

Data Explained

Children Looked After datasets

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Date: June 2023

This Data Explained summarises the content and potential uses of the Children Looked After (CLA) Census dataset. This is the primary dataset relating to children who are looked after in Wales (and its subsets: the adoptions of children looked after dataset; the care leavers aged 16 and over dataset; the care leavers at 19th birthday dataset; and the educational qualifications of care leavers dataset).

This paper aims to guide researchers who are interested in using these datasets to investigate the experiences of children and young people in care in Wales.

This Data Explained has been produced by researchers working together within the ADR Wales Social Justice team at Swansea University, the [Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre](#) (CASCADE) and the [Family Justice Data Partnership](#) (FJDP). It provides a snapshot of current learning about the CLA data. The information presented in this Data Explained has been reviewed by ADR Wales colleagues with expertise within this thematic area and is accepted to be

accurate at the point of publication. Views expressed in this Data Explained are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of ADR Wales partner organisations.

Introduction

In Wales, children's social care services are delivered at local government level, via local authorities. Local authorities are obligated to deliver to the Welsh Government yearly individual-level information about those who are supported by children's social services. The Welsh Government collect and maintain several datasets relating to children receiving services from social care, which includes those focusing on children who are looked after. These datasets contain rich situational and individual-level data items. The information collected in the CLA (formerly Looked After Children) Census dataset allows the trajectories of individual children through the care system to be objectively described in detail.

Subsets of the main CLA dataset also provide snapshots of information about the educational achievements of individual children, and their experiences upon leaving care if they are adopted or age out of the social care system. Each subset dataset must be linked to the main CLA Census dataset to retrieve child characteristics (week of birth, gender, anonymised linking field).

Structure of the datasets

1) Children Looked After Census dataset

At the time of writing, the CLA Census dataset within the Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) Databank spans from 1 April 2002 – 31 March 2021 and the data continues to be collected annually. Its purpose is to provide a complete record of all individual 'episodes' of care that a child has experienced throughout a year and record any changes in the child's placement and legal status. The data available for this period consists of approximately 310,550 recorded episodes, reflecting data for 37,775 unique children.

This dataset has an 'episodic' structure, with the period during which a child is looked after by the local authority being broken down into 'episodes' of care. An episode is when a child is in the care of a local authority for more than 24 hours. A new episode begins every time a child starts to be looked after; there is a change in the child's legal status; and/or the child's placement changes. Episodes are recorded in consecutive date order. Where episodes are consecutive, the new episode will start on the same day as the previous episode finished. A 'period' of care may consist of only one 'episode' or may consist of multiple episodes.

If an episode of care is still open on 31 March in a census year, then the episode end date and the reason for the end of the episode are left blank, and the following year's record starts with the same episode details. In cases where an open episode of care continues unchanged from year-to-year, a record is still submitted every year for that child. These are essentially duplicates of the episodes recorded in the previous year(s). Therefore, it is necessary to remove duplicate records and restructure the data, so that episodes of care for each child can be properly sequenced.

Variables available within the main CLA Census dataset include:

- Child characteristics:
 - Gender (pre-2016, child sex was recorded, recent collections record child gender identity at the census date)
 - Unique Pupil Number (UPN), predominantly recorded for children aged over four years old
 - Ethnicity (broader categories used following the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014))
 - Disability status
 - Asylum-seeking status
 - Week of birth
 - Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) of home postcode (for anonymisation reasons)
 - Local authority responsible for the child.
- Care episodes:
 - Episode start date
 - Episode end date
 - Reason for episode starting
 - Reason for episode finishing
 - Category of need (most relevant category, recorded at the beginning of each care period)
 - Legal status
 - Placement type
 - LSOA of placement postcode (for anonymisation reasons).

2) Adoptions of children looked after dataset

At the time of writing, this dataset includes details of all adoptions of children looked after in Wales from 1 April 2002 – 31 March 2021 and is continuously updated each year. There are 5,255 records for 5,240 children.

Variables include the date that the local authority decided adoption was in the child's best interests; the date that the child was matched with prospective adoptive parents; the date of placement for adoption; and the date that the child was adopted and ceased to be looked after. This dataset also records information about the characteristics of the adopter(s), including gender; the number of adopters; their legal status (i.e. marital status); and their ethnicity. There is also a flag to indicate whether the child has been adopted by their former foster carers.

3) Care leavers aged 16 and over dataset

This dataset includes all children who ceased to be looked after during a collection year if they were aged 16 years or older at the time of care ending, and currently covers 1 April 2016 – 31 March 2021. Only the last date that care ceased is included. There are 3,315 records reflecting 3,240 individual children. There are more records than children because a small minority of

children in this dataset leave care in one financial year, and return to care in the next financial year, following a brief being of not being looked after.

This dataset contains information about whether the care leaver was assigned a personal adviser or 'Pathway Plan' (setting out needs, views, future goals and support), if they were eligible; the type of accommodation they were living in on the census date; and the suitability of the accommodation.

4) Care leavers at 19th birthday dataset

This dataset includes all care leavers who turned 19 years old between 1 April 2002 and 31 March 2016. There are 4,940 records for 4,890 children. This dataset is no longer updated.

Information recorded in this dataset includes whether the care leaver was in contact with the local authority responsible for them when they left care; their involvement in employment, education, or training activities; and the type and suitability of their accommodation.

5) Educational qualifications of care leavers dataset

This dataset includes all children who ceased to be looked after during a collection year if they were aged 16 years or older at the time of care ending, and covers 1 April 2002 – 31 March 2016. There are approximately 7,150 records reflecting 7,080 individual children. This dataset is no longer updated.

The main purpose of this dataset was to record the qualifications that care leavers had gained at the point they ceased to be looked after. Variables include the number of GCSEs attained, by grade range; the number of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) attained; the number of other educational and vocational qualifications attained; and, if no qualifications were attained, the reason for this (such as illness or disability). Although this dataset is no longer updated, it is possible to retrieve information about the number of GCSEs attained by an individual and the grades they achieved in each subject. This is done by linking to the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) dataset, using the Anonymised Linking Field (ALF) or the Individual Record Number (IRN) from the primary CLA Census dataset.

Data limitations

One significant limitation of the CLA Census dataset is the lack of routinely collected information on the individual-level socioeconomic circumstances of children and families requiring state intervention. Such information would provide a more holistic picture of the circumstances and backgrounds of the children who require care.

A further limitation is that the data do not contain information about children post-adoption. When an adoption order is granted, a child's identifiers are changed. This includes their User

Principal Name, unique ID within a local authority, and their NHS number. The impact of this change on the SAIL ALF and the ability to link pre- and post-adoption records is currently unknown, but it is likely that it will not be possible to investigate incidence of return to care, or the educational outcomes of this group.

As with most administrative datasets there is some missing information relating to, for example, home and placement postcodes, primarily of those in older years. There is also some variation in recording between local authorities, and local authority child identifiers do not continue with the child if the responsibility for their care is transferred to another local authority. This can make it challenging to link records for individual children who have this experience. Researchers can mitigate this by using the Individual Record Number and the SAIL ALF to identify children who have multiple local authority identifiers and reunify their care records. In addition, this means that it is necessary to use both the child and the local authority identifiers for each child in order to track individual children within the CLA data.

For the CLA return, local authorities are required to choose only one 'category of need' code from a list that best describes the main reason for the child receiving care at the time the period of being looked after began. This code remains the same for as long as the period of care continues. Therefore, it is not possible to examine whether children enter care for multiple reasons, or to determine whether their reasons for being in care change over time, unless they exit and re-enter the care system.

Researchers within SAIL Databank at Swansea University continue to complete data quality checks to aid further use of the data for all.

Suggested future data linkages

Existing research using administrative records for children looked after in Wales is limited (Allnatt, Elliott et al. 2022; Bywaters et al. 2020; Hodges & Bristow 2019; Hodges 2020a, 2020b; Elliott 2020). However, this is a growing field of enquiry. There is huge potential to explore a range of issues relating to children's social care through data linkage. Administrative data can be used to understand who comes into the care system and what happens to them before, during, and after leaving care. Linkage to other datasets is crucial for understanding short and long-term outcomes for children looked after across several fields (Jay et al. 2017).

Within SAIL Databank, the CLA data can be anonymously linked to a range of other sources of information, such as the additional children's social care datasets ('Children in Need' and 'Children Receiving Care and Support'; Lee et al. 2022), and health, education, family justice, and forthcoming Ministry of Justice data.

Evidence derived from such work could be used to identify where system improvements are needed and inform recommendations for policy and practice.

Existing research using these data

Analysis of routinely collected administrative data for research purposes is a growing field of enquiry. The Welsh children's social care data has rapidly generated interest among researchers keen to access it for different projects and who have applied to SAIL Databank for access. For example, work is currently underway within the Family Justice Data Partnership to examine pathways for children who enter the care system as infants and those who enter as adolescents, respectively. Other research funded by Health and Care Research Wales is investigating educational outcomes for care-experienced children and young people (Lowthian and Crick, Swansea University); the relationship between household risk factors and children's entry into care (Warner, Cardiff University); and ethnic and religious inequalities in children social services: patterns and outcomes (Cheung, Cardiff University).

Other researchers making use of routinely collected English children's social care data for research purposes can be found at [Education and Child Health Insights from Linked Data](#) (ECHILD).

Recommendations

We recommend that attention should be given to the consistency in recording and reporting practices across Welsh local authorities. Although Welsh Government issue guidance for local authorities on completing the CLA data return and undertake extensive validation checks and queries on the data, some variation remains and inaccuracies persist. This is a feature of administrative data that is not collected solely for research purposes.

Nevertheless, standardising the reporting criteria across local authorities does allow for more reliable comparisons to be made. We also outline the benefit of including a flag for socioeconomic status of families in the dataset to provide a fuller picture of the circumstances in which children and young people come into care.

Finally, given the complexities of the data, study designs need to consider the limitations and specific characteristics of the children's social care datasets.

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Disclaimer

Acquisition of the CLA data by the Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) Databank was supported by colleagues within ADR Wales. Swansea University's partnership with the CASCADE, at Cardiff, has supported the development and publication of the related data resource profile (Allnatt, Lee et al. 2022). The data comes from Welsh Government and can be accessed through SAIL Databank. These datasets were not originally collected for research purposes although they are now recognised as valuable resources to answer a variety of research questions on children's social care.

Due to the sensitive nature of the data, all research applications to access data within SAIL Databank are reviewed by an independent Information Governance Review Panel (IGRP). This process includes consideration by Welsh Government, to ensure that the research is an appropriate use of the data and is for the public benefit. The IGRP includes representatives from professional and regulatory bodies, data providers and the general public.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Welsh Government and local authorities for collecting the Children Looked After data and allowing researchers to access it.

This research has been carried out as part of the ADR Wales programme of work, as part of the Social Justice thematic research area. The thematic research areas are aligned to the priority themes as identified in the Welsh Government's Programme for Government. ADR Wales brings together data science experts at Swansea University Medical School, staff from the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data (WISERD) at Cardiff University and specialist teams within the Welsh Government to develop new evidence which supports the Programme for Government by using the SAIL Databank at Swansea University, to link and analyse anonymised data. ADR Wales is part of the Economic and Social Research Council (part of UK Research and Innovation)-funded Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK).

This work is supported by ADR UK. ADR 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.

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