



MIRRA

Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access

About the research

Many people who grew up in care have gaps in their childhood memories and unanswered questions about their early lives. In the absence of family photos and stories they turn to records held by the local authorities and charities that looked after them.

Accessing these records is a practically and emotionally challenging process. Response times are often long and once received records are censored because they include confidential information about family and carers. The language and ideas contained reflect the prejudices and assumptions of the day. Some files are extremely long and confusing whereas others only have a few pages to cover a whole childhood. Records may have been lost or destroyed altogether. Very few services are available to support people through the experience.

MIRRA: Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access is a participatory action research project that explores these issues. It considers how child social care records have been created, kept and used in public and voluntary organisations in England from 1970 to the present. The research is co-produced with care leavers in partnership with The Care Leavers' Association and reflects on how what it is recorded about your childhood can affect you throughout your life.



Research structure

A group of six care leavers and four UCL researchers have worked together to shape MIRRA's direction and focus.

In 2018 and 2019 we are holding interviews and workshops to gather the experiences, thoughts and opinions of four groups who have rights or interests in social care records.



Events are taking place across the country and end with a symposium in July 2019 that brings our research groups together to discuss and debate the findings. Our aim is to generate positive change in the lives of care leavers and in social care recordkeeping in response to key thematic questions.

Research themes

What are the mechanisms and processes currently in use? Do they serve people's needs? How could they be improved?

Accessing records

Support and services

What support is currently available in relation to social care records? What should support look like? How could it be provided?

Redaction of third party information

Who decides what can be disclosed? How are such decisions made and justified? Is it possible to better support care leavers' needs for this information?

Key questions

Language and content

How can the difficult and hurtful contents of care files be shared? What is the role of contextual information?

Memory and identity

Why are care records valuable for memory and identity? How could this value be increased?

Recordkeeping practices

How has social care recording changed? How will the shift to digital systems impact on information rights in the future?



Action 1

Support care leavers' rights to information, memory and identity

WHY?

From our research so far we know that access processes are confusing and time-consuming; that records can be difficult to understand; that language and jargon lack context and that support can be hard to find.

WHAT?

As a result we will co-create an Access to Records 'pack' to act as a practical guide for care leavers of all ages. It will be co-produced with care leavers to make sure that it responds to real need and may include FAQs, sample requests, contextual information, a jargon translator and advice from peers who have accessed their files.

WHO?

We will work with our research partner The Care Leavers' Association and our supporters in other care advocacy organisations to share the resource as widely as possible to reach the people who need it.



Action 2

Influence public policy debates about social care records

WHY?

Social care and information governance practice is driven by legislation and currently the legislative framework for social care recordkeeping is very fragmented. This makes it difficult for care leavers to navigate their rights and hard for practitioners to understand and properly carry out their responsibilities.

WHAT?

MIRRA will produce a policy brief that offers a short and straightforward summary of the issues and provides evidence of need to the people who have influence over policy and strategy development. It will be used locally, regionally and nationally, and will be shared through our partners to increase the leverage for regulatory change.

WHO?

Relationships with influencers and decision makers in the Department of Education, the Information Commissioner's Office, Ofsted and the All Party Parliamentary Group for Looked-After Children and Young People are key to making an impact.



Action 3

Support practitioners and researchers in their recordkeeping responsibilities

WHY?

Interviews with social care and information practitioners suggest that there is a strong desire to improve services to looked after children, young people and care leavers. When the needs of care-experienced people are discussed there is recognition of some of the shortfalls and problems at present.

WHAT?

A recordkeeping framework produced in workshops that bring together care leavers and practitioners will provide a basis on which to build change. The framework will take into account all the stages in a record's life from creation through to disposal and will set out the needs and rights of stakeholders through time. It will complement CLEARmark, The Care Leavers' Association's existing standard for providing access to records.

WHO?

Our ambition is for the framework to be adopted by professional organisations like the British Association of Social Workers and the Information and Records Management Society, and for it to become a tool for teachers and trainers.

Contact us

Do you have an experience you would like to share with us or an idea you would like to discuss? Get in touch. We are keen to hear from anyone who is interested in child social care records.

MIRRA

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