

Young carers

Paula Devine and Katrina Lloyd

There has been a lot of research into the extent and nature of caring by adults in Northern Ireland. For example, data from the 2006 Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey found that 23% of adults had some caring responsibilities and women were more likely to be carers than men (Eason, 2007). Much less research has been carried out on the situation of young carers. Anecdotally, we know that there are many young people who have extra responsibilities because they look after someone who is sick, disabled or elderly, either inside or outside their own home. However, there is a dearth of information about this informal care and the type of young people who are engaged in caring. According to Crossroads (2008) more than 8,500 children and young people in Northern Ireland provide care carrying out tasks that are normally done by adults such as cleaning, cooking and other domestic chores. For many of these children and young people, caring takes up more than 50 hours a week, which may have a detrimental effect on their lives. As Christine Best, Crossroads (NI) Chief Executive points out, 'These children can be lonely, isolated, lose friendships, miss out on education and social activities' (Best, 2007). In order to help fill the gap in our knowledge, this Research Update uses data from the 2007 **Young Life and Times** (YLT) Survey to explore



the extent, nature and effect of caring among young people in Northern Ireland.

more likely than those who were not to live in rural areas (45% and 34% respectively)

Who cares?

In 2007, 627 16 year olds participated in the YLT Survey. These respondents were asked if they have extra family responsibilities because they look after someone who lives with them who is sick, disabled or elderly, and just under one in ten of these young people (9%) said that they did. As Table 1 shows, a higher proportion of respondents (14%) looked after someone who did not live with them. This means that overall, one in five respondents (20%) had some caring responsibilities, with females more likely to say they are carers than males (22% and 17% respectively) although this difference was not statistically significant. Fifteen respondents said that they provided care for someone who lived with them and also for someone who did not live with them. There were differences depending on where respondents lived, as young people who were carers were

Table 1: Caring responsibilities, by gender

	%		
	Male	Female	All
Care for someone at home	7	9	9
Care for someone outside home	12	15	14
Care for someone either at home or elsewhere	17	22	20

Who is being cared for?

As Table 2 shows, of those respondents who care for someone within their own home, more than two in five provided care for a parent (21 respondents), followed by a sibling (13 respondents) and grandparents (8 respondents).

Table 2: Who do you care for living at home?

	Number of respondents
Parent	21
Sibling	13
Grandparent(s)	8
Other relative	4
Myself	1
Name only	1
Total	48

The type of care provided at home by YLT respondents ranged from the general - 'help care for' - to more specific tasks like 'feeding'. Table 3 shows that approximately one third of respondents providing care at home (15 respondents) said that they helped their parents with housework. However, it is not clear if they do this work specifically because their parent is sick, disabled or elderly, or not. The next most frequent type of care given at home is general care for a grandparent (10 respondents).

Table 3: Type of care given at home

	Number of respondents
Help parent with housework	15
General care for grandparent	10
Care for sick/disabled sibling	6
Help with childcare with sibling	5
Support/general care for disabled or sick parent	5
Support sibling in school work	2
General care for aunt	2
Other	3

As the following quotations from YLT respondents show, the range of practical tasks carried out by young people is wide. However, equally important is providing company and support.

'Brother - comfort, medication'.
'Mum - shopping, cooking, general personal care'.

For those respondents who provide some regular service or help for someone not living with them who is sick, disabled or elderly, the most frequently identified group receiving such care are grandparents. As Table 4 shows, several respondents did not provide help or service to a particular person but to an organisation or institution (such as an over 50's bingo club, a hospital or youth club).

Table 4: Who do you care for outside home?

	Number of respondents
Grandparents	39
Other relative	19
Neighbour/Family friend	6
Name only	1
Hospital	2
Bingo club	1
Youth club	1
Total	69

Respondents to YLT also provided a wide range of care outside the home, including personal care (helping to bed), shopping (run errands), housework, personal care or companionship – see Table 5. Reflecting the pattern shown in Table 4, the most frequent type of care is for grandparents and this consists of practical care, such as housework and gardening, or more general or social care.

Specific examples of care that respondents undertake outside the home again emphasise both the practical and emotional nature of these tasks:

'My grandmother is sick so we have to make sure her medication is correct, that she is comfortable and eats'.

'Neighbour with Down Syndrome. I make sure he is not alone and provide adequate care for him when his mother is not there'.

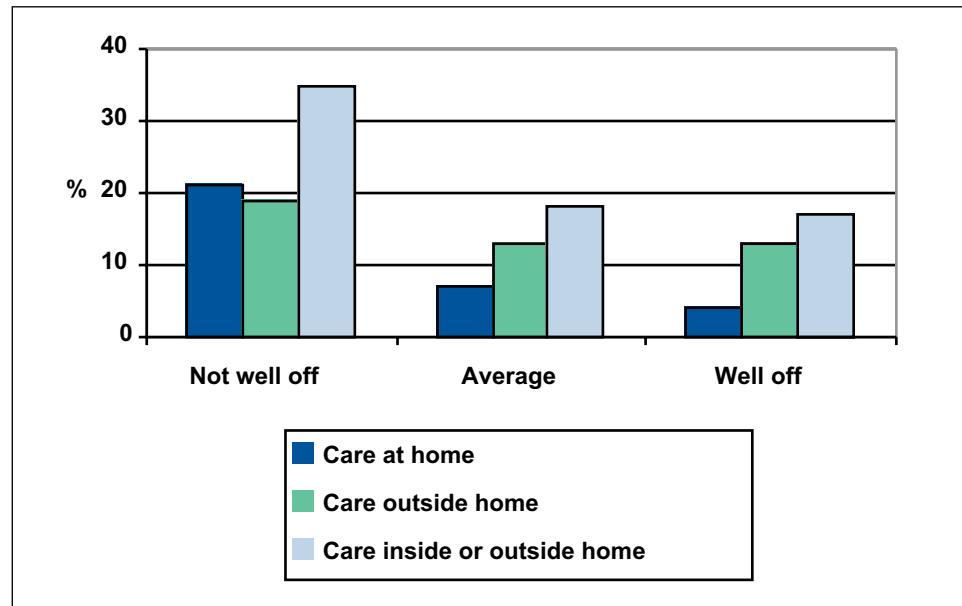
Table 5: Type of care given outside home

	Number of respondents
Help grandparent with housework and/or gardening	29
Other general or social care for grandparent	10
Help other relative with housework or gardening	13
Help/support neighbour or family friend	6
Babysitting/help with kids	4
Help in relative's farm/business	2
General and social care for other relative	1
Volunteering for elderly	3
Other	10
Total	78

Caring and income

Recent research carried out in Northern Ireland has shown that households in poverty are more likely to have someone living in them who requires care than are households that are not in poverty (Monteith and Lloyd, 2008). Similar results were found in this survey. Respondents to YLT were asked how well off they think their family is financially. Just over one half of respondents said that their families were 'average' (57%), while 14% were not at all well off. Approximately one quarter of respondents (27%) said that their family was well off. Figure 1 shows that there were clear differences in the caring responsibilities of young people depending on their family financial circumstances. Respondents who were not well off were significantly more likely to have caring responsibilities at home than respondents from families who were better off. For example, 21% of respondents who were not well off cared for someone in their own home, compared with 4% of respondents who said that their family was well off. Similarly, twice as many respondents who were not well off had some

Figure 1: Caring responsibilities, by family financial background



caring responsibilities (either inside or outside their home) than respondents from well off backgrounds (35% and 16% respectively).

Effects of caring on young people

According to Best (2007) young carers may miss out on education. Depending on the age at which they began caring, this could mean that these young carers may not progress through primary school as successfully as their peers. Fewer respondents to YLT who were carers (42%) attended grammar school than those who were not carers (50%). While it is not possible to tell whether their caring responsibilities had an effect on the type of secondary-level school that young people attended, this is an area that is worth exploring in future research.

The YLT Survey is carried out in August and early September each year. Respondents are asked about their future plans, both in the forthcoming October and then in two years hence. Table 6 indicates that young carers were only slightly less likely than those who were not carers to say

they would be staying on in full-time education in October 2007 (87% and 90% respectively). A similar pattern was found relating to attending college or university in October 2009 - 76% of carers and 80% of non-carers hoped to go on to higher education.

Table 6: Caring responsibilities, by future plans

	% Carer	
	Carer	Not a carer
October 2007		
In further education	87	90
Working	3	4
Other	10	6
October 2009		
In higher education	76	80
Working	14	14
Other	11	6

Mental health

The YLT Survey measured mental health using the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12). The GHQ-12 is a self-completion instrument used to measure disruptions in normal function and the emergence of new distressing symptoms. It is based on answers to questions about twelve

symptoms, such as concentration, sleep loss due to worry, anxiety, loss of confidence and general happiness, experienced by respondents in the previous four weeks (Cairns and Lloyd, 2005). One way of scoring the GHQ-12 involves adding up the responses to the 12 items, with higher scores representing worse mental health. The mean score is often presented and compared across different groups. The mean GHQ-12 score across the 587 YLT respondents that completed this section of the questionnaire is 10.05, with females having significantly higher mean scores than males (10.92 and 8.79 respectively). This difference is consistent with the pattern found in both the 2005 and 2006 YLT Surveys.

The mean GHQ-12 score for respondents who had caring responsibilities was 10.54 (see Table 7). This is higher than the mean score for respondents who did not have caring responsibilities (9.93), although the difference is not statistically significant. These results replicate the findings from the 2006 NILT survey among adults which also showed that there were no statistically significant differences in the mean GHQ-12 scores of carers and non-carers.

Among the YLT respondents, those who care for someone living with them who is sick, disabled or elderly have higher mean GHQ-12 scores than those who have caring responsibilities outside the home. There are several possible explanations for this. Perhaps providing care at home is a more time-intensive commitment, which may have a detrimental effect on mental health. Conversely, it could be that providing help to someone outside the home may be less of a time commitment, and may even provide a 'feel good' effect, such as for those helping out in a local hospital.

Table 7: GHQ-12 scores, by having caring responsibility

	Number of respondents	Mean	Standard Deviation
Is a carer	115	10.54	5.72
Is not a carer	472	9.93	5.62
Caring responsibilities at home	53	11.26	6.27
Caring responsibilities outside home	77	10.30	5.83
All respondents	587	10.05	5.64

Conclusions

This Research Update provides an initial investigation of the level and type of caring responsibilities among young people in Northern Ireland. Approximately one in five respondents provide some type of care inside and/or outside their own home, with significant differences according to gender, location and type of school attended. While these results provide a useful and timely baseline, further qualitative research is needed to explore the effect such responsibilities have in relation to physical and mental health, education and social networks.

Key points

- One in five respondents provides care for someone who is sick, disabled or elderly.
- Females were more likely to have caring responsibilities than males - 22% and 17% respectively.
- Most commonly, caring responsibilities at home related to parents, whilst caring responsibilities outside the home related to grandparents.
- 21% of respondents who were not well off cared for someone at home, compared with 4% of respondents whose families were well off.
- There were no significant differences between carers and non-carers in relation to their future educational plans.
- Respondents with caring responsibilities had worse mental health scores than non-carers, although these differences were not statistically significant.

References

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Paula Devine and Katrina Lloyd are Research Directors of ARK, based in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

The **Young Life and Times** Survey is carried out annually and records the attitudes and experiences of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland.

The **Young Life and Times** Survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the young people think about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/ylt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3947 with any queries.

In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster.

Aberfoyle House, Magee Campus, University of Ulster
Northland Road, Londonderry BT48 7JA
Tel: 028 7137 5513 Fax: 028 7137 5510

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work
Queen's University, Belfast BT7 1NN
Tel: 028 9097 3947 Fax: 028 90 9097 3943