UCL

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.
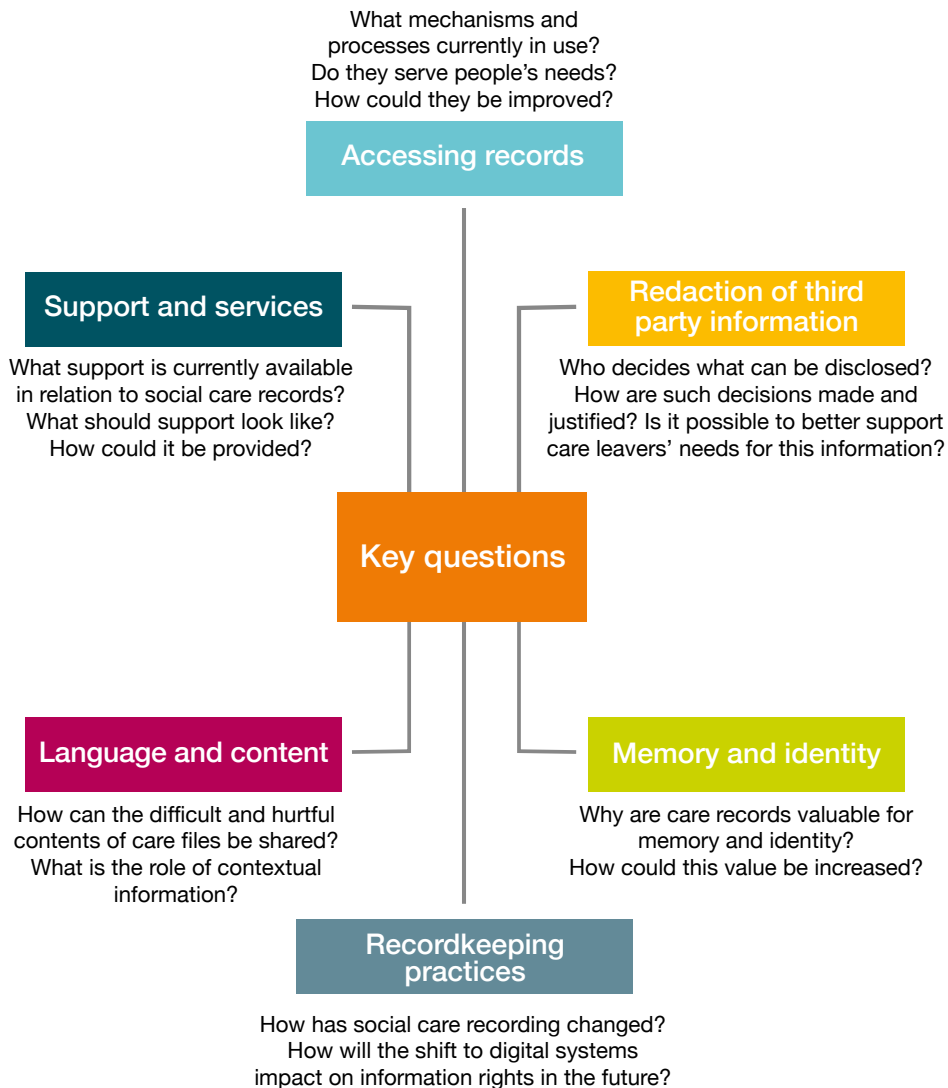
Research structure

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 held interviews and workshops to gather the experiences, thoughts and opinions of four groups who have rights or interests in social care records.

Events have taken place across the country, which have brought our research groups together to discuss and debate the findings, ending with a symposium in July 2019. Our aim is to generate positive change in the lives of care leavers and in social care recordkeeping by answering key thematic questions.

Key thematic questions

What 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:
Supporting care leavers' rights to information, memory and identity

WHY?: Our research has told us that access to records is confusing and time-consuming; that records are often heavily redacted, without explanation, and that practical and emotional support are hard to find.

WHAT?: In response we have created guidance, written with care leavers, to help people understand and navigate the system. This includes a step-by-step guide to accessing records, as well information on what to expect, where to go for help and answers to frequently asked questions.

WHERE?: We are working with Family Action to make this guidance available online on their new Family Connect website, which will be launched in October 2019. It can also be downloaded from the MIRRA website and through our partner, The Care Leavers' Association. We encourage all organisations to include links to the guidance as part of their Access to Records and Leaving Care information, so that it reaches the people who need it.

Action:
Influence public policy debates about social care records

WHY?

Social care and information governance practice is driven by legislation and regulation. Our research has shown that the legislative framework for social care recordkeeping is very fragmented. It also suggests that mixed messages from regulators add to the confusion. This makes it difficult for care leavers to navigate their rights and hard for practitioners to understand and properly fulfil their responsibilities.

WHAT?

MIRRA has produced briefing papers for policy-makers, regulators and sector leaders. These give short and straightforward summaries of the issues and offer recommendations for key changes to the people who have influence over policy and strategy. These can be used locally, regionally and nationally to support change, and have been shared through our partners to increase their reach and leverage.

WHO?

Briefing papers have been written to the Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Information Commissioners Office, Ofsted, IICSA and The National Archives. They are available on our website. A joint All Party Parliamentary meeting of the groups for Social Workers, Looked-After Children and Young People and Archives and History is being held in late 2019 to speak directly to MPs and civil servants.

Action:
Support practitioners and researchers in their recordkeeping responsibilities

WHY?: Our interviews with social care and information practitioners suggest that there is a strong desire to improve recordkeeping for looked-after children, young people and care leavers. The memory and identity needs of care-experienced people is recognised, as are the current problems and shortfalls. However, there is no national standard or benchmark to support best practice.

WHAT?: We have created a recordkeeping toolkit, co-produced in workshops with practitioners from different sectors. This is based on a set of Principles for Caring Recordkeeping, which cover the creation, management and access to records, and take into account the needs and rights of care leavers throughout their lives. The toolkit provides guidance and support for organisations of any size to work towards achieving the Principles.

WHO?: The Principles and Toolkit can be downloaded from our website. A short version is available as a Practice Guide from the British Association of Social Workers, and it has been endorsed by the Archives and Records Association, Family Action and the Care Leavers' Association. It complements the Standards for Access to Records for Adult Care Leavers developed by the Access to Care Records Campaign Group.

Contact us

If you would like further information about the research, do contact us:

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Have you found this and other MIRRA resources useful?
We would love to know. Please contact us with your feedback.