

Exploring the perceptions of police officers towards care experienced children and young people, using Q-methodology

Exploring police officer perceptions of care-experienced children and young people through a statement sorting exercise.

Key details

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Police region	North West
Level of research	PhD
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Date due for completion	September 2025

Research context

Background

Care-experienced children are over-represented within the criminal justice system, with 52% being convicted of a criminal offence by the age of 24. Research has explored why children in care are likely to be in contact with the criminal justice system. It suggests it is shared risk factors (for example, neglect) between children in care and children who offend. Other research focuses on how children in care are treated and how this increases their risk of entering the criminal justice system. The potential role of negative perceptions towards care-experienced children who enter the criminal justice system has been acknowledged throughout the literature.

For most care-experienced children, the police are likely to be the first point of contact when entering the criminal justice system. Therefore, the decisions of the police may influence whether a child enters custody or not. The perceptions of the police towards care-experienced children are therefore important in understanding the potential pathway from care to custody.

There is no known research which explores the perceptions of police officers towards care-experienced children, an important gap that this research hopes to address.

Aims and objectives

This research aims to identify the range of police officer attitudes towards care-experienced children and young people, using a sorting exercise. Further information to understand these attitudes will be derived from post-analysis interviews.

Research methodology

This study aims to recruit 30 currently employed police response officers.

Data collection

To meet the aims of this research, a Q-methodology approach will be used. The data collection procedure is as follows:

1. To begin, participants will complete an online survey which will collect demographic information (age, gender, police job role, police force and years in service).
2. Participants will then sort a set number of statements (68 in total) about care-experienced children into 'agree', 'disagree' or 'no strong feelings'. The placement of each statement will represent the participant's perception of care-experienced children. The final placement of statements will be called a Q-sort, and is expected to take between 30 and 45 minutes.
3. After analysis of the Q-sorts, semi-structured interviews will be offered to some of the participants who completed the sorting exercise (but not all). Those invited to complete the interviews will be selected to represent a wide range of the perceptions identified from the analysis. These 30-45 minute interviews will explore the reasoning behind the positioning of statements, such as agree, disagree or no strong feelings.

Data analysis

Each Q sort will be analysed through by-person factor analysis, resulting in similar responses (attitudes) being grouped into the same factor.

Several semi-structured interviews will be conducted after the completion of this analysis to gather qualitative data. These will be transcribed and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to aid factor interpretations.

Data will be pseudonymised.

Research participation

Any current serving UK police officer is eligible to take part in this study.

Participants will be reimbursed for their time.

Please send expressions of interest to natalie.softley@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk or view the [participant information sheet](#).