

Care experienced children and young people

Research insights from administrative data





This report summarises some key insights on children's experiences with social care, which have been generated through research using administrative data. It serves as a source of evidence for policymakers and practitioners working to support children. It also provides a rich example of the power of administrative data to enable critical research evidence that can improve lives.

Administrative data is information created when people interact with public services, such as schools, the NHS, the courts or the benefits system. The data is de-identified and can be linked to other data which can be accessed in trusted research environments such as the Office for National Statistics Secure Research Service where it can be used for public good research.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Dr Emma Gordon, Director ADR UK, and Professor Karen Broadhurst, Lancaster University

The care system provides a lifeline for children and young people whose parents are unable to care for them. However, there is a UK-wide consensus that more needs to be done to prevent family breakdown, and to help all children thrive in care.

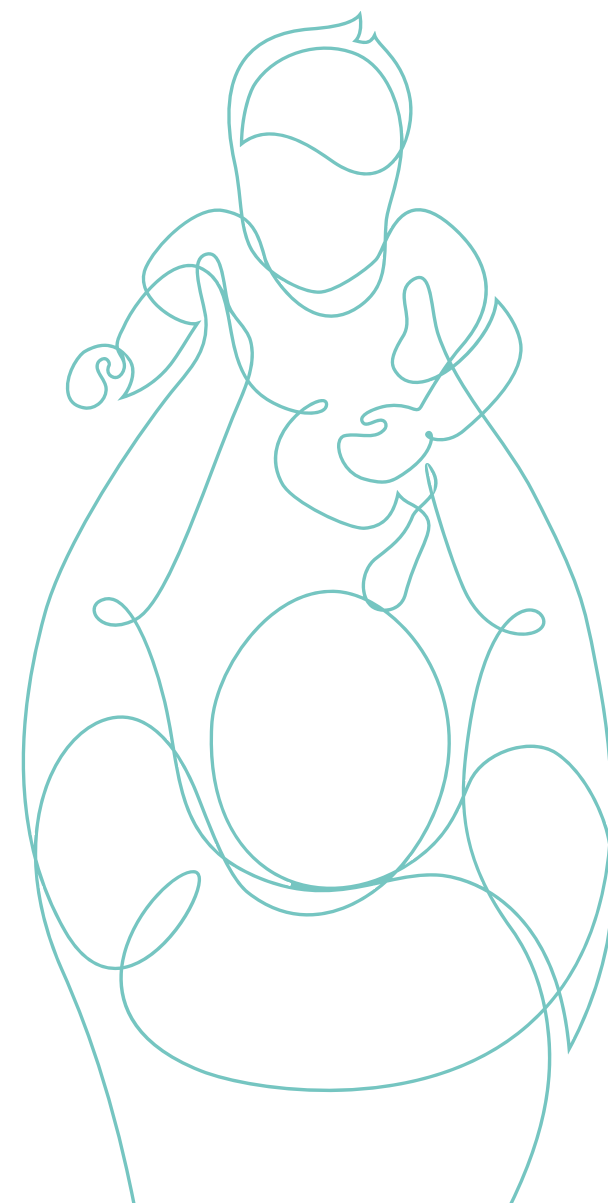
We know from recent independent reviews of the children's social care system in Scotland (*Care Review, 2020*), England (*MacAlister, 2022*) and Northern Ireland (*Jones, 2023*), that there are major, systemic problems with the care system across the UK. The numbers of children in care remain high across all four nations and there has been little done to change the pattern of poor outcomes for the some of the most vulnerable in our society, despite pockets of innovation. Shortages of foster carers and the rising costs of residential care, mean that the State cannot always provide the care and stability that children living apart from their parents desperately need.

Researchers and policymakers play a vital role in the pursuit of solutions to preserve families and improve outcomes for children in care. Effective use of administrative data can support these efforts, providing insight into children's journeys through care, pin-pointing system shortfalls, and revealing how services shape children's lives in the longer-term. Opportunities to make use of administrative data

have been greatly accelerated by the work of ADR UK (Administrative Data Research UK). Previously, research was hindered by only partial views of children's experiences produced by a single agency – for example, through manual reading of files from local authorities. As a result, the needs of children at each stage of their life was not fully recognised.

ADR UK is delivering system-level change in how data can be used to inform improvements in policy and practice. By linking data from different parts of government, and opening up secure access to the de-identified, population-level linked datasets, ADR UK is creating unprecedented opportunities for researchers to advance our knowledge. For the first time, we can look across systems and services using datasets where every child is counted.

We are pleased to introduce the following collection of research that showcases the value and versatility of administrative data. The studies included provide robust empirical evidence of pathways into care, care experience, and life beyond care. As a society, we must ensure we have the conditions in place for every child to have the opportunity to flourish, including those in the care of the State.



Why use administrative data?

Administrative data reflects the use of all public services across the UK. Every interaction with a public sector service produces records from which we can extract information and meaning. Rather than collect new data from scratch, these administrative records – de-identified data representing the whole population of everyone who has used the service over time – enable research at a pace and scale that would simply not be possible through other methods.

Data fuels policy development and using existing data effectively saves time and resources for researchers and policymakers. Administrative data is representative, longitudinal (covering a long period of time), and can produce valuable insights enhancing the quality of research which can help policymakers better understand the complex issues they hope to address.

As administrative data pulls from a wealth of public sector information, its analysis can expose long term trends covering health, poverty, inequality, education and wellbeing. Understanding these trends is crucial for effective policy development. Furthermore, this rich resource produces key data linkages that can be demographically and regionally segmented informing understanding of the distribution of key social issues and changing patterns over time.

Administrative data is collected when people interact with government systems and services. Therefore, understanding people's needs, interests and concerns in relation to the use of their data, and shaping research to address these, is essential for maximising the public benefit of administrative data research. Each of the research projects featured in this report outline the public engagement undertaken to inform their work.

These examples, from the four UK nations, reveal incredibly powerful insights into the care experiences of children, as well as patterns of service delivery and outcomes, that have not been available to us before. These insights are already informing public and policy debate, helping to transform the lives of children in care.

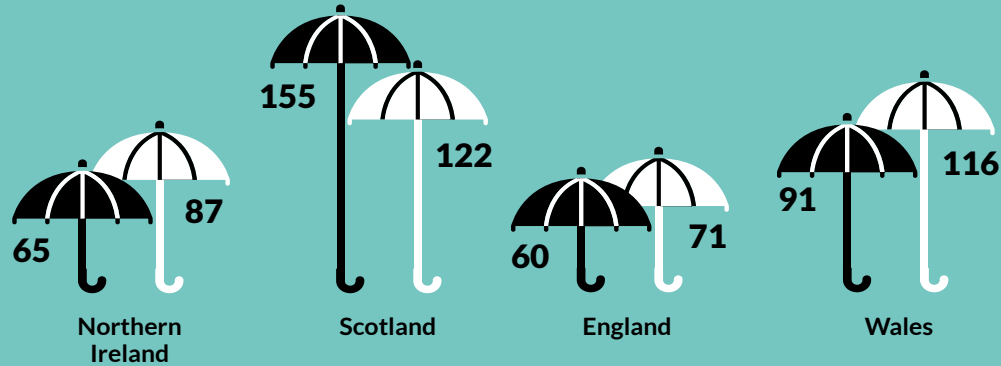


Care experienced children and young people: admin data in focus

Care experienced: a person with experience of being in care, regardless of placement length, type or age. They may still be in care, or have left care.

Annual entry rates of children into care per 10,000 (2013 and 2023)

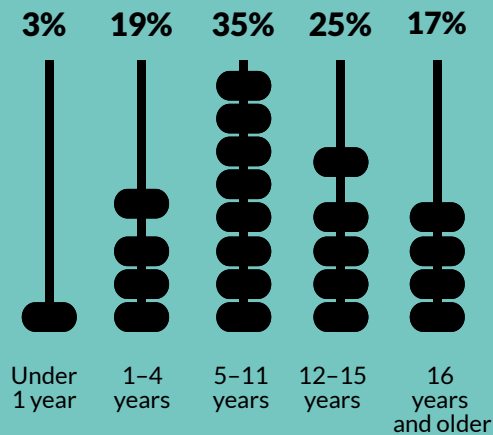
Source: Scottish Government, 2024



● 2013 ● 2023 Rates are not directly comparable between nations due to differences in calculation.

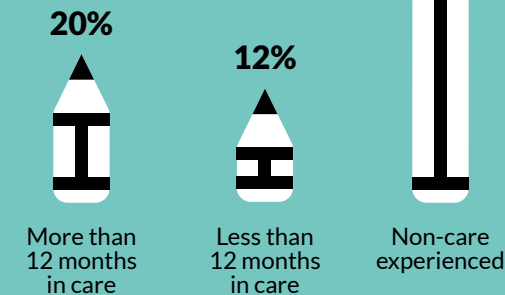
Ages of children and young people in care (Northern Ireland)

Source: Roger and Kinghan, 2024



Academic attainment of care experienced young people at Key Stage 4 (England)

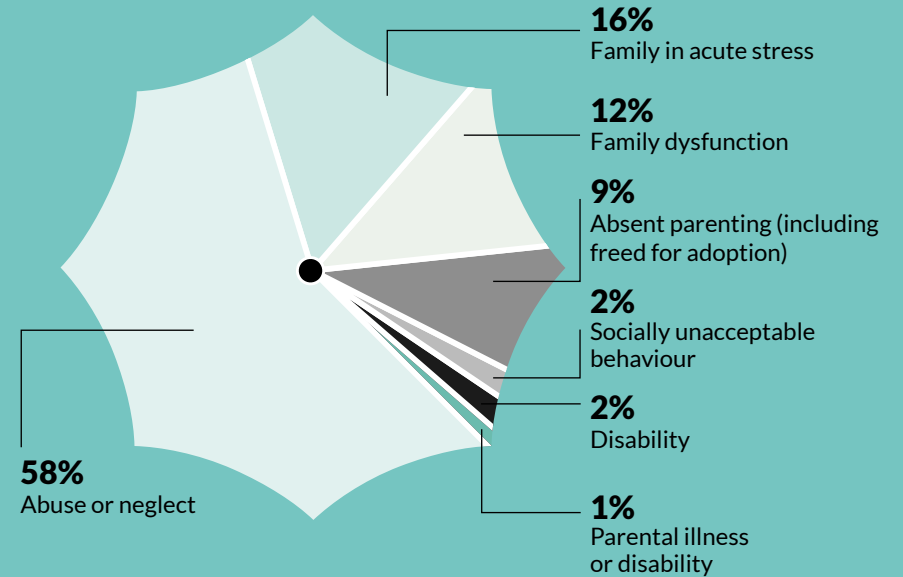
Source: Department for Education, 2024



Percentage of children achieving Grade 4 or above in English and Maths at KS4. Figures from 2023, care experienced status based on 31 March 2023.

Reasons for entering care (Wales)

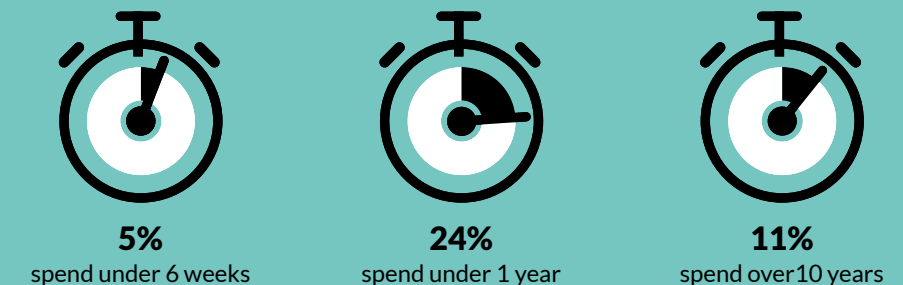
Source: Welsh Government, 2024



Time spent in care (Scotland)

The median time in care is 2-3 years.

Source: Scottish Government, 2024



Impact of funding cuts to preventative services for adolescents (England)



By 2019 an estimated 1,077 more adolescents became care experienced than would have if funding remained at 2011 levels.

Each £10 per child decrease in funding was associated with an extra 1.9 per 100,000 16-17 year olds entering care the following year.

Bennett, D. L., Webb, C. J. R., Mason, K. E., Schlüter, D. K., Fahy, K., Alexiou, A., Wickham, S., Barr, B., & Taylor-Robinson, D. (2021). Funding for preventative Children's Services and rates of children becoming looked after: A natural experiment using longitudinal area-level data in England. Children and Youth Services Review, 131, 106289.



Before care

Understanding the factors that lead children into care is crucial for effective policymaking. Recent research from Northern Ireland sheds light on this complex issue, revealing significant and growing inequalities in child welfare involvement.



Changing trends in child welfare inequalities in Northern Ireland

Lisa Bunting, Nicole Gleghorne, Aideen Maguire, Sarah McKenna and Dermot O'Reilly

School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work (SSESW), Queen's University Belfast, UK

British Journal of Social Work (2024) 54, 1809–1829

Lisa Bunting and colleagues at Queen's University Belfast have analysed linked administrative data to examine how area-level deprivation influences children's trajectories into care. Their study, *Changing Trends in Child Welfare Inequalities in Northern Ireland*, offers a comprehensive analysis of trends from 2010 to 2020, uncovering a clear and widening social gradient in child welfare interventions. By 2020, children from the most deprived areas were nine times more likely to enter care.

The findings illustrate how a child's postcode can dramatically affect their chances of entering care. In 2010, children from the most deprived 10% of areas were four times more likely to enter care than those from the least deprived 10%. By 2020, this disparity had more than doubled, with children from the most deprived areas being nine times more likely to enter care. In the most deprived areas, the numbers of children in care were double the average in Northern Ireland, in the most recent 2020 data.

The widening inequality in rates of care entry was especially pronounced in the 0-4 age group. These patterns of inequality and the contribution of

By 2020, children from the most deprived areas were nine times more likely to enter care.

the younger cohort were also found across other measures besides care entry, such as referrals to children's social care, child protection investigations, and child protection registrations.

These growing disparities have persisted despite policy efforts to reduce the number of children in care, suggesting that broader socioeconomic factors play a significant role. The researchers hypothesise that austerity measures and reductions in public services have disproportionately impacted families in deprived communities, potentially driving the observed patterns.

For policymakers, this research highlights the need to more explicitly address poverty and material deprivation within child protection strategies. It suggests that targeted support for families in the most deprived areas should be prioritised, and that regular monitoring of social care data by deprivation level could help track and address inequalities over time. This study demonstrates the value of linking administrative data in uncovering systemic issues that may not be apparent from aggregate statistics alone.

Engagement

This work was presented to a stakeholder group of senior policy leads in NI Department of Health, SPPG and SBNI, as well as relevant charities and academics, and to Prof Ray Jones as part of his Independent Review of Children's Services in NI.

Featured dataset

[Social Services Client Administration and Retrieval Environment](#)

During care

As children enter and journey through care, the inequalities that shaped their entry often continue to influence their experiences and outcomes. The studies in this section delve into these varied trajectories, starting with a Welsh study from the Born into Care series.

In England, placement stability improved for children aged 1–4 years

38% born in 1992 had more than one placement



14% born in 2008 had more than one placement



Grath-Lone, L. M., Dearden, L., Nasim, B., Harron, K., & Gilbert, R. (2015). Changes in first entry to out-of-home care from 1992 to 2012 among children in England: Analysis of Administrative Data. *The Lancet*, 386. doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(15)00893-4.

Born into care: Understanding care pathways and placement stability for infants in Wales

Laura Cowley, Laura North, Karen Broadhurst, Stefanie Doebler, Bachar Alrouh, Linda Cusworth, Mariam Abouelenin and Lucy Griffiths

Swansea/Lancaster: Family Justice Data Partnership

A key concern raised by the President of the Family Division's Public Law Working Group in 2021, centred on the different routes children enter care. Children can enter care through voluntary agreements with parents, or can enter care on a compulsory basis through care proceedings. For the first time, and given access to Children Looked After data in Wales, researchers were able to compare pathways into care for infants, based on records spanning 18 years (2003-2021) for 6,333 infants.

The study revealed rising numbers of infants entering care across Wales, with significant regional variations. Newborns, defined as those less than two weeks old, consistently comprised the largest proportion of infants entering care each year, accounting for 38% over the period. A clear relationship emerged between care entry rates and area-level deprivation, highlighting the complex interplay between socioeconomic factors and child welfare interventions.

Significant differences in care entry routes were observed across Wales. While voluntary agreements were initially most common, by 2020-21 court orders became equally prevalent. What's interesting is how this varied considerably between areas, suggesting local practices often influence care entry routes, more than defined needs of infants and families.

The study found that 63% of voluntary arrangements became compulsory (care proceedings were issued)

within two years, a trend occurring more frequently and rapidly over time. Moreover, in approximately half of cases, care proceedings were issued within four weeks of an initial voluntary arrangement. Speaking directly to concerns raised by the Judiciary (as above), this finding raises important questions about whether a voluntary agreement with parents is appropriate, if in many cases, the local authority plans to rapidly issue care proceedings.

Local authorities are making greater use of compulsory routes into care rather than seeking voluntary arrangements with parents. However, there are marked differences between local authorities suggesting local practices have a considerable impact on the routes through which infants enter care.



Questions about the relative benefits of voluntary arrangements with parents or compulsory action, must of course be balanced with the critical issue of placement stability. Placement stability emerged as a concern in this Welsh study, with 30% of young infants experiencing three or more placements within two years. However, infants entering care through voluntary arrangements experienced fewer placements than those subject to care orders, challenging assumptions about the relative stability of different care entry methods.

This study is an excellent example of the role that administrative data research plays in filling evidence gaps, challenging assumptions, and providing a very clear steer regarding subsequent qualitative reviews of practice to uncover what lies behind the statistics.

Engagement

This work has been presented to local authorities in Wales and to Welsh Government. It has also been presented to the National Community of Practice (England and Wales) and shared with the Mr Justice Keehan, who led President of the Family Division's Public Law Working Group.

Featured datasets

Children Looked After data collected and maintained by Welsh Government and held in the SAIL Databank.
Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 dataset.

Growing up in kinship care

Joanna Soraghan and Robert Porter

Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, University of Strathclyde
Scottish Centre for Administrative Data Research

Kinship care, where a child is looked after by relatives or friends, has become the most common arrangement for children in care in Scotland with 34% living in kinship care arrangements as of 2023, up from 13% in 2006. This represents a major shift in policy and practice. However, usage of kinship care varies significantly across local authorities (from below 20% of children in care to over 50%). The reasons for this variation are not fully understood, but may reflect differences in local policies, resources, and attitudes towards family-based care.

The majority of kinship carers in Scotland are grandparents (72% – *Wijedasa, 2017*), often stepping in to care for children due to parental substance misuse, mental health issues, or domestic abuse. Many kinship carers face significant challenges in their role. They are more likely than the general population to have health problems (41%) and financial hardship is common, with 80% experiencing financial challenges that are related to their role as a carer (*Young & Hill, 2020*).

40% of children who live in kinship care have experienced no other type of care.

Despite the difficulties they face, kinship carers perform a vital role. Kinship care has clear benefits, often offering stability and good outcomes. Kinship care is often the first living arrangement organised by the local authority when a child's care and protection needs are identified. After a child or young person entered kinship



Kinship caring arrangements in Scotland

An estimated **9,000** children in Scotland, who were not looked after, were cared for by a friend or family member in 2011



At least an additional **4,000** are cared for in a formal kinship care setting



1 in 10 kinship care arrangements last for less than a month



1.6 in 10 kinship care arrangements last over 5 years



Soraghan, J., & Porter, R. (2024). *Growing up in kinship care*. CELCIS, University of Strathclyde, Scottish Centre for Administrative Data Research (SCADR).

care, 55% did not experience any other subsequent care arrangements, and on leaving care, 50% have a recorded destination of 'with friends and relatives'.

However, despite improvements over the last ten years, children with experience of kinship care continue to experience lower attendance rates, higher exclusion rates, and lower qualification attainment compared to the general population. Additionally, a higher proportion of children who have lived in kinship care (72% vs 31% general population) have additional support needs recorded.

These findings suggest that while kinship care arrangements offer many benefits, it is not a perfect solution. Kinship families require tailored assistance to ensure children can flourish within a context of often complex needs, and financial challenge. This assistance may include financial aid, peer support, and enhanced educational and mental health support. The insights gained from administrative data highlight areas where focused interventions could significantly improve outcomes for Scotland's increasing number of children who are growing up in kinship families.

Engagement

Emerging findings have been presented and discussed with key stakeholders, including the Kinship Care Advice Service for Scotland, Social Work Scotland, and the Scottish Government. ADR Scotland's [children's engagement pilot](#) led by Children in Scotland, explored with children and young people how best to communicate data research. We are committed to making our research findings accessible to children and young people and have created an [infocomic](#) and GIFs to help share this research.

Featured dataset

The Scottish Government's [Longitudinal Looked After Children](#).

Care experience, ethnicity and youth justice involvement: Key trends and policy implications

Katie Hunter, Brian Francis and Claire Fitzpatrick

ADR UK Policy Briefing

Dr Katie Hunter and colleagues have conducted the first large-scale analysis exploring the intersection of care experience, ethnicity and youth justice involvement in England. By using linked administrative data from the Ministry of Justice and Department for Education, they were able to examine the youth justice histories of approximately 2.3 million children born between 1996 and 1999.

The study revealed that one in three care experienced children received a youth caution or conviction between ages 10-17, compared to just one in 25 of their non-care experienced peers. This disparity was even more pronounced for certain ethnic minority groups, with 50% of care experienced children from the Roma or Gypsy community and 46% of care experienced Irish Traveller children having youth justice involvement.

The gap in youth justice involvement between care experienced and non-care experienced children widened over time (from seven times more likely to nine times more likely), particularly for some ethnic minority groups. Despite overall decreases in youth



Custodial sentences were at least eight times more common among care experienced children... with differences varying across ethnic groups.

justice involvement across all groups, the relative decrease was less pronounced for care experienced children compared with non-care experienced children, and for Black care experienced children compared with White care experienced children. This suggests diversionary measures to protect children from youth justice sanctions may not have equally benefitted all children.

Of those with youth justice involvement, care experienced children, on average, had four times the number of cautions or convictions than non-care experienced children (four vs one). Again, this was exacerbated for ethnic minority children. A significantly higher proportion of care experienced children also received custodial sentences, with this being twice as likely for Black and Mixed ethnicity care experienced children compared to their White counterparts.

These findings demonstrate the compounded disadvantage faced by children at the intersection

of the care and criminal justice systems, particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds. This analysis of linked administrative data gives weight to previous findings and recent inspections, highlighting the disadvantage these children face. The researchers noted the importance of understanding the context surrounding youth justice involvement to avoid reproducing harmful stereotypes.

To address these inequalities, the authors call for enhanced data collection and sharing, placing a statutory duty on local authorities to prevent unnecessary criminalisation, and promoting better understanding of children's specific needs across all youth justice agencies.

On a positive note, this research provides a robust evidence base for targeted interventions and policy changes that could significantly improve outcomes for potentially vulnerable young people.

Engagement

The project was partnered with the charity Barnardo's, who carried out complementary qualitative research with Black care experienced young people in prison. Using collaborative dissemination and engagement strategies, the project created a strong evidence base for challenging the disproportionate criminalisation of care experienced children and young people from different ethnic backgrounds. The researchers co-designed [an animation](#) which brought together findings from both projects.

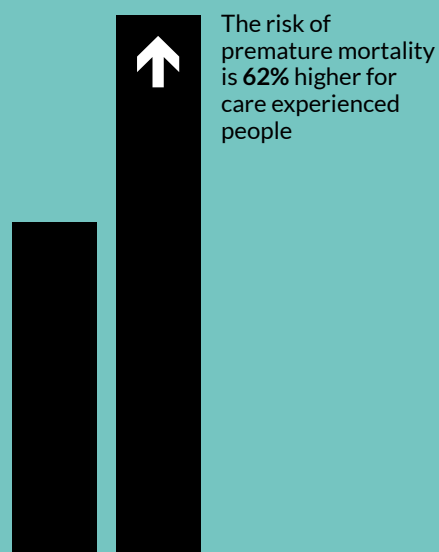
Featured dataset

[The Ministry of Justice & Department for Education linked dataset](#) - England.

Beyond care

The journey of care experienced individuals doesn't end when they leave care. Understanding the long-term outcomes for those who have had contact with social services is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions and identifying areas where ongoing support may be needed.

Premature mortality (England)



Sacker, A., Murray, E., Lacey, R., & Maughan, B. (2021). *The lifelong health and wellbeing trajectories of people who have been in care. Findings from the Looked-after Children Grown up Project.* University College London.

In the eight years after leaving school, care experienced children had different outcomes to the general population (England)

25% had never been in employment or education, compared to 4% among all school leavers



77% had received benefits at some point in those 8 years, compared to 21% among all school leavers



These statistics refer to a person's main activity in the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes dataset. Department for Education (2022). *Post-16 educational and employment outcomes of children in need.* Research report.

Childhood contact with social services and risk of suicide or sudden death in young adulthood: identifying hidden risk in a population-wide cohort study

Sarah McKenna, Dermot O'Reilly and Aideen Maguire

J Epidemiol Community Health 2024;78:47–53

This longitudinal study, by McKenna, O'Reilly and Maguire, which linked population-wide data across 12 years, provides important insights into the elevated risk of suicide and sudden death among young adults (aged 18-36 years) who had contact with social services as children in Northern Ireland. By linking de-identified GP practice registration data to children's social care records and the General Register Office death records, the researchers were able to compare mortality outcomes for 437,008 individuals born between 1985-1997 based on their level of social services involvement in childhood.

The study found that while only 11.7% of the cohort

had childhood social services contact, this group accounted for 35.3% of sudden deaths and 39.7% of suicide deaths in young adulthood. The risk of suicide or sudden death increased as the level of childhood social services contact increased, and was highest among care experienced young adults. These young adults had almost nine times the risk of death by suicide and over seven times the risk of sudden death compared to their peers with no social services contact in childhood.

The authors emphasise that their findings do not imply that increased mortality risk is a result of time spent in care, as many of these children likely

Engagement

This study is part of a wider programme of research being co-produced with care experienced young people who are members of the Data Research Advisory Group, co-facilitated by the Administrative Data Research Centre Northern Ireland and Voice of Young People in Care.

Featured datasets

The National Health Applications and Infrastructure Services database.

The Social Services Client Administration and Retrieval Environment system.

General Register Office death records.

experienced trauma and adversity prior to social services involvement that can have cumulative and lifelong impacts.

Poor outcomes are not inevitable, and care experienced young people working with the research team on the project stress the positive outcomes that can be achieved when children and young people have the right support. Key recommendations include cross-cutting policy to reduce negative impacts of early life adversity, and improved access to health and wellbeing services for children and adults with experience of care.

Young adults with a history of care had almost nine times the risk of death by suicide compared to their peers with no social services contact in childhood.

Summary

As this diverse showcase of research studies demonstrates, care experienced children and those born into care require a multi-pronged approach to receiving support that can truly enable them to flourish. The effective use of administrative data can produce greater understanding for researchers which in turn helps identify critical themes for policymakers, such as persistent inequalities, regional variation, evolving care practices and long-term impact. Research using administrative data has been critical in developing these insights.

Administrative data in this report tells us that:

- In Northern Ireland, inequality of entry into care is widening, with children from the most deprived areas nine times more likely to enter care.
- Over an eighteen-year period in Wales, there was shift in use away from voluntary arrangements and towards court orders, with 63% of voluntary arrangements becoming compulsory within two years.
- Kinship care in Scotland increased from 13% of care arrangements in 2006 to 34% in 2023. This arrangement has positives for children and young people but can be burdensome on carers and is not a panacea. Additionally, administrative data reveals that while there are 4,000 such children in Scotland, an additional 9,000 are ‘informally’

(i.e. not care-registered) in this arrangement.

- One in three care experienced children in England have received a youth caution or conviction and custodial sentences are at least eight times more common among care experienced children. This disparity was even more pronounced for certain ethnic minority groups.
- Increased contact with social services in childhood is correlated with increased risk of suicide or early death, with admin data useful in linking to such longer-term outcomes, whether negative or positive.

Researchers and policymakers alike know that poor outcomes are not inevitable with the right resources. A key strength of administrative data is the ability to produce data-driven insights to identify where more support is needed and pinpoint examples of success. Many care experienced children lead happy and fulfilled lives. Embedding administrative data into research and policy development will have real-world implications for care experienced children to ensure they all can thrive.

Administrative data is versatile, information-rich, and securely accessible for public good research. Working with government, researchers and the public, we must continue to make this data available to generate policy-relevant insights – and to ensure these insights are used to inform change and improve people’s lives.



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About ADR UK


ADR UK (Administrative Data Research UK) is a partnership transforming the way researchers access the UK's wealth of public sector data, to enable better informed policy decisions that improve people's lives. ADR UK is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), part of UK Research and Innovation.

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