

# COMMENTARY

## 1. Numbers of children looked after in England

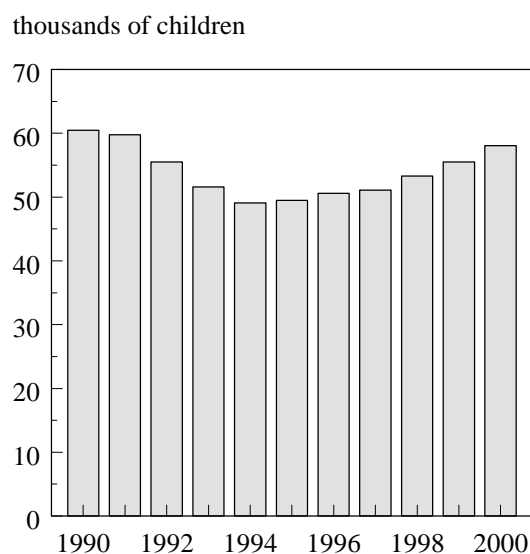
(Tables A, B, 1 – 5, 11 and 13)

### Looked after at 31 March

The latest figures show that the **snapshot** total of children looked after in England at 31 March 2000 was 58,100, excluding those accommodated for an agreed series of short term placements. This was 4.8% higher than the revised estimate for 1999 (55,500). 51 out of every 10,000 children were looked after at the end of 1999/2000.

As can be seen in Table A and Figure 1.1 the long-term decline in the number of looked after children came to an end in 1994, when 49,100 were looked after at 31 March. Since then there has been an 18.2% rise in the number of children looked after, and a 15% rise in the rate per 10,000 children.

**Figure 1.1 Number of children looked after at 31 March, 1990 to 2000**



### Looked after during the year

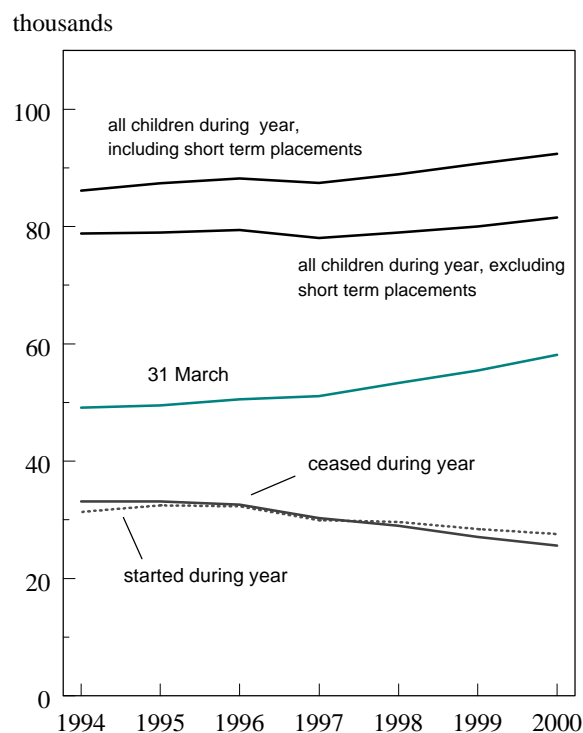
The number of children revealed by a **snapshot** is in many ways little more than a reflection of the volume of care provided at that time. This is because the chances of capturing any particular child in a snapshot view depends on the length of time that child is in care. If children are on average being looked after for longer, then more will be seen on any given day. (See Section 7 of the Commentary “Duration and Volume of Care”). A better measure, therefore, of assessing the growth in the number of children in the care system is to look at

the number of children looked after **at any time** during the year.

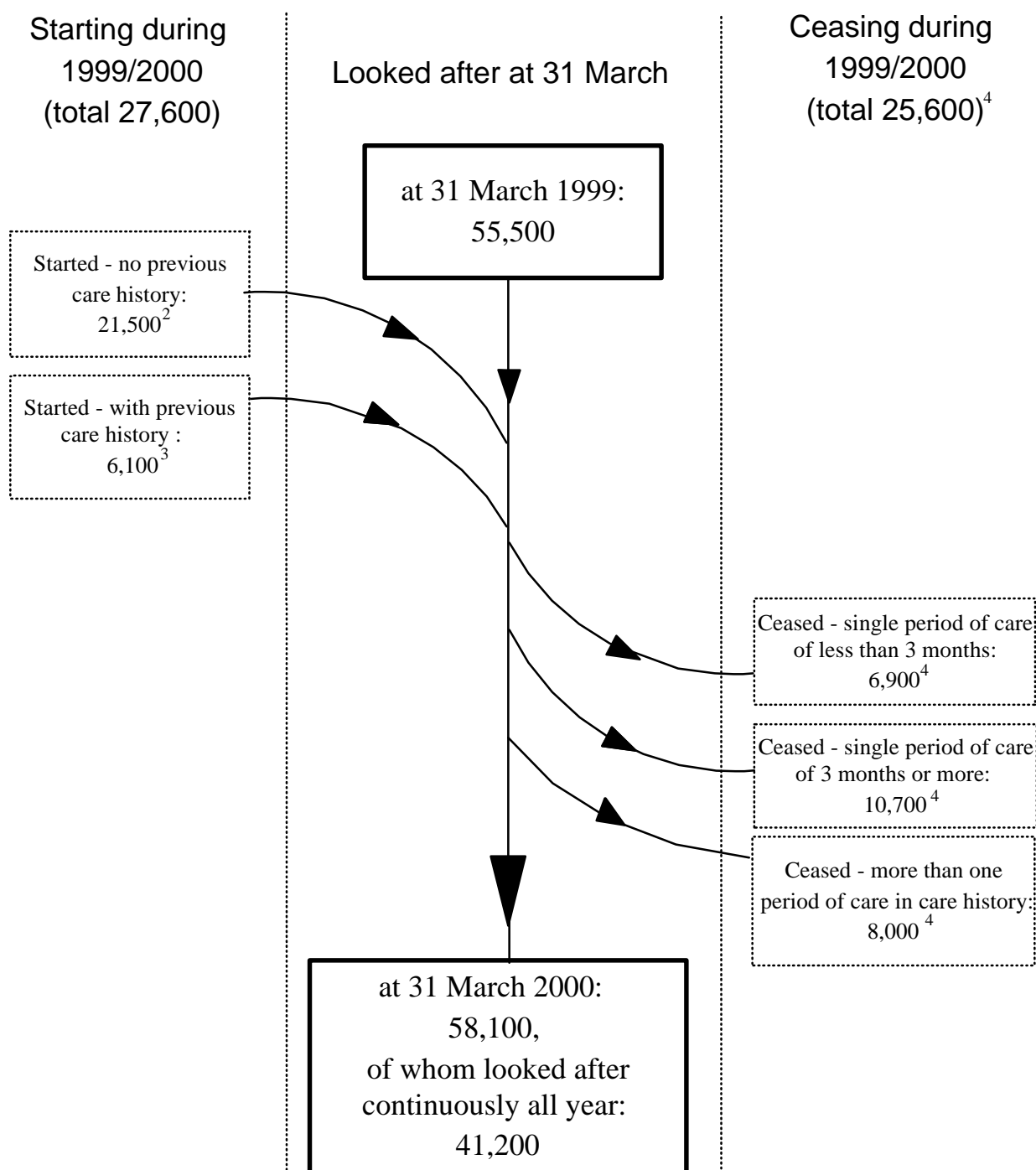
The total number of children looked after during 1999/2000 is estimated at 92,400, 2% higher than during the previous year, and representing 82 out of every 10,000 children under 18 years (see Table 1 and Figure 1.2). This figure includes children who were looked after at some time during the year under a series of short term placements. When measured in this way the population of looked after children has grown by 7% since 1993/4.

Table 1 also shows figures for the numbers looked after during the year excluding children who during that time were looked after only under a series of short term placements (see Section 2). It is estimated that on this basis 81,500 children were looked after at some time during 1999/2000, 2% higher than during the previous year and 3% up on 1993/94 (see Figure 1.2).

**Figure 1.2 Number of children looked after at 31 March and during the year, and number starting & ceasing to be looked after during the year, 1994 to 2000**



**Figure 1.3 Children starting, ceasing and continuing to be looked after during 1999/2000<sup>1</sup>**



Total number of children looked after at any time during the year = 81,500<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Excludes children only looked after under agreed series of short term placements

<sup>2</sup> With current local authority

<sup>3</sup> Including 1,600 children who were looked after at 31 March 1999 and who ceased and started again

<sup>4</sup> Including 2,600 children who started again later in 1999/2000 and were looked after at 31 March 2000

<sup>5</sup> Table does not balance due to discrepancies between the CLA100 returns and SSDA903 submission

(See Technical Notes)

## Started to be looked after

The total number of children who **started** to be looked after during the 1999/2000 year was 27,600 excluding children starting an agreed series of short term placements (compared with 28,400 a year earlier). The number of children who started to be looked after in 1994 was 31,400, since when the numbers starting during the year have fallen by 12% (Table 4 and Figure 1.2).

## Ceased to be looked after

The total number of children who **ceased** to be looked after during the 1999/2000 year was 25,600 compared with 27,100 a year earlier (down 5%) and with 33,100 in 1994 (down 23%) (Table 4 and Figure 1.2).

## The flow of children in and out of care

Figure 1.3 illustrates the relationship between the numbers of children who started and ceased to be looked after during 1999/2000 and those who were looked after at the start and the end of the period. It covers the experience of the 81,500 children who were looked after at some time during the period (but excludes children who were looked after during the year only under agreed series of short term placements).

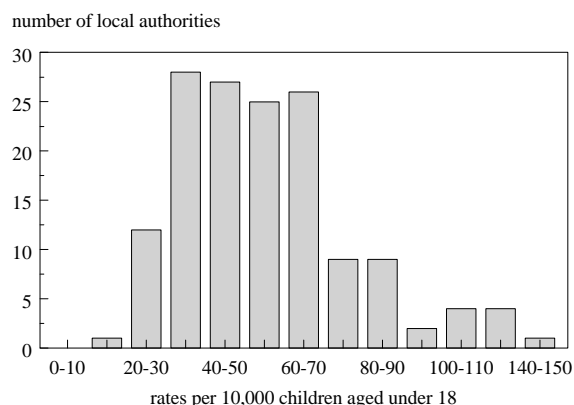
Of those children starting to be looked after during the year 21,500 (78%) had no previous care history with their local authority. Most of the remainder had been looked after during a previous year; some were looked after at the start of this period, ceased and started again.

Two thirds of those ceasing to be looked after during the year did so having had only a single period of being looked after; many of these had had less than 3 months in care (see also Tables U and V). Some of the children ceasing started again later in the year, whilst others will be looked after again at a later date.

## Differences between authorities

The aggregate figures for England conceal considerable variation between local authorities as can be seen in Tables 1 to 5, 11 and 13. This variation reflects differences in the needs of the populations which the local authorities serve, as well as differences in the responses of the individual Social Service departments in meeting the needs of the children in their area.

**Figure 1.4 Children looked after at 31 March 2000 in each local authority**

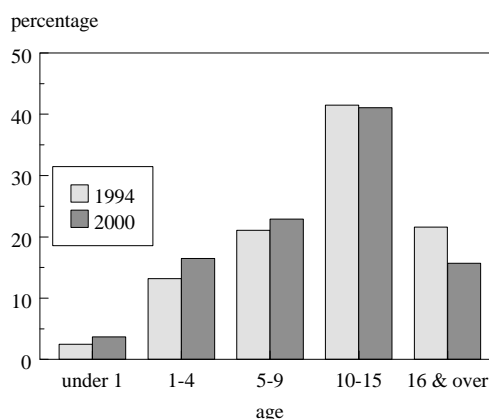


For example, Table 3 provides **snapshot** rates for 31 March 2000, expressed as the number of children looked after per 10,000 children in the local population. Although the average rate for England is 51 the figures for individual authorities range from 10 (Rutland) and 20 in Leicestershire to 143 (Islington). The distribution is illustrated in Figure 1.4.

## Age and sex

The **snapshot** at 31 March 2000 shows that there were more boys looked after (55%) than girls. The proportion of boys has been rising slowly since 1994 (Table B). It is highest amongst the 10 to 15 years olds. In the 1999 mid-year estimates of population, boys accounted for 51% of the population aged under 18.

**Figure 1.5 Children looked after by age at 31 March 1994 and 2000**



The average age of children looked after has been steadily falling for a number of years; their average age at 31 March 2000 was 10 years 5 months, compared with 11 years 3 months in 1994. At 31 March 2000, there were 25,100 children aged under 10 (43% of all children), compared with 18,100 (or 37%) six years ago (figure 1.5).

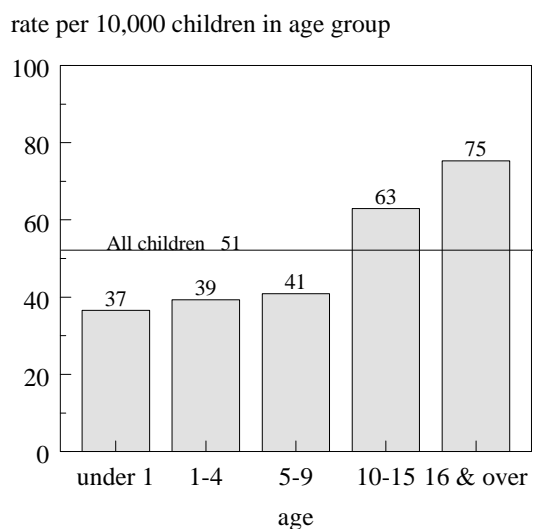
It is noticeable that over the period 1993/4 to 1999/2000, the average age of girls has fallen from 11 yrs 3 months to 10 yrs 3 months, whereas the average age for boys has fallen from 11 yrs 2 months to 10 yrs 6 months, so that boys are now on average older than the girls. These changes are reflected in the change in the age/sex profile of looked after children (Table (i)).

**Table (i) Children looked after at 31 March 1994 and 2000 by age and sex**

Age of children (yrs)	Numbers of children (000's)				Percentage change from 1994 to 2000	
	1994		2000		Boys	Girls
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls		
0	0.8	0.7	1.2	1.0	49	53
1 - 4	3.3	3.1	5.1	4.5	52	47
5 - 9	5.6	4.6	7.1	6.2	28	34
10 - 15	11.5	9.7	13.5	10.4	17	7
16 & over	4.9	4.8	5.1	4.0	3	-17
Totals	26.2	23.0	32.0	26.2	22	14

A far greater proportion of older children in the population is looked after than younger children (Figure 1.6). When expressed as a rate per 10,000 children in the relevant age group the proportion of children looked after at 31 March rises from 37 for children aged under 1 to 75 for those aged 16 and over. The average rate for all children is 51.

**Figure 1.6 Children looked after at 31 March 2000**



## 2. Children who receive short-term breaks

(Tables I and 2)

Some looked after children are accommodated under an agreed series of short term placements (often called 'family link placements' or 'short breaks') as provided for in *Regulation 13 of the Arrangement for Placement of Children (General) Regulations, 1991*. As explained in the Introduction, local authorities can record these either in terms of the period covered by an agreement, or as the individual placements themselves. For this reason it is not possible to include the data for these agreements in most of the tables in this publication. Instead, data for children who are looked after under these arrangements are presented separately at a national level in Table I and by local authorities in Table 2.

A total of 12,200 children received series of short term placements at some time during 1999/2000. Of these, 10,900 were looked after exclusively under short term placements, the remainder having also been looked after during the year in placements that did not form part of an agreed series.

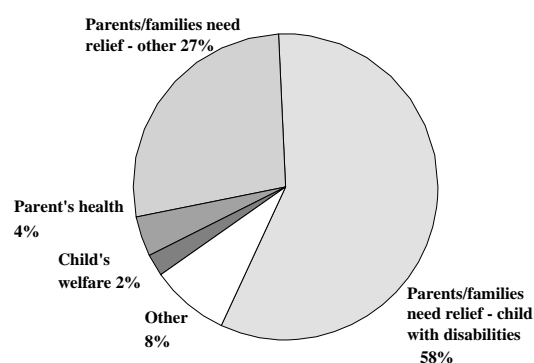
As children accommodated under an agreed series of short term placements can be recorded on the SSDA 903 in two ways, it is not possible to make an accurate assessment of the amount of time children spend in this type of care. However on the assumption that those children whose care is recorded by agreement, receive the same pattern of care as those for whom full details are submitted, the following estimates can be made for the year 1999/2000:

- Average number of children receiving this type of care on any one day – 1,100
- Average number of children in any one week – 2,400
- Average number of days of care per child in the year – 33

Table I shows that the number of children looked after in this way has risen since 1995/96, although the figures suggest numbers may have now reached a plateau. This rise may, at least in part, reflect incomplete reporting of these children in earlier years. In 1999/2000 61% of these children were boys, a higher proportion than for other looked after children. Also unlike other looked after children, whose average age has fallen, their average age has risen since 1995/6, to 11 years 7 months in 1999/2000. 52% were accommodated in foster placements and 42% in children's homes.

Series of short term placements are generally used to provide relief to parents and families. Although sometimes thought of as a means of supporting families caring for disabled children it can be seen from Figure 2.1 and Table I that 42% of the children are recorded as being looked after for reasons other than disability.

**Figure 2.1 Children looked after during the year ending 31 March 2000 under at least one series of short term placements by reason for being looked after<sup>1</sup>**



<sup>1</sup>Relates to child's latest episode of care

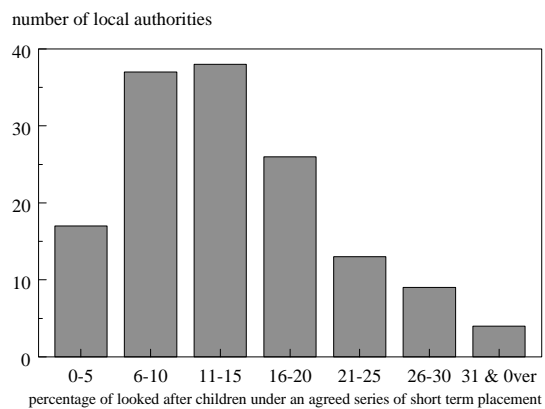
### Differences between authorities

Table 2 shows the numbers of children under series of short term placements in each local authority. (The figures are based on the analysis of the one third sample of looked after children and are therefore subject to sampling error). There is considerable variation between authorities in the number of children looked after in this way when compared with all looked after children (Figure 2.2). Some authorities appear to have provided this service to relatively few children, (and in some cases, for no children at all) whilst other apparently similar authorities accommodated a quarter or more of their looked after population in this way.

In considering these findings it is however necessary to bear in mind that authorities may differ in the way they record these children; the distinction between these children and others looked after under Section 20 is known to cause difficulties when recording

data for the SSDA903 return. In addition, some authorities may fail to record these children, incorrectly treating them as not looked after. Others may have accidentally left these children out of their one-third sample return.

**Figure 2.2 Percentage of children looked after at any time during the year ending 31 March 2000 under an agreed series of short term placements**



### 3. Reason for starting to be looked after

(Tables E and O)

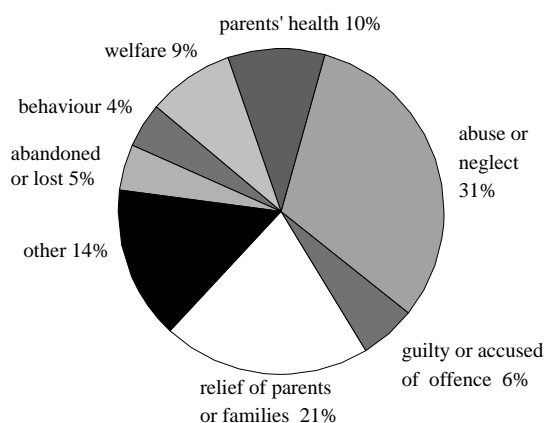
#### Reason for being looked after codes

1999/2000 is the last year for which the SSDA 903 return will collect data on the reason a child is being looked after. (See Appendix B – item 9). With effect from 2000/01, these codes are being replaced by new “Children in Need” codes, which are defined in terms of the main or principal reason the child needs a social service. The new codes were used for the first time in the “Children in Need” data collection during February 2000, and the results were published in December 2000 (available on the internet at [www.doh.gov.uk/cin/cin.htm](http://www.doh.gov.uk/cin/cin.htm)).

#### Children who started in 1999/2000

As can be seen in Figure 3.1, the most common reasons given for starting to look after a child during the 1999/2000 year were to give relief to the parents or families (21%) and abuse or neglect (31%). The other commonly cited reasons were parent's health (10%) and concern for the child's welfare (9%). Table E shows trends over the last 5 years whilst Table O gives more detail for the latest year.

**Figure 3.1 Children who started to be looked after during year ending 31 March 2000, by reason for being looked after.**



#### Trends over time

The most striking trend in Table E is the steady rise in the number and proportion of children starting to

be looked after because of risk of or actual abuse or neglect. 6,500 children (20%) were classified under this reason during the 1995/6 year; by 1999/2000 this had risen to 8,600 children or 31%. Data collected separately by the Department of Health about children on child protection registers show that a quarter of children on the register are also looked after – at 31 March 2000 7,100 children were both on the register and looked after.

Parent's health is now given less often as a reason than in 1995/6, as is own behaviour, whilst more children are recorded as 'abandoned or lost'. However it should be borne in mind that these trends may at least in part, reflect changes in social workers' preference for certain categories rather than changes in the population of looked after children.

#### Looked after children with disabilities

As explained in the Introduction, children who are looked after under agreed series of short-term placements are excluded from most tables in this publication, including Table E. Most of these children are looked after in order to give parents or families relief (Table I). As described in Section 2 of this chapter, more than half of them (7,000) were recorded as being looked after during 1999/2000 for reasons relating to the child's disability. In contrast, of those children who started to be looked after in placements that did not form part of an agreed series (Table E), only 290 were looked after for this reason.

Considering the 92,400 children looked after at any time during the year, 8,200 or 9% were recorded as looked after because they were disabled, although it is interesting to note that about a dozen authorities do not use this category for any of their looked after children.

In addition to these 8,200, other looked after children will have had disabilities but will have been recorded as being looked after for other reasons, and therefore cannot be identified as disabled from the data collected.

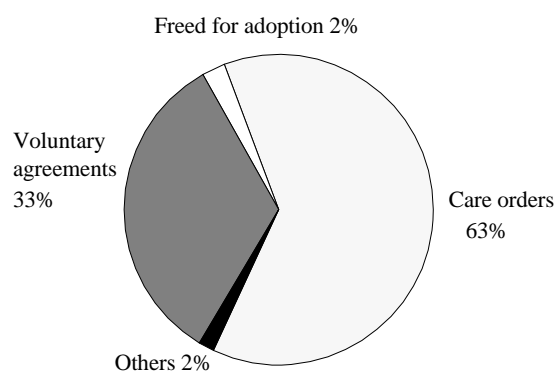
## 4. Legal basis for being looked after

(Tables C, F, K, P, R, 6 and 12)

### Voluntary agreements - single placements under Section 20

The intention of the Children Act 1989 was to promote the use of accommodation as a family support service and, when a child has to live away from home, to make voluntary arrangements with parents wherever possible. Table C shows that at 31 March 2000 there were 19,300 children looked after by voluntary arrangement under Section 20 of the Act, (*i.e.* excluding children under agreed series of short term placements), representing 33% of all children looked after (Figure 4.1). This compares with a peak of 19,900 (39%) at 31 March 1996.

**Figure 4.1 Children looked after at 31 March 2000 by legal status**



It is estimated that just over two thirds of children who started to be looked after during 1999/2000 were accommodated on starting under Section 20 of the Children Act. This proportion has been falling steadily since 1995/6, when it was 77% (Table F).

### Care Orders

Whilst voluntary agreements have declined in number, the use of care orders has increased. Figures for the **snapshot** at 31 March 2000 show that the majority (36,400 or 63%) of children who were looked after on that date were under care orders, 2,000 more than a year earlier (Table C). *Table (ii)* below shows that almost half of this increase can be accounted for by the continuing rise in the use of interim care orders. Table F shows that there has also been a recent increase in the use of interim care orders for children starting to be looked after.

**Table (ii) Numbers of children subject to different kinds of care orders at 31 March**

	1998	1999	2000
Interim	6,300	7,000	7,900
Full	28,900	27,400	28,500
Total	32,100	34,400	36,400

This recent increase in the use of care orders and the decline in the use of voluntary agreements reflects a gradual change in the needs of the population of children looked after by local authorities. It is consistent with the increase in the numbers looked after as a result of abuse or neglect (see section 2 above and Table E), and may suggest that local authorities are becoming more focussed on those cases where intervention is necessary to prevent significant harm to children.

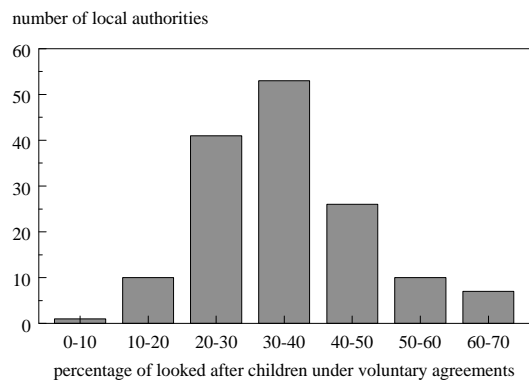
### Children accommodated compulsorily

Of the children who **started** to be looked after during the 1999/2000 year, 4,500 or 17% were accommodated compulsorily, compared with 4,100 in 1995/6 (Table F). Roughly a third of these children were on remand, committed for trial or detained and the remainder were either under police protection or under emergency protection orders.

### Differences between authorities

The figures in Table 6 reveal the variation in the legal statuses of children looked after by different local authorities. For example, local authorities can be seen to vary in the use they make of single voluntary agreements under Section 20 of the Children Act (Figure 4.2). In England, 33% of the children looked after at 31 March 2000 were covered by a single voluntary agreement. At the local authority level this percentage ranges from 4% in Hartlepool to over 65% in 3 outer London boroughs.

**Figure 4.2 Percentage of children looked after under single voluntary agreements at 31 March 2000**



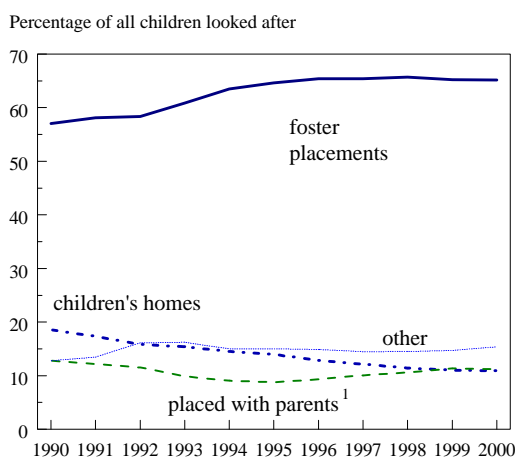
## 5. Placements

(Tables D,L,P,7 and 8)

### Types of placement

Provisional figures for the **snapshot** at 31 March 2000 show that the majority of children looked after were in foster placements (37,900 or 65% of the total). As can be seen from Table D, the number of children in foster placements fell from 34,500 in 1990 to 31,300 in 1994; since then the number has risen steadily. The proportion of looked after children placed in foster placements rose steadily from 57% in 1990 to 65% in 1996, since when it has remained fairly constant (Figure 5.1).

**Figure 5.1 Children in care/looked after at 31 March 1990 to 2000 by placement**



1. Under charge and control of parent or guardian before 1992

In contrast, over the ten years since 1990 there has been a substantial decrease in the number and proportion of looked after children in children's homes<sup>1</sup>. The number fell from 11,200 at 31 March 1990 to 6,300 at 31 March 2000. The 2000 figure represents less than 11% of children looked after, compared with under 19% of those in care in 1990. The number fell steadily from 1990 to 1999, but rose slightly in 2000 against the established trend. Nearly all of this increase is due to an increasing use of private registered homes.

<sup>1</sup> The term "children's homes" is defined here as including local authority community homes, voluntary homes and private registered homes. This is a slight change in definition from that used in previous publications (when voluntary hostels were also included), and reflects the new SDA 903 coding structure which came into effect on 1 April 2000

At 31 March 2000, there were 6,500 children looked after who were placed with parents, representing over 11% of all children looked after. The use of this kind of placement has been increasing since 1995. Prior to the Children Act, the number under legislation comparable to the Placement with Parents Regulations 1991 had been falling steadily. In 1990 there were 7,700 children under the charge and control of a parent or guardian, representing 13% of all children in care.

### Children placed in foster care outside their authority

Of the 37,900 children in foster placements at 31 March 2000, 7,900 or 21% were in placements outside the boundary of their authority. As can be seen from Table (iii), this percentage has increased slightly in recent years. Part of this increase has resulted from local government reorganisation: the increase in authorities unaffected by the boundary changes has been smaller.

**Table (iii) Percentage of children in foster placements at 31 March who were placed outside their local authority**

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
All authorities	16.5	17.1	19.0	20.1	20.8
Authorities unaffected by boundary changes	22.8	23.1	23.9	24.7	25.8

There is considerable regional variation in the use of out of authority foster placements. Authorities in London place, on average, a far greater proportion (51% at 31 March 2000) of their children in foster care outside their boundaries than other authorities. However, English local authorities vary considerably in their geographical size and the implications of an out of authority placement in, say, a small London borough may be quite different from a placement outside a large shire county.

## Children placed in foster care with relative or friend

At 31 March 2000 there were 6,300 children in foster placements in the care of either a relative or a friend, or 16.6% of all children in foster care. As can be seen from table (iv) this percentage has increased slowly over recent years.

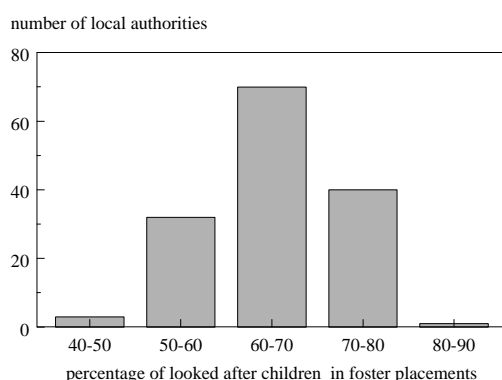
The number of children in foster care with a relative or friend has increased by 32% over the period 1996 to 2000 (from 4,800 to 6,300), which compares with a 15% increase in all foster placements over the same period.

**Table (iv) Percentage of children in foster placements with relative or friend, and other foster placements at 31 March**

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Foster placement with relative or friend	14.1	14.5	15.1	15.7	16.6
Other foster placements	85.9	85.5	84.9	84.3	83.4

## The use of foster care by local Authorities

**Figure 5.2 Percentage of looked after children who were in foster placements at 31 March 2000**

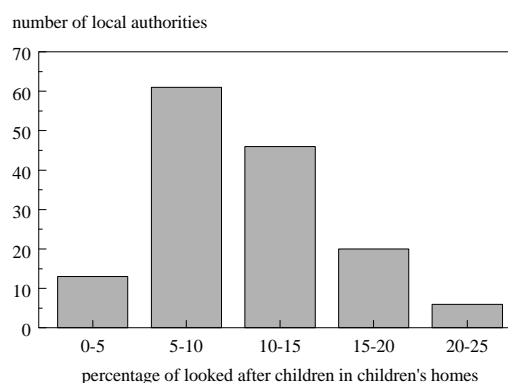


Local authorities vary considerably in the use they make of different types of placement for the children they look after (Table 7). At 31 March 2000 65% of children looked after in England were in foster placements. This percentage has remained fairly

constant for the last five years. The variation in the use of foster placements by local authorities can be seen in Figure 5.2. At one extreme Bracknell Forest had only 43% of its children in foster homes, whilst at the other extreme Bath and N. E Somerset had 89%.

## The use of children's homes by local authorities

**Figure 5.3 Percentage of children looked after who were in children's homes at 31 March 2000**



Similar percentage data for children's homes also reveal variation between authorities (Figure 5.3). At 31 March 2000 11% of children looked after in England were placed in children's homes. At local authority level this proportion ranges from 1% (North Somerset and South Gloucestershire), to 24% (Lambeth). The figures for children's homes cover community homes, voluntary homes, and private registered homes.

## The ages of children in different types of placement

The recent decline in the use of children's homes reflects the feeling that most children are better off in a family setting than in residential care. This is particularly true for younger children who are therefore more likely to be placed with foster carers, placed for adoption or placed with their own parents than older children. This can be seen in Table L, and is also examined in Table 8 at local authority level for children under 10 years of age. At national level, only 2% of children under 10 were placed in children's homes at 31 March 2000. However in some authorities this percentage was over 10%. The figures in Table 8 for 1998 to 2000 are based on an analysis of the one-third sample of looked after children and are therefore subject to sampling error.

The relationship between placement and age is explored in more detail in the charts in Figure 5.4. In each chart the bars represent percentages by age of the total number of children in that type of placement at 31 March 2000.

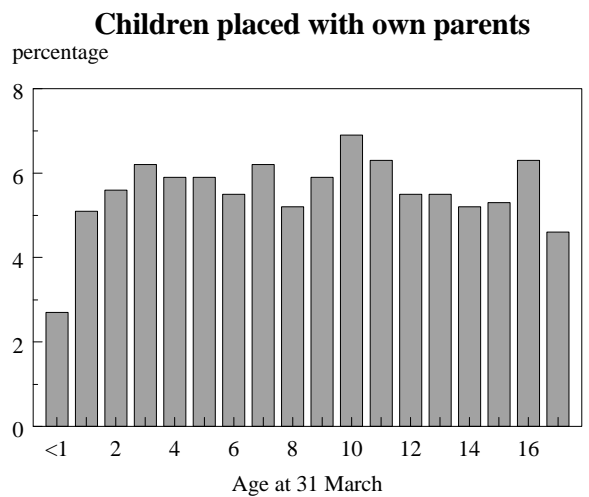
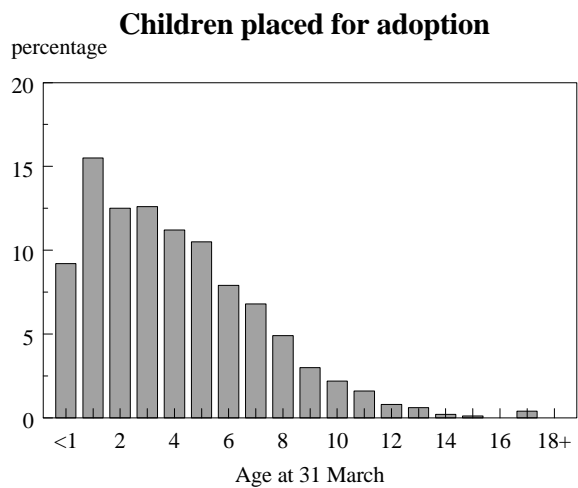
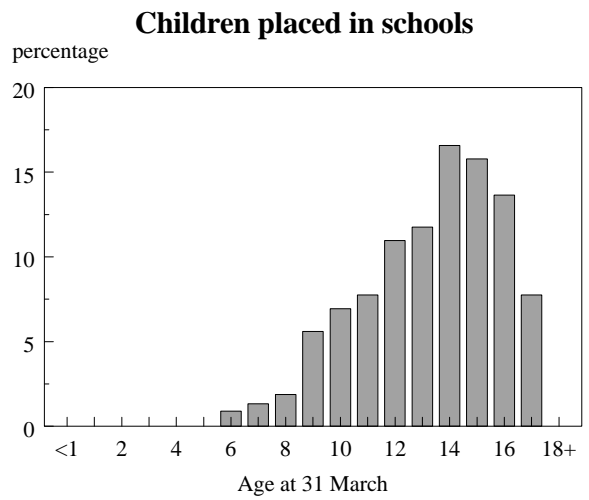
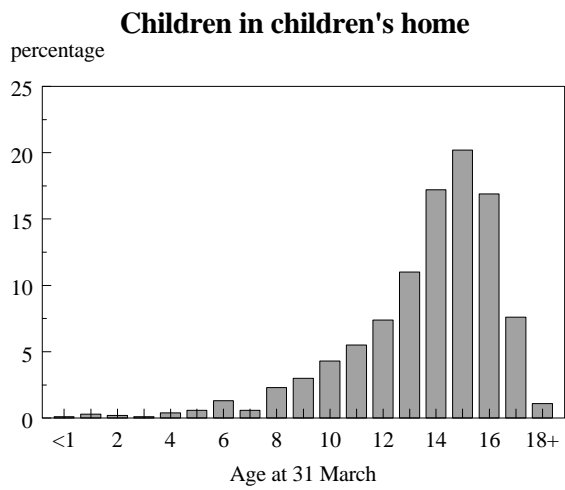
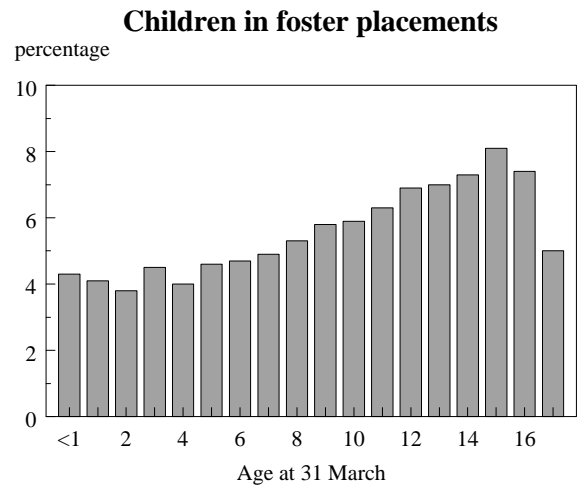
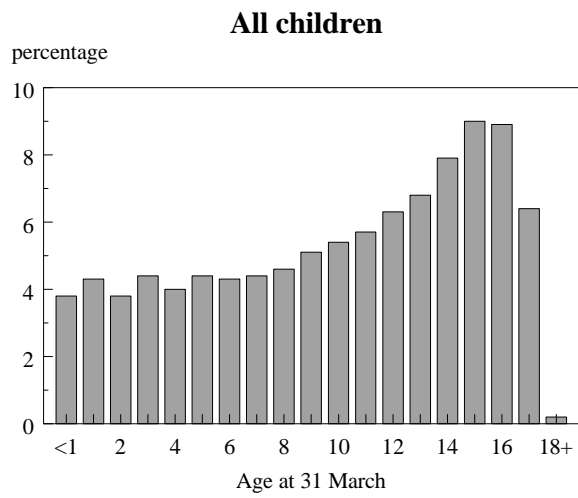
Two thirds of children were placed in foster placements. The age distribution of children in foster placements therefore follows a similar pattern to the overall distribution for all placements, with a peak at age 15.

As discussed above, children's homes are generally not felt to be appropriate for younger children so the majority of children placed in them were teenagers. Similarly most looked after children placed in residential schools were aged 12 or over, although a few were as young as 6.

For children placed for adoption the picture is reversed, with most of them under 10 years of age.

Children placed with their parents are relatively evenly distributed across all ages.

**Figure 5.4 Children looked after at 31 March 2000 by age and placement**



## 6. Stability in care

(Tables U, V, 9 and 10)

### Number of placements during the year

The Department of Health is concerned about the frequent changes in placement that some looked after children experience. To tackle this the Department has established a national target for social services under the National Priorities Guidance (NPG) as follows:

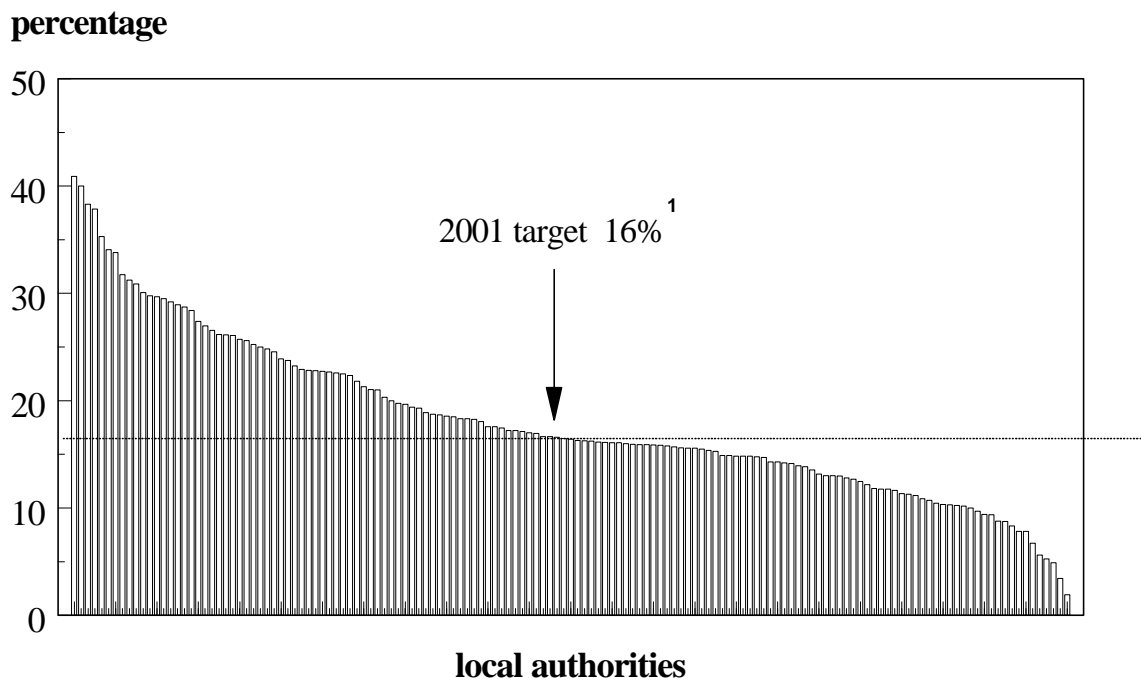
*Reduce to no more than 16% in all authorities, by 2001, the number of children looked after who have three or more placements in one year.*

A count of the number of different placements a child has had over a given period of time provides a rough measure of the stability of care that that child has experienced. The proportion of children looked after

at 31 March who have had 3 or more placements during the year has been established as a performance indicator (A1) in the Performance Assessment Framework (PAF) of social services; it is also a Best Value performance indicator.

Table 9 shows figures for the **snapshot** of children looked after at 31 March who have had **3 or more placements** during the year, as recorded on the SSDA903. (Agreed series of short term placements under Section 20 of the Children Act are excluded.) These figures include **all** recorded placements during the year, not just those in the child's latest period of care; they also include any placements recorded on the SSDA903 form as 'temporary'. The figures for 1999 - 2000 are based on an analysis of the one-third sample of looked after children and are therefore subject to sampling error.

**Figure 6.1 Children looked after at 31 March 2000 with three or more placements during the year, as a percentage of all children looked after at 31 March 2000, by local authority**



<sup>1</sup> National Priorities Guidance for each authority for the year ending 31 March 2001

At 31 March 2000, 18.1% of children looked after had experienced 3 or more placements during the year (compared with 19.2% in 1999 and 19.6% in 1998). Within this total, the figures for individual local authorities vary from 2% to 40%, with the figures reported for London, and particularly inner London, being lower than for the rest of the country. As *table (v)* below shows the percentage of authorities achieving 16% or less has increased steadily since 1996, (with the largest increase being between 1998/9 and 1999/2000) but still falls well below the NPG target of 100% by 2001. In interpreting these figures it should be borne in mind that they will be distorted by any inconsistencies between authorities in the reporting of placements.

**Table (v) Percentage of authorities with 16% of children or less receiving 3 or more placements during the year.**

Year ending 31 March	% of authorities
1996	31.2
1997	34.0
1998	38.6
1999	39.4
2000	52.8

The figures for 1999/2000 in Table 9 differ, for some authorities quite markedly, from those provided for the 1999/2000 Performance Assessment Framework (PAF) (published at [www.doh.gov.uk/paf](http://www.doh.gov.uk/paf)). In general the PAF figures were lower than those shown in Table 9; this may be a result of inconsistencies in the methods used by authorities to calculate this indicator.

## ‘Long-term’ placements

By analysing the full care histories of looked after children as recorded on the SSDA903 it is possible to focus on children who have been looked after continuously for several years. It is informative to then examine what proportion of these have been provided with a stable, ‘long-term’ placement by their local authority.

This approach is illustrated in Table 10. The figures show, for each local authority, the number of children who at 31 March 2000 had been looked after continuously for at least 4 years. They also show the proportion of these who were in a ‘long-term’ foster placement at 31 March, *i.e.* those who had been in their foster placement for at least 2 years.

Table 10 mirrors another of the established PAF indicators (D35), and as with indicator A1 described above, there are differences between this table and the published PAF data. However, even though Table 10 has been based on an analysis of the one-third sample

of looked after children, for reasons stated above for A1, it is considered to provide a more consistent basis for comparing authorities than the PAF data.

Table 10 shows that whilst nationally 46% of these looked after children were found to be in a ‘long-term’ foster placement, the figures for some authorities can be seen to be over 70% whilst a number of others are below 25%.

## Numbers of placements in full care history

An alternative approach to examining long-term stability is to consider the total number of placements that looked after children experience during their full care history. As can be seen in Table U, 37% of children who ceased to be looked after during 1999/2000 had only a single placement in their care history and over two thirds had had 3 or fewer. At the other extreme 1,600 children had had 10 or more placements. It is important to bear in mind that a proportion of these children will be re-admitted and looked after again at a later date (see also Figure 1.3).

Over the period 1995/96 to 1999/2000, the average number of placements per child during its care history rose from 2.9 to 3.5 (Also see Section 7 of the Commentary “Duration and volume of care”).

## Multiple periods of care

Table V provides a similar analysis in terms of the numbers of separate periods of care experienced by these children. Two thirds of children ceasing in 1999/2000 had only had a single period of care (*i.e.* a continuous period of being looked after) but 7% had had more than three separate periods. This table excludes children in receipt of agreed series of short term placements, whose planned care by definition consists of many separate periods of care. A relatively high proportion of those ceasing on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday had had only one period of care; many of these young people had a stable, long-term care history under a care order

## 7. Duration and volume of care

(Tables J, M, N, S, T, W, X and 14)

### Length of time being looked after

By "length of time being looked after" we refer to the total length of time that a child has been **continuously** looked after by a local authority; this is also referred to in this publication as a "period of care".

The children who ceased to be looked after during 1999/2000 had on average been looked after for 617 days. This average fell consistently from the implementation of the Children's Act in 1991 until 1996, since when there has been a steady increase, as shown in *table (vi)* below.

**Table (vi) Average length of latest period of care (POC) and of placements in latest POC of children who ceased to be looked after during years ending 31 March 1994 to 2000**

Year Ending 31 March	Average duration of POC (days)	Average number of placements per POC	Average duration of placement (days)
1994	579	1.69	342
1995	548	1.89	291
1996	531	1.98	269
1997	551	2.13	259
1998	577	2.32	249
1999	595	2.38	250
2000	617	2.44	252

This increase in the average duration of the latest period of care is the result of a number of different factors:

- the increasing use of care orders, and the decline in the use of voluntary agreements (See Section 4 of the Commentary) - children under a care order remain looked after for much longer on average than children voluntarily accommodated (See below)
- the decline in the number of children looked after under voluntary arrangements for very short periods ie. two weeks or less (See below)
- the increase in the number of children remaining in care until their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday (See Section 8 of the Commentary)

Of the children **ceasing** to be looked after during the 1999/2000 year, 47% had been looked after for more than 6 months, and 37% had been looked after for 8 weeks or less (Table S). Table S also shows that whilst the number of children ceasing to be looked after has fallen from 1995/6 to 1999/2000 by 21%, the greatest fall is amongst those who have been in care for less than 2 weeks (36%). This compares with those who had been in care between 6 months and 5 years, where numbers fell by just 3%. Table T shows that children looked after for short periods are mostly looked after under voluntary agreements.

The **snapshot** of children looked after at 31 March provides a different view (Tables M and N). This is because children being looked after for shorter periods are less likely to be captured by this snapshot than those with longer durations of care. At 31 March 2000 6% of children looked after had been looked after for less than 8 weeks. At the other extreme 52% of these children had been looked after for more than 2 years, and 22% for more than 5 years.

### Duration of individual placements

*Table (vi)* above shows that the average length of time children spend in any given placement gradually decreased from 1993/4 until 1997/8, since when it has remained fairly constant, even though the average duration of the latest period of care continued to rise. The table illustrates two distinct trends. Up until 1997/8, the average number of placements per period of care rose primarily because the average length of placements was falling. However, since then, the continuing rise in the average number of placement per period of care is due more to the fact that children are remaining longer in care, than to any other factor.

Table W gives a slightly different view, and looks at all placements which ended during 1999/2000. This shows a large proportion of placements are very short - 23% of placements lasted 7 days or less and 42% lasted less than a month. At the other extreme 7% of placements lasted 2 years or more. Most of the placements lasting 5 years or more are foster placements.

## Duration by legal status

Children under a care order remain looked after for longer than children who are looked after under any other legal status, even though the average length of stay for children under a care order has fallen by 6% over the past five years. Over the same period the average period of care of children looked after under voluntary agreements (Section 20, CA 1989) has risen by 28%. See *table (vii)* below, and Table T.

**Table (vii) Average length of latest period of care of children ceasing to be looked after during the years ending 31 March 1996 and 2000, by legal status on ceasing**

	Year ending 31 March				
	1996		2000		% change 1996-2000
	% of all children ceasing	Average duration (days)	% of all children ceasing	Average duration (days)	
All cases	100	531	100	617	16
Full care orders	13	2,348	15	2,211	-6
Section 20	73	241	66	307	28
Other	13	304	19	382	26

## Number of care days provided

The best way of analysing changing patterns in the volume of care is to consider the total number of days of care provided during the year to looked after children. This involves, for each year ending 31 March, counting every day of care provided within the year.

Table J shows that the total number of days of care provided for all children (other than those looked after under a series of short term placements) during 1999/2000 was just under 21 million, an increase of over 5% from 1998/99, and up 14% since 1995/96. The latter figure compares with an increase over the same period of just under 3% in the number of children looked after at any time during the year (see table 1 and *Table (viii)* below) and as a result, there has been a steady increase in the average number of care days provided per child within the year.

**Table (viii) Number of children looked after at any time during the year and the number of care days provided during the year (excluding children looked after under a series of short term placements)**

	Year ending 31 March				
	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Children looked after in year (thousands)	79.4	78.0	79.0	80.1	81.5
Care days provided (millions)	18.2	18.4	18.9	19.8	20.8
Average care days per child within year (days)	229	226	240	247	255

The number of care days provided during the year follows a similar trend to the number of children looked after at 31 March. (See *Table (ix)* and Table D). This is to be expected as the longer children remain in care, the greater chance they have of being captured in a **snapshot** picture of one day; so the 31 March figure provides a measure of the volume of care. As *table (ix)* below shows, the number being looked after at the year end may follow a different trend to the total number looked after **at any time** during the year. In recent years the former has risen more rapidly than the latter, which indicates that children are staying in care longer.

**Table (ix) : Indices (31 March 1996 = 100) of the numbers of children in care at end of year, care days provided and total numbers looked after during the years ending 31 March 1996 to 2000**

Years ending 31 March	Number at 31 March	Care days provided	Children looked after during year
1996	100.0	100.0	100.0
1997	101.1	101.1	98.2
1998	105.5	104.0	99.4
1999	109.7	108.7	100.8
2000	115.0	114.2	102.7

Table J also shows that the number of days of care provided in children's homes has fallen over the period 1995/6 to 1999/2000 from 2.45 million to 2.27 million (down 7%), whereas the number of days of care provided by foster carers has risen by 15%.

There has also been a steady rise since 1995/6 in the number of days of care provided to children under care orders, whilst the volume of care given to those under voluntary agreements has declined slightly.

Regional figures for the number of care days provided, the number of children looked after at any time during the year, and the average number of care days provided per child are given for 1995/6 and 1999/2000 in Table X. All regions have seen increases in the total number of days of care provided and the average number of days provided per child during this period. The East Midlands, South West and Yorkshire and Humberside saw falls in the number of children looked after during the year.

## 8. Care Leavers

(Tables G and 15)

Local authorities have a duty to 'advise, assist and befriend' young people who have ceased to be looked after at the age of 16 or over (Children Act 1989, Section 24). Increasing the support offered to care leavers, including steps to prevent the inappropriate discharge of young people at the age of 16 and 17 is one of the priority areas under the Department of Health's Quality Protects Programme. In addition two National Priorities Guidance targets have been established to improve the level of employment, training and education of care leavers.

Table G provides national figures for young people aged 16 and over who have **ceased** to be looked after in recent years. It is estimated that 6,800 young people left care in this age range during the year ending 31 March 2000; this figure has fallen steadily since 1995/6, although as a proportion of all care leavers, the ratio has remained fairly constant at around 26%.

There has however been a noticeable change in the age distribution of care leavers aged 16 and over, over the five year period. From 1993/4 to 1998/9, the proportion of care leavers aged 16 or 17 rose steadily from 51% to 67%, but in 1999/2000 this proportion fell back sharply to 59%, with a corresponding increase in the number of children remaining in care until their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. (See table G and *table (x)* below).

**Table (x) Percentage of children aged 16 and over ceasing to be looked after during the years ending 31 March 1994 to 2000, by age on ceasing**

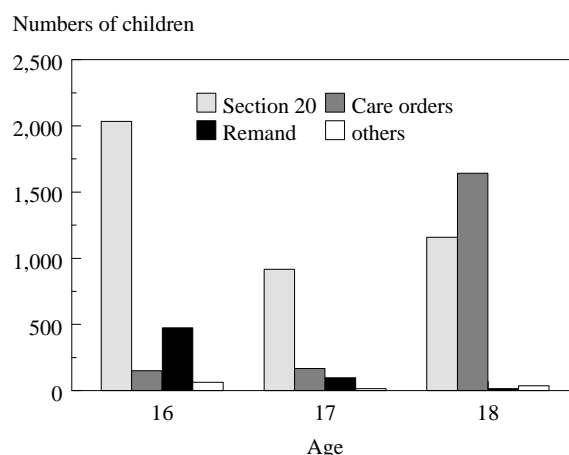
		percentages						
		Year ending 31 March						
Age		1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
16 & 17		51	54	58	59	62	67	59
18 & over		49	46	42	41	38	33	41

Figure 8.1 shows that most of those leaving having been looked after under a care order do so at the age of 18. Figure 8.2 shows that there has been a steady decline in the numbers of this kind of care leaver over the last 7 years, although this fall was more pronounced during the period 1993/4 to 1996/7, than in later years.

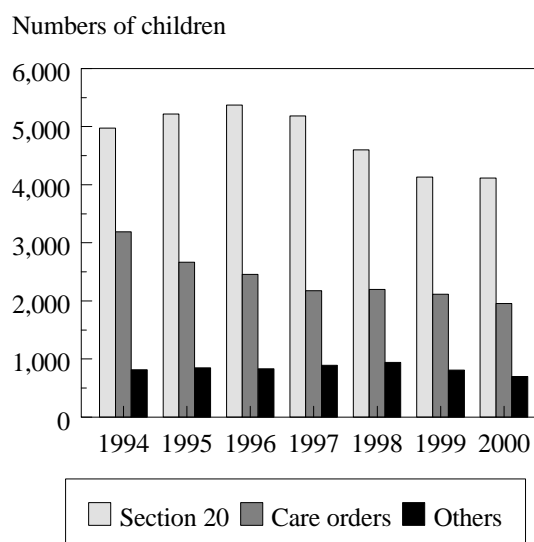
45% of young people leaving care aged 16 or over had been living in foster placements up until ceasing,

and a further 19% in children's homes. More than half of these care leavers had been looked after continuously for more than 2 years, although a quarter had been looked after for less than six months during their final period of care.

**Figure 8.1 Children aged 16 and over who ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March 2000 by legal status and age**



**Figure 8.2 Children aged 16 and over who ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March 1996 to 2000 by legal status**



## **Differences between authorities**

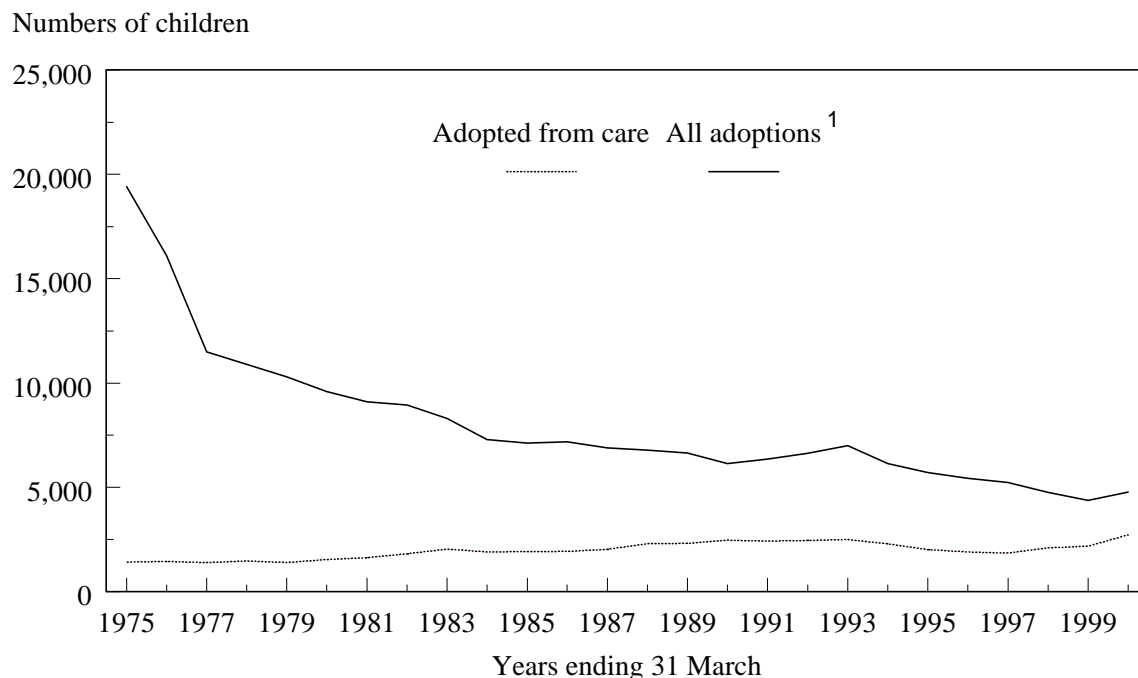
Table 15 gives some information about care leavers aged 16 and over who left the care of each local authority during 1999/2000. Authorities vary considerably both in terms of the number of care leavers they are responsible for, and in terms of the age of their care leavers, their final placement and their length of time in care, factors which may affect the level of post-care support they need.

In order to derive the best estimates, the figures in Table 15 are based on three statistical returns. OC1 data was used for the age breakdowns of care leavers, since it is considered to be more reliable than the CLA 100 return (see Technical Notes) and preferable to the SSDA 903 "one-third" sample. Other analyses in this table are derived from CLA 100 totals and the SSDA903 return, grossed up using figures for the whole population from the CLA100. Thus, these figures in this table are subject to sampling error and caution should be taken when interpreting figures for individual authorities, particularly where the figures for individual categories are relatively small.

## 9. Adoptions

(Tables D, H, 7, 8 and 16)

**Figure 9.1 Children adopted from care, and all adoptions, years ending 31 March 1975-2000, England**



<sup>1</sup> Source: Office for National Statistics. Data for 1999/2000 are provisional. ONS will publish final calendar year figures in the Volume 'Marriage, Divorce and Adoption Statistics', Series FM2, Number 27, in July 2001.

### All adoptions

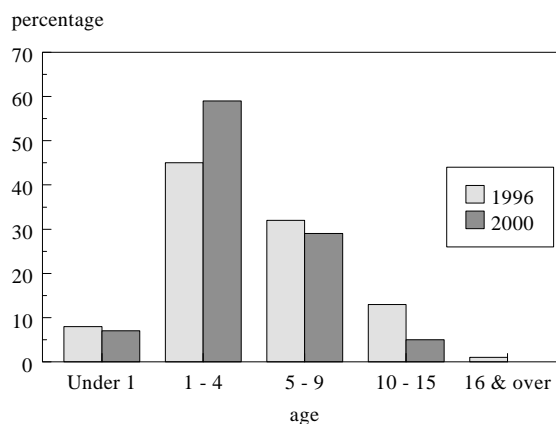
More than half of all children adopted in England have been looked after prior to adoption, most of the remainder being adopted by step-parents or relatives.

As shown in Figure 9.1 the number of children adopted from care has remained fairly constant since 1974/75. However, there has been a significant decrease in the number of all adoptions over this period. In 1974/75 19,400 children were adopted in England, compared with 4,800 children in 1999/2000, a decrease of 75%. This decrease was most dramatic between the years 1974/75 and 1976/77, when the number of children adopted fell 41%. Since then there has been a more gradual decrease in the number of children adopted. It is important to note that the 'all adoption' figures include those children who were adopted from care. In 1974/75, 18,000 children were adopted who had not been in care, this compares with 2,000 children in 1999/2000, a fall of 89%.

### Adoption of children looked after

Table H shows details of the children who **ceased** to be looked after because they went on to be adopted during the years from 1995/6 to 1999/2000. The total number of such children who were adopted has risen from 1,900 in 1995/6 to 2,700 in 1999/2000.

**Figure 9.2 Looked after children who were adopted, during years ending 31 March 1996 and 2000, by age**



Analysis of the SSDA 903 database shows that a child adopted from care will typically:

- be aged under 8 yrs
- have started to be looked after aged 3 or less
- have had only one period of care

All looked after children who are subsequently adopted are placed for adoption with the prospective adopters before adoption. However, this final placement is not always recorded on the SSDA903 form. In 1999/2000, 84% of these looked after children were recorded as having been placed for adoption before their adoption (compared with 66% in 1995/96). Nearly all the remaining children were recorded in foster placements up to adoption. It is likely that some of these were adopted by their foster carers; the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering estimated that during 1998/99 13% of looked after children were adopted by their foster carers<sup>2</sup>. Authorities vary in the extent to which they correctly report placements for adoption; this makes comparisons of the figures in tables 7 and 8 difficult. At national level the number of children recorded as placed for adoption at 31 March rose between 1999 and 2000 (Table D), but at least some of this increase is the result of improved recording of this category of placement.

Not all placements for adoption result in an adoption. Of those placements for adoption that ceased during 1999/2000, 92% ended in adoption, 5% were followed by another placement, and 3% ended with the child ceasing to be looked after but not recorded as having been adopted.

The figures returned to the Department show that the use of freeing orders prior to adoption has been increasing over the last five years and is now used in 40% of cases (Table H). As can be seen from *Table (xi)*, children freed for adoption spend on average about 2 and a half years being looked after before adoption compared with 3 years 4 months for children under care orders when adopted. The children who are adopted most quickly are generally those looked after under voluntary agreement with

<sup>2</sup> *Surveying Adoption – BAAF 2000*; a rich source of data about children adopted from care, their birth parents and their adoptive parents

the parents. Overall the length of time between entry into care and adoption is declining.

**Table (xi) The average time looked after before adoption by legal status on adoption, years ending 31 March**

Legal status		Average time looked after before adoption	
		years	months
All children	1998	3	3
	1999	2	10
	2000	2	10
Care orders	1998	3	10
	1999	3	5
	2000	3	4
Section 20 CA 1989	1998	1	10
	1999	2	0
	2000	1	8
Freed for Adoption	1998	3	0
	1999	2	7
	2000	2	8

For the years 1995/6 and 1996/7, the data in Table 16 have been prepared from the SSDA 903 submission. SSDA903 data has not been used for any of the later years. For these years the SSDA903 return covered a one-third sample of looked after children; this does not give sufficiently reliable estimates of the often small numbers of children adopted in each authority to be used in this table. The sample is however sufficient for analysis at the national level. The figures for 1998/99 and 1999/2000 in Table 16 are those reported by authorities for indicator C23 of the Performance Assessment Framework.

In December 2000 the Government published a White Paper, 'Adoption -a new approach', which set a national target to increase by 40% by 2004/5 the number of looked after children adopted<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> [www.doh.gov.uk/adoption](http://www.doh.gov.uk/adoption)

