The Challenge

Being placed in out-of-home care (for example, with a foster carer or in a group home) is an indicator of serious childhood adversity, such as abuse or neglect. We know from government statistics that more than 100,000 children in England spend time in care each year, but what we don’t know is the proportion that are ever placed in care during childhood. Different patterns of care throughout childhood are also not well-described.

The Research

A research team from the University College London used anonymised social care data for children born between 1992 and 2012. First, they calculated the proportion of children who had been placed in care by age 18. They then explored how characteristics of care (including duration, setting and stability of placements) varied between age groups and had changed over time. They also identified factors that were connected to re-entry to care.

The Results

By age 18, one in 30 children had been placed in care. This proportion varied by ethnicity: Black children were more likely to enter care and Asian children were less likely. Over time the proportion of children entering care increased, particularly for infants below the age of one. At the same time placements in care have also changed becoming longer and more stable. However, about one-third of children who leave care re-enter within five years. Teenagers and White or Mixed ethnicity children are more likely to re-enter care than other children.

The Impact

Taking a long term approach when analysing social care data improves our understanding of who is placed in care and their experiences throughout childhood. By using data researchers now know that placement in out-of-home care is a more common event than government statistics might suggest. Although less than one percent of children are in care each year, this analysis found that one in 30 has spent time in care by the age of 18.

For more information about support for children in care visit: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/

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