



Department  
for Education

# **Children looked after in England year ending 31 March 2014**

**Methodology document**

**September 2014**

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# 1. Summary

The aim of the Statistical First Release (SFR) is to provide information about children who are looked after by local authorities during the year ending 31 March 2014, those adopted from care, and, for those who have recently left care, information as to their activity and whereabouts on their 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays. Updated figures for the previous 4 years are also provided.

The SFR includes information on:

- Children looked after at 31 March in each year
- Children looked after at any time during the year ending 31 March
- Children who started to be looked after during the year ending 31 March
- Children who ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March
- Children looked after who were adopted during the year ending 31 March
- Care leavers now aged 19, 20 and 21

Information is included on the reasons why a child is looked after, their legal status and placement type. Information is also included on the average time taken for each stage of the adoption process.

All figures are based on data from the SSDA903 return collected each spring from all local authorities. This publication is the main source of information on the numbers of looked after children in England; it is used to inform policy decisions to improve the outcomes for this vulnerable group of children. It is also used extensively by other organisations interested in this subject.

This document aims to provide information on the methodology involved in the production of this data – from collection through to publication.

## 2. Data collection

The statistics in this SFR are based on information on looked after children collected in the SSDA903 return which is completed annually by local authorities in England. The return is submitted to the Department for Education and is required for two groups of children:

1. every child who is looked after by the local authority at any time during the year ending 31 March 2014
2. children who have been looked after for at least 13 weeks which began after they reached the age of 14 and ended after they reached the age of 16 who are now aged 19, 20 and 21 (care leavers)

The figures presented for the year ending 31 March 2014 are based on data reported by all 152 local authorities in England, with the exception of Isles of Scilly who are not required to submit a return as they do not currently have any looked after children within their care.

The collection began in 1992 and prior to 1998 the SSDA903 collection covered all looked after children. Between 1998 and 2003 the SSDA903 return covered only a one third sample of children, including only those with a date of birth divisible by three. There was then an aggregate return, the CLA 100 return, which was used to provide 'fast track' data and to gross the sample data. In 2000, the OC1 (educational qualifications of care leavers) return was introduced, followed by the AD1 (children adopted) returns in 2001, and the OC3 return (19th birthday) in 2002. From 2004, the CLA100 return was discontinued and the SSDA903 reverted to covering all looked after children. Becoming a web based data collection for the first time, the SSDA903 return also incorporated the AD1, OC1 and OC3 returns.

Note that additional information on offending, health promotion checks, immunisations, dental checks, health assessments and substance misuse problem identification and intervention is also collected through the SSDA903. This is collected for the cohort of children who have been looked after continuously for at least 12 months at 31 March. However, this is not used in the production of this SFR. It will form part of the Outcomes for Looked After Children Statistical First Release which will be published in December. This information was previously collected via the Outcome Indicators (OC2) return. This return contained aggregated data collected at a local authority level. However the information was added to the SSDA903 in 2008-09 and was collected at child level.

The database used to collect this information is longitudinal with one record for every episode of care. Local authorities are required to update the database every year; including making amendments to previous years' records where there have been changes (see footnotes on historical changes in the relevant tables). The information collected contains details about the child (for example gender, date of birth, unique pupil number) and details about the child's episodes in care (for example category of need, legal status under which the child is looked after and type of placement). When a change

in legal status or placement (or both) occurs, a new episode of care is started and the date and reason for the change are recorded.

The following table shows how data for 2013 has changed between this publication and the previous year's publication due to historical revisions:

<b>Count of children</b>	<b>Reported in 2013 SFR</b>	<b>Reported in 2014 SFR</b>
Children looked after at 31 March 2013	68,110	68,060
Children starting to be looked after during year ending 31 March 2013	28,830	28,960
Children ceasing to be looked after during year ending 31 March 2013	28,460	28,640

Some revisions to previously published data occur as a result of amendments and corrections made by Local Authorities to their historical data. Records for the years since 2005 can be amended directly by Local Authorities. Common amendments include correcting episode information and including missing records. Changes can also be made to dates of birth, gender or ethnicity. An audit of 2013 records changed by Local Authorities shows that around 244 child records were deleted and a further 33 were added to the system. There were 919 master changes made, these are changes to a child's date of birth, gender or ethnic group. In addition changes have also been made to the characteristics of a child's care. It should be noted that a legal status or date change in any episode of care may mean that the child will no longer be included in a particular set of figures. For example, changing a date episode ceased in child's care history may mean that the child is no longer included in ceased figures for 2013 but in 2014, this will also mean that the child is then considered to be looked after at 31 March 2013.

Further information on the data items collected in the SSSDA903 return can be found in the collection guide. This and other documents useful for the completion of the SSSDA903 return can be found on the DfE children looked after [collection website](#).

### 3. Data cleaning

To ensure data accuracy, its consistency and the integrity of each child's history over time, a number of validation checks are carried out on the records at the point of data entry, to identify and remove:

- Unlikely or impossible combinations of legal status
- Unlikely or impossible sequences of dates
- Information which contradicts that already held about the child, in particular details submitted for the beginning of the current year which do not match those at the end of the previous year
- Information in the supplementary milestone fields that contradicts details recorded in the episode date for the same child.

Any record which fails the validation checks is shown as being in error and must be corrected. An explanation of each validation check and guidance on how corrections can be made are documented in the list of [validation rules](#).

## 4. Data processing

### 4.1. Production of snapshot tables

Local authorities supply information to the Department for Education annually, and these records are then linked (by a unique identifier for each child) to any supplied by the same local authority in preceding years (from 1992 onwards).

In early July each year, at the end of the data collection and cleaning process, a 'snapshot' or 'freeze' of the database is taken. As well as containing data for the latest year, this snapshot includes all the historic data for each child, as signed off by the local authority at the end of June of the latest year.

A series of checks are undertaken on these snapshot tables to ensure they have been produced correctly from the database, including year-on-year comparisons, sample checks against the live database (e.g. the number of children adopted in a particular LA) before the data are further processed to produce the tables for the SFR. Cross checking between different snapshot tables is also carried out.

### 4.2. Production of SFR tables

#### Counts and definitions

From this snapshot, a series of data tables are produced. The snapshot tables used for the production of the main SFR tables are as follows:

<b>Snapshot table</b>	<b>Count of children</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>SFR tables</b>
March table	Children looked after at 31 March 2014	Children whose period of care was open at 31 March 2014 (i.e. started on or before 31 March with no end date). Children looked after under an agreed series of short-term placements (i.e. legal status of V3 or V4) are excluded.	A1, A2, A3, LAA1
Episodes table	Children looked after during the year ending 31 March 2014	Children who had an episode of care at any point between 1 April 2013 and 31 March 2014. Children looked after under an agreed series of short-term placements (i.e. legal status	B1, LAB1

		of V3 or V4) are excluded.	
Starts tables	Children who started to be looked after during the year ending 31 March 2014	Children whose period of care started on or after 1 April 2013. If a child started to be looked after more than once in the year, only their first period of care is counted. Children looked after under an agreed series of short-term placements (i.e. legal status of V3 or V4) are excluded.	C1, LAC1
Ceased table	Children who ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March 2014	Children whose period of care ceased on or after 1 April 2013. If a child ceased to be looked after more than once in the year, only their last period of care is counted. Children looked after under an agreed series of short-term placements (i.e. legal status of V3 or V4) are excluded.	D1, LAD1, E1
AD1 table	Children who were adopted during the year ending 31 March 2014	Children who ceased to be looked after on or after 1 April 2013 using reason episode ceased of either 'Adopted – application for adoption order unopposed' or 'Adopted – consent dispensed with by court'	E1, E2, LAE1
OC3 table	Care leavers aged 19, 20 and 21	Children whose 19 <sup>th</sup> , 20 <sup>th</sup> or 21 <sup>st</sup> birthday falls between 1 April 2013 and 31 March 2014 who were previously looked after for at least 13 weeks after their 14 <sup>th</sup> birthday, including some time after their 16 <sup>th</sup> birthday.	F1

### Rounding conventions

Rounding and suppression is applied to the data. The National Statistics Code of Practice requires that reasonable steps should be taken to ensure that all published or disseminated statistics produced by the Department for Education protect confidentiality.

Figures have been rounded to the nearest 10, Local Authority figures have been rounded to the nearest 5. For confidentiality purposes, numbers from one to five inclusive have been replaced in the published tables by a cross (x). To ensure the suppressed number cannot be identified by simple arithmetic secondary suppression may be required. In this case the next smallest number less than 20 is also suppressed. Where any number is shown as zero (0), the original figure submitted was zero (0). The following convention has been used:

”.” means not applicable

“-” means negligible – used to represent a percentage below 0.5%

Percentages have been rounded to whole numbers but where the numerator was five or less or the denominator was 10 or less, they have been suppressed and replaced by a cross (x). Note that percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

### **Grossing**

Prior to 2013, grossing factors were applied to the data in order to compensate for records with errors in their episodes. These were calculated by comparing the number of valid looked after children records reported in the return with the number of invalid records in the system. In 2013, because of the rigorous validation checks applied to data submitted, such discrepancies were very low and the calculated grossing factors to be applied were close to 1. This has continued. After a review of grossing factors, it was decided to discontinue grossing the data from 2013 onwards.

## **5. Further releases of data based on the SSDA903 collection**

The data underlying this release will be published in December along with further information on looked after children, including detailed Local Authority level analysis. A full schedule showing which tables are included under each theme and a publication date will be published on the website for this publication. Information on outcomes for looked after children will also be published in December.

## 6. Consultation process

Feedback on the methodology is welcomed. If you have any comments on the information collected, the timing or format of our outputs or whether these statistics are meeting users' requirements, please contact us via [email](#). If you would like to register as part of our looked after children data user group, please also let us know.



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