

# THE BACKGROUNDS OF CHILDREN ENTERING PUBLIC CARE IN WALES

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This is a brief summary of my doctoral thesis:

Elliott, M. 2017. Looked-after children in Wales: An analysis of the backgrounds of children entering public care. PhD Thesis, Cardiff University.

A full version of which is available at:

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/110473/>

The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For decades, Wales has had rates<sup>†</sup> of children in care higher than those in England. The difference in rates between the two countries became more pronounced in the period around the death of Peter Connelly ('Baby P') and that level of difference continues today. Both the differences in rates of children in out of home care between England and Wales and the variation between Welsh authorities mean this is a policy area which requires urgent investigation in Wales.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the differences in care rates between local authorities in Wales and to understand what might be causing them. To do this, I analysed information about approximately 15,000 children who spent time in out of home care in Wales between 1 April 2008 and 31 March 2014. The study builds on previous research into the differences in the numbers of children who are looked after in Wales<sup>1</sup>.

My study found that:

- Between 2008 and 2014, children in Wales were on average one and a half times more likely to be looked after by local authorities than children in England. The local authority in Wales with the lowest rate had approximately double the rate of the local authority with the lowest rate in England. Welsh local authorities also make up a significant proportion of local authorities in England and Wales with the highest rates overall. In 2014 half of the local authorities with the 'top 10' highest rates for England and Wales were Welsh.
- However, this situation is not evenly spread across every age group. There are more very young children (birth to 4 years) and teenagers (14–16 years) entering care in Wales than might be expected, based on the overall number of children. At the same time, there are fewer children aged between five and 13 years being looked after than would perhaps be expected.
- There were also big differences in the local authorities work, for example, how they use

Special Guardianship Orders to bring an end to children being looked after. The local authority in Wales which used these type of orders most was nine times more likely to use them than the local authority with the lowest use.

- While there were a number of differences in how local authorities work and in the characteristics of the children themselves, only two of these differences were found to have an important influence on the overall rates of children in care. These differences were the age of the child and the 'predominant category of need' (the main reason why they were being taken into care).
- In general, local authorities with a higher proportion of younger children entering care between 2008 and 2014 were more likely to have higher rates of children in care overall, while the authorities with a higher proportion of teenagers had lower rates.
- Local authorities with a larger proportion of children whose predominant need was related to child abuse and neglect usually had higher rates of looked after children overall. In contrast, authorities with lower rates of children who are looked after tended to have more children with other categories of support needs. These categories included family in acute stress, family dysfunction, socially unacceptable behaviour, low income and absent parenting.
- There is a 'social gradient'<sup>2</sup> in the patterns of children entering care in Wales. When levels of neighbourhood deprivation increase, the likelihood of a child becoming looked after also increases. A child living in the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in Wales is almost 12 times more likely to be 'looked after' than children in the 10% least deprived neighbourhoods. This 'social gradient' remained the same throughout the time of the study, even when the data was analysed in different ways.
- Children were more likely to return to care if their initial stay had been for less than six months. Children and young people aged between 11–15 years were also more likely to return to care.

<sup>†</sup> The rate per 10,000 of the child population is worked out by dividing the number of children looked after under 18 by the total number of children under 18 in an area and multiplying that by 10,000

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## Recommendations

The study identified several recommendations for future policy and social work practice:

- Policymakers and practitioners need to pay greater attention to how poverty and financial insecurity affects children and the chance that they will be placed in care by local authorities. This area should be seen to be as important as differences as inequalities in health and in educational achievement.
- In Wales, one requirement of the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 is to prevent persistent problems such as poverty. The Act states that by “understanding the underlying causes of the problems people and communities face can help us find different solutions, intervene early and prevent problems from getting worse or arising in the future”. While there is an explicit focus on health inequalities within this legislation, equal weight should be given to preventing inequalities in child welfare.
- Like other research, my study shows that there are links between poverty and child abuse and neglect. We need to change our systems for collecting data to include information about the material circumstances of families who use local authorities’ services and support. This data would allow researchers, policy makers and practitioners to understand what happens to different households with different family circumstances, rather than a general understanding of different neighbourhoods. As well as collecting this data for families whose children have periods of being looked-after, this information should also be collected for children who are subject to child protection procedures and those identified in Wales as Children in Need (known since 2016 as Children in Need of Care and Support).
- Researchers need to make better use of the large amount of data available about social work and social care. We routinely collect data through the day-to-day business of local authorities’ data, and we could make better use of this in research studies. The network of Administrative Data Research Centres (ADRC) should help us to make better use of data, particularly in Wales.

## OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

There has been an unprecedented increase in recent years in the numbers of children in out of home care ('looked-after' children). Welsh local authorities have some of the highest rates of children in out of home care of local authorities across England and Wales. Whilst having rates generally much higher than those of English local authorities there are also significant differences between local authorities in Wales in the rates of children in care. Both the differences in rates of children in out of home care between England and Wales and the variation in rates between Welsh authorities clearly identify this as a policy area which requires urgent investigation in Wales.

To conduct this research, I used data about children and young people that is collected as part of the day-to-day business of local authorities<sup>††</sup>. The analysis undertaken was grouped into four main themes:

### The Overall Picture

For this analysis I used published data about the number of children being looked after for the twelve years between 2003 and 2014 in England and Wales. As well as data on children who are looked after, I also used information from the Children in Need census in Wales and financial information from local authority annual returns.

For the following three questions, I used the information about individual children who are looked after in Wales which is provided by local authorities every year. To access this information, I had to obtain approval from Welsh Government and put processes in place to make sure individual children could not be identified. The 'child-level' data I used for the study covered six years, from 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2014. It includes information about over 110,000 'episodes' of care in Wales during that time.

### Entries and Exits from Care

I used data relating to how individual children entered or left out of home care to find out whether there are differences between local

authorities in the following:

- How children and young people move in and out of the care system over time
- The main reasons for children becoming 'looked-after'? And differences in their legal status?
- The ages of the children entering, leaving and remaining in longer term care?
- Where children go when they cease to be looked after?

I was also interested in whether differences in the overall numbers of children in care in local authorities were related to any differences in the above.

### Child Welfare Inequalities

I then looked at a sample of almost 9000 'looked-after' children to find out whether there is:

- A relationship between relative deprivation and 'looked-after' children rates at a neighbourhood level
- Evidence of a 'social gradient' in rates of children 'looked-after' in Wales .

To do this, I used data on the deprivation levels of neighbourhoods from the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation<sup>†</sup>. The index is calculated using a range of information on neighbourhoods including income levels, employment, health, education, access to services and housing.

### Returns to Care

Finally, I analysed the child-level data to look at whether there were factors that predicted children who have experienced one period of being 'looked-after' returning to care.

<sup>†</sup>This type of data is referred to as 'administrative data' in research studies

<sup>†</sup> This data is taken from the SSDA903 returns made by local authorities in England and Wales about children who are looked after (now the looked after children census in Wales)

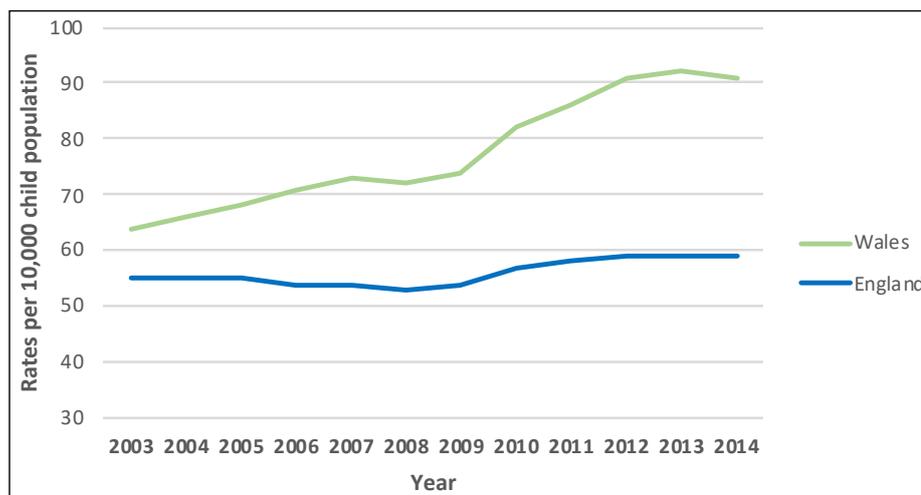
<sup>†</sup> See <https://gweddiill.gov.wales/statistics-and-research/welsh-index-multiple-deprivation/?lang=en>

## THE OVERALL PICTURE

### Comparing England and Wales

Throughout the 12 year period from 2003 - 2014, Wales had a higher rate of children looked-after per 10,000 than England as shown in Figure 1. In addition, the gap between Wales and England increased. In 2003 the rate in Wales was only nine children per 10,000 higher than that in England, but this gap had increased to between 32 and 33 children per 10,000 between 2012 and 2014 – this echoing the statements made by Mark Drakeford, the then Minister for Social Services and Health’s assertion, that children in Wales are on average 1.5 times more likely to enter public care than their peers in England<sup>3</sup>.

**Figure 1: Rates of children ‘looked after’ per 10,000 in England and Wales**



During the period from 2010 to 2014, there were between four and six Welsh local authorities in the ‘top ten’ authorities with the highest rates of children in care in England and Wales. In 2012 and 2013, when there were six Welsh authorities in the top ten, this meant that over a quarter of all Welsh authorities had one of the highest rates per 10,000 in England and Wales.

At the same time, the local authority with the lowest rate per 10,000 in Wales had a rate which was between 2 and 2.8 times higher than the equivalent authority in England. For example in 2013, whilst Richmond upon Thames had the lowest rate in England at 19 children who were looked-after per 10,000 child population, the

local authority with the lowest rate in Wales was Monmouthshire with a rate nearly three times higher (54 per 10,000 of the child population).

### Variations between Welsh local authorities

There were also big differences between the rates of children who were looked after between the 22 local authorities in Wales, as shown in Table 1. The average across Wales for each year is shown in the top row of the table. The rates for each local authority are then colour-coded to show whether they are lower than the Welsh average, the same, or higher. Some of the most striking differences include:

- While children in Monmouthshire were on average less likely to enter care than children in England throughout the whole period, children in Neath Port Talbot in 2003 were almost three times more likely to enter care than children in England.

- While there is a group of local authorities (Monmouthshire, Wrexham, Flintshire, Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion, and Carmarthenshire) which consistently had rates below the Welsh average, there are local authorities whose rates are consistently higher than the average (Neath Port Talbot, Torfaen, Merthyr Tydfil, Bridgend, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Blaenau Gwent).

- There are also authorities such as Caerphilly who appear to buck the trend of increasing rates in England and Wales. In 2003, Caerphilly had a rate of 70 children who were looked after per 10,000, which was six more than the Wales average. However, by 2014 Caerphilly had a rate of 71, which was 20 children per 10,000 lower than the average for Welsh local authorities.

**Table 1: Rates per 10,000 for Welsh Local Authorities 2003 - 2014**

Local Authority	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
<b>Wales</b>	64	66	68	71	73	72	74	82	86	91	92	91
<b>Isle of Anglesey</b>	34	38	45	49	53	54	51	55	59	66	59	55
<b>Gwynedd</b>	59	57	58	57	67	70	70	74	74	82	87	78
<b>Conwy</b>	70	50	59	62	64	74	72	77	75	82	76	76
<b>Denbighshire</b>	68	83	71	69	70	65	71	84	90	83	83	85
<b>Flintshire</b>	43	41	40	42	47	47	44	48	49	52	61	67
<b>Wrexham</b>	42	43	41	41	42	44	45	51	53	60	66	73
<b>Powys</b>	38	41	43	51	51	51	52	55	65	68	59	59
<b>Ceredigion</b>	47	51	52	45	49	53	53	58	63	63	60	60
<b>Pembrokeshire</b>	57	57	61	55	62	56	53	59	62	60	58	50
<b>Carmarthenshire</b>	44	40	41	46	47	50	58	65	69	72	72	66
<b>Swansea</b>	59	69	77	88	86	85	94	120	124	119	126	115
<b>Neath Port Talbot</b>	86	81	86	89	94	98	101	137	145	167	176	169
<b>Bridgend</b>	67	81	76	89	98	93	87	100	112	119	133	141
<b>The Vale of Glamorgan</b>	66	72	67	71	66	62	61	67	77	81	67	68
<b>Cardiff</b>	76	75	77	78	79	75	75	76	73	80	77	84
<b>Rhondda Cynon Taf</b>	74	79	73	86	86	89	87	96	110	119	124	130
<b>Merthyr Tydfil</b>	105	111	130	119	135	136	126	131	131	153	144	140
<b>Caerphilly</b>	70	75	74	72	73	72	79	85	76	79	78	71
<b>Blaenau Gwent</b>	115	123	125	100	95	86	85	83	91	95	96	103
<b>Torfaen</b>	66	76	84	82	95	101	102	118	144	153	154	152
<b>Monmouthshire</b>	26	36	35	38	34	39	58	45	42	57	54	57
<b>Newport</b>	88	80	88	92	94	90	87	89	86	83	84	86

Key	Rate above Wales mean	Rate same as Wales mean	Rate below Wales mean
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## ENTRIES AND EXITS FROM CARE

This section looks at two questions:

- Are there differences in the children entering and leaving care, either between local authorities or in different years?
- Can these differences help to explain why local authorities have varying rates of children who are looked after?

### Differences between local authorities

I identified differences between local authorities in the children and young people who were looked after, and also differences in social work practice. These differences were at both the entry and exit from care. During the period of the study, there were just over 10,500 children who entered the care system for the first time, and 9,990

children who left care for the first time.

Table 2 shows the variations in the characteristics of the children and young people who enter and exit care in different local authorities and also in social work practice, for example, the legal basis under which children initially became looked after. Some examples include:

- The local authority with highest rate of entries to care as a result of an Emergency Protection Order or police protection had a rate that was 13 times higher than the lowest rate.
- The highest rate of children leaving care as a result of a Special Guardianship Order was nine times higher in some local authorities than in those with the lowest rate.
- The highest rate of children returning home after exiting the care system was four times more than the lowest rate.

**Table 2: Differences between local authorities in the characteristics of children at entry and exit**

	HIGHEST RATE PER 10,000	LOWEST RATE PER 10,000
<b>AGE AT ENTRY</b>		
0-4 years	527	146
5 – 11 years	224	54
12 – 15 years	229	90
16-17 years	263	44
<b>LEGAL STATUS AT FIRST ENTRY</b>		
Care Orders	70	18
Voluntary accommodation	218	49
Emergency Protection Order / Police Protection	26	2
<b>NUMBER OF ENTRIES</b>		
1 entry in six year period	174	58
2 entries in six years	84	26
More than 3 entries in six year period	39	11
<b>CATEGORY OF NEED</b>		
Abuse and Neglect	223	37
Disability	6	<1
Parental Illness / Disability	16	<1
Family in Acute Stress	48	2
Family Dysfunction	54	2
Socially Unacceptable Behaviour	14	2
Low Income	0.5	0
Absenting Parenting	17	1
Adoption Disruption	1.5	0
<b>REASON EPISODE IN CARE CEASED</b>		
Adoption	56	8
Home	127	30
Special Guardianship Order	27	3
Independent Living	46	5
Transfer to Adult Services	7	<1

## Explaining the differences in overall rates of children who are looked after

Some of the findings point towards potential differences in policy and practice at a local authority level, which are important in their own right. However, only two of these characteristics, age at entry to care and the main category of need appear to have a statistically significant relationship to differences in overall rates of children who are looked after by local authorities.

Local authorities which take in a higher proportion of younger children have broadly higher overall rates, while the reverse is true of Welsh authorities which take in a larger proportion of older children. This is an important finding as the age profile of entrants and leavers can have implications for the pressures placed on the 'looked-after' children's system within individual local authorities<sup>4</sup>.

The main reasons why local authorities took children into care also seemed to have an impact on their overall rate. While it is not ideal to only look at one 'category of need' for each child, it is the only indicator available within the data used for the study. For all local authorities in Wales, the largest category of need for entries into the care system is 'abuse and neglect'.

However, the proportion of children entering care under the categories of 'abuse and neglect' and for 'family dysfunction', vary significantly between local authorities. For example, in Cardiff, 39% of first entries to care were under the category of 'abuse and neglect' and 33% under 'family dysfunction'. In stark contrast, in Merthyr Tydfil these figures are 95% and just over 2% respectively. What is not clear is whether children who are looked after in Cardiff and Merthyr Tydfil are different, or whether there are simply differences in how the 'category of need' is recorded by the two local authorities. Unfortunately, in this study it was not possible to check whether the local authorities were recording needs in different ways or whether the looked after populations in the two authorities are different.

## What else does the analysis tell us?

### Number of 'Periods' in Care

During the six years covered by the data just over 10,500 children and young people (0-17 years) experienced nearly 16,400 instances of starting a new period in care in Wales. Table 3 shows how many episodes of care were experienced by each child.

**Table 3: The number of entries to the 'looked-after' system in Wales 2008 – 2014**

Number of episodes per child	Number of children	Percentage
1	6,563	62.3
2	2,776	26.3
3	802	7.6
4	247	2.3
5	97	0.9
6+	75	0.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,542</b>	<b>100</b>

- Just over 60% of the children (6,563) experienced only one entry to care. This meant that these children either had only had one period in care in total, or that they entered care between 2008 and 2014 and were still in the system at the end of March 2014.
- The other 3,979 children went on to have one or more further period in care. Fifty-seven children experienced between six and fourteen separate periods in care during the six years.

## Age at Entry

Figure 2 takes the ages at which children entered the looked after system for the first time and compares them with the total population of children in Wales. It shows that:

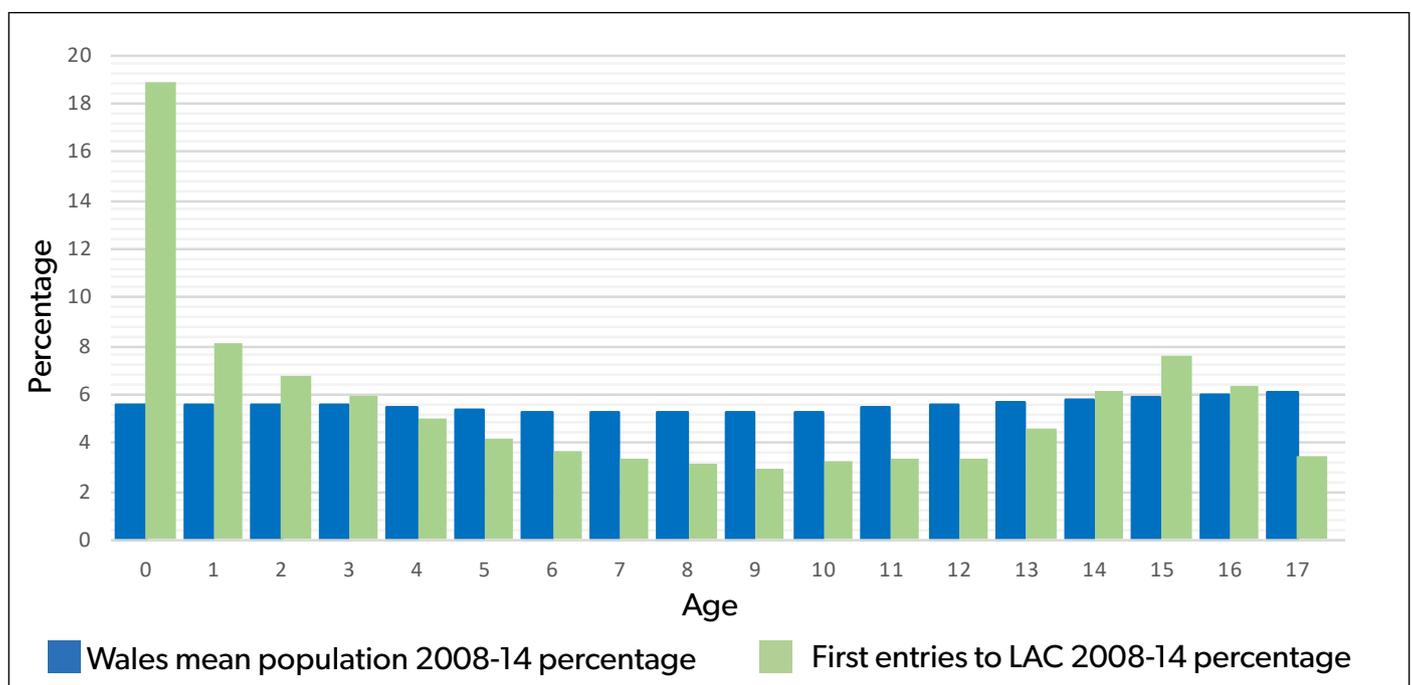
- Approximately 19% of the children who entered care for the first time in Wales were under the age of one, even though only 5.5% of all the children in Wales were aged under one year old – this is therefore over three times what would perhaps be expected.

- More children up to the age of four entered care relative to what would be expected based on the total number of children.

- Between four and thirteen years of age, the proportion of children entering care was less than that of the child population as a whole.

- Between 14–16 years old, the proportion of young people was again higher than would have been expected based on the child population.

**Figure 2: Comparison of the percentage of children becoming 'looked-after' for the first time to the Wales child population (0-17 years) by age**



## Legal Status

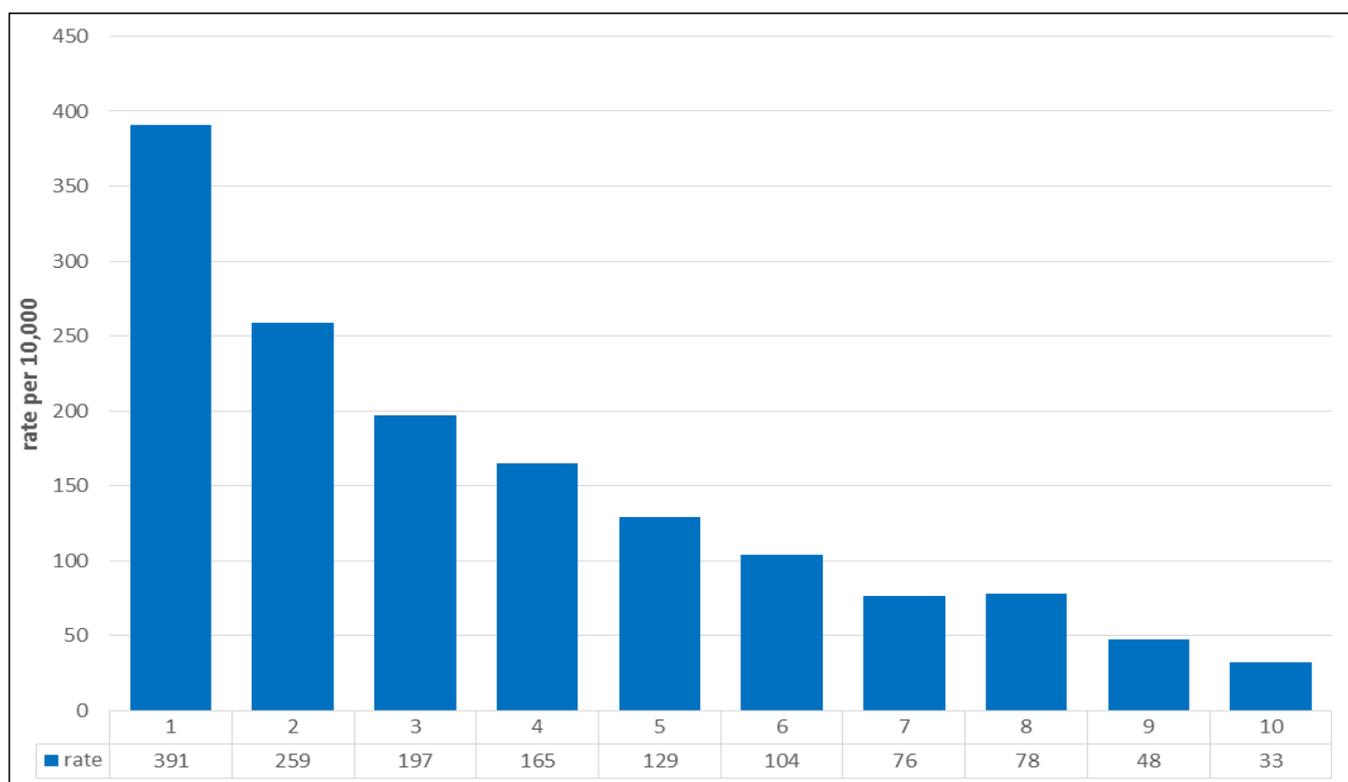
The combined data collected at the end of March each year to allow comparison between years and local authorities show that two-thirds of children in care on that day were looked after on the basis of a care order granted by the courts. However, the child-level data shows completely the reverse, with approximately two-thirds of children entering under a voluntary agreement under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. In contrast, analysis of the child level data where legal status at point of entry was considered shows completely the reverse, with the same proportion of children entering under voluntary agreements under S.20 of the Children Act 1989. Possible explanations for this difference might be that a proportion of children who become looked after through voluntary accommodation both enter and exit care within the space of a year and the times when the data is collected. However, of those who did not leave it would suggest that a proportion move from entering under voluntary accommodation to remaining through the use of care orders. This could arguably be an illustration of the use of voluntary arrangements as a lengthy prelude to care proceedings as highlighted by Lord Justice Munby, or, as some local authorities have argued during presentation of the initial findings of this study, that the use of S20 is using voluntary arrangements in the spirit that they were intended under the Children Act 1989, as part of working in partnership with families not as a way of circumventing the system.

## CHILD WELFARE INEQUALITIES

This section looks at whether the number of children who are looked after in Wales and the differences in rates of children in care between local authorities is related to neighbourhood deprivation. To do this, I used data about nearly 9,000 children who entered care from 18 of the 22 Welsh local authorities. Figure 3 shows the neighbourhoods<sup>†</sup> in the 18 local authorities split into ten equal groups or 'deciles', according to their level of deprivation, and the rate of children who are looked after for each of those groups. The level of relative deprivation in each neighbourhood was identified using the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation 2014.

The graph shows very clearly that there is a 'social gradient' in entries to the care system within Wales. For each decrease in relative deprivation there is a corresponding decrease in the rate at which children become looked after – confirming a finding of previous research into child welfare inequalities<sup>5 6</sup>. A child living in one of the 10% of most deprived neighbourhoods (column 1) in Wales is almost 12 times more likely to become looked after than children living in one of the least deprived neighbourhoods (column 10). This 'social gradient' occurs consistently across years and regardless of how the data are divided i.e. by age group, sex, legal status, etc. Two key examples of this are entry to care by age group and legal status on entry to care.

**Figure 3: The rates of children becoming 'looked-after' for the first time by deprivation decile (WIMD 2014) 2008-2014**



<sup>†</sup>Neighbourhood is used here to describe what is formally referred to as 'Lower Super Output Areas' - see <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/ukgeographies/censusgeography#super-output-area-soa>

Figure 4 shows how the rate of children entering care from different age groups varies by neighbourhood deprivation. For this analysis, I grouped the neighbourhoods into five equal groups or 'quintiles', according to their level of deprivation. The steepest gradient is present in rates of the youngest children entering care. The graph shows that children aged 0-4 years entering care from the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods (a rate of 522 per 10,000 children) in Wales are 10 ten times more likely to enter care than children of the same age living in the least deprived neighbourhoods (a rate of 51 per 10,000 children). In contrast, the gradient present in the data on for young people aged 16-17 years is considerably less steep with the variation in rates between the most and least deprived quintiles being less than four-fold.

**Figure 4: Children becoming 'looked-after' by age group and deprivation quintile**

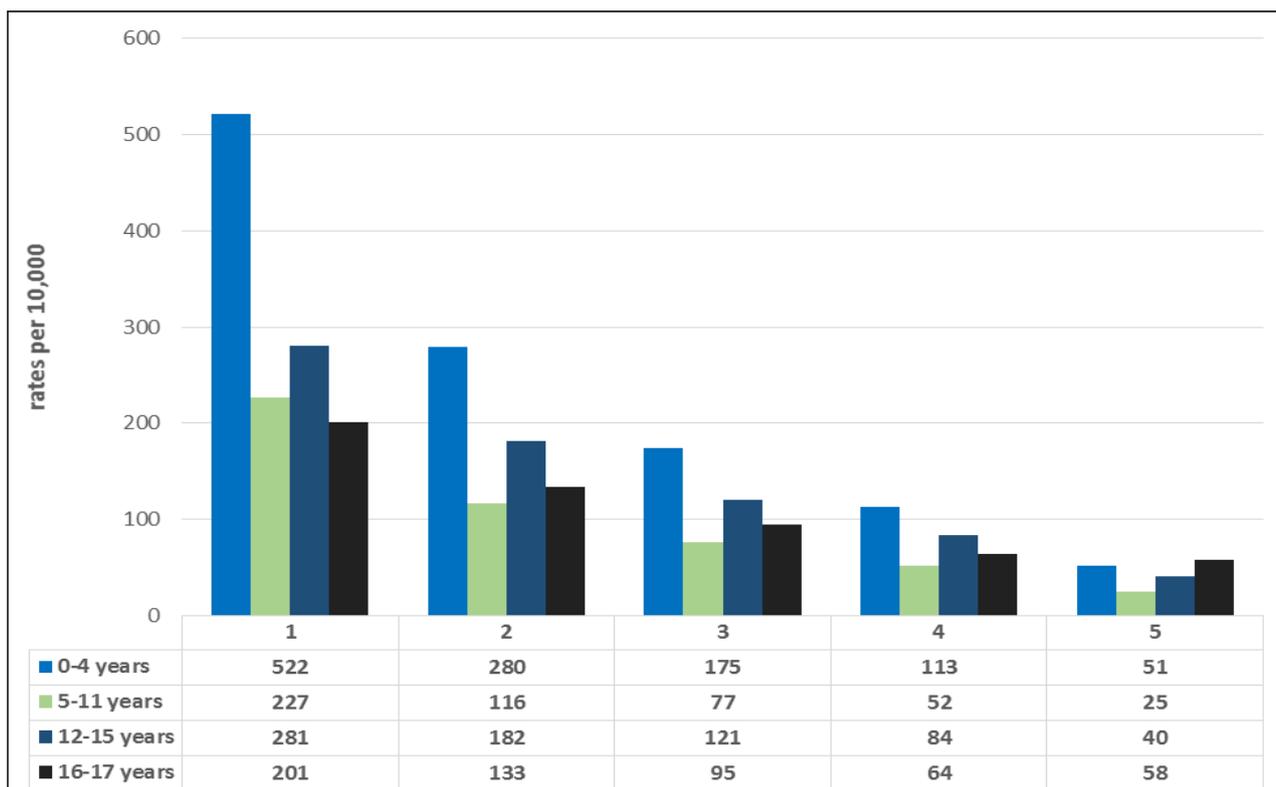
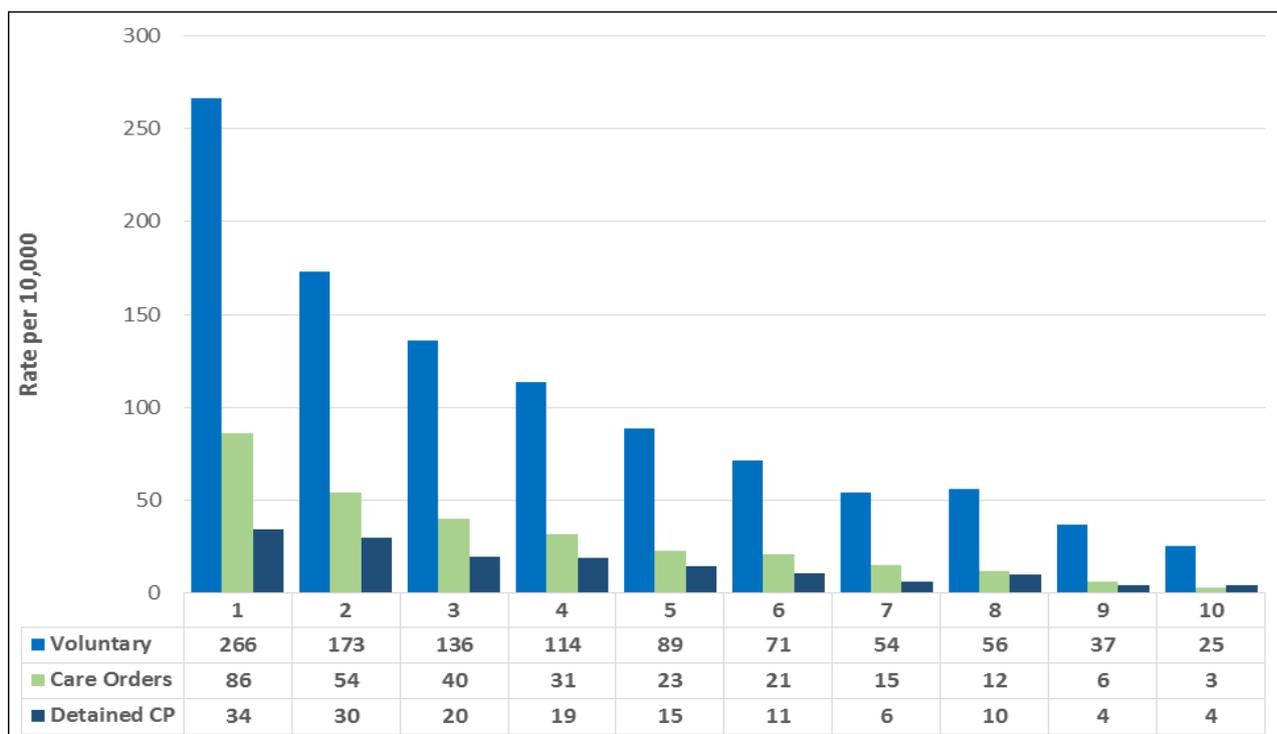


Figure 5 shows how the legal basis under which children and young people enter care varies by neighbourhood deprivation. It shows that children who live in the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in Wales are almost 11 times more likely to become looked after through voluntary arrangements than children living in the 10% least deprived neighbourhoods. In contrast, there is an almost 29-fold difference in the rates of children coming into care through the use of care orders between the 10% least deprived and the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in Wales. The marked difference in the steepness of the 'social gradients' between voluntary accommodation and the use of the courts suggests that the use of voluntary agreements with parents is more evenly distributed across deprivation deciles (although still considerably higher in the poorest neighbourhoods), while the use of the courts to remove children from families is focused much more clearly in the most deprived neighbourhoods.

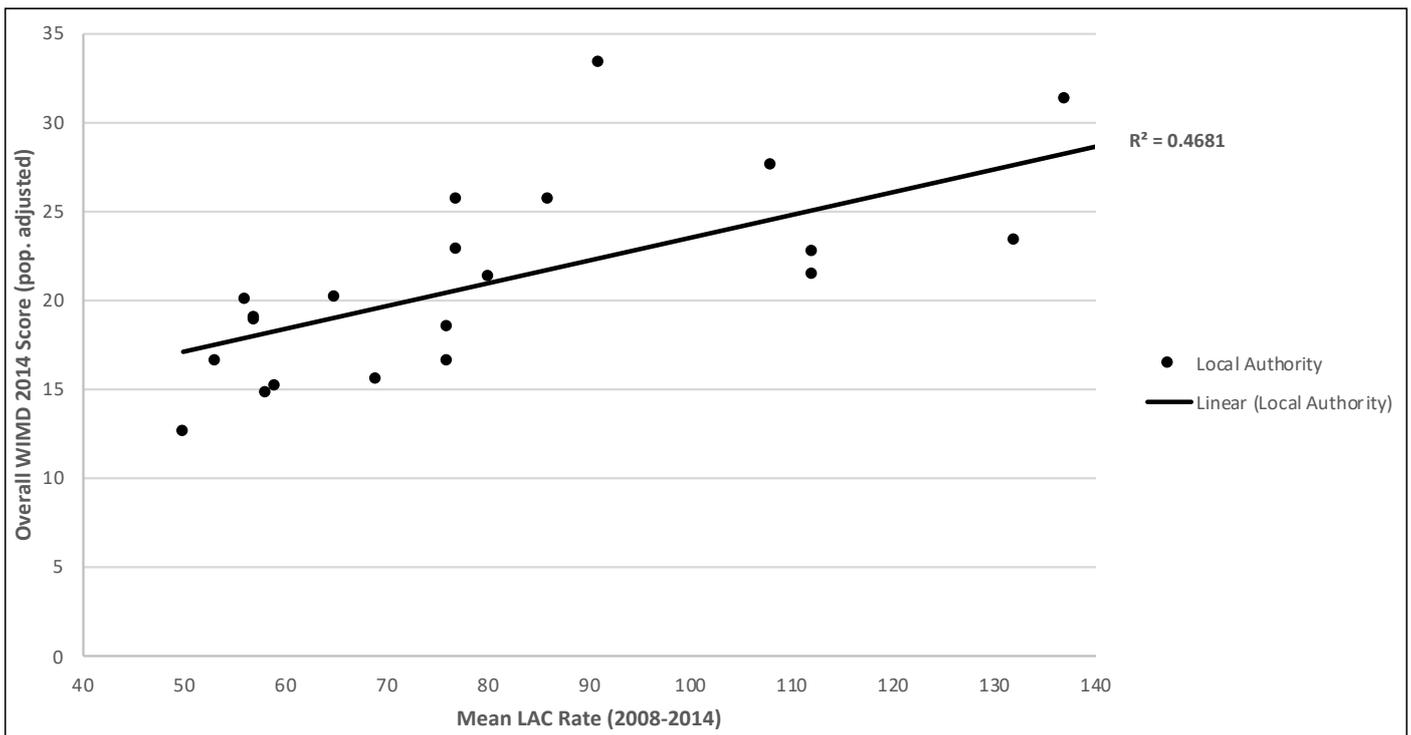
The analysis highlights the overall inequalities in children's chances of becoming 'looked after'. It illustrates that younger children in the poorest neighbourhoods have a much higher likelihood of becoming 'looked after' than their peers in the least deprived neighbourhoods; and that children in the most deprived neighbourhoods are significantly more likely to enter care as a result of a care order.

The relationship between how deprived a local authority is overall and its rate of children looked after was also explored to see if local authorities with more of the most deprived neighbourhoods take more children into care?

**Figure 5: Children becoming 'looked-after' by legal status and deprivation decile**



**Figure 6: Population adjusted local authority deprivation scores plotted against mean looked after children rate**



The graph above shows that there is a relationship between local authority deprivation levels and their overall rates of children looked after. That relationship explains almost half of the difference in rates of children looked after between local authorities. This means that a significant amount of the variation between local authorities is explained by deprivation. However, it also highlights that a range of other factors can have an effect, such as the availability of preventative services, decision-making procedures, staffing levels and organisational culture<sup>7</sup>.

## RETURNS TO CARE

This final section looks at whether certain characteristics or circumstances mean that a child is more likely to return to care. To do this, I used data about nearly 5,000 children who had experienced at least one complete period in care during the six years covered by the study. Of these children, just over 1,200 experienced more than one period in care.

The analysis identified two factors which are linked to a likely return to care – if the child's first period in care was short, and if a child is aged between 12 and 15.

### Short First Stays

There is a link between short first stays, defined as stays of less than 6 months, and children returning to care. This link has also been found in other studies, mainly in the United States<sup>8 9</sup>. However, as these other researchers have argued, this does not mean children should spend longer in care to prevent re-admission. Instead it is a case for gaining better understandings of the reasons for the breakdown of reunification home or about other destinations after care. For children who had a short period in care before going home, their increased likelihood of returning to care may be linked to changes in their home circumstances.

Almost 70% of the cases included in the model have 'abuse and neglect' or 'family dysfunction' as their category of need. Previous research has identified that parental problems<sup>10</sup> relating to poor parenting, or domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health problems (the so-called 'toxic trio' or 'trigger trio') are often those associated with involvement with Children's Services and children becoming looked after. Short stays in care lasting only a few months are potentially not long enough to enable real change in parents' behaviour and therefore children and young people who are reunified with birth parents might be returning to a home life that is largely un-changed.

For children who are returning home, breakdown and return to care are possibly a consequence of families not receiving the support they need

to overcome their problems<sup>11</sup>. A combination of these factors potentially means too little time to make changes before a child returns and too little support for families after.

### Age Group

The highest odds of returning to care is for those children aged between 12-15 years. A child in this age group is over two and a half times more likely to return to care than a young person aged 16 years old. This finding is similar to that of other researchers who found that children in their early teenage years are more likely to 'oscillate' in and out of being looked after<sup>12 13</sup>.

The finding also mirrors the results of a study in England by McGrath-Lone and colleagues (2017)<sup>14</sup> that found that children aged 11-15 years were more likely to re-enter care than younger children. This may be linked to the legal basis on which children enter care. Of those children in the sample aged 12-15 years, almost 90% were under voluntary arrangements when they entered care. In contrast only 60% of children in the youngest age group entered care on this basis. Parents can choose to end such voluntary placements at any time regardless of whether the issues that led to accommodation have been addressed or not. Again, there is also an argument that there is potentially less support and monitoring for this group of children after returning home than for much younger children who are more likely to have been subject to court proceedings.

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