



Department  
for Education

# **Children looked after in England year ending 31 March 2015**

**Quality and methodology information  
document**

**October 2015**

# Contents

1.	Summary	3
2.	Data collection	4
3.	Data cleaning	6
4.	Data processing	7
4.1.	Production of snapshot tables	7
4.2.	Production of SFR tables	7
5.	Data quality and uses	10
5.1.	Children missing from care	10
5.2.	Care leavers	11
5.3.	Revisions	13
5.4.	31 March, starts and ceased comparability	13
5.5.	Children freed for adoption	13
6.	Further releases of data based on the SSDA903 collection	14
7.	Consultation process	15

# 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 2015, 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
- Children who went missing during the year ending 31 March (new in 2015)

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 - and information relating to the quality of the statistics.

## 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 2015
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 2015 are based on data reported by all 152 local authorities in England.

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 at a later date. 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 asked 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 2014 has changed between this publication and the previous year's publication due to historical revisions:

<b>Count of children</b>	<b>Reported in 2014 SFR</b>	<b>Reported in 2015 SFR</b>
Children looked after at 31 March 2014	68,840	68,800
Children starting to be looked after during year ending 31 March 2014	30,430	30,540
Children ceasing to be looked after during year ending 31 March 2014	30,430	30,600

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 2014 records changed by Local Authorities shows that around 1,723 child records were deleted and a further 181 were added to the system. There were 1,371 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 2014 but in 2015, this will also mean that the child is then considered to be looked after at 31 March 2014.

Further information on the data items collected in the SSDA903 return can be found in the collection guide. This and other documents useful for the completion of the SSDA903 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:

Snapshot table	Count of children	Definition	SFR tables
March table	Children looked after at 31 March	Children whose period of care was open at 31 March (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	Children who had an episode of care at any point between 1 April and 31 March. Children looked after under an agreed series of short-term placements (i.e. legal status of V3 or V4) are excluded.	B1, LAB1

<b>Snapshot table</b>	<b>Count of children</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>SFR tables</b>
Starts tables	Children who started to be looked after during the year ending 31 March	Children whose period of care started on or after 1 April. 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	Children whose period of care ceased on or after 1 April. 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
AD1 table	Children who were adopted during the year ending 31 March	Children who ceased to be looked after on or after 1 April 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 and 31 March 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

Missing table	Children who went missing or were away from placement without authorisation during the year ending 31 March	Children who went missing or away from their placement without authorisation. Children looked after under an agreed series of short-term placements (i.e. legal status of V3 or V4) are excluded.	G1
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### **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. National and regional figures have been rounded to the nearest 10 and 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 these cases, another number may be 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. Data quality and uses

### 5.1. Children missing from care

Information has been collected for the first time in 2015, on children who were missing or away from their placement without authorisation in the year ending 31 March, for any length of time. Previously, information had only been collected on children who were missing or absent for at least 24 hours.

The definitions of missing and away from placement without authorisation are as follows:

*Missing from care – a looked after child who is not at their placement or the place they are expected to be (e.g. school) and their whereabouts is not known;*

*Away from placement without authorisation- a looked after child whose whereabouts is known but who is not at their placement or place they are expected to be and the carer has concerns or the incident has been notified to the local authority or the police.*

These reflect the definitions in the [statutory guidance](#) on children who run away or go missing from home or care.

Information was collected on the start and end date of the missing episode. If a child goes missing or away from placement without authorisation more than once in the same day, each separate episode is counted. It is possible that children who were missing were also away from placement without authorisation during the year, and vice versa, so the figures should not be summed to give a total number who were missing or away from placement without authorisation during the year. Additionally, users should exercise caution when summing the number of missing periods and away from placement without authorisation periods together, This is because an away from placement without authorisation period could become a missing episode if the child's whereabouts become unknown. These will appear as separate episodes in the data, but could be one continuous period where the child is away from his/her placement.

This set of information has been published as 'experimental statistics' given it is the first year in which the data have been collected and, therefore, local authority data collection systems and recording practices are still bedding in. Comparisons between local authorities should also be undertaken with caution given the possible inconsistencies in recording practices in this first year.

Information is also collected from police forces in relation to children missing from care. Details of all missing or absent incidents are provided to the National Crime Agency quarterly. The NCA publish annual information – the [latest available](#) was published in November 2014 relating to the 2012/13 year.

This information is not directly comparable with the latest DfE statistics due to the different timings, and statistics based on the latest definitions of missing and absent used by police forces are not yet available.

Ofsted have also previously published some information on children going missing or away from their placement without authorisation, relating to children in foster placements only. Their [latest data](#) is published in 'Fostering in England, 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014'. Statistics in Section D show 4,245 children having gone missing or away from placement without authorisation in the year, relating to a total of 13,305 incidents, which aligns with the SSSA903 data collection.

Table G1 includes figures for the average duration of being missing. Around 90% of both 'missing' and 'away from placement without authorisation' are for 2 days or less. In each case, there are a small number of particularly long durations of being missing reported by local authorities in the data which affect the value of the mean duration. The median has been presented in the tables as it is a better descriptor of the true average value.

<b>Average Measure</b>	<b>Average number of days per 'missing' incident</b>	<b>Average number of days per 'away from placement without authorisation' incident</b>
25 <sup>th</sup> percentile	0 days	0 days
Median	1 day	1 day
75 <sup>th</sup> percentile	1 day	1 day
Mean	2.5 days	1.8 days

Note, the exact times a child went missing or away without authorisation or returned are not recorded, only the date, so the duration of missing incidents are calculated to the nearest whole day.

## 5.2 Care leavers

The cohort for former care leavers was extended in 2014 to 19-, 20- and 21-year-olds and also changed to cover all children looked after for a total of at least 13 weeks after their 14th birthday including some time after their 16th birthday. Following on from this, in 2015, the collection was improved to enable authorities to identify separately those young people who returned to live with parents or someone with parental responsibility for a continuous period of 6 months or more. These young people are no longer eligible for care leaver support and are excluded from the statistics on accommodation and activity of care leavers (table F1). In this statistical first release, figures for 2015 exclude those who have returned home for 6 months as well as those who have died. For 2014, some authorities may have returned information on those who had returned home, although it is expected that in most cases, the LA would not have been in touch with the young person and so activity/accommodation would not have been recorded. The numbers of young people recorded as having returned home for at least 6 months, or having died in 2015, are as follows:

Care leavers	19 year olds		20 year olds		21 year olds	
	2014	2015	2014	2015	2014	2015
Died	20	10	30	20	40	30
Returned home for at least 6 months	.	130	.	140	.	120

‘.’ Not collected.

Analysis indicates that the inclusion/exclusion of those returning home has a negligible impact on the percentages in table F1 and, therefore, year-on-year comparisons are valid.

Additionally, in last year’s collection where some new accommodation categories were introduced, it was not possible for authorities to determine the suitability of the accommodation i.e. where the young person was deported, had gone abroad, or their residence was not known. Therefore, in this statistical release, these accommodation types have been removed from the suitability calculations for both 2014 and 2015.

In 2015, there has been an improvement in recording of activity and accommodation for care leavers. As a result year-on-year changes cannot be immediately assessed. Table F1 presents the percentage of care leavers in each activity/accommodation category as a percentage of all young people; the table below shows care leaver activity and accommodation for those care leavers where information is known only:

<b>Activity of 19-to-21-year-old care leavers</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>
In higher education i.e. studies beyond A level	8%	7%
In education other than higher education	22%	21%
In training or employment	24%	26%
Not in education, training or employment owing to illness or disability	8%	9%
Not in education, training or employment owing to other reasons	32%	29%
Not in education, training or employment owing to pregnancy or parenting	6%	7%
<b>Accommodation of 19 to 21 year old care leavers</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>
With parents or relatives	12%	13%
Community home	4%	4%
Semi-independent, transitional accommodation	11%	11%
Supported lodgings	6%	6%
Gone abroad	-	-
Deported	-	-
Ordinary lodgings	2%	2%
Residence not known	1%	1%
No fixed abode/homeless	1%	1%
Foyers	2%	2%
Independent living	47%	45%
Emergency accommodation	-	-
Bed and breakfast	1%	-
In custody	4%	4%
With former foster carers	4%	5%
Other accommodation	4%	5%

### **5.3 Revisions**

This publication is produced using a final version of the 2015 dataset and we do not plan to make any revisions to this publication. If we later discover that a revision is necessary, this will be made in accordance with our revisions policy.

### **5.4 31 March, starts and ceased comparability**

The number of looked after children at 31 March 2015 (Table A1) does not always equate to the number at 31 March 2014 plus the number who started (Table C1) minus the number who ceased to be looked after in the year (Table D1). The reason for this is that a child is only ever counted once as starting to be looked after during the year, and once as ceasing to be looked after during the year, but in some circumstances a child may enter care and/or leave care more than once during the year. There are also a small number of children who move in and out of respite care during the year for whom the same will apply.

### **5.5 Children freed for adoption**

The 2015 data shows that there are still children subject to freeing orders even though applications for freeing orders could not be made on or after 30 December 2005 as they were replaced by placement orders. Further guidance on the use of freeing orders has been included in our local authority return guide.

## **6. 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.

## 7. 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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