

Understanding Data



Centre for excellence
for Children's Care and Protection

Beyond the headlines

August 2020





Introduction

This is the third in a series of briefings – Beyond the Headlines – that has been providing further information and analysis on commonly reported statistics relating to children and young people in need of care and protection in Scotland.

The two previous briefings – focusing on care experienced people attending university, and on homelessness – have highlighted how headline statistics can be stark and emotive tools in illustrating the experiences faced by children, young people and adults with care experience. However, headline statistics can only tell us one part of the story. It is therefore essential that statistics are analysed, understood and used in ethical and responsible ways that understand what the statistics are saying, what might be missing and what the statistics do not say.

CELGIS works alongside many others to improve outcomes for care experienced children and young people, and with data and evidence at the heart of our work, in this briefing we take a step back and look at the cross-cutting theme of the use of data. To support further discussion and debate, we also raise some key questions and talking points.

For the purposes of this briefing, the following definitions are used: ‘looked after child/children’ – a child or young person looked after in a formal arrangement with a local authority, which may be voluntary or compulsory, and includes a range of living arrangements (e.g. looked after at home, in kinship care, foster care or residential care); the ‘Child Protection Register’ is a confidential list of all children who have been assessed as being at risk of significant harm. If a child is registered on the Child Protection Register they must have a child protection plan, which sets out what action needs to be taken, by whom and when, in order to safeguard the child and promote their welfare. ‘A care experienced child or young person’ is a young person who has been looked after by a local authority at any time in their life, including adopted children who were previously looked after by a local authority



1. What are some of the headlines?



Unborn babies placed on ‘at risk’ register due to fears of abuse rises 150%

(The Herald, 1 April 2020)



Figures show that 103 children aged under 16 had been taken into care by Renfrewshire Council social work bosses in the last year

(Paisley Daily Express, 1 April 2019)



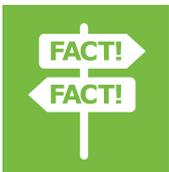
The two headlines above illustrate the language used which may evoke an emotive media and public response to social work intervention in children and families’ lives. Presented in this way, reference to children being ‘taken into care’ or being placed on the Child Protection Register before they have even been born portrays a sense of over-interference, power imbalance and injustice, with ‘social work bosses’ presented in one headline as the culprit. Yet, at the same time, social workers are called to account and criticised if risks are not taken seriously and a child is harmed. The very difficult decisions taken in how to support children and families are not only made by social work but can involve family members and many other services. In this environment, negative headlines can often dominate over the dispassionate and considered analysis of social work statistics.

The information provided in these two headlines are derived from Scotland’s main source of data on children in need of care and protection – the **Scottish Government’s Children’s Social Work Statistics**, published annually. Through its report and supporting data tables, the publication provides:

-  The number of children who are looked after, involved in the child protection system, and who are in secure care.
-  Some disaggregation of the data – e.g. by age, gender, care placement type, length of placement, concerns at child protection registration and length of child protection registration.
-  Data broken down into local authority areas and the national picture.
-  Data collection across years to allow assessment of change over time.

Data on children in need of care and protection is therefore available but, as this briefing explains, reporting what the data shows in a sensitive, dispassionate and considered manner is not easy, especially in a media headline. This requires understanding of the care and child protection systems, the specifics of the indicators, and the wider policy and practice landscape.

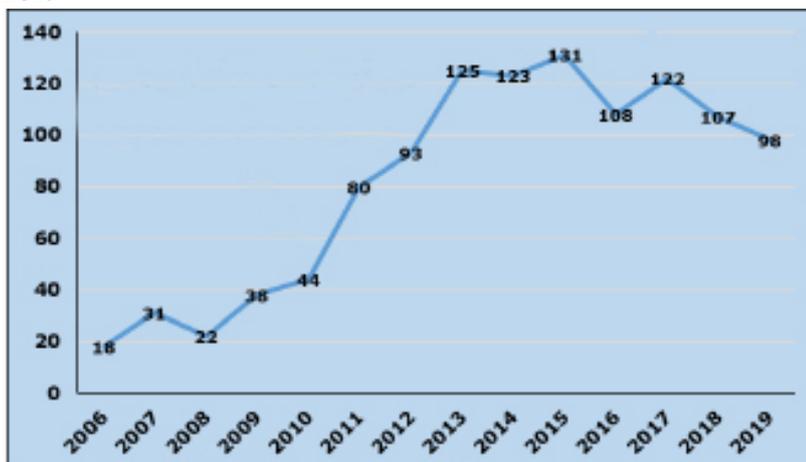
Importantly, those seeking to use children’s social work data should also understand what the statistics do not tell us, including where there are gaps in data relating to children in need of care and protection that we collectively should be actively working to address.



2. What do we need to know beyond the headlines?

Beginning with the headline – “*Unborn babies placed on ‘at risk’ register due to fears of abuse rises 150%*” – this refers to 98 unborn children in Scotland who were on the Child Protection Register on 31 July 2019. It doesn’t indicate which baseline has been taken to calculate the 150% rise. If we look at the figures for 2009, we can see that there were 38 unborn children registered, hence the 150% increase. While this is an accurate calculation of the data, Figure 1 here shows this is not a representative analysis of the data over the decade in question.

Figure 1: Number of Unborn Children on the Child Protection Register in Scotland, 31 July 2006 to 2019



Source: Scottish Government Children’s Social Work Statistics 2018–2019 (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/childrens-social-work-statistics-scotland-2018-2019/>)



Alternatively, by looking at the data from 2006 onwards to see a fuller picture, an increase in the number of unborn children registered can clearly be seen. However, the chart also shows that there have been consistently lower numbers since a peak number in 2015. The reported 150% increase in the headline for a ten year period, is also a 25% decrease since 2015.



The data alone does not tell us about wider, contextual factors that can impact on the numbers. As the annotation to Figure 2 shows, the registration of unborn children was only introduced as a national practice across Scotland following the publishing of the National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland in 2010. Consequently the increased numbers of unborn children placed on the Child Protection Register may largely have been due to administrative and practice changes rather than increased risk and safety concerns among expectant families.

Turning to the second headline – that 103 children in Renfrewshire were taken into care in 2017–18, the headline illustrates the confusion that can exist between children who are ‘taken into care’ (or ‘looked after children’) and children supported by the child protection system. The headline’s 103 children refers to those on the Child Protection Register in Renfrewshire, and not those ‘in care’ on 31st July 2018. There is sometimes overlap in these two groups of children, i.e. a child can be both looked after and on the Child Protection Register at the same time; and they are sometimes consecutive processes, whereby children become first involved with the child protection system, and then deregistered when becoming formally looked after. A child or young person may become formally looked after through compulsory measures, or on a voluntary basis, without necessarily having been involved with the child protection system first. Importantly, the statistics on those supported by the child protection system, and those who are formally looked after, are separate.

Figure 2 shows the Renfrewshire and Scotland-wide data for 2017–18, for looked after children and children on the Child Protection Register. By seeing the data together we can see the headline has not only confused snapshot data (that is for example the number of children on a specific, given date) with activity across the year, but also the two groups of children. The number ‘taken into care’ over the year was 192 and the number of children ‘in care’ on the snapshot 31st July date was much higher at 656 children. Similar patterns can be seen for Scotland as a whole. In summary, a more accurate presentation of this data in a headline would therefore be ‘*Figures show that 192 children needed new support from children’s care services in Renfrewshire in the last year.*’

Figure 2: Looked After Children and Child Protection Register numbers in Renfrewshire and Scotland, 31st July 2017 to 31st July 2018

	On 31 July 2017	From 1 August 2017 to 31 July 2018	On 31 July 2018
Looked After Children			
Renfrewshire	• 659 children	• 192 children started to be looked after • 195 children ceased to be looked after	• 656 children
Scotland*	• 12,070 children	• 3,629 children started to be looked after • 3,785 children ceased to be looked after	• 11,911 children
Children on the Child Protection Register			
Renfrewshire	• 107 children	• 128 registrations of children • 132 de-registrations of children	• 103 children
Scotland*	• 2,195 children	• 3,839 registrations of children • 3,771 de-registrations of children	• 2,263 children

Source: Scottish Government Children’s Social Work Statistics 2017–2018 (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/childrens-social-work-statistics-2017-2018/>)

Note: Scotland data excludes Glasgow data which was not available in that year.

The confusion between the two groups of children has been noted but other points of clarification to make are:

1 'Taken into care' implies that all looked after children are removed from their homes and families. In fact, in Scotland figures include children and young people who are formally 'looked after' continue to live at home, with regular contact with social services (this is over a quarter of Scotland's looked after population, according to the latest figures). A further 28% are also looked after and continue to live with friends or relatives in a formal 'kinship care' arrangement.

Furthermore, 'taken into care' implies that there has been some legal requirement for the child to become formally 'looked after'. The figures show, however, that around 16% of children and young people are formally looked after on a voluntary basis; that is, their parents have requested, under Section 25 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, the local authority provides support for their family by providing care for their child at that time. A useful overview of what it means to be 'looked after' in Scotland is available from the [Scottish Government](#).

2 The distinction needs to be made between the numbers of children who are looked after or on the Child Protection Register on a specific date (i.e. 31 July each year) and the dynamic flow of the use of care or protection measures over the course of a year. Indeed, registration or coming into care is not an endpoint, but instead a change in circumstances that can shift over time. The single date snapshot finds that there were 656 looked after children and 103 children on the Child Protection Register in Renfrewshire on the 31st July, but there was a larger number when taking into account the shifts for children starting and ceasing to be formally looked after with the support of social services, and the children registered and de-registered between August 2017 and July 2018. This pattern can be seen across Scotland and illustrates that the headline snapshot numbers are significantly undercounting the number of children actually affected, albeit there may be a small number of children who are registered and/or de-registered more than once in a year.

3 The Child Protection Register can change from day-to-day. The published single day snapshot on 31st July may not therefore be representative of the typical number of children who are at significant risk of harm and so placed on the Child Protection Register.

4 The data about the number of children who are looked after or on the Child Protection register provides insight into those at greatest need of care and protection. However, there are also many children who may need support but do not meet registration criteria or thresholds. Within the child protection system, data on the number of child protection concerns received by social work and the children involved in pre-registration processes (e.g. Inter-Agency Referral Discussions, Child Protection Investigations, and Initial or Pre-Birth Child Protection Case Conferences) provide a more accurate picture of the wider population at risk of harm.



3. Going beyond the headlines

The media reporting of the headline numbers of looked after children and children on the Child Protection Register draws our attention to children's circumstances, but the interpretation of the statistics can be difficult to get right. Furthermore, from a policy and practice perspective, it is essential to know about the characteristics, views and experiences, and outcomes of these children.

The Children's Social Work Statistics publication offers some insight into the characteristics of children and their experiences, with the age, care placement type, and concerns at registration breakdowns particularly insightful. By age, for example, the data shows that the child protection system concerns mostly younger children with disproportionately few children aged 11 and above subject to child protection processes.

There are, however, limitations in what the Children's Social Work Statistics publication can tell us too, and that has an impact on our understanding of what is happening and how to therefore respond with support to specific groups of children and young people. The information on disabled children is

a clear example here, despite disability figures being included in the publication via a binary question of whether a child is disabled or not. As of 31 July 2019, 11% of Scotland's looked after population were reported as 'known to have a disability' and 4% of children on the Child Protection Register were recorded as disabled. However, further interrogation of the figures means the accuracy of the data needs to be questioned. For example, one of Scotland's largest local authorities reportedly had zero disabled looked after children, while another local authority reported that 69% of its looked after children were disabled. This range shows the data is not reliable, and the uncertainty is reflected nationally in the 47% of Scotland's children on the Child Protection Register whose disability status were not known, recorded or assessed. Whether due to difficulties surrounding the assessment of children's health and disability or the recording of the assessment data, we do not have sufficiently robust data to understand the relationship between child disability and care and protection needs.

Making connections with children's data held by other services is one means of building a better understanding what children need from care services – particularly if data can be linked across organisations' different Management Information Systems. Useful data sources would include:



From health, data on Health Visitor developmental assessments of young children, dental records, and emergency/unplanned hospital admissions.



From education, data on attendance levels and exclusions, additional support needs, and free school meals entitlements.



From police, data on children and young people who are reported missing, and incidents of domestic abuse in household where children live.

We can better understand the views and experiences of children in need of care and protection through the information derived from national surveys of children, particularly if the survey data enables disaggregation of data regarding children in these groups. Such surveys span topics such as online safety, mental health/self-harm, and alcohol and drugs use. More creative approaches would, however, need to be explored to listen to and understand the needs of younger children in need of care and protection, as well as older children with communication support needs.

Data linkage, as highlighted by Scotland's Independent Care Review's *The Promise* published earlier this year (2020), would also contribute to tracking the journeys and outcomes of children in need of care and protection. Through linking individual children's data across multiple years and multiple services we can understand whether, for example, children in need of care and protection (held on Social Work management information systems) go on to be in full health, do well at school, and progress to college, university and/or employment on leaving school (in health, education and Skills Development Scotland management information systems respectively). Such linkage work could be enabled with increased usage of a common identifiers (e.g. children's Community Health Index [CHI] number) being used across different systems.



4. Conversation points

This briefing is designed to prompt discussion, debate, and consideration of what action could be taken to better understand Scotland's children and young people in need of care and protection, and how best to support them.

In February 2020, Scotland's Independent Care Review concluded and set out a way forward for care in Scotland through The Promise. Over the three years of its work, the review scrutinised data that is collected, and also commissioned and generated new research analyses to provide a comprehensive understanding of the care system in Scotland for all those who it is design to care for, and all those working to provide that support. [The Review highlighted a number of observations about the use and availability of data](#), including the value placed on quantitative (hard numbers) and qualitative (lived experience) data, and it is important to reflect on these here as we offer these conversation points:

1. What is not known about children and young people in need of care and protection that would help services to better support them and their families, and how can work be taken forward to identify, collate and analyse this information?
2. What are the journeys and outcomes of children and young people in need of care and protection that we want to understand through longitudinal data collection and linkage of individualised children's data?
3. What research, consultation and participation approaches have worked well in capturing the voice – views and experiences of children and young people – particularly younger children, disabled children, and children with additional support needs?
4. Current data appears to be limited to individual decisions and outcomes. How can we identify and analyse data about practices, services, and programmes and how these have been implemented so that we can assess their impact or otherwise?
5. How do we encourage and embed a more nuanced and sensitive analysis of data among leaders, managers, practitioners, community members and the media so that the needs, experiences and outcomes of children and young people, and the effectiveness of the services to support them, are better understood?



5. Summary

This briefing has looked at data that is often used to inform public debate and media headlines about the lives of Scotland's children in need of care and protection. What stands out is:

- Children and young people's lives and the service systems that exist to support them are dynamic in nature. Headline, snapshot date figures typically under-report how many children are in need of care and protection in Scotland and the nuances around the data and their experiences.
- Contextual information relating to significant changes in policy, practice and data recording processes impact on the data reported. Keeping a record of these changes supports the analysis and sense-making of the data.
- Scotland already has a lot of individualised data on children and young people. How can we bring together this data from different sources and use it in a smarter way? Data linkage is a technical answer to this, but a more practical, short-term response may be for agencies to come together and interrogate what their different data is telling them about their children in need of care and protection.

Definitions

- i. Looked after child:** A child or young person currently looked after in a formal arrangement with a local authority, typically, but not always, involving compulsory supervision arrangements following a children's hearing. Children can be looked after while remaining in the family home, with social work support, or in a kinship, foster or residential care placement.
- ii. Care experienced young person:** A young person who has been looked after by a local authority at any time in their life, including adopted children who were previously looked after by a local authority.
- iii. Care leaver:** A young person who was looked after on or after their 16th birthday and who is aged under 26.
- iiii. Aftercare:** The advice, guidance and assistance which all care experienced young people who were 'looked after' on or beyond their 16th birthday are entitled to receive from their local authority, until they reach their 26th birthday.

CELCIS is a leading improvement and innovation centre in Scotland.

We improve children's lives by supporting people and organisations to drive long-lasting change in the services they need, and the practices used by people responsible for their care.

CELCIS is part of the Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures, based at the University of Strathclyde.

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