



Child carers are often overlooked, yet there are more than 200,000 youngsters under 18 in the UK who are caring for incapacitated parents and relatives. Loughborough has given them a voice

Forgotten army of children finds a Midlands champion

Tony Dawe on Loughborough's help for carers

LONG before *Children in Need* came to our TV screens, many charities had been working to help deprived and abused children. But it took researchers at Loughborough University to identify a forgotten army of children also in need — the 200,000 youngsters under 18 in the UK devoting their lives to caring for incapacitated parents and relatives.

Thanks largely to the researchers, an Act of Parliament was passed to provide a programme of help for the young carers. Support groups were formed and a framework agreed to advise social policy practitioners on how to assess their needs.

The efforts of the young carers research group have helped Loughborough to win a Queen's prize for "enhancing social policy nationally". The award also recognises the work of the three other research centres within the university's social sciences department. The social policy centre has made a major impact on the Government's approach to alleviating child poverty.

The centre for child and family research has worked on the problems of caring for children away from home and the Midlands centre for criminology's work on repeat victimisation has led to a fundamental shift in the understanding of crime.

The award citation concludes: "The research has influenced policymakers and legislators in the UK, resulting in better targeted policy, in particular as it affects neglected and disadvantaged groups."

The department has 34 academic staff, many of them international leaders in their fields, and up to 40 researchers. Peter Golding, department head, says: "We take great pride in the combination of

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academic rigour and innovation that has a real impact on the quality of people's lives.

"One approach is to evaluate government social policy and not take it for granted. For example, the country spends phenomenal amounts on children in care but is that money well spent and is it producing the desired effects?"

"Our research has looked at the adequacy of benefits and the income necessary to raise children and has influenced the way local authorities deal with children with responsibility for caring for elders."

Jo Aldridge, director of the young carers research group

and a lecturer at the university, says: "When we first started our research in 1991, there were no services for young carers. The focus was on the need of adult carers. We carried out a small survey locally and the project escalated from there. The largest part of the exercise was to gather data on a wide scale but a smaller part was to look at the lives of families.

"We conducted in-depth interviews with children about their lives and experiences. There were voices that had never been heard before. They were frightened of outside interference, worried that they might be separated from parents and relatives.

"But we gained their trust and uncovered examples of young people caring without help for parents who were dying, of looking after relatives with mental health problems who might harm themselves, and of running a household, including looking after smaller children," Aldridge says.

Baroness Pitkeathley, the former chief executive of Carer's UK, says: "Society at large simply could not believe that there were so many children whose lives were restricted by the need to provide care for someone else. Enabling young carers to speak up and speak out was a most important aspect of the research."