

# Majority of children in care have experienced significant abuse and neglect

June 20 2019, by Shelley Hughes

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The study highlights the importance of finding stable placements for children taken into care as soon as possible. Credit: University of York

A joint study by researchers at the Universities of York and Stirling has found that 90 percent of children in Scotland who go into care when aged five or under have experienced significant abuse and neglect before they enter the care system.

The study looked at Scottish Government data on the pathways into and through the [care system](#) for children aged five or under who were placed in care (or "looked after away from home") during one year and followed their progress over four years.

Before going into care two-thirds of the children had suffered multiple forms of maltreatment, including [neglect](#) and emotional, physical or sexual [abuse](#). For nearly three-quarters of the children, the abuse was rated as severe and half of the children had experienced neglect while in the womb, due to continuing alcohol or drug misuse during pregnancy.

While the study only looked at data from children in care in Scotland, the pattern is likely to be similar for [young children](#) taken into care elsewhere in the UK, the researchers say.

## **Serious concerns**

Co-director of the study, Professor Nina Biehal from the Department of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of York, said: "Our study highlights some distressing statistics about the level of abuse children have experienced before coming into care.

"The nature and severity of the maltreatment children were subjected to before they entered care suggests that the thresholds for removing them from their parents were high.

"Our findings show that in the vast majority of cases decisions to remove children from their parents were strongly influenced by serious concerns about abuse and neglect. There was no evidence that such decisions are taken lightly."

Additional concerns which contributed to the decision to take children into care included parental drug and alcohol misuse, domestic violence,

[mental health problems](#) and the prior maltreatment of other children. Many of the parents were known to have themselves experienced abuse or neglect in childhood.

## **Proactive support**

Co-director of the study, Dr. Helen Whincup from the University of Stirling, said: "Our findings point to the need for early and proactive support for parents with children at risk of being taken in to care."

The study also looked at the longer-term effects on the children after they entered the care system, tracking them over four years. A screening measure of mental disorders completed by the children's caregivers indicated that 28 percent had mental health difficulties, more than double the proportion found in the general population of children.

Children who had experienced three or more changes of placement and those who entered foster or adoptive homes when they were over three years-old were more likely to experience mental health difficulties than other children.

## **Stable placements**

Professor Biehal said: "We know that children who have experienced abuse and neglect are more likely to experience mental health difficulties. The study highlights the importance of finding stable placements for children as soon as possible.

"Moving children to a settled, stable home in their [early years](#) greatly helps to mitigate the long-term effects of neglect and abuse on development and mental health."

By the end of the study, nearly one-third of the children had returned to their parents and 16 percent had been adopted. However there was considerable delay in adoption. Although most of the adopted children had entered care before they were one year old, the majority were not adopted until three to four years later.

Three to four years after they entered care, nearly one-third of the children still lacked the security of legal permanence—through either a return home, a permanent placement with relatives or long-term foster carers or through adoption.

Robin Duncan, Director of Adoption and Fostering Alliance (AFA) Scotland, said: "I am delighted to see this research come to fruition and commend the researchers for analysing such a phenomenal amount of data about children's experience of abuse and neglect; this should now guide how support to vulnerable [children](#) and their families is provided."

**More information:** Grant, M., Whincup, H., Burgess, C. (2019) Perspectives on kinship care, foster care and adoption: the voices of children, carers and adoptive parents.  
[www.york.ac.uk/media/spsw/pdf/Final%20Report%20-%20Children%20Carers%20and%20Adoptive%20Parents.pdf](http://www.york.ac.uk/media/spsw/pdf/Final%20Report%20-%20Children%20Carers%20and%20Adoptive%20Parents.pdf)

Provided by University of York

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