

Statistics briefing: looked after children

This briefing looks at what data and statistics are available about looked after children to help professionals, and the organisations they work for, make evidence based decisions.

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Introduction

This briefing introduces a range of datasets available in the UK that relate to children in local authority care. Data is collected on the demographics of looked after children, their experiences while in care and their outcomes. Statistics can help professionals and the organisations they work for make evidence based decisions about how best to meet the needs of children in care.

What does the data tell us?

- The number and rate of children in care in the UK are increasing overall, although trends vary between the four nations.
- Certain groups of children are more likely to be in care than others.
- The majority of looked after children are in care because of abuse or neglect.
- Foster care is the most common placement type for looked after children.
- The most common reason for a child to leave care is to return to their family.
- A significant minority of looked after children experience multiple care placements in a year.
- Children in care have below average outcomes across a range of measures, although children in care make better progress in some areas than children in need, a closer comparison group.

- Looked after children, or children who were previously looked after, are more likely than children in the general population to be the subject of case reviews. These represent a very small minority of children.

Who are looked after children?

A child who has been in the care of their local authority for more than 24 hours is known as a looked after child. Each UK nation has a slightly different definition of a looked after child and follows its own legislation, policy and guidance. Looked after children are also often referred to as children in care. The two terms are used interchangeably in this briefing.

What data is available?

Data about looked after children is available from a number of sources. Information covered includes:

- the number of looked after children
- the reasons children are in care
- the characteristics of looked after children, including gender, ethnicity and age
- the types of care looked after children experience, including the type and number of placements
- the outcomes for looked after children, including health, education and offending behavior
- the reasons children leave care.

Throughout this briefing, figures given are the most up to date at the time of publication.

How can the data be used?

Data can only ever tell part of the story. It's important to bear in mind the limitations of the data available.

You can use this data to:	But you can't use it to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ See trends in the numbers of children in care over time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Directly attribute a rise or fall in numbers of children in care to an increase or decrease in need for local authority care.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Look at rates of children in care in the child population. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Compare the rates of children in care across the UK nations.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Identify groups of children that are disproportionately represented within the looked after children population. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Attribute disproportionate representation within the care population to a greater need for care within certain groups.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Identify areas of looked after children's lives where they have poorer than average outcomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Attribute poorer outcomes for looked after children directly to their experiences in care.

What does the data tell us?

The number and rate of children in care in the UK are increasing overall, although trends vary between the four nations.

In 2016/17¹ there were approximately 96,000 looked after children in the UK. The total number of looked after children in the UK has increased every year since 2010. In the last five years the population of looked after children in the UK has increased by 5%, from 91,682 to 96,415. However, it is important to note that this UK-wide trend is not reflected in all four nations.

The numbers of looked after children in England, Northern Ireland and Wales have increased:

- In England the number of looked after children has increased every year since 2008.

- In Northern Ireland the number of looked after children is the highest recorded since the introduction of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.
- In Wales, the number of looked after children reached a new high of 6,405 in 2018.

(Sources: Department for Education (DfE), 2018a; Department of Health Northern Ireland (DoHNI), 2018a; Welsh Government, 2018a.)

¹The most recent year for which we have data for all four UK nations at the time of publication. Different UK nations publish datasets at different points in the year, so available data will not always be for the same year across the UK.

In contrast, after years on the rise, numbers of looked after children in Scotland have shown a decline:

- In Scotland, the number of looked after children peaked at 16,248 in 2012 and was down to 14,897 by 2017.

(Source: Scottish Government, 2018a)

The looked after child population is growing faster than that of the UK child population as a whole. In the last five years, there has been an increase from 68.2 to 69.5 looked after children per 10,000 of the under-18 UK population. The rate of looked after children per 10,000 of the under-18 population varies significantly between the four nations.

	England 31 March 2018	N. Ireland 31 March 2018	Scotland 31 July 2017	Wales 31 March 2018
Rate of looked after children per 10,000 of the under-18 population	63.6	71.2	144.4	101.9

(Sources: DfE, 2018a; DoHNI, 2018a; Scottish Government, 2018a; Welsh Government, 2018a.)

This is partly due to differences between the nations around when children are counted as being 'in care', and what this means in practice. Because of these differences, rates cannot be directly compared between nations.

Certain groups of children are more likely to be in care than others.

In the UK children are **more likely** to be in care if they are:

a) Male

	England 31 March 2018	N. Ireland 31 March 2018	Scotland 31 July 2017	Wales 31 March 2018
Proportion of looked after children that are male	56%	54%	55%	54%
Proportion of under-18 population that is male (all mid-2017)	51%	51%	51%	51%

(Sources: DfE, 2018a; DoHNI, 2018a; Scottish Government, 2018a; Welsh Government, 2018a; Office for National Statistics, 2018.)

b) black or of mixed ethnicity (except in Scotland where only children of mixed ethnicity are overrepresented)

	England 31 March 2018	Scotland 31 July 2017	Wales 31 March 2018
Proportion of looked after child population that is black	7.1%	0.6%	1.4%
Proportion of under-18 population that is black (under-20 for Scotland) ²	5.0%	0.9%	0.7%
Proportion of looked after child population that is of mixed ethnicity	9.5%	1.8%	3.0%
Proportion of under-18 population of mixed ethnicity (under-20 for Scotland) ²	5.2%	0.9%	2.1%

(Sources: DfE, 2018a; Scottish Government, 2018a; Welsh Government, 2018a; Nomis, 2011.)

² Data for the population as a whole is from 2011, when the last census took place.

Data is not available for Northern Ireland.

In the UK children are **less likely** to be in care if they are:

a) female

	England 31 March 2018	N. Ireland 31 March 2018	Scotland 31 July 2017	Wales 31 March 2018
Proportion of looked after children that are female (all mid-2017)	44%	46%	45%	46%
Proportion of under-18 population that is female	49%	49%	49%	49%

(Sources: DfE, 2018a; DoHNI, 2018a; Scottish Government, 2018a; Welsh Government, 2018a; Office for National Statistics, 2018.)

b) Asian

	England 31 March 2018	Scotland 31 July 2017	Wales 31 March 2018
Proportion of looked after child population that is Asian	45%	0.8%	2.1%
Proportion of under-18 population that is Asian (under-20 for Scotland) ³	9.5%	3.3%	2.6%

(Sources: DfE, 2018a; Scottish Government, 2018a; Welsh Government, 2018a; Nomis, 2011.)

³ Data for the population as a whole is from 2011, when the last census took place.

Data is not available for Northern Ireland.

The gender imbalance has been increasing in some nations. For example, in England there was an increase of 11% for looked after boys between 2014 and 2018, compared to an increase of 8% for girls (DfE, 2018a). This difference is likely to have largely been driven by an increase in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children over this period, the majority of whom are male.

Little is known about why certain minority ethnic groups are overrepresented whilst others are underrepresented within the care system. Research has identified a number of potential causes, including: lack of access to appropriate support services, greater unwillingness in some cultures to report concerns about a child's safety, or greater uncertainty among child welfare professionals about how to respond appropriately to the needs of minority ethnic families. However it is likely that many different factors interact to contribute to the differences (Owen, 2009).

The majority of looked after children are in care because of abuse or neglect.

Only England and Wales publish information on why children are looked after. In both nations the majority of children were looked after because of abuse or neglect:

- in England 63% of looked after children were looked after due to abuse or neglect in 2017/18
- in Wales 67% of looked after children were looked after due to abuse or neglect in 2016/17.

(Sources: DfE, 2018a; Welsh Government, 2018b.)

Other reasons for being in care include:

- family dysfunction⁵ (England: 15%, Wales 14%)
- family in acute stress⁶ (England: 8%, Wales: 8%)
- child's disability (England: 3%, Wales: 4%)
- parent's illness or disability (England: 3%, Wales: 3%)
- socially unacceptable behaviour (England: 1%, Wales: 2%).

(Sources: DfE, 2018a; Welsh Government, 2018b.)

⁵ Family dysfunction - Children whose needs arise mainly out of their living with families where the parenting capacity is chronically inadequate (DfE, 2018f)

⁶ Family in acute stress - Children whose needs arise from living in a family going through a temporary crisis such that parenting capacity is diminished and some of the children's needs are not being adequately met (DfE, 2018f).

This measure is important because for many looked after children their pre-care experiences continue to affect them long after they become looked after (Rahilly and Hendry, 2014).

Foster care is the most common placement type for looked after children.

Across the UK, the most common placement for a looked after child is living with foster carers.

	England 31 March 2018	N. Ireland 31 March 2018	Scotland 31 July 2017	Wales 31 March 2018
Proportion of looked after children in foster placements (includes kinship care)	73%	79%	63%	74%
Placement with parents	6%	12%	25%	13%
Residential accommodation	13% ⁷	5%	10%	5%
Other	9%	4%	2%	8%

(Sources: DfE, 2018a; DoHNI, 2018a; Scottish Government, 2018a; Welsh Government, 2018a.)

⁷ Includes Secure units, children’s homes, semi-independent living, residential schools and other residential settings

In Scotland, where the care system is significantly different to the rest of the UK, a large proportion of looked after children (25%) were living at home with their parents.

The most common reason for a child to leave care is to return to their family.

For all nations where data is available, the most common reason for a child to leave care is to return home to their family. Data is not available for Northern Ireland.

	England 31 March 2018	Scotland 31 July 2017	Wales 31 March 2018⁸
Returned home to live with parents or relatives	31%	54%	35%
Adopted	13%	9%	18%
In the care of former foster/kinship carers	11%	23%	12%
Moved into independent/supported living arrangement	15%	7%	10%
Other	30%	7%	25%

(Sources: DfE , 2018a; Scottish Government, 2018a; Welsh Government, 2018a.)

⁸ Excluding instances where a new episode of care began on the same or next day.

In 2016/17, 54% of children who ceased to be looked after in Scotland returned home to their parents. This high proportion can partly be explained by the fact that many looked after children in Scotland (25%) continue to live at home with their parents whilst being “looked after”. These children have been through the Children’s Hearing system and are subject to a Supervision Requirement (i.e. regular contact with social services) with no condition of residence.

This measure is important because research suggests that, without proper support, outcomes for many children reunified with their families are poor, and many will re-enter care subsequently (Wade et al, 2011; Farmer et al, 2011; Farmer and Lutman, 2012).

A significant minority of looked after children experience multiple care placements in a year.

In all four nations the majority of looked after children remained in the same placement last year (68-79%). However a significant minority (around 5-10%) had three or more placements in the last year.

	England 31 March 2018	Scotland 31 July 2017	Wales 31 March 2018
Looked after children with three or more placements in the last 12 months	31%	54%	35%

(Sources: DfE, 2018a; Scottish Government, 2018a; Welsh Government, 2018a.)

In Northern Ireland data is collected, and requested from the Department of Health Northern Ireland, for the NSPCC's annual How Safe are Our Children? report on the number of placements that looked after children have had in the last six months.

- At 31 March 2017, 5% of looked after children in Northern Ireland had three or more placements in the last six months.

(Source: Provided on request to NSPCC by the DoHNI.)

This measure is important because multiple care placements have been shown to have a significant impact on looked after children's wellbeing (Hannon et al, 2010) and are associated with poor behavioural outcomes (Rubin et al, 2007).

Children in care have below average outcomes across a range of measures, although children in care make better progress in some areas than children in need, a closer comparison group.

Many looked after children have experienced abuse or neglect; experiences which are associated with poorer outcomes for children (Wilkinson et al, 2017).

Research suggests that when children in care are compared with children in the general population, they tend to have poorer outcomes in a number of areas such as educational attainment and mental and physical health (Rahilly and Hendry, 2014). However, this is not necessarily the case when they are compared with other groups of children who are likely to have had similar experiences, such as children in need.⁹ One study, which analysed government data, found that looked after children who were continuously in care in England had better educational attainment than children in need (Sebba et al., 2015).

Official data is not available for some outcomes, as they are not routinely or consistently measured or recorded across all four nations. However, there are a number of outcomes which are collected across the UK, a selection of which are outlined below. Data is also included on the mental health of looked after children

which, although not collected across all four nations, has been the subject of a number of large scale research projects.

⁹ A child is considered to be a “child in need” if they are unlikely to achieve or maintain, or have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision of services by a public authority; or if a child’s development or health is likely to be significantly impaired, or further impaired without the provision of such services.

Looked after children are more likely to have a mental health difficulty.

In 2001/2 the Office of National Statistics conducted a survey of the mental health of looked after young people aged 5-17 in Great Britain. This research, which remains the most comprehensive data available on the mental health of children in care, found that overall in Great Britain 45% of looked after children aged 5-17 had a mental health disorder as defined by the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th Revision, compared to 10% of the general population (Meltzer et al., 2003).

	England	Scotland	Wales	GB
Percentage of looked after children with a mental disorder	45%	45%	49%	45%
Percentage of the general child population with a mental disorder	N/A	N/A	N/A	10%

(Sources: Meltzer et al, 2003; Meltzer et al , 2004a; Meltzer et al , 2004b, Green et al, 2005.)

Some more recent data is available on the mental health of looked after children in England and Northern Ireland.

In England, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Youth in Mind, 2012) should be completed for every child looked after for at least 12 months and aged 5-16 as at the end of March.

Data from the Department for Education (DfE) on findings from this questionnaire shows that:

- in 2018, 78% of the 38,39,590 looked after children who met the criteria had a SDQ score returned
- the average SDQ score for England was 14.2, which is classified as “borderline cause for concern”.¹⁰

(Source: DfE, 2018a)

In Northern Ireland, Queen’s University conducted a survey looked at mental health of looked after children in Northern Ireland, supported by a grant from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM).

The research, published in 2015, found that behavioural and mental/emotional health problems were the most common health issues suffered by looked after children and young people in Northern Ireland, with:

- 40% having been diagnosed with behavioural problems
- 35% with emotional problems
- 21% with depression or anxiety.

(Source: McSherry, D. et al, 2015.)

This measure is important because it highlights the need for mental health support for looked after children. If mental health needs are unmet it can increase children’s risk of a variety of poor outcomes, including placement instability and poor educational attainment (Bazalgette, Rahilly and Trevelyan, 2015).

¹⁰ Although SDQ scores can be used as continuous variables, it is sometimes convenient to categorise scores. The initial bandings presented for the SDQ scores by Youth in Mind were ‘normal’, ‘borderline’ and ‘abnormal’. These bandings were defined based on a population-based UK survey, attempting to choose cutpoints so that 80% of children scored ‘normal’, 10% ‘borderline’ and 10% ‘abnormal’.

Looked after children are more likely to have special educational needs (SEN).

England, Wales and Northern Ireland all collect data on the number of looked after children with special educational needs (SEN). Data is not available for Scotland.

	England 31 March 2017	Northern Ireland 2016/17	Wales 31 March 2017
Percentage of looked after children with SEN ¹¹	27%	24%	18%
Percentage of the general child population with SEN	2.8%	5%	3%

(Sources: DfE, 2018b; DoHNI, 2018c; Welsh Government, 2018a.)

¹¹ In England the figures for children with special educational needs (SEN) relates to children with a SEN statement or Education, health and care (EHC) plan; in Northern Ireland and Wales it relates to children with a SEN statement.

Looked after children are less likely to do well at school.

All four nations collect some data on the educational attainment of looked after children.

In Northern Ireland and Wales data relates to children obtaining GCSE grades A* - C.

	Northern Ireland 2016/17	Wales 31 March 2017
Percentage of looked after children achieving 5 or more GCSEs A*-C	48%	21% ¹²
Percentage of the general child population achieving 5 or more GCSEs A*-C	85%	60%

(Sources: DoHNI, 2018c; Welsh Government, 2018c.)

¹² In Wales figures are for the percentage of children achieving the level 2 threshold at key stage 4. This is the equivalent of 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C

In England, following GCSE reforms, a new grading scale of 9 to 1 is being introduced, with 9 being the top grade. The new measure adopted by the Department for Education to track student attainment is called "Attainment 8". Attainment 8 measures the average achievement of pupils across a set of eight subjects. In 2017, the average Attainment 8 score for looked after children in England was 19.3, compared to 44.5 for non-looked after children.

(Source: Department for Education, 2018b.)

In Scotland data relates to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). In 2016/17, 44% of looked after children in Scotland left school with one or more qualification at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level 5 or above, while 86% of all school leavers achieve this level.

(Source: Scottish Government, 2018b.)

Care leavers are less likely to be in education, training or employment.

All four nations collect data on what children go on to do after leaving care.

- In England in 2017/18, 36% of care leavers aged 19 were not in education, training or employment in 2017/18. This compares to 10.0% of 18-year-olds in 2017 and 13.2% of 19-24-year-olds in the general population in October - December 2017.
- In Northern Ireland in 2017/18, 35% of care leavers aged 19 were not in education, training or employment. This compares to 12% of 16-24-year-olds in the general population in April-June 2018.

- In Scotland data is collected for the number of school leavers who go on to a “positive destination” (education, employment, training, voluntary work or an agreement with a trusted professional that they will take part in a programme of learning and activity). In 2016/17, 9% of school leavers who had been looked after for a full year and 31% of school leavers who had been looked after for part of the year had not gone on to some form of positive destination. This compares to 6% of all school leavers.
- In Wales 39% of care leavers aged 19 at 31 March 2016 were not in education, training or employment. This compares to 10.5% of 16-18-year-olds and 18.5% of 19-24-year-olds in the general population in 2016.

(Sources: DfE, 2018a; DfE, 2018e; NISRA, 2018; DoHNI, 2018b; Scottish Government, 2018b; Welsh Government, 2017; Welsh Government, 2018d.)

Looked after children, or children who were previously looked after, are more likely than children in the general population to be the subject of case reviews.

Research indicates that the vast majority of children who are in care in the UK live safely in foster or residential care; only a minority experience harm from those who care for them (Biehal et al, 2014).

A case review is conducted when a child dies, or is seriously harmed, as a result of abuse or neglect. The review identifies ways that local professionals and organisations can improve the way they work together to safeguard children.

Children who are currently in care or who have previous experience of being in care are over-represented as a group among the very small number of children who are the subject of a case review. This can partly be explained by the fact that the suicide of a looked after child, or a suicide in a residential provision for children or young offenders institution, should always result in a review. In contrast suicides by young people in the community are not investigated by the case review process unless maltreatment or neglect are identified as critical factors in their lives (Sidebotham et al, 2016).

- In England, an analysis of 292 serious case reviews (SCRs) from 2011-14 found that 20% of the children who were involved in case reviews were subject to a legal order, such as a care order or Section 20 accommodation, at the time of the incident.
- In Northern Ireland, an analysis of 24 case management reviews from 2003-2008 found that 21% of children had been looked after at the time of the incident that prompted the review, and a further 17% had previously been looked after.

- In Scotland an analysis of 56 significant case reviews from 2007-2011 found that 20% related to children who were or had been looked after. More recent analysis (Care Inspectorate, 2016) provides data on where children were living at the time of the incident, but does not explicitly state how many of the children had looked after status.
- Data is not available for Wales.

(Sources: Sidebotham et al, 2016; Devaney et al, 2013; Vincent and Petch, 2012; Care Inspectorate, 2016.)

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+ Further information



For further reading about looked after children, search the **NSPCC Library Catalogue** using the keyword "children in care".



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