



Jen is bringing up two of her children in south Wales but three more are in care
ADRIAN SHERRATT

JUSTICE FOR FAMILIES

The Welsh towns where 1 in 44 children are cared for by the state

Poverty, a collapse of the family and an aversion to risk have resulted in one of the world's highest rates of looked-after youngsters

[Emily Dugan](#), Social Affairs Correspondent

Sunday April 25 2021, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

Share



Save



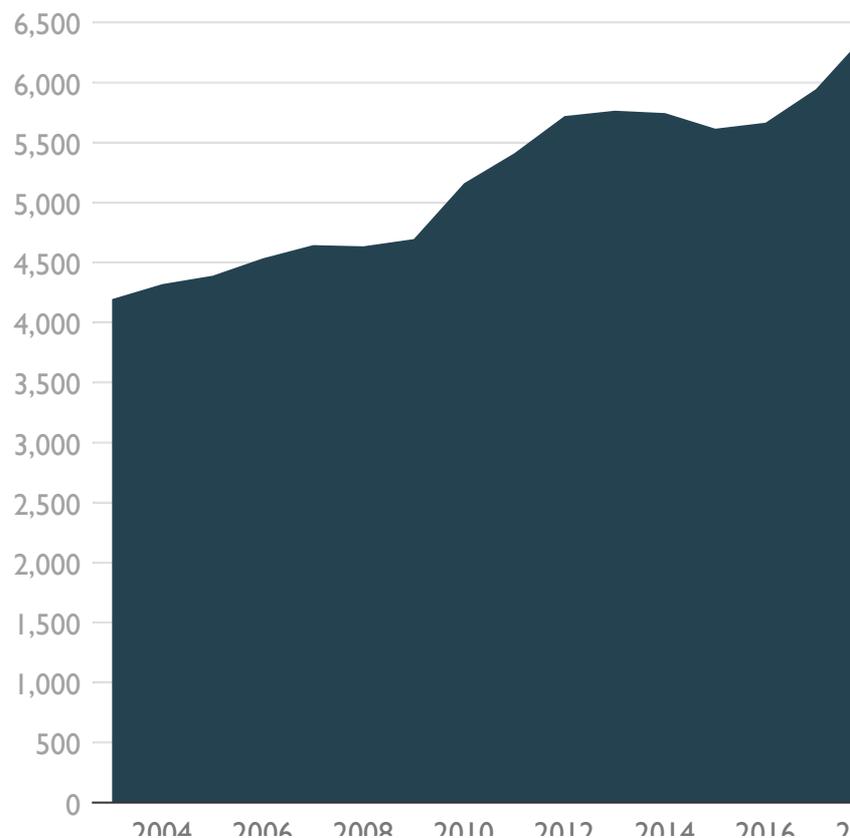
Jen, 34, cannot remember a time when social workers were not in her life. She lives with her five-year-old son and one-year-old daughter in a small hilltop town in south Wales where jobs are scarce and visits from social services are common.

She was three when she was taken into foster care and spent her childhood pinballing among placements and children's

homes. At 17 an older man got her pregnant and her baby was quickly removed into care.

Her fifth child, the first she has been able to bring up from birth, toddles around her, watching Peppa Pig and scribbling in a notebook. Her son was returned to her when he was one but she still worries that social services will take them away.

Children in care in Wales



More than one in 100 children in Wales are looked after by the state. Donald Forrester, a professor of social work at Cardiff University who has studied the care system for decades, believes Wales may lead the world for the proportion of its children in care.

“We do not know what the right rate of children in care is, but these figures raise difficult questions about how we help families and protect children,” Forrester said.

Of Wales' 629,000 children, 7,172 were looked after by the state at the end of March last year, an annual increase of 5 per cent. Most are in foster care while the remainder are in children's homes or with family under court supervision.

International comparisons are tricky but in America, for example, the rate appears to be half that in Wales, with 424,000 of 73 million children fostered or in institutions in 2019.

While there is concern in England about an increase in official removal of children, the growth in Wales is even more pronounced. In 1994 England and Wales both had 0.4 per cent of children in care. Over the next 26 years the rate of under-18s in care in Wales has increased by 153 per cent, compared to 58 per cent in England.

Children in care in England and Wales

Per 10,000 children

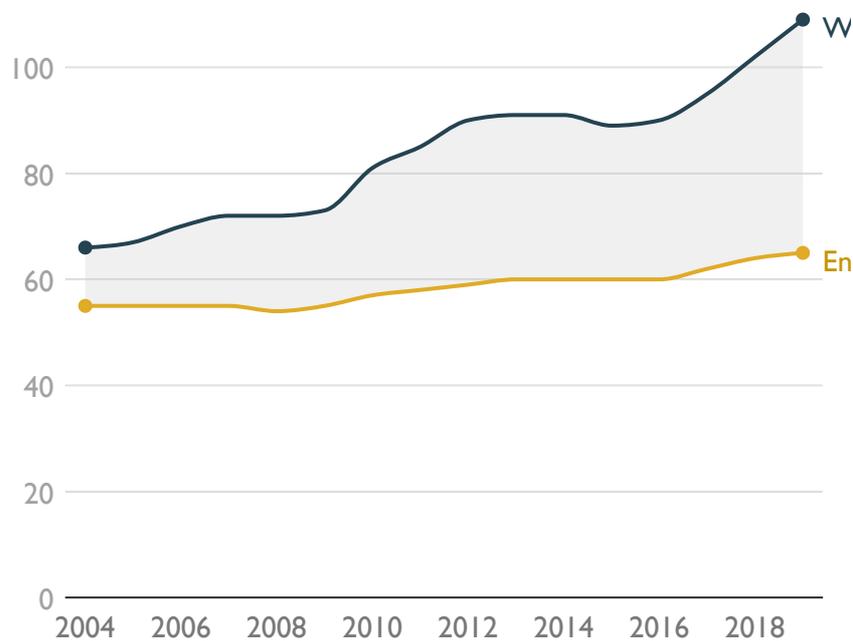


Chart: The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: Wales Centre for Public Policy

Researchers argue that a culture of caution among some social workers and judges in Wales and a lack of support for parents cause babies and children to be removed from families unnecessarily.

For Jen, the threat of intervention is never far away. During lockdown she says social workers put the children on a care plan and threatened to foster them because of damp in her home, despite it being the housing association's responsibility.

“Social workers haven’t really been that great at giving me help or advice,” she said. “There was 63 per cent damp in the house and I was getting blamed for it.”

Jen says her experience makes her value everyday activities with her children. “I love nothing more than the school run and watching my boy come running out to me because I know how precious it is, that I could lose it at any minute.”

Legal mechanisms

In Wales care orders have increased while voluntary agreements have declined (rates per 10,000 children)

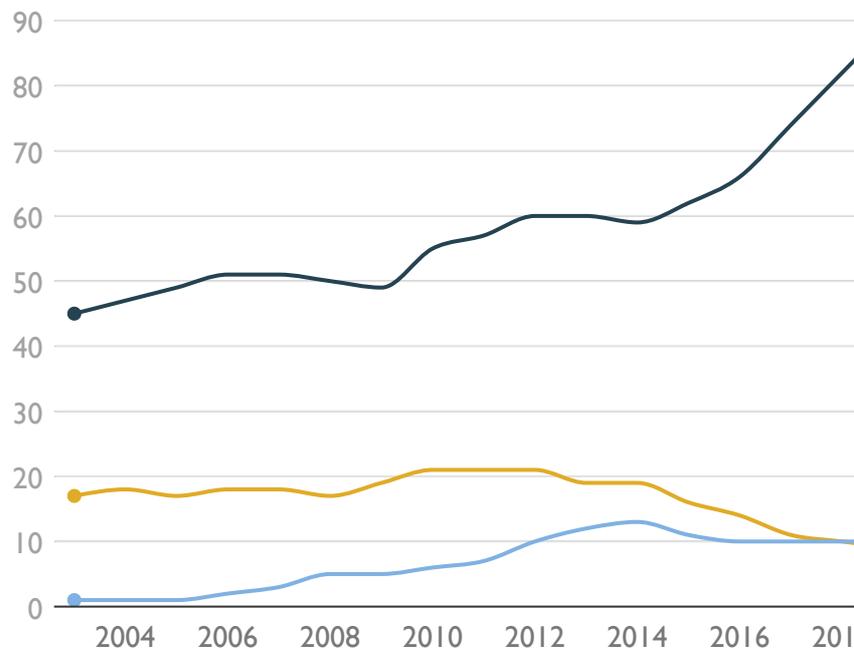


Chart: The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: Stats Wales

She was in toxic relationships as a young woman and had problems with drink and mental health. She has since given up alcohol, got married in 2018 and with the support of the charity Voices from Care, an organisation working with those who have grown up in the system, she has persuaded social services that she is a good enough parent to look after her youngest two.

Jen has no doubt that care was the right place for her growing up – she describes her mum as “very unstable” and her dad was

convicted of abusing an older sibling. But she feels the care system made it harder for her to succeed as a mother herself.

Her experience has informed a chapter in a book on the way mothers who grow up in care are subject to more scrutiny by the state and are much more likely to have their own babies taken away. *The Children of Looked After Children*, published last month by Cardiff University academic Louise Roberts, details how one in four babies adopted in Wales is born to a mother who has herself grown up in care.

Jen says in it that support from care professionals is a lottery. “It shouldn’t be that you are lucky if you have people you can rely on; lucky if you get a good social worker; lucky if you have a strong personal adviser or leaving care team; lucky if you get good housing; lucky if you get offered a mother and baby place; lucky if you get a good solicitor; lucky if the judge is in a good mood. It shouldn’t be down to luck. All young people deserve the opportunity to be a parent and to have a family of their own.”

Deborah Jones, who runs *Voices From Care Cymru*, said: “We’re removing babies when we don’t need to ... I just think this is scandalous practice.”

Allison Hulmes, the national director for Wales at the British Association of Social Workers, said families in post-industrial towns in the valleys faced particular challenges.

“The pollution has gone, the rivers are clean, they’re green and beautiful. But there’s no work. For generations, there’s been no work and really poor transport links. All of that’s become magnified since the welfare reforms in 2012 and ten years of austerity measures. So if you’ve got mental health problems and you’re living somewhere up in the valleys, where’s the support? Services aren’t there.”

Deprivation is only part of the story. Some counties with large numbers of looked-after children are deprived, but others in

Wales with even greater poverty have significantly lower care rates, suggesting approach is a factor.

Hulmes said social work in Wales was preoccupied with mitigating risk rather than supporting families so children can stay with them safely. “We need to reconceptualise the role of social workers,” she said. “The system is set up to punish people for things that are often outside their control.” Social workers have too many cases, she added, leading some to “default to the less risky options”.

Hulmes, a consultant social worker in Wales from 2012 to 2016, said that if drugs or alcohol were involved, the idea of supporting a parent was typically discounted. “Often their automatic assumption would be that using drugs and alcohol equals neglectful, abusive parenting, so remove the kids. But if we know that the use wasn’t resulting in abusive parenting, you can support that parent with their health and to develop other strategies that’s not alcohol or drugs to manage difficulties which are essentially around mental health.”

It is easy to blame high care rates on social workers, but it is usually a court that decides whether children go into care. There are signs that the courts in Wales - and in pockets of England - are more risk-averse than those elsewhere in the UK.

A report this year by a working group set up by the president of the Family Division, Sir Andrew McFarlane, found huge variation in how courts apply the law. In north Wales, 77 per cent of all care applications resulted in a care order between 2010 and 2016. In west London, 39 per cent resulted in a care order, according to Ministry of Justice figures. The report calls for more cases to be supported in the community.

Analysis of the health records of Welsh mothers whose babies were taken away found that more than half had mental health problems, typically treatable types such as anxiety or depression.

Karen Broadhurst, professor of social work at Lancaster University, who conducted the work, said that poor mental health support in Wales helped explain the removal of babies. “There are problems with mental health services in Wales, no doubt about it.”

She said parents needed help before children are taken. “There’s a chicken and egg [situation] here, because if you’re living in very poor home conditions or you’re homeless or you haven’t got adequate housing and you haven’t got help, you’re going to get depressed and potentially going to drink, so everything is interlinked.”

Broadhurst added: “I think that we’ve gone too far in holding parents responsible for things where the causes are wider in terms of society, things such as housing and income security. It’s easy now to get sanctioned if you’re on universal credit and destitution levels are at an all-time high.”

In Torfaen, a county borough to the north of Newport, south Wales, one in 44 under-18s are in care, higher than any other county in the UK.

Since 2010 the proportion of children in care in Torfaen has more than doubled, while across Wales the rate went up by 40 per cent. The sharp rise cannot be explained by poverty, a problem in Pontypool for generations.

The case of a three-year-old boy found “hours away from death” as a result of starvation and dehydration in a house in Trevethin in December 2010 may have played a role. His parents, Lisa Brooks, 25, and Tomas Rhys Lewis, 22, were charged with wilful neglect after he was locked in a bare room with no heating when it was snowing outside. He was covered in injuries and ate his own hair to survive. Researchers say this near-miss may have prompted a more risk-averse approach by the council.

As with the case of Baby P, the ripple effect of one case reported extensively in the media can be felt by families for decades. The

rate of children in care soared across the UK in the decade after Peter Connelly was discovered dead in north London in 2007 after suffering 50 injuries in eight months.

The regional variation is not as simple as Wales outstripping England. While in England 0.67 per cent of children are in care, pockets match Welsh levels. In Blackpool, the rate is only slightly lower than Torfaen's, with more than 1 in 50 children in care.

Jason O'Brien, Torfaen's head of children's services, said: "The looked-after children population within Torfaen cannot be attributed to any singular factor. The council will always be concerned with ensuring the safety of children and young people and will always attempt to ensure that children reside with their parents and families and will only resort to a child becoming looked-after once all other options have been exhausted."

O'Brien said that of the 446 children looked after by the local authority, 120 were subject to court care orders and living with parents.

Scotland appears to have even higher rates than Wales, but its system is different and large numbers of children are looked after within their families.

A Welsh government spokesman said the number of children entering care had declined since 2014 but the rate continued to rise because fewer under-18s were leaving care.

"Reducing the numbers of children in care has been a Welsh government priority and all local authorities now have plans in place to achieve this."

[@EmilyDugan](#)

Comments (109)

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

Andrew Bilson



Add to the conversation...



Sort by **Recommended** ▾



Lanky Lad

25 APRIL, 2021

No mention of where the fathers are and their responsibilities?

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(117\)](#)



Ms. Sian Thomas > Lanky Lad

25 APRIL, 2021

Well said.

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(6\)](#)



Veelanelle

25 APRIL, 2021

May be, stop procreating prolifically, and take responsibility for your children and your life?

Might help.

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(106\)](#)



Tom > Veelanelle

25 APRIL, 2021

Yes. We should be offering and encouraging voluntary sterilisation to men and women with issues.

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(33\)](#)

[↩ Show 2 more replies](#)



Rachel Morgan > Veelanelle

25 APRIL, 2021

If only! That takes education and obviously that is lacking in some areas. Heaven help us, the COVID pandemic will only have made these problems worse.

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(11\)](#)

[↩ Show 2 more replies](#)



SuzB

25 APRIL, 2021

Well done, Jen. Condemning three innocent children to a life in care because you can't keep your pants up. The trouble is that politicians and do-gooders pussyfoot around these issues blaming everybody but the real culprits.

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(94\)](#)

[↩ Show 1 previous reply](#)

M **Ms. Sian Thomas** > SuzB

25 APRIL, 2021

Takes two to tango, what about the feckless men involved in the creation of these poor children?

The cycle of poverty continues.

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(33\)](#)

R **Ros from Wareham** > SuzB

25 APRIL, 2021

Perhaps she was sexually abused or raped?

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(6\)](#)

[↩ Show 1 more reply](#)

R **Richard S**

25 APRIL, 2021

Why is there no pressure on fathers here? I'm sick of seeing all these cases where the mum is basically unemployed, mental health issues etc and we're seeing they're clearly not capable - and the absent father is not even mentioned, let alone named. Name the dads. Shame them for not being around.

Being a deadbeat dad should be as socially unacceptable as drink driving. People should be embarrassed to admit they have a child they choose not to see *(Edited)*

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(86\)](#)

J **Jay** > Richard S

25 APRIL, 2021

"I'm sick of seeing all these cases where the mum is basically unemployed, mental health issues etc and we're seeing they're clearly not capable..."

That sounds as if you are in essence absolving the mothers from all responsibility whatsoever. Whenever a person is turned into nothing much more than a victim like this they are in fact being dehumanised.

Choice is an essential part of being human and countless others have held onto that part of their humanity in the face of all those problems you mentioned and much more.

So yes by all means ask questions about the fathers but let's not make that an excuse for the mothers. *(Edited)*

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(10\)](#)

[↩ Show 1 more reply](#)

R **Ros from Wareham** > Richard S

25 APRIL, 2021

Maybe some of them don't know they are fathers

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(8\)](#)

J **Joey1**

25 APRIL, 2021

The poor children. They don't stand a chance with a start like that. If you have no job and mental health issues, having 5 children isn't going to help your or their situation.

Could better education in schools /earlier initiatives help these areas with future generations?

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(68\)](#)

M **MajorEngineer**

25 APRIL, 2021

Would some contraception help here?

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(55\)](#)

B **Broadside** > MajorEngineer

25 APRIL, 2021

If only it was free in the UK. Oh wait a minute 🤔.

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(23\)](#)

G **Gary Scott**

25 APRIL, 2021

Quote- "Her fifth child, the first she has been able to bring up from birth" how about stop giving birth please!

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(54\)](#)

M **Mywifesaccount** > Gary Scott

25 APRIL, 2021

There's not much entertainment in the valleys.

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(1\)](#)

[Reply](#) [Recommend \(1\)](#)

[Show 1 more reply](#)



Blank

25 APRIL, 2021

Article labelled..'Justice for families!'.....what families?

....nothing is made of the males who have 'donated' towards this tragedy!

They appear to be akin to wandering around a funfair sampling each and every game and simply walking away!...make them pay until it hurts them in their pockets or.....

[Reply](#) [Recommend \(47\)](#)



Mywifesaccount > Blank

25 APRIL, 2021

True. But they're all skint. Wales is an astonishingly deprived place. Very grim indeed. Much of it Makes Redruth look like Mayfair. *(Edited)*

[Reply](#) [Recommend \(1\)](#)



Waldorf > Blank

25 APRIL, 2021

I would like to agree but how do you"make them pay"? The poverty leaves them totally unable to financial contribution. Can we force parents to care about the children they create.

[Reply](#) [Recommend \(3\)](#)



A Hartigan

25 APRIL, 2021

Latest child one year old. So she's not stopping then?

[Reply](#) [Recommend \(47\)](#)



Norman Boyes > A Hartigan

25 APRIL, 2021

It's not her fault, the Housing Association would not pay her power bills and she needed to do something to keep warm.

[Reply](#) [Recommend \(19\)](#)

[Show 2 more replies](#)



gary sexton

25 APRIL, 2021

So at 17, "An older man got her pregnant"...how did that happen?

Then by 34, she has 5 children. Why would she keep having children, after her first was taken into care?

I would suggest, like many of these cases, she deliberately has her children, so as to keep her state benefits, and her free council house etc.

I personally know of 2 people who have done exactly the same over the years. Lived on social security payouts, never worked, and never paid a penny into the state.

A sorry state.

[Reply](#) [☆ Recommend \(46\)](#)

 [BACK TO TOP](#)

GET IN TOUCH

[About us](#)

[Cont:](#)

[Help](#)

[The 1](#)

[The Sunday Times Editorial Complaints](#)

[Place](#)

[Classified advertising](#)

[Displ:](#)

[The Times corrections](#)

[The S](#)

[Careers](#)

MORE FROM THE TIMES AND THE SUNDAY TIMES

[The Times e-paper](#)

[Times Currency Services](#)

[Times Print Gallery](#)

[Times Crossword Club](#)

[Times+](#)

[Times Expert Traveller](#)

[Schools Guide](#)

[Best Places to Live](#)

[Sportswomen of the Year Awards](#)

[Podcasts](#)

© Times Newspapers Limited 2021.

Registered in England No. 894646.

Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.

[Privacy & cookie policy](#)

[Licensing](#)

[Cookie settings](#)

[Site map](#)

[Topics](#)

[Commissioning terms](#)

[Terms and conditions](#)