

LONDON  
SCHOOL of  
HYGIENE  
& TROPICAL  
MEDICINE



LSHTM Research Online

Mc Grath-Lone, L; Harron, K; Dearden, L; Nasim, B; Gilbert, R; (2016) Data Resource Profile: Children Looked After Return (CLA). International journal of epidemiology. ISSN 0300-5771 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyw117>

Downloaded from: <http://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/2649833/>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyw117>

**Usage Guidelines:**

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact [researchonline@lshtm.ac.uk](mailto:researchonline@lshtm.ac.uk).

Available under license: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/>

<https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk>

### Data Resource Profile: Children Looked After Return (CLA)

Journal:	<i>International Journal of Epidemiology</i>
Manuscript ID	IJE-2016-01-0058
Manuscript Type:	Data Resource Profile
Date Submitted by the Author:	14-Jan-2016
Complete List of Authors:	Mc Grath-Lone, Louise; Administrative Data Research Centre for England; University College London Institute of Child Health Harron, Katie; London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Health Services Research and Policy Dearden, Lorraine; University College London Institute of Education; Institute for Fiscal Studies; Administrative Data Research Centre for England Nasim, Bilal; University College London Institute of Education; Administrative Data Research Centre for England Gilbert, Ruth; University College London, Institute of Child Health; Administrative Data Research Centre for England
Key Words:	looked after children, children in care, childhood adversity, administrative data

1  
2  
3  
4 **Data Resource Profile: Children Looked After Return (CLA)**  
5

6 Louise Mc Grath-Lone,<sup>1,2\*</sup> Katie Harron,<sup>3</sup> Lorraine Dearden,<sup>1,4,5</sup> Bilal Nasim<sup>1,3</sup> and Ruth  
7  
8 **Gilbert<sup>1,2</sup>**  
9

10  
11  
12  
13 <sup>1</sup>Administrative Data Research Centre for England, <sup>2</sup>University College London Institute of  
14 Child Health, <sup>3</sup> London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, <sup>4</sup>UCL Institute of Education  
15 and <sup>5</sup>Institute for Fiscal Studies, London, UK.  
16  
17

18  
19 \*Corresponding author. Administrative Data Research Centre for England, 222 Euston Road,  
20 London, NW1 2DA. E-mail:Louise.Mc-Grath-Lone.13@ucl.ac.uk  
21  
22

23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31 **Keywords:** looked after children, children in care, childhood adversity, administrative data  
32

33  
34 **Word count:** 3,473  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

## Data resource basics

### Childhood adversity

Early exposure to adversity, such as abuse or neglect, is associated with poorer outcomes across social, education and health domains (1,2). Children in care (referred to as looked after children in the UK (3)) are a vulnerable group who experience adversity serious enough for the state to intervene in family life and place them under the supervision of child protection services within the home or, more frequently, to remove the child and place them in out-of-home care (OHC) (4). In England, placement in OHC can be voluntary (i.e. with parental consent) or mandated by a court. While some looked after children have complex health needs and are voluntarily placed in temporary care in order to provide respite to their parents (5), the majority of children in OHC are removed from their parents for reasons related to abuse or neglect (6).

Being in OHC is an indicator of serious childhood adversity and a predictor of future adverse health, education and social outcomes (7). For example, children in OHC have poorer mental and physical health than their peers (8–10), are more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as smoking, drinking, and drug taking (11) and have higher rates of teenage pregnancy and premature death (12). The causes of these adverse outcomes are complex and there is considerable heterogeneity among looked after children (13–15). Some variation in outcomes has been associated with key characteristics of the care children receive whilst being looked after (e.g., age at first entry, setting, duration, stability) or their exit from the social care system (e.g., destination, re-entry) (16–18). For example, children in foster care have better mental health outcomes than those in residential group care (11) while psychiatric disorders are more common among children who experience multiple placement moves (10). It is therefore important to determine the prevalence of being placed in OHC among the child population and to explore how different types or patterns of care are associated with outcomes, both in childhood and in later life.

Many studies of looked after children in the UK are based on surveys (8–10); however, these may have selection and/or recall biases and an alternative administrative data source that can be used is the Children Looked After Return (CLA). The CLA offers an important resource to improve understanding about the characteristics of children placed in

OHC, how patterns of care vary across the country and are changing over time, and the relationships between the type or pattern of care and subsequent outcomes.

### **Purpose and scope of the Children Looked After Return**

In England children's social care services are delivered at local government level (i.e. by local authorities). The CLA is a national individual-level dataset held by the Department for Education (DfE) that contains information on all looked after children and recent care leavers in England. Data collection began in 1992 (Table 1) and is ongoing via an annual online census of local authorities. Initially, data collection was mandated for all children in England who were looked after in the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 1992; however, between 1998 and 2003 it was restricted to a one-third sample (selected as children with a day of birth divisible by three) before reverting to include all looked after children in 2004. The CLA contains detailed care histories for looked after children including the start and end dates of each episode of OHC.

According to the DfE, the purpose of the CLA is to monitor the care and outcomes of looked after children (whilst in care and on reaching adulthood) and to enable evaluation of the potential effects of government policy initiatives (5). Outcome data was first collected in 1999, but was limited to the activity of children in care at age 16 (i.e. taking exams, in further education, working, etc.). Since 2009, the outcome data collected by local authorities has been expanded to include child-level information on health-related outcomes such as immunisations, health checks and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) scores. However, outcome data is only collected for children in continuous care for 12 months or more. In 2002, collection of data on the activity and accommodation of care leavers at age 19 began with further follow-up at other ages introduced in later years.

All looked after children are included in CLA (with the exception of the previously-described sample restrictions between 1998 and 2003). However, the CLA does not include private fostering arrangements in which a child is cared for by an adult who is not a close relative (i.e. someone other than a parent, grandparent, sibling, aunt or uncle) (19). The most recent CLA for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015 contained details of 99,230 looked

1  
2  
3 after children – the highest figure since 1985 (20). Coverage of care leavers in CLA is not  
4 complete; information was collected for 84% (n=22,510) in 2014 and 88% (n=23,170) in  
5 2015 (20).  
6  
7  
8  
9

## 10 11 **Data collected**

### 12 13 **Dataset production**

14 Each year all 150 local authorities in England must submit details of the looked after  
15 children in their area and the care provided to them during the period 1<sup>st</sup> April to 31<sup>st</sup> March  
16 to the DfE, via an online census. The number of children in care varies from year to year but  
17 in the most recent period of data collection (1<sup>st</sup> April 2014 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2015) data was  
18 collected for 99,230 children. Local authorities must also provide information for specific  
19 groups of care leavers (i.e. young people who were looked after as adolescents and whose  
20 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> birthday occurred during the preceding year). Data must be returned and  
21 checked by local authorities before the end of June (5). A national dataset is then collated by  
22 DfE. Aggregate tables and summary statistics (at national and local authority level) are then  
23 produced by DfE and published online (21).  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36

### 37 38 **Dataset structure: episodes and periods of care**

39 In the CLA a child's care record is divided into episodes. An episode is the length of time a  
40 child is looked after under the same legal status and in the same placement. When a child's  
41 legal status and/or placement changes a new episode begins (5). The start and end date of  
42 each individual episode is recorded in the CLA and an episode cannot be less than 24 hours.  
43 Episodes of care can be in the home (under supervision) or in alternative out-of-home  
44 accommodation (e.g., with a foster carer or in a children's home, Supplementary Table 1)  
45 and can be voluntary or legally mandated (Supplementary Table 2). A period of care is the  
46 time that a child is continuously looked after by a local authority. A period can consist of one  
47 or more episodes.  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

### Measures collected in CLA

The measures collected in CLA have changed over time but can be broadly grouped as child characteristics, episode information and indicators and outcomes of care (Table 2).

#### *Child characteristics*

When a child becomes looked after by a local authority for the first time, they are assigned a child ID - the main identifier in the CLA. This allows a child's record of care to be linked over time and enables longitudinal analyses. The demographic information collected in the CLA is limited to date of birth, gender and ethnicity (18 categories). Names are not collected. Whether a child is an unaccompanied asylum seeker (or a mother, for girls who are looked after) is also recorded, but this information is not routinely available to researchers. A pseudonymised unique pupil number (UPN) is recorded for looked after children who attend a maintained (or state funded) school or nursery in England (22) which allows linkage of CLA data to other education and social care datasets held by DfE.

#### *Episode information*

Detailed information related to each episode of care is collected in the CLA; for example, start and end dates, placement type, location and provider. Placement type describes the setting in which a child is cared for. Children may be placed at home with their parents whilst being looked after, but the majority are removed and placed in OHC (6). OHC placements include foster care by relatives, friends, strangers or potential adopters; group care in children's homes, residential schools, care homes or residential units; independent living in a B&B, flat or bedsit and "other" settings such as young offender institutes and prisons. The codes used to record placement type have changed over time and are described in Supplementary Table 1. When a child's placement changes (even to another placement of the same type) a new episode begins. However, only placements lasting 24 hours or more are recorded; therefore if multiple placement changes occur in one day only the final placement is recorded (5).

1  
2  
3 The reason a child becomes looked after is recorded in the CLA as their “category of  
4 need”. These hierarchical categories are: abuse or neglect, child’s disability, parental illness  
5 or disability, family in acute stress, family dysfunction, socially unacceptable behavior, low  
6 income and absent parenting. Though it is likely that a child will become looked after for a  
7 combination of the above reasons, only one (the highest ordered in the list) is recorded (23).  
8 Before the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2000 a more detailed variable was used to capture the reason a child  
9 was looked after and the relationship between these former “reasons looked after” and  
10 current “categories of need” is described in Supplementary Table 2.  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16

17  
18 The legal status of a child describes the legal framework under which a child enters  
19 the social care system. For example, child protection is used to ensure the safety of a child  
20 that is considered to be in need and this legal status category includes emergency  
21 protection orders and police protection powers (used in urgent cases where rapid  
22 intervention is required) and child assessment orders (used in non-emergency cases where  
23 there are suspicions but no convincing evidence of actual or likely harm (24)). Children can  
24 also be looked after voluntarily (i.e. with parental consent) under Section 20 of the Children  
25 Act 1989 (3). While it is possible for a child to have multiple legal statuses (e.g., to be under  
26 a care order and awaiting trial) only the most recent legal status is recorded in the CLA. As  
27 for placement setting, if there are multiple changes in one day only the final legal status is  
28 recorded (5). The codes used to record legal status have changed over time and are  
29 described in Supplementary Table 3.  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39

40 When a child ceases to be looked after, the reason the period of care ended is  
41 recorded. For example, a child may cease to be looked after because they return home to  
42 their parents or are adopted. They may also leave care through the granting of a residence  
43 or special guardianship order which confer differing levels of parental responsibility to a  
44 guardian (25) (such as a relative or former foster carer). The codes used to record the  
45 reason OHC ceases and how a child exits the social care system are described in  
46 Supplementary Table 4.  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



### *Indicators and outcomes of care*

One of purposes of the CLA is to monitor outcomes of looked after children while in care and on reaching adulthood; however, outcomes are generally recorded only for children who have been in continuous care for 12 months or more. The data recorded for these children in long-term care include whether they were convicted of a crime, identified as having a substance misuse problem, offered intervention to treat substance misuse and had up-to-date health checks, dental exams and immunisations. Children aged 4 to 16 also have an annual Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire administered and their score is recorded (which can be used as an indicator of emotional or behavioural disorders). Similarly, outcome data is only collected for “relevant and eligible” care leavers, as defined by current DfE guidance (5) i.e. a young person who was looked after at the age of 16 or 17 and had been looked after for at least 13 weeks after the age of 14. The outcomes recorded for care leavers are participation in education and/or employment and living arrangements, currently at age 19 to 21. Indicators of care, such as time to adoption, participation in statutory case reviews and being missing from care, are also collected in CLA. Data related to indicators and outcomes of care are not routinely available to researchers but can be requested.

### **Data quality checks**

The CLA undergoes a number of automated validation checks when data is being returned by local authorities (26); for example, fields that are blank or contain an invalid value will be flagged for review and correction. Unlikely/impossible sequences of dates or combinations of legal status and placement are also automatically flagged, as is information that contradicts records entered in previous years for the same child. During the validation checks local authorities may correct errors or update previous years’ data (i.e. enter an end date for an episode of care that had been ongoing at the time of the last census).

## Data resource use

### Describing trends

DfE statistical tables and reports are published annually and are readily available to the general public online [<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education/about/statistics>]. These DfE tables include information on the rate of looked after children in England by local authority, which can be used as an area-level indicator of childhood adversity. CLA data is used to monitor the use of OHC in England and outcomes of looked after children over time. For example, recent DfE reports indicate that the rates of substance misuse and offending are falling among children in care (20) but the proportion of care leavers not in education, employment or training (NEET) has increased (27).

### Monitoring outcomes using linkage

Only limited educational outcomes are recorded in CLA; however, another DfE administrative dataset (the National Pupil Dataset (NPD)) contains detailed information on a broad range of educational outcomes, including absences, exclusions, Special Educational Needs (SEN) support and type of school attended. Since 2006, NPD and CLA data have been routinely linked via UPN (28) by the DfE and this linked dataset has been used to describe the relative educational outcomes for children looked after in continuous care for 12 months or more (27). Pseudonymised linked CLA-NPD data has also been used by researchers. For example, a recent study by Sebba *et al.* (29) explored the effects of the type and timing of OHC on children's educational outcomes, specifically the attainment of children eligible to sit GCSE exams in 2013. This study also involved linkage to a third DfE dataset that contains details of children who are referred to social services but are not placed in care (the Children In Need (CIN) dataset) available from 2009. This additional linkage allowed researchers to conduct more granular analyses in terms of exposure to adversity during childhood. Children in care (due to serious adversity) were compared to children in need (who experienced adversity at a level that was insufficient to warrant state involvement) and to all other children who were not in care, or in need. The results of this analyses suggest that, while some of the gap in educational attainment between children in care and their peers can be attributed to differences in deprivation and SDQ scores, early placement in long-term foster care can have a protective effect on attainment (29). However, this analysis was limited to children in care at the time of sitting their GCSE exams

1  
2  
3 (at age 15/16) and early exposure to care was simplistically defined as being in continuous  
4 care for at least 12 months and having also been in care during late primary school years  
5 (Key Stage 2).  
6  
7  
8  
9

### 10 11 **Analyses across the child life course**

12 DfE reports make limited use of the rich longitudinal records of care available in CLA. For  
13 example, DfE annual reports focus on the number of placement moves a child has during a  
14 year, rather than the total number of moves they experience during their total time in care.  
15 However, the CLA can also be used to generate evidence on the child life course of care. For  
16 example, in a recent study that used longitudinal CLA data, we calculated the proportion of  
17 children in England who ever entered care throughout childhood using synthetic birth  
18 cohorts. We found that one in thirty children born 1992-94 (3.3%) had entered OHC by age  
19 18 (30), a much higher figure than the 0.6-0.9% of children who spend time in care in any  
20 given year as reported by the DfE (20). The cumulative proportion of children ever entering  
21 care also appeared to be increasing (particularly among infants) and was disproportionately  
22 higher among Black, Mixed or Other ethnicity children. Decomposition of these changes  
23 over time vis-à-vis concurrent changes in the ethnic composition of the child population  
24 indicated that the overall increase in the proportion of children entering care was primarily  
25 due to an increase in the proportion of White children entering care, rather than increased  
26 ethnic diversity among children in England.  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42

### 43 **Cross-national comparisons**

44 Aggregate or child-level CLA data can also be used to explore variation in child protection  
45 and social care systems between different countries. For example, Gilbert *et al.* compared  
46 trends in the use of OHC among infants in England to five other countries using annual CLA  
47 figures published by DfE (31), while Ubbesen *et al.* used individual-level longitudinal CLA  
48 data to compare the patterns of entry to care and type of OHC used in Denmark and  
49 England (32).  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

## Strengths and weaknesses

### Strengths

The main strengths of the CLA are that it has national coverage and is an administrative dataset, thereby negating issues of recall or selection bias associated with survey-based studies of OHC that rely on self-report by care leavers or caregivers. The CLA has collected cross-sectional data annually since 1992 and this allows changes over time in the population of looked after children and the characteristics of the care they receive to be reliably described. The CLA is also a longitudinal dataset that contains complete histories for children and allows care trajectories to be explored in detail. An additional strength is that summary statistics are freely available to download online for use as an indicator of local authority-level adversity during childhood. Furthermore, the DfE recognises the unique value of the CLA as a longitudinal data source for policy evaluation and research and are committed to continued data collection and improvement of its content. For example, permanence is a central component of current social care policy in England (33); therefore, indicators of a breakdown in a permanent exit from care (i.e. adoption, special guardianship order or residence order) and of permanence within social care system via long-term foster care were recently introduced (23). CLA data can also be used to evaluate local policies as data is available by local authority.

### Weaknesses

The restriction of data collection between 1998 and 2003 limits the power of the longitudinal dataset, particularly when exploring variation by local authority or for relatively rare placements or outcomes (e.g. death). A further limitation is that child ID is a local authority specific identifier. If a child is looked after in more than one local authority they will be assigned multiple child IDs, consequently preventing linkage of care records across these administrative boundaries. Similarly, when a child is adopted they receive a new legal identity. Therefore, if they subsequently become looked after again, they are assigned a new child ID. This means that a child's records of care pre- and post-adoption are not linked. However, the main limitation of the CLA is that (as it is an administrative dataset) it does not contain baseline characteristics of children entering care or their families or detailed information related to the care and support looked after children receive (e.g., interventions

1  
2  
3 provided, parental contact, placement with siblings, etc.). Furthermore, outcome data is  
4 only collected for specific groups of looked after children and care leavers and linkage to  
5 other non-DfE datasets (related to health or justice, for example) is not facilitated as name is  
6 not collected.  
7  
8  
9

### 10 11 12 13 **Data resource access**

14  
15 Aggregate statistical tables, annual reports and documentation related to CLA are available  
16 to the public at [<https://www.gov.uk/search?q=children+looked+after+>]. Requests for  
17 pseudonymised child-level CLA can be made by researchers through the NPD team at DfE.  
18 Data related to child characteristics and episodes of care (underlined in Figure 2) are  
19 routinely available for request from 2006 onwards. Other years of data or variables (such as  
20 SDQ score, postcode or UPN) are not routinely available, but can be requested and have  
21 been supplied to researchers in the past (29). Though it is pseudonymised, all CLA data is  
22 considered “tier 1” (i.e. sensitive personal information), therefore to obtain an extract  
23 researchers must complete an information security questionnaire and application form,  
24 which are considered by an advisory panel. When making an application for CLA data the  
25 need for each requested variable must be clearly justified by researchers. Applications can  
26 also be made to link CLA data to NPD and/or CIN data. Further application details and  
27 documents are available at [[https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-pupil-database-apply-  
28 for-a-data-extract](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-pupil-database-apply-for-a-data-extract)].  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

## CLA in a nutshell

- Looked after children represent a vulnerable population who encounter serious early adversity and have poorer health, social and educational outcomes than their peers, both in childhood and in later life.
- The Children Looked After Return (CLA) is an administrative dataset routinely-collected by the Department for Education to monitor outcomes of looked after children (whilst in care and on reaching adulthood) and to enable evaluation of the potential effects of government policy initiatives.
- It contains child-level data about all looked after children in England and recent care leavers, including child characteristics, episodes of care and outcomes.
- Data collection began in 1992 and since then the CLA has been used by researchers to describe the prevalence of children in care and explore the relative educational outcomes of children in care through linkage with other datasets.
- Aggregate statistics are publicly available and researchers can apply for pseudonymised, child-level extracts (including linkage to other Department for Education datasets) at [<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-pupil-database-apply-for-a-data-extract>].

## Funding

This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, grant reference number ES/L007517/1, establishing the Administrative Data Research Centre for England (ADRC-E). The ADRC-E is led by the University of Southampton and run in collaboration with University College London, the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Department for Education for collecting the CLA and allowing researchers to access the data. This publication has not been endorsed or reviewed by the Department for Education. The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely those of the authors.

**Conflict of interest:** None declared.

## References

1. Anda RF, Felitti VJ, Bremner JD, *et al.* The enduring effects of abuse and related adverse experiences in childhood. *Eur Arch Psychiatry Clin Neurosci* 2006;256(3):174–86.
2. Shonkoff JP, Garner AS, Siegel BS, *et al.* The Lifelong Effects of Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress. *Pediatrics* 2012;129(1):e232–46.
3. *Children Act 1989* (UK).
4. Daniel B. Concepts of Adversity, Risk, Vulnerability and Resilience: A Discussion in the Context of the “Child Protection System.” *Soc Policy Soc* 2010;9(02):231-41.
5. Department for Education. *Children looked after by local authorities in England: Guide to the SSDA903 collection April 2016 to 31 March 2017*. London; UK: Department for Education; 2015. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-looked-after-return-2016-to-2017-guide>
6. Holmes L, Soper J. *Update to The Cost of Foster Care*. London; UK: Department for Education; 2010.
7. Viner RM, Taylor B. Adult health and social outcomes of children who have been in public care: population-based study. *Pediatrics* 2005;115(4):894–99.
8. Martin A, Ford T, Goodman R, Meltzer H, Logan S. Physical illness in looked-after children: a cross-sectional study. *Arch Dis Child* 2014;99(2):103–7.
9. Goodman R, Ford T, Corbin T, Meltzer H. Using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) multi-informant algorithm to screen looked-after children for psychiatric disorders. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 2004;13(S2):25–31.
10. Ford T, Vostanis P, Meltzer H, Goodman R. Psychiatric disorder among British children looked after by local authorities: comparison with children living in private households. *Br J Psychiatry* 2007;190:319–25.
11. Meltzer H, Gatward R, Corbin T, Goodman R, Ford T. *The mental health of young people looked after by local authorities in England*. London; UK: The Stationery Office; 2002.
12. Vinnerljung B, Sallnäs M. Into adulthood: a follow-up study of 718 young people who were placed in out-of-home care during their teens. *Child Fam Soc Work* 2008;13(2):144–55.
13. Connelly G, Chakrabarti M. Improving the educational experience of children and young people in public care: a Scottish perspective. *Int J Incl Educ* 2008;12(4):347–61.
14. Harris MS, Jackson LJ, O’Brien K, Pecora PJ. Disproportionality in education and

- 1  
2  
3 employment outcomes of adult foster care alumni. *Child Youth Serv Rev*  
4 2009;31(11):1150–59.  
5  
6  
7 15. Jackson S, Martin PY. Surviving the care system: education and resilience. *J Adolesc*  
8 1998;21:569–83.  
9  
10 16. Jones R, Everson-Hock ES, Papaioannou D, *et al.* Factors associated with outcomes for  
11 looked-after children and young people: a correlates review of the literature. *Child*  
12 *Care Health Dev* 2011;37(5):613–22.  
13  
14 17. Tarren-Sweeney M. The mental health of children in out-of-home care. *Curr Opin*  
15 *Psychiatry* 2008;21(4):345–49.  
16  
17 18. Berens AE, Nelson CA. The science of early adversity : is there a role for large  
18 institutions in the care of vulnerable children ? *Lancet* 2015;6736(14):1–11.  
19  
20 19. Department for Education. *Notifications of private fostering arrangements: year*  
21 *ending 31 March 2014*. London; UK: Department for Education; 2014. Available from:  
22 [https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/notifications-of-private-fostering-](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/notifications-of-private-fostering-arrangements-in-england-2014)  
23 [arrangements-in-england-2014](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/notifications-of-private-fostering-arrangements-in-england-2014)  
24  
25  
26 20. Department for Education. *Statistical First Release 34/2015: Children looked after in*  
27 *England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2015*. London;  
28 UK: Department for Education; 2015. Available from:  
29 [https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015)  
30 [including-adoption-2014-to-2015](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015)  
31  
32  
33 21. Department for Education. *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities*.  
34 London; UK: Department for Education; 2015. Available from:  
35 [https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/outcomes-for-children-looked-after-by-](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/outcomes-for-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities)  
36 [local-authorities](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/outcomes-for-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities)  
37  
38  
39 22. Department for Education. *Unique Pupil Numbers (UPN): A guide for schools and local*  
40 *authorities*. London; UK: Department for Education; 2013. Available from:  
41 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/unique-pupil-numbers>  
42  
43  
44 23. Department for Education. *Children looked after by local authorities in England: Guide*  
45 *to the SSDA903 collection 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015*. London; UK: Department for  
46 Education; 2014. Available from:  
47 [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-looked-after-return-2014-to-](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-looked-after-return-2014-to-2015-guide)  
48 [2015-guide](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-looked-after-return-2014-to-2015-guide)  
49  
50  
51 24. Law J, Martin EA. *A Dictionary of Law*. 8th ed. Oxford; England: Oxford University  
52 Press; 2015.  
53  
54 25. Department for Education. *Special Guardianship Guidance*. London; UK: Department  
55 for Education; 2005. Available from:  
56 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/special-guardianship-guidance>  
57  
58  
59  
60



- 1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60
26. Department for Education. *Children looked after return 2014 to 2015: Validation checks*. London; UK: Department for Education; 2014. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-looked-after-return-2014-to-2015-validation-rules>
  27. Department for Education. *Statistical First Release: Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England, as at 31 March 2014*. London; UK: Department for Education; 2014. Available from: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/191969/SFR32\\_2012Text.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/191969/SFR32_2012Text.pdf)
  28. Department for Education. *Children in need census matched to the national pupil database*. London; UK: Department for Education; 2014. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need-in-england-2012-to-2013>
  29. Sebba J, Berridge D, Luke N, *et al*. *The Educational Progress of Looked After Children in England: Linking Care and Educational Data*. Oxford; UK: University of Oxford; 2015.
  30. Mc Grath-Lone L, Dearden L, Nasim B, Harron K, Gilbert R. Changes in first entry to out-of-home care from 1992 to 2012 among children in England. *Child Abuse Negl* 2015;51:163–71.
  31. Gilbert R, Fluke J, O'Donnell M, *et al*. Child maltreatment: variation in trends and policies in six developed countries. *Lancet* 2012;379(9817):758–72.
  32. Ubbesen M-B, Gilbert R, Thoburn J. Cumulative incidence of entry into out-of-home care: Changes over time in Denmark and England. *Child Abuse Negl* 2015;42:63–71.
  33. Department for Education. *Data Pack: Improving permanence for looked after children*. London; UK: Department for Education; 2013. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-permanence-for-looked-after-children-data-pack>

## Pocket profile – Children Looked After Return (CLA)

**Title:** Data Resource Profile: Children Looked After Return (CLA)

**Authors:** Louise Mc Grath-Lone,<sup>1,2\*</sup> Katie Harron,<sup>3</sup> Lorraine Dearden,<sup>1,4,5</sup> Bilal Nasim<sup>1,3</sup> and Ruth Gilbert<sup>1,2</sup>

**Keywords:** looked after children, children in care, childhood adversity, administrative data

**Corresponding author:** Louise Mc Grath-Lone [Louise.Mc-Grath-Lone.13@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:Louise.Mc-Grath-Lone.13@ucl.ac.uk)

**Cite this as:** The full version of this profile is available at IJE online and should be used when citing this profile.

**Data Resource Basics:** The CLA is a national, child-level dataset held by the Department for Education (DfE) that contains information on children in care and recent care leavers in England. Data collection began in 1992 and is ongoing via an annual electronic census; however between 1998 and 2003 data collection was restricted to a one-third sample (Table 1). The most recent 2014-15 CLA contained details of 99,230 looked after children in England during the year and 23,170 care leavers aged 19-21.

**Data Collected:** The measures collected in CLA have changed over time but can be broadly grouped as child characteristics, episode information and indicators/outcome of care (Table 2). Child characteristics include gender, date of birth and ethnicity, as well as unique IDs that allow linkage of care records over time and with educational records. Detailed episode information is collected including start/end dates, placement setting, why the child is looked after (legally and in terms of need) and mode of exit from care. Outcome data is primarily collected for two groups; children in long-term care (i.e. continuous care of more than 12 months) and recent care leavers. For children in long-term care these outcomes include whether a child was convicted of a crime, identified as having a substance misuse problem, offered intervention to treat substance misuse and had up-to-date health checks, dental

1  
2  
3 exams and immunisations. Children aged 4 to 16 also have an annual Strengths & Difficulties  
4 Questionnaire administered and their score is recorded (which can be used as an indicator  
5 for emotional or behavioural disorders). Educational outcomes for children are not recorded  
6 in the CLA but are obtained through routine linkage with another DfE dataset. In the most  
7 recent 2014-15 CLA, the outcomes recorded for care leavers were participation in education  
8 and/or employment and living arrangements on their 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays.  
9

10  
11  
12  
13  
14 **Data Resource Use:** Longitudinal CLA data has been used by researchers to describe the  
15 changing prevalence of children in care and explore the relative educational outcomes of  
16 looked after children (through linkage with other datasets). Cross-sectional CLA data is used  
17 by the DfE to publish annual reports on outcomes for children in care and care leavers.  
18  
19

20  
21  
22 **Reasons to be cautious:** Complete care histories are only available for one-third of children  
23 born before 2004 due to data collection restrictions. CLA does not collect baseline  
24 characteristics of children entering care, detailed information related to social care  
25 interventions or outcome data for all children/care leavers.  
26  
27  
28

29  
30  
31  
32  
33 **Collaboration and data access:** Aggregate data at national and local authority-level are  
34 publicly available through the DfE website and pseudonymised child-level data extracts  
35 (including linkage to other Department for Education datasets) can be requested by  
36 researchers at: [[https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-pupil-database-apply-for-a-data-  
37 extract](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-pupil-database-apply-for-a-data-extract)].  
38  
39  
40

41  
42 **Funding and competing interests:** The CLA is held and funded by the DfE. The authors  
43 declare no conflict of interest.  
44  
45  
46

47  
48  
49 **Author affiliations:** <sup>1</sup>Administrative Data Research Centre for England, <sup>2</sup>University College  
50 London Institute of Child Health, <sup>3</sup> London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, <sup>4</sup>UCL  
51 Institute of Education and <sup>5</sup>Institute for Fiscal Studies, London, UK.  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

Table 1: Coverage of data in the Children Looked After Return (1992 to 2016)

	Year (ending 31 <sup>st</sup> March)																												
	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016				
Child characteristics*	Plain shading						Patterned shading						Plain shading																
Episode information*	Plain shading						Patterned shading						Plain shading																
Adoption information							Patterned shading						Plain shading																
Outcome information†							Patterned shading												Plain shading										
Care leaver information‡													Patterned shading																

Plain shading = individual-level data, patterned shading = aggregate data. \*Individual-level information was collected for children whose day of birth was divisible by three. Aggregate data was collected for all other children. †Outcome data is only collected for children who are looked after continuously for 12 months or more on 31<sup>st</sup> March. The type of outcome data currently collected is listed in Table 2. ‡Data collection for care leavers was initially at age 19 only, but has been extended to those aged 20 or 21 since 2014. It will include children who leave care at age 17 and 18 from 2016 (5). The information collected for care leavers is listed in Table 2.

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49

Table 2: Measures collected by Children Looked After Return

Child characteristics	Episode information	Indicators and outcomes of care	
<p><i>For all children in care</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Child ID</u></li> <li>• <u>Gender</u></li> <li>• <u>Date of birth</u></li> <li>• <u>Ethnicity</u></li> <li>• Unique Pupil Number</li> <li>• Is a girl in care a mother?</li> <li>• Is the child in care an unaccompanied asylum seeker?</li> </ul>	<p><i>For all children in care</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Local authority providing care</u></li> <li>• <u>Start date of care episodes</u></li> <li>• <u>Reason a new episode started</u></li> <li>• <u>Reason a placement changed</u></li> <li>• <u>Legal status of child</u></li> <li>• <u>Category of need of child</u></li> <li>• <u>Placement type</u></li> <li>• <u>Placement location (in/outside local authority)</u></li> <li>• <u>Placement provider (local authority, voluntary sector, etc.)*</u></li> <li>• Unique Reference Number of placement provider</li> <li>• <u>End date of care episodes</u></li> <li>• <u>Reason episode ceased</u></li> </ul> <p><i>For children in continuous care for 12 months</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home postcode when entering care</li> <li>• Placement postcode</li> <li>• Distance between placement and home</li> </ul>	<p><i>For all children in care</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start and end dates of any period that child was missing from care</li> <li>• Is the child re-entering care after the breakdown of a permanent placement?</li> </ul> <p><i>For children re-entering care after the breakdown of a permanent placement</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Type of permanent arrangement</li> <li>• Date of exit to this permanent arrangement</li> <li>• The local authority where the child was previously looked after</li> </ul> <p><i>For children in continuous care for 20 days</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Date of statutory review</li> <li>• Child’s participation in the review</li> </ul> <p><i>For children who are placed for adoption</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Date the decision to be placed for adoption was made</li> <li>• Date child and prospective adopters were matched</li> <li>• Date of adoption</li> <li>• Number of prospective adopters</li> <li>• Gender of prospective adopters</li> <li>• Marital status of prospective adopters</li> <li>• Date decision that a child should no longer be placed for adoption was made</li> <li>• Reason why a child should no longer be placed for adoption</li> </ul>	<p><i>For children in continuous care for 12 months</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the child convicted during the year (if aged &gt;10 years)?</li> <li>• Are health surveillance checks up to date (if aged &lt;5 years)?</li> <li>• Are immunisations up to date?</li> <li>• Were the child’s teeth checked by a dentist during the year?</li> <li>• Are annual health assessments up to date?</li> <li>• Was the child identified as having a substance misuse problem?</li> <li>• Was the child offered an intervention for substance misuse problem?</li> <li>• Was the child eligible to take GCSE examinations?</li> <li>• What was the child doing when aged 16 or over (e.g. in school, employment)?</li> <li>• Strengths &amp; Difficulties Questionnaire score</li> </ul> <p><i>For care leavers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was the local authority in touch with the young person during the year?</li> <li>• What was the child doing on their birthday (i.e. in education, employment)?</li> <li>• What type of accommodation was the child living in on their birthday?</li> <li>• Was the accommodation suitable?</li> </ul>

The years in which these variables were collected in the CLA vary and are described in full in official Department for Education guidance. The underlined variables are available for request from the Department for Health through the National Pupil Dataset team. Other variables are not routinely available to researchers, but can be requested. \*Care episodes recorded in CLA are funded by the state via local authorities, but may be delivered on their behalf through approved private organisations (e.g. a looked after child may be placed with an agency foster carer or in a children’s home run by a charity).