

## Looked after children in Scotland have faced ‘significant neglect and maltreatment’

Almost 90% of children aged five and under - studied as part of a major new research project led by the University of Stirling - experienced abuse or neglect before entering care.

A team of experts discovered 384 out of the 433 children involved in one strand of the study had directly experienced abuse or neglect – and two-thirds had suffered multiple forms of maltreatment, including neglect and emotional, physical and sexual abuse - before being removed from their parents.

The findings come from a survey of social workers in 19 local authorities conducted as part of the wider [\*Permanently Progressing? Building secure futures for children in Scotland\*](#) research project, which is published today (20 June).

Undertaken by academics and researchers from the Universities of Stirling, York and Lancaster, in partnership with Adoption and Fostering Alliance (AFA) Scotland, the full study is the first of its kind to track the experiences and pathways of all 1,836 children in Scotland who became looked after, either at home or away from home, in 2012/13, when they were aged five or under.

Researchers found 71% of the cases of abuse and neglect that occurred while children were in the care of their parents, were described as being of ‘high severity’.

Lead academic, social work expert Dr Helen Whincup from the University of Stirling, said: “This is the first research project to investigate decision-making, permanence, progress, outcomes and belonging for all Scotland’s children who became looked after when they were aged five years old and under.

“Our findings highlight that prior to becoming looked after away from home, family life was difficult for these children, and some had experienced multiple ‘types’ of maltreatment.”

Half of the 433 children were under a year old when they became looked after away from home, including almost a third (32%) who were under six weeks old. One in five of the children (21%) were less than seven days old.

Dr Linda Cusworth from Lancaster University led the data analysis on this strand. She added: “The decision to remove children from their parents was generally based on significant maltreatment, together with the experience of multiple problems - including parental substance misuse, domestic violence and mental health problems. Often these factors came within the context of poverty and housing issues.”

Professor Nina Biehal from University of York, who co-directed the study commented: “The nature and severity of the maltreatment experienced by these children before they entered care suggests that thresholds for removing them from their parents are high.”

Researchers also found that parents had often also experienced difficult and disrupted childhoods. The report showed 62% of mothers and 33% of fathers of children on a pathway to adoption had experienced neglect as a child themselves.

Dr Whincup added: “The finding that neglect features in the childhoods of such a large proportion of these parents emphasises the need for early, proactive and sensitive support services to be available to parents.”

The wider study also found that two to three years after becoming looked after away from home, children had levels of emotional and behavioural problems two to three times higher than seen in the general population of children, however the support accessed by carers varied.

Kinship carers – grandparents or other extended family members - reported receiving far less support than foster carers or adoptive parents.

Robin Duncan, Director of AFA Scotland, stated: “I am delighted to see this research come to fruition and commend the researchers for analysing such a phenomenal amount of data about children’s experience of abuse and neglect; this should now guide how support to vulnerable children and their families is provided”.

## **Ends**

The full study and final reports on all strands are published today, Thursday 20 June and can be found here: [Permanently Progressing? Building secure futures for children in Scotland](#)

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## **Notes to editors**

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Interdisciplinary in its approach, Stirling’s research informs its teaching curriculum and facilitates opportunities for knowledge exchange and collaboration between staff, students, industry partners and the wider community.

The University's scenic central Scotland campus – complete with a loch, castle and golf course – is home to more than 14,000 students and 1500 staff representing around 120 nationalities. This includes an ever-expanding base for postgraduate study.

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