

TECHNICAL NOTES

Combining data from five sources

The statistics presented in this publication are, in the main, derived from five statistical returns submitted by local councils in England. Details of the returns are given in chapter 1.

The statistics presented in this publication are based on five returns made by local councils in England:

- form CLA100, on which councils provide a range of aggregate figures on their looked after children; (introduced in 1997/8)
- form SSDA 903, on which they provide detailed data on a 'one-third' sample of their looked after children, covering children born on a day of the month divisible by 3. This sampling approach was introduced from 1 April 1997;
- form OC1, on which authorities provide detailed data on the educational qualifications of all young people aged 16 or over who ceased to be looked after; (introduced for 1999/2000)
- form AD1, on which councils provide information on all children adopted from care during the year (introduced 2000/01)
- form OC3, on which councils provide information on the accommodation and activity for a selection of former looked after children on their 19th birthday (introduced 2001/02)

Figures from the CLA100, AD1, OC1 and OC3 collections for the year ending 31 March 2002 were summarised in Department of Health Statistical Bulletins published in November 2002¹. Since then some additional information has been received and as a result some figures have been revised in this publication.

Of the two data sources concerned with the numbers of children being looked after (the CLA100 and the SSDA903), it is generally felt that the SSDA 903 is the more accurate. There are three reasons for this:

- it is a straightforward survey of all episodes of care and there is no bias in the collection towards any particular child or data item
- all SSDA 903 records are subjected to a rigorous validation to ensure that all reported

episodes are fully consistent one with another. Failure to pass any validation test renders the entire care-history of the child invalid, and these records are excluded from all analyses.

- efforts are made to ensure that for every child who is looked after at 31 March, a further episode for that child is submitted in the following year. No child can simply go "missing" from the database without this being reported back to the appropriate council.

The principal disadvantage of the SSDA 903, being a one-third sample survey, is that it is unable to produce reliable estimates when sample numbers are small.

Estimation methodology

Figures presented here for years before 1997/98 are based entirely on the detailed SSDA 903, which for those years covered all looked after children. For 1997/98 onwards data from the two collections, SSDA 903 and CLA100, have been combined to provide the best estimates available of the figures at a national level and at a local council level.

For the years 1997/98 and 1998/99, the methodology in the main has been to use a range of multiplying factors which are calculated by comparing CLA 100 totals for the numbers of children who

- started to be looked after during the year
- ceased to be looked after during the year
- looked after at 31 March

with corresponding counts of valid SSDA 903 records. For the year 2000/01, the count of the number of children starting to be looked after was dropped from the CLA100, and for 2001/02, the count of the number ceasing to be looked after during the year will also be dropped. These changes have meant a revision to the current grossing methodology, and it was decided that for the years 1999/2000 and 2000/01, only one multiplying factor based on the number of children looked after at 31 March should be prepared for each local council. This change, which would in any event need to be introduced with effect from 2001/02, was brought forward to 1999/2000 following a close examination of the CLA100 and SSDA 903 data, which were found to deviate one from the other in a number of key areas in recent years. By using just one factor, the results obtained will follow the pattern as revealed by the SSDA 903

¹ www.doh.gov.uk/public/stats3.htm

sample, rather than the CLA100. For the reasons stated above, the SSDA 903 is considered to be the more accurate.

Additionally, OC1, OC3 and AD1 data has been used to prepare tables V, Xi, Xii, Y, Z, 16, 17,18 and 19. As the coverage of the OC1 is 100%, the age and sex breakdown of care leavers as shown on this return differs slightly from the results obtained by grossing sample numbers from the SSDA903.

In some tables that present data on children being looked after at 31 March, figures from 1997/98 are based entirely on the aggregate data from the CLA100 return. These include Tables A, D, F, 1 and 5 - 7.

Figures from the two sources, SSDA 903 and CLA100, are presented on a consistent basis wherever possible, so that the sum of figures from the sample equals the total figure from the CLA100. However in some cases this has not been possible – and footnotes have been added to explain any inconsistency. The act of sampling invariably reduces the reliability of some of the breakdowns presented. This should be borne in mind when interpreting figures for individual authorities that are derived from the SSDA903, particularly where the figures for individual categories are relatively small.

Missing data

All councils in England managed to submit data for all five returns for 2001/02 in time for inclusion in this publication. There are however, a few gaps in coverage for earlier years; all figures for England include estimates for any missing data.

Data Quality

The Department goes to great lengths to ensure that the quality of its data relating to looked after children are as accurate as can be achieved within a reasonable time scale with the resources available.

Both the SSDA 903 and the CLA 100 are subjected to validation checks, as well as being compared one with the other. Inconsistencies between the two returns are raised with councils for checking and correction.

The introduction of the AD1, OC1 and OC3 in recent years has required extra validation checks to be carried out across all five returns. Again, any inconsistencies found have been referred back to local councils, and these have, in the main, been addressed.

Table E2 at Appendix E gives a comparison of the CLA 100 and SSDA 903 databases as at the time they were “frozen” in order to prepare this publication. In this table ratios are given for each local council in respect of the number of children looked after at 31 March for the past four years. Taking into account leap years, the expected value of all ratios is 3.07, although exactly this figure is unlikely to be achieved very often because of the chance effects of sampling. Ratios which indicate a significant difference between the CLA 100 and the SSDA 903 submission have been underscored, and any estimate in this publication that depends on an underscored ratio should be treated with caution.

It will be noticed that the number of councils with underscored ratios have remained fairly constant at around 25 for the past four years.

Powers of Criminal Courts (Sentencing) Act 2000

For reasons of simplicity, for the period 1997/98 to 1999/2000 local councils were asked to include in their CLA100 figures children under Sections 90 - 92 of the Powers of the Criminal Courts Act 2000, (formally Section 53 of the Criminal & Young Persons Act 1933) even though these are generally not looked after. This requirement was however dropped for 2000/01. This means that estimates for the number of children looked after at 31 March 1997/98 to 1999/2000 are inflated by about 100 children compared with figures for other years.

Local Government Reorganisation

Local councils affected by reorganisation at the end of March 1998 supplied the Department with information indicating which successor council took over responsibility for which looked after child. This information covered all children looked after by these authorities since the implementation of the Children Act. It has therefore enabled us to present estimated data in this publication for the new authorities for years before they came into existence.

Rounding and Confidentiality

To ensure that no individual child can be identified from statistical tables, we have introduced new conventions for the rounding and suppression of very small numbers. All figures which appear in national tables (Tables A to Z) have been rounded to the nearest hundred if they exceed 1,000 and to the nearest ten otherwise; and all figures at local council level have been rounded to the nearest five.

In addition, all figures at local council level of five or less have been suppressed.

It has on occasion been necessary to suppress other data whenever it would be possible to calculate missing data by means of simple arithmetic. The rule applied in these circumstances has been to suppress the next smallest data item. As a result of all these changes, detailed figures may not sum to the totals presented. For further details of roundings and suppression, see Appendix C.

Rates and percentages

Rates per 10,000 population have been calculated using the appropriate mid-year estimates of the number of children in England aged under 18, supplied by the Office for National Statistics. A small number of young people aged 18 and over are included in the figures, but this is not thought to seriously distort the rate. The mid-year population estimates for 1999 to 2001 are presented in Appendix E. These have been used to derive estimates of rates for the years 1999/2000 to 2001/02 respectively.

Percentages are presented in the tables in italics. They are shown as whole numbers, and as a result may not sum to 100 due to rounding. All rates and percentages, where the numerator is five or less, or the denominator is ten or less, have been suppressed for reasons of client confidentiality.

Adoptions data

The data for tables V and 17 have been taken from a number of sources. For 1997/98, where the only data source is the SSDA903, no estimates have been made at local council level (Table 17) as it is felt that the one-third sample of looked after children does not give sufficiently reliable estimates of the often small numbers of children adopted in each council. For later years, local council data has been taken from either the former KS1 return, or the AD1.

The one-third sample is however sufficient for analysis at the national level, and the data presented in Table V is based on the SSDA903 return. However, for all years other than 1997/98, the sample numbers have been grossed up to meet the England total number of adoptions, as reported on either the KS1 or the AD1 (rather than using the usual grossing factors).

Children in Need codes

2000/01 was the first year of the implementation of the new "Children in Need" codes, which have replaced the former "Reason a child is being looked after" data item on the SSDA903 return. These new codes have been defined so as to identify the main or principal reason the child needed a social service at the start of their latest period of being looked after (for details see Appendix B – item 9), and bring the SSDA903 into line with the Department's biennial "Children in Need" data collection.

Figures on the Internet

The Department of Health's web site contains a copy of this publication, with all the tables in a suitable format for downloading into Microsoft Excel. It can be found under the heading Social Care at:

<http://www.doh.gov.uk/public/stats3.htm>

Symbols used in the tables

The following conventions have been used in the tables:

- .. not available
- data suppressed for reasons of confidentiality. Normally this will refer to numbers of five or less, or percentages where either the numerator or the denominator is ten or less