



Trends in early intervention and permanence planning in Scotland

Policy Briefing based on Woods, R. & Henderson, G. (2018). Changes in out of home care and permanence planning among young children in Scotland, 2003 to 2017. *Adoption & Fostering*, 42(3), 282-294. DOI: 10.1177/0308575918790435

The context: Policy trends in child protection

In recent years, we have witnessed substantial policy changes in child protection in Scotland, including early intervention and early permanence.

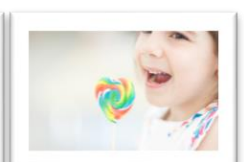
Early intervention: In Scotland, the first years of life have been seen increasingly as crucial for children's future development. The Scottish Government's 'Getting It Right For Every Child' approach and Early Years Frameworkⁱ advocate early intervention for children whose home experiences may be damaging. The most decisive form of early intervention is to remove a child from their birth parents, into 'out of home care'.

Early permanence: Children in out of home care often pass through multiple placements before finding a permanent homeⁱⁱ, and this instability is detrimental to their wellbeingⁱⁱⁱ. In Scotland, looked after children were typically waiting several years to achieve permanence^{iv}. These findings have prompted a policy shift in Scotland towards speedier permanence for looked after children^v.

Scotland is not alone in moving in these directions. Australia and Canada have seen policy shifts towards early intervention^{vi}, while policy shifts towards earlier permanence have occurred across the UK, USA and Canada^{vii}.

The research: Trends 'on the ground'

To establish whether these policy trends were reflected 'on the ground' in child protection practice, we followed the first three years of life of a sample of looked after children in Scotland: 110 children who were born in 2003/4 (henceforth the 2003 cohort), and 117 children born in 2013/14 (henceforth the 2013 cohort). All the children were placed under compulsory measures of supervision before their third birthday. The children's birth parents typically experienced multiple difficulties, including alcohol abuse (46% of families), drug abuse (57% of families), offending (66%), mental ill health (64%) and financial difficulties (51%).





Findings and Implications

Early out of home care of young looked after children has increased. Only 9% of the 2003 cohort was placed in out of home care at birth, compared to 33% of the 2013 cohort. At three years, 40% of the 2003 cohort lived with their birth parent(s), compared to 28% of the 2013 cohort. The differences between cohorts were statistically significant, meaning that we can be confident that these differences occur across young looked after children in Scotland, not only in our sample. The increased out of home care was provided mainly by foster carers. See figure 1 for more details.

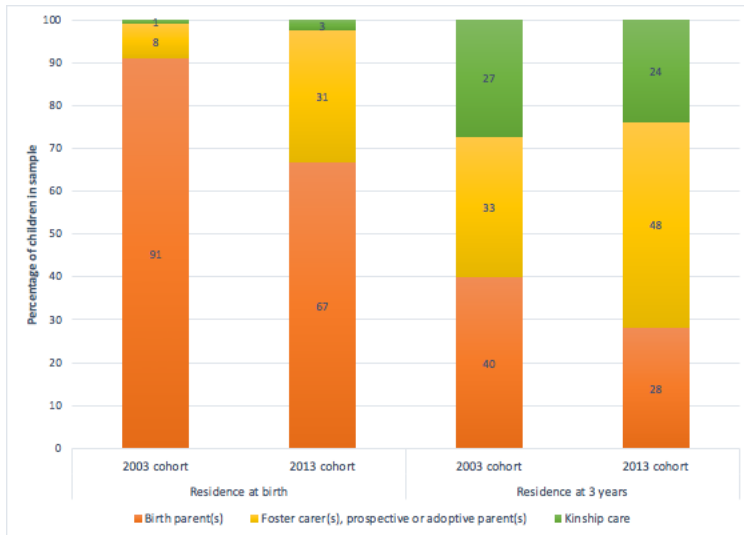


Figure 1. Residence of 2003 and 2013 cohorts at birth and at three years.

Early permanence has also increased. Focusing only on the 150 children who were not in their birth parents' care at three years of age, 67% of the 2003 cohort had a permanence plan in place by age three, compared to 83% of the 2013 cohort. Again, these differences were statistically significant. See figure 2.

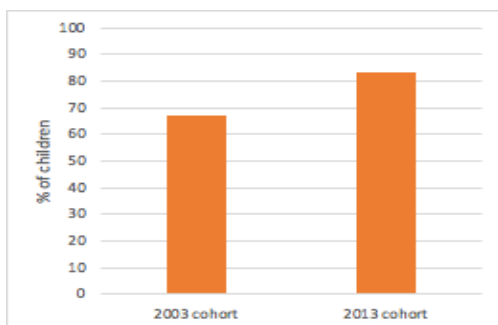


Figure 2. Percentage of children in out of home care at 3 years with permanence plan by 3 years



These results suggest that decision-making about vulnerable children 'on the ground' in Scotland is responding to recent policy changes regarding early intervention and permanence^{viii}.

Unintended consequences: Policy trends towards early intervention and permanence may also be having other effects:

Permanent removal at birth: It has become more common to remove vulnerable babies from their birth parents at birth (early intervention trend). Most of these babies are not returned to their birth parents over the following three years of their lives, and most have permanence plans in place by three years (early permanence trend); see figure 3. The result is that more vulnerable babies born in Scotland are likely to never live with their birth parents or families, even if this was not the original intention when they were removed.

Family fragmentation: Early and long term removal into out of home care limits opportunities for young children to develop relationships with siblings. Almost all of the babies in our sample who were placed in out of home care were separated from one or more sibling^{ix}.

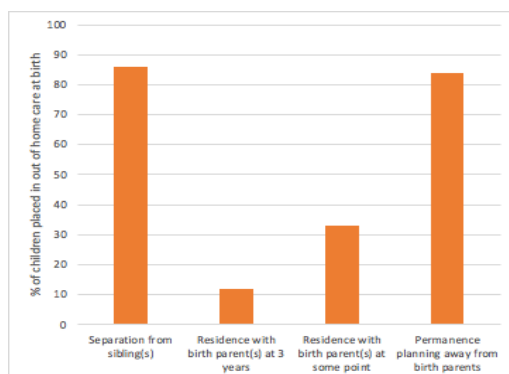


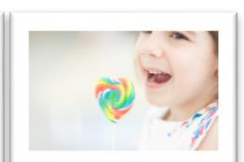
Figure 3. Events in first three years of children placed in out of home care at birth

Conclusions

Over the last fifteen years, early out of home care and early permanence planning have increased in Scotland. These trends offer important benefits to vulnerable children, including earlier protection from potential or actual harm, and reduced instability in the child protection system. However, these trends are interacting to cause an increase in early long term removal of young children from their birth families, with implications for family relationships including siblings. These costs must be carefully weighed against the benefits of early removal and permanence.

Get in touch

Would you like to more about this research, or give us feedback on it? Do you have ideas about how Scotland should respond to these findings? We would love to hear from you.





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^{viii} Note that policy changes are not the only possible explanation for the differences between cohorts.

^{ix} Note that we recorded sibling separation that occurred for any reason, not only through child protection measures.

