience homelessness**, with the highest risk in the first two years after leaving care. Factors such as living in an urban or deprived area, multiple times in care, transition out of care before age 18 years and last placement in a foster care setting versus kinship care were associated with increased risk. Discharge to the care of parents or former foster carers were associated with reduced risk of homelessness. The results underline the need for early, coordinated, and sustained support during the transition out of care into adulthood to reduce homelessness and improve outcomes for our young people leaving care.

What we did

We conducted a retrospective matched cohort study of 970 young people in NI who left care between 2012 and 2015 (at age 16, 17 or 18 years). Each care leaver was matched 1:1 with a young person with no social care history of the same age and sex, and who had the same area of residence, deprivation level and mental health status (using prescribed medications for a mental health condition and / or a psychiatric hospital admission as proxy indicators of mental ill health). By securely linking anonymised social care and health data to homeless presentation data from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive¹ up to 2022, we were able to follow individuals for up to 10.8 years after leaving care and estimate both the risk of homelessness over time and factors associated with homelessness within the care leaver group. The work was conducted in collaboration with the Housing Executive and with ongoing input from care experienced young people supported by the charity Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC).

¹ The [Northern Ireland Housing Executive](#) is the single national housing authority with a statutory duty to respond to homelessness in NI and provide accommodation for certain homeless households.

Background

Young people aging out of care face a steep transition to independence, often much earlier than their peers [1]. Without the family and financial safety nets that most young people rely on, care leavers are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness [2]. While this is well recognised by frontline service providers and in international literature [3,4] there is no empirical population-level, longitudinal evidence in Great Britain or NI [5,6]. We address this gap by linking anonymised administrative data to quantify the risk of homelessness among young people leaving care in NI and to identify factors that increase or reduce that risk.

What we found

Homelessness was much more common among care leavers than among other young people in NI.

63.9%

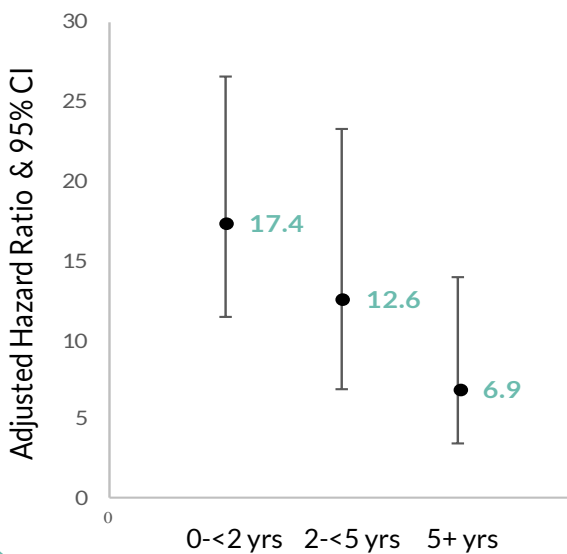
of care leavers presented as homeless compared to 10.1% of matched young people

42.1%

of care leavers presented as homeless within the first two years after exit

56.3%

of care leavers presented as homeless more than once



The risk of homelessness² was highest in the **first two years** after exit, when care leavers had over **17 times** the risk of homelessness compared to young people with no social care history.

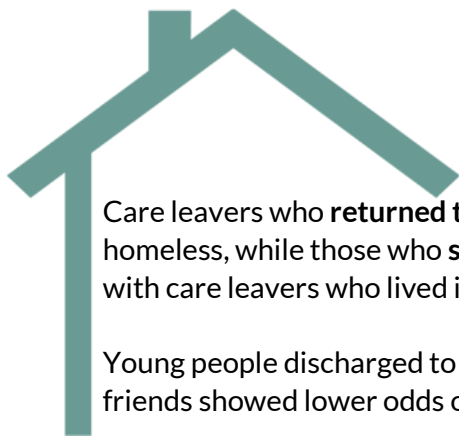
Although the risk reduced over time, it remained nearly **seven times higher** than for other young people even five to ten years after leaving care.

² Data on time-specific risk are from a Cox proportional hazards model estimating risk of index homeless presentation to the Housing Executive for care leavers compared to matched young people.

Several factors were associated with a **higher likelihood** of homelessness among young people leaving care:³

- ↑ Young people who had been in **care three or more times** were **around 50% more likely** to become homeless than those with only one care episode.
- ↑ Those who **left care early (aged 16–17 years)** were **more than twice as likely** to experience homelessness compared with those who left at 18 years.
- ↑ Leaving from **foster care placements** was also linked to a higher risk - around **70% more likely** than for those last placed in kinship care. Care leavers whose final placement was in a **children's home or other setting** also showed elevated risk, although these results were **inconclusive** (possibly due to smaller numbers and lower statistical power).
- ↑ Care leavers living in urban areas were almost three times more likely to experience homelessness than those living in rural areas. Care leavers living in the most deprived areas were also more likely to experience homelessness.

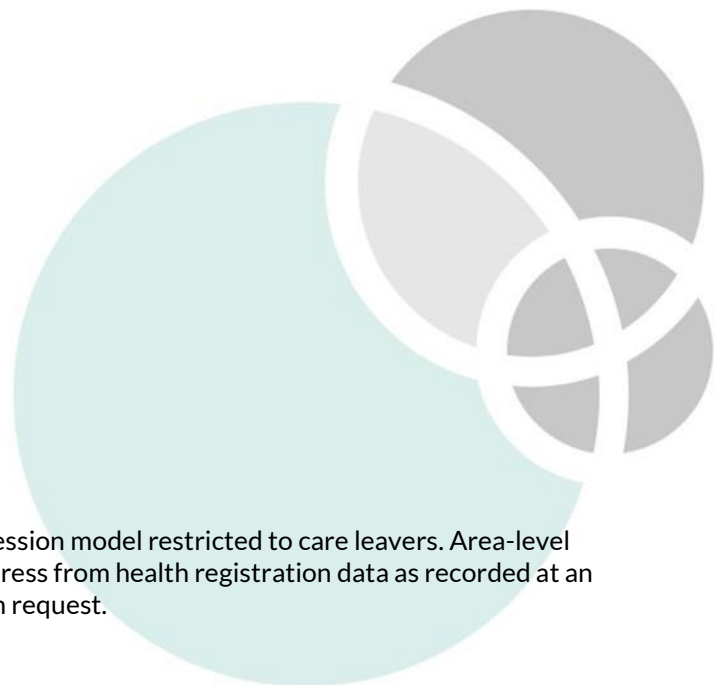
Some transition pathways appeared to **protect young people** from homelessness after leaving care:



Care leavers who **returned to live with their parents** were around **60% less likely** to become homeless, while those who **stayed with former foster carers** were around **65% less likely** compared with care leavers who lived independently after discharge.

Young people discharged to jointly commissioned / supported accommodation or to relatives or friends showed lower odds of homelessness, but the differences were **inconclusive**.

³ Data on risk and protective factors are from a logistic regression model restricted to care leavers. Area-level characteristics were assigned using anonymised patient address from health registration data as recorded at an individual's 16th birthday. Full regression results available on request.



Why it matters

This study provides the first UK population-level evidence showing how the transition out of care is associated **with a high risk of homelessness**.

The results highlight a critical window in the first two years after leaving care, where targeted support could prevent housing crises. Findings reinforce the importance of **early and needs-led transition planning** and aftercare that extends beyond age 21 - aligning with upcoming reforms under the Adoption and Children Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and the Northern Ireland Programme for Government 2024-2027.

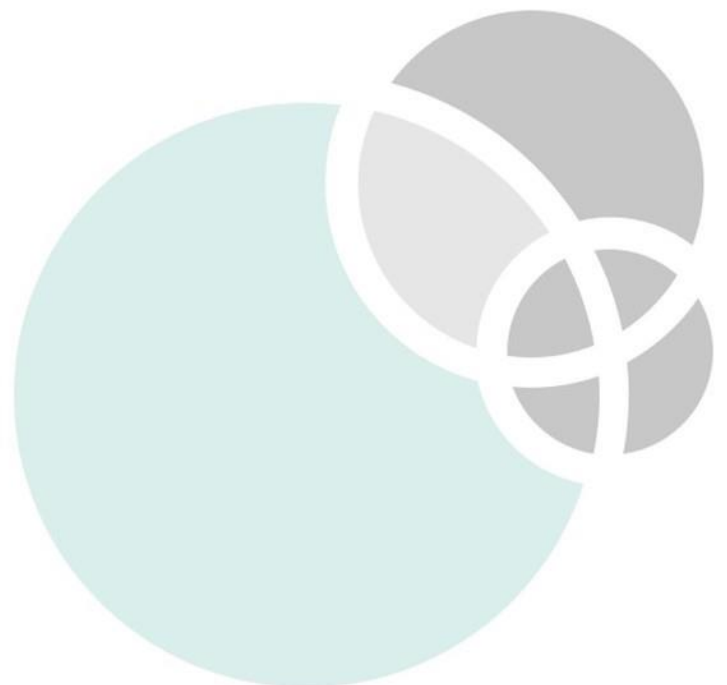
Findings also highlight the importance of **stable relationships and supported housing options** in helping care leavers make a safe and secure transition to adulthood. By identifying who is most at risk, these data can inform housing and social care services to better coordinate support, reduce preventable homelessness, and help care leavers build stable adult lives.

What next?

A full report related to our research exploring contact with children's social care and homelessness will be published by ADRC NI in 2026.

The analyses in this Data Insight form part of a wider ADRC NI research project [exploring the predictors and consequences of homelessness in Northern Ireland](#) which will publish results in 2026.

ADRC NI continues to advocate for up-to-date NI wide children's social care data, which is not presently available for research purposes post-2015 [7].



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About ADR NI & ADR UK

Administrative Data Research Northern Ireland (ADR NI) is a partnership between the Administrative Data Research Centre Northern Ireland (ADRC NI) and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). ADRC NI is a team of research specialists at Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University who bring extensive knowledge and experience in developing innovative research for public benefit, analysing complex data sets and independent public engagement. NISRA are experts in statistics and research with a proven track record in curating, linking, and managing large-scale data sets. The ADR NI partnership is supported by the Health and Social Care Research and Development (HSC R&D) Unit.

Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK) is a partnership transforming the way researchers access the UK’s wealth of public sector data, to enable better informed policy decisions that improve people’s lives. By linking together data held by different parts of government and facilitating safe and secure access for accredited researchers to these newly joined-up and de-identified data sets, ADR UK is creating a sustainable body of knowledge about how our society and economy function – tailored to give decision makers the answers they need to solve important policy questions.

ADR UK is made up of four national partnerships (ADR England, ADR Northern Ireland, ADR Scotland and ADR Wales), and the Office for National Statistics (ONS), which ensures data provided by UK Government bodies is accessed by researchers in a safe and secure form with minimal risk to data holders or the public.

Contact

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