

**CHILD WELFARE:  
HOW ENGLISH SPEAKING COUNTRIES ARE LOSING THEIR  
WAY**

**Dr Andy Bilson**

Emeritus Professor of Social Work, University of Central Lancashire  
Adjunct Professor, University of Western Australia

## What I'll talk about



- International trends in child protection
- What is happening in England
- Does child protection protect children?
- Some thoughts on what this means for Finland



Across the English speaking industrialised countries a common trend in child protection has emerged. In country after country increasing numbers of children are drawn into the child protection system and their situations investigated for possible abuse by parents. For example, a recent study in the USA has shown that 37% of all children experience an investigation by child protection services before the age of eighteen and this increases to 53% for African American children. This 'investigative turn' with its large increases in child protection investigation is accompanied by reductions in support for families all taking place purportedly as a response to the economic crisis of 2008-09 and to promote the safety of children. However, this covers a significant change in the understanding of the role of the state and its relationship to the family. This ideological shift to what has been called *authoritarian neoliberalism* also includes a growing trend to contract out services which has spawned a market of 'evidence-based' programmes which embed its assumptions particularly about parental responsibility and blindness to the impact of poverty and inequality.

Andy will present these international trends before providing a case study of the changes in England drawing on information from his research into child protection and welfare. He will show that growing numbers of children are taken from their parents and placed in state care, guardianship or adoption. The basis for this growing removal of children is a focus on the rescue of children from 'future harm' attributed to exposure to neglect or emotional abuse. He will give an example of how a focus on child deaths and serious harm has led to misinterpretation of research and has exaggerated the risk of harm to children and led to policies that

mislead front line staff on the danger faced by children and lead to unnecessary and harmful practice. He will argue that the growing focus on safety rather than support for families has led to systems in need of significant reform.

# International Trends and Orientations

Gilbert, Parton & Skivenes, 2011 updated the study of Child Protection Orientations in 10 industrialised countries.

Key findings include:

- Initial categories of 'child protection' and 'family services' are converging and a 'child-focused orientation' emerging
  - a move towards a more paternalistic role for the state through which the interests of the child are valued above the institution and privacy of the family
- Increases in children in out of home care in 9 out of 10 countries studied



“The child protection approach framed abuse as the harmful behavior of malevolent parents, which called for legal investigation and public measures to control deviant, if not outright criminal, behavior.

family service orientation perceived the problem as a manifestation of family dysfunction stemming from psychological difficulties, marital troubles, and socio-economic stress, which are amenable to therapeutic interventions.”

“Changes in orientation in each country illustrate the ways in which competing demands of public expenditure, individual rights and the less tangible area of societal views on childhood come together to impact upon changes in policy and provision. All nations included in this discussion engage to some degree in these challenges and developments identified in policy and practice over the past ten to fifteen years reflect shifts arising from both global and internal social and political change. “

Gilbert, N., Parton, N. and Skivenes, M. (2011) Child Protection Systems: International Trends and Orientations, Oxford, Oxford University Press

## International Trends and Orientations The investigative Turn

The investigative turn in English speaking countries has left child welfare in crisis

- Increasing reports and investigations: Canada, USA, Australia, England, Scotland, Ireland
- High proportionate involvement in child protection:  
USA 37% New Zealand 25%  
Australia 25%



Across the English speaking industrialised countries a common trend in child protection has emerged. In country after country increasing numbers of children are drawn into the child protection system and their situations investigated for possible abuse by parents. The latest data shows increases in child protection investigations in Australia of 42% between 2012 to 2016, Canada, 74% between 1998 and 2008, and in the US, 17% between 2007 and 2015. In England between 2008 and 2017 investigations more than doubled (a 124.3% increase).

*High and growing levels of involvement:* a recent study in the USA has shown that 37% of all children experience an investigation by child protection services before the age of eighteen and this increases to 53% for African American children. 25% in New Zealand and Australia with far higher rates for Aboriginal children

All relevant references are linked in Bilson A (2008) More parents accused of child abuse than ever before TheConversation <https://theconversation.com/more-parents-accused-of-child-abuse-than-ever-before-100477>

This ideological shift to what has been called *authoritarian neoliberalism* also includes a growing trend to contract out services which has spawned a market of 'evidence-based' programmes which embed authoritarian neoliberal assumptions particularly about parental responsibility and blindness to the impact of poverty and inequality. If these programmes are brought in to a welfare oriented systems such as the one in Finland they risk contaminating practice with ideas and approaches that have led to this huge and damaging wave of intervention in children's lives in English speaking countries.

# Increasing use of foodbanks in the United Kingdom



Number of 3 day emergency food supplies in 2017-18 **1,332,952**

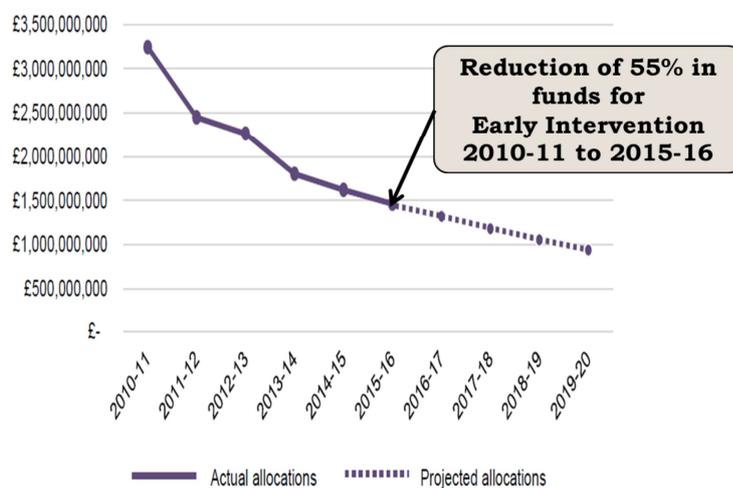
**484,026** of these went to children.

Low Income 28% Benefit Delays 24% Benefit change 18%



This 'investigative turn' with its large increases in child protection investigation is accompanied by reductions in support for families all taking place purportedly as a response to the economic crisis of 2008-09 and to promote the safety of children. However, this covers a significant change in the understanding of the role of the state and its relationship to the family. It includes rapidly increasing inequality – the massive increase in the use of foodbanks from 25,000 to 1 and a third million in just 9 years illustrates just one aspect of this rapid growth in poverty and inequality in England.

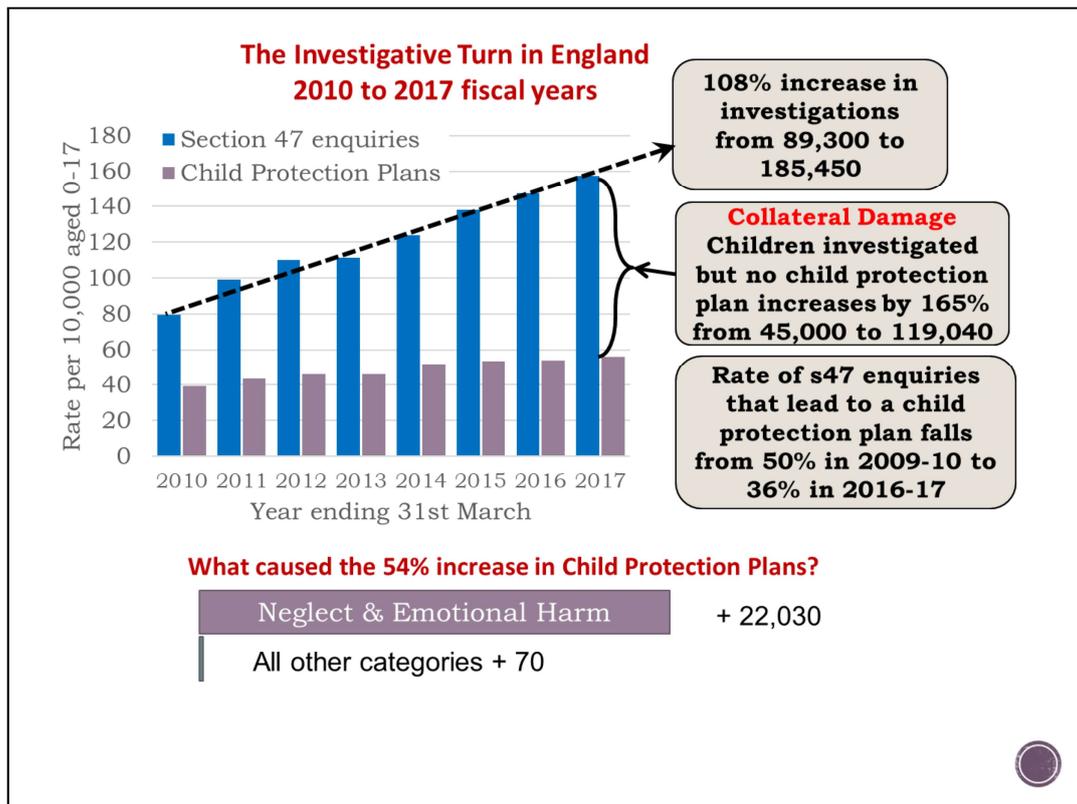
# Government expenditure on Early Intervention 2010 -2020



Source: *Losing in the long run: Trends in early intervention funding.*  
Action for Children, NCB, Children's Society



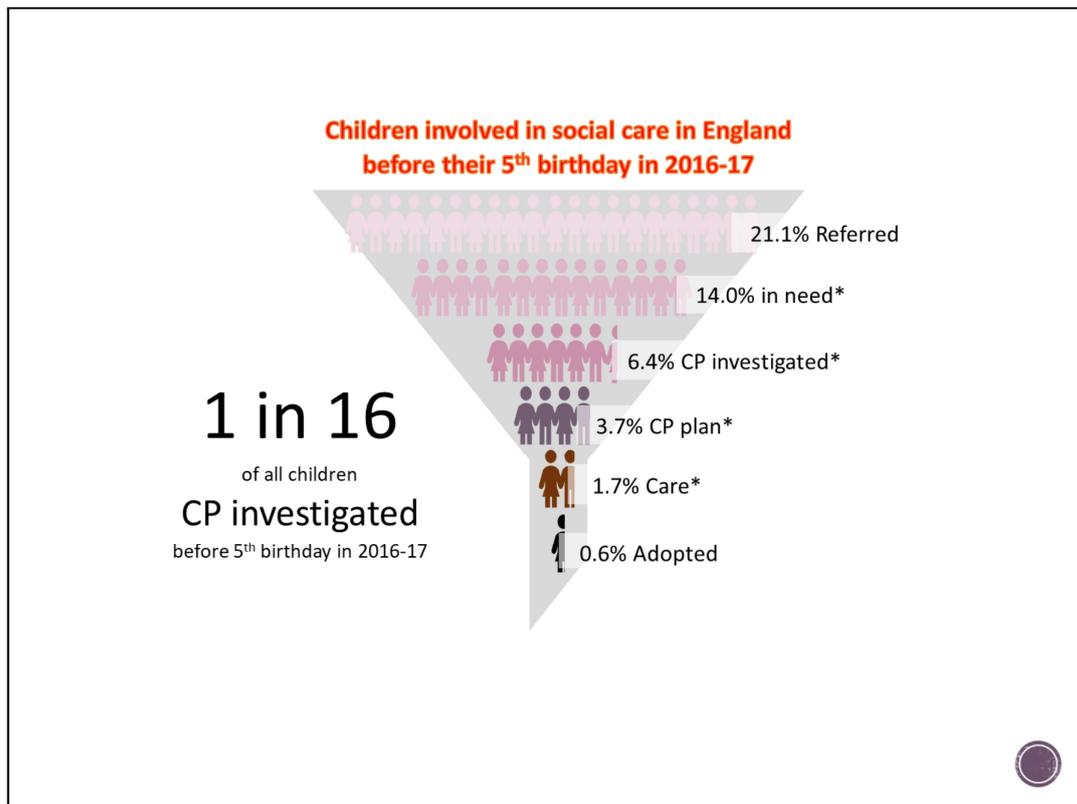
At the same time there have been massive cuts in welfare benefits as well as services aimed at supporting children – for example the expenditure on early intervention has now reduced by more than **£2 billion** and this is just one area where expenditure has fallen



Here is the pattern of statutory service responses to children. There is a huge increase in child protection investigations. 119,000 children's families investigated but without needing to be placed on a child protection plan. Each of these families are harmed by being suspected of abusing their child. This was not due to an increase in the number of referrals to children's services but instead to a dramatic change in the way referrals were responded to – in 2010 15% of referrals led to an investigation by 2017 this had doubled to 29%. The number of children on child protection plans increased by 54% almost **all** due to increases in Neglect and Emotional harm this accounted for 99.7% of the increase in CPPs (22,030 out of a total increase of 22,100)

These statistics are from my paper available below

[http://bilson.org.uk/wp\\_new/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Adoption-and-SG-prepublication.pdf](http://bilson.org.uk/wp_new/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Adoption-and-SG-prepublication.pdf)



Before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday last year

1 in 5 children referred to Children's Social Care

1 in 7 require a service to achieve acceptable levels of health or well-being

But these services have changed and almost half now are CP investigated.

Almost half of children who had been on a CP plan end in care and a third of children who enter care become adopted – and rates of adoption vary across the country – but more of that later

This is from my submitted paper available below

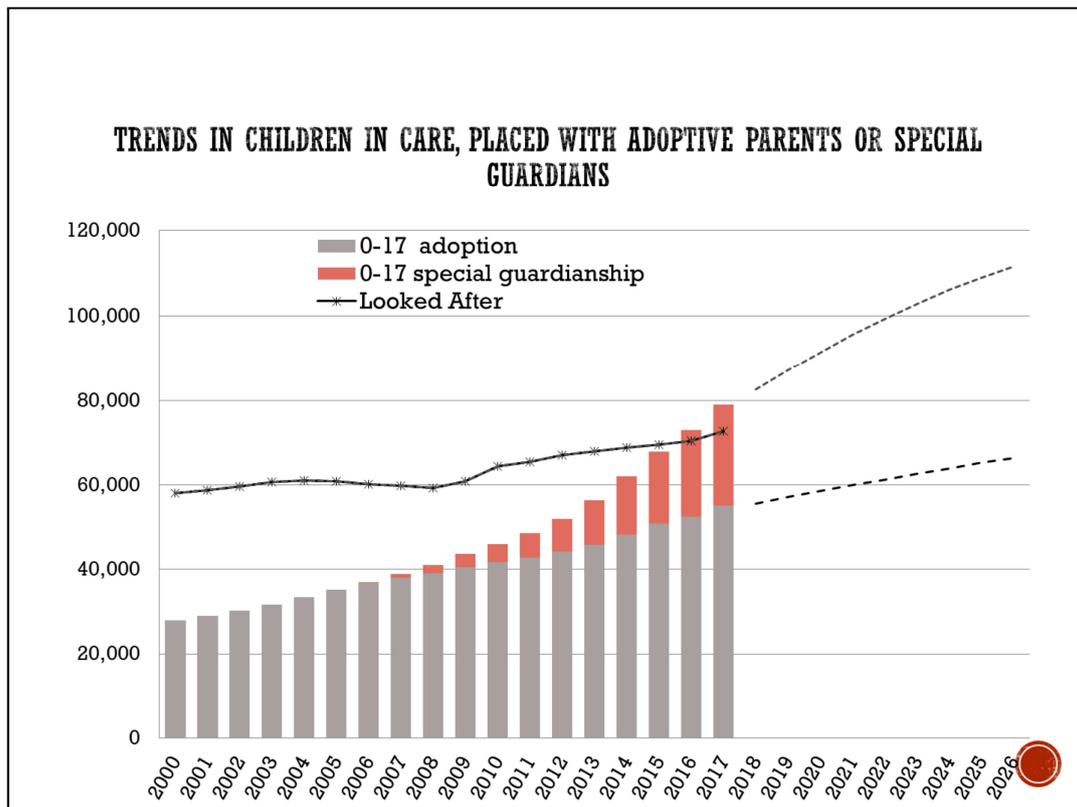
[http://bilson.org.uk/wp\\_new/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Adoption-and-SG-prepublication.pdf](http://bilson.org.uk/wp_new/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Adoption-and-SG-prepublication.pdf)



Compared to children born 5 years earlier there were the following increases in the number of children involved in children's services

So more investigations BUT child deaths haven't changed over this period. Massive increase in collateral damage to families and children This change is alongside increasing poverty and reducing support

This is from my submitted paper [http://bilson.org.uk/wp\\_new/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Adoption-and-SG-prepublication.pdf](http://bilson.org.uk/wp_new/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Adoption-and-SG-prepublication.pdf)



67% increase in children away from home 86,127 to 143,514

Both the numbers in care and living in permanent placements have risen

20% Increase in children staying for long periods in care despite the policy of increasing adoption being aimed at reducing long stays in care

Projections of numbers adopted or in special guardianship will continue to rise at 2017 rates beyond the next 10 years

This is from a Community Care article

<http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2017/02/09/the-governments-adoption-drive-isnt-doing-what-it-set-out-to-do/> but was updated in my extract from evidence submitted to Care Crisis review [http://bilson.org.uk/wp\\_new/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/community-care-update.pdf](http://bilson.org.uk/wp_new/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/community-care-update.pdf)

## **LESSONS FROM INCREASING PERMANENCY IN ENGLAND**

In England Adoption was introduced to replace long stays in care

- There is a large but hidden increase in children who are separated from parents
- Where adoption went up the most the number of children in care **INCREASED**
- Where adoption went up the least the number of children in care **FELL**



Promoting adoption has been accompanied by increases in children in care  
Analysis of patterns of adoption use show that:

Local authorities that are High users of adoption have increased numbers in care  
Low users of adoption have decreased numbers in care

Outcomes of care have not improved

This is from a the extract from evidence submitted to Care Crisis review by  
Professor Andy Bilson [http://bilson.org.uk/wp\\_new/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/community-care-update.pdf](http://bilson.org.uk/wp_new/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/community-care-update.pdf)

## Does Child Protection Protect children?

Gilbert et al. (2012a) used data in a comparison of six countries to consider trends in physical abuse and neglect in reports and outcomes focusing on children younger than eleven. Their conclusion was that:

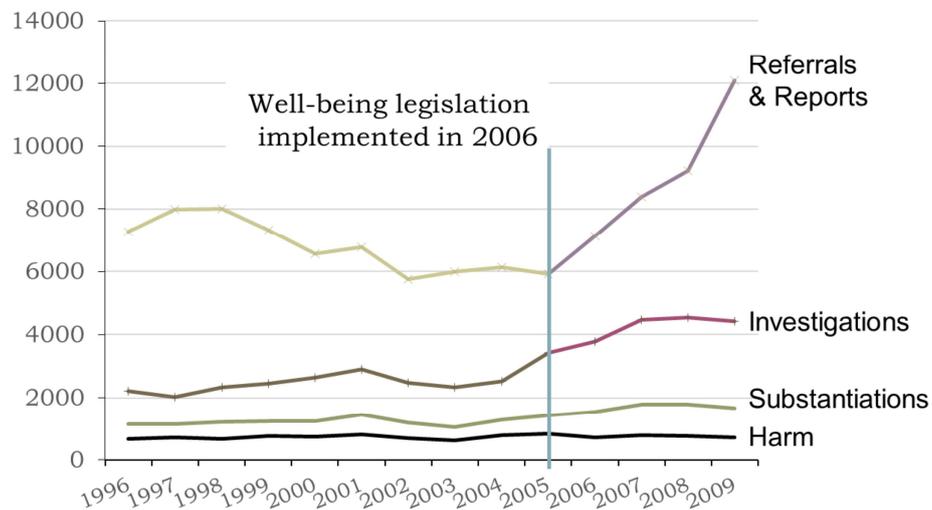
**Our results show no clear evidence for an overall decrease in child maltreatment despite decades of policies designed to achieve such reductions** (Gilbert et al., 2012, p. 770).



Only major study of outcomes at a national level across 6 countries

Gilbert, R., Fluke, J., O'Donnell, M., Gonzalez-Izquierdo, A., Brownell, M., Gulliver, P., Janson, S. and Sidebotham, P. (2012) 'Child maltreatment: Variation in trends and policies in six developed countries', *The Lancet*, 379(9817), pp. 758–72.

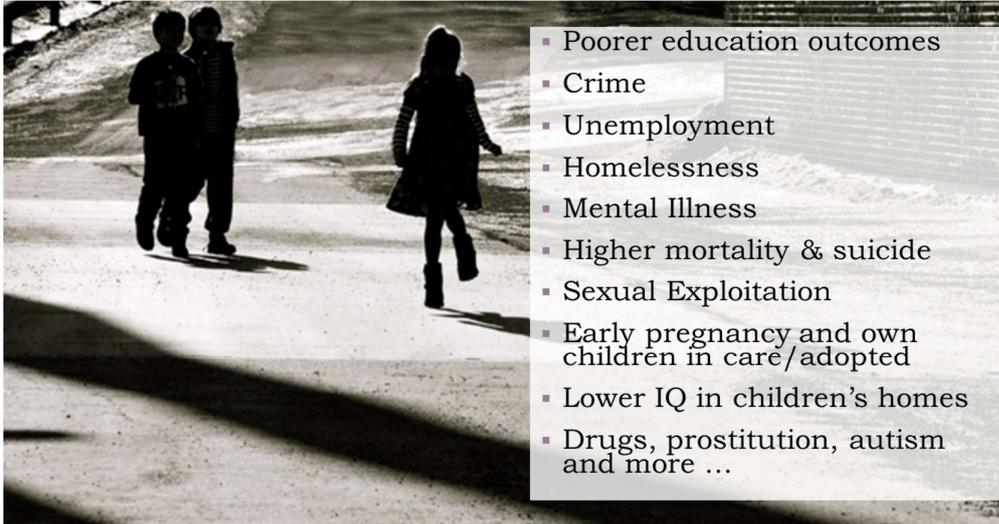
## Reports, Investigation and Harm in Western Australia 1996 to 2009



1. My study uses social worker's assessment of harm at the point of substantiation
2. O'Donnell et al. (2010:143) found that in WA between 1990 and 2005, **93.6% of those found to have been maltreated did not have a 'maltreatment' related hospital admission.**

Bilson, A., Cant, R., Harries, M., & Thorpe, D. H. (2017). Accounting for the increase of children in care in Western Australia: what can a client information system tell us?. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 72, 291-300.

## Outcomes of Care Across Europe



- Poorer education outcomes
- Crime
- Unemployment
- Homelessness
- Mental Illness
- Higher mortality & suicide
- Sexual Exploitation
- Early pregnancy and own children in care/adopted
- Lower IQ in children's homes
- Drugs, prostitution, autism and more ...

“Outcomes are poor even when compared to other children with roughly comparable backgrounds and problems.” [Source: UK Parliament 2009 ]

The following are from a range of sources many are summarised in the National Surveys of Children in Alternative Care by Eurochild

[https://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/public/05\\_Library/Thematic\\_priorities/06\\_Children\\_in\\_Alternative\\_Care/Eurochild/Eurochild\\_Publication\\_-\\_Children\\_in\\_Alternative\\_Care\\_-\\_2nd\\_Edition\\_January2010.pdf](https://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/public/05_Library/Thematic_priorities/06_Children_in_Alternative_Care/Eurochild/Eurochild_Publication_-_Children_in_Alternative_Care_-_2nd_Edition_January2010.pdf)

Higher mortality & suicide (e.g. Austria, Finland, Russia, Sweden)

Poor education (e.g. Austria, England, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands)

Crime (e.g. Austria, England, Sweden)

Unemployment (e.g. Austria, England, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Sweden)

Homelessness (e.g. Austria, England, Hungary, Ireland)

**Mental Illness** (Sweden UK adopted romanian orphans)

IQ - Van IJzendoorn MH, Luijk MPCM, Juffer F (2008) IQ of children growing up in children's homes: A meta-analysis on IQ delays in orphanages. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 54(3): 341–356.

Young women aged 15 to 17 who have been in care are 3 times more likely to become teenage mothers than others of their age;

## Finland: Some Questions

- What are the trends here?
- Are too many children coming into care and what are the outcomes?

### THE NUMBERS OF CHILD WELFARE NOTIFICATIONS AND EMERGENCY PLACEMENTS GREW IN 2017

- The number of child welfare notifications grew by 15 per cent in 2017.
- The number of children subject to emergency placements grew by 15 per cent since 2016
- In 2017, one per cent of the population's 0–17-year-olds were in care.
- 1.4 per cent of the population's 0–20-year-olds were placed outside the home.
- 4.5 per cent of the population's 0–20-year-olds were open care clients of child welfare services.

Statistical report 17/2018  
[[www.thl.fi/statistics/childmaintenance](http://www.thl.fi/statistics/childmaintenance)]

Finland has some very good outcomes but also some concerning trends. The increases in notifications to some extent mirror increasing child protection notifications in English Speaking countries. It is likely to overload agencies with work which detracts from the main task of promoting welfare. Whilst it may be thought that it is a good thing to notify children at an early stage there is a very real danger of causing the collateral damage seen in English speaking countries where families are harmed by intervention and avoid involvement with agencies even where children and families need help

# Finland: Some Questions

- What are the trends?
- Are too many children coming into care and what are the outcomes?
- Is there a change from child welfare orientation to 'child-focused orientation'?
- What are the outcomes for children in the Finnish child protection system?
- Should Finland promote adoption?
- Do you have good enough information to manage the child welfare system?
- Should you follow the lead of US and English speaking countries?

The total of children and young people placed outside the home, and the included numbers of children taken into care and children in emergency placement, 1991-2016\*

