

Changes in the nature and sequence of placements experienced by children in care 1980-2010

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Abstract

This article compares the nature and sequence of placements experienced by children entering care in England (and in one case Wales) in 1980 and in 2010. The two samples comprise sequential admissions from a selected date. In each case, results are presented for those who left care early (within six months) and those who were still there twelve months after entry. It was found that residential care was widely used in 1980 both as an initial placement and following foster care disruption but by 2010 its use had virtually disappeared. The demise of observation and assessment centres is especially significant for reflecting practice changes with regard to the assessment of children's needs. The results for the amount of children's movement between placements while in care were varied, showing a slight increase for the short-stay group and only a modest reduction for those who stayed longer. The implications of the findings for policy and practice are discussed.

Introduction

Child care history is marked by both continuity and change. Some problems seem to endure despite our best efforts to eliminate them, while others, salient in by-gone times, now appear incomprehensible. We still wrestle with how to handle child abuse and neglect and seek alternative family placements for separated children but look agog at the workhouse conditions described in the Curtis report of 1946, the enforced emigration of children to Canada and Australia and the beating of children in residential homes. We have certainly come a long way since children's ability to recite the catechism was sufficient to satisfy inspectors that the institutional regime was satisfactory.

But in other respects, change seems to have brought some losses. Critics claim that the personal aspects of caring have been lost with professionalisation, bureaucratic management and the demands of paperwork and recent deterioration in employment openings, financial benefits and housing opportunities are making life especially difficult for young people bereft of family support who are leaving care.

So what is the truth? How much has actually changed?

This study offers some answers by comparing changes in the use and patterns of placements experienced by children in care over a 30 year period.

Naturally, any historical comparison faces the problem of comparing 'like with like' and the danger of transferring the values and situations of one era to another. For example, it is frequently asked whether the care population today is more 'difficult' than previously. But despite the seeming simplicity of this question, there is no clear answer; while the problems faced by individual children are probably just as severe as

ever, it is likely that the care population as a whole now presents more complex problems because of better preventive work and the wider availability of options available to deal with situations that once required a child's separation from home.

Professionals have also made life harder for themselves by their increased knowledge and sensitivity to the causes of children's problems, attention to the outcomes of what they do and awareness of the dangers of 'drift' and impermanency intrinsic to the care system. The practice agenda has widened, too, with issues of placing siblings, contact with birth relatives, ethnicity, religion, culture and human rights becoming more contentious. There are also more options available to help children and growing specialisation within broad placement categories, such as therapeutic or respite foster and residential care. Sensitivity is also demanded with regard children's wider development, for instance, addressing post-traumatic stress, promoting continuities in their lives, fashioning effective responses to their educational, health and long-term needs, all in addition to the practical matter of where they should live. Alongside all this, carers are more involved in decisions and are seen as needing training and support. These factors make the provision of what seems on the surface a relatively simple task – providing substitute care - a much more elaborate exercise than before.

The variety of placement options and knowledge about their individual strengths and weaknesses have recently been reviewed in the *Child Placement Handbook* (Schofield and Simmonds, 2009) and it is significant that this task required 23 chapters and 480 pages. This is considerably longer than earlier seminal texts, such as the 132 pages needed by Charlotte Towele to discuss *Common Human Needs* in 1944 (revised 1957) and the 306 required by Jean Kastell in 1962 to cover *Casework in Child Care*. While older readers might look back to these times as a 'golden age', this increased knowledge must surely be welcome even if it complicates decisions once made with confidence.

Undertaking an historical comparison

It would be easy to present the results of this comparison in a straightforward manner but caveats are necessary in order to avoid the risk of drawing conclusions that support established stereotypes. For example, it is not possible to interpret the patterns of substitute care without knowing the needs of the children who are in the system and the severity of the problems they face.

There are two useful starting points to this exercise. The first comprises two studies by Roy Parker (1980; 2010). He published a survey of children in care in England in 1980 and has recently compared the situation then and now. He found a 35% reduction in the number in care at any one time, more adoptions from care and increasing use of foster placements with an accompanying decline in residential ones. In addition, the proportion of annual admissions of children under the age of one almost doubled (11% to 19%) over the thirty years but the increase in the actual number of such children was less marked (11%) due to a fall in entries to care from 43,500 in the year ending March 31st 1980 to 27,800 in the equivalent period in 2010.

The second is a survey by Jane Rowe and colleagues (1989) that charted all (9,723) placement starts and all placement (9,335) endings experienced by 5,868 children in the care of six English local authorities between April 1985 and March 1987. Their

findings echo those of Parker and the Dartington study to be discussed in that young children were numerous among admissions but many tended to leave care quickly, whereas adolescents usually stayed longer and so dominated the age profile of children in care for a long time¹. Moreover, only 15% of teenagers were fostered but these were mostly in long-term placements. Only 40 of the 260 placements where adoption was considered involved children over the age of five.

To assess the effectiveness of placements, Rowe's team applied two criteria: did the placement last as long as needed, and did it meet its aims in most respects? Of the placement endings, 60% of foster placements, 46% of residential ones and 36% of 'home on trial' situations met the criteria but there were large differences according to the age of the child and placement aims. The 'home on trial' figures are also inflated because these placements only usually end when difficulties arise. The authors admit that, 'it is difficult to know how to interpret these results because there are so few benchmarks against which to measure them' (p. 183) but their study greatly helps with compiling an accurate picture of care practice at that time.

One important aspect of Parker's and Rowe's sample that is also significant for this study is the large number of adolescent truants and young offenders who were in care then but who, since the implementation of the 1989 *Children Act*, would not be today as they are now dealt with by other agencies, such as special education and the youth justice system. In the 1980 sample used in this study, truants accounted for 6% and offenders for 18% of those still in care two years after reception; and for them residential care was a frequent placement choice. In addition, as many as 9.6% of the 44,700 care admissions in England and Wales in 1980-1 were criminal remands, compared with only 1.7% of the 27,800 in England in 2009-10, for whom there are limited placement options.

Thus, in reviewing statistical patterns and trends there is a need to be clear about the composition of the groups under scrutiny, the definitions of need and behaviour that are employed and the relationship between the two. In addition, interventions and practices standards are likely to have changed in the interim. While the conditional clauses that pepper this article might irritate the reader, their justification should be clear from this discussion.

Sample and method

The article uses data from two studies of sequential admissions of children to care, one in 1980 and one in 2010. The earlier research was undertaken by the Dartington Social Research Unit and its focus was upon the problems of maintaining links between children in care and their families. It followed up for two years (subsequently increased to five) all children admitted after 1st January 1980 in one Welsh and four English local authorities². In four authorities the number was 100 in each and in the

¹ As Jane Rowe's professional work mostly involved fostering and adoption for younger children, she told me how she had been surprised by the extent of work with adolescents revealed by her study.

² Because the research focused on the family links of separated children, criminal remands were excluded from the sample. These accounted for 9.6% of the 44,700 care admissions in England and Wales in 1980-1. If they subsequently came into care on a care order or under voluntary arrangements, they were included in the sample, but if they did not, for example because they were acquitted, sentenced to custody or given fines or community disposals, they were excluded. Clearly, the presence

fifth, where entries were much slower, 50. Of these 450 children, 228 (51%) had left care within six months and 195 (43%) were still there at 12 months. The results were published in the book *Lost in Care* (Millham *et al.*, 1986).

The 2010 study, also by the Social Research Unit at Dartington, comprises sequential admissions to care in several English local authorities. To make the 1980 and 2010 studies comparable in size and qualification for inclusion, the same criteria were applied with regard to criminal remands but unaccompanied asylum seekers were excluded as this category did not exist in the earlier study period. The starting date was a set point in 2010 and the follow-up continued for twelve months. The size of the entry sample was 430³, with 131 (31%) of these children having left care within six months and 163 (38%) still there after one year. These figures compare with those of 51% and 43% for the 1980 group. It appears that fewer children leave care quickly nowadays and many more do so in the period 6 to 12 months after entry (31% compared with 6%), but with no significant increase in the proportion of staying for more than a year.

The availability of these data enables a comparison to be made between the care placements experienced by the two groups - the 450 children coming into care in 1980 and the 430 entering in 2010.

Background characteristics of the children in the two samples

Age distribution

The marked difference in the age distribution between the 1980 and 2010 samples is the increase in the extreme age groups. The proportion of under-1s admitted to care has risen from 11 to 21% and the figures for those over fifteen from 8% to 17%. As a result, there has been a slight decline in the proportion of primary school age children. This reflects the growing number of referrals for abuse and neglect following recent child death tragedies and the wholesale implementation in two of the authorities of the requirement in the 2009 House of Lords judgement *G v LB Southwark* for local authorities to use the care system (Section 20 of the 1989 *Children Act*) to provide accommodation for homeless 16- and 17-year olds.

Table 1:
The age distribution of the children in the 1980 and 2010 samples:

| Age | 1980 | 2010 |
|------------|-------------|-------------|
| | % | % |
| Under 1 | 11 | 21 |

of a group of young people at high risk of further offending, and the decision made to include or exclude them, will affect the results of any comparison of placements as most offenders will have been in residential establishments; but it is difficult to calculate the extent of this effect as court disposals for the remanded children were not recorded in the statistics of the time. An informed guess would be that there were 50 remands initially excluded from the sample, about 12 of whom would have subsequently been placed on care orders and so became included in the sample.

³ It was not always possible to gather complete data on all the siblings when children entered care together, but it was recorded whether they were placed together. However, for the 63 children who were not, there were no reports of placements other than those listed in Tables 3, 5 and 7.

| | | |
|--------|-----|-----|
| 1-4 | 21 | 19 |
| 5-9 | 17 | 12 |
| 10-15 | 43 | 31 |
| 16-16+ | 8 | 17 |
| N= | 450 | 430 |

Reasons for entry to care

At the time of the 1980 study, the *Children Act 1969* was in force and this classified the legal orders for admission to care under categories closely associated with the reasons. Thus there were several sub-types of care order, each associated with the child's circumstances. The fact that evidence about the severity of the child's need had been tested by a court also indicated that a threshold of severity had been crossed. This makes it relatively easy to analyse children's backgrounds, compared with the situation following the implementation of the *Children Act 1989* when the subdivisions of care orders were abolished and a single criterion of actual or likely significant harm was introduced.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, there is now greater sensitivity to past histories, current incidents and the long-term effects of neglect and abuse, so for example some 'acting out' behaviour previously perceived as 'awkward' may now be viewed as symptomatic of trauma. Also, as the reasons for a child's entry to care are usually multiple, neglect and abuse are likely to be emphasised more than in the past. Hence, domestic violence is often categorised under abuse and neglect than a breakdown in family care, as is abandonment and desertion. This increased focus on abuse and neglect is apparent when the reasons for the child's admission to care in the two samples are collapsed into three broad categories: abuse/neglect, challenging behaviour and family breakdown. As the following table shows, the proportion involving abuse and neglect has nearly doubled at the expense of the other two reasons.

Table 2:
Reasons for admission to care

| Reason | 1980 % | 2010 % |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Abuse/neglect | 26 | 48 |
| Challenging behaviour | 25 | 17 |
| Family breakdown | 49 | 35 |
| TOTAL= | 450 | 430 |

While it cannot be deduced from this that abuse and neglect among entrants to care has increased in either prevalence or severity since 1980, it is certainly perceived more as the main reason for necessitating separation and as a factor affecting placement choice and care plans for the child.

Sequences and patterns of care placements 1980-2010

Children's first placements

When the first placements of children entering care are compared, it is clear that major changes have occurred over the past thirty years. As the following tables show, there has been a dramatic decline in the use of residential care from 46% to 2%, with the complete disappearance of the observation and assessment centres that previously accommodated 21% of entrants. This is despite the fact that the 2010 sample includes more older adolescents for whom fostering may be hard to achieve; but for them bed and breakfast or supported lodgings are preferred to more traditional forms of residential care. It is also clear that not only is foster care used far more widely (an increase from 42% to 75%) but that there is also noticeably more variety in the types of provision available; for example, emergency facilities and accommodation for mothers and babies.

The details are as follows:

Table 3:
Placements of children on admission to care in 1980 and 2010

| Placement | 1980 | 2010 |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| | % | % |
| Remain at home | 3 | 2 |
| | | |
| Kinship care | 3 | 10 |
| | | |
| Foster care | 42 | 75 |
| | | |
| Residential care | 46 | 2 |
| Children's home | 23% | 2% |
| O and A Centre | 21% | 0% |
| Residential nursery | 1% | 0% |
| Residential school | 1% | <1% |
| Secure unit | 0% | <1% |
| Hostel | 0% | <1% |
| | | |
| Hospital | 5 | 1 |
| | | |
| B & B | 0 | 5 |
| Supported housing | 0 | 2 |
| Independent living | 0 | <1 |
| Women's refuge | 0 | <1 |
| Mother and baby unit (with child) | 0 | 4 |
| | | |
| Other | 1 | 0 |
| % | 100 | 100 |
| | | |
| Total = | 450 | 430 |

Many of these differences reflect changing attitudes to what is thought best for separated children, with a clear emphasis on the benefits of family rather than residential living. This applies to many children, such as adolescents, the disabled and behaviourally challenging, who were previously often considered to be 'unfosterable'. The fall in the use of residential care was underway by 1980 with sub-normality hospitals and residential nurseries already defunct and approved schools turned into a diminishing number of community homes with education on the premises (CHEs). Despite efforts to define a positive role for residential child care (HMSO, 1988), the decline in the use of children's homes is also understandable given their high cost, concerns about institutionalisation and the plethora of revelations about abuse. But, as explained, it is also due to the facts that more older teenagers are placed in B & B-type accommodation and persistent young offenders, who comprised 6% of the 1980 entrants, are dealt with by the youth justice system - their residential sojourns are spent in young offenders institutions rather than in community homes with education on the premises run by local authority children's services.

But it is the demise of observation and assessment centres that is especially interesting as it reflects changing views on assessment methods. The Curtis committee of 1946 recorded that it they had ‘received almost unanimous recommendations in favour of what (were) variously described as reception homes, sorting homes or clearing stations’ and, by 1975, O and A centres had been set up across the country and sheltered 5,300 children. They replicated the regional classifying school system used to allocate young offenders to approved schools although even in that system, by the early 1970s attempts at matching children’s psychological characteristics to school regimes were faltering with criteria such as proximity to home and academic ability taking precedence over other considerations. Thus by the 1980s, O and A centres were criticised for often being a long way from children’s home areas, introducing an unnecessary and additional placement change, analysing the child’s needs in an isolated and artificial context, an undue reliance on psychometric and personality tests, portraying a static picture that stayed with the child forever and producing placement recommendations that could be predicted on entry or which were unobtainable. In addition, the system tended to maintain a moribund system where one residential institution passed children on to another. Consequently, by 1995 the daily population of these establishments had fallen to 700 and three years later the category had disappeared completely from local authority statistical returns to central government⁴.

This change over 30 years also acknowledges the increasing practice sophistication with social workers becoming more responsible for managing the whole of the child’s care experience, including the regular assessments demanded by law and carried out using various frameworks and concepts developed during that period (Dept. of Health, 2000). Indeed, Adcock (2010, p. 48) has summarised this transformation from an isolated set of tests to one that ‘has evolved around a recognition that at its heart, there is a relationship between agency, the assessing social worker and the prospective carers, the child and the parents. Within that relationship, adults and children can be helped to learn, understand, change and develop more positive and satisfying patterns of interaction’.

The series of placements of children who left care before six months in 1980 and 2010

Further contrasts between the two samples are found in an analysis of the types and sequence of placements experienced by children whose stay in care was relatively short.

The 228 children in the 1980 sample whose stay in care was less than six months experienced a total of 278 placements, as follows.

Table 4:

Placement changes among the 228 children in the 1980 sample who left care within six months (excluding the move associated with leaving care)

⁴ I am grateful to Roy Parker for providing information on this change.

| PLACEMENTS | | | | | |
|---------------------------|------------|-----------------------|-----------|--------------|----------|
| FIRST | | SECOND | | THIRD | |
| Remained at home | 2 | | | | |
| Kinship care | 4 | | | | |
| <i>(1 moved)</i> | 1→ | O & A centre | 1 | | |
| Foster care | 132 | | | | |
| <i>(17 moved)</i> | 17→ | Home to family | 1 | | |
| | | Children's home | 6 | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | O & A Centre | 1 |
| | | Foster home | 10 | | |
| | | <i>(4 moved)</i> → | | Foster home | 2 |
| | | | | O & A Centre | 2 |
| O & A Centre | 32 | | | | |
| <i>(9 moved)</i> | 9→ | Children's home | 4 | | |
| | | CHE | 1 | | |
| | | Foster home | 3 | | |
| | | Secure unit | 1 | | |
| Children's home | 48 | | | | |
| <i>(11 moved)</i> | 11→ | Home to family | 1 | | |
| | | O & A Centre | 3 | | |
| | | Children's home | 3 | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | O & A Centre | 1 |
| | | Foster home | 3 | | |
| | | Residential nursery | 1 | | |
| CHE | 0 | | | | |
| Hostel | 1 | | | | |
| Res Special school | 1 | | | | |
| Hospital | 6 | | | | |
| <i>(4 moved)</i> | 4→ | Home to family | 2 | | |
| | | Children's home | 1 | | |
| | | Special school | 1 | | |
| Other | 2 | | | | |
| <i>(2 moved)</i> | 1→ | Fostered by relatives | 1 | | |
| | 1→ | Hospital | 1 | | |
| Total = | 228 | | 44 | | 6 |

ALL CHILDREN LEFT CARE

These patterns partly reflect the background characteristics of the short-stay children who often differed from the others in that there are more sibling groups accommodated under voluntary arrangements. Hence, 132 (58%) of the 228 children were first placed in foster care, usually following temporary family breakdowns; but 82 (36%) were still initially looked after in residential settings, 40% of which were observation and assessment centres rather than children's homes.

The placement experiences of the 2010 sample who left care within six months were quite different, as the following table shows.

Table 5:

Placement changes of the 131 children in the 2010 sample who left care within six months (excluding the move associated with leaving care)

| PLACEMENTS | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|--------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|-----------|
| FIRST | | SECOND | | THIRD - 3+ | |
| Remained at home | 1 | | | | |
| Kinship care | 14 | | | | |
| Foster care | 95 | | | | |
| <i>(32 moved)</i> | <i>26</i> → | Foster care | 26 | | |
| | | <i>(8 moved)</i> → | | 3 Foster homes | 5 |
| | | | | 4 Foster homes | 1 |
| | | | | 5 Foster homes | 2 |
| | | Adopted | 1 | | |
| | | Children's home | 2 | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | Foster Care | 1 |
| | | B & B | 1 | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | 2 Support'd acc | 1 |
| | | Refuge w M | 1 | | |
| | | Missing | 1 | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | Indep. acc.→ 2 foster homes | 1 |
| O & A Centre | 0 | | | | |
| Children's home | 3 | | | | |
| <i>(1 moved)</i> | <i>1</i> → | Children's home | 1 | | |
| Secure Unit | 1 | | | | |
| B&B, lodgings, independent | 11 | | | | |
| <i>(2 moved)</i> | <i>2</i> → | Foster care | 1 | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | 3 foster homes | 1 |
| | | B & B | 1 | | |
| Mother and baby provision | 6 | | | | |
| CHE | 0 | | | | |
| Hostel | 0 | | | | |
| Residt'l school | 0 | | | | |
| Hospital | 0 | | | | |
| Total = | 131 | | 35 | | 12 |

ALL CHILDREN LEFT CARE

In the 2010 sample, foster and kinship care are the dominant placements (83%) with traditional residential establishments almost non-existent (3%). Neither is residential care used as much as before to accommodate children following foster care disruption, 35% in 1980 reducing to 6% in 2010. These changes have led to an increase in the number of short-stay children leaving care from foster homes. In the 1980 sample, 129 of the 228 children (57%) left care via this route compared with 92 out of 131 (70%) in 2010. This finding reinforces the earlier point about the additional responsibilities placed on current foster carers for helping children leave care after a short separation from home.

However, despite changes in types of placement and the disappearance of movement intrinsic to the O and A system, there is no evidence of a reduction in the amount of overall movement experienced by short-stay cases. In 1980, 44 of the 228 children (19%) experienced a placement change compared 35 of the 131 (27%) in 2010 but this increase is not statistically significant ($\chi^2=2.7$, $df=2$, ns). Moreover, only 3% of the 1980 children had more than three placements, compared with 9% thirty years later. This is partly due to the greater number of older adolescents in the study who frequently move between various types of supported accommodation, but the power of this explanation is questioned by the figures for changes from initial foster care, 13% and 34% respectively. Overall, the number of placements experienced by the short-stay children rose in the thirty year period from an average of 1.22 per child in 1980 to 1.37 in 2010 but it is difficult to evaluate this increase without knowing the how the moves affected the quality of the care received by the child.

Having looked at the sequence of placements experienced by children who left care early, the discussion now turns to those who were still in care one year after admission

The placements of children who were still in care 12 months after admission

One hundred and ninety five (43%) of the 450 children entering in care in 1980 were still in care after 12 months, and 165 (38%) of the 430 entering in 2010. As before, the placement patterns of the two groups are compared, beginning with the 1980 sample.

The patterns for this group are as follows:

Table 6:

The sequence of placements experienced by the 195 children in the 1980 sample who were still in care 12 months after admission

| PLACEMENTS | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|-----------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------|-----------------|---|
| | FIRST | SECOND | THIRD | | FOURTH - 4+ | |
| At home | 8 | | | | | |
| <i>(6 moved)</i> | 4→ | O & A | | | | |
| | | <i>(4 moved)</i> → | O & A | 1 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | CHE | | 1 |
| | | | CHE | 1 | | |
| | | | Home | 2 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | O & A | | 1 |
| | 1→ | Children's home | | | Children's home | 1 |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Home | 1 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Home | | 1 |
| | 1→ | Residential school | | | | |
| With Kin | 11 | | | | | |
| <i>(2 moved)</i> | 2→ | Parents | | | | |
| Foster care | 53 | | | | | |
| <i>(36 moved)</i> | 6→ | Home | | | | |
| | | <i>(4 moved)</i> → | Relatives | 4 | | |
| | 11→ | Children's home | | | | |
| | | <i>(8 moved)</i> → | Children's home | 4 | | |
| | | | Adoption family | 2 | | |
| | | | Foster care | 1 | | |
| | | | Home | 1 | | |
| | 8→ | Foster home | | | | |
| | | <i>(3 moved)</i> → | Foster home | 1 | | |
| | | | Children's home | 1 | | |
| | | | Adoption family | 1 | | |
| | 5→ | O & A | | | | |
| | | <i>(4 moved)</i> → | Foster care | 1 | | |
| | | | CHE | 1 | | |
| | | | Children's home | 2 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Foster care | | 1 |
| | 3→ | Adoption family | | | | |
| | 2→ | Hostel | | | | |
| | 1→ | Independence | | | | |
| O & A Centre | 62 | | | | | |
| <i>(61 moved)</i> | 24→ | Children's home | | | | |
| | | <i>(7 moved)</i> → | Residential school | 1 | | |
| | | | Home | 1 | | |
| | | | Hostel | 1 | | |
| | | | Secure unit | 1 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | CHE | | 1 |

| | | | | | | |
|------------------------|-----------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| | | | CHE | 1 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | Remand→ Ch's home→Lodgings | 1 |
| | | | Lodgings | 1 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | 2 lodgings | 1 |
| | | | Friends | 1 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | Home | 1 |
| | 18→ | CHE | | | | |
| | | | <i>(4 moved)</i> → | CHE | 1 | |
| | | | | Home | 3 | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | O & A →Hostel →Missing | 1 |
| | 7→ | Foster home | | | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Home | 1 | |
| | 8→ | Home | | | | |
| | | | <i>(5 moved)</i> → | Children's home | 2 | |
| | | | | O & A | 1 | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | CHE | 1 |
| | | | | Relatives | 1 | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | O & A | 1 |
| | | | | Hostel | 1 | |
| | 1→ | Relatives | | | | |
| | 1→ | Adoption family | | | | |
| | 2→ | Psychiatric Unit | | | | |
| | | | <i>(2 moved)</i> → | Home | 1 | |
| | | | | Hostel | 1 | |
| | | | | | | |
| Children's home | 48 | | | | | |
| <i>(33 moved)</i> | 6→ | Home | | | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | O & A | 1 | |
| | | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Home →Secure unit →Home | 1 |
| | 6→ | O & A | | | | |
| | | | <i>(5 moved)</i> → | Home | 1 | |
| | | | | CHE | 2 | |
| | | | | Children's home | 2 | |
| | | | <i>(2 moved)</i> → | | Children's home | 2 |
| | | | | | <i>(1 moved to foster care)</i> | |
| | 12→ | Children's Home | | | | |
| | | | <i>(6 moved)</i> → | Children's home | 6 | |
| | | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | O & A →CHE | 1 |
| | 5→ | Foster home | | | | |
| | | | <i>(2 moved)</i> → | Home 1 | 1 | |
| | | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Foster home | 1 |
| | | | | Friends | 1 | |
| | 2→ | CHE | | | | |
| | 1→ | Relatives | | | | |
| | 1→ | Residential school | | | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | O & A | 1 | |
| | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|------------------------|------------|--------------------|--------------------|---|-------------|---|
| CHE | 0 | | | | | |
| Hostel | 0 | | | | | |
| Res. school | 0 | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Hospital | 11 | | | | | |
| <i>(11 moved)</i> | 3→ | Foster care | | | | |
| | | <i>(2 moved)</i> → | Home | 2 | | |
| | 4→ | Children's Home | Home | 4 | | |
| | 2→ | O & A | | | | |
| | | <i>(2 moved)</i> → | Children's home | 2 | | |
| | 1→ | Relatives | | | | |
| | 1→ | Home | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Lodgings | 1 | | | | | |
| <i>(1 moved)</i> | 1→ | O & A | | | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Hostel | | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | Independent | 1 |
| | | | | | | |
| Adoption family | 1 | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| Total = | 195 | 150 | 67 | | 17 | |

The striking feature of this analysis is the frequency and complexity of children's movements while in care and the fact that 75% of the 340 placements made were in residential establishments. As explained, the 195 children in the 1980 sample who were still in care 12 months after admission included many young offenders who are now dealt with by other agencies, so it is not surprising that 56% of the initial placements were in observation and assessment centres and children's homes and that 16 of the 53 (30%) first placed in foster care and four of the eight who stayed at home subsequently moved into residential establishments. The tendency for observation and assessment centres to start a route through an established network of residential establishments is also confirmed; of the 62 admissions two thirds (68%) moved on either to children's homes (39%) or to community homes with education on the premises (29%).

The placement sequences for the 2010 sample were quite different, as the following table shows.

Table 7:

The sequence of placements experienced by the 163 children in the 2010 sample who were still in care 12 months after admission

| PLACEMENTS | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|------------|---------------------|--------------------|--------|----------------|---|
| | FIRST | SECOND | THIRD | | FOURTH - 4+ | |
| At home | 5 | | | | | |
| <i>(1 moved)</i> | 1 | Foster care | | | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Home | 1 | | |
| With Kin | 14 | | | | | |
| <i>(1 moved)</i> | 1→ | Independent | | | | |
| Foster care | 131 | | | | | |
| <i>(87 moved)</i> | 73→ | Foster care | | | | |
| | | <i>(28 moved)</i> → | Foster care | 2 8 | | |
| | | | <i>(9 moved)</i> → | | 5 Foster homes | 9 |
| | | | YMCA | 1 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | Foster care | 1 |
| | | | Hospital | 1 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | Independent | 1 |
| | | | M & baby | 1 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | 2 Foster homes | 1 |
| | | | Relatives | 9 | | |
| | | | Lodgings | 1 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | Lodgings | 1 |
| | | | Independent | 1 | | |
| | | | Spec guardian | 1 | | |
| | | | B & B | 1 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | 2 Supptd accom | 1 |
| | 2→ | Adoption family | | | | |
| | 8→ | Relatives | | | | |
| | 1→ | Special Guardian | | | | |
| | 1→ | Lodgings | | | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Lodgings | 1 | | |
| | 1→ | Hospital | | | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Independent | 1 | | |
| | 1→ | B & B | | | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Supportd accom | 1 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | Supportd accom | 1 |
| O & A Centre | 0 | | | | | |
| Children's home | 2 | | | | | |
| <i>(2 moved)</i> | 2→ | Foster care | | | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | M & Baby | 1 | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------|--------------------|--------------------|---|-------------|---|
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | M & baby | 1 |
| Res school | 1 | | | | | |
| CHE | 0 | | | | | |
| Hostel | 0 | | | | | |
| Refuge | 1 | | | | | |
| <i>(1 moved)</i> | <i>1</i> → | Home | | | | |
| Hospital | 1 | | | | | |
| <i>(1 moved)</i> | <i>1</i> → | Foster care | | | | |
| M & Baby foster care | 4 | | | | | |
| <i>(4 moved)</i> | <i>1</i> → | Relatives | | | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Relatives | | | |
| | <i>1</i> → | Children's home | | | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Foster care | 1 | | |
| | | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | | Foster care | 1 |
| | <i>1</i> → | Foster care | | | | |
| | <i>1</i> → | Lodgings | | | | |
| Lodgings/ Independent | 4 | | | | | |
| <i>(4 moved)</i> | <i>1</i> → | Lodgings | | | | |
| | | <i>(1 moved)</i> → | Supportd accom | 1 | | |
| | <i>1</i> → | Independent | | | | |
| | <i>2</i> → | Supported accom | | | | |
| Adoption family | 0 | | | | | |
| Total = | 163 | 101 | 33 | | 17 | |

The 2010 patterns confirm the major shift in placement choice and sequences when compared with the situation 30 years ago. Only three of the 163 children were initially placed in residential care and two of them quickly moved to a family setting. Moreover, none of the 73 who left their first foster placement entered residential care and, overall, only 3 of the 201 total placements were in children's homes.

With regard to movement while in care, unlike the situation of the short-stay children, there was evidence of a modest reduction. In the 1980 sample, 77% moved while in care and 9% had three or more placements. In the 2010 sample, these figures were 62% and 10% respectively, a fall that is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 9.50$, $df=1$, $p<0.01$). The average number of placements per child also fell slightly in the thirty-year period from 1.39 to 1.29.

Discussion

This thirty-year comparison of children's placements is inevitably constrained by limitations in the data. There is no evaluation of whether the changes recorded are good or bad from a welfare perspective, neither is there a breakdown of patterns by age, gender or need. It is, nevertheless, comprehensive in that it scrutinises complete

samples of care admissions and so reflects the daily work of children's services with regard to looked after children in the first year of care. The contrast revealed is significant for understanding current practice and its development over the past three decades.

Despite these reservations, there can be little doubt about the startling shift in placement options and choice. Residential care has virtually disappeared from the child care system in the early months of a child's stay, both as a reception facility and as a response to foster care disruption. In addition, older adolescents are now more likely to be offered supported accommodation in the community than placements in hostels or residential homes. All of this has happened despite greater concerns about the risks of harm and less tolerance of challenging behaviour.

There is no evidence, however, to indicate a sizeable reduction in the movement of children while in care, a target that has featured in many of the Government's reforming strategies. Indeed, for some short-stay children things appear to have got worse. What is different, however, is the greater likelihood of moves between foster homes, and between community placements for older adolescents, suggesting a shift in the responsibilities of foster parents extending beyond that of providing substitute care to managing children's contacts with birth relatives, their education, services to meet special needs and leaving care.

Although the two follow-up studies are restricted to twelve months, it is also significant that despite the Coalition Government's stress on the benefits of adoption, this is not a major issue when selecting the children's placements in the first year of being in care. It seems that during this period, questions of permanence and the possibility of adoption are less prominent than giving support to parents and exploring the possibilities of kinship care, even though Government guidance requires that a plan for permanency be agreed by the four months review. Much of the social work in the first months involves securing foster placements, sometimes with an element of twin tracking in which options for the future are kept open. Practice guidance indicates that this should involve assessing the comparative parenting capacities of family members and long-term foster carers but in the first year, effort appears to be devoted to returning the child home or to relatives at the expense of developing other possibilities.

Much of the professional activity early on tends to focus on contact with birth relatives, making sure that people turn up and monitoring the quality of the interaction. Very few evidence-based programmes (such as *Incredible Years* or *Nurse Family Partnership*) appear to be offered to families and it is sometimes difficult to ascertain from case notes how the support children, families and carers receive is intended to improve their circumstances, even on the few occasion when residential assessments, mother and baby foster care and parenting programmes are used. However, this may be a misrepresentation of current practice as case records usually contain limited service information on these matters; whilst there are often references to the support that has been offered, there is much less information on engagement and responses.

Social work is often castigated in the media for poor and unimaginative practice. But given the enormous risks of harm faced by children in care and the chances of things going wrong with regard to family placement and access, the changes charted in this article represent a major shift in policy and practice, akin to the much more widely documented closure of residential institutions. It also contradicts the accusation of alleged child rescue obsessions. Obviously, a descriptive study such as this cannot

determine whether the changes found are good for children's well-being and as with other radical reforms of social issues, people are left wondering what the changes herald; but whatever the gains and losses, it cannot be said that social work with children in care has stood still or that the criticisms of the anti-institution reformers have gone unheeded. Indeed, in the light of this evidence one might dare suggest a paraphrase of the well-known proverb to, in this case, 'plus ça change: ce N'EST PAS la même chose'.

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