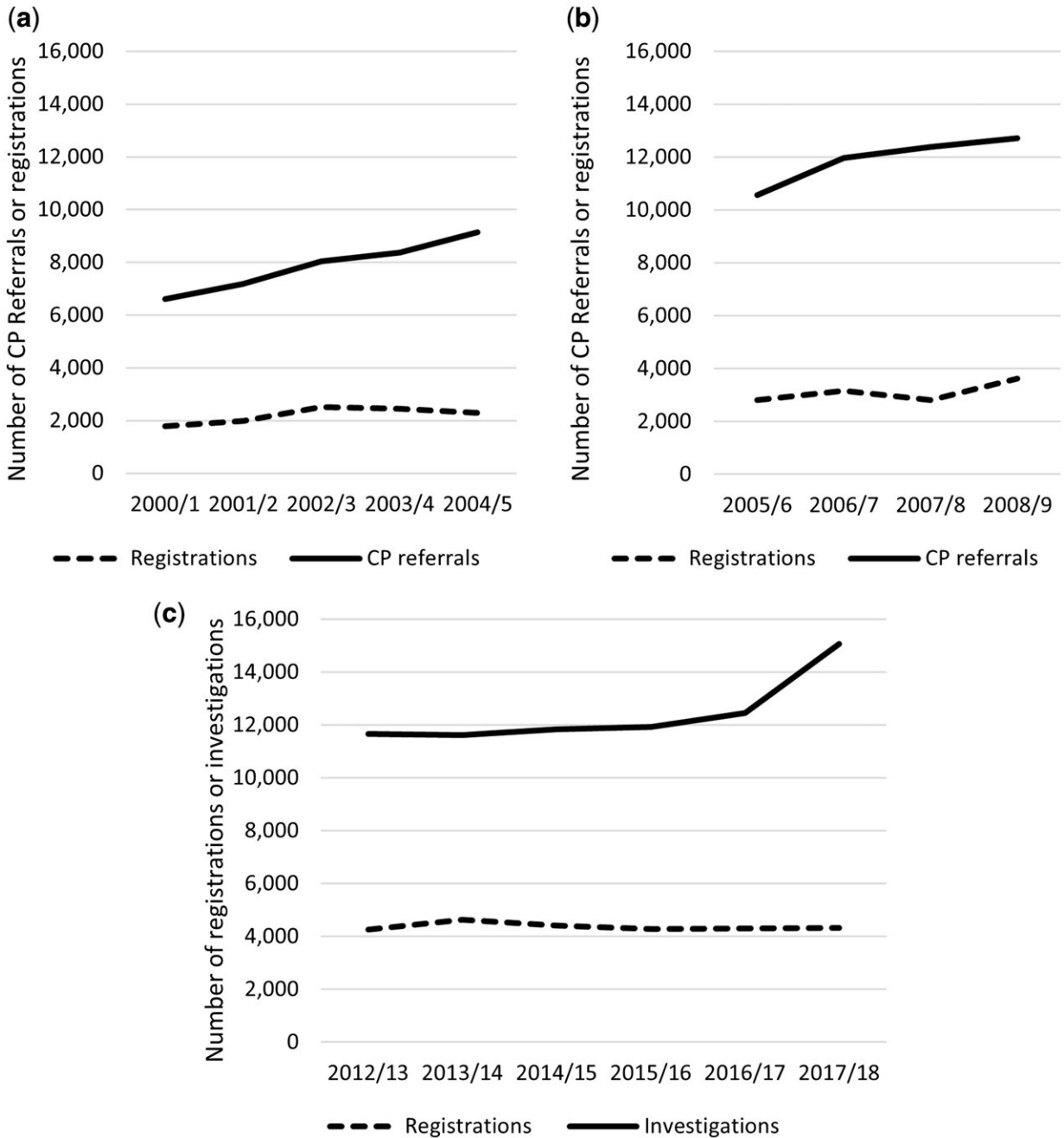


# **One in four of all children in Scotland are referred to children's social care before their fifth birthday**

February 23 2023

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Three graphs showing investigations or child protection referrals and annual number of child protection registrations in Scotland. (a) Registrations and CP referrals—child protection referrals count the number of children who had a child protection referral. (b) Registrations and CP referrals—child protection referrals count the total number of child protection referrals. (c) Registrations and CP investigations—in 2017/18, the City of Glasgow did not submit data on the number of investigations, figures for Glasgow’s submission in 2016/17 have

been added to the 2017/18 total. Source: (a and b) Scottish Government (2009), [Table 1](#). (c) [Bilson \(2022\)](#). Credit: *The British Journal of Social Work* (2023). DOI: 10.1093/bjsw/bcad079

More than one in four of all children in Scotland are referred to children's social care before their fifth birthday, according to new research.

The study, completed by University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) Emeritus Professor Andy Bilson and independent researcher Marion Macleod, also found that one in 17 children had been investigated for concerns about child protection; and one in 38 had been subject of compulsory measures of care before their fifth birthday.

Published today in the peer-reviewed *British Journal of Social Work*, the study collected data via Freedom of Information (FOI) requests from all the 32 [local authorities](#) in Scotland. Conducted in 2019, it asked for information about how many children born in the year ending 31 July 2013 had reached the various stages of the child protection process before their fifth birthday.

"It shows that a family's chance of being investigated for abuse depends very much on where you live. This matters because a wide range of research and Scotland's own Care Review shows how families and children are harmed by being investigated unnecessarily," says UCLan Emeritus Professor of Social Work Andy Bilson.

The data showed that 13,784 children had been notified to children's social work before their fifth birthday because of concerns about their welfare, a rate of 26.5% of children born in 2012 in the 27 local authorities providing this data.

One in every 17 children, a rate of 6.0%, had been subject of a child protection investigation which triggers when there are concerns that they are suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. And one in 26, a rate of 3.8% of all children, had been placed on the Child Protection Register before their fifth birthday.

The likelihood of being investigated varied widely between local authorities and this wasn't wholly due to differences in the levels of social deprivation as might be initially expected.

Clackmannanshire had the highest rate of investigations, with 18.5% of all children investigated before the age of five. The likelihood of being investigated for abuse ranged from almost one in five in Clackmannanshire to just over one in fifty (2.1%) in Aberdeenshire.

The rate of investigations had little relationship to the level of deprivation in the local authorities. The six most deprived areas (Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Ayrshire, West Dunbartonshire, Dundee City and North Lanarkshire) had less than half the rate of investigations of Clackmannanshire and the other four of the five local authorities with the highest rates of children investigated (Dumfries & Galloway, Falkirk, Midlothian and South Ayrshire) were all in the least deprived half of local authorities.

The rates of children who had been on the [child protection](#) register before the age of five also varied, but with a smaller range from 1.6% in Aberdeenshire to 7.6% in Angus.

The study found disparities in the rates of other interventions. For example, Children in Dundee were much more likely to have been taken into care or adopted than other local authorities, with 2.0% of all children adopted before the age of five—a rate more than two times higher than the second ranked authority (East Ayrshire).

"Local authorities have been put in a position of fear of missing a child being harmed to the extent that resources are so focussed on investigation and children in care, leaving increasingly little left to support families and prevent harm," says Bilson.

This indicates a major difference in a child's chances of being subject of a social work intervention depending on the local authority in which they live.

The researchers are calling for a paradigm change in children's services in Scotland where twice as many children are now in care than 20 years ago, despite a Scottish Government review in 2019 that found the current system doesn't work.

UCLan Emeritus Professor of Social Work Andy Bilson said, "This study shows the high rate of social work interventions in children's lives. It also shows that a family's chance of being investigated for abuse depends very much on where you live. This matters because a wide range of research and Scotland's own Care Review shows how families and children are harmed by being investigated unnecessarily.

"Sadly, even though we are seeing such large numbers of children referred to children's services, we still see tragic cases of child abuse slip through the net. Local authorities have been put in a position of fear of missing a [child](#) being harmed to the extent that resources are so focussed on investigation and [children](#) in care, leaving increasingly little left to support families and prevent harm."

**More information:** Andy Bilson et al, Social Work Interventions with Children under 5 in Scotland: Over a Quarter Referred and One in Seventeen Investigated with Wide Variations between Local Authorities, *The British Journal of Social Work* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/bjsw/bcad079](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad079)

Provided by University of Central Lancashire

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