Department for Education

Family Routes: children who returned to care after leaving for adoption or to live with a special guardian

Research report

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Summary

The analysis reported in this summary is part of a wider Department for Education (DfE) funded study, *Family Routes: Growing up in Adoptive and Special Guardianship Families.* The overall aim of the Family Routes research is to gain a better understanding of the experiences, needs, and outcomes of children who left care on an adoption or special guardianship order. This report examines the stability of permanence arrangements and explores the factors that predict disruption, and what happened to the children after they returned to care. For an overview of the methodology used in the data analysis and an outline of the whole core sample, please refer to the separate published report.

There are no satisfactory terms to describe the situation where children return to care after previously leaving care on an adoption order or to live with a carer who has a special guardianship order. In this report, the term 'disruption' will be used to describe children who have re-entered care. Using linked social care administrative datasets, this analysis aimed to determine whether the disruption rate had changed since the previous study on disruption (Selwyn et al., 2015).

Adoption Orders were introduced in 1926 and, once made, cannot be undone except in a minimal set of circumstances.[1] Adoptive parents hold all parental responsibility. It is a lifelong commitment, and the adoptive parents can make all decisions about the child's upbringing. Adoptive parents are usually matched to a child/ren after the local authority has decided that the child's welfare is best met through adoption and the court has considered the evidence and made a placement order. Since the introduction of special guardianship orders, it is rare for relatives to apply for an adoption order, and most adoptive parents have no previous relationship with the child.

Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) were introduced in December 2005. Special guardians are often family members, but they do not necessarily have an existing relationship with the child. About 89% of SGOs are made to a close relative, 9% to previous foster carers, and 1% to others such as more distant relatives or family friends (https://www.coram.org.uk/resource/local-level-asg-data-q2-2023-2024/). The legal order gives the carer parental responsibility to make day-to-day decisions and ends when the child turns 18.

The research used administrative data supplied by the DfE and analysed within the Office for National Statistics secure research service. The datasets made available were the social care datasets that included children looked after and adoption data,

[1] RE X and Y (CHILDREN: ADOPTION ORDER: SETTING ASIDE) CA-2024-001106 [2025] EWCA Civ2 2025 https://www.judiciary.uk/judgments/re-x-and-y/

the care leaver dataset, children in need and data on the children who had returned to care since 2014 after leaving care on a permanence order.

The children in the sample[2]

In the datasets, there was information on:

- 70,170 children who left care and were adopted between April 1st 2004 and March 31st 2023: 970 children had returned to care (disruption)
- 48,020 children who left care to live with a special guardian between January 1st 2006, and March 31st 2023: 1,890 children had returned to care (disruption)

Research questions

- What is the disruption rate of adoptive and special guardianship orders?
- How does stability differ by factors such as the child's age at placement and age at return to care?
- What were the trajectories and outcomes for children who left care on an adoption or special guardianship order but later returned to care?

The analysis examined the factors and differences between the rate of return to care for adopted and special guardianship children using a comprehensive range of statistical tests and the available data.[3] This study was able to examine disruptions over a more extended period than the previous study[4] and had access to the national administrative datasets.

Findings on the disruption rate

Overall, about 95% of adopted children and 89% of children who left care to live with a special guardian had not returned to care by 31st March 2023.

The cumulative rate of disruptions was calculated for children under the age of 18. Different time spans were required for adoptions (data from 2004) and SGOs (data

[2] An additional year (2022-23) of social care data was available for the analysis of disruptions. Hence, a larger sample size than reported in the methodology and preliminary analyses report.
[3] Statistical tests included Kaplan-Meier and Cox regressions. These were used to examine the factors and estimate the probability of adoption and special guardianship continuing past March 31st 2023 (the date at which the data provided ended).
[4] Selwyn et al (2014) *Beyond the Adoption Order* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/beyond-the-adoption-order-challenges-intervention-disruption

from 2006), as SGOs were introduced in December 2005, and disruptions occurred at varying ages.

- 12 years after the adoption order, the adoption disruption rate was 4.8%
- 8 years after leaving care to live with a special guardian, the SGO disruption rate was 10.4%
- Using the same period of 8 years, 2% of adoptions and 10% of SGOs disrupted
- There was a large, statistically significant difference between the rates of adoption and SGO disruption. Adoption was more stable than special guardianship. However, the child's older age when they left care to live with their special guardian partly explains the higher rate of disruption (described in the next section)
- The disruption rates remain low and much lower than the number of placement changes for children who remain in care. There are no national data examining long-term placement stability for children in care over 8 years, which would enable a comparison with the disruption rates for adopted or SGO children. However, in 2023, 31% of children in care had more than one placement during that year, and over a two-year period (2023 and 2024) 46% had more than one placement.[5] There was some evidence of decreased disruption rates for both adoptions and SGOs beginning around 2015. This suggests that there may have been a real improvement in disruption rates in recent years.

Regression models: factors predicting disruption for <u>adopted children</u>

The age at which the child left care for adoption was the strongest predictor of disruption.

- Older children placed with a single adoptive parent more frequently had stability than older children placed with couples
- Children aged over 4 at the time of the adoption order were at higher risk of disruption than children adopted before the age of 4. The increased risk was greater for children aged 4-10 (31 times greater risk than those aged 0-4) and for those adopted aged 11 or older (26 times greater risk than those aged 0-4).

[5] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/stability-measures-for-children-looked-after-in-england/2024
:

- Delays between entry to care and leaving care on an adoption order of over 3 years brought a greater risk of disruption

- Post-order, disruption risk was at its highest when children were living in their adoptive families and were more than 11 years old

Regression models: factors predicting disruption for SGO children

- There was an increased risk of disruption when the child's reason for first being in care was absent parenting[6]

- There was an increased risk of disruption when the SGO had been made to a relative compared with other types of special guardians

- Black children living with a special guardian had an increased risk of disruption compared with children of any other ethnicity

- Being older than 4 when leaving care to live with a special guardian was a strong predictor of disruption. There was little increase in risk between orders made at ages 4-10 and those made when children were 11 or older

- SGO disruption risk was at its highest when children were living in their SGO families and were more than 11 years old

Differences between the adopted and SGO children before leaving care

Child's age

Older age at entry to care and leaving care was associated with a greater frequency of disruption for adopted and SGO children. Adopted children were significantly younger at entry and leaving care than SGO children, but older at the time they re-entered care after a disruption.

- Intact families: the adopted children were on average age 1 on entry to care and age 3 when they left care on an adoption order, compared with SGO children who were age 4 at entry to care and age 6 when they left care

- Disruptions: On average, the children whose adoptions had disrupted were age 4 at entry and age 8 when they left care. SGO children were, on average, 5 years old at entry and age 7 when they left care

[6] Absent parenting is where there are no parents available to provide care. The parents may be deceased, missing or have abandoned the child. The category is also used for parents who are giving consent for their child to be adopted.

Placement changes in care

Before leaving care, adopted children experienced more placement changes than the SGO children. Over half (52%) of the SGO children had the same carer throughout their time in care, compared with 11% of the adopted children. Children who experienced a disruption had more changes of carers.

Length of time in care and length of time before returning to care

There were differences in how the length of time in care was associated with disruption for the adopted and SGO children.

- 58% of adoption disruptions occurred for children who had waited three or more years from entry to care until having an adoption order
- For SGO children, time had the opposite effect, as the children who left care to live with their special guardian within a year of entering care had a greater risk of returning to care: 44% of SGO disruptions were where children had left care within a year of entry
- The average mean time between leaving care on an order and returning to care was 6 years for adopted children and 4 years for SGO children.

Children in Need services <u>before</u> the disruption

The disruption rate was low. However, there had been many concerns for some of the children before they returned to care. Before the disruption, 470 (47%) of the 970 adopted and 920 (49%) of the 1,890 SGO children who returned to care had been referred to services as a Child in Need. Assessments were undertaken. There was a greater frequency of child-related concerns identified for the adopted children (81%) whose placements had disrupted compared with SGO children (66%) and carer-related concerns were more frequent for SGO families (84%) than for adopted parents (75%). Compared to children in SGO families, the following concerns were more frequently identified for adopted children: child mental health, going missing, exploitation/trafficking and drug/alcohol misuse. More frequently identified as concerns in SGO families were carer alcohol/drug misuse, adult mental health and domestic abuse.

After referral, 35% of the adopted children and 45% of the SGO children who had experienced a disruption were on a child in need plan before they re-entered care.[7] Following a child protection conference, 6% of adopted children and 18% of SGO

[7] The children were assumed to be on a child in need plan, if they were a child in need and not on a child protection plan and were not looked after

children who had experienced a disruption had been on a child protection plan before they re-entered care.

Returning to care following a disruption

The mean age when adopted children returned to care was 14, whereas the mean age at SGO disruption was 11. The main reason recorded for re-entry for adopted children was that the family was under acute stress (55%). In contrast, for SGO children, the most frequently recorded reason (37%) was abuse or neglect. The coding of abuse or neglect does not necessarily mean that the carers were responsible for the maltreatment. However, it may indicate that they were unable to protect the child from abuse. There were significant differences between the experiences of children following an adoption disruption or an SGO disruption.

Even after accounting for age at return to care, adopted children more frequently had a residential placement as their first placement and experienced more changes of placement than the SGO children. This suggests that differences in the first placement type reflect differences in the children's needs rather than being driven solely by different ages at return to care.

After returning to care, 25% of the adopted children and 41% of the SGO children who had experienced a disruption later left care on another permanency order, returned to a parent or carer, or had found stability within the care system as they were in Staying Put placements.

Most children who experienced a disruption remained in care: 84% of the adopted and 65% of the SGO young people had entered care after a disruption and were either being looked after as of March 31, 2023, or had remained in care until the age of 18. Adoptions were less likely to disrupt than SGOs, but when they did, it was often associated with a higher level of child need.

1. Background

The analysis of linked administrative data that underpins this report is part of a broader Department for Education (DfE) funded study, *Family Routes: Growing up in Adoptive and Special Guardianship Families.*[8] The research aims to gain a better understanding of the experiences, needs, and outcomes of children who left care on an adoption order to live with a special guardian. One of the outcomes considered is that the children returned to care. The terms commonly used in the UK literature to describe these situations are 'breakdown' and 'disruption'. In the US, distinctions are typically made between breakdowns that occur before the adoption order (disruption) and those that occur after the order (dissolution or displacement). None of the terms indicate whether the return to care is temporary to provide respite or is a permanent breakdown of relationships. Adoptive parents generally dislike the terms and prefer 'parenting at a distance', highlighting that the young person is unable to remain within the family. Still, they remain the child's legal parents, and many remain committed to the child's welfare. In this study, using linked administrative data and to ease reading, the term 'disruption' will be used to indicate children who have returned to care after an adoption or special guardianship order was made.

This report examines the stability of permanence arrangements and explores the factors that predict disruption, and what happened to the children after they were returned to care.

Planning for permanence

When children are looked after and are unable to return to live safely with their birth parents, the local authority is required to consider how best to meet the child's needs for permanence. Planning for permanence is an integral part of care planning and is outlined in the regulations.[9] All looked after children should have a permanence plan in place by the second review (four months after entering care). Planning for permanence is defined as:

> … the long-term plan for the child's upbringing and provides an underpinning framework for all social work with children and their families from family support through to adoption. The objective of planning for permanence is to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging (Department for Education, 2015: 22-23, s2.3).

[8] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/family-routes-study-making-decisions-about-their-childrens-care
[9] The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 Part 2 Section 5

Research, statutory regulations, and policy[10] recognise the importance of children having a home where they feel they belong and with adults who will love and care for them through childhood and beyond.

Social workers have several options to consider when making the permanence plan. The first option is usually for social workers and other agencies to work with and support the birth family to enable children to return home. However, if it is unsafe to return children home, different forms of permanent family-based care, such as adoption, special guardianship, and long-term (permanent) foster care, are considered.

Adoption Orders were introduced in 1926 and, once made, cannot be undone except in a minimal set of circumstances.[11] Adoptive parents hold all parental responsibility. It is a lifelong commitment, and the adoptive parents can make all decisions about the child's upbringing. Adoptive parents are usually matched to a child/ren after the local authority has decided that the child's welfare is best met through adoption and the court has considered the evidence and made a placement order. Since the introduction of special guardianship orders, it is rare for relatives to apply for an adoption order, and most adoptive parents have no previous relationship with the child.

Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) were introduced in December 2005. Special guardians are often family members, but they do not necessarily have an existing relationship with the child. About 89% of SGOs are made to a close relative, 9% to previous foster carers, and 1% to others such as more distant relatives or family friends (https://www.coram.org.uk/resource/local-level-asg-data-q2-2023-2024/). The legal order gives the carer parental responsibility to make day-to-day decisions and ends when the child turns 18.

Previous research on disruption

An international review of adoption research found that few adopted children return to care, and disruption rates are low (Palacios et al., 2018). In contrast, there has been less research on the longer-term outcomes of children who leave care to live with a special guardian (Simmonds and Harwin, 2020). The previous study, Beyond the Adoption Order (BTAO, Selwyn et al., 2015), using data supplied by English local authorities, found that the rate of return to care for adopted children was 3% over 12 years (2000-2011/12).[12] Children whose carers had an SGO experienced a

[10] Keeping children safe, helping families thrive - GOV.UK
[11] RE X and Y (CHILDREN: ADOPTION ORDER: SETTING ASIDE) CA-2024-001106 [2025] EWCA Civ2 2025
[12] Data on 37,335 adoptions and 565 adoption disruptions. 5,921 SGOs and 121 SGO disruptions

disruption rate of 6% over a five-year period (2006/7-2011/12). Adolescence was the peak age when disruptions were most prevalent. Similarly, a study using Cafcass data[13] of children in court proceedings where a SGO was made reported that 5% of the cases returned to court for new care order proceedings within five years (Harwin et al.,2019). However, findings have been limited as most SGO children in the samples had not yet reached adolescence. The BTAO study also relied on local authorities being aware of whether the child had returned to care. However, all studies have found that both adoption orders and SGOs provide greater stability than the placements of children in care. National statistics indicate that 10% of children in care have three or more placement moves each year, and 46% experienced a placement move within the previous two years.[14]

When the data for the BTAO study was collected in 2014, the role of the virtual school head had not been extended to include support for adopted and SGO children, nor had the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) been established. The Fund was introduced in 2015 to provide therapeutic support to adopted children and young people up to the age of 21, or up to 25 for those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) if they have been assessed as needing support. The eligibility for support was extended in 2016 to include children and young people who had left care to live with a special guardian. The funding was intended to reduce the delays and barriers that families face in accessing support, thereby improving the mental health and well-being of children and their parents or carers, and reducing the risk of children re-entering care. Evaluations of the ASGSF have found numerous benefits for children and families.[15] Between 2023 and 2024, 83% of applications to the Fund were made on behalf of adopted children, and 17% of the applications were to meet the needs of children in special guardianship.[16]

Whilst the availability of support has increased since 2015, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019/2020 negatively affected many families. It disrupted all children's daily lives due to school closures, social distancing, limited access to activities and other restrictions, leading to increased stress for some parents/carers and poorer child and adolescent mental health (Ng and Ng, 2022). Research on the impact of COVID-19 found that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds were most at risk of being negatively affected by the pandemic (Montero-Marin et al., 2023). Analysis of the national census (Nandy and Selwyn, 2013) revealed that kinship carers were predominantly grandparents residing in the poorest neighbourhoods, with poorer

[13] The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service
[14] https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2020/11/cco-stability-index-2020.pdf and https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions
[15] https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/evaluations-of-the-adoption-support-fund-asf

[16] RAA-Annual-Data-Insights_FINAL-1-Oct-24.pdf

housing, and were more likely to have a disability or health condition compared to parents in the general population. The impact of COVID-19, increasing child poverty, and austerity are likely to have disproportionately affected kinship carers, who are the largest group of special guardians.[17] It is, therefore, timely to re-examine the stability of adoption and special guardianship orders a decade after the conclusion of the BTAO study.

Research questions

The *Family Routes: Growing Up in Adoptive and Special Guardianship Families* research aims to gain a better understanding of the experiences, needs, and outcomes of children who left care on an adoption or special guardianship order. One of the outcomes the study has considered is the stability of the permanence arrangements. Specifically, the analysis reported in this report considered:

- What is the disruption rate of adoptive and special guardianship orders?
- How does stability differ by factors such as the child's age at placement and age at return to care?
- What were the trajectories and placement outcomes for children who left care on a permanence order (adoption and special guardianship order) but later returned to care?

The Data Supplied

This research utilised linked administrative data from 2004 to 2023, supplied by the DfE, and analysed within the Office for National Statistics' secure research service.[18] The datasets provided (Table 1) included information on children looked after and adoption data (e.g., sex, ethnicity, age. dates of entering and leaving care, type and number of placements, reasons for entering and exiting, legal status, types of orders), children in need (referrals and assessments) data on care leavers (accommodation and activity), and data on the year of re-entry to care and the type of previous permanence order. The 'previous permanence' data is particularly significant as it contains data from 2014 on the children who returned to care after leaving on a permanence order, providing crucial information for our analysis. Compared with the data analysed in the methodology and preliminary analyses

[17] https://kinship.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/The-impact-of-covid-19-on-kinship-care-report.pdf
[18] This work contains statistical data from ONS, which is Crown Copyright. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation.

report, an additional year of social care data (2022-2023) was available for the disruption analysis.

Table 1: Department for Education data provided by collection year

Social Care Data	2004/5 – 2013/14	2015/16-2018/19	2018/19-2022-23
Adoption decisions	•	•	•
Episodes (reason for entry & leaving, placements, dates, orders)	•	•	•
Children in Need	*	*	•
Previous permanence (children who re-entered care after having left on a permanence order)	*	•	•
Outcomes age 5- 17 yrs (SDQ, substance misuse, convictions)	*	•	•
Care Leavers aged 16 years+	*	•	•

• = requested and provided * = not requested Source ONS.

Analysis

The analysis examined the factors and differences in the rate of return to care for adopted and special guardianship children using a comprehensive range of statistical tests, including chi-square tests of association and goodness-of-fit tests, Welch t-tests, Mann-Whitney U tests, log-rank tests, and logistic regressions. Effect sizes are reported, ensuring a robust and thorough analysis. Kaplan-Meier and Cox regression analyses were used to examine the factors and estimate the probability of adoption and special guardianship continuing past March 31, 2023 (the date the data provided ended).

The data on children re-entering care included children (n=1,570) with no record in the other social care datasets of the child having left care on an adoption order or going to live with a special guardian. The children may have had no other record because they left care before 2004, were adopted in another UK country, or had a disrupted private SGO arrangement or a disrupted child arrangement /residence order. However, there were a few children whose social care records showed that they had been in an adoptive placement, but no adoption order had been made.[19] In

[19] Children can be placed for adoption but the adoptive parents or the child ask for the placement to end. This occurs pre-order and usually very quickly after the child is placed as it becomes apparent that it is not a good match. In a few cases, courts refuse the adoption application. These children were not included in the analyses.

a few cases, the date recorded when they first exited to live with a special guardian was before SGOs existed. Children were excluded from the analysis if there was no record of the child leaving care on an adoption order or SGO in the social care looked after or adoption datasets (Table 2).

Table 2: Children who returned to care between 1st April 2004 and 31st March 2023, having previously left on an adoption order or to live with a special guardian

Type of order	Number of orders in the social care dataset	Number of children with a recorded disruption but no order in the social care datasets	Number of children with a recorded disruption and an order recorded in the social care dataset
Adoption	70,170	900	970
Special Guardianship	48,020	670	1,890
Total	116,260	1,570	2,860

Base n= 116,260 Source ONS.

Therefore, the disruption analysis used data on the following:

- 70,170 children who left care and were adopted between April 1st 2004 and March 31st 2023 and 970 adopted children who later returned to care (disruptions) between April 1st 2004 and March 31st 2023
- 48,020 children who left care to live with a special guardian between January 1st 2006, and March 31st 2023 and 1,890 SGO children who returned to care between January 1st 2006 and March 31st 2023

Limitations

The child's Strengths and Difficulties score[20] and whether the child had a criminal conviction were available for 21% of the sample after they returned to care. These outcome variables were not analysed due to the large proportion of unavailable data.

[20] The SDQ is a screening questionnaire for emotional and behavioural problems. National data from 2023/24 shows that about 77% of children in care (age 5-16) who have been continuously looked after for 12 months or more have a completed SDQ. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions

Data on whether the special guardian was a close relative or an unrelated carer began to be recorded from the 2018/19 financial year. Detailed information on the type of special guardian was unavailable for 8,920 (19%) children.

Some factors identified in previous research associated with the stability of placements are not collected in the administrative datasets, e.g., maternal drug/alcohol use during pregnancy, sibling placements or transracial placements.

2. Pre-order factors associated with children's later return to care

An analysis of pre-order factors (described below) was conducted to determine whether they might be related to a child's return to care. The factors selected were those identified in previous research (e.g., Palacios et al., 2018) and that had been collected in the administrative data.

Sex and ethnicity

The child's sex was not statistically associated with a disruption of either order.[21]

Ethnicity data were missing for 820 (1%) of the adopted children and 530 (1%) of the SGO children. Black adopted and Black SGO children more frequently returned to care than children of any other ethnicity (Table 3).[22]

Table 3:The ethnicity of children who returned to care (2004-2023)

Ethnicity	Adopted not disrupted n (%)	Adopted Disrupted n (%)	SGO not disrupted n (%)	SGO Disrupted n (%)
White	57,540 (99%)	820 (1%)	36,860 (96%)	1,440 (4%)
Mixed	7,300 (99%)	90 (1%)	5,050 (96%)	230 (4%)
Black	1,550 (97%)	40 (3%)	2,290 (94%)	150 (6%)
Asian	1,060 (99%)	10 (1%)	860 (96%)	40 (4%)
Other	930 (99%)	10 (1%)	540 (94%)	30 (6%)
Total	68,380 (99%)	970 (1%)	45,600 (96%)	1,890 (4%)

Base Adopted n= 69,350 SGO n= 47,490 Source ONS.

The analysis examined whether a difference by ethnicity for children who were adopted may partly be explained by Black children leaving care at older ages compared with White children (Table 4). Older age at the time of the order is a known risk factor for disruption (Palacios et al., 2018).

[21] x^2=2.739 df1 p<.098 Additional Tables 20 and 21
[22] x^2=25.9 df4 p<.001 Cramer's V 0.02 small effect size

Table 4: Mean age when the child left care for adoption or to live with a special guardian by ethnicity (2004-2023)

	Adopted Mean age (years)	SGO Mean age (years)
White	3.6	5.7
Mixed	3.4	5.4
Asian	3.2	7.0
Black	5.1	6.0
Other	3.4	6.0
All children	3.6	5.7

Base Adopted n= 69,350 SGO n= 47,090 Source ONS.

Logistic regression models were fitted to show the effect of the child's Black ethnicity (compared to all other ethnicities) and their age at the time of the order on the risk of disruption (Additional Tables 22-25, Models 1-4). Once the effect of age at adoption order has been controlled for, Black children slightly more frequently experienced an adoption disruption than other children. For SGO children, the increased risk of disruption for Black children was largely unexplained by their age at order. Analysis also considered whether being adopted by a single carer increased the risk of disruption, as 32% of single adoptive parents had adopted a Black child (Table 5).[23] Data on the partnership status of special guardians is not collected.

Table 5: The partnership status of adoptive parents (2004-2023)

Child's ethnicity	Single adoptive parent	Couples	Total
All other ethnicities	5,040 (7%)	63,530 (93%)	68.570 (100%)
Black	510 (32%)	1,090 (68%)	1,600 (100%)
Total	5,550 (8%)	64,620 (92%)	70,170 (100%)

Base n=70,170 Source ONS.

About 1% of adoptions had disrupted if a couple (heterosexual or LGBT+) had adopted the child. If the adoptive parent was single, 4% had disrupted if the child was of Black ethnicity. However, the statistical relationship between ethnicity and single parenthood is complex because 44% of single adoptive parents had adopted older

[23] x^2 =1289.95, df1, p<.001 phi 1.36: a large effect size

children. Indeed, once the age of the child was controlled in regression models, single parents more frequently adopted older children than couples and adoptions were more frequently stable (Table 26, Additional Tables). The age at the time of the adoption order was the most significant predictor of adoption disruption.

Overall, we found that older age at the time of the order largely explained the increased risk of disruption for Black adopted children but not for Black SGO children. The available data did not help us understand why SGO Black children were at greater risk. It may be that, as other research has found, Black kinship carers face additional barriers to accessing appropriate support that would prevent disruptions.[24] Data published on applications to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund in 2024 shows that 3% of applications were made by Black parents/carers (adoption and special guardian applications were not separately reported).[25] The data analysed here showed that 5% of all children cared for by a special guardian were of Black ethnicity.

Age at first entry to care (pre-order)

Previous research has shown that delayed entry to care and the possible prolonged exposure to maltreatment are associated with an increased risk of later adoption disruption (Howe, 1997; Selwyn et al., 2006). Those earlier findings were replicated in the study datasets (2004-2023) for the adopted and the SGO children.

- The children whose adoptions had disrupted were significantly older at entry to care (average age 3.9 years) than children who had not returned to care (average age 1.2 years).[26]

- The SGO children who had later returned to care were also older at entry to care (average 5.3 years) compared with children living with their special guardians (average 3.6 years).[27]

Pre-order movement in and out of care

Some children went in and out of care several times before they left care on a permanence order. Unsuccessful returns to parents (reunifications) were the main reason for re-entry to care: 5% of the adopted and 6% of the SGO children experienced at least one unsuccessful reunification.

[24] https://kinship.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/research/raised-by-relatives/#key-findings
[25] https://www.coram.org.uk/resource/asgsf_2024_data_insights/
[26] Mann-Whitney *U*= 1002688, z 37.6, *p*<.001 Cohen's *d* 1.5 large effect size
[27] Mann Whitney *U*= 33390256, z 17.3 *p*< .001 Cohen's *d* 0.34 small effect size

In care, adopted children had significantly more foster placements[28] (large statistical effect size) compared with the SGO children, partly because few of the adopted children were adopted by their foster carers. About one in three adopted children (who entered care under two years old) had three or more foster placements before leaving care on an order, compared with one in six SGO children.[29] A previous study (Selwyn et al., 2014) found that just over half of the children who later left care on a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) were first placed with a family or friends (kinship) carer who became their special guardian. This first placement became their permanent placement, resulting in fewer moves in care.

Over half the SGO children (52%) had no change of carer before leaving to live with an SGO carer, compared with 11% of adopted children with no change of carer.[29] Changes in placement are known to increase the risk of mental health problems, especially for young children who lack an attachment figure (Maguire et al. 2024). This analysis found that children who experienced a disruption had more changes of carers and unsuccessful reunifications before leaving care on an adoption order or Special Guardianship Order (SGO) than those who did not experience a disruption (Table 6).

[28] Changes of carer Adopted v SGO x^2 =20645.6, df 4, p<.003 phi=0.4 large effect size
[29] Selwyn, J et al (2025) Family Routes: methodology and preliminary analyses of the administrative data. DfE

Table 6: Pre-order mean number of changes of carers and unsuccessful reunifications (2004-2023)

	Adoption not disrupted	Adoption disrupted	SGO not disrupted	SGO disrupted
The mean number of changes of carer before the order	1.64	1.89***	0.88	0.98 **
The mean number of reunifications before the order	0.05	0.11***	0.07	0.12***

Base: Adopted n= 70,170 SGO = 48,020 Source ONS. *p<.05; ** p<.01 ***p<.001

Time from entry to leaving care on an adoption order or to live with a special guardian

Previous research has shown that delays in social work decision-making, family-finding, and court processes result in children waiting in care, which increases their risk of experiencing placement and carer changes (Prime Minister's Review, 2000; Selwyn et al., 2006; Children's Commissioner, 2020). However, the effect of 'time' differed for adopted and SGO children

- 58% of adoption disruptions occurred for children who had waited three or more years from entry to care until having an adoption order
- 44% of SGO disruptions were where children had left care within a year of entering care

The distribution of time from entry to care to leaving care for adoption or to live with a special guardian differed significantly between children who did and did not experience an adoption or SGO disruption.[30]

[30] Adopted x^2= 1074.0, df3, p < 0.001, Cramer's V 0.12. SGO x^2 = 30.7, df3, p < 0.001, Cramer's V 0.03, small effect sizes. Additional Table, Table 28

The child's age when they left care for adoption or to live with a special guardian

Children's age at the time they left care also significantly differed by the type of legal order: adopted children were younger than the SGO children (Table 7).

- Intact placements: The adopted children were, on average, three years younger (at age 3) than those leaving to live with a special guardian (at age 6).[31]

- Disrupted placements: the mean age at leaving care was similar for the adopted (age 8) and SGO children (age 7)

Table 7: Comparison of mean age when leaving care for adoption or to live with a special guardian by the stability of order (2004-2023)

The child's age when they left care on an order	Adoption not disrupted	Adoption disrupted	SGO not disrupted	SGO disrupted
Mean age	3.5 years	7.6 years	5.6 years	7.3 years

Base: Adopted n=70,170 SGO n=48,020 Source ONS.

Children adopted by their previous foster carers

Previous research conducted more than 20 years ago indicated that about 13% of children were adopted by their former foster carers (Ivaldi, 2000). This proportion has barely risen – between 2004 and 2023, 16% of adoptive parents were the child's previous foster carers. Examining the proportions of disrupted adoptions, it appeared that adoption by a foster carer was less stable than matched adoptions[32] (Table 8). It should be noted that the comparison here is between 2% of foster carer disrupted adoptions compared with 1% of matched disrupted adoptions: a very small statistical effect size.

[31] Mann-Whitney *U* tests for different distributions Adopted *U*= 7183228, z 42.1, p< .001 Cohen's *d* 1.7, a large effect size SGO *U*= 33460168, z 17, *p*<.001 Cohen's *d* 0.37 moderate effect size

[32] Stability of foster carer adoptions x^2 = 13.8, df1, $p < 0.001$, phi = 0.01 small effect size

Table 8: Comparison of adoption disruption rates between children adopted by foster carers and matched adoptive parents (2004-2023)

Adopted by foster carers	Not disrupted n (%)	Disrupted n (%)	Total n (%)
Matched adopters	58,150 (99%)	770 (1%)	58,920 (100%)
Foster carer adoptions	11,050 (98%)	200 (2%)	11,250 (100%)
Total	69,200 (99%)	970 (1%)	70,170 (100%)

Base: Adopted n= 70,170 Source ONS.

Just as with the earlier findings on single adoptive parents and the risk of disruption, children adopted by foster carers were significantly older at entry to care, older at adoption and experienced a longer delay between entry to care and leaving care for adoption (Additional Tables 28-30). These factors were all associated with disruption.[33] There are no data on why these children were entering care later and staying in care longer, but it may have been because adoptive parents could not be found and foster carers stepped in to become adoptive parents, or there were lengthy negotiations for support packages, or LAs had not supported the carers' adoption application or other delays caused by legal and social work practice (Ofsted 2012; DfE 2012).

The carers with a special guardianship order

New codes were introduced in 2018/19 to identify whether the child's special guardian was a close relative or the child's previous unrelated foster carer. Using data from 2018/19, a higher percentage of SGO disruptions occurred when the order was made to a relative (Table 9).[34]

[33] Delay is recognised as often detrimental to children's outcomes. For example, the Adoption and Children Act (2002) states, "The court or adoption agency must bear in mind at all times that, in general, any delay in coming to a decision is likely to prejudice the child's welfare."

[34] x^2 = 45.900, df1, p<.001 phi .038 moderate effect size

Table 9: Risk of disruption by type of special guardian (2018-2023)

Type of special guardian	Not disrupted n (%)	Disrupted n (%)	Total n (%)
SGO, relative	28,600 (97%)	1,000 (3%)	29,610 (100%)
SGO unrelated foster carer	2,150 (99%)	20 (1%)	2,170 (100%)
Total	30,760 (97%)	1020 (3%)	31,780 (100%)

Base: SGO n=31,780 Source ONS. Children whose type of special guardian was unknown were omitted.

The higher percentage of relative disruptions (3%) was an unexpected finding, as these children were, on average, younger at entry to care and at the time of the order and experienced fewer delays than unrelated special guardians (Table 9). A younger age would suggest a lower risk of disruption. Data are not collected on whether the special guardian is a single carer. An earlier analysis of census data (Nandy et al., 2011) found that 60% of kinship carers (encompassing all types of kinship care) were single female carers. However, the SGOs granted to unrelated carers disrupted quicker (mean 1.6 years after the order) compared with SGOs made to relatives (2.9 years later).

Table 10: Comparison of (a) mean age at entry to care, (b) mean age at SGO and (c) mean order delay between children by type of special guardian, 2005-2023

Years	Type of special guardian		Mann-Whitney test for different distributions			Cohen's *d* effect size
	Unrelated	Relatives	*U*	Z	*p*	
Age at entry to care	5.50	5.32	29189771.5	-7.11	< 0.001	0.07
Age left care to live with a special guardian	8.08	6.74	21338901.5	-26.1	< 0.001	0.65
Time from entry to leaving care (years)	4.05	1.47	15624427.5	40.0	< 0.001	1.34

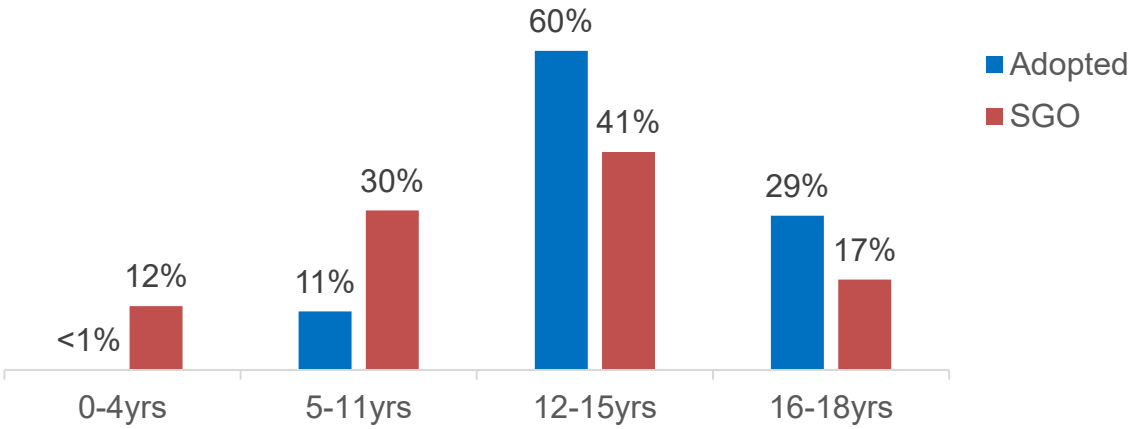
Base: SGO n= 31,780. Children whose type of special guardian was unknown were omitted. Source. ONS.

Age at return to care

As shown in Figure 1, 89% of the adoption and 58% of the SGO disruptions occurred during the secondary school years. Adopted children were, on average, 14.2 years old when they first returned to care. Children who had lived with a special guardian returned on average at 11.2 years, a statistically significant difference.[35]

[35] Mann Whitney test z-=19.2 p< .001 Cohen's *d*=0.75 moderate effect size

Figure 1: Post order: the child's age at return to care (2004-2023)



Base Adopted n= 970 SGO n= 1,890 Source ONS.

The time between the child leaving care on an order and the return to care

The average mean time between leaving care on an order and returning to care was 6.1 years for adopted children, significantly longer than the average time of 3.6 years for SGO children. There was a mean difference of 2.5 years between the adopted and SGO children.[36] However, we have also shown in the analysis that adopted children were, on average, younger when they left care.

[36] There was a mean difference of 2.5 years ± 0.12 [mean ± standard error], t=19.95, df 2034.95 *p* = <.001 Cohen's *d* 3.21 Large effect size.

3. Calculating disruption rates

This study aimed to calculate the rate of return to care after a child had left on an adoption or special guardianship order, and to compare the disruption rates of

adoption and special guardianship orders (SGOs). The cumulative rate of disruption after Y years since the adoption order or SGO was calculated as:

Number disrupted within Y years of order / (Number exposed Y years from order + number disrupted within Y years of order)

The 'number exposed Y years from order' was the number of children under 18 and still within the follow-up period Y years after leaving care for adoption or to live with a special guardian (follow-up ended on 31st of March 2023).

The cumulative adoption disruption rate

The cumulative adoption disruption rate was calculated for periods ranging from 1 to 12 years.[37] The time period (T) was the date when the child left care and ended when the child was still under 18, up to 31 March 2023. This was the most extended period considered, as the rate estimate becomes unreliable as time (T) approaches either the duration of the study period or 18 years, which is the maximum possible duration. The number of children still exposed to the risk of an adoption disruption after T years becomes small relative to the size of the sample (Table 11).

After the child had been adopted for 12 years, the adoption disruption rate was 4.8%. It should be noted that the disruptions observed at any point in the 12 years analysed in this study covered many more years (2004-2021) than the BTAO study (2000-2011/12).

[37] The cumulative adoption disruption rate after N years is the proportion of those adopted who experience an adoption disruption within N years of the adoption.

Table 11: Time in years since leaving care for adoption and the cumulative rate of adoption disruption (per 1,000 adoptions) 2004-2023

Time in years since leaving care for adoption	Rate of disruptions per 100 adoptions
1	0.1%
2	0.2%
3	0.3%
4	0.4%
5	0.6%
6	0.9 %
7	1%
8	2%
9	2%
10	3%
11	4%
12	5%

Base: Adopted n= 70,170 Source ONS.

As there was information on orders and disruptions that occurred up to March 31st 2023, the length of time each child had lived with their adoptive families differed, as did their age. Therefore, calculating a rate of disruption as a proportion of all adoptions would not have allowed for the fact that some children had a shorter period at risk of disruption, i.e. the adoptions had not had time to break down. For example, a child adopted in 2021 (average age 4) would not have reached the teenage years by 2023 (the last year of available data). The overall disruption rate is also relatively crude, as it does not indicate which factors increase the relative risk of disruption. Statistical methods known as survival modelling allow 'time' to be considered in analyses of factors associated with risk. Kaplan-Meier and Cox proportional hazards modelling were used in the following calculations.[38]

[38] The proportionality of hazards was tested by visually inspecting the curves in the Kaplan-Meier plots and log minus log plot, ensuring the curves were parallel.

Modelling the factors that increased the risk of adoption disruption

The following factors were entered into Cox regression models based on the above descriptive analysis and the available information in the databases (see Additional Table 30).

- sex (male/female)
- whether the adoptive parents/special guardians were the child's previous foster carers (yes/ no), and for adoption, whether the parents were single or couples
- number of placements before the order
- child's age at the time of the order
- time between entry to care and leaving care on an order
- age[39]

Results

- The child's sex, number of previous placements, and whether the adoptive parents were matched or foster carers were not statistically significant predictors of disruption once all the other factors were controlled
- Being a single adoptive parent became a protective factor once children's ages were included in the model. Older children placed with a single adoptive parent more frequently had stability than older children placed with couples
- Children aged over 4 at the time of the adoption order were at higher risk of disruption than children adopted before age 4. The increase in risk was greater for those aged 4-10 (31 times greater risk than those aged 0-4) at the time of the order and for those adopted aged 11 or older (26 times greater risk than those aged 0-4)
- Children whose time from entry to care to the date of the adoption order was more than 3 years had a six times greater risk of disruption compared to children whose adoption order was made in less than three years
- At any time post-order, adopted children aged 4 -10 were at no greater risk of disruption than children adopted under 4. At greater risk of disruption were

[39] Child's age was banded as the risk of disruption did not increase linearly with increasing age for adopted and SGO children

adopted children aged 11-16 (4 times greater risk), and at much greater risk were those aged 16 to 18 (9 times greater risk).

The cumulative SGO disruption rate

Using the same method, the cumulative rate of disruptions was calculated over an 8-year period (Table 12). The rate estimate became unreliable as the time since the order neared the end of the available data, and when the young person was still under 18 years old. SGO children were older than adopted children when they left care. After eight years of living with a special guardian, the SGO disruption rate was 10.4%.

Table 12: Time in years since SGO and the cumulative rate of SGO disruptions (per 1,000 orders) 2005-2023

Time in years since SGO	Rate of disruptions per 100 SGOs
1	1%
2	2%
3	3%
4	4%
5	5%
6	6%
7	8%
8	10 %

Base SGO n=48,020 Source ONS.

Modelling the factors that increased the risk of SGO disruption

The factors identified as associated with SGO disruption in the analysis were used to model SGO disruptions. In this model, the reason the child had first entered care was included (as the reasons were earlier shown to be statistically significant only for the SGO children), and the variables on delay from entry to care to leaving care were omitted as they were too closely correlated with other variables (Additional Table, 31). Data on whether the carer was single or in a couple are not collected and, therefore, could not be included.

Results

- There was no difference in risk of SGO disruption by the child's sex or by the number of placements they had had whilst looked after.
- Once all other factors were controlled for, there was an increased risk of disruption (1.2 times greater risk) when the SGO had been made to a relative compared to other special guardians.
- There was an increased risk of disruption when the child's reason for first being in care was absent parenting[40] (1.6 times greater risk)
- There was a 1.4 times greater risk of disruption where the child's ethnicity was Black compared with a child having any other ethnicity
- There was an increased risk of disruption when the child was over 4 when they left care. Children aged 4-10 years showed a 2.0 times greater risk, and those aged 11-16 had a 2.1 times greater risk than those under 4 when they left care.
- At any time post-order, children living with a special guardian aged under 11 years had a reduced risk of disruption. The risk of disruption increased significantly once children were over 11 (1.6 times greater), with a further increase in risk after they reached the age of 16 (2.6 times greater).

Comparing the adoption and SGO rates of disruption

The modelling of factors shows that for adoption, the child's age at the time they left care for adoption was the most statistically significant predictive disruption factor, especially for those who were aged 4-10 years when they left care. For SGOs, having an order over the age of 4 was also a strong predictor of disruption, although there was little difference in risk between orders made at ages 4-10 and those made when children were 11 or older. Most disruptions occurred during adolescence, and the risk persisted until age 18.

A comparison of the cumulative disruption rate of orders

Because SGOs only became available in December 2005, a comparison of the rates of disruption between adoptions and SGOs was conducted over an eight-year period,

[40] Absent parenting is where there are no parents available to provide care. The parents may be deceased, missing or have abandoned the child. The category is also used for parents who are giving consent for their child to be adopted

from January 1, 2006, to March 31, 2014, when children were under 18 years old (Table 13).

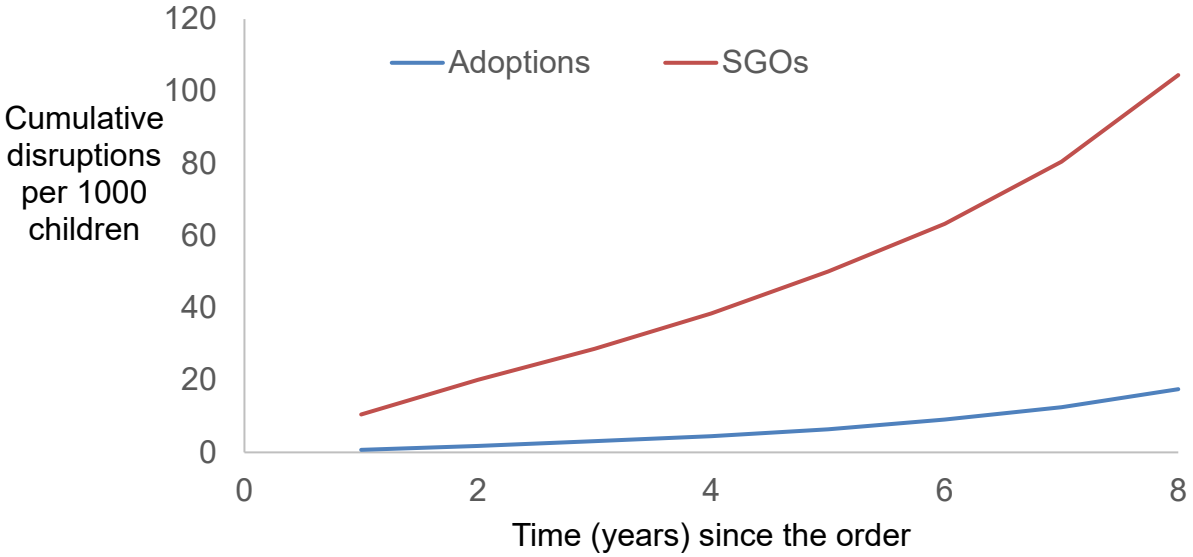
Table 13: Time in years since the adoption and special guardianship order and cumulative rates of disruption per 1,000 orders (2005-2023)

Years	Cumulative number of adoption disruptions per 1000 orders	Risk of adoption disruption	Cumulative number of SGO disruptions per 1000 orders	Risk of SGO disruption
1	0.7	7 in a thousand	10.5	10 in a thousand
2	1.8	2 in a thousand	20.1	20 in a thousand
3	3.1	3 in a thousand	28.7	29 in a thousand
4	4.5	4 in a thousand	38.5	38 in a thousand
5	6.4	6 in a thousand	50.1	50 in a thousand
6	9.1	9 in a thousand	63.3	63 in a thousand
7	12.5	12 in a thousand	80.5	80 in a thousand
8	17.5	17 in a thousand	104.5	104 in a thousand

Base Adoptions n=63,540 SGOs n=48,020 Source ONS.

The rates are shown graphically in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Comparison of the rate of disruption for SGOs and adoption orders (2006-2023)



Base Adoption = 63,320 SGOs n=39,200 Source ONS.

There was a large, statistically significant difference between the rates of disruptions of adoptions and SGOs.[41]

Annual disruption rates

The annual disruption rates for adoption and SGOs were calculated from 2008 to 2021 (Table 14) as follows. First, the number of adoptions and SGOs was calculated at the beginning of each year; that is, the number of children who had been given an order before this year who were not yet 18 and the child had not experienced a disruption. The number of adoptions and SGO disruptions during the year was divided by the number of current orders to produce an annual disruption rate. Beyond 2021, estimates of the rates became unreliable as the number of children being followed up became too small to produce reliable estimates of disruption.

[41] X^2 = 1336.139, df1, p <.001.

Table 14: Annual disruption rate per 1,000 children (2008 to 2021) and mean age of children with an order at the start of the year

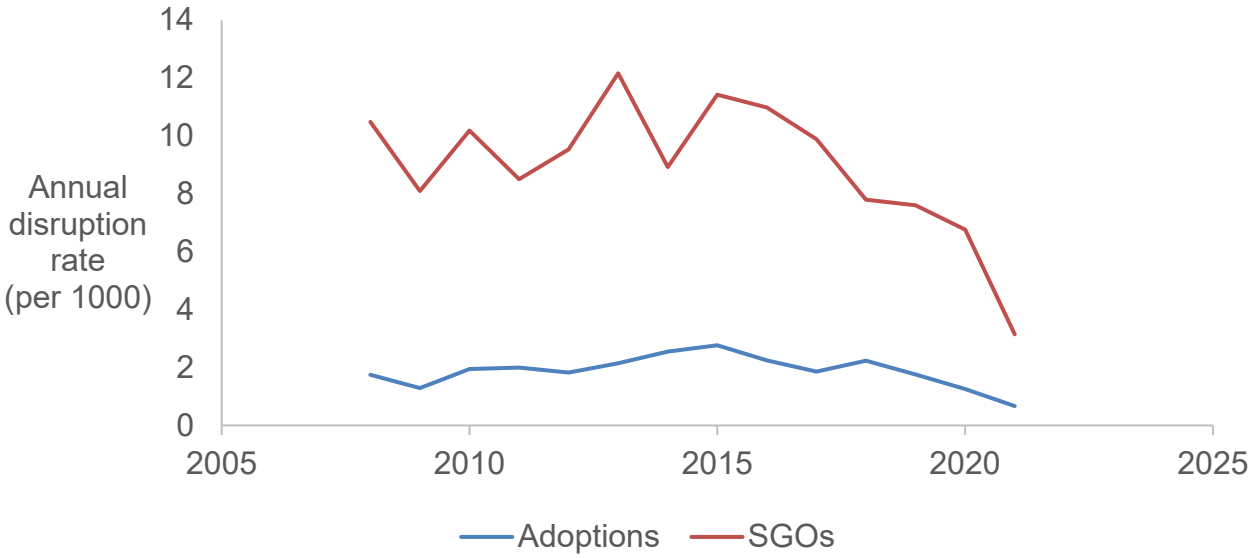
Year	Disruption rate (per 1000)		Mean age of children with an order at the start of the year	
	Adoptions	SGOs	Adoptions	SGOs
2008	1.75	10.49	5.96	6.60
2009	1.29	8.10	6.41	6.98
2010	1.95	10.19	6.86	7.51
2011	2.00	8.51	7.34	7.60
2012	1.83	9.54	7.75	7.77
2013	2.15	12.17	8.08	7.83
2014	2.55	8.93	8.28	7.85
2015	2.77	11.43	8.40	7.98
2016	2.25	10.99	8.67	8.11
2017	1.86	9.89	8.96	8.41
2018	2.24	7.80	9.28	8.73
2019	1.76	7.61	9.63	9.04
2020	1.26	6.77	9.91	9.35
2021	0.67	3.15	10.20	9.68

Base Adoption n = 63,320 SGOs n 39,200 Source ONS.

Several factors will influence the disruption rate for a given year. For example, we have shown that the risk of disruption increases with children's age, and SGO children tend to be older at entry to care and when they leave care (see previous section Age at Entry to Care and Table 7). The mean age of the population of adopted and SGO children in this study increased over time. Therefore, all else being equal, we would expect to see a corresponding increase in the disruption rate over time. However, there is some evidence of a decrease in disruption rates for both adoptions and especially for SGOs beginning around 2015 (Table 14 and Figure 3). This suggests that disruption rates may have improved in recent years, especially as

the number of children entering care rose yearly between 2015 and 2019.[42] The sharp decrease in 2021 may also be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lower numbers entering care, as well as the additional flexibility in accessing the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund during the COVID-19 pandemic (Institute of Public Care, 2021).

Figure 3: Annual disruption rates for adoptions and SGOs (2008 to 2021)



Base Adoption = 63,320 SGOs n=39,200 Source ONS.

To gain a deeper understanding of the reasons why children had returned to care, the data on children who had experienced a disruption and subsequently returned to care were linked with the Children in Need (CIN) social care data. The CIN data[43] was provided for 2013-2019: 10% of all the disruptions had occurred before 2013; therefore, it was unknown whether they had been referred as a child in need.

[42] 30,000 children entered care in 2015, 32,050 in 2016, 32,810 in 2017, 32,940 in 2018 and 31,680 in 2019. In 2020, a decrease (n=31,010) and in 2021 (n= 30, 970) in the numbers of children entering care https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2024

[43] Children in need data after 2013 are known to be reliable. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/methodology/children-in-need

4. Children in Need referrals before the children re-entered care

Before the disruption, 470 (47%) of the 970 adopted and 920 (49%) of the 1,890 SGO children who returned to care had been referred to services as a Child in Need care at least once. Most frequently, the first referral for adopted children came from schools, education services, or local authority services. For SGO children, the first referrals primarily came from schools, education services, and the police (Additional Table 32).

There was no further action (decided either before or after an initial assessment) for 130 (28%) adopted and 90 (10%) SGO children.

An episode of need begins when a child is referred to children's social care services and is assessed as needing children's social care services. The primary need for services at the first episode of need was recorded as abuse or neglect for 54% of the adopted and 60% of the SGO children who had been referred and whose placements had disrupted (Additional Table 33). The codes used in the administrative data do not indicate whether these were concerns about abusive behaviours between siblings, child/adolescent to parent violence, or abuse by parents/carers or other adults outside the family.

Concerns identified by social workers

The dataset also contained the additional factors that concerned social workers at the end of the assessment. Social workers identified concerns that related to children (Figure 5, Additional Tables), adoptive parents or special guardians (Figure 6 Additional Tables) and concerns about others in the households (Figure 7 Additional Tables) There were some commonly identified concerns in adoptive and SGO families, but also statistically significant differences between them:

Concerns about the child's special guardians were identified for 84% of the referred SGO children. Concerns about the child's adoptive parents were identified for 75% of the referred adopted children.[44]

- Carer drug misuse was a concern for 25% of the children's SGO carers and 3% of children's adoptive parents[45]

[44] x^2 =18.85, df1. p<.001 phi .117 small effect size
[45] x^2 =102.85, df1, p<.001 phi .272 small effect size.

- Carer alcohol misuse was a concern for 23% of the children's SGO carers and 6% of children's adoptive parents[46]
- Carers' mental health was a concern in 36% of SG families and 25% of adoptive parents[47]
- Domestic abuse was a concern in 35% of SGO families and 25% of adoptive families[48]
- Neglect was the only type of abuse where there was a significant difference between the referred adopted and SGO families: 33% of children living with a special guardian and 20% of children in adoptive families[49]
- 41% of the referred SGO children and 29% of the adopted children had additional concerns identified about others living in the household

There were higher and significantly different proportions of identified child-related concerns for the adopted children (81%) compared with SGO children (66%) who had been referred.[50] There was a statistically significant difference (p<.001), with concerns about adopted children reported at a greater frequency than for SGO children for each of the following child-related concerns: mental health, going missing, child sexual exploitation/trafficking, misusing alcohol, drugs, self-harm, and learning difficulties.

Concerns that the child was a young carer were reported more frequently for those living with a special guardian (p<.001).

Children in Need and Child Protection Plans

After the referral as a Child in Need, and following assessments, child in need and child protection plans were provided to support the families and children:

- Child in Need plans: 35% of the adopted children and 44% of the SGO children had a Child in Need (CIN) plan in place before the disruption. A few (10 adopted and 30 SGO children) had a CIN plan solely because of the child's disability[51]

[46] x^2 =58.57, df1, p<.001 phi .205 small effect size
[47] x^2 =16.07 df1, p<.001 phi .108 small effect size
[48] Domestic abuse, the three categories of abuse against the child, parent and others in the household were merged to create a binary Yes/No variable. x^2 = 14.35 df1, p<.001 phi .102 small effect size
[49] x^2 26.79 df1, p<.001 phi .139 small effect size
[50] x^2 =35.78, df1, p<.001 phi.208 small effect size
[51] The children had no additional factors identified in their assessments

- Child Protection Plans (following an initial Child Protection conference): 60 (6%) of adopted children and 320 (18%) of SGO children who had been referred (and later experienced a disruption) had been on a child protection plan before they re-entered care (Additional Table 34)

Although plans and additional support were in place for 340 adopted children and 830 SGO children who had been referred as a child in need, all the children re-entered care, as they experienced a disruption. The datasets did not contain information on other types of support these children had received, nor the support received by the other children, who had not been referred as a child in need, but returned to care. For example, children and their families may have been receiving support from social work teams, adoption support teams or other voluntary support services. The following section examines the number of placements children experienced after returning to care and whether social workers were able to find a different type of placement that became permanent. The analysis went beyond examining disruption factors and rates to consider whether children returned to their adoptive or special guardianship families after a period in care, or whether another type of permanence was found for the child or young person. The children selected for the analysis consisted of children who met all the following criteria:

- There was a record of disruption of an order (adoption / SGO)
- There was a record of the child leaving care on an order (adoption / SGO) in the social care dataset
- There was a year recorded for the disruption
- There was at least one episode of care in the datasets after the disruption

5. Children's placements after returning to care

The sample size was 2,660: 930 adopted children and 1,730 SGO children who had returned to care between 2006 and 2023. The children whose data were missing were all over 16 years of age (40 (4%) adopted and 160 (8%) SGO young people whose placements had disrupted). It is probable that after they left their adoptive or special guardianship families, they did not meet the criteria to be included in the care leaver datasets.[52]

The mean age when adopted children returned to care was 14, whereas the mean age at SGO disruption was 11, a statistically significant difference (Table 15).

Table 15: Mean age at return to care by order (2006-2023)

Mean		Mann-Whitney test for different distributions			Cohen's *d* effect size
Adoption	**SGO**	**U**	**Z**	***p***	
13.9	10.9	542584.5	-13.8	< 0.001	0.68

Base: Adoption n=930 SGO n=1,730 Source ONS.

Reason for entry to care after a disruption

The differences in the needs identified in the Children in Need assessments between the adoptive and SGO families were also evident in the profiles of children when they returned to care.

The primary children in need code recorded for children when they returned to care after a disruption is shown in Table 16. The main reason for re-entry for adopted children was that the family was under acute stress (55%), whereas for SGO children (37%), the main reason was abuse or neglect. The coding of abuse or neglect does not necessarily mean that the carers were responsible for the maltreatment but may indicate that they were unable to protect the child from abuse.

[52] National care leaver data excludes those who returned home to live with parents or someone with parental responsibility for a continuous period of at least 6 months, those whose care was transferred to another LA, those who have died since leaving care and those who do not meet the definitions of a relevant or former relevant child

Table 16: Reason for entry to care after a disruption (2006-2023)

	Adopted %	SGO %
Family under acute stress	55%	25%
Abuse or neglect	9%	37%
Family dysfunction	18%	8%
Parental illness/disability	c	10%
Socially unacceptable behaviour	18%	8%
Child's disability	c	8%
Low income	0	4%

Base: Adoption n=930 SGO n=1,730 Source ONS.
C = suppressed numbers as less than 10

Placements

The type and number of placements after re-entering care were analysed.

Types of placements after return to care

There were statistical differences in the distribution of first placement type by type of order.[53] In particular, adopted children (20%) more frequently than SGO children (12%) had a residential placement. In comparison, SGO children (78%) more frequently than adopted children (72%) had a foster placement or a placement (3%) with a parent or someone with parental responsibility. A few children moved immediately to independent living.

However, placement types may be influenced by the child's age at re-entry to care, as residential placements tend to be used for adolescents. On average, adopted children were older (14 years) than SGO children (11 years) at re-entry. To determine whether age at re-entry accounted for the higher percentage of adopted children in residential care, the data were divided into two age groups: those under 11 years of age and those 11 years of age and older. Although few adopted children returned to care under 11, residential placements were used more frequently for adopted children under and over 11.[54] This finding suggests that these differences in

[53] x^2 = 49.2, df4, p < 0.001, Cramer's V 0.14 small effect size

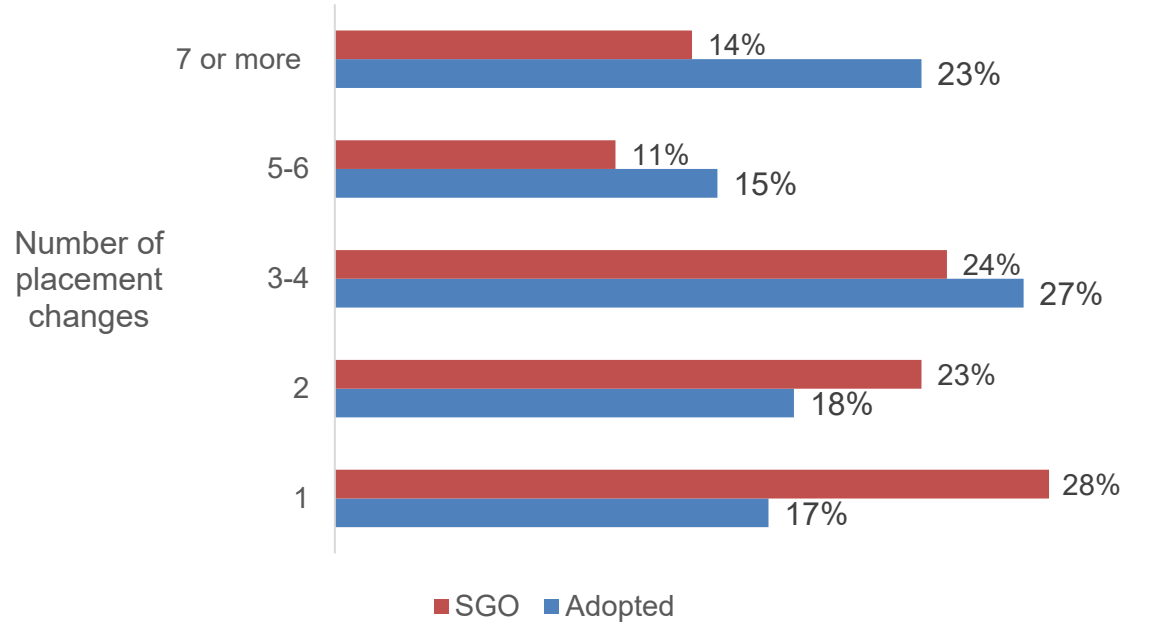
[54] x^2 = 17.2, df3, p < 0.001, Cramer's V = 0.15.small effect size

first placement type after re-entry to care reflect differences in the children's needs rather than being driven solely by adopted children being older at re-entry to care.

Number of placements following return to care

The number of placements following the return to care was calculated using the two codes in the dataset, indicating that both the child's placement and the carer had changed. There was a significant difference in the distribution of the number of placements[55] after the child returned to care by type of order (Figure 4), a statistically higher mean number of placements for adopted children was observed compared to SGO children.[56]

Figure 4: Number of placement changes after returning to care by order (2006-2023)



Base Adoption n=930 SGO n=1,730 Source ONS.

As expected, the mean number of placements increased with the time since the child returned to care (Additional Table 35). However, even after accounting for the length of time since re-entering care, the adopted children had more placements than the SGO children (Table 17).[57] This finding suggests that the difference in placement numbers after adoption and SGO disruptions reflects differences in the needs of

[55] x^2 = 68.5, df4, p < 0.001, Cramer's V = 0.16 small effect size
[56] U = 645973, Z -8.39 p<.001 d 0.30 medium effect size
[57] A Bonferroni correction factor of 3 has been applied to the p-values for the tests for individual bands because 3 parallel tests have been carried out.

children and is not simply a function of the longer mean time since re-entry for adopted children.

Table 17: Mean number of placements by time since re-entry to care and type of order (2006-2023)

Time since re-entry to care	The mean number of placements			*p*	Cohen's *d* effect size
	Adopted	SGO	All orders		
Less than 5 years	3.95	3.11	3.36	< 0.003	0.28
5 to 8 years	4.67	3.68	3.99	< 0.003	0.28
8 years or longer	5.52	4.41	4.90	< 0.003	0.24
All	4.78	3.65	4.05	< 0.001	0.30

Base Adoption n=930 SGO n=1,730 Source ONS.

Reasons for placement moves after returning to care

The reason for placement moves began to be collected in the administrative data from the 2015/16 academic year. Guidance to LAs asks for the primary reason to be recorded whilst recognising that a placement change may be due to several factors.[58] For each child, the most frequently occurring reason for placement moves was identified (Table 18). To simplify the number of options, the following codes were merged into one category, 'Concerns about the quality of care': allegations against the carer, approval removed from the placement, placement no longer meets the child's needs, concerns about the standards of care, and the carer resigns. Similarly, the carers requesting the move due to the child's behaviour, the child requesting the move, and the child moved to custody were aggregated into a single category of 'Reasons connected to the child.'

[58] Children looked after by local authorities in England Version 1.3 March 2021 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-looked-after-return-2020-to-2021-guide

Table 18: Most frequently occurring reason for placement moves after returning to care (2016-2023)

Reason for the placement move	Adoption	SGO	All children
Moved as part of the child's care plan	240 (40%)	410 (41%)	650 (41%)
Other reason	180 (29%)	330 (33%)	510 (32%)
Reasons connected to the child	130 (22%)	170 (18%)	300 (19%)
Concerns about the quality of care	50 (9%)	80 (8%)	130 (8%)
Total	600 (100%)	990 (100%)	1,590 (100%)

Base: Adoption n=600 SGO n=990 Source ONS.

There were differences in the reasons for placement moves between the adopted and SGO children who had returned to care. However, the overall differences fell short of statistical significance (p = 0.086).[59] Notably, adopted children more frequently than SGO children had experienced placement moves due to reasons connected to the child (Table 18). The 'Other' reason was coded for nearly a third (32%) of all the children; no additional information is available. The DfE guidance to the LAs states that the 'Other' code should only be used in exceptional circumstances.

The child's last recorded placement following a disruption

Between 2007 and 2023, some children left care again, while 17% were still being looked after as of March 31, 2023 (Table 19).

[59] x^2 = 6.60, df3, p = 0.086, Cramer's V = 0.06 small effect size

Table 19: Last recorded placement in the datasets (2007-2023)

The last recorded placement	Adoption	SGO	All children
Supported independent living	240 (26%)	330 (19%)	570 (21%)
Other	260 (28%)	210 (12%)	470 (18%)
Still looked after	100 (10%)	350 (20%)	450 (17%)
Returned to live with parents or other persons with parental responsibility	120 (13%)	200 (11%)	320 (12%)
Special guardianship order to another carer	10 (1%)	260 (15%)	270 (10%)
Over 18 and in a Staying Put arrangement	90 (10%)	140 (8%)	230 (9%)
Unsupported independent living	60 (7%)	60 (4%)	120 (5%)
Adopted – a subsequent adoption order following return to care	10 (1%)	130 (8%)	140 (5%)
Residential care funded by adult services	30 (3%)	30 (2%)	60 (2%)
Custody	c (c%)	c (c%)	20 (1%)
Child Arrangement Order	c (c%)	c (c%)	10 (k)
Total	930 (100%)	1,730 (100%)	2,660 (100%)

Base: Adopted n=930 SGO n=1,730 Source ONS.
C= suppressed numbers as less than 10; K = more than 10 but less than 1%

Children who were still looked after in 2023

Table 19 shows that 450 children were in care on March 31, 2023: 10% of the adopted children (mean age 15) and 20% of the SGO children (mean age 13).

Children who left care on another permanency order

Following the return to care after a disruption, 2% of the adopted and 23% of the SGO children left care under another legal order. These children's first order tended to disrupt quickly, and their second permanence order was made before they were 11 years old. None of the second orders had disrupted by March 31st 2023. The types of second orders were:

- Adoption Orders: Ten (1%) previously adopted children left care on another adoption order, and 130 (8%) children who had previously lived with a special guardian also left care on an adoption order
- Special Guardianship Orders: Similarly, ten (1%) previously adopted children left care to live with a special guardian and 260 (15%) SGO children left care to live with a different special guardian
- Child Arrangement Orders: A few (n=10) children had also left on a Child Arrangement order

Children who left care and returned to live with a parent or an adult with parental responsibility

The codes in the dataset do not distinguish between children who were returning to their adoptive family, special guardianship family or were returning to their birth families. Although the birth parents of adopted children do not have any parental responsibility, social workers might use the code to indicate a return to the birth family.[60] The data show that 13% of the adopted children (mean age 17) and 11% of the SGO children (mean age 14) had left care to live with a parent or a carer with parental responsibility. None had returned to care by March 31st 2023.

Young people who left care at 18 years old

Most (75%) of the adopted children and 45% of the SGO children who had re-entered care after a disruption remained in care until the age of 18.

The children's last recorded accommodation was:

- Independent living (supported and unsupported): adopted (32%) and SGO (23%) of the SGO young people
- Other type: adopted (28%) and SGO (12%) young people. Guidance to LAs is that the category 'other' should be used for exceptional circumstances, and if no additional information is available. The average age of young people in these 'other' placements was 18. A previous DfE analysis of the use of the 'other' coding suggested that the majority of occasions when this coding was used was when young people ceased to be looked after when they reached 18, and more detailed codes of their arrangements had not been provided [61]
- Staying Put foster placements: adopted (10%) and SGO (8%) young people

[60] The BTAO study found adopted young people often tried to return to their birth families but that for most the original family problems remained and those arrangements broke down
[61] DfE A guide to looked after children statistics in England May 2020 Version 1.5 A guide to looked after children statistics in England page 26

- Residential care provided by adult social care: adopted (3%) and SGO (2%). The use of these placements suggests that these young people had needs that could not be met in the community.

Finding permanence after a disruption

Overall, about 95% of adopted children and 89% of children who left care to live with a special guardian did not return to care. The disruption rate was low, significantly lower than the placement moves for children in foster care. It might be expected that if a child experienced a disruption, they would remain in care until they aged out at 18 as a care leaver. However, 25% of the adopted children and 41% of the SGO children who had experienced a disruption left care on another permanency order, or returned to a parent/carer. A few (9%) had found stability in the care system as they were in Staying Put foster placements.

6. Discussion

There is some evidence that the adoption and SGO disruption rates have changed over time, with a general pattern of a reduction in disruption rates for both adoptions and SGOs over recent years. The available data cannot prove a causal link between reduced rates of disruption, government reforms and increased support. It may be that the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund, the extension of virtual school head duties, and the growth of support services for adoptive and special guardianship families, as well as SGO information becoming more accessible through the work of the charity Kinship, have enabled more children to remain with their families. The costs of these support services must be considered against the higher costs of being looked after. A local government survey (2023) of the local authority costs of care found that the average weekly cost of foster care was £ 2,000-£ 3,000 per child, and if in residential care, £ 3,000-£ 5,000.[62] Costs rose for children with a high level of need, and the median cost for these children was £16,000 per week. LAs reported in the survey that the high level of need was driven by the child's challenging behaviours, disrupted and emergency placements, and the increasing number of teenagers entering care. These high levels of need were apparent in the adopted young people who returned to care.

The risk of disruption was significantly higher for children living with a special guardian than for adopted children. Over an 8-year period, 17 out of every 1,000 adoptions had been disrupted, compared with 104 SGOs. For both types of orders, the risk of disruption was higher when the child was older, when they left care to live with their adoptive parents or special guardians. The mean age of children when they left care to live with a special guardian was age 6, compared with adopted children who were age 4. This difference in mean age at the time they left care to live with their adopters/special guardians may partly explain the higher rate of disruption for SGOs. Children of Black ethnicity living with an SGO carer more frequently experienced a disruption than children of any other ethnicity. The administrative data does not provide any indicators of why this might be, and further research is needed.

The evidence from the analysis of this large dataset supports the use of early permanence[63] to reduce the number of foster placements the children had before leaving care for adoption. Findings also show the importance of ensuring that adopted children get into their permanent placements as quickly as possible. Being aged 4-10 at the time of leaving care for adoption was the strongest predictor of adoption disruption. Children, not in early permanence placements, will have

[62] https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/high-cost-childrens-social-care-placements-survey?form=MG0AV3
[63] https://adoptionengland.co.uk/leaderships-and-management-ep/early-permanence-planning-practice-guide

developed an attachment to their foster carer, and the move to a new family needs careful planning. Practice needs to improve in supporting the child's transition from foster care to the adoptive family. For example, it may be beneficial for practitioners to use the transition to adoption model developed by the University of East Anglia more widely.[64] That model recognises the importance of the child's relationship with their foster carer and promotes a more flexible transition rather than the frequently used 14 days of introductions before moving permanently. The findings also raise other questions that cannot be answered solely through the analysis of administrative data, such as whether the younger children had been adequately prepared and included in planning.

While the evidence on promoting adoption stability is for speedy decision-making and placing a child quickly in their adoptive placements, the evidence for children placed with a special guardian was that leaving care quickly had a negative effect on the stability of their placements. There was no data to explain this finding. It may be that special guardians were unprepared for the needs of the child, lacked professional and family support, struggled financially, or their own ill health prevented them from continuing. In comparison with adoption, special guardians do not attend preparation groups, the children do not have an extensive health assessment, matching is less thorough, particularly if the carer is a relative, and until recently, less support has been available,[65] and carers have been unaware of its existence. The evidence from this study should inform ongoing debates about the assessment, preparation for, and support of kinship carers.

Most disruptions occurred during adolescence: a finding consistent with the previous disruption study (Selwyn et al. 2017). Services and support need to continue to develop to meet children's needs during adolescence, particularly work on helping adopted children integrate their dual identities (birth family and adoptive family identities) and for SGO children to manage complex family relationships.

Before the children re-entered care following a disruption, 47% of the adopted children and 49% of the SGO children had been referred to children's social care services. The profiles of the adopted and SGO children, as well as their families, were quite different. The social work assessments identified a greater frequency of multiple types of child-related concerns for adopted children than for SGO children. Once children returned to care, the adopted children had more placements, including residential and more remained in care compared with the SGO children. A possible explanation of these findings is that adoptions were less likely to disrupt than SGOs,

[64] https://www.movingtoadoption.co.uk/
[65] For example, the national training programme of kinship carers delivered by the charity Kinship https://kinship.org.uk/for-professionals/working-with-kinship-carers/our-programmes/kinship-training-and-support-service/

but when they did, it was often associated with a higher level of child need and a more difficult prognosis following a disruption than for SGO children. The analyses have identified factors associated with disruption that could be used to target early intervention services for those children most at risk. Those factors were the child's age at entry to care, number of previous foster placements in care, time from entry to order, child's age at order, the child's ethnicity, adopted couples with an older adopted child, and if the child was currently a teenager. In addition, concerns about special guardians' capacity to protect children from harm and their own difficulties especially drug/alcohol misuse, mental ill health and domestic abuse led to SGOs disrupting. In adoptive families, concerns were more frequently identified about the child's needs, especially the child's mental health, going missing, exploitation/trafficking and self-harm.

The final report in this series will summarise the evidence from the different elements of the Family Routes study (data analysis and interviews) and suggest recommendations for policy and practice.

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Appendix A: Additional tables

C= suppressed numbers as less than 10

K = more than 10 but less than 1%

All numbers have been rounded to the nearest zero and down from 5. Consequently, tables do not always sum to 100%.[66]

Table 20: Adoption disruption and child's sex (2004-2023)

Sex	Not disrupted n (%)	Disrupted n (%)	Total n (%)
Male	35,680 (99%)	480 (1%)	36,160 (100%)
Female	33,520 (99%)	490 (1%)	34,010 (100%)
Total	69,200 (99%)	970 (1%)	70,170 (100%)

Base n=70,170 Source ONS.

Table 21: SGO disruption by child's sex (2005-2023)

Sex	Not disrupted n (%)	Disrupted n (%)	Total n (%)
Male	23,050 (96%)	930 (4%)	23,980 (100%)
Female	23,080 (96%)	960 (4%)	24,040 (100%)
Total	46,130 (96%)	1,890 (4%)	48,020 (100%)

Base n=48,020 Source ONS.

[66] This work contains statistical data from ONS, which is Crown Copyright. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation.

Table 22: Model 1 Logistic regression: risk of adoption disruption for children of Black ethnicity (2004-2023)

Coefficient	Beta	Standard error	*p*	Odds ratio	95% confidence interval (CI) for the odds ratio
Black ethnicity	0.676	0.160	< 0.001	1.97	1.44-2.09

Base Adopted n= 69,350 Source ONS.

A second model was fitted that additionally controlled for the effect of age at the time the child left care for adoption (Model 2).

Table 23: Model 2 Logistic regression: risk of adoption disruption for children of Black ethnicity and age at leaving care for adoption (2004-2023)

Coefficient	Beta	Standard Error	*p*	Odds Ratio	95% CI for Odds Ratio
Black ethnicity	0.381	0.172	0.026	1.46	1.05-2.05
Age at order	0.341	0.0081	< 0.001	1.41	1.39-1.43

Base Adopted n= 69,350 Source ONS.

Table 24: Model 3 Logistic regression risk of SGO disruption for children of Black ethnicity (2004-2023)

Coefficient	Beta	Standard Error	p-value	Odds Ratio	95% CI for Odds Ratio
Black Ethnicity	0.522	0.087	< 0.001	1.69	1.42-2.00

Base n=47,090 Source ONS

Table 25: Model 4 Logistic regression model of risk of SGO disruption for children of Black ethnicity and age at leaving care to live with a special guardian (2004-2023)

Coefficient	Beta	Standard Error	p-value	Odds Ratio	95% CI for Odds Ratio
Black ethnicity	0.497	0.087	< 0.001	1.64	1.39-1.95
Age at order	0.074	0.0048	< 0.001	1.08	1.07-1.09

Base SGO n=47,090 Source ONS.

The raw odds ratio giving the effect of Black ethnicity on the risk of disruption for adopted children is 1.97 (Model 1). Once the age at adoption order has been controlled, the odds ratio is reduced to 1.46 (Model 2). Note that the statistical significance of the effect is also reduced from $p < 0.001$ to $p = 0.026$. Once the effect of age at adoption order has been controlled for, Black children were slightly more likely to experience an adoption disruption than other children. For SGO children, the increased risk of disruption for Black children is largely unexplained by their age at order (Models 3 and 4): controlling for age at order only reduced the odds ratio for the effect of Black ethnicity on the risk of disruption from 1.69 to 1.64.

Table 26: Cox proportional hazards model of risk factors for adoption disruption 2004-2023

Covariate	*B*	SE	*P*	Hazard Ratio	95%% Confidence Interval for Hazard Ratio	
Sex= Female	.044	.065	.506	1.044	.919	1.188
3-4 placements (vs. 1-2 placements)	-.024	.076	.748	.976	.841	1.132
5+ placements (vs. 1-2 placements)	.137	.108	.206	1.146	.928	1.417
Once reunified (vs. never)	.063	.127	.620	1.065	.830	1.366
Twice or more reunified (vs. never)	-0.90	.288	.756	.914	.519	1.609
Adopted by foster carers	-.062	.084	.461	.940	.797	1.108
Age (4-10 yrs) at order (vs. 0-4 yrs)	3.434	.270	**<.001**	31.005	18.248	49.852
Age (11+ yrs) at order (vs. 0-4 yrs)	3.272	.325	**<.001**	26.362	13.941	50.281
Delay (1-2yrs) from entry to care to order (vs. less than a year)	1.102	.393	**.005**	3.011	1.393	6.511
Delay (3+yrs) from entry to care to order (vs. less than a year)	1.913	.384	**<.001**	6.773	3.191	14.378
Adoptive parent is single	-.355	.118	**.003**	.701	.556	.883
Child's age is 4-10 (vs. age under 4)	-.524	.575	.362	.592	.192	1.826
Child's age is 11-16 (vs. age under 4)	1.471	.589	**.013**	4.354	1.371	13.823
Child's age is 16-18 (vs. age under 4)	2.236	.605	**<.001**	9.354	2.857	30.629

Base Adopted n = 70,080 Source ONS.

Table 27: Comparison of order delay between disrupted and non-disrupted orders (2004-2023)

Time from entry to care to order	Adopted Not disrupted n (%)	Adopted Disrupted n (%)	SGO not disrupted n (%)	SGO disrupted n (%)
Less than a year	5,230 (7%)	10 (1%)	23,520 (51%)	840 (44%)
1-2 years	30,320 (44%)	100 (10%)	10,940 (24%)	520 (27%)
2-3 years	20,690 (30%)	300 (31%)	3,610 (8%)	160 (9%)
3+ years	12,960 (19%)	560 (58%)	8,060 (17%)	370 (20%)
TOTAL	69,200 (100%)	970 (100%)	46,130 (100%)	1,890 (100%)

Base adopted n=70,170 SGO n= 48,020 Source ONS.

Table 28: Adoption by former foster carers (2004-2023)

	n	%
Adopted by foster carers	11,250	16%
Adopted by others	58,920	84%
Total	70,170	100%

Base n=70,170 Source ONS.

Table 29: Comparison of (a) age at entry to care, (b) age at adoption order and (c) adoption order delay between children who were adopted by their foster carers and other adopted children 2004-2023

Variable	Adopted by foster carers		Mann-Whitney test for different distributions		Cohen's *d* effect size
	No	Yes	Z	*p*	
Age at entry to care (years)	1.25	1.46	3.5	< 0.001	0.11
Age at adoption order (years)	3.44	4.09	4.5	< 0.001	0.26
Time to adoption order (years)	2.20	2.63	11.5	< 0.001	0.34

Base = 70,170 Source ONS.

To read a Cox regression table, the hazard column is the risk (probability) of reaching the event (disruption), given that the individual has not reached it up to this point. The hazard ratio is understood in relation to the "reference category". For example, we can look in Table 7 at the effect on disruption of the child's age at the time they left care for adoption. A child aged 4-10 years was 31 times more likely to disrupt compared with a child placed under 4 and after adjustment for all the other explanatory variables in the model. Positive coefficients (*B* in the Table) show a higher risk. When *B* is negative, the risk is lower.

Table 30: Cox proportional hazards model of adoption disruption risk factors including ethnicity and legal status of adoptive parents (2004-2023)

Covariate	*B*	SE	*P*	Hazard Ratio	95%% Confidence Interval for Hazard Ratio	
3-4 placements (vs. 1-2 placements)	-.021	.076	.780	.979	.844	1.136
5+ placements (vs. 1-2 placements)	.144	.108	.182	1.155	.935	1.427
Once reunified (vs. never)	.065	.127	.611	1.067	.832	1.368
Twice or more reunified (vs. never)	-0.93	.289	.747	.911	.517	1.604
Adopted by foster carers	-.085	.085	.316	.918	.778	1.084
Age (4-10 yrs) at order (vs. 0-4 yrs)	3.436	.270	**<.001**	31.067	18.287	52.780
Age (11+ yrs) at order (vs. 0-4 yrs)	3.274	.325	**<.001**	26.422	13.971	49.967
Delay (1-2yrs) from entry to care to order (vs. less than a year)	1.100	.393	**.005**	3.003	1.389	6.494
Delay (2-3yrs) from entry to care to order (vs. less than a year)	1.718	.384	**<.001**	5.571	2.624	11.829
Delay (3+yrs) from entry to care to order (vs. less than a year)	1.896	.384	**<.001**	6.660	3.137	14.141
Adopter is single, child's ethnicity is not Black	-.428	.129	**<.001**	.652	.506	.839
Adopters are a couple, child's ethnicity is Black	.375	.197	.057	1.455	.989	2.141
Adopter is single, child's ethnicity is Black	.237	.272	.383	1.268	.744	2.159
Child's age is 4-10 (vs. age under 4)	-.522	.575	.364	.593	.192	1.830
Child's age is 11-16 (vs. age under 4)	1.483	.589	**.012**	4.406	1.388	13.989
Child's age is 16-18 (vs. age under 4)	2.256	.605	**<.001**	9.545	2.915	31.250

Base n=70,170 Source ONS.

Table 31: Cox proportional hazards model risk factors for SGO disruption 2005-2023

Covariate	B	SE	*p*	Hazard Ratio	95%% Confidence Interval for Hazard Ratio	
Sex = Female	.023	.046	.610	1.024	.935	1.120
Ethnicity = Black (vs. all other Ethnicities)	.341	.085	**<.001**	1.407	1.192	1.660
Reason first in care = child's disability (vs abuse or neglect)	-.292	.318	.358	.747	.401	1.391
Reason first in care = family in acute stress / low income (vs. abuse or neglect)	.125	.084	.135	1.133	.962	1.335
Reason first in care = socially unacceptable behaviour (vs. abuse or neglect)	.415	.225	.065	1.515	.974	2.355
Reason first in care = absent parenting (vs. abuse or neglect)	.481	.157	**.002**	1.618	1.190	2.200
3-4 placements (vs. 1-2 placements)	.100	.057	.083	1.105	.987	1.236
5+ placements (vs. 1-2 placements)	.158	.103	.125	1.171	.957	1.433
SGO with kin (vs. not kin or unknown)	.173	.047	**<.001**	1.189	1.084	1.305
Age 4-10yrs at order (vs. 0-4 years)	.687	.085	**<.001**	1.987	1.681	2.349
Age 11+yrs at order (vs. 0-4 years)	.737	.136	**<.001**	2.089	1.600	2.727
The child’s age is 4-10 (vs. age under 4)	-.376	.105	**<.001**	.686	.559	.842
The child’s age is 11-16 (vs. age under 4)	.455	.142	**.001**	1.576	1.193	2.081
The child’s age is 16-18 (vs. age under 4)	.958	.178	**<.001**	2.606	1.840	3.691

Base SGO n=47,260 Source ONS.

Table 32: Source of the first Child in Need referral (2013- 2019)

	Adopted %	SGO %	Total %
Schools and education services	24%	23%	24%
Police	14%	19%	17%
LA services	22%	10%	13%
Individuals including family members/relatives or self-referral	14%	12%	12%
Other, anonymous, not known	10%	13%	12%
Youth offending	7%	7%	7%
GP/ health and hospital services	3%	10%	8%
Another LA external service	3%	3%	3%
Legal agency, CAFCASS, prison	c%	1%	1%
Total	470 (100%)	920 (100%)	1,390 (100%)

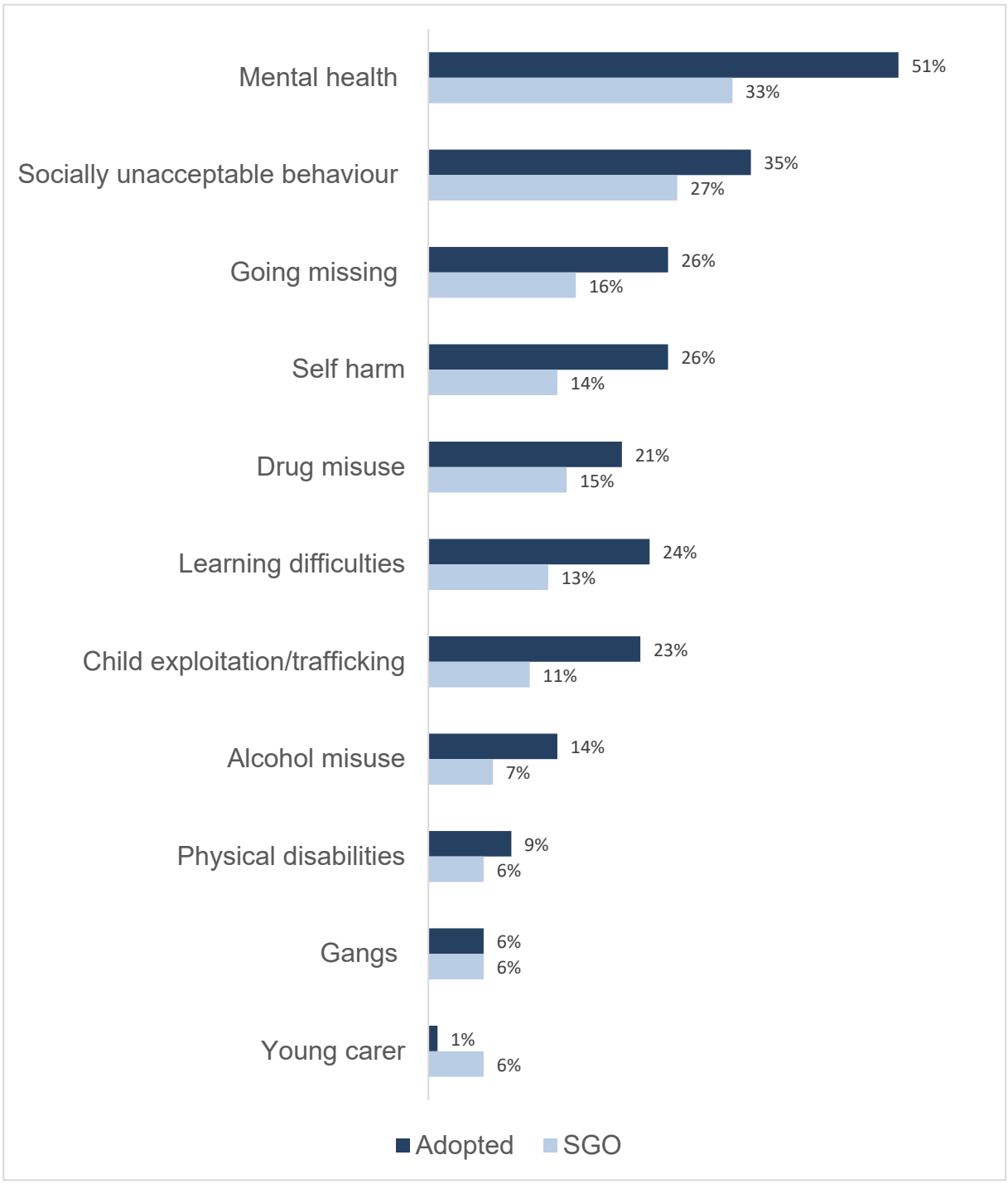
Base n=1,390 Source ONS.

Table 33: The primary need identified by the social worker at the first assessment

	Adopted n%	SGO n%
Abuse or neglect	190 (54%)	500 (60%)
Family under acute stress	70 (21%)	110 (13%)
Family dysfunction	40 (13%)	150 (18%)
Parental disability/illness	C (c%)	20 (3%)
The child's disability/illness	10 (3%)	10 (1%)
Socially unacceptable behaviour	C (c%)	10 (1%)
Low income	C (c%)	10 (1%)
Absent parenting	C (c%)	10 (1%)
Cases other than CIN	10 (4%)	10 (1%)
Total	340 (100%)	830 (100%)

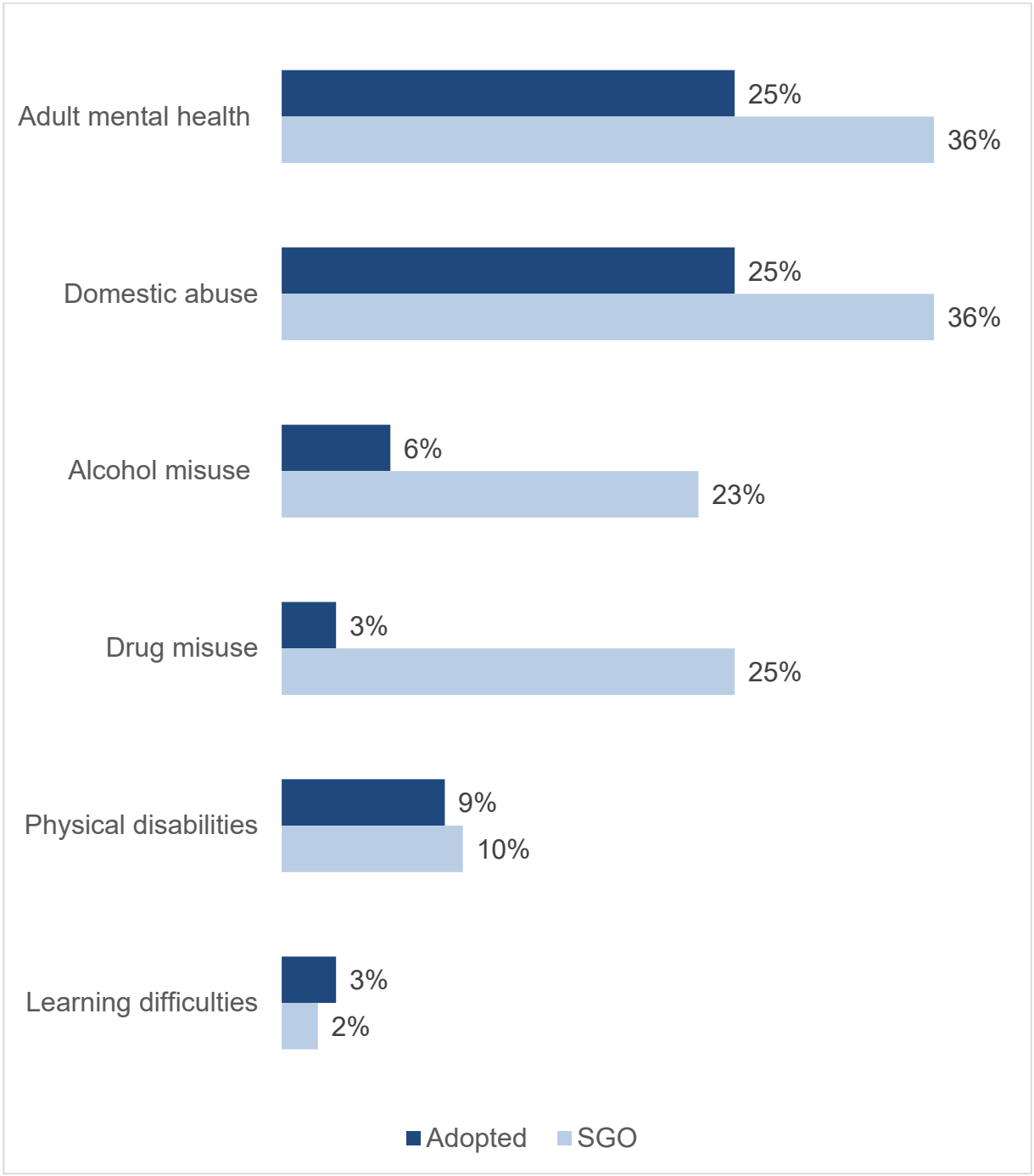
Base n=1,170 Source ONS.

Figure 5: Assessment factors: Additional child-related concerns identified (2014-2019)



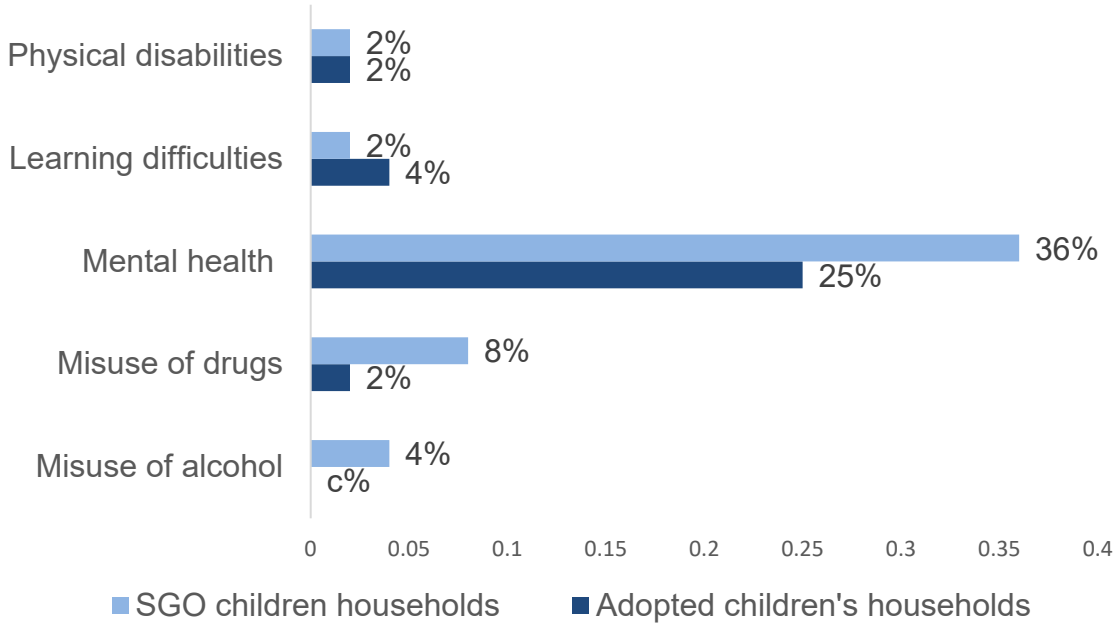
Base adopted n=420 SGO n= 920 Source ONS. There were multiple areas of concern, and therefore, the columns do not add up to the total number of assessments.

Figure 6: Assessment factors: Additional Concerns identified related to parents/carers 2014—2019



Base adopted n=470 SGO n=920 Source ONS. Multiple areas of concern and therefore columns do not sum

Figure 7: Concerns about others in the children's households



Base adopted n=470 SGO n=920 Source ONS.

Table 34: The type of abuse the child protection plan was put in place to prevent (2013-19)

Type of maltreatment	Adopted children who later returned to care n%	SGO children who later returned to care n%	Total n%
Neglect	20 (33%)	170 (53%)	190 (50%)
Emotional	20 (33%)	110 (34%)	130 (34%)
Multiple	c (c%)	40 (12%)	40 (10%)
Physical	10 (c%)	10 (3%)	20 (5%)
Sexual	c (c%)	10 (3%)	10 (3%)
Total	60 (100%)	320 (100%)	380 (100%)

Base n=380 Source ONS.

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