

# Scotland's most vulnerable children wait years for placement in permanent homes: Report

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Scotland's care system is taking years to find many of the country's most vulnerable children permanent homes—and too many of them have no

contact with their siblings, according to new research.

The study of more than 1,800 [children](#) "looked after" in Scotland reveals that it took, on average, more than two years to find them a permanent home, and more than 1 in 10 were in temporary placements 10 years after becoming looked after.

The researchers found that 91% of children had experienced maltreatment before being taken into care, and that the proportion of children with emotional and behavioral problems, as reported by caregivers, was five times higher than that seen in the general population of children.

The study also found that the whereabouts of nearly 1 in 10 (9%) of children was unclear in the administrative data, as there was a lack of "crucial" information.

Researchers on the Permanently Progressing longitudinal study, led by the University of Stirling in collaboration with Lancaster University, and the Association for Fostering, Kinship & Adoption Scotland (AFKA), have been looking at the lives of all 1,836 children who became looked after in Scotland aged 5 or under in 2012–13, tracking their progress from infant to adult.

Key findings of the study's second phase were [published](#) at a major conference in Stirling on Tuesday, 10 September, 2024.

Dr. Helen Whincup, Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Stirling, who led the study, said, "Despite the numbers of children and families involved, there have been gaps in what is known about children's pathways through the care system, their route and time to living in permanent families, and what influences outcomes and well-being.

"Since 2014, the research team have been addressing these gaps by gathering and analyzing data."

Phase 1, covering 2014 to 2018, was reported in 2019: "Permanently Progressing? Building secure futures for children in Scotland."

Phase 2 analyzed administrative data—the Children Looked After Statistics (CLAS) up to the end of July 2022, education data, and surveys of social workers and kinship caregivers (usually relatives), foster caregivers and adoptive parents. The team also interviewed caregivers across adoptive, kin and foster families, children and young people, and birth parents.

A core aim of Scottish Government policy and practice guidance is that children should have stable, loving and permanent homes throughout their childhoods and into adulthood, and that decisions about permanence should be timely.

Findings of the study included:

- More than 79% (1,458) of children were in homes intended to be permanent, but this took a long time; the average time to permanence was more than two years.
- More than one in 10 children (12%) were still, or again, in impermanent placements.
- Decisions made early in children's lives influenced their permanence status in 2022, with children becoming looked after under the age of 1 more likely to be adopted.
- Contact with brothers and sisters varied according to where children lived (kinship care, foster care, or if they were adopted).
- Some had several moves—almost two-thirds (64%) of children who had ever been looked after away from home had two or more placements, and one in 10 (10%) children had five or more.

One child told researchers: "When I was younger, nobody was telling me what was going on, just moving me, almost like a piece on the chessboard. "Just leave him there for now or take him back?" "No, move him here."

The Scottish Government is the "corporate parent" for care-experienced children, but crucial information about children was missing from administrative data, and for 9% of children there was not enough detail to tell their permanence status. In addition, ethnicity was recorded as "unknown" for 8% of children. The team says this means the evidence base on how ethnicity influences outcomes is compromised.

Dr. Whincup said, "The Children Looked After Statistics can tell us whether children are adopted, but not whether the adoption has broken down. This is a major gap given the impact of breakdown for children and their families, and the support they are likely to require. This gap could be closed if administrative data recorded whether children entering care were previously adopted."

She added, "While it is heartening that permanence has been achieved for most of the children, it is worrying that for many this took over two years—a long time in a child's life.

"It is also concerning that 1 in 10 of children had five or more placements, and 10 years after becoming looked after more than 1 in 10 children were still, or again, in impermanent placements.

"This is not what we would want for any child."

Caregivers reported more than a third (36%) of children as having a long-standing illness, disability or health problem affecting their day-to-day activities.

"This gives some sense of the level of support the children and their caregivers—whether kinship caregivers, foster caregivers and [adoptive parents](#)—will continue to need," said co-investigator Dr. Linda Cusworth of Lancaster University.

A report from the Independent Care Review, known as "The Promise" (2020), reaffirmed that children should live with their brothers and sisters, and where this is not possible, local authorities have a duty to maintain connections. This duty is now set out in Section 13 Children (Scotland) Act 2020.

Almost half of the 98 children whose caregivers completed the Permanently Progressing Phase 2 survey have no contact with brothers and sisters they live apart from.

Dr. Paula Jacobs, Research Fellow at the University of Stirling, who was involved in interviewing children and caregivers, said, "We heard about the complexity of renewing or maintaining connections across different families, where children may have different needs.

"While not underestimating the sensitivity needed to maintain or renew connections, the fact that so many children do not currently have any form of contact with their brothers and sisters is stark."

In July 2023, [12,206 children](#) remained "looked after" in Scotland.

The Permanently Progressing study was funded by a philanthropic donor and the Nuffield Foundation. Ash Patel, Program Head Justice at the Nuffield Foundation, said, "This pioneering research provides the richest and most textured insight into the experiences of children in the Scottish care system, highlighting their often-long journey towards permanence, living in a stable and loving home.

"It is perhaps the most detailed study of its kind in the U.K. and provides a dynamic picture of the vulnerability and resilience of the children and their caregivers. In this important research, Dr. Whincup and her colleagues also offer clear evidence base about the holistic care and support needed by both children and families."

**More information:** Key findings from Phase Two: final report and accessible summaries – Permanently Progressing? Building secure futures for children in Scotland. [permanentlyprogressing.stir.ac ... ccessible-summaries/](https://permanentlyprogressing.stir.ac.uk/accessible-summaries/)

Provided by Lancaster University

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