

# **Childhood Temporary Separation**

## **Long-term Effects of Wartime Evacuation in World War 2**

**J.S.M. Rusby**

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*Childhood Temporary Separation:  
Long-term Effects of Wartime Evacuation in World War 2*

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**Childhood Temporary Separation: Long-term effects of wartime  
Evacuation in World War 2**

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**Department of Psychology  
Birkbeck College  
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## **Abstract**

This study investigates possible links between temporary separation from parents in childhood due to evacuation in World War 2 and later psychological development and adult relationships. The conclusions from an earlier qualitative pilot study had suggested that the developmental outcome of evacuation was perceived by those involved as lying on a continuum, at one extreme the experience was 'life-enhancing' and at the other it had left an 'emotional legacy' depending on an individual's experience. This present lifespan survey using self report questionnaires and involving 900 respondents from the county of Kent confirmed these perceptions and examined whether they were reflected by measures of mental health, marital history and adult attachment. The methodology employed univariate and multivariate analyses, including causal structural models of depression for both sexes, and involved both childhood and life-course mediating variables.

In terms of mental health highly significant associations were found for the evacuation experience variables of Age at Evacuation and Care Received with the Incidence of Depression, Clinical Anxiety and Factor 2, Self-criticism, of the Depressive Experiences Questionnaire (Blatt et al., 1976), all in the predicted sense. Females were found to be particularly vulnerable to Clinical Anxiety if evacuated at 10-12 years with an incidence of 18%, accompanied by a high level of Self-criticism. Structural path models for the onset of depression confirmed that females not only had higher levels of Factor 1, Dependency, but were more vulnerable to these levels. Divorce rates were also highly associated with these same evacuation variables and multiple divorce rates for both sexes fell from 10%, if evacuated at 4-6 years, to 0% for those evacuated at 13-15 years. Adult attachment style measured by the self-report Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) was also affected, with a fall in the Fearful style from 25% to 7% with increasing age at evacuation. Overall there was a tendency for male respondents to move to the Dismissive and females to the Fearful styles when secure attachment was lost.

It is believed that such a lifespan development study, based on an 'experiment in nature' and involving an ageing cohort, has potential value in influencing future policy in the fields of mental health and social care.

This survey is dedicated to Diana - who inspired me with her story

to Vigdis - who provided encouragement  
and support over many years

to 'Bonnie' - who ensured I got two good walks a day  
to drive the cobwebs away

and to all those 'evacuees' who generously shared their  
experiences and feelings with me and are the heart of this work

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This study was carried out solely by the named author.

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## **Chapter 1 The Evacuation - history and experience**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This quantitative study into the long-term effects of childhood separation from parents is based on the experience of some 900 respondents from Kent who were evacuated to the West Country and South Wales during 1939-45 in the Second World War. None of them were evacuated privately or with their mothers and their individual circumstances and experiences varied greatly in terms of their age when first evacuated, the period they were away from home and the care they received. Little has been written about the possible long-term effects of such a childhood diaspora, which is surprising considering not only the innate sociological importance of the subject but also its relevance to developmental psychology in that it allows an examination to be made of a naturally occurring sample who experienced separation from their parents in childhood under a range of circumstances. As Wolf (1945) says in her review of the literature of that period: 'History has here made a cruel psychological experiment on a large scale' (p.389).

In this introductory chapter we will look briefly at the history of the evacuation scheme and how it was experienced, particularly by those who took part in a pilot study for this present research (Rusby, 1995). In Chapter 2 we will discuss the results of this pilot study, which used grounded theory analysis of oral histories, and consider how these results might relate to developmental theories in psychology and the overall implications for the quantitative study detailed in this thesis.

### **1.2 The evacuation scheme and its implementation**

The evacuation of children in World War 2 was a large-scale scheme for the evacuation of mainly unaccompanied children from largely urban and industrial areas of Britain where the Government believed they were likely to be at risk from aerial attack in the event of war with Germany. Although some preparatory work had been carried out in 1937 the main planning for such an eventuality began in May 1938 when the prime organising committee, the Sub-committee for Evacuation of the Imperial Defence Committee, met in the House of Commons under the chairmanship of Sir John Anderson. Their terms of reference were 'to examine the problem of the transfer of persons from areas which might be exposed to continuous air attack and to recommend plans for the purpose' (Titmus, 1950, p.32). One of the first things implemented was a large-scale survey in potential reception areas of the amount of surplus accommodation that was available and whether householders were willing to receive unaccompanied children or their teachers. This was carried out by over 100,000 volunteers throughout the country known as 'visitors'. This information was tabulated by the local councils and then forwarded via the county councils to the Ministry of Health. By the end of July 1938 the Anderson Committee report had been completed and the Home Secretary presented the main points to Parliament. These were that evacuation should be compulsory, accommodation should be mainly in private houses, under powers of compulsory