Exploring the reasons why record numbers of children are in care

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What the data shows

- 31 March 2018 - 75,420 children in care in England
- 4% rise on 31 March 2017
- 17% rise on 31 March 2010
- Number of children entering care fell by 3% after a period of gradual increase
- The number of children leaving care also fell (down 5%)
- The average duration of the latest period of care rose slightly from 758 days in 2017 to 772 days in 2018

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What the data shows

- On average between 1994 and 2017, population of children in care has grown by 1.87% per year
- Overall population of children has also been increasing, but not at the same rate (0.3%)
- Some periods of fluctuation:
  - Between 2005-2009 numbers began to fall
  - But in 2010 there was a rise of 6%
- Rates of looked after children per 10,000 have risen from 43 in 1994 to 64 per 10,000 in England in 2018
- Now have larger number of children in care than ever before

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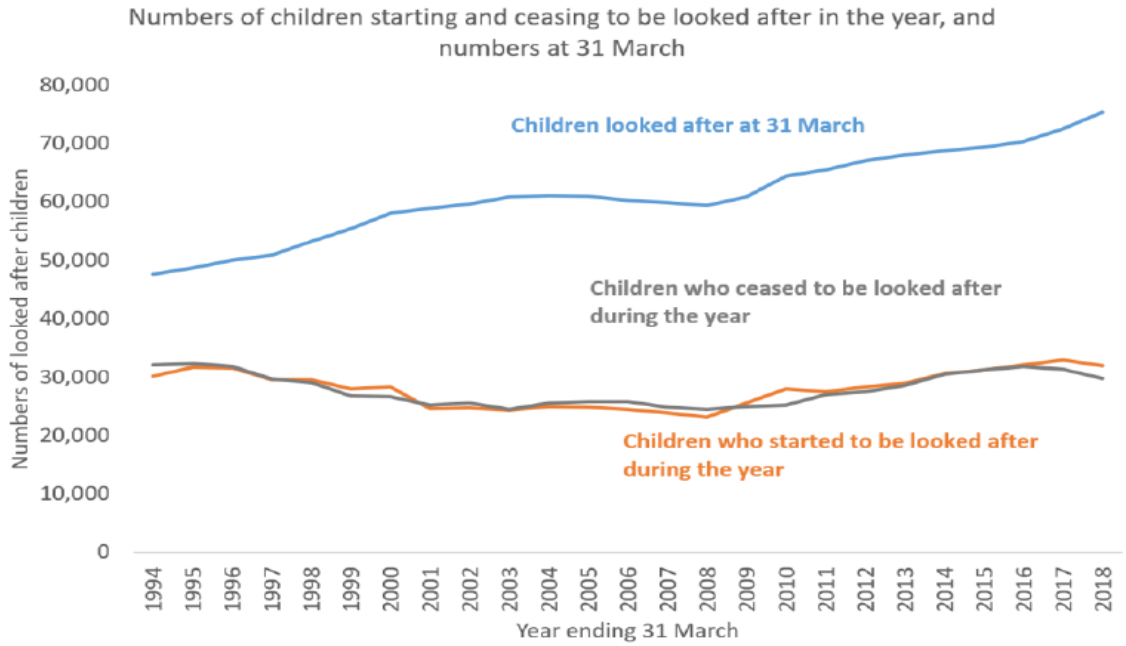
What the data shows

Source: Children Looked after in England including adoption:2017-2018



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What the data shows

- Data shows marked local variations in rates e.g. in 2017/18 185 per 10,000 in Blackpool in contrast to 23 per 10,000 in Richmond Upon Thames
- Data tables can hide key differences in populations
- Rate of children entering care in Kent was 45 per 10,000 children in 2015/16, three times the rate for Essex with 14 children per 10,000.
- This can partly be explained by Kent's unusually high proportion of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children living within the local authority (Care Crisis Review)

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Is there a ‘right’ rate?

- For many children moving into care can be a good outcome
- Studies of children in care tend to find that they have better outcomes compared to children in need
- Coram Voice’s Bright Spots snapshot 2018 concluded that whilst some young people were struggling others are doing very well

“Going into care has really helped me as I got a fresh start in life to do good things in life so I appreciate it ” (11-18yrs)

“Hate it, I don’t care how much effort they put in, they don’t really care about the kids. I feel like it’s all about money... if I was going to review it i would give it 1 star.” (11-18yrs)

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Increasing focus on rise

- Despite recognition of the absolute necessity and benefits of the care system for some children, has been increasing focus on rising numbers entering care
- Care Crisis Review published report and recommendations earlier this year
- Priority topic for What Works Centre for Children's Social Care - Safely reducing the need for children to enter care
- Government concern illustrated in recent budget which saw:

"£84 million over 5 years for up to 20 local authorities, to help more children to stay at home safely with their families"

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Impact of deprivation

- Child Welfare Inequalities Project identified a ‘strong social gradient’ - increases in deprivation are accompanied by increases in the chances of children entering care
- Population increases have been concentrated in most deprived LAs (12%) compared to least deprived (4%)
- In England children in the most deprived 10% of small neighbourhoods were over ten times more likely to enter care than children in the least deprived 10%
- Child abuse and neglect not caused by poverty, but research highlights additional stresses of parenting in poverty (Care Crisis Review)
- Since 2010 the most deprived 20% of local authorities have cut spending on children’s services by 25%; the least deprived 20% have had cuts of 4%/5% (Webb and Bywaters (2018))

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Impact of deprivation

- But deprivation doesn't explain it all.
- Statistical neighbours – LAs sharing similar economic and demographic profiles - have marked differences in their rates of children coming into care
- E.g Halton Borough Council's rate rose by 81% from 2013 to 2017; its 'statistical neighbours', Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council, had a fall in its rate of 12% (Care Crisis Review)
- Has been steady rise in care rate over 30 year period despite different levels of economic prosperity over that time
- Child Welfare Inequalities Project – Northern Ireland, highest rates of deprivation coupled with lowest rates of children in care

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Impact of loss of early help?

- One factor for difference in NI could be the greater emphasis on community based family support services
- Concern in England around reductions in early help with limited funds focussed on statutory interventions
- Questions about rising thresholds
- Percentage of referrals assessed but found to be not in need has risen from 19% in 2012-13 to 28.5% in 2017-18
- AfC report from 2017 found 140,000 children assessed, found not in need but not signposted on to early help
- In a survey of social workers, 60% said that the finances available to children's services influences their decisions about whether to offer 'early help' either 'very much' or 'to a great extent'

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Funding cuts

- Fall of £2.4bn in central government funding for children services between 2010 and 2016 (AfC, TCS & NCB, 2017)
- During the same time local authorities have cut spending by £1.6bn. This has created a funding gap which is unsustainable
- There has been an increase in late intervention spending of 7% as spending on early intervention – for example children's centres – has fallen by 40%
- Within local authority budgets late intervention now accounts for 73% of all spending
- New EIF report shows the need for a long term approach to early intervention to reduce pressures on social care

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Professional practice

- The Care Crisis Review looked in depth at the impact of professional practice on care rates
- Evidence submitted suggested some children, young people and families are not getting the early help they want
- Practitioners in some LAs are frustrated that high case loads mean they don't have the time they would like to spend with families
- Some practitioners feel they are focused on risk and are 'risk averse', partly in response to the media coverage of Peter Connolly's case and Ofsted inspections
- Concern were expressed that Ofsted's 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' judgements can have counterproductive effects on practice
- Receiving a negative judgement can destabilise an authority and result in a high turnover of staff at every level of the organisation, leaving behind a demoralised workforce

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Professional practice

Concerns echoed in BASW's 80:20 campaign report:

"It is incredibly paperwork heavy and unlike the expected outcome from Munro it appears to have gone more that way with the feeling that assessments need to be more thorough and robust, in turn less family friendly"

"You have no time to meet with families as your continually bogged down by paperwork. Our admin has been cut so … they are basically paying SW double the amount to do admin"

"I spend the majority of my time writing about children's & family life, as opposed to providing intervention & face to face direct work to inform my understanding"

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Conclusion

- Complex picture
- Deprivation is a factor but can't explain it alone
- Other factors include how services, policy and practice implemented at local level
- Some LAs have bucked the trend with falling rates
- Need more research – What Works Centre for Children Social Care
- Further data collection on families to help our understanding
- Urgent need for more funding – SR2019 presents an opportunity

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