

# Linking Our Lives - Episode 4

## Why data is key to reducing inequalities for the care experienced.

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Data, care, Amanda, work, research, care leavers, Longitudinal Study, Sir Ian, people, researchers, findings, enable, ONS, link, children, civil society, census, CeLSIUS, outcomes, analyses.

### SPEAKERS

Sir Ian Diamond, Christine Garrington, Amanda Sacker

#### **Christine Garrington** 00:00

Welcome to Linking our Lives England and Wales since 1971, a podcast about the ONS Longitudinal Study. I'm Chris Garrington, and in this series, on behalf of CeLSIUS, which supports researchers who use information from the study, I'm investigating how it makes a difference to the work of policymakers and society. In this episode, we're in conversation with Professor Amanda Sacker from the International Centre for Lifecourse Studies at UCL, who's been using the ONSLS to look at the outcomes of adults who spent some or all of their childhood in care. We're also delighted to be joined by Professor Sir Ian Diamond, the UK's National statistician, who's leading calls for more detailed and more regular data that would enable this groundbreaking research and work to be developed further. I started by asking Amanda what it was she'd hoped to achieve with her Nuffield Foundation funded research.

#### **Amanda Sacker** 00:48

We wanted to use the unique data in the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study to build a more comprehensive picture than had been possible for, right up until midlife, so showing the health and the social functioning of people who had been in care and depending on where they'd been placed, with family or with unrelated foster parents or in a residential home, and see if there are any differences by where they were placed.

#### **Christine Garrington** 01:14

Now, there were some really important findings from this research, specifically about people's health prospects. Can you talk us through those first and foremost?

#### **Amanda Sacker** 01:23

We found that children who'd been in care had poor health throughout life, and they also had a shorter life expectancy, and the causes of that shorter life was mainly from preventable causes like suicide or substance abuse and accidents. So these are things that we could try and sort out for people who have been in care.

#### **Christine Garrington** 01:45

Indeed and a key thing to emerge also was around different types of care, wasn't it? Can you explain what you found there?

**Amanda Sacker** 01:51

Well whatever the outcome, whether we were looking at health or work or having children, for example, we found that those who have been in care had less straightforward adult lives than children who had grown up with their parents. And with some exceptions, this carried on right into their 40s. But on top of that, we found that those in residential care had the most difficult time on average, and those in kinship care, that's with family members, had the most unproblematic time. And adults who have been placed with foster parents in childhood place some way in between those two groups.

**Christine Garrington** 02:26

Okay, I'm going to come back to you in a moment. Amanda talk in a bit more detail about where you got your information from, but I want to turn to Sir Ian now, who's keenly interested in this work, to ask what you made of Amanda and her colleagues findings around these huge inequalities that people who spend their childhood in in care face.

**Sir Ian Diamond** 02:45

Well, thanks very much. And can I just first off, deeply congratulate Amanda and the team on what I think is really, really important and painstaking, I use that word deliberately, piece of work. A really, really top-class piece of social scientific analysis. What the project does show also, and I think I'd like to say that at the beginning, is the importance of having these longitudinal data which enable us to track people's life journeys over time and really to be able to bring really deep insights, which will enable our ministers and our policy makers and decision makers to be informed on how we can impact on the lives of children with experience of care, so that they have the same opportunity as everyone. And what this research really shows, and I don't think anyone cannot be struck by the enormous disparities in social and health outcomes that children who have experience of care have and are going to play out over the entire life course.

**Christine Garrington** 03:58

Were there any findings that struck you in particular?

**Sir Ian Diamond** 04:00

I was so disappointed that lower levels of educational achievement for care leavers persisted right into later adulthood, fully 30 years later. And I have to say, while some people did manage to gain qualifications later, they did so after a long period of time, not as so many of their peers who hadn't experienced of care would have had almost immediately. And so really, we're looking at a lifetime of social disadvantage, and particularly for those with experience of residential care, and this leads to a greater risk of early death for these people, and that's so sad.

**Christine Garrington** 04:42

Was there anything else that surprised you?

**Sir Ian Diamond** 04:44

I think it was unexpected that for black people, their educational achievement and subsequent life outcomes were not linked to experiences of care. For white people, there was a clear link. Care experience led to poorer outcomes, and I think these new findings imply that the negative experiences associated with care are a feature of all black people's lives. Now these findings are unexpected, and I believe need replicating, and we need further research into the lives of cared for children, which will be immeasurably improved as we are able to link further administrative data into the analyses.

**Christine Garrington** 05:29

Yeah, you talked a little earlier about the relevance for policy and practice, and we'll talk about recommendations in a moment, but the linking our lives podcast is all about research that uses the ONS Longitudinal Study, as Amanda mentioned. So I want to take a little bit of time here to talk specifically about the data. So Amanda first, why was it that the ONSLS was the right data for research of this kind, to tackle this particular issue, these questions?

**Amanda Sacker** 05:57

I'd just like to thank Sir Ian for such kind comments about our research. It certainly was a painstaking and painful experience at times. So back to the ONS Longitudinal Study. Why is it important? Well, for a start, it's a very large study, approximately 1% of the population, with over 1 million people who'd been recorded in the Census's from 1971 to 2011. And it was this large sample that made it possible for us to carry out robust research on a small subgroup of the total population, and that's children who had been in care. And we could use the information about everyone in the household on the day of the Census to identify whether each child in the Longitudinal Study was living with a parent or with another relative or with a foster carer, or they were in residential care. And because the Census is so complete compared with other surveys, we have much better follow up information, the most researchers have previously been able to achieve. So there's two factors, the very large sample size and the fact that we had more complete data over time meant that this really was the perfect data resource for investigating what happened to this hard to reach population of children who have been in care.

**Christine Garrington** 07:20

Yeah, yeah, indeed. Now Sir Ian, good as the data is, and it is, as Amanda said, really you know, fantastic resource for this type of research. It only takes us so far on the road to really understanding what's going on here. What are your thoughts on the data that exists already, and what's needed to fully understand why these inequalities occur and persist over time.

**Sir Ian Diamond** 07:41

Well the first thing I'd say is that I do remember some conversations with the great but sadly now late John Fox, fully 40 years ago, around the setting up of these data. And I say that because it demonstrates that with longitudinal data, you need to be with this for a long time to get the benefits, and I think that's one of the great things that these data bring. But we know that just Census data and some of the vital registration that we're able to link to it will not provide all the richness that we need fully to understand what are driving some of the important results that Amanda and her team have found. And that's why we need to be able to link in data, sometimes data from some of the great surveys that ONS produces, but also administrative data. There is an enormous opportunity here to bring administrative data from a wide range of government departments together, and we are able to do that now to enable researchers to access it safely, securely, ethically and in a way that the public approve of. And I think that's one of the most important things that we need to do in the future.

**Christine Garrington** 09:04

Yes I'm interested in your point there about involving the wider public in these decisions and these debates around how their data is used.

**Sir Ian Diamond** 09:13

It is absolutely critical that we give every citizen a voice in our data, and that's why we will, on the 28th of September, publish the report of our inclusive data task force led by Dame Moira Gibb and that is really aiming to give us advice and recommendations of how we really ensure that everybody in our society has a voice and how, therefore, we can add to these great findings from Amanda and the team in a way that really brings further granularity and further understanding of the processes which drive some of the results that we've seen. Yeah, I think. Partially answered this really already, but you know, you've stated very openly that you're keen to work

across this statistical system to help drive this forward. Do you have a feel for very specifically, what's needed, what's actually needed? Yeah I do. And the first thing to say is the inclusive data task force, which will report is comprised of academics and of representatives of a civil society, and they've been working over the last year to make these recommendations. And I say that because the first thing to say is that this further work will not be the Office of National Statistics you know, sat in a darkened room with cold towels on our head, it will be the Office of National Statistics working closely with groups, right across civil society to build trust, to understand the way that their data are potentially able to be used, and to share their data with them. It is not again, just for us to have, if you like, ownership of the data. The data are owned by the whole of society, and that is one of the things that we are doing through setting up an integrated data service that's going to reach right across the statistical system, bringing data together in a safe, secure and ethical way, and will enable us to host at ONS, but across but on behalf of government, academia, research institutions and civil society data which can be used to inform policy to improve people's lives. And we've been doing this recently through our secure Research Service, where we have a public health data asset that's been crucial in understanding the dreadful pandemic that we are going through, and we're also making use of data which looks at the life course impacts of people with different educational outcomes.

**Christine Garrington** 12:00

Okay, yeah, really, really interesting times. And Amanda, I'm guessing, you know, quite a lot of that is sort of music to your ears. What's your take on this question of better, more frequent, more detailed information, and how that can be generated and made available to researchers like you within the sort of the context that Sir Ian was just talking there.

**Amanda Sacker** 12:19

I really feel that this piece of research has just started the whole process, and it's absolutely key that we keep moving on with trying to find how to do the best for children who, for whatever reason, find themselves in care. And one of the things we really need to know about is about their experience of the care system, and whether it's that that's driving some of their challenges in adulthood, or whether it's the adverse experience that led them to being in care in the first place that's the root cause. And to do that, we need better, more frequent and more detailed information on care placements, things like their location, the duration and so on, and then we can begin to make progress on this issue.

**Christine Garrington** 13:03

Yeah, no. And of course, you know, as you've both said, behind every data point that we talk about here, of course, is a real person, someone, in this case, you know, potentially, who's been let down in their early life and then struggles to do well in school, in work, in relationships. You know, the research makes some really strong recommendations for policy and practice around that, Amanda tell us what needs to change?

**Amanda Sacker** 13:26

Well, quite a few things, really, I've picked out some of the most important to my mind. So for instance, some care leavers get support to help them make a successful transition to independent living, but we've seen that this needs to be rolled out more quickly to all care leavers and for longer. Ian mentioned about education and needing lifelong support. Care leavers just take longer to manage to make those transitions to a happy adulthood. Secondly, care experienced adults should be given priority access to mental health services. We've seen about the early mortality and how that's linked to things like drug abuse and so on, and they really deserve to be given that priority access. Next, I would like to see more joined up working between everyone involved in children's care, that's going right from government departments through to care providers, because it's only by everyone pulling together that we're going to see real change. And finally, the statutory requirements for children in care need to be improved, both in terms of supporting informal caregivers, of which there are a very large number now.

And secondly, monitoring outcomes, because if there's no monitoring of what happens to people who have been in care, how do we know whether any of our policies are exceeding and making things better for them?

**Christine Garrington** 14:53

Sir Ian I'm guessing there's a lot there you agree with. What would you like to see happen next?

**Sir Ian Diamond** 14:59

Well, just to pick up on something that Amanda said the government is so committed to monitoring and evaluating all new policies. And I do think we need to make sure that we do have really strong monitoring and evaluation strategies of any initiatives. But I think we really do need to be ambitious and radical in the way we work forward now to bring large amounts of data together into the Integrated Data Service. We don't need to form data lakes, we can bring them individually for particular analysis, and we can do that in a safe, secure and ethical way, and in a way that engages with the public. And effectively, the opportunities to find new solutions to old problems are limitless here. And I do think this is an opportunity for all people who do research in social science using data to bring new insights to many, many data, to have the opportunity to analyse data, which when I was a junior researcher, I could only have dreamt about, certainly around some of the questions that Amanda has just raised, as well as issues around net zero, around levelling up further issues on the pandemic, issues around homelessness and reducing re-offending, these are all priorities that can really benefit enormously from linked data from a number of sources, and I think we have a real responsibility to make that happen, as I said, at pace, to enable researchers to address questions that will impact on the lives of all of our citizens by providing new insights. And I just think that's incredibly important that we do that for all members of our society.

**Christine Garrington** 17:00

Thanks for listening to this episode of Linking our Lives England and Wales since 1971 which is produced by CeLSIUS, an ESRC funded service at UCL, which supports researchers looking to make use of the ONS Longitudinal Study in their work. There are a host of resources available on the CeLSIUS website, and you can follow us on Twitter at [@CeLSIUSNews](#) or get in touch at [CeLSIUS@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:CeLSIUS@ucl.ac.uk).