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Original Research Article

At the crossroads of disadvantage: An intersectional analysis of the Scottish data on care

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Abstract:

The data system for care in Scotland has been criticised for failing to accurately depict the lives of care experienced young people. This article examines and evaluates national statistics and definitions in the context of education. It uses an intersectional lens and the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund as an applied case study. Descriptive analysis of both national statistics and quantitative data from Freedom of Information requests submitted to local authorities is used to evaluate the Scottish educational data system. The findings indicate that the data system struggles to identify care experienced individuals, instead focusing on looked after children, who are treated as a homogenous group within the data. The system also overlooks key factors that may contribute to lower educational attainment, such as sex, socioeconomic status and disability. Furthermore, the existing indicators do not provide a sufficiently detailed view to draw meaningful inferences on changes in care experienced young people's attainment over time. The analysis demonstrates how decisions around data and definitions shape who is included, create gaps in local authorities' knowledge and influence resource allocation. The article advocates for greater criticality among users of official statistics, its findings are highly relevant for policymakers, practitioners and researchers interested in education or the data system for care experienced young people. It also aims to support keeping the Promise by advocating for a more inclusive data system which would provide a greater evidence base for future policy development.

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Introduction

Having experience of care has been associated with increased risk of homelessness, hospitalisation, social exclusion, unemployment, imprisonment, poor mental health and lower educational outcomes when compared to the general population (Fleming et al., 2021; Barratt et al., 2020; Welch et al., 2018; Gypen et al., 2017). The Independent Care Review (2020) was an inquiry set up by the Scottish Government to understand the challenges faced by Scottish care experienced children and young people and how the care system was influencing their life chances. The review heard over 5,500 experiences, over half of these were from individuals with care experience or their families, the remainder were from the paid or unpaid workforce (Independent Care Review, 2020). This culminated in a series of recommendations known as the Promise, which should be implemented by 2030 (Independent Care Review, 2020).

As a result of striving to keep the Promise, the Scottish Government and local authorities have implemented policies to improve outcomes for care experienced people. The established policies include the Care Leaver Payment, guaranteed interview schemes and the Care Experienced Bursary. The Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund is a further policy example. It forms part of the wider Scottish Government Attainment Challenge, which aims to close the poverty-related attainment gap (Scottish Government, 2026a). The fund allocates £1,225 to each of Scotland's 32 local authorities for each looked after child (aged 5-15) (Scottish Government, 2026a). In the 2023-24 academic year £10.5 million was allocated across Scotland (Scottish Government, 2024a). However, this money must then be used to improve the educational outcomes for the much broader cohort of all care experienced young people aged 0-26 and those on the edges of care. This paper reports the first part of a mixed methods study, aimed at evaluating the implementation of the fund in Scotland. It specifically examines the data system for care experienced young people in education within the applied case study of the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund. By taking an intersectional approach, this paper examines how indicators such as the Highest Level of Attainment Achieved, used within the Scottish Government's Education Outcomes for Looked After Children annual publication could potentially be misleading. Consequently, these

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indicators may result in well-intentioned but misinformed education policy.

A note on the language of care

There are three prevalent terms found within the Scottish literature and policy. The first is Looked After Children, which is a statutory term defined in the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 (as amended). It refers to any child under the age of 16 who is currently being looked after by a local authority. This includes those living in foster care, residential care and living at home with their parents with a Compulsory Supervision Order. A Compulsory Supervision Order is made by either a Children's Hearing panel or a sheriff. It places a duty on a local authority to act in relation to the needs of the child or young person and can set out compulsory conditions for the young person to comply with. The second term is Care Leaver, a further statutory term defined as someone who ceased to be looked after on or after their 16th birthday. The final term is care experienced, which has no statutory definition but has many definitions within the literature (see Pinkney and Walker, 2020; Bayfield and Smith, 2024; Howard and MacQuarrie, 2022). However, there is broad recognition that it has a wider conceptualisation than statutory terms such as looked after children or care leavers (Bayfield and Smith, 2024). Within this research, the definition of care experienced set out in the Promise will be followed. This includes any young person with experiences of care (kinship, foster care, residential care, living with parents) regardless of whether this was voluntary or compulsory (Independent Care Review, 2020).

Terms such as looked after have been found to be stigmatising (Independent Care Review, 2020). The term care experienced is generally preferred by those who have experienced the care system (Pinkney and Walker, 2020). This is because the term repositions the individual as an active agent with experiences of care rather than a passive recipient of care (Howard and MacQuarrie, 2022). These definitions matter as they are used to decide eligibility for support. For example, currently only Care Leavers are eligible for Continuing Care and/or Aftercare, meaning anyone leaving care before the age of 16 has no legal entitlement to this support (Scottish Government, n.d.). This will be extended under the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill to all individuals who have met the definition of looked after at any point

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prior to their 26th birthday. Despite this, it will still not extend to individuals who are care experienced but have never been considered looked after (for example those in informal kinship care). Therefore, these terms and their practical use in policy and practice are highly debated. Since care experienced is the preferred term, this paper has attempted to use it, both in recognition of the more encompassing definition but also in an attempt to move away from deficit-based approaches. However, due to the use of the statutory terms within the data collection systems, it is not possible to avoid them entirely, as to do so would miss the nuance of who is and is not included within the current data system.

The Scottish Education System

In Scotland, children start compulsory school between the ages of 4.5 and 5.5. They complete 7 years of Primary School (called Primary 1 to Primary 7 or abbreviated to P1-P7) where they study a Broad General Education under the Curriculum for Excellence. Once they have completed Primary 7, they move to a larger secondary school where they can study for up to 6 years (Secondary 1 to Secondary 6 or abbreviated to S1-S6). Secondary school is split into two stages, the first is the junior phase which lasts 3 years (from S1 to S3). In this stage students continue to study a Broad General Education. The second phase is the senior phase (S4-S6); this is where students take qualifications. Qualification levels are measured using the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). The SCQF provides a comparable framework for qualifications in Scotland. It ranges from SCQF level 1 up to level 12 (equivalent to a doctoral degree). Upper secondary school students generally take qualifications at SCQF levels 3-7. Students can leave school once they turn 16 years old, which generally happens during S4. However, students can choose to stay until the end of S6 to gain higher level qualifications or study a greater breadth of subjects. Students generally take between 4 and 8 qualifications a year dependent on school policy, SCQF level and individual choice. Students can also sit qualifications at multiple SCQF levels within a single year, for example, sitting level 5 Maths in the same year as level 6 History. SCQF level 6 is the level of qualification required to enter higher education in Scotland, with level 7 being equivalent to the first year of a bachelor's degree. Generally, students would not study qualifications at SCQF level 6 until they were in S5 or S6 and would not study at level 7 until S6.

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The Existing Data Framework

It is important to note that data on the care system include both qualitative and quantitative information and both have essential roles in ensuring successful policy. Additionally, there have been studies which have used administrative data and data linkage to provide further insights (for example Soraghan and Porter, 2016 and Allik et al., 2022). However, this study focuses on examining the publicly available quantitative data landscape. Therefore, when the research mentions the data framework, it refers to quantitative data collected by local authorities and analysed by the Scottish Government.

Existing research in Scotland on the care experienced data framework is limited. The Promise found that within routinely collected data the social demographics collected were of such poor quality that it was very challenging to identify care experienced individuals (Independent Care Review, 2020). The data that is regularly used to monitor educational attainment is official statistics published by the Scottish Government (see for example The Promise Progress Framework, COSLA et al., 2024).

Official statistics are often discussed as neutral and objective facts in relation to the area of study (Jenkins, 2019). Although the government statisticians aim to collect and analyse data as objectively as they can, they are not immune to the influence of subjective viewpoints (Holt, 2008). This is because the statistics are part of a wider political process (Antonelli, 2016). This process results in statistics being constructed objects which change depending on the underlying definitions and methodologies used (Jenkins, 2019). For example, deciding to collect data on looked after children rather than for all care experienced young people has a direct effect of creating a narrower dataset (as the looked after cohort is a smaller group). The impacts can sometimes seem arbitrary. However, take the example of a child who is living with a foster carer. This child would be legally defined as looked after and consequently included in the dataset. If the same child is subsequently adopted by the foster carer, then they would no longer meet the legal definition of looked after and are removed from the data. This change occurs even though the substantive and material living conditions for the child have not changed. Within wider public discourse, a statistic can be perceived as representative of an entire issue (Jenkins, 2019). Yet as demonstrated in the example, a particular statistic only represents a single attribute within

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the sphere of study (Jenkins, 2019). Therefore, official statistics can only give an overview of broader issues (Holt, 2008).

The Promise Oversight Board is an apolitical group appointed to ensure the government and corporate parents keep the Promise by 2030. They found that the official statistics prioritise the needs of the care system and on what is easy to measure, rather than what is important for keeping the Promise (Promise Oversight Board, 2022). This again links to the decision to focus statistics on individuals who are looked after, rather than the wider care experienced group. In subsequent reports the Promise Oversight Board (2023, 2025) note that the data system is still not linked up, with individual information sources being held separately. This is preventing overall improvements within domains such as education as the drivers of attainment cannot be adequately explored. The Scottish Parliament (2025) estimated that there are 25,000 people aged under 16 in Scotland who have been legally defined as looked after at one point in their life, they use this as a proxy for care experienced in the absence of a legal definition. On the 31st July 2024 there were 9,741 individuals under the age of 16 who were legally defined as looked after in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2025a). Since the proxy care experienced definition used is narrower than the definition for this research, it would mean that a minimum of 61% of care experienced young people are excluded from statistics which solely include currently looked after children. However, since the 2021-22 academic year, the Scottish Government has published educational statistics for people who had been considered looked after at any point since the age of 5 (Scottish Government, 2024b) which would mean the majority of the excluded 61% are now included.

Currently all Scottish local authorities are responsible for data on the looked after children and young people they care for, regardless of where they live (Scottish Government, 2021a). The Scottish Government produces yearly statistics from the local authority data. The data are gathered using three submissions: the Looked After Children Data Submission, Child Protection Submission and the Secure Care Submission (Scottish Government, 2024c). These provide data on the level of the individual. The individual data are then aggregated by the Scottish Government to create the statistical publications. With regard to education, the Scottish Government links the Scottish Candidate Number to the education dataset (which is submitted separately by local

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authorities). All Scottish children in state schools are assigned a Scottish Candidate Number during their first year in primary school. Audit Scotland (2025) found that the data linkage method used misses out groups of children. They note that since Scottish Candidate Numbers are assigned in Primary 1, children whose only experiences of care are prior to beginning school are excluded from the statistics. In the 2023-24 year 576 children under the age of 5 ceased being looked after in Scotland and consequently may be excluded from the data (Scottish Government, 2025a). However, longitudinal data would be required to fully quantify this. Clark et al. (2017) attempted to link administrative education and health data and found that 44% of currently or previously looked after children from the 2011-12 academic year did not have a valid Scottish Candidate Number, even though 95% of students attended state schools. In the 2014-15 academic year the Scottish Government stated that 79% of children aged 5-15 in Scotland had a valid Scottish Candidate Number (Scottish Government, 2016). In the 2023-24 academic year, they state that this had risen to 93% (Scottish Government, 2025b). Additionally, they estimate that the percentage of looked after children with valid Scottish Candidate Numbers is broadly equal to that of the entire population. This suggests that descriptive statistics relating to the attainment of looked after children have increased in reliability since 2011 due to a more complete administrative dataset.

The current system primarily focuses on the experiences of looked after children as these are the individuals for which public authorities have statutory responsibility under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Additionally, public bodies named in Schedule 4 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 (such as health boards, councils and Police Scotland) have Corporate Parenting responsibilities to looked after children and care leavers. However, the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Bill has passed the Scottish Parliament. If the bill is granted royal assent and becomes law, it will extend the corporate parenting support to all young people under the age of 26 who have ever been considered looked after (Currie et al., 2025). If the Corporate Parenting duties are extended this would further emphasise the need for more detailed data gathering. This would illustrate the extent to which Corporate Parents are meeting the needs of the full cohort of previously looked after children, rather than solely those of the individuals currently included in the data. This would require finding a way to

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understand the educational trajectories of individuals who start and finish their care experience prior to beginning school. Additionally, care experienced young people may have a fear of unwanted disclosure or stigma if they self-disclose their care experience, which may deter individuals from wanting to access support or be recorded as care experienced in a formal data collection system (Pinkney and Walker, 2020). Children have the right to privacy under Article 16 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, n.d.). Therefore, any data collection system must ensure accordance with these rights. Overcoming these data challenges is central to the role of the Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT) who is responsible for the attainment of all care experienced learners in a local authority (Sebba and Berridge, 2019). In Scotland, 18 local authorities have a VSHT with McIver and Bettencourt (2024) finding that collating robust data on care experienced students was an ongoing challenge.

Overall, the evidence shows large gaps within the data system for care. In the context of education, there is evidence that individuals are being excluded from the data due to missingness of linkage identifiers and decisions on definitions. However, none of the research has considered the limitations of the current descriptive statistics themselves. This is the key gap which this research aims to fill.

Intersectionality

The theory of intersectionality can provide greater context and depth to our understanding of educational statistics. Intersectionality is the idea that social categories form an interconnected system, with an individual's position at the interfaces of these categories shaping their experience of the social world (McMaster and Cook, 2019). Crenshaw (1989) is credited with first coining the concept of intersectionality. She examined black women's experiences of discrimination cases within the USA. She used the metaphor of a crossroads to explain intersectionality, whereby one road represented the sex of the individuals and the other the ethnicity. A car crash (representing discrimination in the metaphor) can occur on the sex road, the ethnicity road or at the intersection. The central idea was that black women could be discriminated against because of their sex, their ethnicity, a culmination of both or because of their unique identity as black women. There is debate in the literature about whether combinations of disadvantage are additive or multiplicative. Additive

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disadvantage is where an individual's experience is equal to the sum of its parts. Multiplicative disadvantage is where individuals with intersecting marginalised characteristics experience additional disadvantage beyond the additive effect (Bauer et al., 2021).

According to Keller et al. (2023) there are three main approaches to analysing intersectionality. The first is the anticategorical approach which argues that social life is too complex for categories, so they should not be used within intersectional research. The intracategorical approach acknowledges the relevance of categories but remains critical, emphasising the heterogeneity of social strata. Finally, the intercategorical approach is where analytical categories are adopted to analyse inequalities between social groups and interactions between social categories. In quantitative analysis either the intracategorical or intercategorical approaches can be used (McMaster and Cook, 2019). This study utilises the intracategorical lens to explore how the data system on care may be overlooking intersecting characteristics of young people.

Methods

Two data collection methods were used within this research. The first was to collate descriptive statistics published by the Scottish Government in their Education Outcomes for Looked After Children publications. The second was to submit Freedom of Information requests to every Scottish local authority. Freedom of Information requests are an underutilised research method within social sciences (Savage and Hyde, 2014) and can be used to request information from any Scottish public authority (Scottish Government, 2023a). This method makes institutional data publicly available, enabling analysis which would not be possible using alternative methods (Savage and Hyde, 2014). To ensure the desired information is returned from the institution it is important the wording be specific (Walby and Luscombe, 2017). To this end, a draft request was created and checked by colleagues for ambiguity. The request asked 6 questions of each local authority. The questions which relate to this paper were the total number of care experienced people aged under 26 living in the authority at the time of request and, secondly, for this to be broken down into age categories (ages 0-4, 5-9, 10-14, 15-19, 20-26). The revised request was sent to a single local authority as a test case in September 2024. The test local authority requested clarification on the definition of care experienced used in the research, this was provided and

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incorporated into the wording of the request. This was accepted by the test case without further amendment. The finalised request was sent to the remaining 31 local authorities in October 2024. Of the 32 local authorities in Scotland, 27 responded. 5 local authorities did not send any form of reply, despite a legal obligation to do so. Due to time constraints, the responses were not chased. Additionally, within the responding local authorities there was a good mix of areas by urban/rural, ethnicity, disability and Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation quintiles. Therefore, the sample was considered to provide a good representation of Scotland as a whole.

The national statistics were analysed using descriptive analysis, primarily graphed trends. The Freedom of Information data were also analysed using descriptive statistics. They were integrated within the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund allocations to examine how different definitions result in different funding amounts per young person.

This research was fully approved by the University of Glasgow Social Science Ethics Committee.

Results

National descriptive statistics

Figure 1: Attainment of School Leavers by Looked After Status from 2010 to 2024 (Own Work, Data Source: Scottish Government, 2025b)

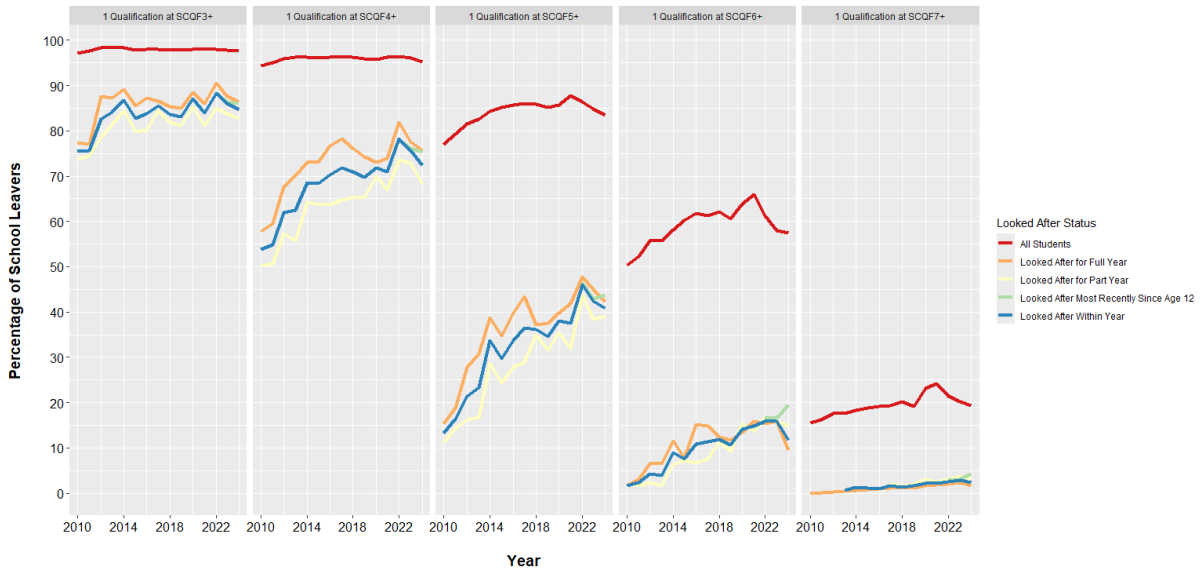

Figure 1 shows the percentage of school leavers who achieved at least 1 qualification at each SCQF level or higher by looked after status. The data

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shows that looked after school leavers have far lower attainment compared to all students. However, this gap widens from SCQF level 3+ to 6+, before slightly shrinking at level 7 (though this is mainly due to low numbers of students studying qualifications at SCQF level 7). Since 2010, the number of learners achieving awards at SCQF levels 3+ and 4+ has been consistent but there has been a slight increase in those achieving an award at levels 5+ to 7.

There has been an increase in the proportion of looked after school leavers achieving an award at SCQF level 3+ from 2010 to 2014. However, since 2014, there has been a relatively high proportion of looked after young people (approximately 15%) who are leaving school with no qualifications at SCQF level 3+. There have been large increases in the proportion of young people achieving at SCQF levels 4+ to 6+ (particularly at level 5+) and an increase in attainment at level 7. Although achievement at level 6+ has improved since 2010, the increase is not as pronounced as for levels 4+ and 5+. This suggests that more work is required to ensure looked after children are attaining at higher SCQF levels. When comparing the looked after cohort to all students, Figure 1 shows the gap between the two groups across all SCQF levels has generally been shrinking since 2010, due to the large attainment increases of looked after school leavers.

Figure 2 shows the stage students left school from 2010-2024. It shows that a far higher proportion of looked after children left school at S4 or below compared to all learners. There are also far fewer looked after leavers staying until S6.

For the all-students group, the number leaving at each stage has stayed broadly consistent across time. However, since 2010, there has been far fewer looked after young people leaving school at S4 or before. Additionally, there has been a slight rise in the number of looked after children leaving in S5. The number leaving at S6 has risen sharply since 2010. Within the categorisations of looked after school leavers, the general trend is the same, but young people in care for the full year were more likely to leave school in S4 or below compared to young people looked after for part of the year.

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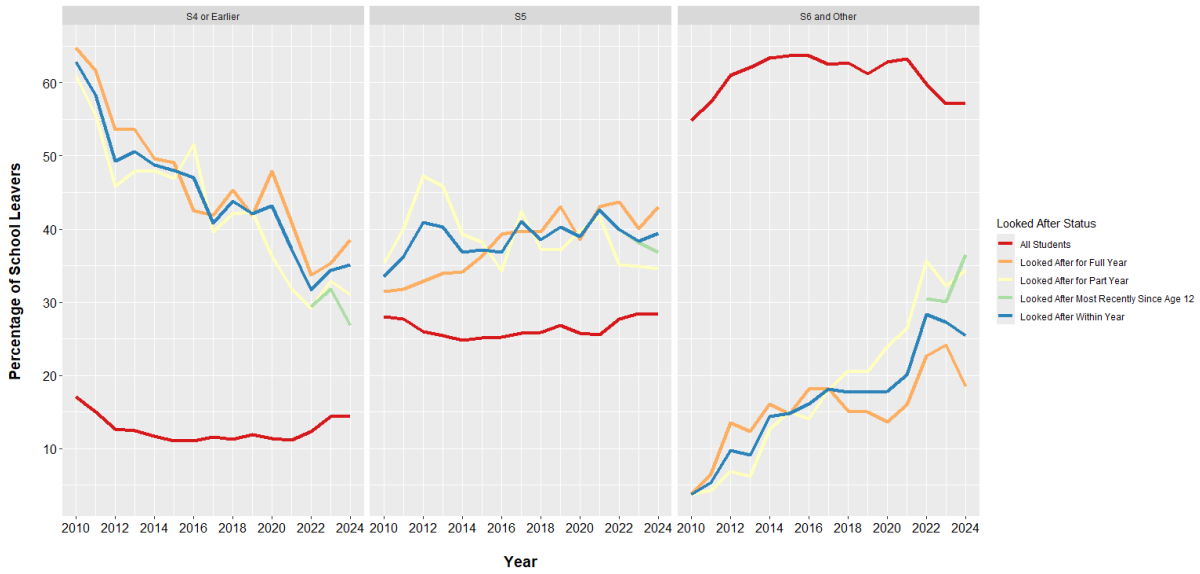
Figure 2: School Leaver Stage by Looked After Status from 2010 to 2024 (Own Work, Data Source: Scottish Government, 2025b)



It is evident that looked after children are staying in school longer now than in 2010 and that their attainment has increased over the same period. Figure 3 shows a scatterplot between the proportion of looked after young people leaving school in S4 or before compared to the number attaining at SCQF level 5+ since 2010. The scatterplot suggests a negative relationship, whereby achievement at SCQF level 5+ decreases as the number of looked after children who leave school in or prior to S4 increases. A correlation test was completed to see if this relationship is statistically significant. The P-value was below 0.05 and normality seemed acceptable. Therefore, the null hypothesis (that there was no relationship between the two variables) is rejected. The correlation value was -0.95 which suggests a very strong negative linear relationship between the two variables.

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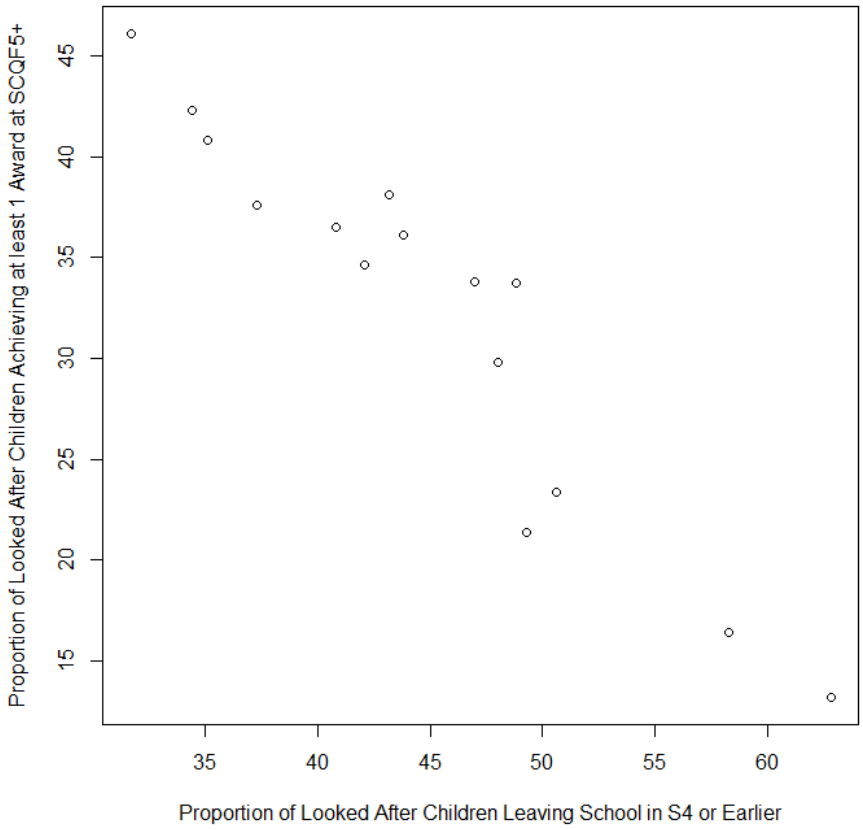
Figure 3: Scatterplot of School Leaving in S4 or before and Awards at SCQF Level 5+ (Own Work, Data Source: Scottish Government, 2025b)



This analysis is quite crude since it utilises national level data, which may be masking a more nuanced picture. Additionally, the analysis cannot show causation. Therefore, it remains unclear whether staying on at school has caused the increase in attainment or if increased attainment has motivated young people to stay in school longer. It seems logical that if looked after young people stay in school longer, they are more likely to attain at higher levels, even if the reason for staying on is debatable. This is an important consideration for policy. Since the attainment data gathered is not at a set point in time i.e. at the end of S4, it is not possible to determine whether the increases in attainment in Figure 1 are because of structural change within the education system or the natural consequence of remaining in school for longer.

With who and where a young person is living can also have an impact on their ability to attain. Figure 4 shows the attainment of looked after school leavers by placement type across SCQF levels. It shows that young people looked after at home with their parents have the lowest levels of attainment across all SCQF levels. Those in foster care have the highest

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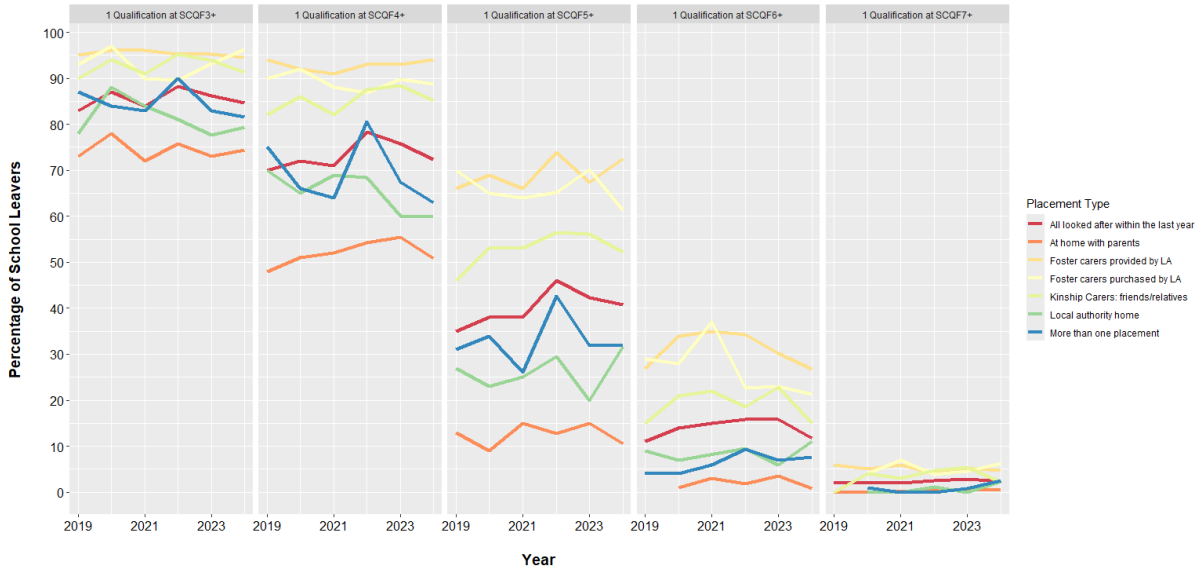
(followed by those in kinship care). The attainment gap between placement types is widest at SCQF level 5+, with broadly stable patterns since 2019.

Figure 4: Secondary School Attainment of Looked After Children by Placement Type from 2019 to 2024 (Own Work, Data Sources: Scottish Government (2025b, 2024b, 2023b, 2022, 2021b, 2020))



Freedom of information data

Figure 5 shows a box plot of local authority funding amounts per young person from the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund by different definitions. The right box plot represents the amount received by each local authority in the 2023-24 academic year divided by the number of looked after children aged 5-15 for each local authority. This is the method the Scottish Government used to calculate funding (Scottish Government, 2026a). There is minimal deviation across local authorities, this is expected as the government aim to allocate £1,225 per young person meeting the definition. However, the small divergence across some authorities suggests reporting figures are not always accurate and thus some councils receive slightly higher levels of funding than intended. The box plot in the middle represents the amount of funding divided by the number of looked after children aged 0-17 in 2023 for each local authority. This suggests a different picture- some local authorities have massively increased their per young person funding level, whereas others have decreased. This results from the Scottish Government holding funding constant over the funding period, even though the number of looked after children fluctuates year on year (Scottish Government, 2026a). The boxplot uses different care experienced and looked after

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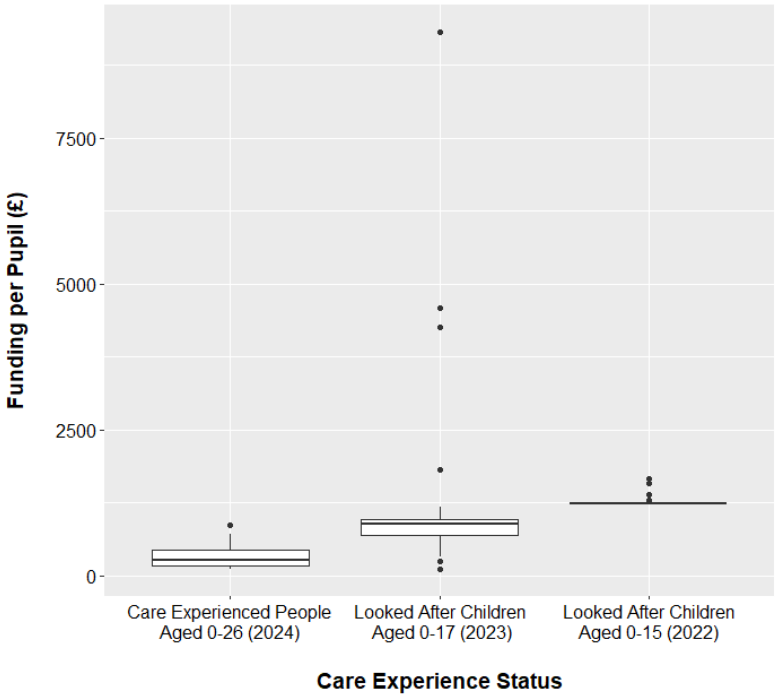
metrics from across the funded period (2022-26) to understand how this decision impacts per pupil allocations.

Figure 5: Per Young Person Funding Distribution of the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund (Own Work, Data Source: Freedom of Information request; Scottish Government, (2024b and 2024a))



When the funding is divided by the number of care experienced young people aged 0-26 for each of the local authorities who replied to the Freedom of Information request (the left boxplot), local authorities are left with a median value of £400 per young person. Combining the total Scotland wide Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund allocation for the 2023-24 academic year and the Scottish Parliament (2025) estimate for the number of young people aged under 26 who have been considered looked after at any point since 2009, allows a more accurate per care experienced child estimate. The mean value per care experienced child from this calculation is £190. The Scottish Parliament (2025) dataset does not include pre-2009 experiences of care. Additionally, their definition of care experienced is narrower than the definition used for this research and narrower than the eligibility criteria for the fund (which also includes young people on the edges of care). Therefore, the real number of young people entitled to support from the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund will be higher than the proxy. Meaning that the £190 per child is an overestimate, with the real value being lower than this.

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The aim of providing funding certainty for local authorities (by using the number of looked after 5-15-year-olds in 2022 to derive funding allocations for the entire funding period), has resulted in unequal funding across Scotland. Some local authorities have high per-student funding (as the number of looked after children has decreased but the funding has not) whilst others are lower than the notional allocation (as the money remained the same but the numbers of looked after children has increased). Additionally, the care experienced per capita funding illustrates very low funding levels compared to the size of the target group. This is not necessarily reflective of the effectiveness of the funding as local authorities do not allocate funding per child, and instead money is pooled together. The graph only illustrates how different definitions and eligibility criteria result in relative funding (dis)advantage.

When considering the number of care experienced young people living within each authority it is important to note that 7 local authorities (out of 27) said they did not know the number of care experienced young people aged 0-26 living in their local authority. Figure 6 shows the number of care experienced children and young people living in Local Authority 1 across different age groups. It shows that the number increases as the age groups increase, this is the expected distribution. A young person is considered care experienced regardless of how long they are in care meaning the number cannot decrease unless people move out of the local authority.

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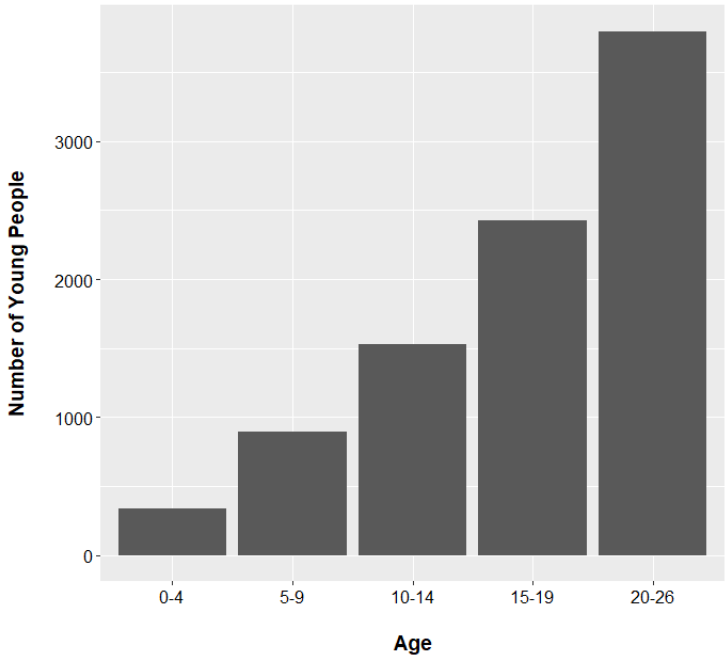
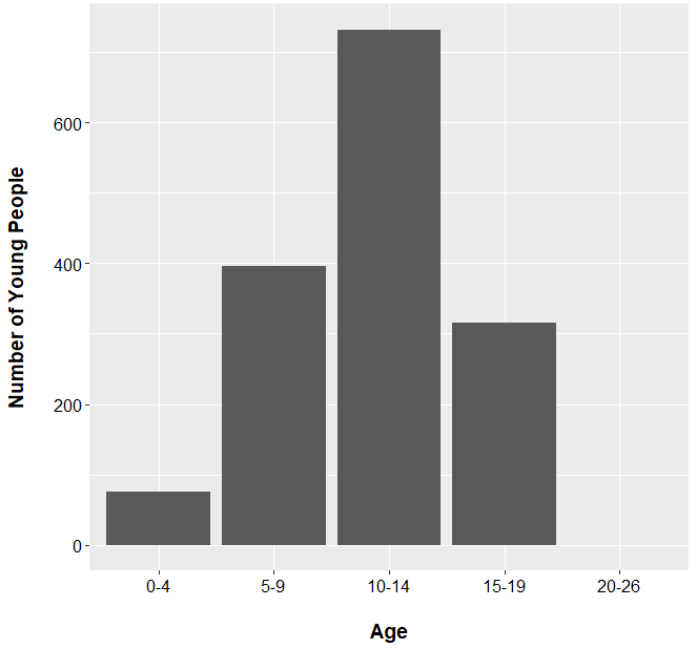
Figure 6: Number of Care Experienced Young People in Local Authority 1 (Own Work, Data Source: Freedom of Information request)



However, some local authorities provided information which was contrary to the expected distribution. For example, Figure 7 shows the data return for Local Authority 2. It shows an expected increase in care experienced numbers from ages 0-14 but then a drop off in the 15-19 age group. They then claim to have no care experienced young people aged 20-26 living within the authority.

Figure 7: Number of Care Experienced Young People in Local Authority 2 (Own Work, Data Source: Freedom of Information request)



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As previously outlined, the definition of care experienced makes this highly improbable, unless all the care experienced people in Local Authority 2 moved outside the boundaries by their 20th birthday. What is more likely is that the local authority does not track the number of care experienced young people once they reach age 16. Only 14 of the 27 local authorities provided graphs with the expected distribution (similar to Figure 6), the remainder stated they did not have the information (7 authorities) or provided improbable distributions, similar to Figure 7 (6 authorities). Therefore, it seems that some local authorities have limited knowledge of how many care experienced young people live within their boundaries. Local authorities who employed a VSHT seemed to have a greater awareness of the number of school-aged care experienced young people living in their area. Only 4 of the 17 local authorities who answered the Freedom of Information request and have a VSHT stated they did not know how many care experienced young people lived in the authority. However, only 8 of the 17 provided the expected distributions for the older age group which may suggest that more work is required for VSHT local authorities to identify all the care experienced young people aged under 26.

Discussion

The analysis of the descriptive statistics showed that the attainment of looked after school leavers has increased over the last 14 years. There was evidence of sustained achievement improvements at SCQF levels 4+ and 5+, yet the drivers of these attainment changes are unclear. Since looked after children have been staying in school longer, this may account for the increased attainment. Therefore, it is not possible to conclude on whether the education system has improved to better meet the needs of care experienced young people, empowering them to achieve more through better support and engagement or whether there is an external factor which is driving reduced early school leaving. If the data were displayed at a fixed time point, i.e. at the end of S4, then this would provide a better indication as to the underlying causes of the perceived increases in attainment. Additionally, the data do not tell us about the grades achieved by the young people, since it only provides a pass/ fail dichotomy. The lack of this data may be hiding or obscuring the true picture of changes in educational attainment over time. It may be the case that what was previously an inequality between passing and failing has evolved into stratification by qualification grade. Alternatively, the

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lack of information on the qualification types studied may be masking horizontal inequalities (inequalities in the content studied).

The descriptive statistics approach used by the Scottish Government is intercategorical as an entire category of individuals are compared (looked after vs not looked after). However, looked after children are not a homogenous group (McClung and Gayle, 2010). It is debatable whether comparing care experienced young people to all leavers is a fair comparison to begin with. It is well established that there are a wide range of inequalities which are associated with differing levels of educational attainment, including poverty, disability, ethnicity and sex (Farquharson et al., 2024). We do not know whether the care experienced group is comparable to the rest of the population, due to lack of intersectional data within the descriptive statistics. Therefore, it is not possible to determine the extent to which the lower attainment of care experienced individuals can be associated with the care system, compared to other social characteristics such as sex or socioeconomic status. This is particularly important as care experienced young people are generally exposed to more cumulative disadvantage compared to the general population. For example, Allik et al. (2022) found that 59% of children who went on to become care experienced in Scotland were born in the 20% most deprived areas (compared to 25% in the general population). Additionally, the same study found that care experienced children were also more likely to be born into jobless families and to a young mother (under the age of 25), when compared to the general population. There has also been research suggesting that young people with disabilities are disproportionately represented within cohorts of looked after children in Scotland (Hill et al., 2017). Furthermore, in 2024, 62% of looked after children aged 16-18 (approximate school leaving age) were male (Scottish Government, 2025a). Since males already have lower attainment than females within the general population, this may be distorting comparisons. Overall, despite evidence that experiences of care are associated with further disadvantage when controlling for other factors (McClung and Gayle, 2010), the impact of other life experiences on subsequent educational attainment cannot be discounted.

Although the majority of the descriptive statistics take an intercategorical approach, there is some limited evidence of an intracategorical approach when the data compares placement types. The challenge with these statistics is that the context is not clear. We do not know the individual

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circumstances which resulted in a child becoming looked after, for example adverse childhood experiences. The individuals placed in foster care, and to a lesser extent kinship care, have far higher attainment. Yet we don't know how stable these living arrangements have been or the living conditions. Perhaps the socioeconomic position of the carers and their pre-existing knowledge of the care system allow them to provide better opportunities or support to young people. Additionally, existing research has shown that the age of a young person when entering care is associated with the type of living arrangement they experience (McClung and Gayle, 2010). Therefore, the focus on attainment by placement type may be a proxy or confounding variable for other causes of increased/ decreased attainment e.g. age of becoming looked after.

There was evidence that some local authorities were unable to identify care experienced young people through their data systems, particularly once they had left school. Those local authorities with a VSHT employed were more likely to have knowledge of how many school aged care experienced young people lived in their boundaries. However, this pattern did not seem to hold for the number of care experienced young people post school leaving age. Professionals within Corporate Parent organisations will be able to identify some young people through other means such as prior relationships. Furthermore, there is no legal obligation for local authorities to know how many care experienced young people live in their area. However, within the policy context of the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund, the lack of reliable data arguably makes it more challenging to prioritise spending and ensure individuals eligible for support can easily receive it. Additionally, the lack of any attainment metrics for individuals past school leaving age published by the Scottish Government makes it challenging to evaluate the success of the policy for young people after they have left school. Although other sources of post school data exist, for example through the Scottish Funding Council, it does not provide a breakdown by local authority. This is further exacerbated by the focus on looked after children rather than those with care experienced and the findings of previous literature on the limitations for children who cease being looked after before starting school.

The exploration of the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund per capita allocations further exemplifies the importance of definitions and eligibility criteria for policies attempting to support care experienced

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young people. By keeping the funding constant over the funding period, the Scottish Government have provided longer term guarantees for councils, which is positive. However, in local authorities where the number of care experienced young people has increased, they have proportionally less resources to support care experienced young people than authorities with more stable numbers. Perhaps a no-detriment approach would be more effective, where the funding local authorities receive can increase if the number of care experienced individuals increase, but the funding allocation cannot decrease over the funding period. Additionally, the use of the number of looked after children aged between 5-15 supported by each local authority as the allocation criteria may also be detrimental. Since the number of looked after children is decreasing (Scottish Government, 2025a), the total allocation for the next funding period 2026-27 is £9.5 million (Scottish Government, 2026b). This is approximately £1 million less than the previous funding. The allocation criterion is the same but due to the lower numbers of looked after children, the total fund has decreased. The Scottish Government's estimated number of care experienced people aged under 26 will not likely decrease for at least 5 years because their dataset only backdates to 2009. Therefore, their estimates are unlikely to decrease until this has reached saturation point (when those in 2009 start to approach their 26th birthday). This again reinforces the need to understand the size and geographical distribution of the care experienced cohort so that more appropriate allocation methods can be derived which are more in line with the recommendations of the Promise.

The intersectional lens taken here shows that the existing descriptive statistics do not take into account wider inequalities, which may be exacerbating the negative educational experiences of care experienced young people. Although previous research has found that local authorities are already experiencing high levels of administrative burdens due to data collection requirements (Audit Scotland, 2025), the majority of this data are already collected through standard collection procedures, for example the Pupil Census. Therefore, the integration of at least some statistics on horizontal inequalities and intersectional inequalities could be conducted by the Scottish Government to provide greater policy evidence for relevant parties without increasing the data burden. Additional, research is required to identify what factors have influenced care experienced

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young people remaining in school and how other social characteristics affect their attainment.

Conclusion

This research utilised an intersectional lens within the context of the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund to explore the challenges of the data system relating to care experience in Scotland. The findings of this research illustrate the importance of considering the limitations of data and of determining how the methods used could be potentially excluding or masking the true experiences of care experienced individuals. Statistics on care experience do not exist in a vacuum and consequently other relevant factors which can impact their life experiences such as sex, socioeconomic status and disability should be considered within the national statistics. This research aims to serve as insightful reading for both practitioners and policy makers on the importance of considering both the justification and the implications of data policies and definitions. Although these concepts often seem distant to the immediate challenges faced by care experienced young people, they are essential to ensuring that we have a high-quality evidence base for future decision making.

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