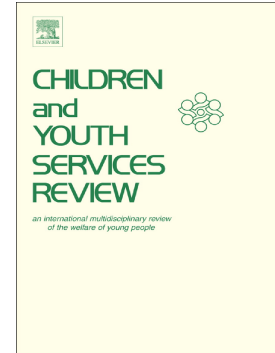


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Adoption and Child Protection Trends for children aged under five in England: Increasing investigations and hidden separation of children from their parents

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Abstract

This study provides an analysis of the ‘investigative turn’ in England by comparing two large cohorts of children, one whose fifth birthday was in 2011-12 and the other in 2016-17. It shows a 35% increase in children investigated before their fifth birthday to a rate of one in every 16 children in 2017. Investigations were less likely to lead to a child protection plan and there was a 60% increase in children facing the collateral damage of an unfounded investigation. Where it was deemed necessary to respond to child protection concerns with a plan of action concerns were focussed less on immediate safety and more on the long-term effects of neglect or emotional harm caused by a range of family related problems. The rate of children separated from their parents at the age of five had substantially increased and there were wide variations in adoption and child protection trends between local authorities. The study shows that the chances of a family receiving support or being split up are determined by national and local policies, resources and a growing culture of child rescue responses to family difficulties.

Key words: Adoption, Child protection, Children in care, Child protection investigations, Neglect, Emotional abuse, Special guardianship

Adoption and Child Protection Trends for children aged under five in England: Increasing investigations and hidden separation of children from their parents

1. Introduction

The response to children by the state particularly, though not exclusively, in English speaking post-industrial countries is increasingly investigative rather than welfare oriented (Bilson, 2018; Gilbert, 2012) and constitutes what has been called an investigative turn (Bilson, Featherstone and Martin, 2017). Child protection investigations have increased rapidly in Australia (42% between 2012 and 2016), Canada (74% between 1998 and 2008), the US (17% between 2007 and 2015; all rates cited in Bilson, 2018), and in England (122% between 2010 and 2018; DfE, 2018c). A large and growing proportion of the child population face the prospect of their family being investigated for suspected child abuse or neglect (37% in the US, Kim et al. 2017; 22.5% in South Australia, Delfabro et al, 2010; 23.5% in New Zealand, Rouland and Vaithianathan, 2018).

This study provides an anatomy of the investigative turn in England. The child welfare system in England is in crisis. Services to help children and families in difficulty have been decimated (Bilson, Featherstone & Martin, 2017); there are rapidly expanding numbers of care and adoption proceedings placing the court system in crisis (Butler, 2018); and many local authorities that provide child welfare services have overspent their budgets, largely due to increasing numbers of children in care, and face continuing reductions in budgets (Ellison and Renton, 2018). This paper identifies recent service trends that are behind this crisis showing how a system designed to promote welfare has increasingly become one of surveillance and child rescue.

In England local authorities purchase or provide children's social care services within a common legislative and national policy framework intended to promote child well-being and support families. The legislation requires local authorities to provide services to all children who are 'in need' where need is defined as requiring services to achieve or maintain a reasonable level of health or development or a child who is disabled (HM Government, 2018:21). The same legislation aims to prevent significant harm to individual children by requiring local authorities to carry out an investigation where such harm is suspected in order to decide whether action is needed to safeguard or promote the child's welfare (HM Government, 2018). There is an expectation that whether a child is assessed as being either a child in need or at risk of significant harm, that the necessary support is then provided by the relevant agencies to improve the child's welfare. Where, following an investigation, a child was found by a multi- agency case conference to have been suffering or to be likely to suffer significant harm a child protection plan is drawn up to protect the child and promote their well-being. For those children where it is decided that they are not able to remain living at home because of child protection concerns, the local authority may apply for a care order to place the child in state care (HM Government, 2015).

Since 2000, a key policy for all governments has been to reduce the numbers of children being looked after long term in state care by encouraging local authorities to place children in their care for adoption (HM Government, 2000; DfE 2016). A further aspect of this promotion of 'permanency' was special guardianship, which was introduced in legislation in 2005. A child for whom adoption is regarded as not appropriate, such as older children and those living stably with a relative or foster carer (DfE, 2015), can be placed with a special guardian on a permanent basis. The relatively high number of children in care in England alongside this expressed policy preference for placing children for adoption (often without parental consent), aligns England's child care policy to that of the US rather than to the

welfare approaches of most other European countries, where the focus is on preventing children coming into care by putting resources into strengthening families alongside a reluctance to place children for adoption (Sargent, 2003; Fenton-Glynn, 2016).

In 1999 2,060 children were adopted from state care in England, by 2017 the annual number of children adopted more than doubled to 4390 alongside 3650 placed in special guardianship (Bilson, 2017). Thus, almost four times as many children left care to permanent placements in 2017 compared to 1999. Over the same period the number of children in care has increased by 25% and is higher than for over 30 years and more children are spending long periods in care (Bilson, 2017). The president of the family division of the high court of England and Wales, Sir Andrew McFarlane, identifies the link in these trends to reducing support for families saying:

“It may properly be said that we have reached a stage where the threshold for obtaining a public law court order is noticeably low, whereas, no doubt as a result of the current financial climate, the threshold for a family being able to access specialist support services in the community is conversely, very high” (cited in Butler, 2018).

In order to understand how these trends in increasing investigation and the use of adoption relate to each other, this paper provides an analysis of data concerning two cohorts of children and their experience of children’s services before their fifth birthdays in the years ending 31st March 2012 and 2017. It also shows that despite these overarching national trends there are differences at local levels.

2. Methods

The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives every individual in the UK the right to request recorded information from any publicly funded body or organisation. This paper uses data from several freedom of information (FoI) requests. Two FoI requests obtained information

on the number of adoptions and special guardianship orders made in the whole of England for each of the financial years from 1994-5 to 2015-16 and the number of children in care on 31st March by age in single years on 31st March 1995 to 2016. This data provides a means to calculate the total number of children who have been placed in adoption or special guardianship and their ages at the end of any particular year. This calculation of what might be called the stock of children who had left care to be adopted or placed in special guardianship shows how many children aged under eighteen on the 31st March had experienced being separated from their parents in these placements.

A further series of FoI requests were sent to all 152 English local authorities requesting data on two cohorts of children. The 2012 cohort had their fifth birthday in the year ending 31/03/2012 and the 2017 cohort had their fifth birthday in the year ending 31/03/2017. These requests asked for data on the number of children who had, before their fifth birthday, been involved with different parts of children's services including adoption. The request also asked for the legal status of children who were looked after on 31/03/2012 and 31/03/2017 and this data is used as a proxy for the child being in care on their fifth birthday.

Ninety-three of the 152 local authorities provided some or all of the data requested for both the 2012 and 2017 cohorts and a further six provided data for 2017 only. Seventy local authorities provided complete data on looked after children and adoption for both cohorts and for other aspects of the data the numbers of local authorities on which results were based is given in the relevant tables. Office for National Statistics (2016, 2017) mid-year estimates of the number of children aged 5 in the relevant year is used to calculate rates per 10,000 children aged five for local authorities. This age was chosen in preference to the number aged under one because it was found that the population of five-year-olds was higher, particularly for the 2017 cohort. This means that estimates of rates are more conservative using this approach.

3.1 Limitations

Using FoI requests enabled the study to be undertaken quickly with wide coverage but limits the scope of the study in a number of ways. Some local authorities reported that they could not provide data over the periods given due to changes of information systems that limited reporting and in other cases because this would exceed the maximum time allowed for a freedom of information request.

The questions focussed only on data that was collected nationally to ensure that there would be consistency in the definitions and terms used but a small number of local authorities still reported in a different format for some questions. This particularly affected one question concerning the category of maltreatment when a first child protection plan was implemented. Nationally local authorities are asked to report on the main category of maltreatment, but some local authorities responded with data that had multiple categories (e.g. neglect plus physical abuse). These authorities were excluded from the analysis of this area.

In some cases where less than five children fell into a category the data was redacted. In these the mean value of the possible values of 1 to 4 (2.5) was used to allow inclusion in analysis. This may create a very small error on analyses that combine data across local authorities but may cause a larger discrepancy where findings on some individual small authorities are reported. Similarly, in the FoI request that collected data from the Department for Education on ages of children looked after, adopted or placed in special guardianship numbers were rounded to the nearest 10.

The ability to fully check the quality of the data is also limited. Checks were carried out through identifying logical anomalies such as whether the number of children experiencing child protection plans was higher than the number of children who had been investigated. In a small number of returns data was queried with the local authority and amendments received.

As a check that the responses to the FoI request reported on individual children rather than counting the number of referrals, the FoI request to local authorities asked for both the number of referrals on children in the cohort and the number of children referred. This check could not be included for all categories due to time limits for work on FoI requests, but this question was intended to highlight that other questions were focussed on the number of children. In the case of adoption and legal status of a child at 31st March there cannot be duplicates for individuals. In the absence of direct access to the data this means that the study is reliant on the skills of local information officers to accurately interpret the request and provide correct data.

Finally, this study is collecting data on children having contacts with individual local authorities. Some children may move between local authorities and have contacts with more than one and may then be counted twice. This will lead to a small error in totals when some of the categories of local authority data are combined.

The results for both sets of FoI requests are dealt with in the sections below. Where overall trends for all five-year-old children across England are reported this uses data from the Department for Education. Findings that focus on the two cohorts of children aged five use data from the local authority FoI requests.

3. Results and discussion

The study shows the current rate of involvement of children in the child welfare system before their fifth birthday and how this has changed relative to children born just five years earlier (see table 1). The data showed increases in both the number and rate of children involved in all levels of the child protection system (table 1) except for the number and rate of children looked after at 31st March which has a different pattern discussed below. Key findings are:

1. Large increases in investigations and higher proportion unfounded
2. Large increase in children separated from parents
3. Large differences in adoption and child protection trends between local authorities

Each of these findings is now discussed in turn and, because of the wide range of issues involved, findings include discussion of each issue.

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Table 1: Involvement in children's services showing comparisons of the 2012 and 2017 cohorts

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Number and rate per 10,000 children involved with children's services before the age of five

	2012 cohort Number of Children (Rate /10,000 children) ¹	2017 cohort Number of Children (rate/10,000 children) ¹	Increase or decrease in number of children and (rate of children) between 2012 and 2017 cohorts
<i>Referred to children's services data from 79 local authorities²</i>	67,144 (2,015)	78,101 (2,114)	+16% (+5%)
<i>Children in need data from 65 local authorities²</i>	31,061 (1,164)	41,372 (1,400)	+33% (+20%)
<i>Investigated (section 47 enquiry) data from 71 local authorities²</i>	14,700 (469)	22,178 (635)	+51% (+35%)
<i>Child protection plan data from 88 local authorities²</i>	11,713 (306)	15,932 (375)	+36% (+22%)
<i>Adopted data from 70 local authorities²</i>	1,221 (41)	1,856 (56)	+52% (+36%)

<i>Looked after before the age of five data from 70 local authorities²</i>	4,828 (161)	5,773 (173)	+20% (+7%)
<i>Number and rate per 10,000 children looked after on 31-03-2012 or 31-03-2017</i>			
<i>Not on a placement order data from 70 local authorities²</i>	944 (32)	1,008 (30)	+7% (-4%)
<i>On a placement order data from 70 local authorities²</i>	358 (12)	256 (8)	-28% (-36%)
¹ <i>Rate per 10,000 children aged 5 in mid-2016 and mid-2011</i>			
² <i>The number of local authorities with comparable data for this type of involvement</i>			

3.1 Large increases in investigations and higher proportion unfounded

The investigative turn found in many English-speaking countries (Bilson, Featherstone and Martin, 2017, Bilson 2018) is evident in these findings. The rate of children subject of a child protection investigation increased by 35% and children who had been on a child protection plan by 22% (table 1). This spiralling growth of child protection investigations (Bilson, 2018) means that *one in every sixteen children aged five in 2017* had been through a child protection investigation. In some local authorities this rate was even higher reaching a peak of more than one in six children in Blackpool and more than ten percent of all children in seven local authorities. Over half of child protection investigations are on children aged five and over so a much higher proportion of children will have been investigated by the time they age out of the child protection system.

This 35% increase in the rate of children investigated before the age of 5 (table 1) was not due to increasing referrals. There was little change in the proportion of children referred to children's services (table 1) nor were children referred more frequently. Where children were referred on more than one occasion the average was 1.77 referrals per child in the 2012 cohort and 1.74 in the 2017 cohort.

There was also an increase of 20% in the proportion of children who were assessed to be in need and require a service to protect their well-being (table 1). This increase means that one in every seven children aged five in 2017 had been assessed and found to be in need and this includes the growing numbers investigated for child protection concerns. This worrying statistic demonstrates a rapidly growing challenge to children's health and development. Despite the emphasis placed within governmental guidance (HM Government, 2018) on inter-agency working to promote preventive responses through providing 'early help' aimed to reduce the numbers in need, the government's austerity policies have undermined these good intentions by the evisceration of children's centres (Smith et al, 2018) and the rapidly reducing funds for anything but statutory services (Webb and Bywaters, 2018; Ellison and Renton, 2018). This removal of support is additional to the increasing poverty and inequality affecting a growing group of children and families due to cuts in benefit payments and, for those in employment, poor and insecure pay (Barnard et al 2017).

3.1.1 Increase in unfounded investigations

In England investigations not followed by a child protection plan increased almost three-fold between 2010 and 2018 (by 187%, DfE, 2018a) and at the same time the proportion of investigations followed by a plan fell from 50% to 35% (DfE, 2018a). This study showed a 60% increase from 1.6% of five-year-olds having experienced an investigation which did not find significant harm and lead to a plan to 2.6% between the two cohorts. Parents being accused of harming their child, even if subsequently found not to have done so, significantly

harms families and children (Davies, 2011) causing shame and stigma (Gibson, 2016; Smithson & Gibson, 2017) and rarely leads to help being offered or accepted even where a child is in need (Thorpe et al, 2011). This 60% increase in the rate of children investigated and found not to have been significantly harmed represents what might be considered collateral damage to *1 in every 38 children* before their fifth birthday.

In addition the focus of child protection engagement has changed. The category of maltreatment applicable when the child was first subject to a child protection plan is shown in table 2. *Neglect and emotional maltreatment were by far the most common reasons for a child protection plan* being the key category in three-quarters of plans. The rate of children on child protection plans starting because of emotional maltreatment and neglect had increased by 36% whilst those for sexual and physical maltreatment barely changed in the five years between these cohorts. Child protection plans mostly focussed on these areas rather than physical and sexual maltreatment which together accounted for 16.2% of plans in the 2017 cohort. This finding is similar to that of Trocmé et al (2014) in Canada who found that concerns focussed less on immediate safety and more on the long-term effects of a range of family related problems. However, there is little evidence to show that, at the population level, child protection activity of this sort reduces harm to children or promotes well-being. Gilbert et al (2012 p.758) in a study across six countries including England considering neglect and physical maltreatment in children younger than eleven found “no clear evidence for an overall decrease in child maltreatment despite decades of policies designed to achieve such reductions”.

If all this investigative action was effective in protecting children or preventing future harm we would expect to see a reduction in investigations and findings of abuse over time, but there has been an increasing rate of both for the last fifteen years in England. It is sad to note that despite the continued rise in investigations, the number of child deaths recorded by the

Child Death Overview Panels as being due to deliberately inflicted injury, abuse or neglect have changed little since 2010 fluctuating between a low of 30 in 2010 and a high of 62 in 2014 (DfE, 2017). This is likely to be a more accurate indicator of the deaths in child protection cases than the more general homicide rates often used (e.g. Bentley et al., 2017). This raises the key question of whether the increasingly investigative response to families does reduce risk of serious harm. At the same time and despite their wealth, the post-industrial English speaking countries with increasing investigations and child protection based policies are in the top fourteen rich OECD countries on measures of child health and well-being (Unicef, 2017 page 11). In England recent government policies have hollowed out support for families and increased inequality whilst promoting more and more investigations concentrated in the most deprived communities (Bywaters et al 2016). With no evidence of reductions in harm and the collateral damage to a growing minority of children and families, these policies need to change (Ellison and Renton 2018).

Table 2: Type of maltreatment recorded at the start of the first child protection plan

Number of children with this type of maltreatment recorded at the start of the first child protection plan

	2012 cohort	2017 cohort	Increase or decrease in number of children and (rate of children) between 2012 and 2017 cohorts
	Number of Children (Rate /10,000 children) ¹	Number of Children (rate/10,000 children) ¹	
<i>Neglect</i>	4795 (137)	6818 (177)	+42% (+28%)
<i>Physical</i>	1515 (44)	1851 (48)	+22% (+10%)
<i>Sexual</i>	444 (13)	512 (13)	+15% (+4%)
<i>Emotional</i>	2608 (75)	4279 (111)	+64% (+48%)
<i>Multiple/not recorded</i>	1112 (32)	1094 (28)	-2% (-12%)

Data is for 78 local authorities with complete data for both cohorts

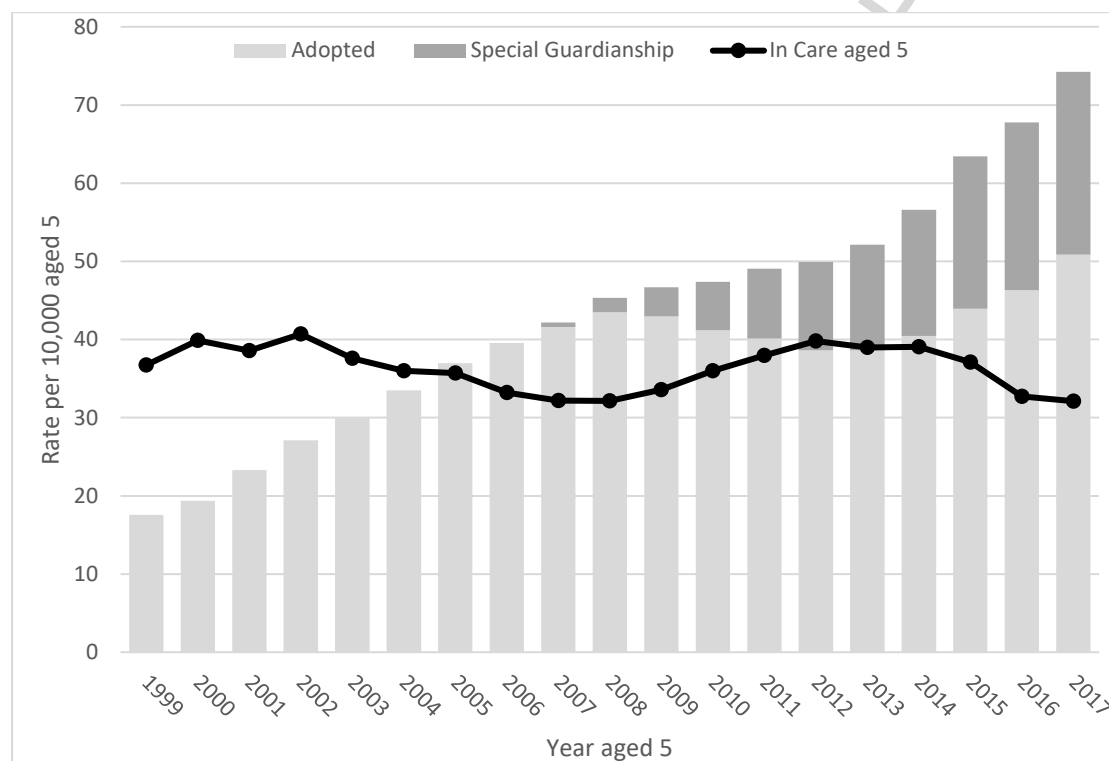
population of children aged 5 in mid-2011 was 347,385 and in mid-2016 was 386,218

3.2 Large hidden increase in children separated from parents

Gilbert's comparative analysis of data from 10 states showed that in 9 of the 10 the rate of children in state care had risen in the previous decade. In this study the rate of children who had experienced a period of being in care before the age of five had increased by 7%, but the rate of children in care at the age of five had reduced by 12% from 43 to 38 per 10,000 (table 1). However, the 36% increase in the rate of children adopted before the age of five means the combined rate of children separated from their parents has increased by up to 13% (some children who were adopted may have returned to state care due to an adoption breakdown so

there may be a small amount of double counting). Even this figure underestimates the numbers separated from their parents as it does not include those with special guardians for whom data was not available in the cohort study and the next part of this section uses the data from another FoI to look at this.

FIGURE 1: Rate per 10,000 children aged five who had been adopted, placed in special guardianship or were looked after on 31st March 1999-2017



Source: Freedom of information request to Department for Education

In 1999 before the change in government policy, 1500 children aged 0 to 4 years were adopted and special guardianship had not been introduced (DfE, 2018c). In 2017 these numbers placed permanently had significantly increased and 3,370 children were adopted and a further 2,170 placed with special guardians (DfE, 2018c). Government provides statistics on how many children were looked after on the 31st March each year but doesn't provide statistics for the stock of children who were living with adoptive parents or guardians.

Freedom of information requests have been used to calculate the rate of five year-olds who

had been placed for adoption or in special guardianship before their fifth birthday and this is shown in Figure 2 along with the rate of five-year-olds in care on 31st March each year. The graph shows that the rate of children in care at the age of five has fallen by 14% since 1999 from 37 to 32 per 10,000 five-year-old. In contrast the rate of children adopted or placed in special guardianship before their fifth birthday had increased by 322% between 1999 and 2017 from 18 to 74 per 10,000 five-year-olds.

Most of the children placed in adoption or special guardianship will still be in that placement as post-order disruption rates for both types of legal orders have been found to be low, with an overall disruption rate for adoption of 3.2% (Selwyn et al., 2014) and an estimated disruption rate for special guardianship of just under 6% (Wade et al., 2014). Adoption disruptions were more likely to occur five or more years after the adoption order was made, most commonly occurring during the teenage years. Whilst special guardianship order placements were found to be more likely to disrupt quickly and within two years of the legal order being made, the child being older at their entry into care was found to be a higher disruption risk factor for children on both types of order and means lower rates for these cohorts of children aged under 5.

Thus, the rate of children separated from their parents in care, adoption or special guardianship at the age of five has increased from a figure likely to be just under 55 per 10,000 in 1999 to just below 108 in 2017. The intention of government policies that adoption and special guardianship would replace care has clearly not been fulfilled (see also Bilson 2017) and because figures for the stock of children placed in adoption and special guardianship are not published this is a hidden increase in children separated from their parents.

3.3 Large differences in trends between local authorities

There were significant differences in trends between the 152 local authorities and these are now considered. The number of children who had an adoption decision and were either adopted or in care on a placement order waiting for adoption had increased but the change was lower than for adoptions alone (34% increase in numbers and 20% in rate). This trend for children with adoption decisions is used here as it more fully reflects the continuing trend in adoptions and removes some of the differences between cohorts due to reductions in the time taken to place children with adoptive parents in recent years.

The changes in children with adoption decisions between the 2012 and 2017 cohorts in each of the 70 local authorities are shown in figure 1. In the 2017 cohort *there was a twelve-fold difference in rates of adoption between the local authority with the highest and lowest rates.*

FIGURE 3: Rate of children with formal adoption decisions 2012 and 2017 cohorts

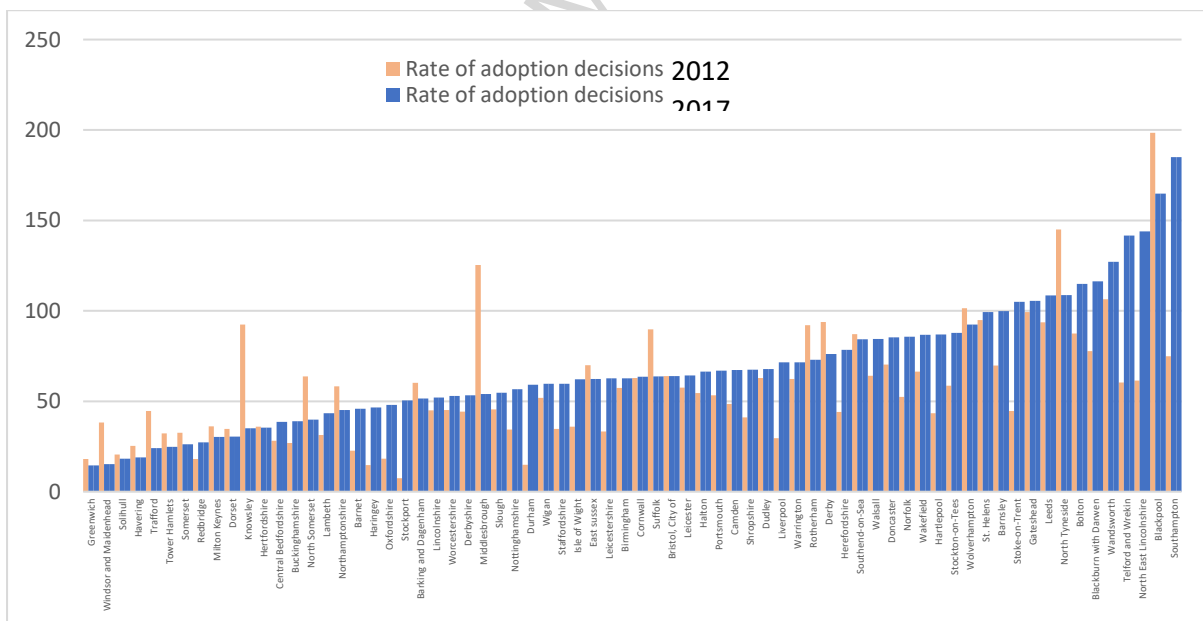


Table 3: Four patterns of change in rates of adoption between cohorts

<i>Pattern</i>	<i>Number of local authorities</i>	<i>Criteria for inclusion in this pattern based on change in rate of adoptions between 2012 and 2017 cohorts</i>
<i>Large increase</i>	20	Increase in the rate adopted greater than 25/10,000 children
<i>Small increase</i>	13	Increase in the rate adopted between 10 and 25/10,000 children
<i>Little change</i>	26	Change in rate adopted between +10 and -10 /10,000 children
<i>Reduction</i>	11	Decrease in rate adopted greater than 10/10,000 children

3.3.2 Poor quality indicator used to promote adoption

The Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board is responsible for leading the implementation of government policies on adoption. It ranks local authorities on their performance against key indicators (DfE 2016). Most of the performance measures focus on the timeliness of adoption activities and the recruitment of adopters. The main indicator used to assess the local authority's level of use of adoption is the percentage of children leaving care to be adopted and here the guidance (DfE, 2018 p.10) says: "A higher percentage represents good performance, but percentages should not reach 100%". This indicator was calculated for each of the 70 local authorities in this study but *was not sensitive to different patterns of child protection intervention or to the differences in rates of entry to care seen in practice and reflected in the FoI data.*

For example, Blackburn with Darwen had a highly ranked score of 27% on this indicator for the period 2015-2017. This authority had a high adoption rate of 116 per 10,000 children. At 326 per 10,000, it also had one of the highest rates of children entering care before the age of five following a 74% increase in children entering care between the two cohorts. Child

protection activity was also very high with 1,020 per 10,000 (over 10% of children) being investigated before the age of five – a rate that nearly doubled between the two cohorts. In contrast Wigan, a similar nearby local authority, also had 27% of children leaving care for adoption in 2015-2017. However, it had substantially lower rates than Blackburn with Darwen's at 60 per 10,000 adopted; 162 per 10,000 entry to care and 617 per 10,000 for section 47 investigations. *It is hard to understand how the percentage of children leaving care for adoption can be regarded as an indicator of good practice when it is underpinned by such diverse patterns of activity.*

3.3.2 Four patterns of change in adoption and child protection activity

There were four different patterns of change in the rate of children being adopted which are shown in table 3 and details of how rates of involvement at different levels of children's services had changed against these four patterns are shown in table 4. One group of eleven local authorities had a *reduction* in the rates of adoption decisions of more than 10 per 10,000. This group had generally had higher than average rates of adoption decisions in the 2012 cohort and had fallen to close to the average of 56/10,000 in 2017 (from an average of 85 to 59 per 10,000). Twenty-six local authorities had *little change* in rates of adoption decisions and another thirteen had a *small increase* of between 10 and 25 per 10000.

The remaining twenty local authorities had a *large increase* in the rate of adoption decisions of more than 25 per 10000 – more than double the average change between these two periods (table 4). This latter group had a rate of children having an adoption decision below the average for the 2012 cohort, but this had almost doubled by the 2017 cohort (from 41 to 80 per 10,000). This increase was because of both a 30% increase in children entering care before the age of 5 in these authorities (from 169 to 207 per 10,000) alongside an increase in the proportion of these children entering care who were adopted which increased from 25.4% to 38.5%.

The changes in this group of authorities were associated with a larger than average increase in involvement in children's social care at all levels (table 4). The group stood out having the largest increases in all measures of activity concerned with child protection (table 4). The rate of children on child protection plans had risen by over 52% compared to a change of 18% in the other local authorities. The rate of children who had been investigated under section 47 increased by 90% almost three times the next highest increase (table 4).

A more detailed analysis of the reasons for children being put on child protection plans showed that all categories of abuse had risen in the local authorities with a large increase in adoption but that emotional harm and neglect had more than doubled (114% increase) compared to a 26% increase in other local authorities. Physical abuse in these authorities rose by 64% compared to a 6% increase in other authorities and sexual abuse by 38% compared to 6% elsewhere. There were no significant differences in rates of deprivation between local authorities with these different patterns of adoption and child protection activity. Thus either there was a far larger change in all types of abuse in the authorities with a large change in adoption or this was due to lowering thresholds for investigations and child protection plans. These changes occurred at a time when government's approach to child protection changed from a focus on supporting families to a child-centred approach (Parton and Williams, 2017) promoting a culture of rescue, with key guidance stating: "A desire to think the best of adults and to hope they can overcome their difficulties should not trump the need to rescue children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes." (cited in Parton and Williams, 2017 page 90).

Table 4: Rate of Involvement with children's social care for the four patterns of change in adoption

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Patterns of change in rate of children adopted

	<i>2012 cohort Rate /10,000</i>	<i>2017 cohort Rate /10,000</i>	<i>Increase or decrease in rate /10000 children between 2012 and 2017 cohorts</i>
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Adopted or on a placement order at age 5

<i>Large increase</i>	41	80	+96%
<i>Small increase</i>	54	71	+32%
<i>Little change</i>	50	51	+3%
<i>Reduction</i>	85	59	-31%
<i>All local authorities</i>	53	64	+21%

Entered care before age 5

<i>Large increase</i>	160	207	+30%
<i>Small increase</i>	169	178	+6%
<i>Little change</i>	154	150	-2%
<i>Reduction</i>	178	172	-3%
<i>All local authorities</i>	161	173	+7%

Entered care and not on a placement order on 31/03/12 or 31/03/17

<i>Large increase</i>	37	42	+14%
<i>Small increase</i>	44	29	-35%
<i>Little change</i>	26	26	0%
<i>Reduction</i>	22	24	+9%
<i>All local authorities</i>	32	30	-4%

Child protection plan before age 5

<i>Large increase</i>	278	422	+52%
<i>Small increase</i>	317	370	+17%

<i>Little change</i>	304	352	+16%
<i>Reduction</i>	318	404	+27%
<i>All local authorities</i>	306	375	+22%
<i>Section 47 enquiry before age 5</i>			
<i>Large increase</i>	410	778	+90%
<i>Small increase</i>	543	722	+33%
<i>Little change</i>	455	602	+32%
<i>Reduction</i>	442	525	+19%
<i>All local authorities</i>	469	635	+35%
<i>In Need before the age of 5</i>			
<i>Large increase</i>	1272	1820	+43%
<i>Small increase</i>	1238	1499	+21%
<i>Little change</i>	864	1024	+19%
<i>Reduction</i>	1486	1763	+19%
<i>All local authorities</i>	1164	1400	+20%
<i>Referred before the age of 5</i>			
<i>Large increase</i>	1731	2311	+33%
<i>Small increase</i>	2062	2153	+4%
<i>Little change</i>	1995	2125	+7%
<i>Reduction</i>	1749	2080	+19%
<i>All local authorities</i>	2015	2114	+5%

5. Conclusion

The findings above show the impact of current policies and resource decisions in the child protection system. Firstly, there has been a substantial increase in the number of children

placed away from their parents across England as a whole. The full extent of this has been hidden since the numbers living on any one day in adoptive families and special guardianship are not estimated or published. Secondly there are large disparities between local authorities in the rate of children being adopted or on placement orders with high and increasing rates of decisions to adopt children accompanying large increases in child protection investigations and children in need. These large differences are between authorities with similar demography.

The finding that the group of authorities with the biggest increase in adoption also had large increases in all levels of involvement with children's social care is important. The background of increased social work activity at all levels in these authorities may be due to substantial and rapid changes in the needs of children because of the increasing pressures on families and the removal of family support. This may explain the large increase in children in need before their fifth birthday and more worryingly the large increase in child protection investigations due to concerns about significant harm. However, this is a rapid change in just five years and the increases are substantially higher than in other local authorities with similar levels of deprivation. A more likely explanation is a combination of cuts in family support alongside a change from a family preservation to a child rescue orientation to practice (Parton and Williams, 2017) in these authorities leading to changes in thresholds for interventions and responses to family difficulties (Featherstone et al 2016). Whatever the cause, the plight of children and families is worsening and they face less support, more removal of children and more investigations in response to their difficulties (Ellison and Renton, 2018). In addition, both this finding and the finding on the adoption score card indicator show the impact of government promoting adoption without adequate consideration of the wider context of responses to children's needs and family difficulties.

The overall increases in children in need and child protection investigations and plans as well as the rapid changes in over a third of local authorities in the study should be seen alongside the 89% of Directors of Children's Services who have reported that it is becoming increasingly challenging to fulfil their statutory duties to provide help for children in need (Clements et al, 2017). The combination of cuts in children's services, increasing inequality, the government's promotion of child rescue and the huge increase in child protection investigations has created a hostile environment for children living in the most deprived communities. This research shows that in just five years the rate of child protection investigations had increased by 35% to a rate of one in every 16 children. These investigations were increasingly unfounded with a 60% increase in the rate of children facing the collateral damage of an unfounded investigation. Alongside this there is a large increase in the number of children separated from their parents. The fact that this is not happening evenly across the country suggests that this is not an issue of reducing parental competence but rather that the chances of a family receiving support or being split up are determined by national and local policies, resources and a growing culture of child rescue responses to family difficulties.

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Highlights

- There was an increase of over 35% in the rate of children adopted or investigated for child protection concerns before the age of five in 2016-17 compared to 2011-12
- There was a 60% increase in rate of children subject of unfounded child protection investigation in 2016-17 compared to 2011-12
- 1 in every 16 children was investigated before the age of 5 and 1 in every 38 children had an unfounded investigation
- The rate of five-year-old children separated from parents almost doubled since 2000 when the numbers in care, adoption and special guardianship are combined
- 12 x difference in the rate of adoption decisions between lowest and highest ranked local authorities
- Where adoption increased the most there was a larger than average increase in involvement in child protection at all levels

Conflict of Interest

Neither author has any conflict of interest to declare

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