Beyond the Adoption Order: An Investigation of Adoption Disruption in Wales

Research Report

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Executive Summary

Background

This study was commissioned by the Welsh Government to establish the rate of post-order adoption disruption in Wales. This is the first national level study of adoption disruption in Wales, which was undertaken alongside a similar study in England.[1]

The stability of adoption has been seen as one of its strengths, but the long-term permanence of adoptive placements in the UK has been unknown. Although the research to date has estimated adoption disruption to be between 2%-50%, these studies have been limited by a focus on narrowly defined populations; on children placed before 1990; and on disruptions that occurred before the Adoption Order was made. Consequently, social workers lack reliable information about the stability of adoptive placements and reasons for disruption to aid them in making decisions about permanence. This research was intended to fill this gap in knowledge.

Aims and Method

The aim of the research was to establish the rate of, and reasons for, adoption disruption after an Adoption Order had been granted. Adoptees were defined as previously looked after children adopted out of care. Inter-country adoptions and step-parent adoptions were excluded. A disruption was defined as when an adopted child under the age of 18 years old was no longer living with their adoptive parent(s).

This study used a quantitative research design to meet the research objectives. For this purpose, the Welsh Government provided data on all children who had been looked after and adopted between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2012. The data supplied are collected annually from every local authority and the dataset is known as the SSDA903 return. It consists of a number of items and codes that track children's care careers in terms of their placements and changes of legal status.

It was not possible to establish the number of post-order adoption disruptions from the national data given to us by the Welsh Government for two reasons. First, the information about children who have adoption disruptions has not been routinely collected.[2] Secondly, care careers of adopted children cannot be tracked over time. Children who re-enter care cannot be linked with their earlier care histories, as they are given a new ID when they re-

[1] Selwyn, J., Wijedasa, D., and Meakings, S. (2014) *Beyond the Adoption Order: adoption disruption and families in crisis*. Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, University of Bristol. www.bristol.ac.uk/hadley

[2] Although the Welsh data has had such a code to since 2006, the data did not span the whole study period and was not robust enough to calculate the adoption disruption rate. This is because the 'reason for re-entry to care' code allows only the *main* reason for return to be recorded and adopted children who re-enter care for other reasons may not have been coded as having had an adoption disruption.

enter care. Therefore, we conducted a national survey of all adoption managers in Wales to find children who had experienced a disruption after the making of an Adoption Order.

All 22 Local authorities (LAs) and the two voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) in Wales were asked to provide details of disrupted adoptions of children placed by them and who had had an Adoption Order made between April 1st 2000 and March 31st 2012. Twenty-one of the LAs and the two VAAs responded to the survey, making a 96% response rate. We then used the information provided by the adoption managers to match the children (who had had an adoption disruption) with their record in the SSDA903 database. This process enabled us to explore their complete care histories before they were placed for adoption. After exploring the characteristics of the children who experienced an adoption disruption, we used statistical methods known as event history analyses (EHA) to calculate the disruption rates and to explore predictors of disruption.

Characteristics of children who experienced an adoption disruption

The total number of children adopted in Wales between April 1st 2002 and 31st March 2012 was 2,352. Of these, 35 were identified as having disrupted post order. The majority (66%) of adoptions disrupted when the children were 11 years or older. The average age at disruption (11.6 years) was slightly younger than the average age at disruption in England (12.7 years).

Compared with children whose adoptions were intact, children whose adoptions disrupted were significantly more likely to be older at entry to care, older at adoptive placement, and consequently, older at the time of Adoption Order.[3] This was the case for children placed with stranger adopters as well as foster adopters. As expected, our analysis found that the majority (61%) of the children who had a disruption also had lengthier care careers.[4]

Legal status indicates the severity of home conditions for these children prior to entering care. The children who experienced a disruption were more likely to have come into care on an Emergency Protection Order or under police protection compared with the children whose adoptions were intact. However, there was no statistical difference in the reason for entry to care between the two groups.

We did not find any statistically significant gender or ethnic differences between the adoptions that remained intact or had disrupted. This is an important finding because it is often thought that boys are more challenging to parent and therefore more likely to disrupt. However, this assumption was not borne out.

[3] Children whose adoptions were intact were on average 3.6 years old at the time of the order in comparison with the children who had experienced a disruption, who were on average age 6 .6 years old.

[4] They were significantly more likely to have been in care for two or more years before being placed for adoption compared with those in intact placements. The majority (71%) of children who remained with their families had been placed for adoption within 2 years of entry to care.

It was not surprising to find that instability in care was associated with adoption disruption.[5] As with many other studies, we also noticed a local authority variation in the proportion of disruptions. The percentage of disruptions, as a proportion of all adoptions between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2012 in each of the LAs varied between 0% and 6%.

Adoption disruption rate

The main objective of this study was to calculate the national rate of adoption disruption for Wales and to establish the factors that predicted disruption. For this purpose, we analysed the complete national data set on all children who were adopted from care in Wales between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2012.

We found that over an 11 year follow-up period, the Welsh national adoption disruption rate was 2.6%, which indicated that about 3 in 100 adoptions would disrupt over an 11 year period. The rate of adoption post order disruption in England was very similar, where the cumulative risk of disruption over a 12 year period was that about 3 in 100.

The Cox regression model indicated that **older age at placement, a higher number of moves in care before being placed for adoption and a lengthier time period between placement and the Adoption Order were all predictors of adoption disruption.**

- The risk of adoption disruption was three times more for children who were older than 4 years old at the time of adoptive placement when compared with children who were less than 4 years at the adoptive placement. We saw the same effect in the England analysis.
- For each move a child had in care, the risk of disruption increased nearly threefold.
- Also significant was the time from placement to order, with those who waited more than a year to get the order twice as likely to disrupt.

The study confirms the negative impact of delay and the importance of getting children into their adoptive placement as quickly as possible. It also alerts social workers to the period between placement and the making of the order. Families who delay applying for the Adoption Order are likely to need more intervention, as the delay probably reflects parents' uncertainties about their relationship with the child.

The majority of disruptions were when children were over 11 years of age. Services are also therefore needed for teenagers and those parenting teens. The second phase of the study in 2014 involves interviews with adoptive parents and young people, where we will be able to explore in much greater detail their views of the support they have received and their experiences of disruption.

[5] 43% of the children who were in intact placement had none or only one move in care, whilst 85% of the children whose adoptions had disrupted have had two or more moves in care before being placed for adoption.

Recommendations

1. **Recording of adoption disruption and disruption of other permanent placements on legal orders**

We recommend that a new variable should be introduced in the SSDA903 returns (the data returned to the Welsh Government by every local authority) on whether one of the reasons for entry to care is an Adoption, Special Guardianship Order or a Residence Order disruption.

2. **Recording of Residence Orders in the local authority data returns**

The Welsh children looked after database does not hold any information on children who are looked after and who are on Residence Orders. We recommend introducing Residence Order as a new legal code in the SSDA903 data returns.

3. **Recording of long-term foster care placements**

Although we were able to calculate the length of time the children have spent in a foster placement (a calculation that is currently used as an indicator of placement stability), it is not possible to differentiate the placements that are meant to be permanent. We recommend the addition of an extra variable to the SSDA903 data returns to indicate whether a placement is meant to be a permanent placement (yes/no).

4. **Recording of placement stability**

The way placement changes are coded in the SSDA903 returns raise important questions about the analysis and understanding of movement in care. At present a new episode is created when a child's legal status changes and/or when a child actually moves to a new placement (and consequently has a new carer). However, a new placement and thus a new episode are also created when:

a) the foster carer moves out of the LA area
b) a missing child returns to the same carer
c) when a foster placement becomes an adoptive placement

In all the above instances, a new episode and a placement change is created, although the carer has remained the same. Therefore, an analysis of the current data indicates the number of *types* of placements the children have had in care, but not the number of carers and *stability* of placements. Any analyses of long-term fostering placements would be affected by the above. We strongly urge an additional variable in the SSDA903 returns to indicate whether any new episode involves a change of carer (yes/no). This would improve our understanding of stability and movement in care.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Permanency in care

In the year ending 31st March 2013, there were 5,743 children looked after by the local authorities in Wales. The number of looked after children has been increasing and has risen by nearly a quarter (24%) over the last five years (Welsh Government 2013).

Reunification with birth families is usually the best possible outcome for children who are looked after. Yet, recent research has highlighted the poor outcomes for children who return home but who later return to care. Two studies found that more than half of the reunified children in their samples became looked after again within five years of being returned home (Wade *et al*. 2011; Farmer 2012). Given the severe circumstances which bring most children into care[6] and the number of children who are unable to be return home safely (Welsh Government 2013), other options need to be considered. For most children who are unable to return home, an alternative permanent placement becomes the plan, which is usually kinship care, long-term fostering, or adoption. In this study, we focused on children placed for adoption.

Adoption as an intervention

Nearly three-quarters of children who are adopted out of care have histories of abuse or neglect that place them at great risk of poor developmental outcomes (Norman *et al.* 2012; Livingston Smith *et al* 2013). Adoption can be a positive intervention for these children. A meta-analysis of domestic and international adoptions found that adoption is an effective social intervention, with marked improvements in adopted children's growth, attachment security and cognitive capabilities compared to the peers that they left behind in the care system (Van IJzendoorn and Juffer 2006). Furthermore, adopted young people tend to perform better in cognitive tests and have better academic outcomes than their counterparts in foster care (Vinnerljung and Hjern 2011; Wijedasa and Selwyn 2011). Research in the UK and the USA has indicated that adoption yields more cost savings in terms of the return on investment, compared with foster care (Hansen 2008; Selwyn *et al.* 2006). It has also been noted that there are longer term benefits of adoption, as adopted adults are less likely than adults who were fostered to be involved in criminal activities, engage in substance abuse, and that the children of adopted adults are less likely to come into care (Livingston Smith *et al.* 2013).

However, there is debate about whether being adopted places a child at greater risk of psychological problems compared with their peers. Some research (e.g. Brodzinsky 1987; Levy-Shiff 2001; Miller *et al.* 2000) suggests that adoption creates a psychological risk and

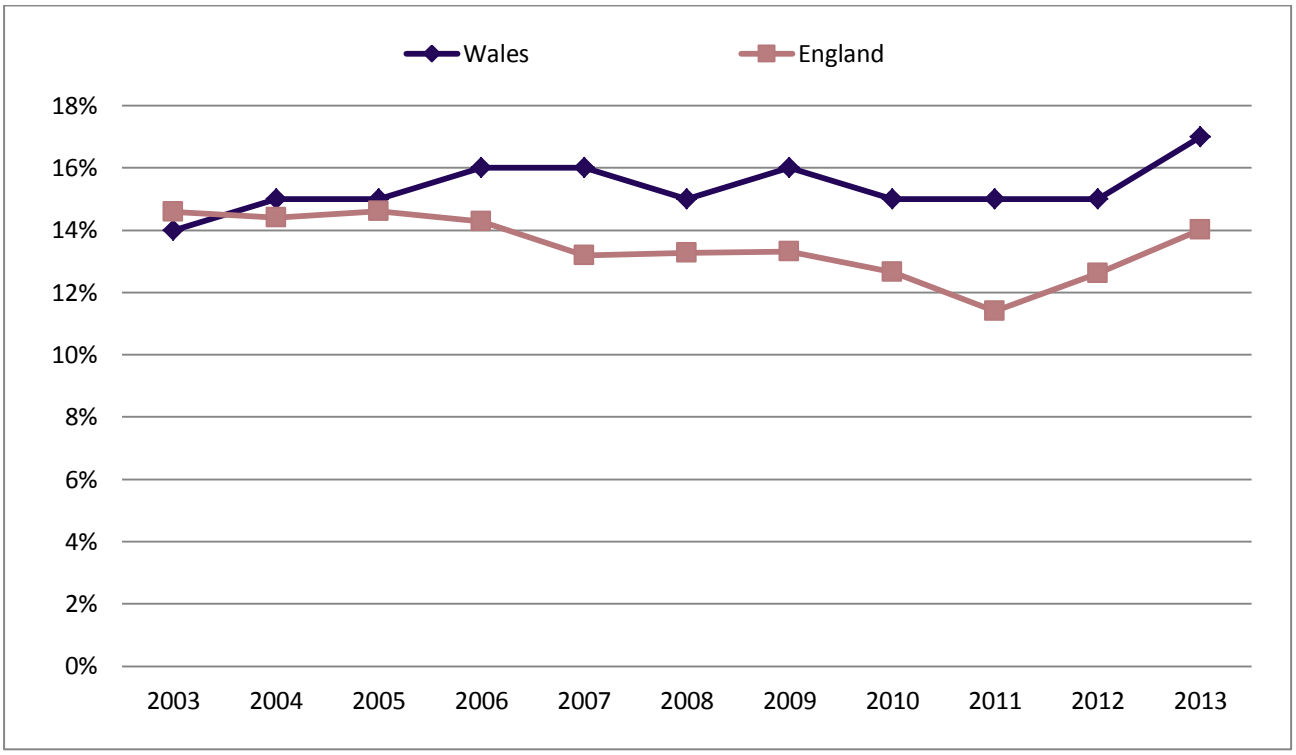
[6] Most children (61%) become looked after due to abuse or neglect, and about a quarter (26%) were taken into care due to family dysfunction or acute stress in families.

that adoptees are over-represented in clinical populations, while other studies (e.g. Triseliotis 1991; Collishaw *et al.*1998) report that most adoptees live an adult life free of psychopathology. Yet, there is strong and compelling evidence that the impact of earlier adverse experiences can remain (Cicchetti 2013;Ungar *et al*. 2013) and that the impact of maltreatment (Livingston Smith *et al.* 2013) does not disappear simply because a child is placed for adoption.

Adoption in Wales

The percentage of children ceasing to be looked after on Adoption Orders in Wales increased slightly to an all time high of 17% during the year ending 31st March 2013 (Welsh Government, 2013). This is slightly higher than the percentage of similar children in England (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Percentage of children adopted in Wales and England, as a percentage of all children ceasing to be looked after (2003-2013)



Adoption law, which is very similar in England and Wales,[7] was brought up to date by the Adoption and Children Act 2002. The process of adopting a child in England and Wales is both thorough and rigorous. The prospective adoptive parents go through a training and preparation period, during which a home assessment is completed. Children are then matched with the most suitable parents before being placed with their new family after a period of introductions. The adopters can apply for an Adoption Order after the child has lived with them continuously for 10 weeks. The child remains a looked after child until the

[7] Apart from some Wales only regulations, which primarily deal with administrative issues.

making of the Adoption Order. The Adoption Order legally shifts all parental responsibility of the child to the adoptive parents and the child is issued with a new birth certificate, a new hospital number, and new national pupil number: in effect a whole new identity. It should also be noted that an adoption in England and Wales cannot be revoked except under very exceptional circumstances. This is very different to the legal situation in USA where an adoption can be dissolved through an application to the court.

Adoption disruption

Although adoption is often the best option for young children unable to return to their birth families, there are adoptive placements that end. In the USA, the term 'disruption' has been used to describe adoptions that end before the making of the Adoption Order and 'dissolution' to define adoptions that breakdown after the making of the order. Given that an Adoption Order cannot be revoked in England except in very exceptional circumstances, the terms 'disruption' and 'breakdown' has been used interchangeably in the UK. Both terms are inexact and have negative connotations. A child may not be living with their adoptive family but relationships might be good with plans for the child to return. Alternatively, a child may be living in an 'intact' adoption, but could be unhappy within strained and tense relationships. From the statistical data, we had no way to ascertain whether the relationships continued or not. However, during the course of the study, we received information from adoption managers that some children had returned to their adoptive homes, which indicated that disruptions can be transient in nature. Therefore, in this study, we have intentionally referred to the situation where a child no longer lives with the adoptive family as a 'disruption' rather than a 'breakdown', as the term 'breakdown' implies that all physical ties and relationships have ended.

Factors associated with adoption disruption

There have been a number of substantial reviews of the adoption disruption literature (Rosenthal 1993; Rushton 2003; Evan B Donaldson 2004; Coakley and Berrick 2008) and specific reviews and research on the process of matching in adoption (Evan B Donaldson 2010; Dance *et al.* 2010; Quinton 2012). The research evidence is consistent on factors that are associated with disruptions. These include the child's age at placement, a history of previous disruptions, maltreatment, continuing negative influence of the birth parents, and children's behavioural difficulties. More recently, there has been interest in the poorer outcomes for children who had been singled out for rejection in their families (Rushton and Dance 2003) and for those with attachment difficulties (Howe 2005; Schofield and Beek 2006; Rutter *et al*. 2007). Understanding the impact of early trauma on children's development and behaviour has become a key feature of working with adoptive families in difficulty.

There may be additional factors that are increasing risks. For example, high turnover of social work staff, lack of professional knowledge about adoption, and bureaucratic structures that shifts the responsibility for children from team to team creates defensive practices and delayed decision-making. Court delays have also increased dramatically since the Children Act 1989. Delays increase the risk of moves in foster care, affect the development of secure attachments, and have been associated with the onset of mental health difficulties (Rubin *et al*. 2007). In addition, the characteristics of children have been changing. More children have been entering care because of maternal drug/alcohol misuse, and the impact of such use during pregnancy and later parental neglect have detrimental developmental effects.

National adoption breakdown rate

The stability of adoption has been seen as one of its strengths, but the long-term stability of adoptive placements in the UK has been unknown. This is surprising when social workers have to make complex decisions about whether adoption is the right placement for children alongside competing information on the benefits of kinship care or of long term fostering. Most of the research on adoption disruption to date has focused on narrowly defined populations, on children placed before 1990 and on disruptions that occurred before the Adoption Order was made (See Appendix A). In the UK, the adoption disruption rate has been considered as just one of the outcome measures in studies that have examined adoption outcomes more generally. Disruption has rarely received specific attention. This is partly because it is impossible to use available administrative data to link a child's pre and post care histories. Consequently, the rate of disruption has been quoted as ranging between 2-50%, with some arguing that adoptions disrupt frequently.

It is essential for social workers to have more reliable information about the stability of placements and reasons for breakdown, to aid them in making decisions about permanence. This research was intended to fill the gap in knowledge and provide more accurate information on adoption disruption.

Chapter 2 Method

The aim of the research was to identify the number of adoptions that had disrupted post order and to:

- Calculate the national adoption disruption rate for Wales
- Explore the characteristics of the children whose adoptions disrupt
- Investigate the factors that were associated with disruption
- Explore the critical time points during an adopted child's life when the likelihood of disruption increases

Definitions and work plan

Although there are inter-country and step-parent adoptions that disrupt, the focus of this study was on the disruption of adoptive placements of children placed for adoption from the care system. In this study, disruption was defined as:

> *a legally adopted child under the age of 18 years old who was no longer living with their adoptive parent(s). The child may have returned to care, be living with the adoptive extended family, the birth family, independently, or in some other arrangement.*

The original work plan also included a comparison of adoption disruptions with disruptions of long-term fostering placements, Special Guardianship Orders and Residence Orders. However, the data required were not available as: children in long-term fostering placements are not identified in the Welsh databases; the Welsh Government does not collect information on children with Residence Orders as part of the SSDA903 data returns; and there were no SGO disruptions during the study period. Therefore, the disruptions of these three types of placements could not be compared with the adoption disruptions.

The study used a quantitative research design. For this purpose, the Welsh Government provided data on looked after children and children adopted, which was supplemented with new information on adoption disruptions collected through a national survey of adoption managers.

National datasets on children looked after and adopted in Wales

An application was made to the Welsh Government for access to information on children in their care. Appropriate data management procedures were implemented and ethical approval gained from the ethics committee at the School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol.

Information was supplied by the Welsh Government on all children who had been looked after and adopted on or after 1st April 2002 until 31st March 2012, excluding children who were asylum seekers and those having short break care. This information is collected annually from every local authority and is known as the SSDA903 return.[8] The data return consists of a number of items and codes, which track children's care careers in terms of their placements and changes of legal status. The information provided consisted of two main data files: an adoption file and an episode file. A full list of the variables in the two datasets can be found in Appendix B.

- **Adoption file[9]**

This file contained details of *all* looked after children who had had an adoption order made between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2012 (n=2,352).[10] Data were available on: local authority; gender; whether adopted by foster carers; date of best interest decision; date of match; date of placement; and date of adoption order.

- **Episode files[11]**

In this file, a child has more than one line of data, as each time a placement or the legal status changes a new episode is created. This file enabled the tracking of the care histories of children and has variables such as date of entry to care; date of placement change; date of legal status; type of placement etc.

We were provided with the episode data file, which contained details of all children looked after between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2012 (n=19,848). We were also provided with historical episode data for 3,081 of 3,984 children (77%) who had episodes before 1st April 2002, which was merged with the main episode file before analyses.[12]

The main aim of the study was to calculate the adoption disruption rate. To do this, we needed to identify the children within the datasets, who came back into care after an adoption disruption. Although the Welsh data has had such a code to record adoption disruptions[13] since 2006, the data did not span the whole study period and was not robust enough to calculate the adoption disruption rate. This is because the 'reason for re-entry to care' code allows only the *main* reason for return to be recorded and therefore adopted children who re-enter care for other reasons may not have been included in this count. Furthermore, even when we could identify children who entered care after an adoption

[8] Local authority returns are subject to an extensive series of validation checks to ensure that the information provided uses the correct codes and identifies impossible sequences of dates

[9] Adoption dataset which is part of the SSDA903 returns on all adoptions in Wales 1st April 2002-31st March 2012

[10] Considering one adoption per child. The number is 2,353 when the child who had two adoptions is considered.

[11] Episode file from the SSDA903 returns on all looked after children in Wales (excluding asylum seeking children and children on short term breaks) 1st April 2002-31st March 2012

[12] The Welsh Assembly Government indicated that the rest of the data were not available

[13] As part of the Children in Need codes

disruption, we could still not link the child to his or her previous care history, as the child has a new ID after the making of the Adoption Order.[14]

To assemble the child's adoption journey (date of the child's best interest decision, date placed; whether the child was adopted by a former foster carers etc.), we needed to know the child's ID on the local authority systems at the time the child was adopted. To collect this information, we contacted all the LA adoption managers and the managers of two VAAs in Wales and asked them to complete a survey.

National survey of adoption managers

An online and a paper survey were sent to 22 LAs and 2 VAA adoption managers in Wales. It requested information on the number of children who had an Adoption Order made between April 1st 2000 and March 31st 2012 and where the placement had disrupted (see Appendix C). Twenty-one[15] of the 22 local authorities and both VAAs responded to the survey, making the response rate 96%.

Adoption managers were also asked to provide additional information on: whether the child had been adopted by a previous foster carer or by adopters approved by another LA or a VAA; the child's gender; the dates of placement, order, and disruption; whether the child came back into care after the disruption; and to give any other useful information on the disruption such as whether the child was part of a sibling group. Local authorities were also asked for the child's unique pre-adoption ID number.

Creating a new database of intact and disrupted adoptions

The adoption managers in Wales reported 30 adoption disruptions that they knew of between 2000-2012. We used the child's unique identifying number, date of birth, gender, and the date of the Adoption Order to match children with disruptions with their records within the SSDA903 datasets.

Additional information on disruptions was also added to the database as a result of:

- Identifying (within the dataset) adopted children who had returned to care but whose ID numbers had not been changed.[16]
- Identifying children who started to be looked after on a Children in Need (CIN) code of 'adoption disruption.[17]

[14] The child's local authority ID, NHS number and pupil number are changed after the making of an Adoption Order
[15] One local authority did not respond to the request for information
[16] Nine such cases identified, five of which were already reported by the respective local authorities
[17] Fifteen such cases identified. Two were already reported by their respective local authorities and 13 were outside this study's timeframe i.e. Adoption Orders were before 1st April 2002

- Identifying children on the adoption database, who had experienced an adoption disruption and been placed again for adoption.[18]

Using all sources, 35 adoption disruptions were identified as having occurred between April 1st 2002 and 31st March 2012.

It is important to note that the managers reported that the Welsh LAs were also looking after nine children who had come back into care after an adoption disruption but who had been placed by English adoption agencies. English adoption managers were unaware of five of the nine disruptions.

Statistical analyses

The data were analysed in SPSS v19 using bivariate and multivariate statistical methods. We first took an in-depth look to explore whether children who had experienced disruptions had different characteristics from those who remained with their adoptive families through tests such as Chi square and Mann-Whitney U tests.

We then calculated the overall rates of disruption for adopted children. Event history analyses[19] (EHA) was used to calculate the disruption rates and to explore predictors of disruption. A simple reporting of the proportions as rates would have inadvertently under-estimated the disruptions rates as given the longitudinal nature of the dataset, some children may had a shorter period at risk of disruption. EHA analyses allows '*time to event*' to be considered in the analyses and importantly takes into account those who have experienced the event (disruption) *and* those who have not.

However, the overall disruption rate is still quite a crude figure and gives no indication of which factors increase the relative risk of disruption. Therefore, we went on to explore which factors contributed to disruption through Cox proportional hazards modelling. Each of the age and time variables were first explored individually within Cox regression models to see whether they met the proportional hazards assumption.[20] Data that did not meet the assumption were recoded into categorical variables.[21]

There were several advantages of using Cox regression modelling:

- The model considers time at risk in calculations. The database contained information on children over different lengths of time. Therefore, it would be expected that there

[18] One child
[19] Also called 'survival analyses' in the fields of biostatistics, medical science and epidemiology
[20] We fitted the original linear term alongside squared and cubed terms in the Cox regression model. A significant result for the squared or the cubic term indicated that the relationship between the age/time variable and the time to disruption was not linear.
[21] Based on the values of the hazard ratio [exp (B)] plots.

would be a greater chance of disruption for the children tracked over the longer time period.
- The model allows each variable to be controlled against all other variables. Therefore, we could assess the independent effect of each variable.
- The model allows certain predictors such as age to vary over time and thus we could assess the change in risk against change in the variables over time.

Strengths and limitations of the data

This study collected new data on adoptions that disrupted after the making of an Adoption Order and merged this data with the national data held on all adoptions in Wales between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2012. The dataset was substantial and contained data on every child adopted in Wales over a 10-year period. Achieving a sample size this large through other research methods would be very difficult due to time and cost constraints. The size allowed more sophisticated statistical analyses to examine the adoption breakdown rate and it also allowed the testing of widely believed 'facts' about what increases the risk of disruption. A further strength was the longitudinal nature of the dataset, with the capacity to track children over time using their unique ID number.

Nevertheless, all data has limitations and this was the case here. First, although we would have liked to compare the stability of adoptions with different types of 'permanent' placements such as long term fostering and children on Special Guardianship Orders or on Residence Orders, we were not able to achieve this because:

- Children in long-term fostering placements are not indicated as being in a permanent placement on the database.
- Welsh Government does not collect information on children on Residence Orders as part of the SSDA903 data returns.
- Although the Welsh Government does collect data on Special Guardianship Orders, analyses of the data indicated that none of the looked after children who had an SGO made had come back into care.[22]

Second, analyses were limited to the variables in the national datasets. For example, we would have liked to examine whether different types of abuse influenced outcomes, but abuse and neglect are amalgamated into one category. Neither are data collected on variables such as infant exposure to alcohol/drugs pre-birth or on whether the child was placed as part of a sibling group.

[22] LA adoption managers were contacted to check that the dataset was correct and the managers confirmed that they knew of no SGO disruptions within the study time period . However, one LA knew of two recent SGO disruptions that were outside the study period.

Third, there are no statutory requirements on local authorities to collect data on adoptions that break down after the making of the order and therefore not all the adoption disruptions would have been known to the adoption managers. It is also likely that the disruptions they were aware of, were those where the child became looked after and not those where the adoptive family had found other ways of managing the difficulties. For example, the child might live with extended family members. It is likely that there was some under-reporting.

Fourth, disruption is an inexact concept. It tells us nothing about the quality of relationships. It should not be assumed that the adoption has ‘failed’ because the child is not living with their adoptive family or that the adoption is ‘successful’ because the adoption is intact.

Chapter 3 Adoption disruption

In this chapter, we explore the characteristics of children who had adoption disruptions compared with the children who remained with their adoptive families in intact placements. The total number of children adopted between April 1st 2002 and 31st March 2012 was 2,352. Of these, 35 were identified as having disrupted adoption post order.

With such a small number of adoption disruptions, caution is needed in the interpretation of the statistical analyses. However, we were able to compare the findings with those of a similar study of disruption undertaken in England (Selwyn *et al.* 2014) where the numbers of adopted children and disruptions were much greater. Both studies used the same methodology and the comparison was possible as the characteristics of adopted children were very similar in the two countries (Table 1).

Table 1 Characteristics of children adopted in Wales and England between 1st April 2010 and 31st March 2011

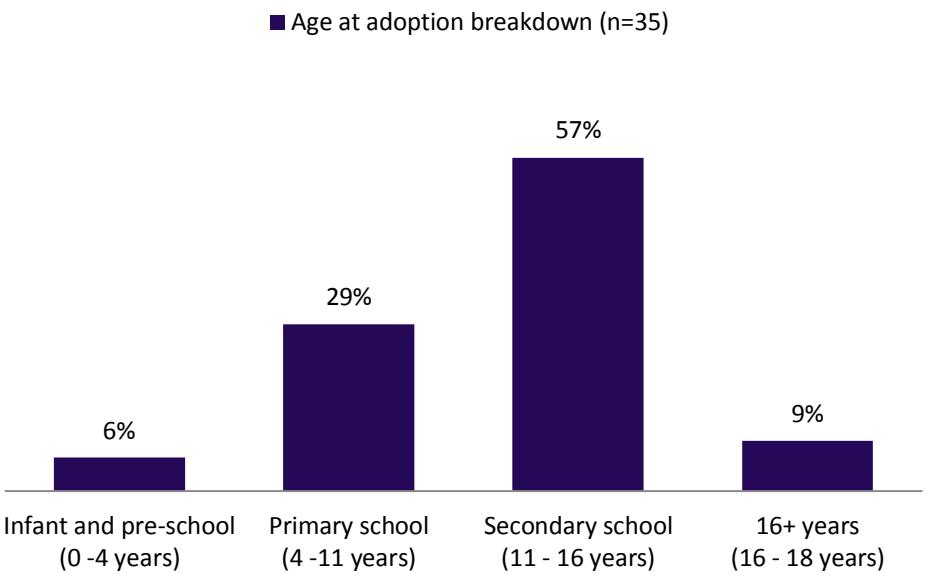
	Wales (n= 252)	**England (n= 3,090)**
Male	52%	51%
White ethnic origin	86%	85%
Reason for entry to care being abuse or neglect	79%	71%
Age at entry to care is between 0-4 years	94%	91%
Age at adoptive placement is between 0-4 years	74%	73%
Adopted by previous foster carers	13%	16%

The child's age at disruption

The majority of adoption disruptions in Wales had occurred during the secondary school years.[23](Figure 2) The average age at disruption (11.6 years) was slightly younger than the average age in England (12.7 years).

[23] Mean= 11.61, SD=3.93, CI=10.26-11.96, Range = 14 months–17 years

Figure 2 Child's age in years at the time of the adoption disruption



Children's characteristics at the time of entry to care

Table 2 sets out the characteristics of the children whose adoptions disrupted and those whose adoptions were intact.[24] None of the adoptions that had disrupted in Wales were known to have involved a child with a disability, although only 12 children with a disability had been adopted during the previous ten years. Previous research (Glidden 2000) has found that adoptions involving children with a disability are less likely to disrupt, perhaps because adoptive parents are more prepared and aware of the difficulties the child has and will continue to experience.

Age at entry to care

Most adopted children enter care at a young age and are placed for adoption before their third birthday. This was the case in this sample where the average age at entry to care for children who went on to be adopted was 14 months of age[25] and the average age at placement was 2 years and 7 months.[26] Children who entered care very young waited a long time before being placed for adoption.

Previous research has shown that increased risk of disruption, unstable care careers and poor outcomes are associated with the length of time children are exposed to maltreatment and delayed entry to care (Howe 1997; Selwyn *et al.* 2006; Sempik *et al*. 2008). Therefore,

[24] The numbers in each analysis differ because of missing values in each of the variables
[25] Age at entry to care: mean 1.22yrs (SD= 1.75)
[26] Age at placement: mean 2.69 (SD= 2.17)

we examined the two groups of intact and disrupted adoptions to see if there were any differences in the age that they first became looked after. Children whose adoptions later disrupted were significantly more likely to have entered care at an older age.[27] Children whose adoptions were intact had first become looked after on average at 12 months of age whereas those that had disrupted were on average 2 years and 7 months old (i.e. there was a difference of 19 months between the two groups). These ages of children at entry to care were similar in the study of disruption in England.

Table 2 Characteristics of the children at entry to care

	Adoption Intact N=2,317 %	**Adoption Disruption N=35 %**
Gender	n=2,317	n=35
Male	51	46
Female	49	54
Ethnicity		
White	86	86
Mixed	2	3
Asian	0.2	0
Black	0.5	0
Other	1	0
Unknown	10	11
Main reason for entry to care	n=2,305[28]	n=35
Abuse or neglect	74	86
Family dysfunction	7	0
Family in acute stress	8	6
Child's disability	0.3	0
Parental illness or disability	5	9
Absent parenting	5	0
Socially unacceptable behaviour	0.1	0
Other reason	0.1	0

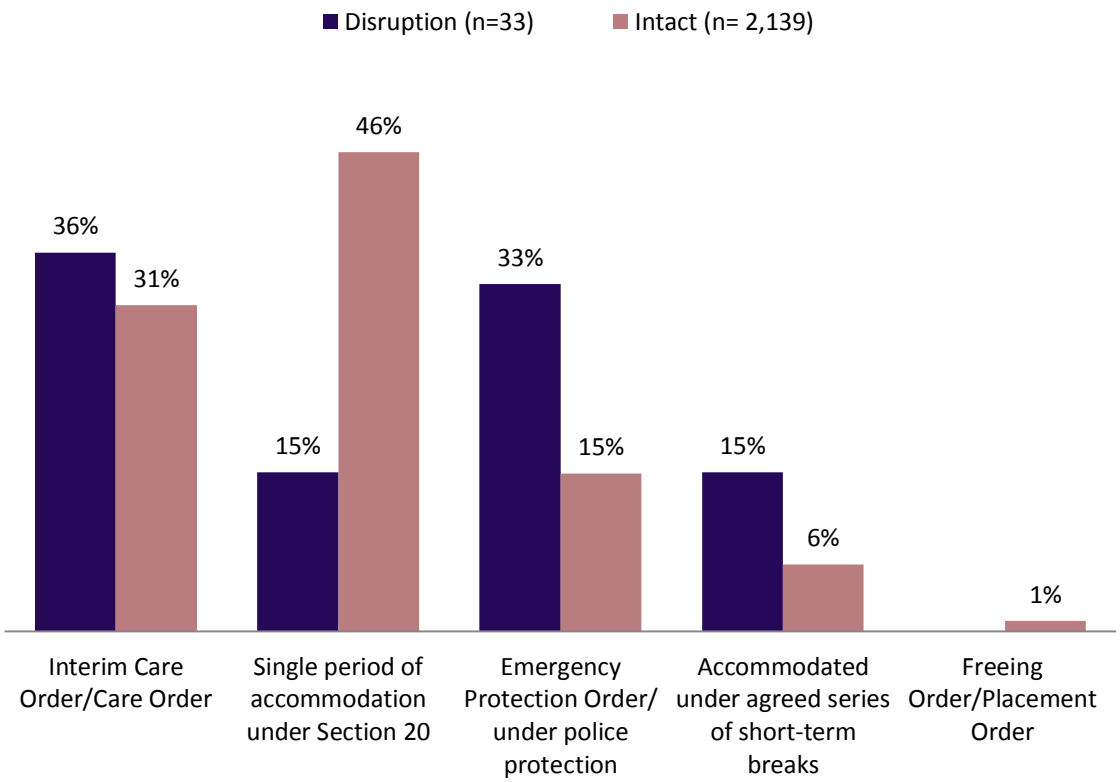
Legal status at entry to care

Legal status indicates the severity of home conditions for these children prior to entering care. The children who experienced disruptions were also significantly more likely to have become looked after on an Emergency Protection Order or under police protection

[27] Mann Whitney $U = 59.948$ $p < .0001$
[28] The numbers differ because of missing information

compared with the children whose adoptions were intact.[29] The children's legal status at entry to care is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 The legal status of children at entry to care



Gender, ethnicity and reason for entry to care

There was no statistically significant gender or ethnic differences between the adoptions that remained intact or had disrupted. There was also no statistical difference in the reason for entry to care between the two groups. Our analysis of adoption disruptions in England had the same result. This finding is important because it is often thought that boys are more challenging to parent and therefore more likely to disrupt. However, this assumption was not borne out. Indeed, although the difference was not statistically significant, slightly more girls than boys had experienced disruptions in both Wales and England.

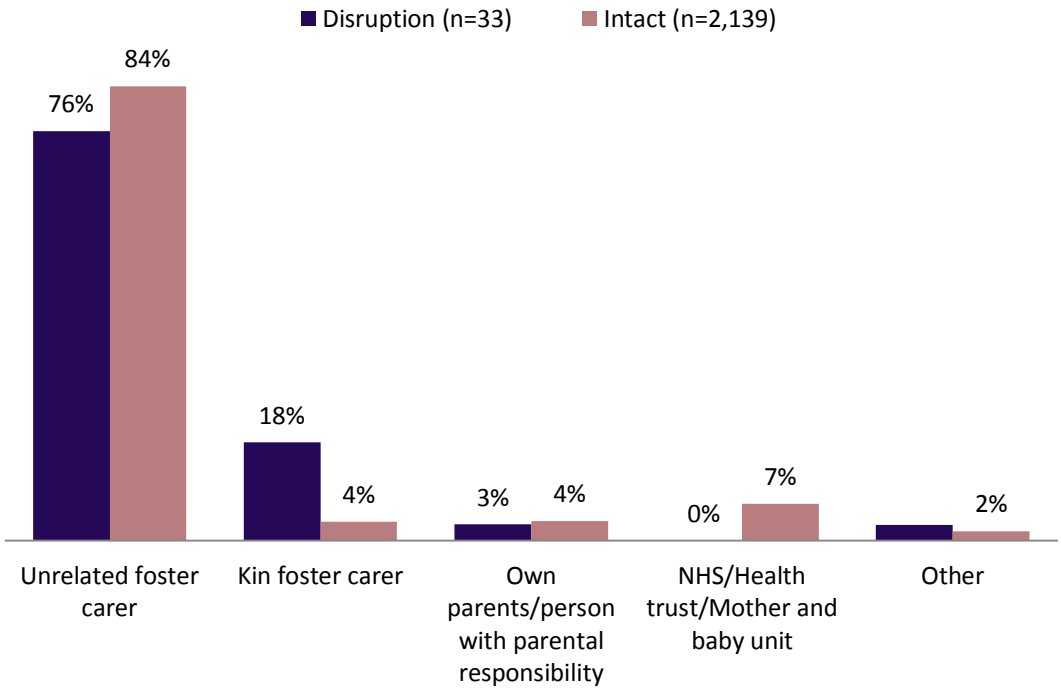
Few ethnic minority children had been placed for adoption in Wales: only 81 children in the period 2002-2012. However, 243 adopted children did not have their ethnicity recorded and therefore the number of ethnic minority children adopted may be higher (Table 2).

[29] $\chi^2(1)=16.3$, $p<.001$

First placements

Children's placements as they first entered care are shown in Figure 4. Although the numbers seem to indicate that there were more adoption disruptions for children whose first placement was wi.th a kinship carer, this could not be statistically tested due to small numbers.

Figure 4 First placements at entry to care



Care careers of looked after children who were later adopted

In the previous section, we established that children who had had disruptions were significantly older at entry to care and that they were more likely to come into care on Emergency Protection Orders or under police protection compared with the children who remained with their adoptive families. In this section, we explore whether these differences continued to have an impact on their care careers up to the point they were placed for adoption. We wondered: were children who had post order adoption disruptions more likely to have had lengthy care careers, have had more reunification attempts and more placements than children who remained with their adoptive families?

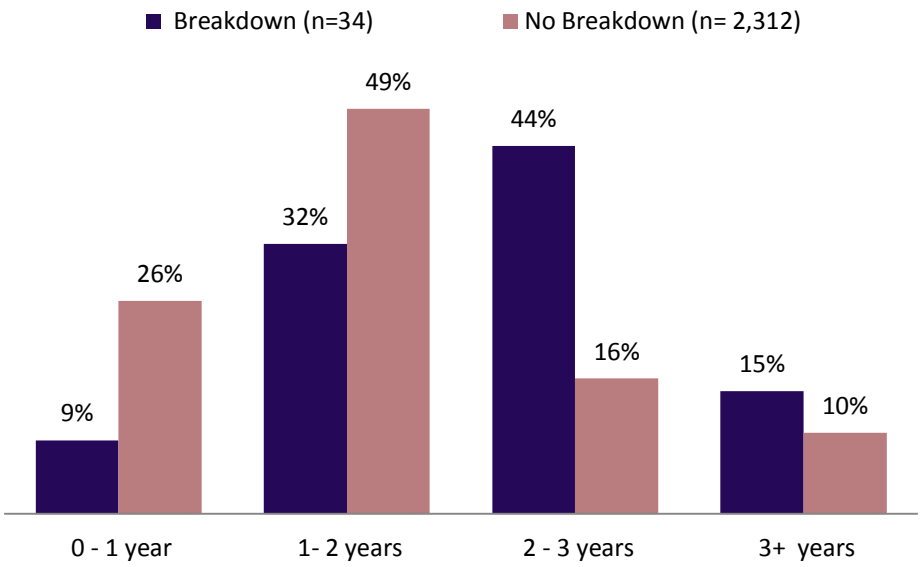
Attempts to reunify children with birth parents

Of all the children who went onto to be adopted from care in Wales, only 7% had had a failed reunification attempt (range 1- 22 reunification attempts). There was no difference between the disrupted and intact group on whether reunification had been attempted.

Length of time in care until adoptive placement

As expected, our analysis found that the majority (61%) of children who experienced a disruption also had lengthier care careers. These children were significantly more likely to have been in care for two or more years before being placed for adoption compared with those in intact placements. The majority (71%) of children who remained with their families had been placed for adoption within two years of entry to care[30] (Figure 5). The same association was found in the England study.

Figure 5 Length of time in care until placed with adoptive family



Movements in care before adoptive placement

Previous research (Sinclair *et al.* 2007; Ward 2009) has shown that children who have multiple placements in care are more likely to experience disruptions compared to those who do not move around. We were therefore interested to explore how many times adopted children had been moved. In the following analysis, only children with a complete care history have been included.

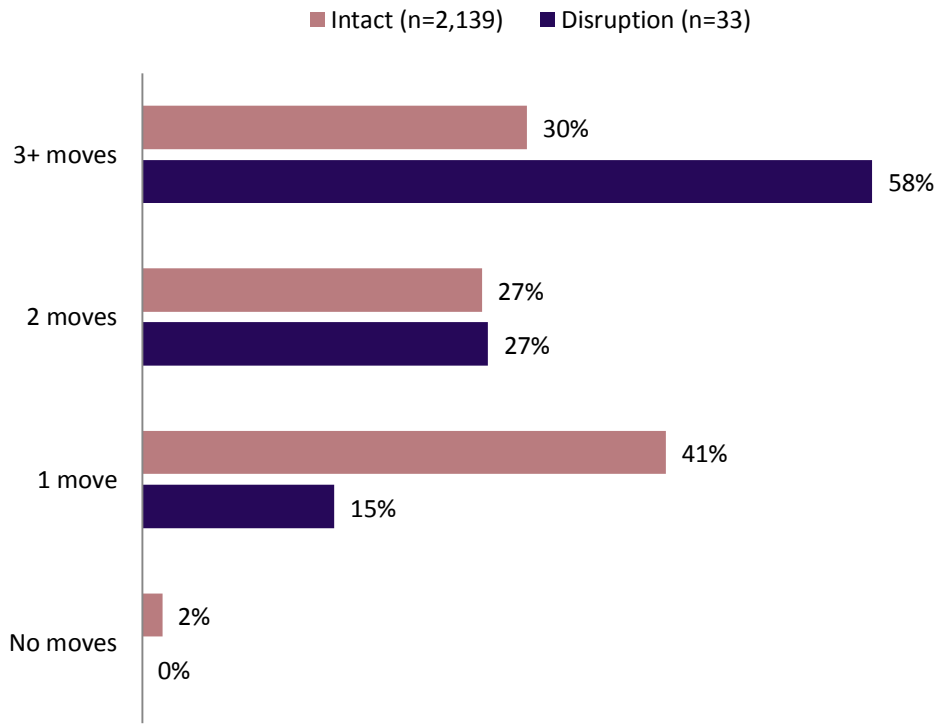
Examining movement in care is complex, as data only allows movement to be examined and the number of moves does not necessarily equate with the number of carers. For example, in the dataset was a child who appeared to have had 36 moves before being placed with her adoptive family. We contacted that particular LA, and other LAs who also had children with many moves recorded, to try and understand whether the large number of moves were data entry errors or whether these were multiple episodes of shared care. The LAs confirmed that the high numbers of moves were indeed respite care arrangements.

[30] $\chi^2(1)=18.7$, $p<.001$

However, the LAs had not used the codes that are designed to identify shared care arrangements. Therefore, either LAs were using the wrong codes or the arrangement was with a different carer for each episode of respite. It was not possible to identify the number of carers a child had had from the data. However, any move even if it is with a known carer (as in a shared care arrangement) can be detrimental to children, as it produces additional stress, instability, and discontinuity in children's lives.

Higher number of moves in care was a statistically significant predictor of adoption disruption: 43% of the children who were in intact placements had only one move in care, whilst 85% of the children whose adoptions had disrupted had had two or more moves in care before being placed for adoption[31] (Figure 6). The results were similar in the English study.

Figure 6 Number of moves in care[32]



[31] $\chi^2(1)=10.2$, $p<.01$

[32] Data missing on 2 cases of disruption and 178 children in intact adoptions

The child's age at placement with their adoptive family

Calculating the age at placement with the adoptive family was straightforward for children (83%) placed with stranger adopters, but for children (17%) adopted by former foster carers there were two possible time points. These were:

a) The child's age when they first moved into the foster placement

b) The child's age when the LA formalised the placement as an adoptive placement with the child's foster carer.

We considered both time points, as the first gives information about the length of time the child has spent with the same carer whereas the second time point has been used most frequently in previous research. It is the point in time where the decision is made that the foster carer will become an adoptive parent. At this point, the foster carer needs to make a psychological shift from being a temporary carer to a full time parent. Children too, have to accept that they will not be returning to their birth family, as however unlikely, they may have harboured hopes whilst in foster care that this might occur.

Children in intact adoptive placements who had been adopted by their foster carer had first started to live with their carer at about the same age (average age 2 years and 3 months) as those who were in intact placements and adopted by stranger adoptive parents (average age 2 years and one month). However, it took on average a further 15 months before the LA made the decision that the foster carer was to become the adoptive parent.

Children whose adoptions later disrupted were placed at older ages. This was true for children placed with stranger adopters as well as foster adopters (average age 4.4 years and 4.8 years respectively). This was an expected finding, given that children who experienced an adoption disruption were much more likely to have been older at entry to care. Children who were adopted by previous foster carers also waited much longer for the foster placement to become an adoptive placement. The same age pattern and delay was found in the English data. The delays for children are shown in Figure 7 and Figure 8.

Figure 7 The child's average age at best interest decision and placement with stranger adopters

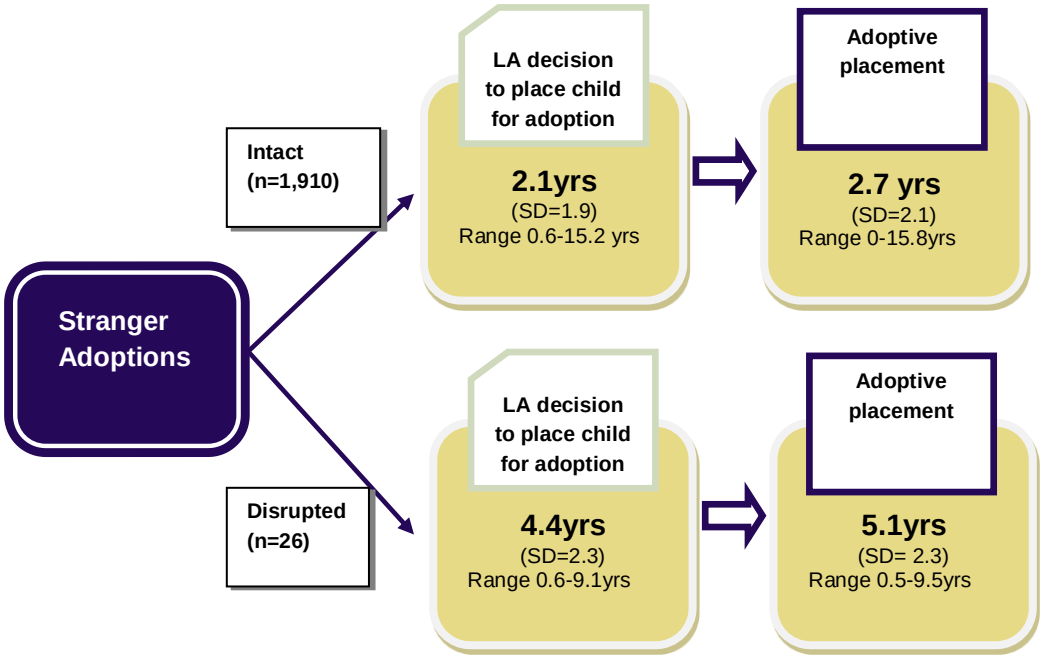
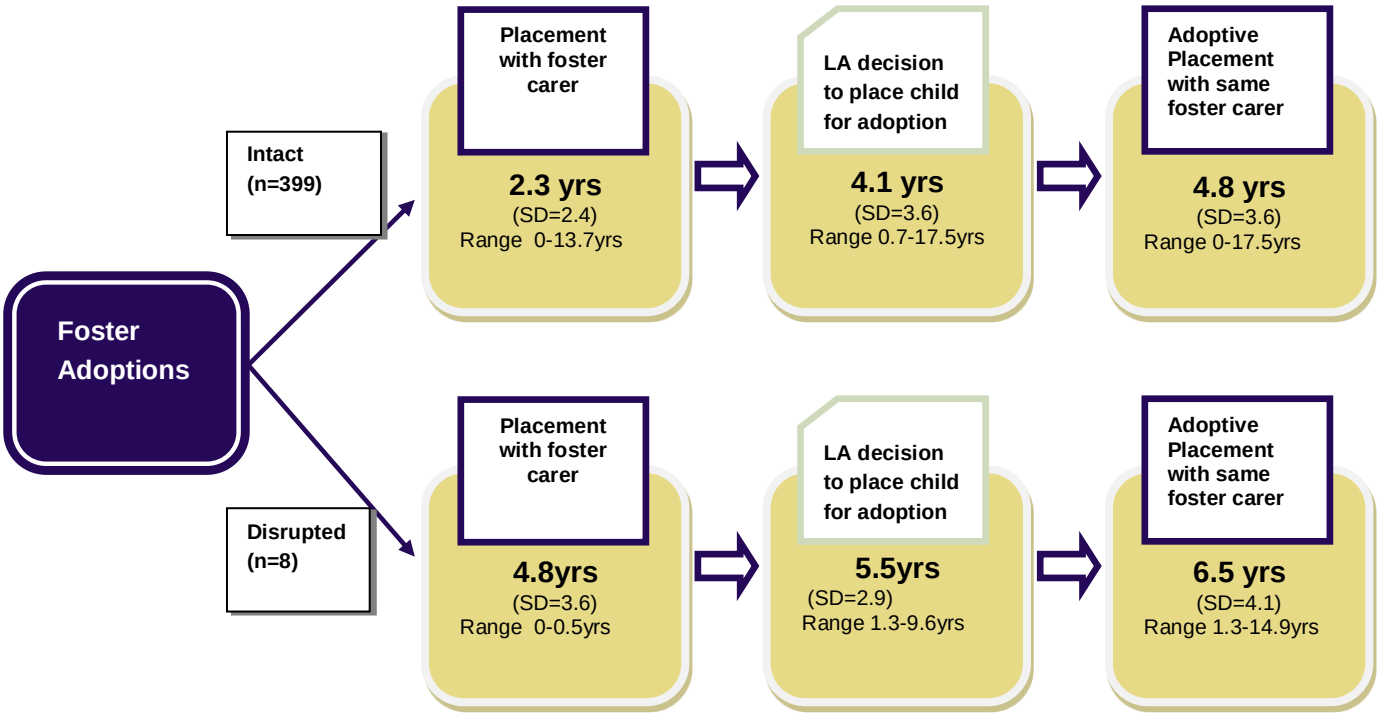


Figure 8 The child's average age at placement, best interest decision, and time of adoptive placement with foster adopters



The child's age at the time of the Adoption Order

Children whose adoptions later disrupted were older at entry to care, older at placement and were also older at the time of the Adoption Order. Children whose adoptions were intact were on average 3 years and 6 months old at the time of the order in comparison with the children who had experienced a disruption, who were on average age 6 years and 6 months old. However, it should also be noted that whilst being older at the time of the order was associated with adoption disruption, 13% of children in intact adoptions had also been legally adopted at age 6 years or older. Conversely, 26% of children who went on to have a disrupted adoption were legally adopted at 4 years of age or younger.

The Adoption Process

Table 3 presents the average time in years between the adoption process milestones for the two groups.

Table 3 Time in years between adoption milestones (Years: Months)

Time in years	0 up to 2 years at entry to care		2 up to 4 years at entry to care		4 and above at entry to care	
	Intact (n=1,765)	Disruption (n=11)	Intact (n=348)	Disruption (n=14)	Intact (n=187)	Disruption (n=7)
Entry to care to adoption decision (Best Interest)	1:2	1:5	1:5	1:9	1:9	1:11
Adoption decision to matching	0:6	0:9	0:8	0:8	0:8	0:3
Matching to being placed for adoption	0:1	0:1	0:2	0:1	0:2	0:10
Being placed for adoption to the adoption order	0:11	1:3	1:1	1:9	1:2	1:7
Total average time between entry to care and adoption order	2:8	3:10	3:4	4:6	3:9	4:7

The children who had adoption disruptions were significantly more likely to have had lengthier adoption processes in total compared with those children whose adoptions were intact,[33] similar to the pattern seen in England. We were unable to explore whether these differences were associated with the children's age at entry to care due to small sample sizes.

The characteristics of the adoptive parents

The Welsh SSDA903 data collection has only recently asked for information on the characteristics of adoptive parents. Information on the adoptive parent's gender and marital

[33] Mann Whitney U= 66,786, Z= 5.33, p <.05

status has only been collected since 2006 and was missing for the majority (about 80%) of adoptions that had disrupted. Therefore, we were not able to explore whether those factors were associated with greater risk of disruption. The SSDA903 dataset also does not include information on the type of agency that approved the adoptive parents. Therefore, claims that placing with VAA approved adopters leads to fewer disruptions could not be tested. However, we do know from the data collected from the adoption managers that the adoptive parents in nearly three quarters of the disruptions (where the information had been provided[34]) had been approved by the same local authority that placed the child, and that none were approved by VAAs. In contrast, in the adoption disruption study in England, 12% of adoption disruptions were families where the adoptive parents had been approved by VAAs.

Adoption by Foster Carers

Previous research conducted over a decade ago indicated that 13% of children were adopted by their former foster carers (Ivaldi 2000). The proportion of adoptions by the child's foster carer between 2001 and 2012 in Wales was 17%, which indicates that the number of foster carer adoptions have barely increased over the years.

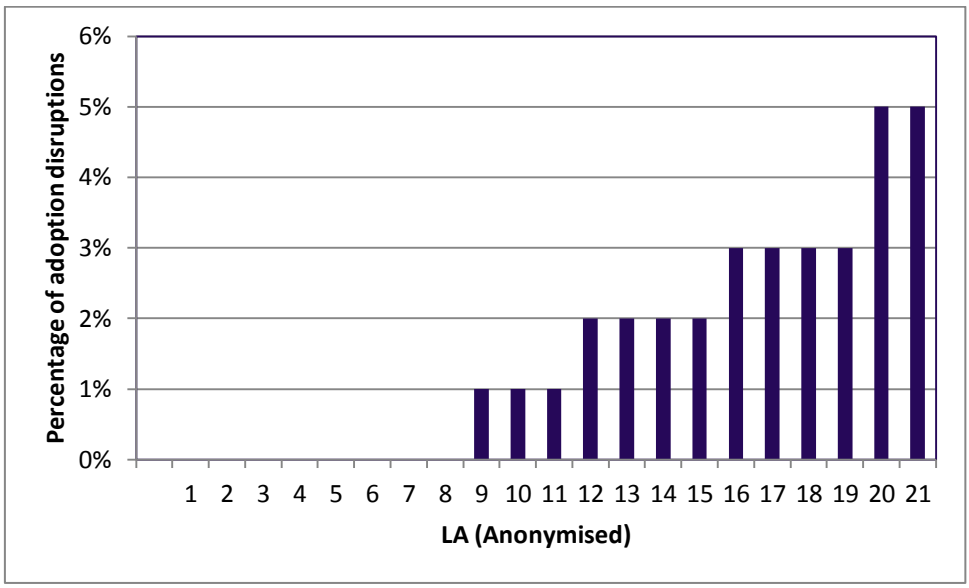
For a long time it has been assumed that foster carer adoptions are more stable than adoptions by strangers. It has been thought that foster carers have well established relationships with children and therefore have based a decision to adopt on a realistic view of the child's difficulties. However, we found no difference between the disruption and intact groups on whether the children were adopted by their foster carers or by stranger adopters. Therefore, there was no evidence that foster carer adoptions were more stable than placement with stranger adoptions over time, even when controlling for age.

Variation in local authority disruption rate

As with many other studies, we noticed a local authority variation on the proportion of disruptions reported. The percentage of disruptions, as a proportion of all adoptions between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2012 in each of the LAs varied between 0% and 6% and are shown in Figure 9.(The local authorities have been allocated a number to maintain anonymity). In England, the LA variation in disruptions was between 0% and 7.4%.

[34] Information was available for 29 of the 35 disruptions

Figure 9 Variation in local authority adoption disruption rates (as a proportion of adoptions between 2002-2012)



Further research is needed to understand why the disruption rate varies so much between LAs and if placing a child with another LA's approved adoptive parents brings additional risks. It is not safe to assume that the LAs with the highest disruption rate have the poorest practice. It might be that they place more sibling groups or older hard to place children.

This chapter has examined factors that were associated with adoption disruption. Children who were older when they first became looked after, who had moves in care, and who were older at placement for adoption were all at greater risk of disruption. Delays in decision-making also increased the risk of the child having to leave their family.

In the next chapter, we examine which of the individual factors carries the greatest risks and identify the overall adoption disruption rate.

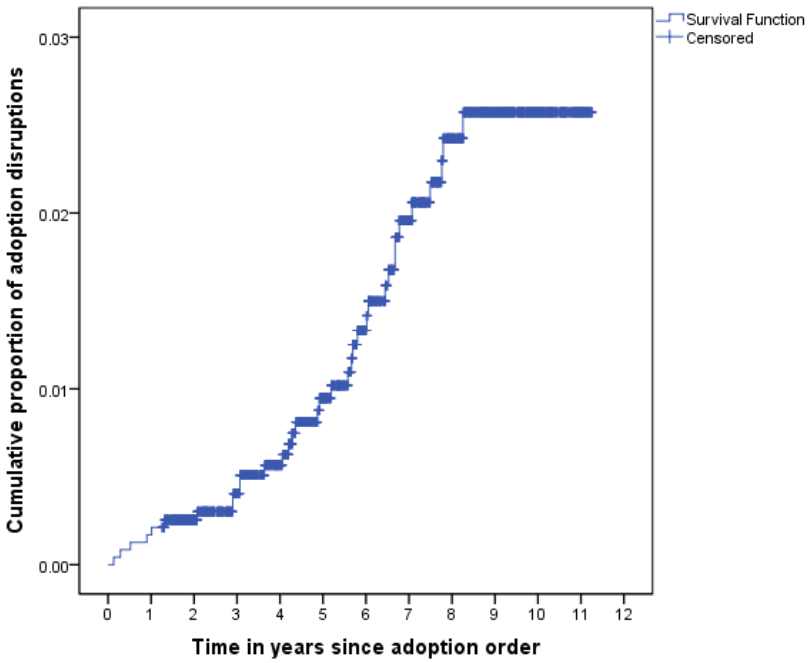
Chapter 4 Establishing the rate of post-adoption order disruptions

The key objective of this study was to calculate the national rate of adoption disruption for Wales. An additional objective was to examine the factors that predicted disruption. For this purpose, we analysed a complete national data set on all children who were adopted from care in Wales between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2012 (N=2,352). Altogether, there were 35 adoption disruptions over the time period in consideration.

As the adopted children had Adoption Orders made over a ten-year period, the follow-up time for each child differed in length.[35] Therefore, calculating a rate of disruption as a proportion of all adoptions was inadequate, as it would not have allowed for the fact that some children would have had a shorter period at risk of disruption. Methods known as survival modelling allow 'time' to be considered in the analyses (see method chapter). A Kaplan-Meir analysis was used to establish the overall disruption rate and then Cox regression modelling to explore the predictors of disruption.

We found that over an 11 year follow-up period, the Welsh national adoption disruption rate was 2.6%, which indicated that about 3 in 100 adoptions would disrupt over an 11 year period. The cumulative rate of adoption post order disruption in England was very similar, where the cumulative risk of disruption over a 12 year period was that about 3 in 100.

Figure 10 Kaplan Meir survival estimates of the cumulative proportion of disruptions after the Adoption order



[35] Children were followed up until July 2013 (until end of the adoption manager survey) and therefore the maximum follow-up period was 11 years

Table 4 shows the cumulative proportions of adoption disruptions over time.

Table 4 The time since the Adoption Order and cumulative rates of adoption disruption

Time in years since adoption order	Cumulative percentage of adoption disruptions over time	Risk of disruption
1	0.2%	2 in 1000
2	0.3%	3 in 1000
3	0.4%	4 in 1000
4	0.7%	7 in 1000
5	1.0%	1 in 100
6	1.4%	1 in 100
7	2.1%	2 in 100
8	2.6%	3 in 100

This overall disruption rate is quite a crude figure and gives no indication of which factors increase the relative risk of disruption. Therefore, we went on to estimate the predictors of disruption through a Cox regression model.

A model to predict adoption disruption

Based on previous research and the information available in the databases, the final variables entered in the Cox model for adoption disruptions were[36]

- Time between entry to care and adoptive placement
- Number of moves before the adoptive placement
- Age at adoptive placement
- Time between adoptive placement and order
- Age as a time varying covariate[37] (to consider how children aged over the years since the order)

The hazard ratios, confidence intervals, and the p-values for the multivariate Cox regression model are shown in Table 5.

[36] Although we were interested in looking at whether being approved by a local authority or a voluntary agency made a difference to the outcome, it was not possible to include this variable in the model, as this information was only available for the adopters of children who had a disruption. Age at entry to care, and age at adoption order were not used in the final model as this was highly correlated with age at placement.

[37] We wanted to investigate if the varying age of the child over the course of time had an effect on whether the adoptions disrupted. This was done to explore whether age at placement or the actual age at any given time had more effect. For example, were teenage years more risky than other ages? Statistically, this was achieved by considering age as a time varying covariate in the Cox regression model.

Table 5 The hazard ratios, confidence intervals, and the p-values for the multivariate Cox proportionate model

	B	SE	Sig.	Hazard Ratio	95.0% CI for Hazard ratio	
					Lower	Upper
Age at adoptive placement						
0-4 years (reference category)						
4+ years	1.19	.57	.04	3.28	1.07	10.07
Time from adoptive placement to order						
0-1 years (reference Category)						
1+ years	.79	.40	.05	2.21	1.00	4.87
Number of moves before adoptive placement	1.03	.50	.04	2.79	1.06	7.40
Age (since order)			NS			
Time between entry to care and adoptive placement			NS			

The model indicated that older age at placement, delayed time to order from placement, and higher numbers of moves were all predictors of adoption disruption. Age since making of the order was not significant after adjusting for these other factors.

This model is quite different to the findings in the English study of adoption disruption. In England, the biggest predictor of disruption was the child's age: *being a teenager was the greatest risk factor.* This factor was not significant in the Welsh data. Given that the English study had far more disruptions (events) in consideration in the analyses, we should be wary of concluding that there is no effect of age in the Welsh cohort.

Predictors of Adoption Order disruption

Age at placement with adoptive parents

The risk of adoption disruption was about three times more for children who were older than 4 years old at the time of adoptive placement when compared with children who were less than 4 years at the adoptive placement. The same effect was found in the England analysis.

Number of moves in care before adoptive placement

For each move a child had in care, the risk of disruption increased nearly threefold.

Time between adoptive placement and order (delay)

Also significant was the time to order from placement, with those who waited more than a year to get the order more likely to disrupt. Compared to children who had an Adoption Order made within a year of being placed, the risk of disruption was about twice more for children who had the order made after a year.

Chapter 5 Summary and recommendations

The main aim of this study was to calculate a national adoption disruption rate for Wales and to explore the factors that were associated with adoption disruption. The study used a quantitative research design to meet this aim. For this purpose, the Welsh Government provided data on looked after children and children adopted between 2002 and 2012, which was supplemented with new information on adoption disruptions collected through a national survey of adoption managers. Twenty-one of the 22 local authorities and both VAAs in Wales responded to the survey making the response rate 96%. The total number of children adopted between April 1st 2002 and 31st March 2012 in Wales was 2,352. Of these, 35 were identified as having disrupted post order.

The majority of adoptions disrupted when the children were older than 11 years of age. The statistical analysis of intact and disrupted adoptions showed that children whose adoptions later disrupted were older at entry to care, older at placement and older at the time of the Adoption Order. The children who experienced disruptions were also significantly more likely to have come into care on an Emergency Protection Order or under police protection and were more likely to have been in care for two or more years before being placed for adoption compared with those in intact placements. Higher number of moves in care was also a statistically significant predictor of adoption disruption.

There was no statistical difference in the reason for entry to care between the two groups. Nor were there any statistically significant ethnic or gender differences between the adoptions that remained intact or had disrupted. This is an important finding because it is often thought that boys are more challenging to parent and therefore more likely to disrupt but this assumption was not borne out. Indeed, although the difference was not statistically significant, slightly more girls than boys had experienced disruptions in both Wales and England.

As with many other studies, we noticed a local authority variation in the proportion of disruptions reported. The percentage of disruptions, as a proportion of all adoptions between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2012 in each of the LAs varied between 0% and 6%. Further research is needed to understand this variation.

All of these above results are directly comparable and are similar to those found in a similar study that we carried out with the national data in England (Selwyn *et al.* 2014).

As the children had their Adoption Orders made over a 10 year period (2002-2012), the follow-up time for each child differed in length.[38] Therefore, calculating a rate of disruption as a proportion of all adoptions was inadequate as it would not have allowed for the fact that some children would have had a shorter period at risk of disruption. To account for this, we used statistical methods known as survival modelling to allow 'time' to be considered in

[38] The children were followed up until July 2013, which is when the survey of adoption managers concluded.

the analyses. We found that over an 11 year follow-up period, the Welsh national adoption disruption rate was 2.6%, which indicated that about 3 in 100 adoptions would disrupt over an 11 year period. The rate of adoption post order disruption in England was very similar, where the cumulative risk of disruption over a 12 year period was about 3 in 100 (Selwyn *et al.* 2014).

The multivariate model indicated that older age at placement, delayed time to order from placement, and higher numbers of moves were all predictors of adoption disruption. Age since making of the order was not significant after adjusting for these other factors. This model is quite different to the findings in the English study of adoption disruption. In England, the biggest predictor of disruption was the child's age: *being a teenager was the greatest risk*. A factor that was not significant in the Welsh data. Given that the English study had far more disruptions (events) in consideration in the analyses, we should be wary of concluding that there is no effect of age in the Welsh cohort. This analysis however supports the English findings that older age at placement and delayed decision-making are important predictors of adoption disruption. It also highlights the significant delay for infants who enter care at 14 months of age but wait on average a further 17 months to be placed with a family.

Typically, adoption support services have developed to support families in the first few years of placement. This study highlights that adopters who delay seeking an Adoption Order may be at particular risk of later disruption. Therefore, social workers need to identify families who delay, and work on improving child and parent relationships. The majority of disruptions were when children were over 11 years of age. Services are also therefore needed for teenagers and those parenting teens. The second phase of the study in 2014 involves interviews with adoptive parents and young people, where we will be able to explore in greater detail their views of the support they have received and their experiences of disruption.

Recommendations

1. **Recording of adoption disruption and disruption of other permanent placements on legal orders**

This research was carried out after the National Assembly of Wales' Children and Young People Committee reported in November 2012 on its Inquiry into Adoption (Children and Young People Committee 2012). One of the recommendations of the committee was that there should be an established mechanism for tracking disruptions of adoptions. We would like to support this recommendation and extend it by suggesting that a new variable should be introduced in the SSDA903 returns (the data returned to the Welsh Government by every local authority) on whether the child was previously adopted, or on a SGO, or a Residence Order.

2. **Recording of Residence Orders in the local authority data returns**

The Welsh children looked after database does not hold any information on children who are looked after and who are on Residence Orders. We recommend introducing Residence Order as a new legal code.

3. **Recording of long-Term foster care placements**

Although we were able to calculate the length of time the children had spent in a foster placement (a measure that is currently used as an indicator of placement stability), it was not possible to differentiate between placements that were intended to be permanent and those where children lived but without a permanent plan. To understand drift in care we recommend the addition of an extra variable to the SSDA903 data returns to indicate whether a placement is intended to be a permanent placement (yes/no).

4. **Recording of placement stability**

The way placement changes are coded in the SSDA903 returns raise important questions about the analysis and understanding of movement in care. At present a new episode is created when a child's legal status changes and/or when a child actually moves to a new placement (and consequently has a new carer). However, a new placement and thus a new episode are also created when:

a) the foster carer moves out of the LA area
b) a missing child returns to the same carer
c) when a foster placement becomes an adoptive placement

In all the above instances, a new episode and a placement change is created although in essence the carer has remained the same. In its present form, the episode data does not indicate whether the carer remained the same or not. An analysis of the current data would indicate the number of *types* of placements the children have had in care, but not the actual *stability* of placements and the number of carers the children have had in care. The above would affect any analyses of long-term fostering placements.

We would strongly urge an additional variable in the SSDA903 returns to indicate whether any new episode involved a change of carer (yes/no). This would be important in understanding stability and movement in care.

Conclusion

The analyses indicate that post order adoption disruption rate is very low. Over an 11-year follow-up period, the cumulative adoption disruption rate in Wales was about 3 in 100, which is the same rate as found in a similar study in England. Most adoptions disrupted in the teenage years. Children's older age at entry to care, delays in decision-making and moves in foster care all increased the risk of adoption disruption.

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Appendix A

Table A.1 UK studies on adoption disruption 1990-2013

Authors	Country	Sample size	Method	Length of follow up period)	Disruption definition	Pre-order disruption rate	Post Order disruption rate
(Fratter et al. 1991)	England	1,165	Special needs adoptions made by 24 VAAs 1980-1984. Age of children less than 3yrs old-12+years Survey	18 mths-6.6ys	Irrevocable breakdown before or after order	21%	
(Holloway 1997)	England	129	All children with a permanence plan in one LA 1986-1990. Review of administrative data and case records	3-5yrs	Any termination of the placement, except leaving the family after the child's 18th birthday or moving to independent living aged 16 plus.	2%	
(Quinton et al. 1998)	England	61 families	Late placed children 5-9yrs old from London LAs. Interviews with parents and social workers, measures and direct assessment of child completed by parents and teachers. Assessment one month after joining new family, at 6mths and one year later.	1yr	No longer living in the adoptive home	5%	
(Thoburn et al. 2000)	UK	210 special needs children placed by a VAA	Ethnic minority adopted children from the Fratter and colleagues 1991 sample. Case file and interviews with 38 families and 28 young people, Use of standardised measures	10-15 years		24%	
(Rushton et al. 2001)	England	72 families	72 families parenting 133 children. Sibling study. Face to face interviews with parents, social workers at 3mths and 12mths post placement	1 year	Child no longer living with adoptive family	10%	

Authors	Country	Sample size	Method	Length of exposure to disruption (follow up period)	Disruption definition	Pre-order disruption rate	Post Order disruption rate
(Selwyn et al. 2006)	England	97	97 older children (4-12yrs) placed for adoption 1991-1996 from one LA Case file review, measures completed by parents and teachers, and interviews with adoptive parents	5-10 years	Child no longer living with adoptive family	11%	6%
(Rushton et al. 2006)	England	99	Children 5-11 yrs old at placement Adopters interviewed at placement, one year, and six years later	On average 6yrs later	No longer living in the adoptive home	23%	
(Biehal et al. 2010)	England	97	Follow-up children aged 7-18yrs Postal survey Interviews	7.6yrs since entering care	No longer living in the adoptive home	13%	
(Dance et al. 2010)	England	131 children	Case file review Interviews with sub sample of adopters and social workers	6mths	Child no longer living with adoptive family	5%	
(Randall 2013)	England	328 children	All placements made by one VAA 2001-2011. Case file analysis of risk factors and support provided	2-12yrs	Child no longer living with adoptive family	3.8%	3.7%
(Beckett et al. 2013)	England	22 children adopted by non-relatives	Follow up of a complete cohort of 59 children involved in care proceedings in 2004-5 in one LA, 22 of whom were adopted. Case file study.	3-5 yrs	Complete termination of placement intended to be child's permanent home	14%	

Annex B

Table B.1 Variables in the adoption file held by the Welsh Government

Year_PR	Processing year (Financial Year)
LA	Local authority Code
CHILDID	Child ID given by Welsh Government
adop_no	Number of adopters
DATE_POC	Age at entry to care
BI_Deci	Local authority best interest decision
Match	Date matched with adopters
Placed	Data placed with adopters
Adopted	Date of adoption order
Foster	Was the child adopted by former foster carer/s
SEX	Sex
DOB	Date of Birth
No_adop	Number of adopters
Gen_ad	Gender of adopters
Stat_ad	Marital status of adopters
Eth_ad1	Ethnicity of adopter 1
Eth_ad2	Ethnicity of adopter 2
CLA_CODE	Child code given by local authority

Table B.2 Variables in the Episode file held by the Welsh Government

Variable	Label
Year_code	Processing Year (Financial Year)
Local_authority_code	Local authority
Child_code	Child ID given by Welsh Government
Episode_number	Episode number
Date_of_episode	Date of episode
Reason_episode_started_code	Reason episode started
Date_ceased	Date episode ceased
Reason_episode_finished_code	Reason episode ceased
Placement_postcode	Placement location
Category_of_need_code	Category of need code
Legal_status_code	Legal status
Placement_type_code	Placement type
Year_code	Reason episode ceased

Appendix C

C.1 The letter sent to adoption managers

University of BRISTOL

Beyond the Adoption Order

Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies
School for Policy Studies
8 Priory Road
Bristol BS8 1TZ

Dear Adoption Manager,

A STUDY OF THE CONTINUITY OF ADOPTIVE PLACEMENTS IN WALES

WELSH NATIONAL SURVEY OF ADOPTION MANAGERS

You may already be aware that the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies at the University of Bristol has been commissioned by the Welsh Government to investigate adoption disruption. This is an important study as there has been much conjecture, but little evidence, about the number of adoptions that disruption. As no central records are kept of adoption disruptions**,** we are relying on your experience and knowledge to identify the number of adoption disruptions that happen, ***after the adoption order.*** This letter is accompanied by an information sheet about the study; information about ethics, confidentiality, and data protection; and a paper copy of the survey. We would be very grateful if you could **please complete the survey by 05/04/2013**. You can either:

a) **Complete the secure survey online**: at https://www.survey.bris.ac.uk/sps/nationalsurvey

b) **Call us**: Fill in the survey that is attached to this letter and speak to us on the phone. We will record the information on a secure university computer. You can ring us on any weekday between 9am and 4pm.

Due to the sensitive nature of the data, **please do not post or e-mail** the survey back to us, unless using registered post or a secure password protected email. We would like to encourage *everyone* to respond. We know that some teams may not have all the information we are requesting, but please complete the survey as far as you are able, using information from letterbox, adoption allowances, and personal knowledge. We do realise that we are asking you to undertake additional work at a time when resources are constrained. However, we cannot emphasise enough how important your input will prove. We really do appreciate your help.

Yours sincerely,

Prof.Julie Selwyn
(Director)

Dinithi Wijedasa
(Research Associate)

C.2 The information sheet sent to adoption managers

INFORMATION SHEET

The research team at the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies at the University of Bristol has been commissioned by the Welsh Government to investigate the continuity of adoptive placements after an adoption order has been granted.

Why is this research important?

Adoption is a life changing experience for children and their adoptive families. In Wales, adoption has been used as an intervention for maltreated looked after children for more than three decades. During the last ten years, there has been a new Adoption and Children Act (2002), regulations, guidance and a set of National Minimum Standards introduced. Good quality assessments of children and adopters, careful matching of children's needs and parenting capacity, and planned adoption support are recognised in the regulations and guidance as essential for successful placements. While these improvements suggest that disruptions might decrease, other factors such as the high turnover of social work staff and court delays could be working in the opposite direction. In addition, the characteristics of children have been changing. More children have been entering care because of maternal

drug/alcohol misuse and the impact of such use during pregnancy and later parental neglect are known to have detrimental developmental effects.

Information on the rate of and reasons for adoption disruptions are needed to inform policy and practice in all aspects of the adoption process: assessment and training of adopters; preparation of children for adoption; and post-placement and post-adoption support. However, there has been no recent research on whether adoption disruptions are increasing or decreasing. We also do not know how the rates of adoption disruptions compare with disruptions for children in other kinds of permanent placements. This research is intended to begin to fill this gap in knowledge.

Most disruptions occur in any kind of placement before the making of orders, but this creates complexity for adoption research. Comparing stability of placements is complex because most children being placed for adoption are placed with 'strangers' whereas other types of permanency often involve *confirming* established relationships and placements. Therefore, if we were to compare children being *placed* for adoption with children who already had other types of orders, it would be a comparison of new placements with those that had lasted. It is therefore important to use the making of a legal order as the point at which disruption is measured and compared. Ascertaining the 'true' rate of adoption disruption is also difficult because the links between a child's pre-adoption and post-adoption history are removed at the time of the Adoption Order.

The Study

The aim of this research is to establish the rate of adoption disruption and to compare this with the disruption rate of other kinds of permanency options.

1. **Creating a national database to establish 'known' disruption rates for all types of Orders**

We have requested access data on all looked after children from the Welsh Government based on the SSDA903 returns (the annual local authority returns on looked after children) from 1st April 2002 to 31st March 2011. This is the best available data to calculate *national* disruption rates on Residence Order (ROs), Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) and long-term foster care.

However, it is not possible to identify in the dataset children returning to care after an adoption disruption post-Order as an adopted child is assigned a new unique child identifier if there is a re-entry to the care. Therefore, pre-adoption history and post-Order events cannot be linked on the SSDA903 datasets. However, if we are able to get the *pre-adoption* child identifier for adoptions that had broken down, these identifiers can be used to identify

the adoptive placements in the Welsh dataset that broke down after the Order. To obtain the pre-adoption child identifiers, we are undertaking a national survey of adoption team managers, as detailed below.

2. National survey of adoption and VAA managers in Wales

All adoption managers in Wales will be asked to complete a survey on children, who had an adoption order made between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2011. The survey will focus on instances where the adoption subsequently broke down, *after* the adoption order has been granted. The children may be back in care; living with birth family; living with the extended family; independently; or in some other arrangement.

This information will then be merged with the national data held by the Welsh Government on looked after and adopted children to explore the characteristics of children who had an adoption disruption compared with those who did not have a disruption.

Contact the research team:

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C.3 The information about ethics and confidentiality sent to adoption managers

ETHICS, CONFIDENTIALITY AND DATA PROTECTION

Ethical Approval and access to information

Ethical approval has been gained from the ethics committee of the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol. In addition, we have the **'approved researcher status' from the Secretary of State** in compliance with the regulations in the Adoption and Children Act (2002). The applicable regulations are set out below.

For adoptions before 2005 (pre-commencement adoptions):

Children Act 1989, S.83 (1) (b): The Secretary of State may conduct, or assist other persons in conducting, research into any matter connected with the *adoption of children.*

For adoption after 2005 (post-commencement adoptions):

The Disclosure of Adoption Information (Post-Commencement Adoptions) Regulations 2005, Part 3 (8)(2)(b) :*An adoption agency may disclose section 56 information (including protected information) to a person who is authorised in writing by the Secretary of State to obtain information for the purposes of research.*

XX City Council may also use your personal data, after it has been anonymised, to allow the statistical analysis of data to allow the Council to effectively target and plan the provision of services

✓ **CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY**

All data will use numerical identifiers to identify children. There are no names attached to the information that we are requesting from adoption managers. No identifiers will be used during the data reporting stage. Analyses will aggregate data and it will not be possible to identify individual children.

✓ **DATA PROTECTION**

The research will comply with the principles of the Data Protection Act 1998. The responses to the survey will only be seen by Dinithi Wijedasa and Julie Selwyn. All other data will be held in locked cabinets and password protected secure computers within the university precinct, accessible only to the research team.

✓ **RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE ADOPTION MANAGERS**

The appropriate guidance on the responsibilities of adoption managers are below:

The Adoption Guidance (Adoption and Children Act 2002, First revision: February 2011) Chapter 11(29):
An adoption agency may disclose to a researcher authorised in writing by the Secretary of State, section 56 information, and protected information. It is for the adoption agency to decide if it wishes to participate in any research, as the Secretary of State cannot commit any agency to research activity.

The Adoption Guidance (Adoption and Children Act 2002, First revision: February 2011) Chapter 11(32):
The adoption agency must keep a written record of any disclosure made under AIR 8 or 9 on the adoption case record. This record must include a description of the information disclosed, the date on which the disclosure was made, the person to whom the information was disclosed; and the reason for the disclosure.

We thought it might be helpful to suggest the wording that needs to be placed on children's adoption files:

"Information was disclosed by (name of person disclosing the data) to Julie Selwyn and Dinithi Wijedasa from the University of Bristol, who were authorised researchers approved by the Secretary of State. The researchers were funded by the Welsh Government to undertake a study on Adoption Disruption. This disclosure was released on dd/mm/yyyy and included the following information: Name of local authority that placed the child; Pre-adoption local authority child identifier; Date of birth; Gender; Whether the child was placed with local authority (LA) or Voluntary adoption agency (VAA) approved adopters ; Whether the child was adopted by the foster carer; Date of placement; Date of adoption order; Date of adoption disruption; and whether the child came back into care after the adoption broke down"

C.4 The survey sent to adoption managers

University of BRISTOL

Beyond the Adoption Order

A STUDY OF THE CONTINUITY OF ADOPTIVE PLACEMENTS IN WALES

NATIONAL SURVEY OF ADOPTION MANAGERS

This national survey of adoption managers in Wales is being conducted as part of a study funded by the Welsh Government to establish the number of adoption disruptions that occur *after* the adoption order.

We would be very grateful if you could **please complete the survey by 05/04/2013**. You can either:

c) **Complete the secure survey online**: at https://www.survey.bris.ac.uk/sps/nationalsurvey

d) **Call us**: Fill in the survey that is attached to this letter and speak to us on the phone. We will record the information on a secure university computer. You can ring us on any weekday between 9am and 4pm.

Due to the sensitive nature of the data, **please do not post or e-mail** the survey back to us, unless sent by registered post or password protected email. We understand that providing the information may not be an easy task, but would like to appeal to each one of you to respond, as every record will add to the accuracy of the information that will be reported at the end of the study. Please complete the survey as far as you are able, using information from letterbox, adoption allowances, and personal knowledge.

We would like to know the details of children whom you know of, who had experienced an adoption disruption, after the adoption order was granted.

To be included as a record in the survey the children will have to fulfil **both** these criteria:

- ✓ **Had an adoption order made between 1st April 2002 and 31st March 2011**
- ✓ **The adoption subsequently broke down and the child was no longer living with the adoptive family**

The information you provide will be collated by us and matched with the data from local authority statistical returns (SSDA903 returns) on looked after and adopted children. It is essential that you provide us with the **child's pre-adoption ID number** where possible, as this will enable us to match the information you supply with the child's record on SSDA903 returns.

Thank you very much for your time. If you need any more information or further clarification regarding this survey, please do not hesitate to contact us:

Dinithi Wijedasa
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Prof.Julie Selwyn
Email: j.selwyn@bristol.ac.uk
Phone: 0117 9546734

Before you complete the survey, please read the definitions below

Adoption Disruption

For the purpose of this study, adoption disruption has been defined as when the child is no longer living with the adoptive family. The child may have returned to care, be living with the adoptive extended family, the birth family, independently, or in some other arrangement.

Name of LA placing the child

Please indicate the name of the local authority that placed the child for adoption.

Pre-adoption local authority child identifier

The unique ID that the local authority had for each looked after child, before the child was legally adopted. It can include alphabetic and numeric characters.

Date of adoption order
Please record this in DD/MM/YYYY format (day/month/year).

Date of birth of the child
The date of birth must be recorded in DD/MM/YYYY format (day/month/year).

Gender
Please indicate whether the child is male (M) or female (F).

Date of placement
For children adopted by foster carers*:* date the placement became an adoptive placement, i.e. after the Adoption Decision Maker (ADM) agreed the link, or if a direct application, the date of the adoption order.

For other children*:* the day the child moved in with the adoptive family.

Date of adoption disruption
Please provide **any** information that you may have available, even if it is only the year of disruption.

Was the child placed with local authority (LA) or Voluntary adoption agency (VAA) approved adopters?
Please tick the relevant box to indicate whether the adoption order was granted to adopters approved by your local authority, adopters approved by another local authority or adopters approved by a voluntary adoption agency.

Was the child adopted by the foster carer?
Please tick the relevant box to indicate yes or no.

Did the child come back to care after the adoption disruption?
Please indicate whether the child came back into local authority care after the adoption disruption.

Any other information
Please give any other information that you think is useful. For example, please indicate sibling groups, or where the child went to, if the child did not return to care.

National Survey of Adoption Managers

1. **Today's Date:**……

2. **Your Name:**……

3. **Name of your local authority/VAA:**……

4. **Job title:**
   ……

5. **Telephone number:**
   ……

6. **E-mail:**
   ……

7. **Address:**……
   ……

8. **To your knowledge, how many children placed by YOUR local authority have experienced adoption disruptions, after having an adoption order granted between 1st April 2000 and 31st March 2011?** *(Do not include children placed by another LA with your adopters)*

   ……

9. **To your knowledge, how many children <u>placed by OTHER local authorities</u>, but living in your LA, have experienced adoption disruptions, after having an adoption order granted between 1st April 2000 and 31st March 2011?**

……

10. **Please give the following information about each child who experienced an adoption disruption, after having an adoption order granted between 1st April 2000 and 31st March 2011**

    1) Name of LA placing the child
    2) Pre-adoption local authority child ID
    3) Date of adoption order
    4) Date of birth of the child
    5) Gender
    6) Date of placement
    7) Date of adoption disruption
    8) Was the child placed with LA or VAA approved adopters
    9) Adopted by the foster carer?
    10) Did the child come back to care after the adoption disruption?
    11) Any other information (for ex: please indicate sibling groups, or where the child went to, if the child did not return to care)

11. **Would you like to receive a summary of the report at the end of this study? Yes/No**