

# Outcomes for care leavers -what can we learn from Swedish national register studies?

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- Long term outcomes for children who have grown up in foster care
  - school/educational outcomes
  - suicide and suicide attempts
  - mental health problems
  - substance abuse (illicit drugs and alcohol)
  - serious crime
  - teenage parenthood
  - welfare dependency
  
  - relation between school performance and other outcomes

# Fresh analyses from on-going research

- Population: **all** residents born 1972-81 and their parents
- N= around 1 million children + parents. Here:
  - 7 000 long term foster care (average 12 years before age 18)
  - 6 500 in-home care before age 13 (never in out-of-home care)
  - 1 100 Swedish born adoptees
  - 900 000 normal group peers
- Identified and followed in different National Registers (data bases covering the entire population) from end of primary school to 2005. Longitudinal analyses.
- Registers linked through personal identification numbers, unique for every individual. Children and parents linked through “The Multi-generation Register”.

# Our definition of “School failure”

- not complete grades from primary school at age 16  
(cannot apply to secondary school)
- or...
- very poor grades from primary school at age 16
  - lower than (national average – 1 SD)
  - 1/6, one of the 4 poorest performers in an average school class

# IQ

- Measured through cognitive tests at military conscription at age 18
- Not an absolute constant:
  - At age 18, IQ is also an outcome of childhood (cf. French adoption studies)
  - Test results are influenced by education, easier to get high scores after secondary education
- Limitation: analyses with IQ = only boys

## Summary: School/educational outcomes

Compared to peers with the same IQ, children who grew up in foster care had

- high over-risks of leaving primary school without complete grades (no access to secondary education)
- over-risks for school failure
  - 50% of the foster care boys, 33% of foster care girls
- over-risks of getting only compulsory education
- much poorer chances of getting a university degree

Compared to peers with the same **grades** from primary school, children who grew up in foster care had

- over-risks of getting only compulsory education
- much poorer chances of getting a university degree

“They were cheated twice...”

...and we have most likely **underestimated** the problems (IQ at age 18 is dependent on childhood experiences and educational status)

# Sonia Jackson, 1994

- “Among the many disadvantages suffered by foster children, low educational achievement probably has the most serious consequences for their future life chances”
- Was she right?

# School grades matter... - for everyone

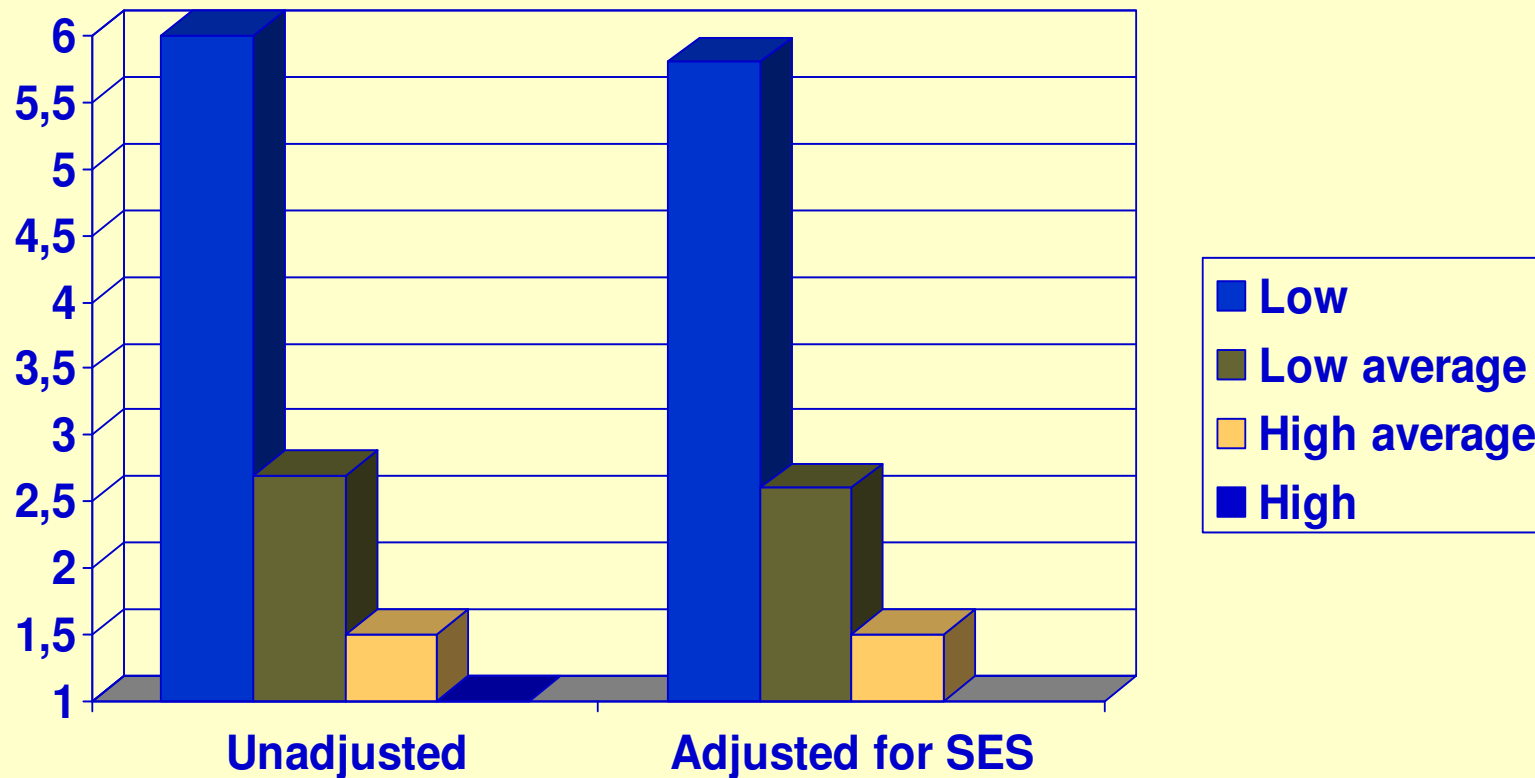
Jablonska B, Lindberg L, Lindblad F, Rasmussen F,  
Östberg A & Hjern, A (2009):

‘School performance and hospital admissions due to self-  
inflicted injury: a Swedish national cohort study.’

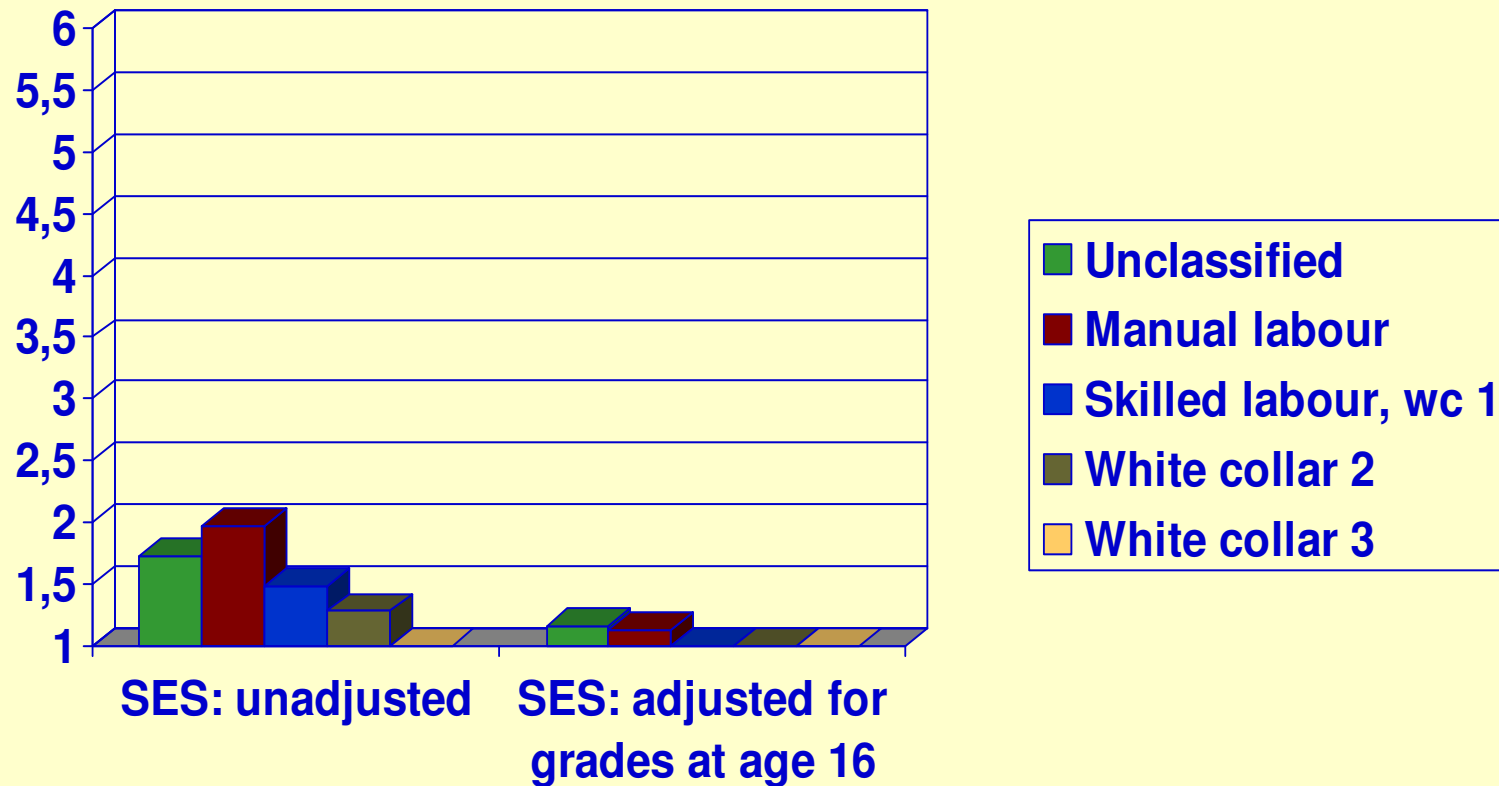
*International Journal of Epidemiology*

(Advance access publ)

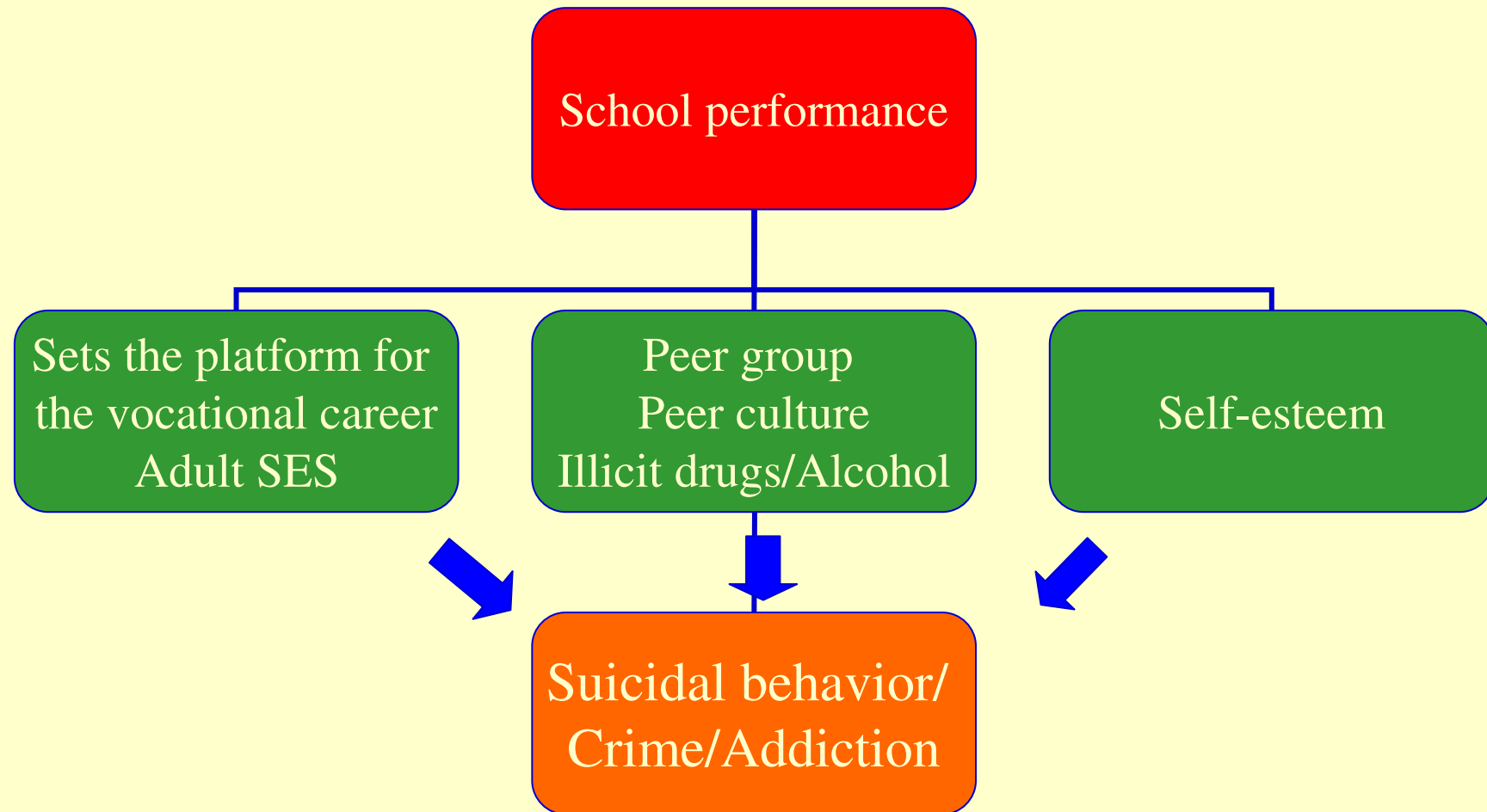
Relative risk (RR) of self inflicted injury  
by average school grades at age 16; birth cohorts 1973-77  
(follow-up from end of primary school to 2001)



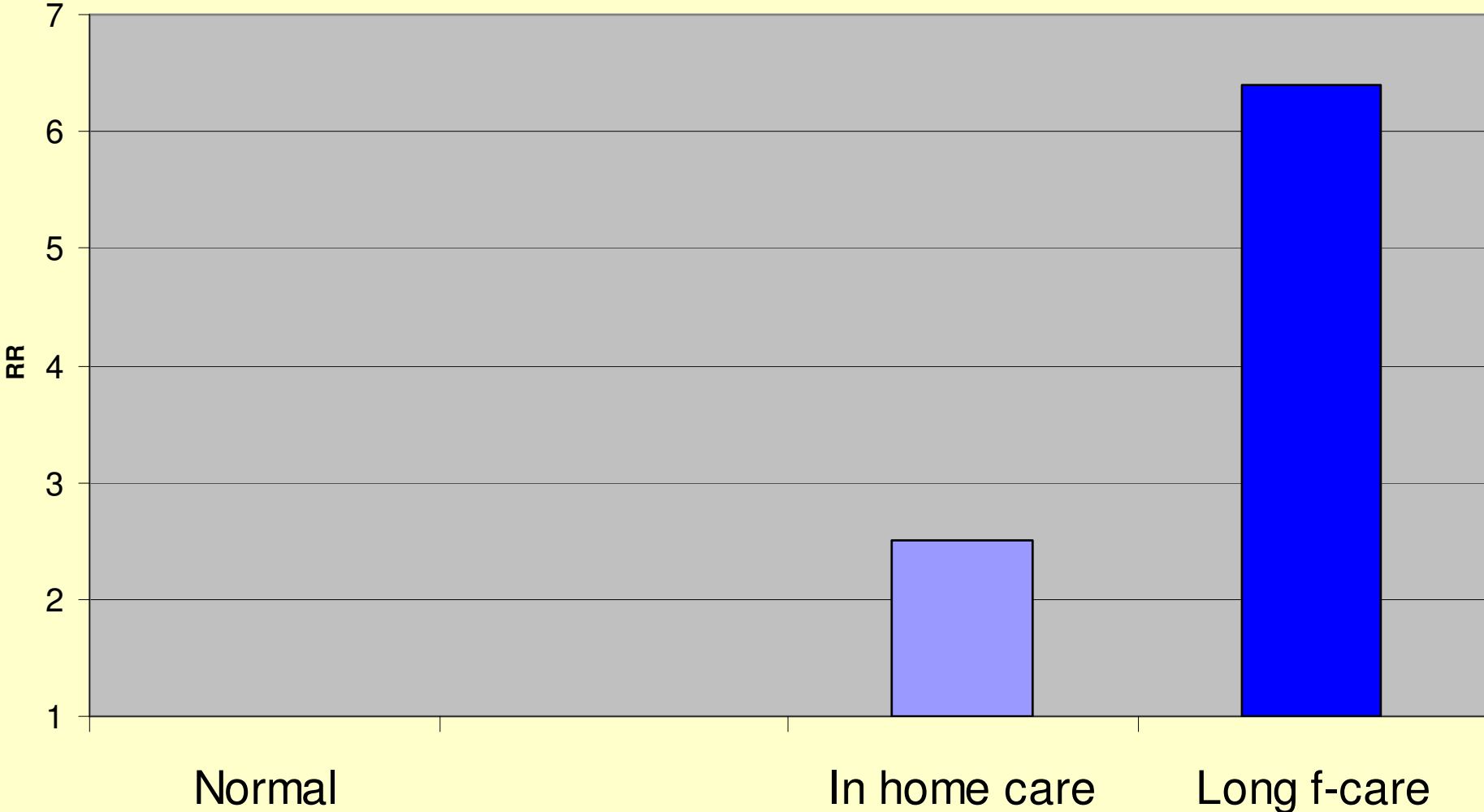
RR of self inflicted injury by childhood SES,  
birth cohorts 1973-1977  
(follow-up from end of primary school to 2001)



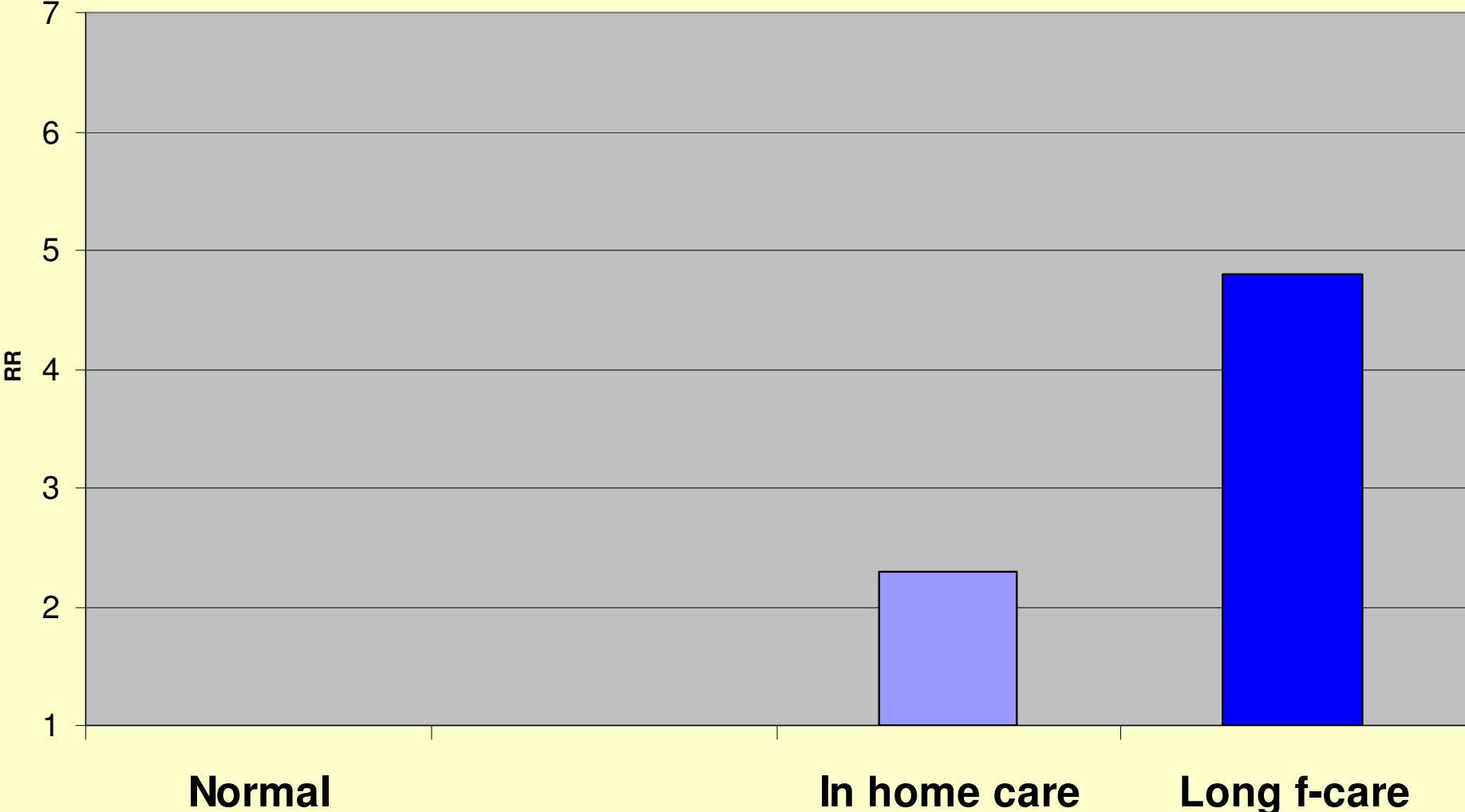
# School performance and suicidal/antisocial behavior; Tentative pathways



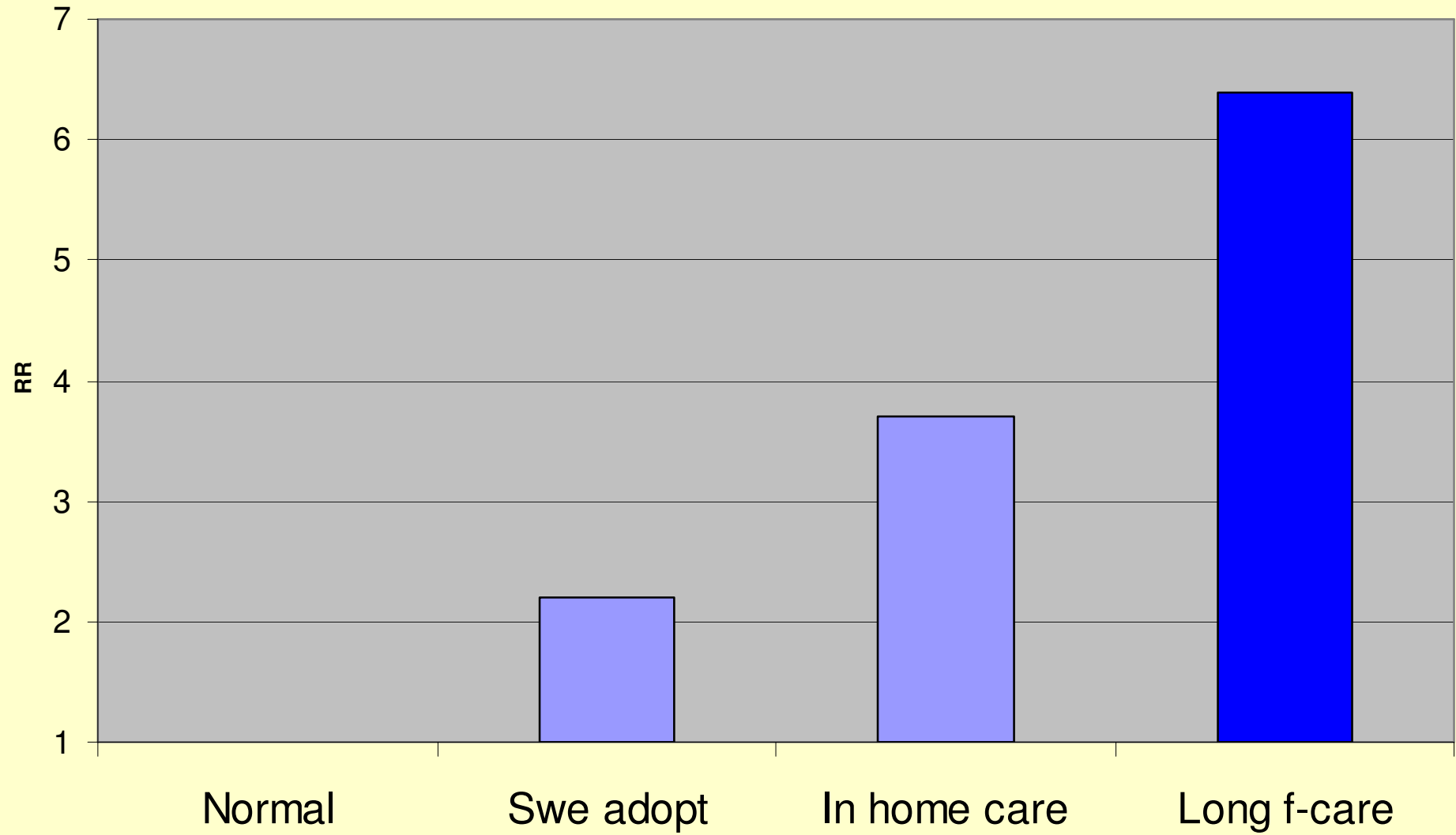
# Suicide



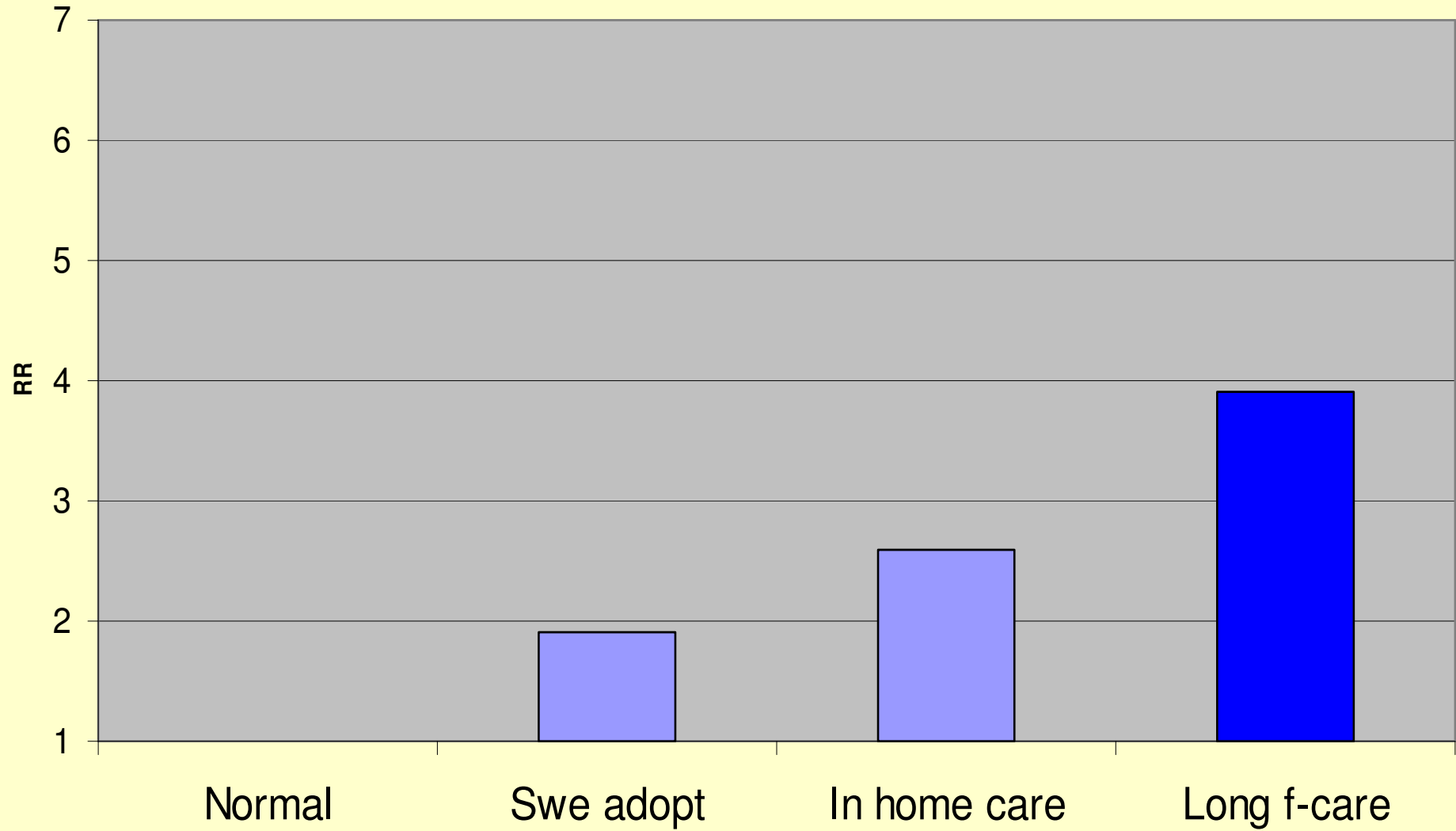
# Suicide adjusted for school failure



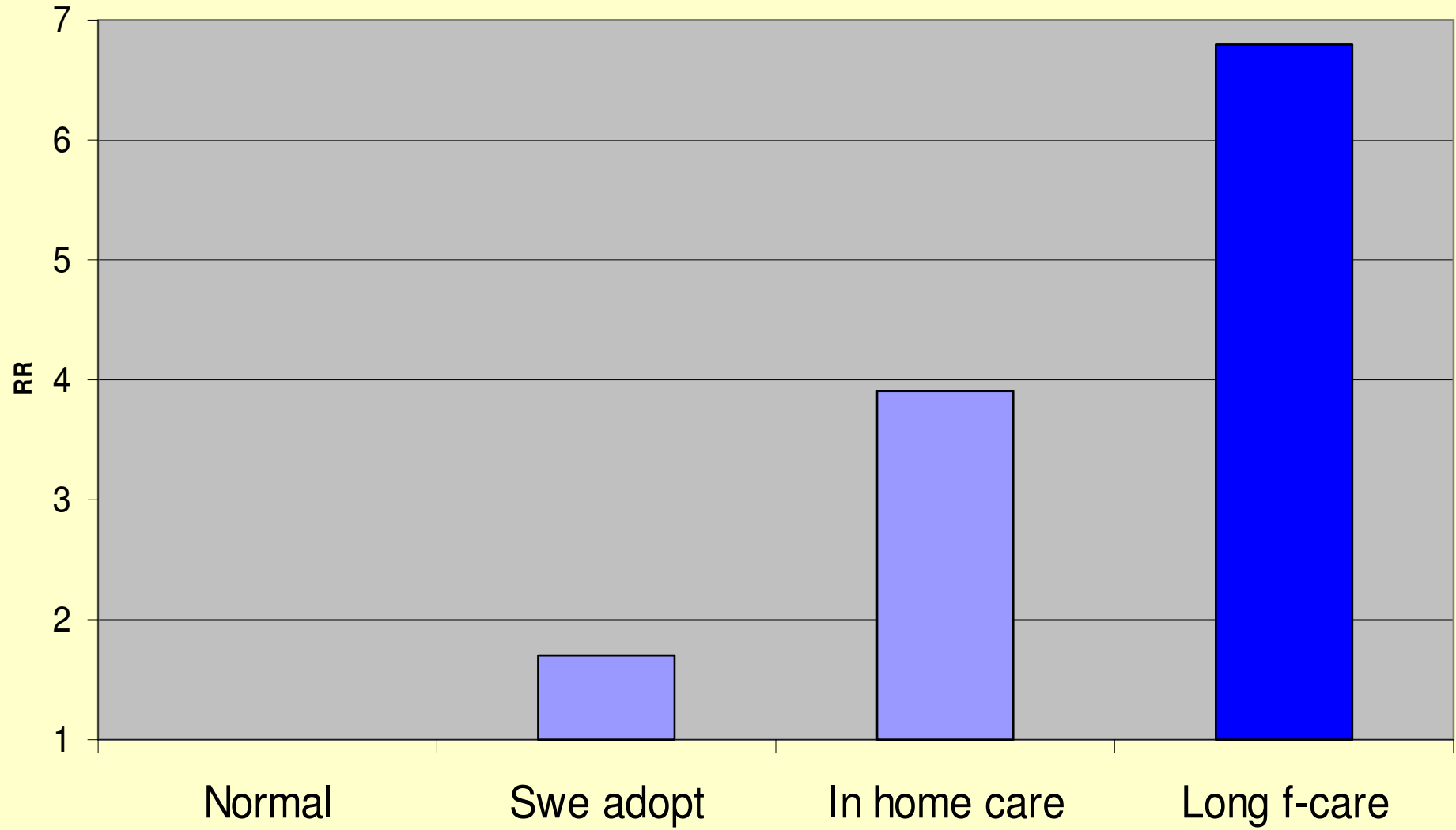
## Suicide attempts



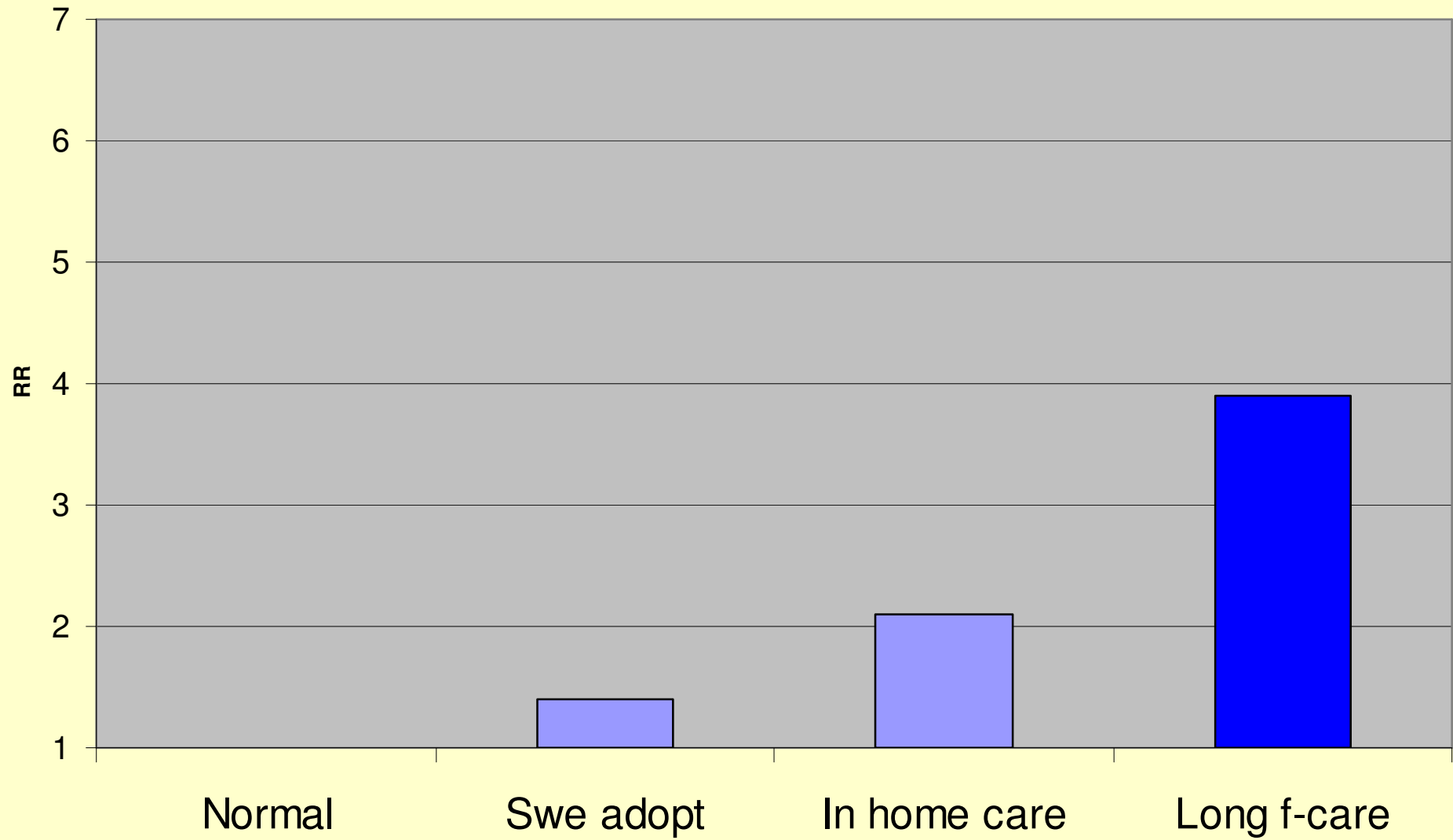
## Suicide attempt adjusted for school failure



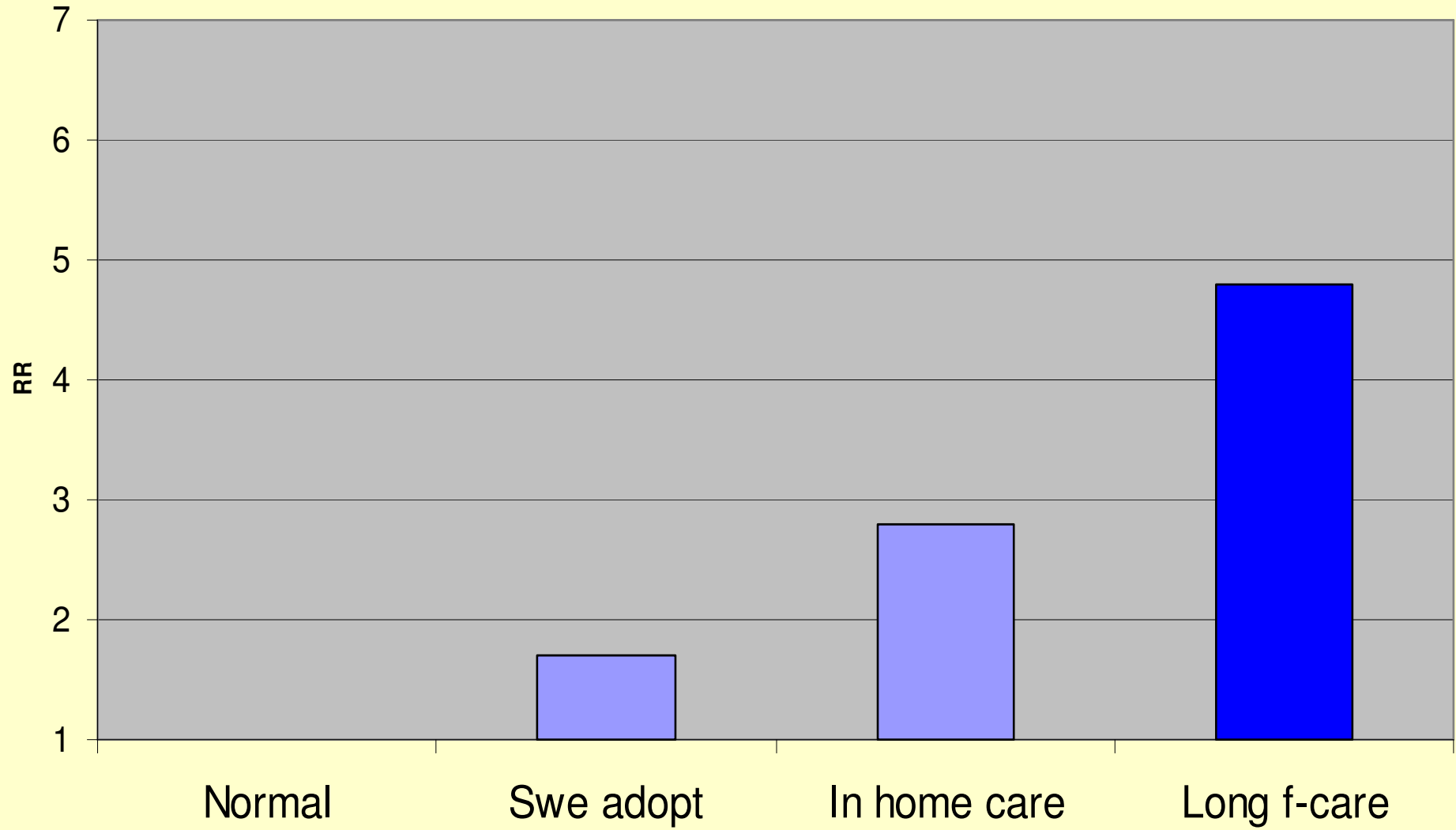
## Drug abuse age 20 +



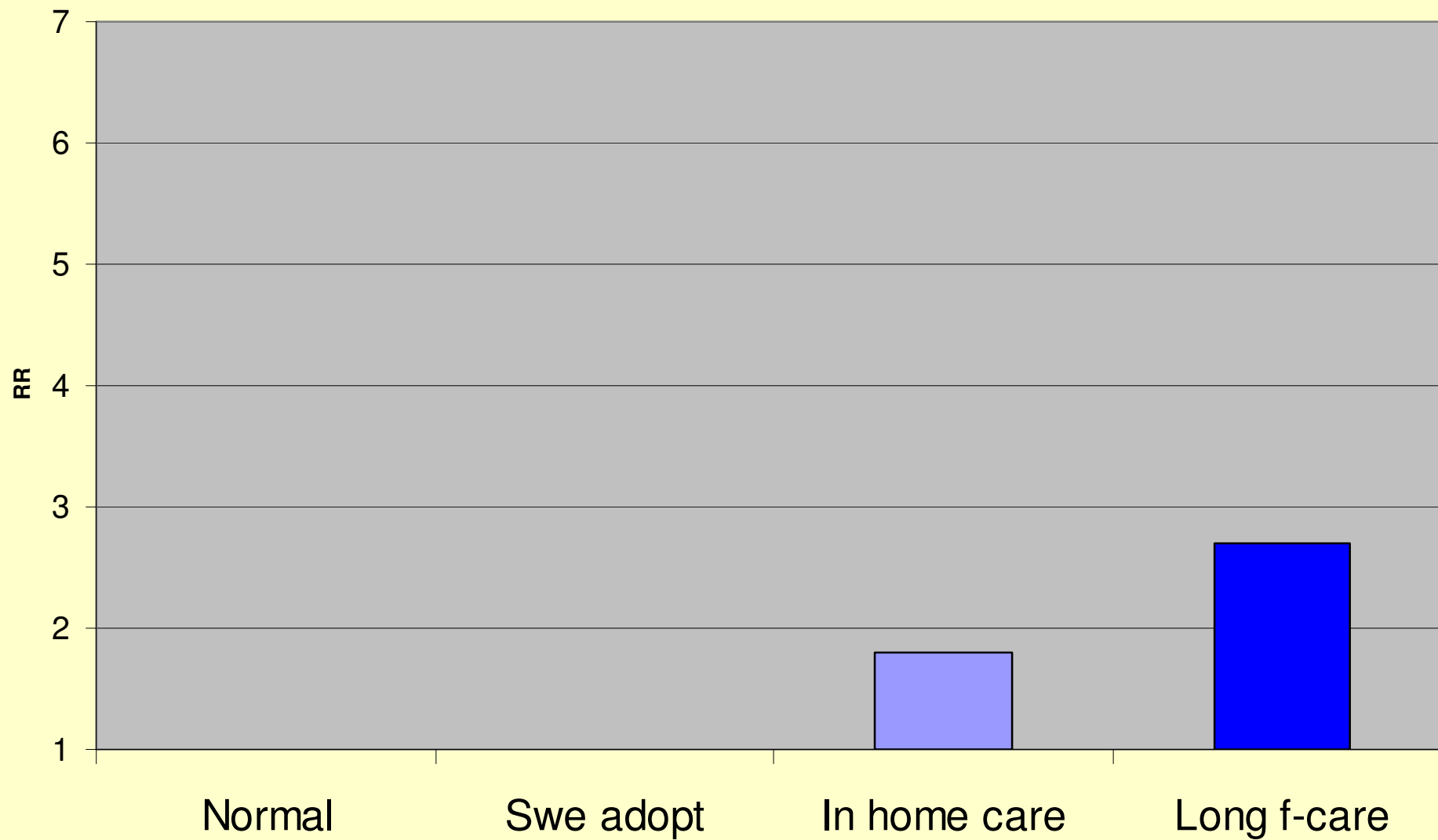
# Drug abuse age 20+, adjusted for school failure



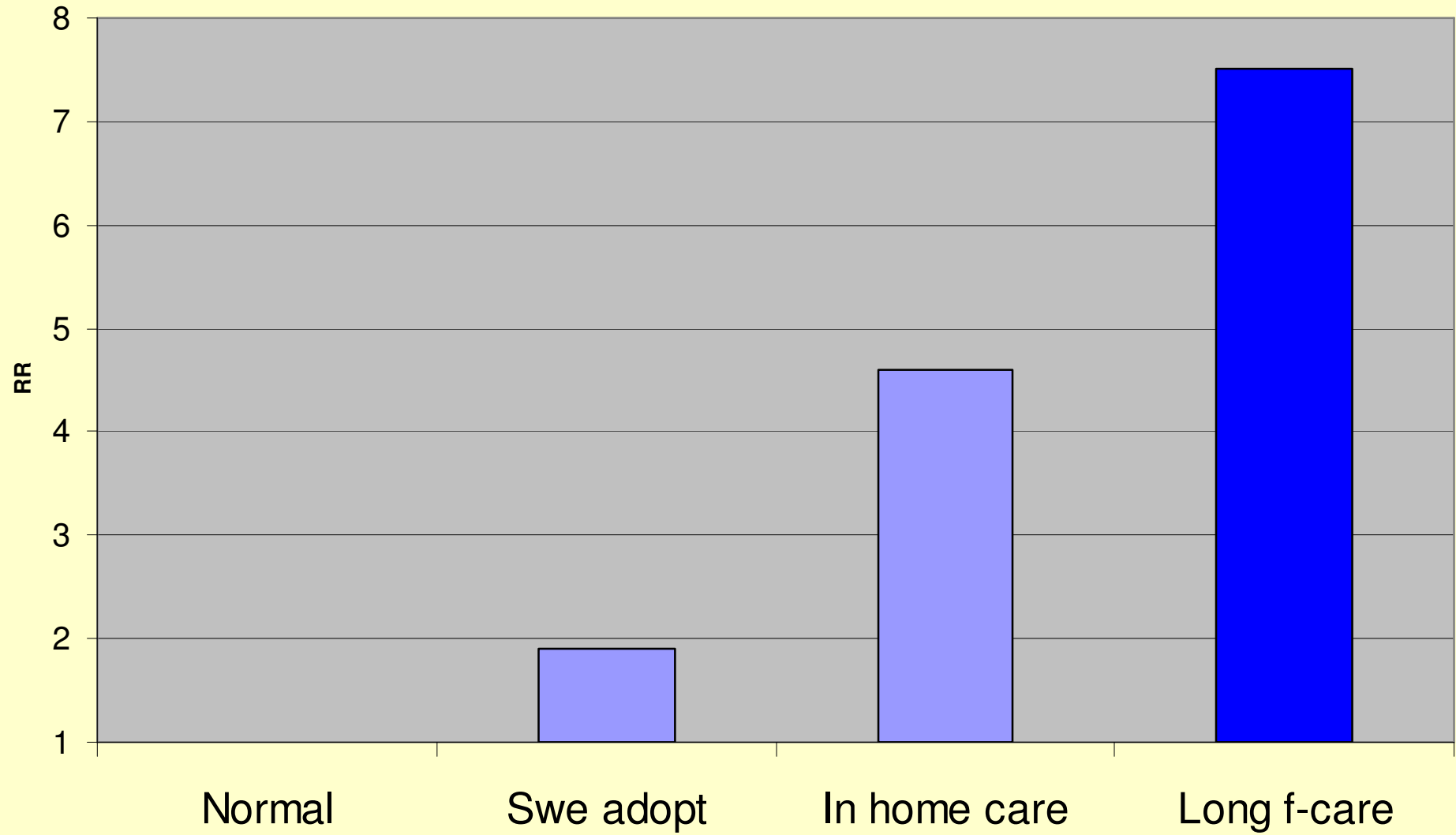
## Alcohol abuse age 20+



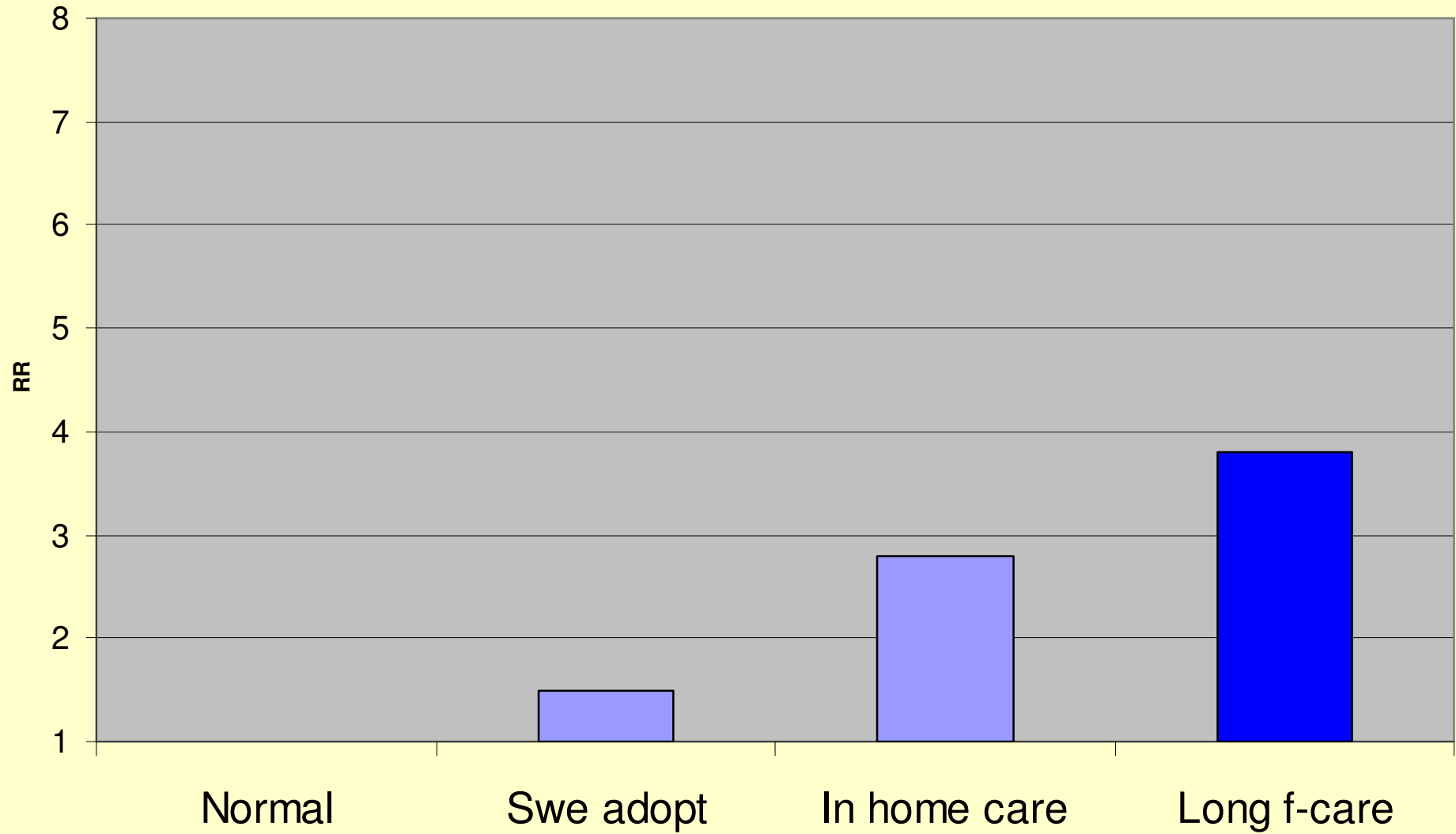
## Alcohol abuse age 20 +, adjusted for school failure



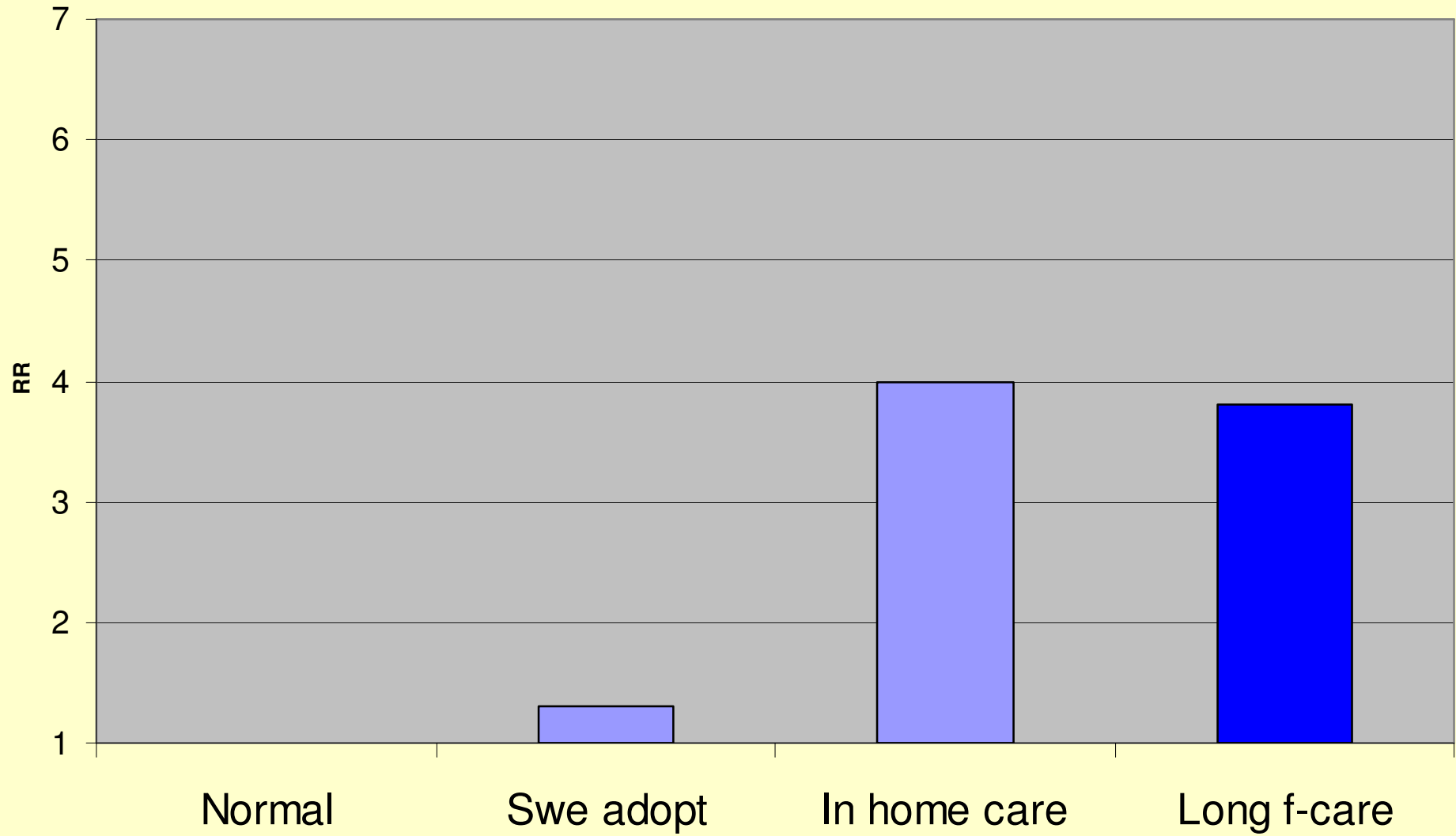
## Serious crime age 20+



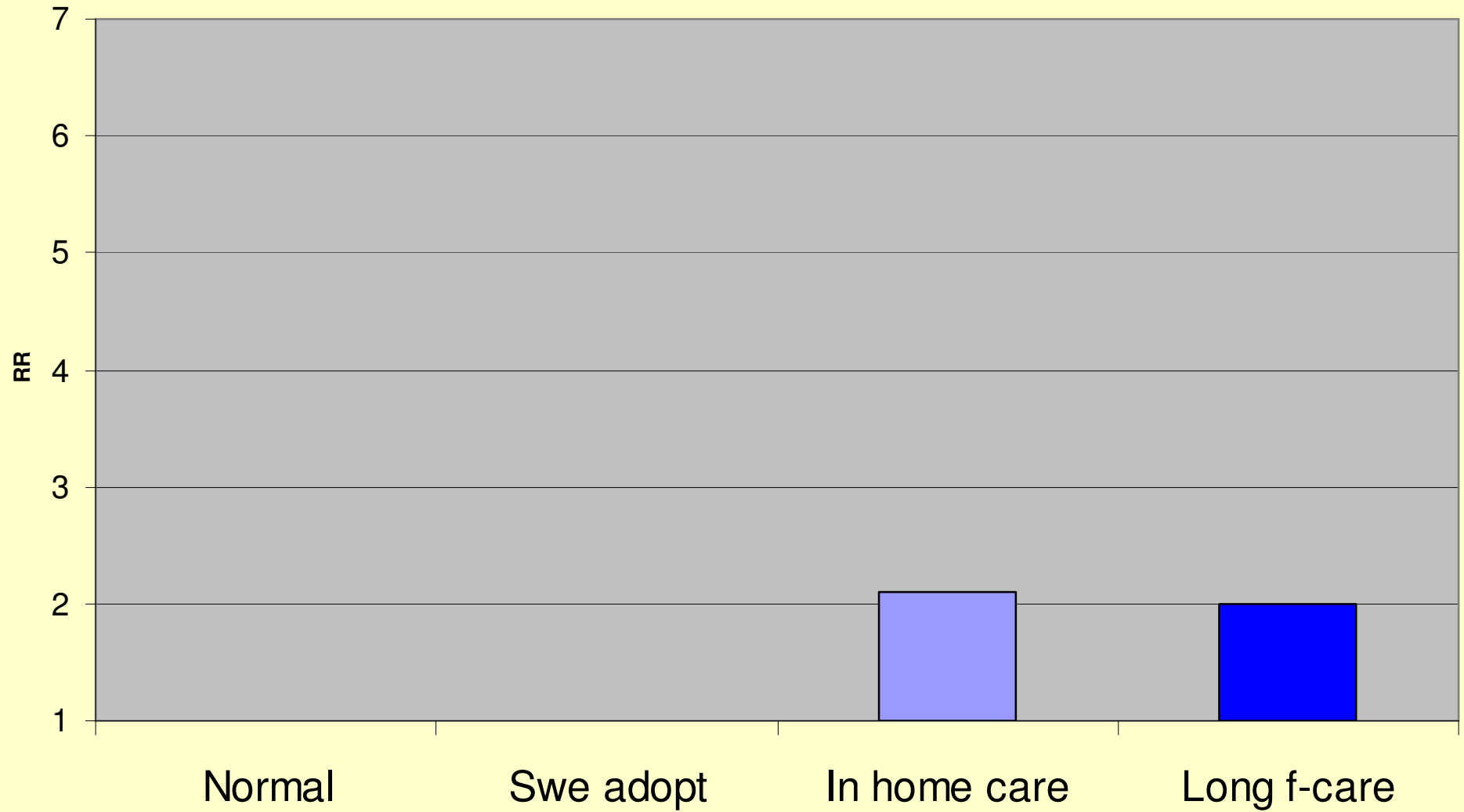
## Serious crime age 20+, adjusted for school failure



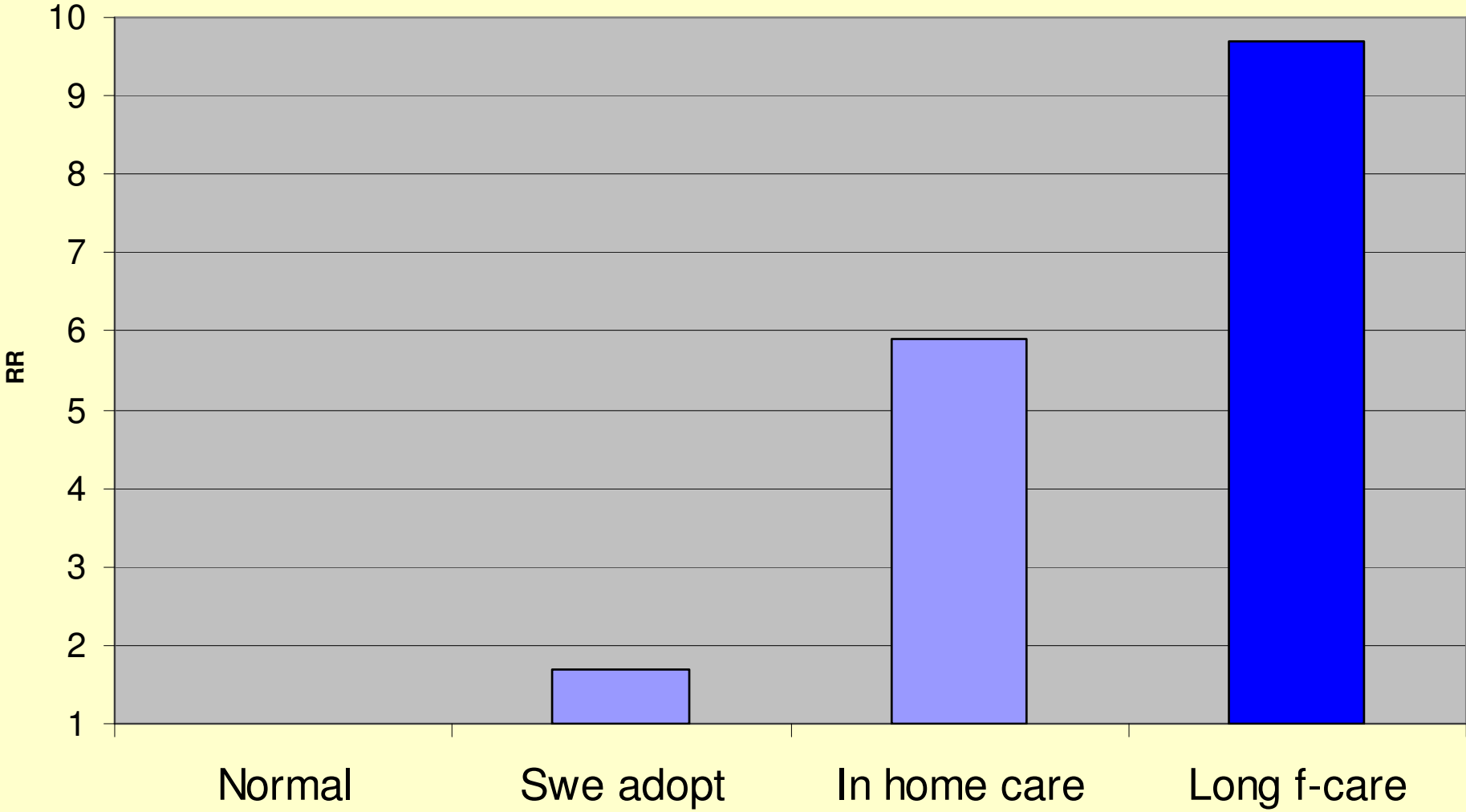
# Teenage parent



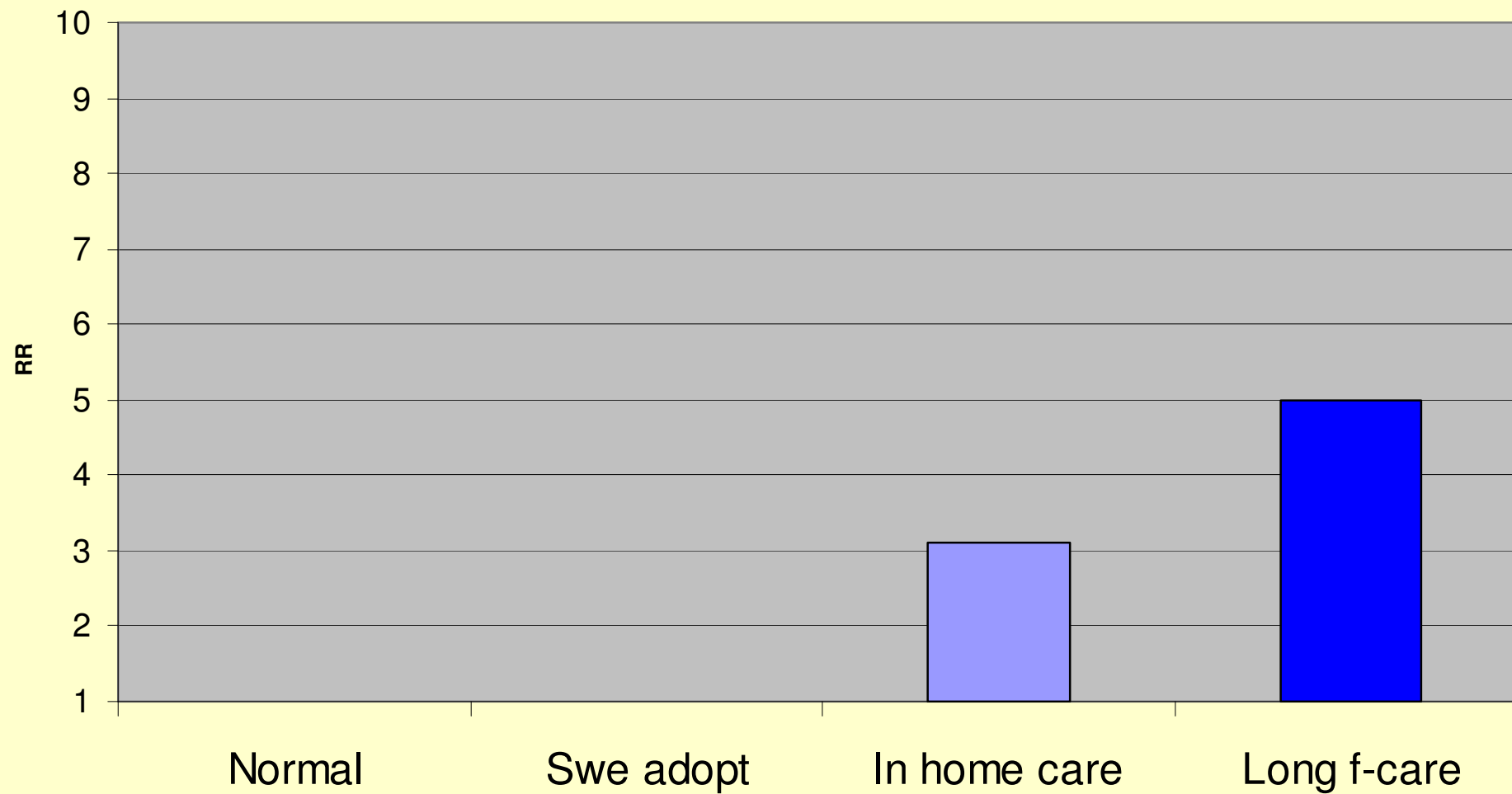
## Teenage parent, adjusted for school failure



# Welfare dependency at age 25



## Welfare dependency at age 25, adjusted for school failure



# Summary

- Children who have grown up in foster care have dramatic over-risks for all negative outcomes we examined
- Most over-risks are reduced by half when we adjust the analyses for school failure
- Adoptees do far better, even when we adjust the analyses for parental risk indicators (serious mental health problems and substance abuse; not shown here)
- Children who received in-home care before their teens – but grew up in their parents’ care – have lower over-risks than children who grew up in foster care

# Summary of regression analyses of all 8 outcomes for only long foster care

- Gender \*\*\*
- Birth year --
- Age at entry to care --
- Time in care --
- Mother psychiatric care (\*)
- Mother substance abuse --
- Father psychiatric care (\*)
- Father substance abuse --
  
- **School failure** \*\*\*

# Bad outcomes tend to appear in clusters....

## How many “do OK”?

### “No serious problems”

- not dead by suicide and
- no suicide attempts and
- no psychiatric care and
- no drug/alcohol abuse and
- no serious crime and
- not living on welfare at age 25

### “Doing well”

- “No serious problems” and
- not teenage parent and
- no welfare at age 25 and
- more than primary education at age 26

# “No serious problems”

	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>
Normal peers	92%	95%
International adoptees	81%	88%
Swedish adoptees	83%	89%
Welfare families*	66%	81%
In-home care before teens	66%	82%
Long term foster care	55%	69%

\* Poorest 2% in Sweden

# “Doing well”

	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>
Normal peers	79%	80%
International adoptees	70%	75%
Swedish adoptees	66%	73%
Welfare families*	42%	49%
In-home care before teens	44%	51%
Long term foster care	39%	45%

\* Poorest 2% in Sweden

# Regression analyses of “no serious problems” and “doing well” for long term foster care

- Sex/gender (girl) (\*)
- Birth year --
- Age at entry to care --
- Time in care --
- Mother psychiatric care --
- Mother substance abuse --
- Father psychiatric care --
- Father substance abuse --
- **No school failure \*\*\***

# Inevitable conclusions and more questions

- Yes, Sonia Jackson was right. Poor school performance and school failure seems to be the strongest risk factor for foster children's future life chances. Especially for boys.
- Why so poor school performance? Analyses of these data provide no answers, eg. low age at entry and long time in care does not improve school results.
- Experiences from a small program trial in Helsingborg:
  - not poor IQ, not behavior problems, not internalized problems
  - **knowledge gaps**, poor basic reading skills, poor basic numeracy skills (changes of schools, changes of carers)
  - low expectations from teachers and from foster parents
  - 75% were performing substantially below their IQ

- Poor school performance and school failure are “**variable risk factors**”. We can influence them, we can change them. It does not have to be like this.
- Problem: no evaluated programs aiming to improve school performance for foster children in primary school age.
- We have tried in Helsingborg - with promising results. It can be done.
- Outcomes are usually worse for children in residential care, compared to long term foster care.

Education is by far  
the largest economic investment society  
makes in its children.

Do the same for children in state care!