

Growing Up in Kinship Care: Findings relating to children and young people's experiences of kinship care in Scotland

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Date: August 2024

This Data Insight explores the experiences of children and young people in Scotland who have spent time living with a family member or family friend while in care – known as 'kinship care'. The Growing Up in Kinship Care study makes use of the Scottish Government's Longitudinal Looked After Children dataset.

While this Data Insight focuses solely on the children and young people's experiences of being in care, analysis is currently underway on linked data for these children from health, education and child protection. Full findings will be published in September 2024.

What we did

The key dataset for this research is the Scottish Government's Longitudinal Looked After Children (CLAS) dataset, which contains information on the care experiences of all children and young people who have been 'looked after' by one of Scotland's 32 local authorities from 2008/09 until 2018/19. The dataset contains details of the dates that a child was in care, the type of environment(s) they lived in (e.g. with foster carers, with friends and relatives, in residential care), and the legal reason for them being in care, amongst other information. Further details on the dataset are

Background

When a child is unable to remain at home with their parents for any reason, they may become 'looked after' by their local authority. The latest published figures recorded that there were 12,206 children in Scotland who are 'looked after'¹, and who are cared for under different arrangements such as living with a foster family or in residential care. Some 'looked after' children also live at home with their parent(s), with the local authority taking responsibility to provide support and supervision to the child and their family. A 'looked after' child may also be cared for by a member of their extended family or a family friend – this is known as kinship care.

Where it is not in a child's best interests to live at home with their parents, national policy and guidance in Scotland states that care within their wider family and community circle, supported by social work services, should be the first option explored².

This has led to a substantial increase in the proportion of children in care who are living with kinship carers throughout recent years – from around 1 in 8 in 2006 to more than 1 in 3 in 2023. As the proportion of 'looked after' children living with kinship carers continues to rise, it is important that we better understand their experiences and outcomes in order to ensure that their needs can be met.

available in this [Data Explained](#) document published by Soraghan and Raab.

There are approximately 19,000 children and young people within the dataset who have been recorded as having lived with kinship carers at some point in time. The records for these children were extracted from the CLAS dataset, and were then linked to records for the same children across education, Children’s Hearings, child protection and health visiting datasets.

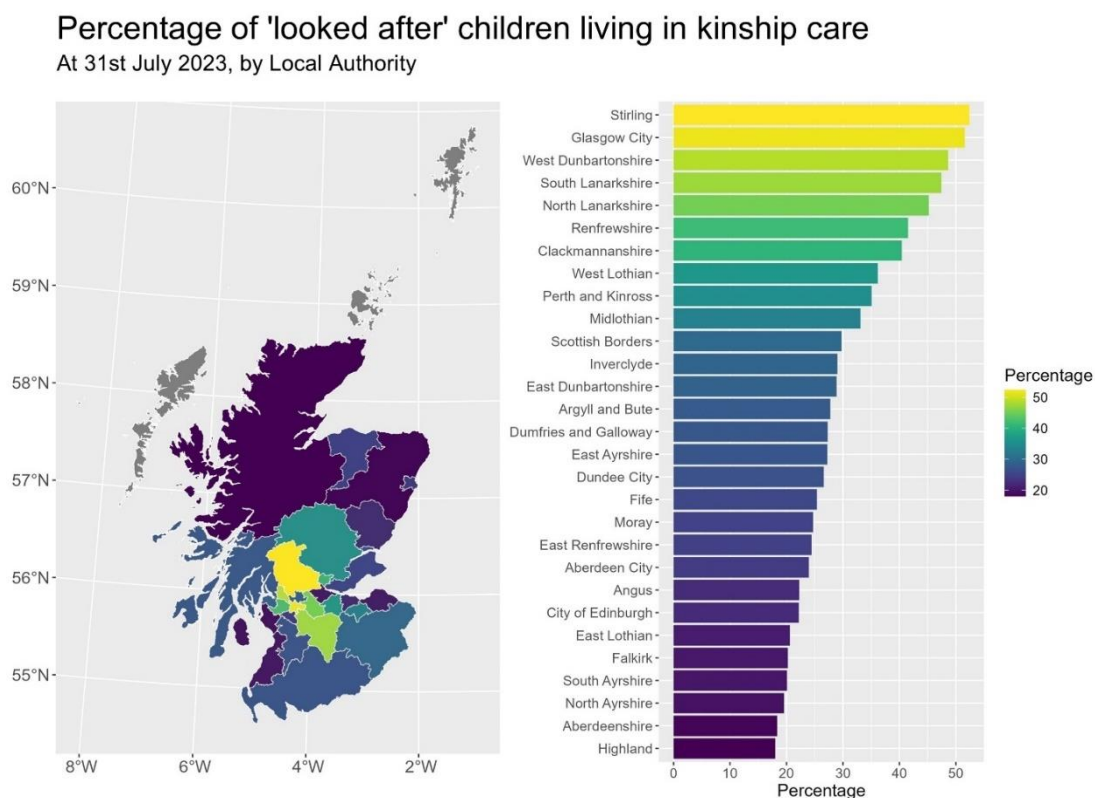
This Data Insight presents the results of a descriptive analysis of the data on these children’s care experiences that is contained within the CLAS dataset.

What we found

Variation across Scotland

We found that there were differences across Scotland’s local authorities in terms of how likely a ‘looked after’ child was to be living in kinship care. This ranged from less than 20% of children in care in North Ayrshire, Aberdeenshire and Highland, to over 50% in both Glasgow and Stirling. We found evidence of a moderate relationship between deprivation and the likelihood of a child in care living with kinship carers, with higher proportions of children living with family members and friends in more deprived areas.

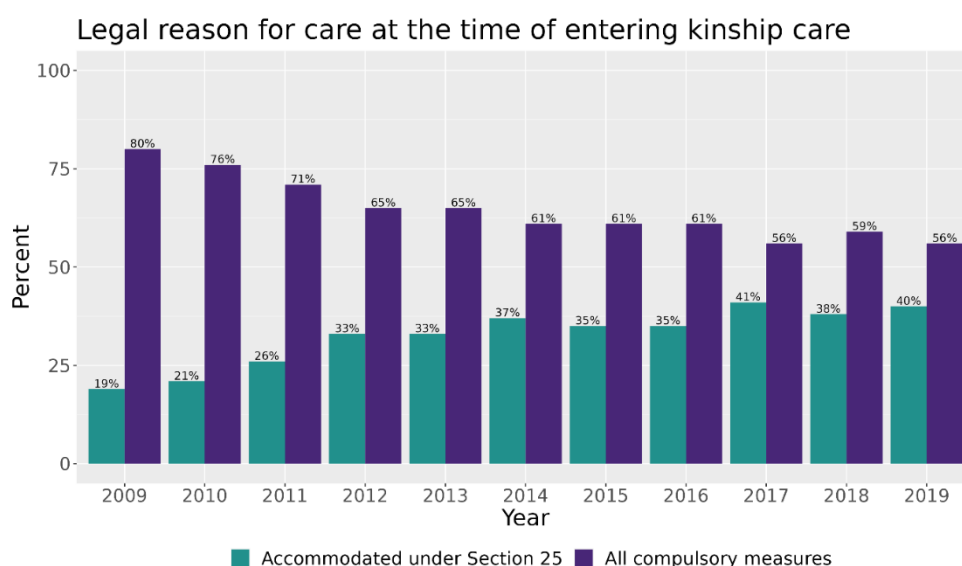
Figure 1: The percentage of ‘looked after’ children who are living in kinship care as of 31st July 2023, by local authority.



Legal basis for children and young people living in kinship care

When children come into care in Scotland, there must be legal basis in place for this. These bases include a range of compulsory orders, such as a Compulsory Supervision Order, or a Child Protection Order, as well as Section 25 arrangements, which are sometimes known as ‘voluntary’ care arrangements. Our analysis found that it has become more common over the period studied for children to be cared for in kinship care under Section 25 arrangements. As a proportion this has more than doubled between 2009 and 2019, going from 19% of kinship care placements to 40%. We also found that Section 25 arrangements are more commonly used for children living in kinship care than they are for other types of care placements.

Figure 2. The legal basis that was recorded for a child being ‘looked after’ at the point of them going to live with a kinship carer, by year.



Of those who came into care under Section 25 arrangements and lived directly with kinship carers (n=5185), 76% remained living under these arrangements throughout their time in kinship care.

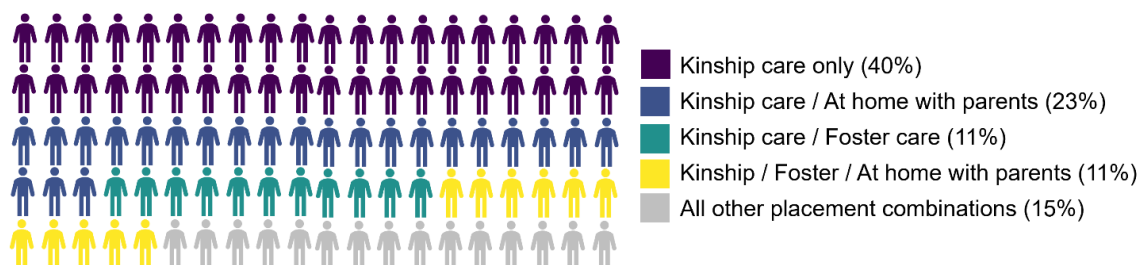
Types of care settings experienced

Of the approximately 19,000 children who had experienced kinship care at any point, it was most common for children and young people to have only experienced kinship care (40%), with a combination of kinship care and time spent ‘looked after at home’ with their parents being the next most common combination (23%). This means that only around 1 in 3 children (37%) who lived in kinship care also spent time in a care environment where people outside of their family network were providing their care.

Our analysis also found that 2 in 3 children (66%) who experienced kinship care had moved directly into kinship care at the point at which they became ‘looked after’.

Figure 3. The combinations of placements experienced by the children and young people who had experienced kinship care throughout their time in care

Combinations of placements experienced by children who spent time in kinship care
(n=19,109)



Length of time spent in kinship care

The average length of kinship placement was around 1 year and 4 months but there was great variation within this. Children who had come into kinship care under a Compulsory Supervision Order tended to experience longer placements than those coming into care under Section 25 arrangements, and there were significant differences in average placement length seen across Scotland's local authorities.

We found that kinship care can be used as either a short-term or long-term solution to provide for the needs of children and families. Around 1 in 10 placements (9%) lasted less than one month, while 1 in every 6 placements (16%) lasted for more than 5 years.

Leaving kinship care

Looking across the period from 2008 to 2019, there were approximately 21,500 completed kinship placements. In 48% of these placements the child left care directly after living with kinship carers. In the other 52%, the child moved to another care environment and remained 'looked after' by the local authority.

We found that, after leaving kinship care, most children either lived with family members or friends, or returned to live with their birth parent(s). This was true both when a kinship care arrangement ended due to the child leaving care, or when it ended due to them moving to a new care environment.

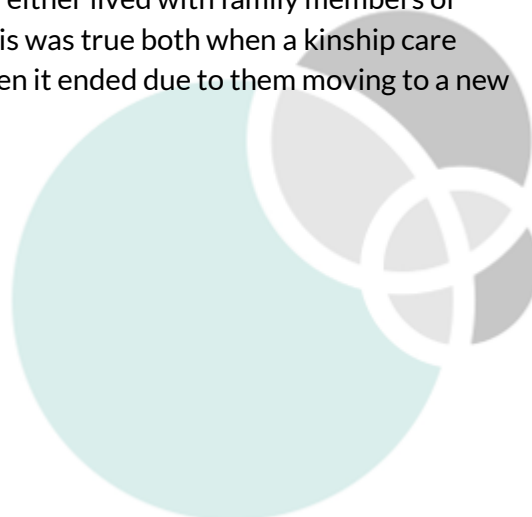


Figure 4. The type of placement that children and young people moved into when they left a kinship placement but remained 'looked after'.

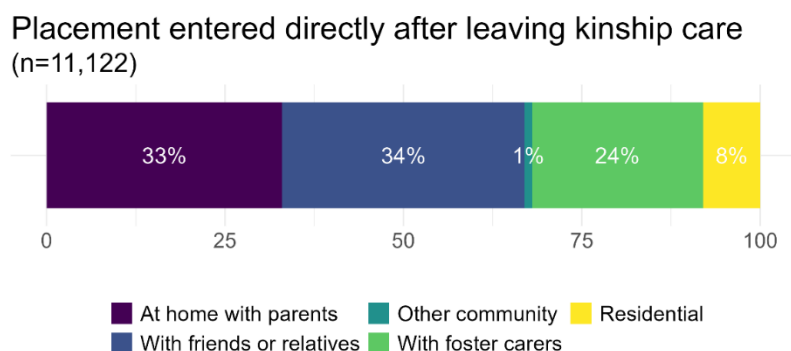
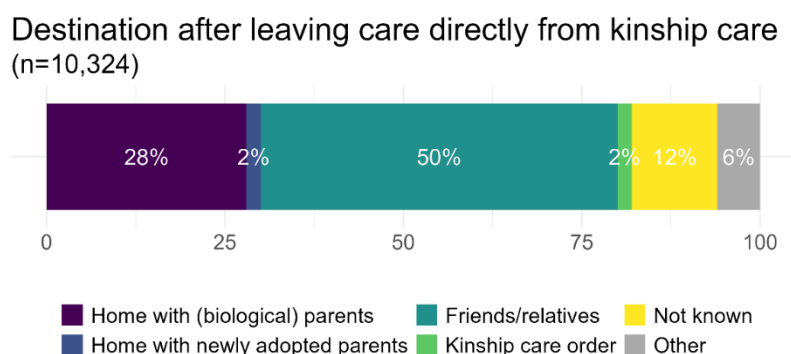


Figure 5. The recorded destination for children and young people upon leaving care directly from kinship care.



Why it matters

The findings presented here provide new insights into the experiences of children and young people who have spent time living with kinship carers while 'looked after' in Scotland. We found that kinship options for a child tend to be explored early on in their time in care. We also found that most 'looked after' children who spend time in kinship care are only cared for within their wider family and friend network, with only 37% of the children in our sample having experienced care away from home with carers who were previously unknown to them. In addition, the analysis has shown that most children and young people continued to live with family members, friends or birth parents after their experience of kinship care.

The research also evidenced a high degree of regional variation in children's experiences of kinship care across Scotland. It is important that this variation is further explored to ensure that kinship families are supported appropriately no matter where they live.

As the proportion of children who are living with kinship carers increases, it is important that their experiences are understood, and that efforts are made to determine how well this type of arrangement works for children, young people and families. We hope that the evidence presented can aid policymakers and practitioners alike in their work to support kinship families and ensure that all children are provided with the opportunities and support that they need and deserve in order to live happy, healthy and fulfilled lives.

What next?

The next phase of the research will make use of the linked data available for these children from education, health, child protection and Children's Hearings. This data will enable us to gain insights regarding the lives of these children and young people beyond their experiences of care, and will allow us to determine where challenges exist and what additional supports may be beneficial for Scotland's kinship families. This analysis is currently underway, and full findings of the research will be published in September 2024.

References

1. Scottish Government (2024). Children's Social Work Statistics 2022-23 – Looked After Children. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/childrens-social-work-statistics-2022-23-looked-after-children/>
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3. Soraghan, J. & Raab, G. (2023). Data Explained: Scottish Government's Looked After Children Longitudinal Dataset. ADR Scotland. Available at: https://www.adruk.org/fileadmin/uploads/adruk/Documents/Data_Explained/Data_Explained_Scottish_Government_Looked_After_Children_Longitudinal_Dataset_April_2023.pdf

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the contribution and support of:

- ADR UK
- Electronic Data Research and Innovation Service (eDRIS) and Public Health Scotland (PHS)
- Scottish Government – Education Analytical Services (EAS)
- National Records Scotland (NRS)
- Edinburgh Parallel Computing Centre (EPCC)
- Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration (SCRA)
- Scottish Centre for Administrative Data Research (SCADR)
- CELCIS, University of Strathclyde

About ADR Scotland

ADR Scotland is a partnership between the Scottish Centre for Administrative Data Research (SCADR) and Scottish Government's Data for Research, Platforms and Legislation Unit. It is funded by UKRI/ESRC, as part of the ADR UK (Administrative Data Research UK) partnership. Our vision is that research and data linkage are valued and used effectively to deliver benefits for the people of Scotland.

Working alongside our delivery bodies (RDS, PHS, EPCC and NRS) we aim to create insights primarily about the Scottish population and their communities; prioritising children's lives and outcomes, lifelong health and wellbeing, health and social care, poverty and fair work, and building safer communities. Our investment in improving access to administrative data and investing in data linkage infrastructure and capacity, enables vital research to be carried out, to better inform policy and public services utilising Scotland’s wealth of public sector data.

About 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. By linking together data held by different parts of government and facilitation safe and secure access for accredited researchers to these newly joined-up and de-identified data sets, ADR UK is creating a sustainable body of knowledge about how our society and economy function – tailored to give decision makers the answers they need to solve important policy questions.

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