

Statistics briefing: children in care

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

November 2024

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 children in care, 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.

Who are children in care?

A child who has been in the care of their local authority for more than 24 hours is legally 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, a term which children often prefer. Both terms are used interchangeably in this briefing.

- [Find out more about children in care on NSPCC Learning](#)
- [Read our blog Why language matters: why you should avoid the acronym 'LAC' when talking about children in care](#)

What data is available?

Data about children in care 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 children in care, including gender, ethnicity and age

- the types of care looked after children experience, including the type and number of placements
- the outcomes for children in care, including health and education
- 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 2022/23 there were approximately 107,000 looked after children in the UK. In the last five years the population of looked after children in the UK has increased by 8%, from 99,428 to 107,057. 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**, 83,840 children were looked after in 2023. The number of looked after children has increased every year since 2008.
- In **Northern Ireland**, the number of looked after children was 3,801 in 2023. The highest recorded since the introduction of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.
- In **Wales**, slightly increased from 7,055 in 2022 to 7,210 in 2023.

(Sources: Department for Education (DfE), 2023a; Department of Health Northern Ireland (DoHNI), 2023; Welsh Government, 2024a)

In contrast, number of looked after children in **Scotland** have shown a decline from last year:

- In **Scotland**, the number of looked after children is down to 12,206 in 2023, from 12,447 in 2022.

(Source: Scottish Government, 2024)

The number of looked after children is growing faster than that of the UK child population. In the last five years, there has been an increase from 71.6 to 76.7 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 2023	N. Ireland 31 March 2023	Scotland 31 July 2023	Wales 31 March 2023
Rate of looked after children per 10,000 of the under-18 population	70.5	87.0	121.3	116.4

(Sources: DfE, 2023a; DoHNI, 2023; Scottish Government, 2024; Welsh Government, 2024a, Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2024)

This is partly due to differences between the nations around when children are counted as being 'in care'. 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 2023	N. Ireland 31 March 2023	Scotland 31 July 2023	Wales 31 March 2023
Proportion of looked after children that are male	57%	53%	54%	54%

Proportion of under-18 population that is male	51%	51%	51%	51%
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(Sources: DfE, 2023a; DoHNI, 2023; Scottish Government, 2024; Welsh Government, 2024a; ONS, 2023)

b) Black or of mixed ethnicity

	England 31 March 2023	N. Ireland 30 September 2023	Scotland 31 July 2023	Wales 31 March 2023
Proportion of looked after children that are Black	7.1%	1.4%	1.1%	1.6%
Proportion of under-18 population that is Black (under-20 for Scotland) ²	5.7%	0.8%	0.9%	1.3%
Proportion of looked after children of mixed ethnicity	10.5%	N/A	1.9%	4.3%
Proportion of under-18 population of mixed ethnicity (under-20 for Scotland) ²	6.8%	N/A	0.9%	3.6%

(Sources: DfE, 2023a; DoHNI, 2024; Scottish Government, 2024; Welsh Government, 2024b; ONS, 2023)

² Data for the population of England and Wales is from 2021, when the last census took place. Scotland is still using 2011 census data for their ethnicity breakdown.

Data is not available for the proportion of looked after children that are of mixed ethnicity in **Northern Ireland**.

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

a) female

	England 31 March 2023	N. Ireland 31 March 2023	Scotland 31 July 2023	Wales 31 March 2023
Proportion of looked after children that are female	43%	47%	46%	46%
Proportion of under-18 population that is female	49%	49%	49%	49%

(Sources: DfE, 2023a; DoHNI, 2023; Scottish Government, 2024; Welsh Government, 2024a; ONS, 2024)

b) Asian or White

	England 31 March 2023	N. Ireland 30 September 2023	Scotland 31 July 2023	Wales 31 March 2023
Proportion of looked after children that are from an Asian background	5.3%	N/A	1.1%	2.5%
Proportion of under-18 population that is from an Asian background (under-20 for Scotland) ³	12.3%	N/A	3.3%	3.7%

Proportion of looked after children that are White	71.3%	92.6%	81.6%	88.5%
Proportion of under-18 population that is White (under-20 for Scotland) ³	74.2%	95.1	94.5%	90.2%

(Sources: DfE, 2023a; DoHNI, 2024; Scottish Government, 2024; Welsh Government, 2024b; ONS, 2023)

³ Data for the population of England and Wales is from 2021, when the last census took place. Scotland is still using 2011 census data for their ethnicity breakdown.

Data is not available for the proportion of looked after children that are from an Asian background in **Northern Ireland**.

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 families from certain ethnicities. However, it is likely that many different factors interact to contribute to the differences (Ahmed, 2022).

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** 65% of looked after children were looked after due to abuse or neglect in 2022/23
- in **Wales** 65% of children receiving care and support who are were looked after were looked after due to abuse or neglect in 2022/23.

(Sources: DfE, 2023a; Welsh Government, 2024i)

Other reasons for being in care include:

- family dysfunction⁴ (England: 13%, Wales 15%)
- absent parenting (England: 9%, Wales: 3%)
- family in acute stress⁵ (England: 7%, Wales: 10%)
- child's disability or illness (England: 2%, Wales: 4%)
- parent's illness or disability (England: 2%, Wales: 2%)
- socially unacceptable behaviour (England: 1%, Wales: 2%)

(Sources: DfE, 2023a; Welsh Government, 2024i)

⁴ Family dysfunction - Children whose needs arise mainly out of their living with families where the parenting capacity is chronically inadequate (DfE, 2023a)

⁵ 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, 2023a).

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 children in care

Across the UK, the most common placement for children in care is living with foster carers.

	England 31 March 2023	N. Ireland 31 March 2023	Scotland 31 July 2023	Wales 31 March 2023

Proportion of looked after children in foster placements (includes kinship care)	68%	83%	66%	69%
Placement with parents	7%	8%	20%	14%
Residential accommodation ⁶	19%	6%	11%	10%
Other ⁷	6%	4%	z	7%

(Sources: DfE, 2023a; DoHNI, 2023; Scottish Government, 2024; Welsh Government, 2024c)

⁶ Includes secure units, children's homes, semi-independent living, residential schools and other residential settings

⁷ Includes prospective adopters and in the community

In **Scotland**, where the care system is significantly different to the rest of the UK, a large proportion of children in care (20%) 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 2023	Scotland 31 July 2023	Wales 31 March 2023⁸
Returned home to live with parents or relatives	27%	51%	35%
Adopted	9%	7%	13%
In the care of former foster/kinship carers	16%	27%	13%

Moved into independent/supported living arrangement	16%	7%	13%
Care taken by another local authority	4%	n/a	0%
Turned 18 years old and continuing to live with former foster parent(s) in a When I Am Ready arrangement	15%	n/a	10%
Other ⁹	12%	7%	12%

(Sources: DfE, 2023a; Scottish Government, 2024; Welsh Government, 2024d)

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

⁹ Not known is included in Other

In 2022/23, 51% 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 (20%) 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 (Ford and McKay, 2024).

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

In **England, Wales** and **Scotland** the majority of looked after children remained in the same placement last year (69-84%). However, a significant minority (around 4-11%) had three or more placements in the last year. Data for **Northern Ireland** is not published.

	England 31 March 2023	Scotland 31 July 2023	Wales 31 March 2023
Looked after children with three or more placements in the last 12 months	11%	4%	9%

(Sources: DfE, 2023a; Scottish Government, 2024; Welsh Government, 2024e.)

This measure is important because multiple care placements have been shown to have a significant impact on looked after children's wellbeing and are associated with poor education and employment outcomes when leaving care (MacAlister, 2022).

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 areas such as mental and physical health (MacAlister, 2022). However, this is not necessarily the case when compared with other groups of children who are likely to have had similar experiences, such as children in need.¹⁰ 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, some outcomes are collected across the UK, a selection of which are outlined below. This briefing also includes data on the mental health and wellbeing of looked after children which,

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

¹⁰ 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.

Children in care are more likely to have a mental health issue and have lower levels of wellbeing

England and **Wales** routinely collect and publish official data related to the mental health or wellbeing of children in care. In **Northern Ireland** one-off pieces of research provide some insight, whilst a review of available evidence in **Scotland** by the Independent Care Review found, “There is no national reporting on wellbeing for children and young people in care”.

In **England**, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) should be completed for every child looked after for at least 12 months and aged 5-16 as at the end of March. The questionnaire helps assess the emotional and behavioural health of children and identify any potential areas of concern.

Data from the DfE on findings from this questionnaire shows that:

- in 2023, 75% of the 43,390 looked after children who met the criteria had a SDQ score returned
- 40% of looked after children who received an SDQ score which was identified as a “cause for concern”, and a further 13% of scores were considered on the “borderline” of cause for concern.

(Source: DfE, 2024a)

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 children in care 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)

In **Wales**, the Young people 'looked after' briefing paper found that young people looked after have lower wellbeing and life satisfaction scores than those not in care. In terms of mental wellbeing, those in residential care had the lowest wellbeing score.

Adolescents were asked to appraise their life satisfaction from "0" being the worst possible life, and the top as "10" as the best possible life. For life satisfaction, 85% of young people not in care rated their life as being 6 or more, compared to:

- 72% in kinship care
- 71% in foster care
- 58% in residential care

(Source: DECIPHer, 2020)

The Welsh Government produces annual statistics on the mental health status of children receiving care and support by local authority. In 2023 it was reported that

625 looked after children were identified as having mental ill health, 16% of the 4,000 children for whom data was available.

(Source: Welsh Government, 2024j)

This measure is important because it highlights the need for mental health support for looked after children. If mental health and wellbeing 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).

Children in care are more likely to have additional or special educational needs

England, Wales and **Northern Ireland** all collect data on the number of looked after children with additional or special educational needs (SEN). Data is not available for **Scotland**. In **Scotland** the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 sets out that looked after children should be assumed to have Additional Support Needs (ASN) unless assessed otherwise.

	England 31 March 2023	Northern Ireland 2022/2023	Wales 31 March 2023
Percentage of looked after children with SEN ¹¹	31%	28%	13%
Percentage of the general child population with SEN	4%	7%	3%

(Sources: DfE, 2024a; DfE, 2024b; DoHNI, 2024; Department of Education (DoE), 2023; Welsh Government, 2024f; Welsh Government 2024g; Welsh Government, 2024h;)

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

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