

Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2013

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 2013, those adopted from care, and, for those who have recently left care, information as to their activity and 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 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.

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 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:
- every child who is looked after by the local authority at any time during the year ending 31 March 2013
 - children who were being looked after by the local authority on 1 April 2010 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 1993 and 31 March 1994, whereby their 19th birthday data are required.
- 2.2 The figures presented for the year ending 31 March 2013 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.
- 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, 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.
- 2.4 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.
- 2.5 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.

2.6 This release has reported that there were 67,080 children looked after at 31 March 2012, 30 higher than reported in last year's publication. This release reports the number of children starting to be looked after in the year ending 31 March 2012 as 28,390. In the 2012 release this figure was published as 28,200. The number of children who ceased to be looked after in the year ending 31 March 2012 was 27,510; in 2012 this was reported as being 27,350. 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 2012 records changed by Local Authorities in 2013 shows that around 170 child records were deleted and a further 190 were added to the system. There were 1,000 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 2012 but in 2013, this will also mean that the child is then considered to be looked after at 31 March 2012.

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/stats/childrenlar/a00217479/cia2012-13>

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://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/stats/childrenlar/a00217479/cia2012-13>

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 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.
- 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 Tables - A1, A2, A3, LAA1
Episodes table	Children looked after during the year ending 31 March Table - B1
Starts table	Children who started to be looked after during the year ending 31 March Tables - C1, LAC1
Ceased table	Children who ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March Tables - D1, LAD1, E1
AD1 table	Children looked after who were adopted during the year ending 31 March Tables - E1, E2, LAE1

OC3 table

Children now aged 19 years who were looked after
on 1 April then aged 16
Table - 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 contains rates per 10,000 children under the age of 18. These are calculated using the appropriate mid-year population estimates supplied by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

4.3 Grossing

- 4.3.1. In previous years grossing factors have been 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 are very low and the calculated grossing factors applied are close to 1. After a review of grossing factors, it has been decided to discontinue grossing the data. The table below shows the grossing factors calculated in 2013 and the headline figures which would have been presented had grossing continued.

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Grossing factor	1.000445	1.000378	1.000330	1.000099	1.000010
Children looked after at 31 March – ungrossed figure	60,900	64,450	65,500	67,080	68,110
Children looked after at 31 March – grossed figure	60,930	64,480	65,520	67,080	68,110
Children starting to be looked after at 31 March – ungrossed figure	25,680	28,080	27,500	28,390	28,830
Children starting to be looked after at 31 March – grossed figure	25,690	28,090	27,510	28,390	28,830

Children ceasing to be looked after at 31 March – ungrossed figure	25,000	25,290	27,100	27,510	28,460
Children ceasing to be looked after at 31 March – grossed figure	25,010	25,300	27,110	27,510	28,460

At local authority level just one local authority has a difference in the number of looked after children for the years 2010 to 2013. In 2009 there were 27 local authorities with a difference in the number of looked after children at 31 March. The difference was mostly 1 child, only 2 local authorities had a difference higher than this. Both of these local authorities show a difference of 4 children.

4.4 Rounding Convention

4.4.1 Rounding and suppression is applied to the data.

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 will be published in December.

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

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:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education/series/statistics-looked-after-children>

- 5.4 Information on outcomes for looked after children will 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 the 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](#)