

# Looked after children and offending: risk, resilience and restorative justice

Gillian Schofield

Centre for Research on Children and Families, UEA

**Background and purpose:** There are concerns in the UK for young people who are looked after in care and are also offenders.

This study was a partnership between the Centre for Research on Children and Families at the

University of East Anglia and The Adolescent and Children's Trust (TACT). It aimed to identify the individual, family, community and systemic factors which reduce risk and promote resilience. In the UK, social work with both offenders and looked after children often draws on restorative justice, an approach originating among indigenous communities in New Zealand, Australia and the USA.

This paper offers findings on risk and resilience and the implications for restorative justice practice.

**Methods:** This multi-method study included a national survey of care and youth offending social work services; multi-agency focus groups; file searches, narrative interviews and psychological measures (e.g. social cognition) with a total sample of 100 young people (14-19).

**Results:** The characteristics and pathways of looked after children in relation to offending demonstrated the risk arising from abuse and neglect, late placement and multiple moves. It confirmed the benefits of close relationships, including with social workers, and active engagement in education and activity.

But it identified that problems of social cognition and empathy linked to maltreatment were likely to make offending more likely and restorative justice practice more difficult. The isolation of young people in care could also challenge the involvement of family and community in the restorative justice process.

**Conclusion:** Although psychological difficulties for children in care might appear to rule out restorative justice by social workers, this study suggested that using restorative justice approaches was likely to help young people to become more resilient. The study used both social work and psychological methods to understand complex situations relevant cross-culturally and to draw on solutions that have been generated in very different cultures.

Keywords: Care; offending; restorative justice