

Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2012

Methodology Document

1. Summary

1.1. 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 2012, and, for those who have recently left care, information as to their whereabouts on their 19th birthday. Updated figures for the previous 4 years are also provided.

1.2 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
- Children now aged 19 years who were looked after on 1 April then aged 16

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.

1.3 All figures are based on data from the SSSDA903 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.

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

2. Data collection

2.1 The statistics in this SFR are based on information on looked after children collected in the SSSDA903 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:

- Every child who is looked after by the local authority at any time during the year ending 31 March 2012
- Children who were being looked after by the local authority on 1 April 2009 under any legal status other than V3 or V4 (an agreed series of

short-term breaks) and whose date of birth fell between 1 April 1992 and 31 March 1993, whereby their 19th birthday data are required.

2.2 The figures presented for the year ending 31 March 2012 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 have any looked after children within their care.

2.3 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 day of birth divisible by three. There was then an aggregate return, 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 as 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.

2.4 Note that additional information on offending, health promotion checks, immunisations, dental checks, health assessments, substance misuse problem identification and intervention, and position and activity after year 11 is also collected through the SSDA903 for children 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. .

2.5 The database used to collect this information is longitudinal with one record for every child. 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.

2.6 This release has reported that there were 65,520 children looked after at 31 March 2011, the same figure reported in last year's publication. This release reports the number of children starting to be looked after in the year ending 31 March 2011 as 27,500. In the 2011 release this figure was published as 27,310. The number of children who ceased to be looked after in the year ending 31 March 2011 was 26,830 – as published in the 2011 release. In 2012 this was reported as being 27,080. 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 required to records prior to 2005 and corrections to dates of birth, sex or ethnicity for all historical records can also be made. An audit of 2011 records changed by Local Authorities in 2012 shows that around 630 child records were deleted and a further 240 were added to the system. There were 1,780 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.

2.7 Further information on the data items collected in the SSDA903 return can be found in the guidance notes. This and other documents useful for the completion of the SSDA903 return can be found on the DfE children's statistical returns website at:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statisticalreturns/childrenlar/>

3. Data Cleaning

3.1 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.

3.2 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 given in the document 'SSDA903 validation checks for 1 April 2012 onwards'. This can be viewed at the following link:

http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/s/ssda903_validationrules_2011_12.pdf

4. Data Processing

4.1 Production of 'snapshot' tables

4.1.1. 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).

4.1.2 In early August 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.

4.1.3 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	Contents	SFR table in which the data are used
March table	Children looked after at 31 March	A1, A2, A3, LAA1
Episodes table	Children looked after during the year ending 31 March	B1
Starts table	Children who started to be looked after during the year ending 31 March	C1, LAC1
Ceased table	Children who ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March	D1, LAD1
AD1 table	Children looked after who were adopted during the year ending 31 March	E1, E2, LAE1
OC3 table	Children now aged 19 years who were looked after on 1 April then aged 16	F1

4.1.4 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, etc 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

4.2.1 Production of Rates: Table A1 usually contains rates per 10,000 children under the age of 18. These are calculated using the appropriate mid-year estimates supplied by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). However, the ONS are currently in the process of updating their estimates based on 2011 Census data and therefore these rates will be released with additional tables for this SFR in November.

4.3 Grossing

4.3.1. Once the SFR tables have been produced in their 'raw' form, grossing factors are applied to the data in order to compensate for records with errors in their episodes. These are calculated by comparing the number of valid looked after children records reported in the return with the number of invalid records in the system. Because of the rigorous validation checks applied to data

submitted, such discrepancies are usually very low and the grossing factors applied are close to 1. For example, in 2012, there were 27 invalid records and 99.99% of records were valid, which meant the grossing factor was 1.00027. The table below gives the grossing factors applied to the England figures for each of the last five years and includes a summary of the LA level grossing factors. Grossing factors for each LA have been published on the website as table LAG1.

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
England grossing factor	1.00027	1.00080	1.00086	1.00089	1.001177
No. of LAs with grossing factor >1	38	35	37	37	15
Maximum number of invalid records for an LA	8	9	6	8	4
Highest grossing factor for an LA	1.015564	1.023585	1.022936	1.019011	1.010152

4.4 Rounding Convention

4.4.1 Once the figures have been grossed, rounding and suppression is applied.

4.4.2 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). 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.

5. Further releases of data based on the SSDA903 collection:

5.1 The data underlying this release was also published on 25 September.

5.2 Further information on looked after children, including detailed Local Authority level analysis will be published on 29 November.

5.3 A full schedule showing which tables are included under each theme and a publication date is shown on the web site for this publication. This can be accessed at:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001084/index.shtml>

5.4 Information on outcomes for looked after children is expected to be published in December (see end of section 2 above).

6. Consultation Process

Feedback on the methodology is welcomed. We have worked with some interested parties such as looked after children data user group to:

- Seek feedback on whether these statistics are meeting users' requirements
- Consult on any future changes to this data collection and the timing and format of our outputs.

If you would like to participate in this group then please register your interest via [email](#)