

| Abuse in foster care: a review of the research

Report for the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

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February 2022

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Introduction

This review of UK and international evidence on abuse in foster care was commissioned by the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry and forms part of its wider investigations into the abuse of children in care in Scotland. Concerns about the abuse of children in foster care have a long history. In both Scotland and England the origins of child welfare systems lie in the operation of the Poor Law and, from the late 19th century, the work of charitable associations which boarded out orphaned, destitute or ill-treated children with substitute families, or placed them in residential institutions. Scotland's approach was distinctive as, unlike in England, the majority of these children were boarded out with families. Historical studies of children placed away from home suggest that many Scottish children placed with foster carers had positive experiences of boarding out and developed warm relationships with their carers. However, there is also evidence that some boarded-out children experienced cruelty at the hands of their foster carers.¹

From the early 20th century—and almost certainly before that time—newspaper reports on the trials of a small number of foster carers charged with severe abuse and neglect provide evidence that concerns about abuse in foster care have a long history. However, such trials were reported infrequently and it is likely that other children experienced ill-treatment too, which was neither recognised nor reported.

The first widely reported case of abuse in foster care in Britain was that of Denis O'Neill, a 12-year-old Welsh evacuee who experienced severe abuse and neglect while in foster care and died in 1945 following an assault by his foster father. Later that year, this was followed by the trial of the Scottish foster carers who subjected the two ████████ brothers to a brutal regime of extreme physical cruelty and neglect.² The impact of these cases and others, along with co-occurring concerns about abuse

¹ Lynn Abrams and Linda Fleming, [*Report into the Historic System to Protect and Prevent Abuse of Children in Scotland, 1948–1995: Report for the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry*](#) (Edinburgh: Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, 2019); Andrew Kendrick, Erin Lux, Sharon McGregor, and Richard Withington, *Development of Children's Care Services in Scotland: Report for the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry* (Edinburgh: Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, forthcoming).

² "Foster Parents on Trial", *The Scotsman*, ████████ 1945.

in residential care, led to the setting up of inquiries into the care of children in both residential and foster care, including the Monckton Report.³

Since that time, there have been further official inquiries into abuse in both foster and residential care including, among others, the Edinburgh Inquiry⁴ and the Utting Review.⁵ Serious Case Reviews and official inquiries into individual cases—such as the Reading Serious Case Review⁶ and the Wakefield Inquiry⁷—have confirmed that maltreatment in foster care may be extremely serious. Some foster carers have been imprisoned, including Eunice Spry, Kenneth Norton, and the two foster carers responsible for the sexual abuse of a succession of children in Wakefield. There have also been cases where children have died as a result of the abuse; including Shirley Woodcock in 1984 and Chelsey Essex in 2007. These high-profile cases can provide no evidence regarding the extent to which abuse by carers occurs, but they indicate that when it does occur, it may, in some cases, be extremely serious.

This report builds on our earlier review of research on abuse in foster care, which covered the period to December 2009.⁸ It brings together the findings from that review with those from studies published from 2010 to 2021 to provide a comprehensive account of the research on abuse in foster care.

Few studies have investigated the question of abuse in foster care in Scotland. In view of the limited Scottish research, this review includes evidence from non-research sources in Scotland, as well as evidence from research.

³ [cmd. 6636] HMSO, *Report by Sir Walter Monckton on the Circumstances Which Led to the Boarding Out of Dennis and Terence O'Neill at Bank Farm, Minsterley and the Steps Taken to Supervise Their Welfare*, (London: HMSO, 1945); [cmd. 6922] HCPP, *Report of the Care of Children Committee*, (1946); and [cmd. 6911] HCPP, *Scottish Home Department, Report of the Committee on Homeless Children*, (1946).

⁴ Kathleen Marshall, Cathy Jamieson, and Alan Finlayson, *Edinburgh's Children: The Report of the Edinburgh Inquiry into Abuse and Protection of Children in Care* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh City Council, 1999).

⁵ William Utting, *People like us: the report of the review of the safeguards for children living away from home* (London: HMSO, 1997).

⁶ Reading Local Safeguarding Children Board, *Serious Case Review: Overview Report, Subject: A Baby known as Child E*, (Reading: Reading Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2011).

⁷ Brian Parrott, Annie McIver, and June Thoburn, *Independent Inquiry Report into the Circumstances of Child Sexual Abuse by Two Foster Carers in Wakefield* (Wakefield: Wakefield Metropolitan District Council, 2007).

⁸ Nina Biehal, "Maltreatment in foster care: a review of the evidence", *Child Abuse Review*, 23, 2014, 48-60.

- Part 1 of this report focuses solely on Scotland. It reviews the non-research evidence on abuse in foster care in Scotland from 1930, including newspaper and online news reports, serious case reviews, and official inquiries.⁹
- Part 2 updates our previous review of research, examining both UK and international research on abuse and neglect (maltreatment) in foster care published in English. This review used systematic methods to identify relevant publications and assess their quality (see appendix on [Methods](#)).

⁹In 1930, responsibility for separating children from their families was transferred (following the [Local Government Act, 1929](#)) from the Poor Law guardians to local authorities.

Part 1: Evidence from media reports, inquiries and reviews in Scotland since 1930

This section of the report concentrates on non-research background literature related to Scotland and covers the period from 1930 to the present. As [Chapter 4](#) will show, research on abuse in foster care in Scotland is very limited. However, there is much we can learn from other sources and so this chapter provides an overview of the non-research evidence drawn from media reports, inquiries, reviews and other grey literature from 1930 onwards. A detailed history of the development of childcare and protection systems in Scotland is available elsewhere;¹⁰ our focus in this chapter is specifically on literature in relation to maltreatment in foster care.

Newspapers and online media

Media reports on maltreatment in foster care from 1930 onwards were identified via a search of the British Newspaper Archive for print newspapers, and from a combination of searches, including local, national, and specialist press for online reports. The search strategy used the terms foster, foster care, foster parent, boarded out, ill treatment, abuse and neglect, and included wildcard symbols to ensure that words starting with similar letters were included—for example abuse, abusive, abused. Further terms, such as local area names, were added subsequently to search for additional reports on the cases identified.

Print media sources

The earliest article identified was in the *Aberdeen Evening Express* on 22 March 1939.¹¹ This article discussed a report by the Royal Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children on parental neglect and also criticised the boarding out of children with “unsatisfactory foster parents”. Reflecting on the language used at the time, newspaper articles in the 1930s and 1940s primarily reported on “cruelty” and “ill-treatment” towards children who had been boarded out to live with foster carers.

¹⁰ See for example Lynn Abrams and Linda Fleming, [Report into the Historic System to Protect and Prevent Abuse of Children in Scotland, 1948–1995: Report for the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry](#) (Edinburgh: Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, 2019); Andrew Kendrick, Erin Lux, Sharon McGregor, and Richard Withington, *Development of Children’s Care Services in Scotland: Report for the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry* (Edinburgh: Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, forthcoming).

¹¹ [“Cause of child neglect. Severe impact of parents”](#), *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 22 March 1939.

During this period a further 85 articles mentioned the boarding out of children but made no reference to ill-treatment.¹² Most of these focused on the need to recruit more foster carers, and some praised the work of foster carers. Another group of articles discussed the widespread practice of boarding out city children in rural areas, often expressing concern about the impact of city children on rural communities.

As only the most serious cases of abuse and neglect in foster care went to the High Court, the Scottish press only reported on a few cases. Multiple articles in 1945 reported on a court case involving two brothers, [REDACTED] (age 12) and [REDACTED] (age 10), and the extreme cruelty shown by their foster carers in Fife.¹³



The Scotsman, [REDACTED] 1945. Reproduced with permission of JPI media

The wide coverage of the death of Dennis O'Neill at the hands of his foster father in England earlier in the year may have amplified media attention to the carers' trial.¹⁴ As the trial was underway, newspaper reports focused on details revealed during the

¹² See for example "[Homeless Children](#)", The Scotsman, 8 May 1948.

¹³ See for example "[Fife foster parents for High Court: Accused of ill-treating two boys](#)", [REDACTED] Evening Telegraph, [REDACTED] 1945. See also "[Foster parents charged: Cruelty to boarded out boys alleged](#)", [REDACTED] Courier, [REDACTED] 1945.

¹⁴ See for example "['I'd not have left rabbits in Mrs. Gough's care'. Criticism of boarding-out visitor responsible for O'Neill brothers](#)", Daily Record, 13 April 1945.

court case of the serious injuries the boys had received as a result of the severe and persistent physical abuse they had experienced.¹⁵

These two cases in 1945 appear to have generated much discussion of relevant services and the practice of boarding out children. After the conclusion of the [REDACTED] brothers' legal case, in August and September, newspapers reported on a post-trial conference in Fife at which the suggestion that boarded-out children should be visited by a qualified social worker, rather than a boarding-out visitor was discussed.¹⁶ Similarly, newspapers in Scotland were critical of officials in Newport responsible for the care of the O'Neill brothers,¹⁷ and one article described a report to the Aberdeen Public Assistance Committee, which claimed that conditions in Aberdeen were much better than in England, and that a similar case was unlikely to occur, despite the fact this was a month after the trial of the [REDACTED] foster parents in Scotland.¹⁸

The press reported on two further cases in Scotland in the 1990s. The first involved a couple who had fostered over 100 children over a 24-year period.¹⁹ It was reported that children were subjected to a range of cruel and abusive acts, including having their heads held under water in a cold bath if they wet the bed and being subject to indecent assault. According to the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* on 2 March 1993, social workers returned children who ran away to the foster carers' home.

In 1998, a case of historic sexual abuse in West Lothian was reported in which a woman, who was under 12 years old when the sexual abuse started, disclosed her experiences to her social worker several years later.²⁰ She was described as having

¹⁵ ["Boys' lips pulled with pliers – court allegation: Fife foster parents on trial in Dundee"](#), Aberdeen Evening Express, 31 July 1945. See also ["Allegation: Fife foster parents on trial in Dundee"](#), Aberdeen Evening Express, 2 August 1945; ["Foster parents on trial. Charge of ill-treatment of two boys. Doctor and head teacher tell of injuries found"](#), The Scotsman, 2 August 1945 (see picture above).

¹⁶ ["Mrs. Mann on cruelty case"](#), Coatbridge Express, 15 August 1945. See also ["Fife wants closer vigil on children"](#), Dundee Courier, 18 September 1945; ["Fife and boarded out children: Conference health after Walton trial"](#), Dundee Evening Telegraph, 17 September 1945.

¹⁷ ["Boarding out of O'Neill boys – K.C.'s criticism. Primary responsibility on Newport authority"](#), Aberdeen Evening Express, 28 May 1945. See also ["Too great a readiness to assume all was well". Authorities must share the blame, says K.C."](#), The Evening Telegraph, 28 May 1945.

¹⁸ ["Boarded children. Aberdeen official's assurances"](#), Aberdeen Press and Journal, 20 September 1945.

¹⁹ ["Foster parents accused of reign of terror"](#), Aberdeen Press and Journal, 2 March 1993.

²⁰ ["Foster father admits rape of girl in his care. Victim breaks her silence after 20 years"](#), Aberdeen Press and Journal, 5 November 1998.

been reluctant to disclose the abuse at the time due to fears of losing the experience of family life, despite the persistent sexual abuse she experienced.

Online media

A further 21 online articles published between 2008 and 2020 were identified, some of which reported on historic cases of abuse in Scotland dating from the 1950s onwards.

Two articles, one in March 2014 and one in March 2017, were based on adults' recollections of their experiences of being boarded out to live with families in rural Scotland in the 1950s and 1960s. The articles also referenced the apology made in 2010 by Gordon Brown to children who had been sent overseas to Australia and other Commonwealth countries, known as the child migrant generation.²¹ Three brothers aged four, six, and nine years, who had been removed from their parents' care, recalled being made to "live like slaves" and work for their foster carer, who was subsequently convicted of child neglect in 1956.²² Similarly, another man in his 50s described being taken from Glasgow in the 1960s to live in Tiree with a physically abusive carer who was already caring for another 21 children.²³

'She dragged me into the kitchen and pushed my head down on to the hot rings' Foster child demands government apology over abuse in care

Daily Record, 5 March 2017.

A more recent article, published in 2021, reported that Police Scotland had apologised to ██████████ of a girl who had died in foster care in 1960 aged two years old for withholding information about her death. The girl and her family were of Romany Gypsy heritage. At the time, her injuries were described as "self-inflicted" and two reviews of the case carried out by ██████████ Police in 1988 and 1993

²¹ For an account of child migration schemes in Scotland, and the experiences of Scottish children who were migrated, see Stephen Constantine, Marjory Harper, and Gordon Lynch, [*Child Abuse and Scottish Children sent Overseas through Child Migration Schemes: Report for the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry*](#) (Edinburgh: Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, 2020)

²² ["There was no childhood for us': Brothers torn from their families and forced to live as slaves from the age of FOUR"](#), The Mirror, 30 March 2014.

²³ ["She dragged me into the kitchen and pushed my head down on to the hot rings'. Foster child demands government apology over abuse in care"](#), Daily Record, 5 March 2017.

concluded that the death had been “fully investigated.” A third review in 2006 challenged the earlier findings, but this information was not shared with the [REDACTED] or other family members.²⁴

A male former foster carer was convicted and given a prison sentence in 2019 for sexually abusing five children, at least one of whom was in his care, over a number of years starting in 1968. Although he denied the charges, the article reports he had disclosed the fact he had abused children to a psychiatrist. The accounts of the abuse of different children were described as “so similar in time, character and circumstances that they mutually corroborated each other.”²⁵

Several other foster carers were identified in reporting on court cases related to abuse that had taken place between the 1970s and 1990s. A case reported in May 2017 followed the conviction of a foster carer for sexual abuse and rape offences occurring in Dunfermline between 1975 and 1987 against three girls, the youngest of whom was aged four years at the time the abuse began.²⁶

Maybole foster parent jailed for 10 years after 'cruel, cowardly and wicked' catalogue of rape and sexual abuse against children

Ronald Wilson was unanimously convicted in March 2017 of three rape offences and indecency and indecent assault crimes against three girls.

Daily Record, 12 May 2017.

Another court case in March 2019 resulted in a conviction for abuse that had taken place in Glasgow between 1980 and 1986, and the article mentions a man who had been abused as a boy while in foster care, describing his “31 year fight to get justice”.²⁷ The article also reported that one boy told the jury that he had “submitted to sexual abuse” out of fear that he would otherwise be returned to residential care.

²⁴ [REDACTED]
September 2021.

²⁵ “[Paedophile pensioner jailed for raping girl, 13, and sexually abusing children as young as three](#)”, Edinburgh Evening News, 27 September 2019.

²⁶ See for example “[Maybole foster parent jailed for 10 years after 'cruel, cowardly and wicked' catalogue of rape and sexual abuse against children](#)”, Daily Record, 12 May 2017.

²⁷ “[Scout master jailed for sexually abusing two boys](#)”, BBC News, 13 March 2019.

Another former foster carer was convicted of the abuse of several boys in Perth in the early 1990s at a court case held in 2008.²⁸ At least one of the boys was placed in foster care with the perpetrator at the time the abuse occurred. In a similar case, a man in East Lothian was convicted in 2019 of serious sexual abuse against nine children since the 1990s. An article on *The Times* website, dated April 2019, reported that he had tried to put himself forward to become a foster carer, including for one girl he abused, but social workers prevented him from doing so.²⁹

Serial sex offender tried to foster child he abused

The Times, 9 April 2019.

The fifth case involved a foster carer who was convicted of physically assaulting three children in her care between 1992 and 1995. The abuse was reported to the police in 2017. One of her former foster children, quoted in the article, described being tied to a bed for long periods and being shut in a dark cupboard and noted “now we have been believed after years of being told we are making things up.”³⁰

Several online articles in 2017 reported on a case in Glasgow, involving three sisters who started claims against Glasgow City Council in relation to being physically and sexually abused in the 1990s and 2000s by foster carers, a male and female couple, approved by the local authority.³¹ The articles reported that although the male carer was ordered to leave the foster home after separate complaints emerged, insufficient monitoring enabled him to return and continue to abuse the girls.³² The timing of this case was similar to a Supreme Court ruling that Nottinghamshire County Council

²⁸ [“Foster carer jailed after abuse”](#), BBC News, 18 November 2008.

²⁹ [“Serial sex offender tried to foster child he abused”](#), The Times, 9 April 2019.

³⁰ [“Cruel Scots foster mother who beat children in her care with wooden spoon avoids jail”](#), Daily Record, 12 July 2021.

³¹ [“Three sisters sue council over alleged child abuse by foster couple branded ‘two of the worst humans’”](#), The Mirror, 20 November 2017. See also [“Sisters take legal action against Glasgow City Council after foster parent ‘abuse’”](#), The National, 21 November 2017; [“Glasgow foster parents accused of sickening child abuse. ‘They were two of the worst humans’”](#), Glasgow Live, 20 November 2017.

³² [“Sisters sue council over alleged abuse by foster parents”](#), BBC News, 20 November 2017.

was vicariously liable for abuse committed by foster carers towards a child in their care.³³

NEWS

21st November 2017

Sisters take legal action against Glasgow City Council after foster parent 'abuse'

The National, 21 November 2017.

The media reported on four further cases in Scotland relating to more recent abuse since 2000. One involved a man, the son of foster carers, who was convicted in 2008 of the sexual abuse of three siblings fostered by his family over a number of years.³⁴ The abuse was only disclosed after the man had left the family home and moved into shared accommodation with friends elsewhere. The second involved a foster carer in Fife who plead guilty in 2012 to the rape of one girl from the age of 11 years, and the attempted rape of a three-year-old girl between May 2006 and November 2007.³⁵ The third involved a male foster carer convicted in 2016 who sexually abused two girls aged 13 and 14 years, including one in his care. This abuse was discovered when the mother of one girl found text messages on her daughter's phone.³⁶ The fourth involved a female foster carer convicted in 2019 of physically abusing an 11-year-old girl between January 2015 and August 2016. The article reported the girl said the foster carer told her she would be "out on the streets" and sent to residential care if she disclosed the abuse.³⁷

In 2017 the Scottish legal press reported that the conviction of a foster carer for sexual abuse of two children in his care had been quashed because of failures at the original trial.³⁸

³³ "[Council vicariously liable for foster carers' abuse, Supreme Court rules](#)", Law Society of Scotland, 18 October 2017.

³⁴ "[Six years for foster care abuse](#)", BBC News, 2 September 2008.

³⁵ "[David Leggatt admits sex assaults on girls in Fife](#)", BBC News, 22 November 2012.

³⁶ "[Clifford Warde jailed for filming sex abuse](#)", BBC News, 2016. See also "[Former foster carer Clifford Warde handed prison term for sexual offences against children](#)", Alloa & Hillfoots Advertiser, 7 December 2016.

³⁷ "[Cruel foster carer who assaulted 11-year-old girl spared jail](#)", Daily Record, 10 July 2019.

³⁸ "[Foster carer's sexual assault conviction quashed following 'defective representation' appeal](#)", Scottish Legal News, 15 September 2017.

Overview: media reporting on maltreatment in foster care

In most cases, the print and online articles were relatively brief news items focused on the process or outcomes of court cases. It is therefore not possible to determine from these sources how allegations by or about children in foster care were addressed by agencies, whether assessments and supervision of foster carers had missed or responded inappropriately to previous allegations or concerns about carers' behaviour, and what support children received at the time or subsequently.

Perpetrators in the reported cases were predominantly male foster carers, but also included female foster carers and the child of a foster carer. It is notable that in several cases, the media reported that perpetrators were not only foster carers but also held other statutory or community roles that involved working with children. For example, the foster carer convicted of sexual abuse in Glasgow carried out during the 1980s was also a scoutmaster,³⁹ and the foster carer convicted of similar offences in Perth during the 1990s had also been a football coach and had previously managed childcare services in another local authority.⁴⁰

Earlier reports up to the 1940s tended to contain more details about individual children who were abused, including their names and other information that could identify them. In more recent reporting, with the exception of adults who had come forward to disclose historical abuse, children's names were withheld, although their ages, genders, and sometimes the local authority in which the abuse occurred were mentioned.

³⁹ "[Scout master jailed for sexually abusing two boys](#)", BBC News, 13 March 2019.

⁴⁰ "[Foster carer jailed after abuse](#)", BBC News, 18 November 2008.

Evidence from official inquiries and reviews

Eight reports of inquiries, reviews and other work undertaken in Scotland that included material on maltreatment in foster care were identified, including a UK review that referred to one case from Scotland. The reports comprised a mixture of national reports, reports related to individual regional councils or local authorities, and analysis of case reviews. Two additional reports were identified that addressed maltreatment of children in care, and included children in foster care, but where it was difficult to glean whether this included children maltreated in foster care.

All inquiries and reviews followed allegations or convictions related to the maltreatment of children in care, particularly residential care. Each report is described briefly below, followed in [Chapter 3](#) by a summary of what can be learned from these reports for foster care. Although it is almost certainly the case that other reviews or inquiries may have been carried out in the period since 1930, our search results were limited to reports that were available and accessible to the research team, within Covid-19 restrictions, during the search period for this review.

A number of reports dating from the early 1990s focused on concerns about children's experiences in residential care, but few have referred specifically to abuse in foster care. We have included selected material from these reports in the current review where relevant to maltreatment of children in foster care. For example, the review prepared for the Lothian Regional Council, ***Listen – Take Seriously What They Say*** (1993), addressed how complaints from young people in care should be handled.⁴¹ Although the report was commissioned following a member of staff's conviction for offences committed against girls in residential care, the report referred to the needs of young people in foster care too. Pertinent recommendations from the report highlighted the need for staff to "continue the present readiness...to hear children and to recognise their rights as individuals", as well as the need for a consistent and sensitive procedure for investigating complaints, with an appropriate level of independence within the department.

The ***Predictors of abuse in foster care*** (1995) report was commissioned by Tayside Regional Council social work department, following a meeting of a multi-disciplinary group of social work, policy, and child psychiatry professionals in the light of

⁴¹ Alan Finlayson and Alison Newman, [*Listen – Take Seriously What They Say: a review of present and planned arrangements for responding to complaints from young people in care, with recommendations for further action*](#) (Edinburgh: Lothian Regional Council Social Work, 1993).

concerns about several instances of abuse in foster care in the region.⁴² It was based on a qualitative survey of social workers and a case file analysis for “all instances of substantiated abuse” in foster care in the region from January 1990 to September 1994. Twenty-four incidents of substantiated abuse involving 22 children and young people cared for in 13 foster families were identified. The majority of children (18) experienced physical abuse—“smacked, hit or physically mishandled”—and six experienced sexual abuse, ranging from inappropriate sexual requests to sexual abuse over an unknown period. Less information was available on how the agency responded to allegations or substantiated instances of abuse, although the authors note that practice was inconsistent: comparing two cases of smacking, in one case involving a single recorded incident the carer was charged by the police, while in another case involving multiple incidents, the police were not informed and the agency took no action other than reminding the carers of departmental policy. Finding that some files lacked adequate or clearly recorded information, the authors highlighted the importance of case files containing comprehensive and up-to-date information.

The ***Children’s Safeguards Review*** (1997), sometimes referred to as the *Kent Report*, examined child protection across a variety of arrangements away from home, including foster care.⁴³ The Minister of State at the Scottish Office ordered the inquiry, following “an appalling catalogue of offences against children”, which had led to a number of previous inquiries into cases of abuse of children living across different settings; including residential care, a specialist boarding school, a children’s hospital, and foster care. The breadth of the inquiry limited the depth in which it explored maltreatment in foster care. However, in highlighting the lack of knowledge about the abuse of children in care in general, the author explicitly cited foster care as an area where research was particularly scarce. As several of the recommendations arising from the inquiry applied to all children being cared for away from home, subsequent reports related to foster care also referenced material from this report.

In relation to foster care, the review recommended that fostering should be brought within the inspection process. The report also included several recommendations to address issues in child protection that would be relevant to children experiencing maltreatment in foster care, such as increased funding to *Childline*, continued

⁴² Andrew Kendrick and Stewart Brodie, *Predictors of Abuse in Foster Care: Report to Tayside Regional Social Work Department* (Unpublished, 1995).

⁴³ Roger Kent, *Children’s Safeguards Review* (Edinburgh: Social Work Services Inspectorate, 1997).

support for *Who Cares? Scotland*, a proposed national network of children's advocates, and a pilot scheme for a refuge for children who have run away from care placements.

The Scottish Office accepted the recommendation that fostering be brought into the inspection process in their response to the report the following year, which noted that a change in legislation would be required.⁴⁴ The Scottish Office also proposed that the availability of foster care be expanded to reduce the number of children living in residential care and noted that national standards on foster care were being developed with a national working party. Notably, the Scottish Office accepted Kent's recommendations in relation to improving how data on child protection were collected and reported, including Recommendation 3: "There should be studies of the aetiology of the abuse of children living away from home and research into abuse in foster care". It noted that there was "agreement that meaningful research in this area is needed" and stated the Scottish Office Central Research Unit would follow up the recommendation.

The ***Edinburgh's Children*** (1999) inquiry, established by Edinburgh City Council, followed a High Court case, which led to two former care workers being imprisoned for serious abuse of children in residential care in Edinburgh and Lothian between 1973 and 1987, initially involving charges related to 27 children.⁴⁵ Although the bulk of the inquiry focused on residential care, the inquiry interviewed three foster carers, and several recommendations in the report applied to foster care. In line with the *Kent Report*, the inquiry echoed the proposal to bring foster care into the inspection process. Similarly, it emphasised the value of children's access to a range of sources of support and advocacy, including within the local authority via Children's Rights Officers, and through external organisations such as *Who Cares? Scotland*. Three further recommendations aimed to ensure that children could speak directly and independently to Children's Hearings panels, outwith the presence of their foster carers or parents and other adults, and with a representative of their choice present. It also stated that information on allegations, including those that were withdrawn or

⁴⁴ The Scottish Office, [*The Government's Response to the Kent Report on Children's Safeguards Review*](#) (Edinburgh: HSMO, 1998).

⁴⁵ Kathleen Marshall, Cathy Jamieson, and Alan Finlayson, [*Edinburgh's Children: The Report of the Edinburgh Inquiry into Abuse and Protection of Children in Care*](#) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh City Council, 1999).

unsubstantiated, should be made available to panel members at the next Children's Hearing for the child.

The inquiry report also addressed the question of how social work departments should deal with investigations. It briefly described concerns raised by a former Edinburgh employee about the handling of an allegation against a foster carer where workers within the local area handled the investigation. While noting that they had not investigated the case further, the authors recommended that investigations into allegations against foster carers should be carried out independently and therefore kept separate from ongoing practice and monitoring by social workers carrying responsibilities for foster care in the local area. They added:

It would be an antidote to the tensions resulting from the dual responsibility of resource team workers in recruiting and supporting foster carers. It would act as a counterbalance to the perspective of the weary social worker, who may recognise that the placement is not ideal but proceed because it is all they have got. Quite simply, if the placement is not good, it is not good enough.⁴⁶

A number of other recommendations related to training were made, including that panel members and social workers should be trained and supported to understand the long-term impact of experiences in residential or foster care. In discussing training for social workers, it highlighted that training should address the potential for negative experiences in care, and that workers needed to be prepared to hear and take seriously concerns or allegations and be clear about their responsibilities to respond and take further action where appropriate.

Within the past decade, a number of reports have been published on the analysis of case reviews in Scotland. In the first report ***Audit and Analysis of Significant Case Reviews*** (2012), the authors examined 56 significant case reviews and 43 initial case reviews conducted in Scotland between 2007-12.⁴⁷ The report described one significant case review involving foster care that matched the description of a significant case review identified in searches for the current report. Another case, described in brief, involved abuse of a child in kinship care, but it was unclear who had perpetrated the abuse. The analysis highlighted a range of learning points, some

⁴⁶ Kathleen Marshall, Cathy Jamieson, and Alan Finlayson, [*Edinburgh's Children: The Report of the Edinburgh Inquiry into Abuse and Protection of Children in Care*](#) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh City Council, 1999).

⁴⁷ Sharon Vincent and Alison Petch, [*Audit and Analysis of Significant Case Reviews*](#) (Edinburgh: Scottish Government, 2012).

of which apply to any family type, including fostering families; such as the need to keep families/carers informed throughout the significant case review; to reflect critically on the child's story, experiences, and feelings; to explore the reasons for children's challenging behaviour at school and/or absconding from foster care; and to include information in significant case reviews on whether children and families were informed and involved in the process.

Following this analysis, the Care Inspectorate published the first of three triennial reviews, *Learning from Significant Case Reviews in Scotland* (2016), based on an analysis of significant case reviews completed between April 2012 and March 2015.⁴⁸ Twenty significant case reviews involving 23 children and young people were reviewed, involving a mixture of maltreatment—10 children or young people recorded as experiencing abuse, neglect, or physical injuries—and other forms of harm, such as sudden unexpected death in infancy, drug overdose, and suicide. The report notes that two of the children were living in foster care and two in kinship care at the time when they were harmed or died, and that in two cases "charges were brought against parents and kinship carers but subsequently dropped". However, it is not possible to identify from the data presented which experiences or outcomes involved children in foster or kinship care, and therefore whether any of the significant case reviews related to maltreatment in foster care.

Similarly, the second triennial review, *Learning from Significant Case Reviews* (2019), reported on an analysis of 25 significant case reviews carried out between April 2015 and March 2018, which concerned 44 children and young people.⁴⁹ Twenty-two of the significant case reviews related to abuse and neglect, but none of the children were recorded as living in foster care at the time of concern, although three were living with friends or relatives.⁵⁰ The report did not mention foster care, and there was no indication that the children experienced abuse or neglect while in kinship care.

A further report by the Care Inspectorate, *A Report on the Deaths of Looked After Children in Scotland 2012 – 2018* (2020), drew together themes emerging from the

⁴⁸ Care Inspectorate, [Learning from Significant Case Reviews in Scotland](#) (Dundee: Care Inspectorate, 2016).

⁴⁹ Care Inspectorate, [Learning from Significant Case Reviews](#) (Dundee: Care Inspectorate, 2019).

⁵⁰ Care Inspectorate, [Learning from Significant Case Reviews](#) (Dundee: Care Inspectorate, 2019), 44.

deaths of 61 care-experienced children and young people.⁵¹ Although eight of the children were recorded as living in foster care, kinship care, or residential care (these categories were not disaggregated); there is no specific mention of maltreatment after children became looked after away from home, either in relation to causes of death or the care received by children and young people prior to their deaths.

The most recent triennial review from the Care Inspectorate, ***Triennial Review of Initial Case Reviews and Significant Case Reviews (2018 – 2021): Impact on Practice*** (2021), examined the key findings from 50 Initial Case Reviews—which did not proceed to full Significant Case Reviews—23 Significant Case Reviews and two thematic learning reviews.⁵² Similar to previous reports, the information is not disaggregated in a way that makes it possible to identify findings related to children in foster care, although it noted that the Significant Case Reviews all concerned children and young people who were either living at home or in residential care, while a minority (25%) of children and young people who were subjects of Initial Case Reviews were looked after and accommodated—living with relatives, in foster care, residential care, or a supported tenancy.

In addition, an analysis of learning from 52 case reviews in England, Scotland and Wales was published by CoramBAAF as a good practice guide: ***Safeguarding Children Living with Foster Carers, Adopters and Special Guardians: Learning from Case Reviews 2007 – 2019*** (2020).⁵³ The authors identified 52 reviews—serious case reviews in England and Wales; significant case reviews in Scotland—between 2007 and 2019 which related to children living with foster carers, adopters, or special guardians⁵⁴. Although only one significant case review from Scotland was identified, it is notable that of the full 52 reviews, in 39 cases children were living with foster carers. Learning from these reviews therefore provides an important broader context for understanding the harm that can result from maltreatment in foster care.

⁵¹ Care Inspectorate, [A report on the deaths of looked after children in Scotland 2012-2018](#) (Dundee: Care Inspectorate, 2020).

⁵² Care Inspectorate, [Triennial review of Initial Case Reviews and Significant Case Reviews \(2018-2021\): Impact on practice](#) (Dundee: Care Inspectorate, 2021).

⁵³ Hedy Cleaver and Wendy Rose, *Safeguarding Children living with Foster Carers, Adopters and Special Guardians: Learning from case reviews 2007-2019* (London: CoramBAAF, 2020).

⁵⁴ Special Guardianship is a court order in England which grants parental responsibility to someone with a close relationship to the child, such as family member or former foster carer. For further information see "[What is Special Guardianship?](#)", Coram BAAF, Retrieved 23 December 2021.

Learning from inquiries and reviews

A number of important themes can be identified from the inquiries and reviews carried out in Scotland. A summary of this learning from the grey literature is presented below, with references to additional sources where relevant.

Enduring lack of focus on foster care

A recurring recommendation from the above inquiries and reviews was the need for a greater focus on foster care as distinct from other care arrangements. Multiple reports at both local and national level were published in the 1990s, including reviews and inquiries commissioned following serious concerns about severe physical and sexual abuse of children in care in a number of local authority areas in Scotland. This timing raises two issues. First, as evidenced in the media reports and legal cases that had been brought to the High Court, there have been publicly documented cases of, and concerns about, maltreatment from at least 1939, more than 50 years earlier than the first of these reports. Second, 25 years on from this evidence that maltreatment in foster care was formally recognised at a systemic level, it remains the case that relatively little attention has been paid to abuse in foster care compared to residential care. This is despite the authors of these reports acknowledging the urgency of the task, and calling attention to the issue as early as 1994:

Given the difficulties which have been identified in assessment and review procedures being able to screen out *all* abusive families, the emphasis in relation to selection, training and retention of foster carers must be that child abuse, including child sexual abuse, is high on the agenda of the social work agencies. This must incorporate the fact that child abuse and child sexual abuse takes place in foster care.⁵⁵

There are additional gaps that have emerged since the publication of previous reviews. For example, our searches did not identify any material on maltreatment in foster care placements secured by Permanence Orders, as opposed to other care arrangements for long-term fostering. As Permanence Orders are a Scottish-specific legal order, there may be differences from children's experiences in other legal contexts.

⁵⁵ Andrew Kendrick, *Fostering Assessment in the Context of Child Sexual Abuse: A literature review* (Dundee: Tayside Social Work Department, 1994), in Andrew Kendrick and Stewart Brodie, *Predictors of Abuse in Foster Care: Report to Tayside Regional Social Work Department* (Unpublished, 1995), 12. Emphasis in the original.

In the reports on analyses of significant case reviews and Care Inspectorate data, it appeared that only one significant case review or death of a child in care involved abuse perpetrated by a foster family. This finding in relation to significant case reviews seems somewhat surprising considering the rates of allegations identified in UK and international research on maltreatment in foster care—discussed in subsequent chapters—as well as the cases described in media and other reports from Scotland. The publication⁵⁶ and refinement⁵⁷ in recent years of national guidance for undertaking significant case reviews may mean this changes in future analyses.

The importance of children’s perspectives

Nearly all the inquiries and reviews gathered some information directly from children and young people, or drew on secondary sources—such as interviews conducted previously—to represent children’s views alongside other information gathered from a wide range of professionals, including social workers, police, medical professionals, psychologists, and children’s rights officers. In the ***Edinburgh’s Children*** report, a book written by one of the young people—referred to as Child H—about his experiences in residential care and subsequent adoption was described as providing “a very helpful, practical insight into what life in care was like for this primary school child; what he perceived as the strengths and weaknesses of the residential care system and the staff who looked after him, including his field social worker.”⁵⁸ There is long-standing recognition of the contribution children, young people and adults with personal experience of care can make to improving policy and practice. However, reflecting the broader pattern discussed above, most of the children’s accounts related to experiences in residential care, and there were far fewer examples of personal perspectives on maltreatment in foster care.

Similarly, we found little information about what happened next for children after abuse was identified and how their experiences affected their subsequent lives, although clearly maltreatment in care, particularly where this remains undiscovered or unacknowledged, can have long-term effects. An article in the *Scottish Journal of*

⁵⁶ See Scottish Government, [National Guidance for Child Protection Committees for Conducting a Significant Case Review](#) (Edinburgh: Scottish Government, 2015).

⁵⁷ See Scottish Executive, [Protecting Children and Young People: Interim Guidance for Child Protection Committees for Conducting a Significant case Review](#) (Edinburgh: Scottish Executive, 2007).

⁵⁸ Kathleen Marshall, Cathy Jamieson, and Alan Finlayson, [Edinburgh’s Children: The Report of the Edinburgh Inquiry into Abuse and Protection of Children in Care](#) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh City Council, 1999), 60.

Residential Child Care, Why Historic Abuse? noted the long-term impact for adults who experienced abuse in residential or foster care as children, which is echoed in the media reports of adults seeking justice or an apology for the actions of individual carers and/or the state institutions responsible for their care.⁵⁹ Overall, however, across the identified reports few details were available on the children's perspectives on the impact of the abuse, how the surrounding adults responded, and what had helped, or would have helped them recover. This does not necessarily mean that children's views were not sought, as in some reports information may have been omitted to protect children's privacy. Nevertheless, it highlights an important gap in knowledge available for wider learning, and one that is compounded by the lack of research in Scotland.

There are signs that the policy and practice landscape in Scotland has already shifted towards recognising the existence and impact of poor experiences in the care system. In addition to the evidence being gathered about the abuse of children in care for the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry, the Independent Care Review involved hearing direct and detailed accounts of children and young people's lives, including those with poor experiences across care arrangements. Agencies at local and national level are now beginning to engage with the work to realise the ambitions of the Promise, which brings a particular focus to centring care-experienced young people's voices.

Context of maltreatment

Across the varied sources of grey literature from Scotland, there was limited detailed evidence in relation to risk and protective factors of maltreatment in foster care. Nevertheless, some reports raised or suggested important points about the context in which maltreatment took place.

The ***Predictors of abuse in foster care*** report highlighted that many of the children who were abused in foster care had already experienced high levels of instability, including prior to entering care and, for some children, multiple moves in foster care and/or residential care, or in and out of care.⁶⁰ Two children had also been abused in

⁵⁹ Samina Karim, "[Why 'historic' abuse? Experiences of children reporting abuse historically](#)", *Scottish Journal of Residential Foster Care*, vol.16, 3, 2017. See also Samina Karim, [Power and the historic abuse of children in care](#), PhD thesis, 2020.

⁶⁰ Andrew Kendrick and Stewart Brodie, *Predictors of Abuse in Foster Care: Report to Tayside Regional Social Work Department* (Unpublished, 1995).

previous placements. While noting the contradictions in the wider evidence base on predicting abuse behaviour, and the limitations of data available in their own case study analysis, the authors raised three issues. First, the context in which abuse took place: several placements were described as “difficult”, with children and young people’s distress reflected in “demanding and challenging” behaviour, and carers’ own stress exacerbated by other circumstances, such as bereavement, redundancy, or caring for a family member who was unwell. Second, information about carers over time was not always drawn together in ways that might identify patterns of concern. Third, in one instance involving a child who had been raised as a Muslim, it appeared that assumptions about the child’s interpretation of events were based on cultural stereotyping.

Although only one review from Scotland was included in the ***Safeguarding Children Living with Foster Carers, Adopters and Special Guardians*** analysis, the outcomes for children directly involved in these reviews (including death and serious harm) are a stark reminder of the consequences for some children as a result of maltreatment in foster care.⁶¹ In a second publication, ***Safeguarding children living with foster carers, adopters and special guardians: A guide to reflective practice***, the messages from the research are summarised in relation to five key areas: assessing and selecting carers; ensuring children’s welfare, safety and nurture; supporting carers; maintaining respectful uncertainty; and collaborating in the interests of the child.⁶² Although not primarily derived from practice in Scotland, the material resonates with the findings from reviews and inquiries outlined in this section.

Looking across the range of grey literature underlines the need for assessments, supervision, and decision-making processes to be aware of and consider the potential risk of maltreatment from carers, but also other adults and children with whom children in foster care may spend time. For example, one of the court cases described in newspaper reports involved the birth son of foster carers who had been sexually abusing children in their care for a number of years.⁶³

⁶¹ Hedy Cleaver and Wendy Rose, *Safeguarding Children living with Foster Carers, Adopters and Special Guardians: Learning from case reviews 2007-2019* (London: CoramBAAF, 2020).

⁶² Hedy Cleaver and Wendy Rose, *Safeguarding Children living with Foster Carers, Adopters and Special Guardians: Learning from case reviews 2007-2019* (London: CoramBAAF, 2020).

⁶³ “[Six years for foster care abuse](#)”, BBC News, 2 September 2008.

Disclosure

The grey literature raises important points in relation to how maltreatment comes to light, and this is one area where more granular consideration is given to improving practice and policy. Several sources described children feeling unwilling or unable to disclose or alert adults to the abuse due to fear of consequences, including being removed from the carers; concerns they would not be believed; awareness of previous inappropriate response to disclosures; or lack of belief that anything would change as a result. An article in 2017 reported on barriers to children's disclosures and adults' responses historically, including how social constructs of children, abuse and social work practice at the time exacerbated the risk of children feeling or being unable to disclose experiences safely to adults.⁶⁴

In the ***Predictors of abuse in foster care*** report, 12 of the 24 incidents came to light when the child disclosed the abuse to their birth mother, teacher, social worker, or new foster carer. In six cases, either another child disclosed the incident, or it was discovered when another child was abused. Neighbours alerted social work in four cases, and in two cases the foster carers reported it themselves. Eighteen cases involved physical abuse and six cases involved sexual abuse, but the report did not identify whether type of abuse was associated with the mode of disclosure.⁶⁵

The ***Edinburgh's Children*** inquiry reported that the presence of carers or birth parents at Children's Hearings had inhibited children from making disclosures to the panel. Where there was a continuity of members between panels, and children had at least one familiar face at the panel, they were more likely to feel comfortable to express concerns. Similarly, relationships between abusers and other familiar adults—for example, a social worker being married to a residential worker at their children's home—had deterred children from feeling able to raise what was happening with adults around them. As noted earlier, recommendations in the report aimed to strengthen practice to ensure children had opportunities to speak directly and

⁶⁴ Samina Karim, "[Why 'historic' abuse? Experiences of children reporting abuse historically](#)", *Scottish Journal of Residential Foster Care*, vol.16, 3, 2017.

⁶⁵ Andrew Kendrick and Stewart Brodie, *Predictors of Abuse in Foster Care: Report to Tayside Regional Social Work Department* (Unpublished, 1995).

independently at Children's Hearings, and to access sources of support within and outwith the local authority more readily.⁶⁶

Conclusion: implications for practice and policy

As Kendrick and colleagues, among others, have pointed out, a focus on concerns about residential care has significantly outpaced attention paid to abuse in foster care.⁶⁷ While there is a long-standing acknowledgement that a stronger research evidence base is needed, there are nevertheless clear indicators from the grey literature that a small number of children in Scotland, as in other countries, experience maltreatment in foster care and that such maltreatment has not always been recognised quickly enough, nor responded to appropriately.

As described above, a number of recommendations across the reports were aimed at or relevant to preventing, identifying, and responding to maltreatment in foster care, broadly in relation to areas including:

- Assessment, supervision and review of foster carers,
- Children's access to a range of sources of support,
- Training for social workers, panel members and others,
- Complaints systems and reporting,
- Responding to and recording concerns or allegations, and
- Investigations of allegations and related support.

However, the picture remains a partial one. Particularly urgent gaps include the lack of information on children's experiences of the systems in Scotland when abuse occurs, and how agencies and individuals have responded at the local level. These gaps risk hampering practice and policy efforts to address maltreatment in the current foster care system, and particularly within the specific policy and legal landscape in Scotland. In order to provide a wider context, drawing on evidence from the UK and internationally, in the subsequent chapters we review the research on a range of aspects of maltreatment in foster care.

⁶⁶ Kathleen Marshall, Cathy Jamieson, and Alan Finlayson, *Edinburgh's Children: The Report of the Edinburgh Inquiry into Abuse and Protection of Children in Care* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh City Council, 1999).

⁶⁷ Andrew Kendrick, Moyra Hawthorn, Samina Karim, and Julie Shaw, *Scotland: Historic Abuse in Care and Human Right*, in Joanna Sköld and Shurlee Swain (eds), *Apologies and the Legacy of Abuse of Children in 'Care'*, Palgrave Studies in the History of Childhood (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Part 2: Evidence from research

The extent of the problem: UK evidence

This chapter discusses the UK research on abuse in foster care, focusing first on the UK as a whole and second, specifically on Scotland. Few UK studies have directly addressed this topic and much of the literature that does exist has focused on carers' experience of allegations of abuse, with little attention to the children who may experience abuse in this setting. In view of the paucity of UK research on abuse in foster care, this chapter draws both on the limited research on this topic and on selected grey literature, which mainly comprises surveys of foster carers who were members of the fostering charity the *National Foster Care Association (NFCA)* and its successor, the *Fostering Network*. We also report evidence on abuse in foster care drawn from a number of wider studies of children looked after away from home in the UK.

Contemporary interest in abuse in foster care initially emerged in the late 1970s in the USA and in the mid-1980s in the UK. This was a period of growing concern about the physical abuse of children which was to some extent prompted by the 'rediscovery' of child abuse within the family by an American study of 'battered children' in the 1960s and, from the 1970s, by growing awareness of abuse in residential institutions in the USA.⁶⁸ In the UK, increasing attention to the problem of child abuse within the family was also driven by a succession of widely reported official reports on child deaths from abuse within their families, 29 of which were published between 1974 and 1985.⁶⁹

It was in this context that, from the mid-1980s, a small number of UK academics began to highlight the distress experienced by foster carers who were the subject of 'unfounded allegations', publishing a number of brief articles in *Foster Care*, the journal for members of the *NFCA*. These described the distress of foster carers accused of abuse and how these problems could be exacerbated by social work

⁶⁸ C. Henry Kempe, Frederick N. Silverman, Brandt F. Steele, William Droegemueller, and Henry K. Silver, "The battered child syndrome". *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 181, 1962, 17-24; D. Gil & K. Baxter, *Abuse of children in institutions* (San Francisco: San Francisco Child Abuse Council, 1978); J. R. Garrett, "The institutional maltreatment of children: an emerging public issue", *Residential Community and Child Care Administration*, 1, 1979, 57-68.

⁶⁹ Nigel Parton, *The Politics of Child Abuse* (London: Macmillan, 1985).

practice. However, they did not appear to acknowledge the possibility that some carers may indeed harm the children in their care.⁷⁰

It was only in the 1990s that UK academics and the *NFCA*, and later the *Fostering Network*, began to investigate the extent of the problem of abuse in foster care, conducting several surveys of foster carers to investigate the percentage of foster carers who experienced allegations of abuse. Caution is needed when comparing rates of allegations or confirmed abuse because some studies report the *prevalence* of allegations while others report their *incidence*. Studies of the *prevalence* of allegations of abuse, for example, report the total number of foster carers who have ever been the focus of an allegation during the course of their fostering careers. In contrast, studies of *incidence* may report the number of new allegations during a specified time period, in most cases one year.

The likelihood that allegations will be reported is obviously higher if all allegations throughout a carer's fostering career are counted, as in estimates of prevalence, whereas the total number of allegations will almost certainly be lower if surveys only count the number of allegations made in a single year, as in most studies of incidence.

Prevalence of allegations in the UK

Much of the early evidence on the prevalence of allegations of abuse in the UK comes from surveys of foster carers published by the *NFCA* and its successor, the *Fostering Network*. The ***Allegations against foster families study*** (1995) included questionnaires for foster carers in an issue of its membership journal, *Foster Care*, which asked them about their experience of allegations, if any. Their responses indicated that 34% (177) of the 519 carers who participated in the survey had experienced one or more allegations during their fostering careers. Half of the allegations concerned physical abuse and just over one-third concerned sexual abuse, but there were relatively few reports of neglect (8% of allegations).

⁷⁰ Stephen Nixon, Carolyn Hicks, and Sue Ells, "Support for foster parents accused of child abuse", *Foster Care*, 86, 1986, 8-10; Stephen Nixon and Carolyn Hicks, "Experiencing accusations of abuse", *Foster Care*, 87, 1987, 10-11; Carolyn Hicks and Stephen Nixon, "Allegations of child abuse: foster carers as victims", *Foster Care*, 58, 1989, 14-15; Carolyn Hicks and Stephen Nixon, "Unfounded allegations of child abuse in the United Kingdom: a survey of foster parents' reactions to investigative procedures", *Child and Youth Services*, 15, 1991, 249-260; Stephen Nixon and Pat Verity, "Allegations against foster families: carers' expectations", *Foster Care*, 84, 1996, 11-14.

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of the foster carers reported that the allegations against them were unfounded and only 6% reported that they were substantiated. However, since the carers who received these questionnaires were presumably still working as foster carers, it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of this sample of foster carers reported the allegations to be unfounded.⁷¹

Since that time, the *Fostering Network* has conducted further surveys of their members. The ***Allegations in Foster Care*** (2006) survey sent questionnaires to the *Fostering Network's* 5,000 members and reported that 35% of carers had experienced an allegation during their fostering careers.⁷² The most recent of these surveys, ***The State of the Nation's Foster Care*** (2019) sent questionnaires to 4,037 members of the *Fostering Network* and reported that 35% of the carers who completed the questionnaire had experienced allegations.

All three of these surveys therefore came to similar conclusions, reporting that just over one-third of foster carers had ever been the subject of an allegation. However, the response rates for these studies were either low—only 20% for the *Allegations in Foster Care* study—or not reported. It is therefore difficult to assess whether the foster carers who participated in these surveys were representative of the wider population of carers. On the one-hand, carers who have experienced allegations might be more likely to participate in a survey on this topic than those who have not, which would inflate the number reporting that they had ever experienced an allegation. On the other hand, the reported rate of allegations may be an underestimate, as some foster carers accused of abuse may give up fostering even if they are exonerated, while those for whom the allegation is substantiated are unlikely to remain in the foster care system and would not, therefore, be recruited to a survey of foster carers.

Other studies have explored foster carers' experience of being the subject of allegations of abuse. The ***Fostering Can Never Feel the Same For Us*** (2004) survey sent questionnaires to 190 carers who had contacted the *Fostering Network* helpline following an allegation. Only one-third (64) of these carers participated in the research but, despite its low response rate, the survey provided useful descriptive

⁷¹ Pat Verity and Stephen Nixon, "Allegations Against Foster Families. Survey Results", *Foster Care*, 11, 1995, 13-16.

⁷² Vicki Swain, *Allegations in Foster Care: A UK study of Foster Carers' Experiences of Allegations* (London, The Fostering Network, 2006).

data on local authority responses to allegations and how these might be perceived by foster carers. Nearly one-fifth of the carers reported that they had not been told the nature of the allegation against them. Almost all of them had undergone full child protection investigations, and most felt that the lack of information provided during these investigations had made matters worse.⁷³

Surveys with higher response rates are likely to have more representative samples. The **York Carers study** (2004) was a wide-ranging study of foster care which included questions on the nature of support provided to foster carers and its effects on them and on outcomes for foster children. Postal questionnaires sent to 950 foster carers included a question that invited them to tick "allegations of abuse" on a list of possible "stressful events" if they had ever experienced allegations. The survey had a response rate of 61%, higher than the rates reported by the previous surveys of foster carers and, importantly, the analysis took account of factors that might bias the sample. This rigorous study reported that 16% of the foster carers surveyed had experienced an allegation of abuse during the course of their fostering career, a much lower prevalence rate than those reported by the above surveys of allegations.⁷⁴

Other studies have provided descriptive data on carers' experiences of allegations. Many foster carers felt they had not been treated with courtesy and respect after allegations were made, and said they did not feel that investigations into these allegations had been conducted in a professional manner, with some complaining that they had not had a chance to give their side of the story during the investigation.⁷⁵ Concerns about a lack of information, advice and support were common and some foster carers complained that they had not been told about the reason for the investigation.⁷⁶ Some carers felt that this lack of information increased the stressfulness of the situation, as did the poor feedback that some said they had

⁷³ Fostering Network, *Fostering Can Never Feel the Same for Us: A Study of Foster Families that Have Been the Subjects of an Allegation* (London: The Fostering Network, 2004).

⁷⁴ Kate Wilson, Ian Sinclair, and Ian Gibbs, "The trouble with foster care: the impact of stressful 'events' on foster carers", *British Journal of Social Work*, 30, 2000, 193-209; Ian Sinclair, Ian Gibbs, Kate Wilson, *Foster carers: Why They Stay and Why They Leave* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004).

⁷⁵ Brian Minty and Sheila Bray, "Allegations against foster carers: an in-depth study", *Child Abuse Review*, 10, 5, 2001, 336-350; The Fostering Network *Fostering Can Never Feel the Same for Us: A Study of Foster Families that Have Been the Subjects of an Allegation* (London: The Fostering Network, 2004).

⁷⁶ Stephen Nixon and Pat Verity, "Allegations against foster families: carers' expectations", *Foster Care*, 84, 1996, 11-14.

received concerning the conclusions of the investigation.⁷⁷ In some cases, carers were particularly upset because their supervising social workers had not been allowed to communicate with them, which left them feeling isolated and unsupported.

These findings highlight the need to provide clear information and independent advice and support to foster carers subject to allegations of abuse and neglect. In one study, over half of the—albeit unrepresentative—sample of carers surveyed reported that their experience of allegations of abuse had made them want to give up fostering.⁷⁸ Unfounded allegations of abuse and neglect are not only deeply distressing for foster carers, but may also lead some of them to give up fostering, even if the allegations are not substantiated. In the context of a perennial shortage of foster carers, this may have a serious impact on the fostering system.

Incidence of allegations in the UK

Three UK studies have measured the *incidence* of allegations during a single year through an analysis of agency data from social work records. The first of these was the ***NFCA Agency Survey*** (1996), which sent questionnaires to an unspecified number of social services departments in England.⁷⁹ The questionnaires were completed by 59 local authorities, which between them accommodated children in 7,619 fostering households. The study reported that just 4% of foster homes (305) had been investigated for allegations of abuse during the year in question. Reports of maltreatment were deemed to be unfounded in 50% of these investigations and in 20% of cases the investigation was inconclusive. The ***Fostering Network's Allegations Against Foster Carers report*** (2011) similarly investigated the incidence of allegations during a single year (2009-10) based on an analysis of data from 17 fostering agencies in England—14 local authorities and three independent fostering providers—which had nearly 3,500 approved foster families between them.⁸⁰ During the year 2009-10, 4.3% of fostering households had an allegation made against them

⁷⁷ Kate Wilson, Ian Sinclair, and Ian Gibbs, "The trouble with foster care: the impact of stressful 'events' on foster carers", *British Journal of Social Work*, 30, 2000, 193-209; Brian Minty and Sheila Bray, "Allegations against foster carers: an in-depth study", *Child Abuse Review*, 10, 2001, 336-350.

⁷⁸ Fostering Network, *Fostering Can Never Feel the Same for Us: A Study of Foster Families that Have Been the Subjects of an Allegation* (London: The Fostering Network, 2004).

⁷⁹ Stephen Nixon and Pat Verity, "Allegations against foster families: carers' expectations", *Foster Care*, 84, 1996, 11-14. It was not possible to publish the response rate for this study due to the limited information provided.

⁸⁰ Helen Clarke, *Allegations against foster carers: an exploration of pay levels and policies during an investigation* (London: The Fostering Network, 2011).

that resulted in a strategy meeting or discussion. Following this meeting/discussion, 1.4% of fostering households were involved in a formal child protection investigation (under s.47 of the Children Act, 1989). Allegations against a further 2% of fostering households resulted in a potentially less serious “standards of care” investigation and for just under 1% of households no further action was taken following a strategy meeting or discussion.

Looking at this in terms of allegations rather than households, one third (33%) of allegations were dealt with by a formal child protection investigation but a greater percentage (48%) underwent a standards of care investigation. No further action was taken concerning the remaining 19% of allegations.

The report noted some variations in patterns, policies and procedures between fostering services but argued that no significance could be attached to these differences as the number of allegations in any single fostering service was small and could vary over time.

Most recently, the ***Keeping children safe study*** (2014) investigated the incidence and nature of alleged and substantiated abuse and neglect in foster care and residential institutions across the UK.⁸¹ The first phase of the study was a survey of allegations of maltreatment in both foster and residential care, which gathered data through Freedom of Information requests (FOIs) sent to all 211 UK local authorities.

Nearly three-quarters (156/74%) of local authorities responded to the FOIs, which requested information on the number of allegations and confirmed cases of abuse in foster care (and separately, residential institutions) for three consecutive years: 2009-10, 2010-11, and 2011-12. On average, each local authority reported 10-11 allegations of abuse in foster care per year. However, there was wide variation in the numbers reported, which ranged from zero to 75 allegations per year. This variation may not only reflect real differences in rates of allegations, but also local differences in thresholds for reporting and recording these allegations. The study estimated that the total number of allegations of abuse in foster care across the UK ranged from 2,100 to 2,400 a year, which equates to three to four allegations per 100 fostered children per year.

⁸¹ Nina Biehal, Jim Wade, Linda Cusworth, and Susan Clarke, [*Keeping children safe: allegations concerning the abuse or neglect of children in care*](#), Research Report, Impact and Evidence Series (London: NSPCC, 2014).

Allegations that are substantiated

Evidence on confirmed maltreatment in foster care is scarce in the UK. The *Keeping Children Safe* study's analysis of data from 74% of local authorities in the UK found that the mean number of substantiated cases of abuse or neglect in foster care was less than three per local authority, ranging from 2.2-2.5 per year. As we might expect, there was significant variation between authorities in the number of substantiated cases. While 19 local authorities reported no confirmed cases in three years, one reported 78 confirmed cases over the three years of the study. However, this high rate was unusual, as only seven local authorities reported more than five substantiated cases of abuse or neglect in each of the three years of the study, all of which were in large local authorities, in terms of the number of children they looked after.

Extrapolating from these data and taking local authority size into account in the analysis, the study estimated that the total number of confirmed cases of maltreatment in foster care in the UK ranges from 450-550 per year. This equates to an annual incidence rate of 0.80-0.88 cases of substantiated abuse per 100 children in foster care each year in the UK—with a mean rate of 0.83 children per year. In other words, while 3-4% of children in foster care were the subject of alleged abuse, the allegations in question were substantiated for less than 1% of fostered children each year. However, while the *rate* of substantiated maltreatment is indubitably low, it nevertheless represents a considerable number of children in need of protection: that is, 450 to 550 per year. Moreover, a failure to substantiate abuse may not necessarily mean that no abuse has occurred.

Evidence is also available from a handful of other UK studies which came across histories of maltreatment in foster care in the course of wider research on children looked after away from home. Social workers who participated in the **York Outcomes study** (2005) of 596 children in foster care, reported abuse by previous foster carers in just under 3% of cases.⁸² Also in 2005, the **Belonging and Permanence study** explored outcomes for 196 children currently or formerly in foster care, reporting that at least 10 children had been abused in previous foster placements.⁸³ Two other studies also reported instances of abuse in care, although it

⁸² Ian Sinclair, Claire Baker, Kate Wilson, and Ian Gibbs, *Foster Children: Where They Go and How They Get On* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005).

⁸³ Ian Sinclair, Claire Baker, Kate Wilson, and Ian Gibbs, *Foster Children: Where They Go and How They Get On* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005); Nina Biehal, Sarah Ellison, Claire Baker, and Ian

is important to note that their samples were very small and were unrepresentative of the wider population of fostered children. The ***Adopting or fostering a sexually abused child study*** (1991) interviewed 66 foster families caring for sexually abused children. The interviews focused on the placements of 80 children, including eight who had experienced abuse in a foster or adoptive placement. It was notable that perpetrators included not only the foster/adoptive mother or father but sometimes the foster mother's boyfriend or a foster brother.⁸⁴ In Scotland, the ***Teenagers and the social work services study*** (2000) similarly reported histories of abuse in foster care in relation to a few young people in its sample. Among the 27 young people with experience of foster care, one girl had been sexually abused by a male foster carer and another by a family friend in a private fostering arrangement.⁸⁵

Allegations that are unproven

Allegations of abuse or neglect cannot always be categorised as substantiated or unsubstantiated, as some investigations are inconclusive, leaving professionals uncertain about the best course of action and children uncertain about what will happen next. It is difficult to compare the few UK studies which have included attention to unproven allegations as the uses and meanings of words such as unsubstantiated, unfounded and unproven may vary.

The ***NFCA Agency Survey*** collected data on the outcomes of investigations into 302 cases investigated during a one-year period. Information on allegations was reported by staff drawn from 59 local authorities. The study reported that 22% of the allegations were "founded", 50% were recorded as "not founded", and in 20% of cases the outcomes of the investigation were classified as "not able to determine". In a further 7% of cases, the investigation of allegations was still in progress. However, the results of this study should be viewed with caution due to problems with sampling and analysis.⁸⁶

Sinclair, *Belonging and Permanence: Outcomes in long-term foster care and adoption* (London: BAAF, 2010).

⁸⁴ Catherine Macaskill, *Adopting or fostering a sexually abused child* (London: BAAF, 1991).

⁸⁵ John Triseliotis, Moira Borland, and Malcolm Hill, *Teenagers and the Social Work Services* (London: HMSO, 1995).

⁸⁶ Stephen Nixon and Pat Verity, "Allegations against foster families: carers' expectations", *Foster Care*, 84, 1996, 11-14.

Over 20 years later, the *Unproven Allegations in Foster Care study* (2016) used agency data to examine the problem of investigations that are inconclusive.⁸⁷ This comprehensive study focused on cases that had been “closed as unproven”, a category which comprised allegations described as either “unsubstantiated” or “unfounded”. The study analysed anonymised data from agency records provided by 19 agencies—including local authorities and independent fostering providers—on 190 cases which were “closed as unproven” during a one-year period. It reported that 84% of the carers with allegations classified as unproven had continued to foster, despite a lack of conclusive evidence. Carers were subsequently deregistered in just 5% of cases which were closed as unproven, which suggests that relatively few of the unproven cases were thought to raise serious concerns.

The *Keeping Children Safe study* (2014) reported that over three-quarters (77-78%) of allegations were recorded as unsubstantiated.⁸⁸ Additional information on 1,098 (74%) of the unsubstantiated allegations was provided by 85 of the local authorities participating in the study. While 40% of unsubstantiated allegations were classified as unfounded, the majority (58%) were recorded as “unsubstantiated due to a lack of evidence”. The high proportion of cases with insufficient evidence to confirm or deny allegations represents a grey area for professional decision-making.

Roughly two-thirds (95) of the local authorities participating in the study provided information on children who were removed from placements in circumstances where the alleged abuse could not be substantiated. Their replies indicated that children were permanently removed from their placements in 13-16% of cases where allegations were unsubstantiated. However, these data do not indicate whether the children were removed at the time the allegations were made or later, as a precautionary measure when lingering concerns about the allegations remained.

Allegations and confirmed abuse in Scotland

No research studies have focused specifically on abuse in foster care in Scotland. However, we identified three reports by the *Fostering Network* and two Scottish research studies on wider issues in foster care that address this issue. In 2005,

⁸⁷ Gillian Plumridge and Judy Sebba, *The Impact of Unproven Allegations on Foster Carers* (Oxford: Rees Centre, University of Oxford, 2016).

⁸⁸ Nina Biehal, Jim Wade, Linda Cusworth, and Susan Clarke, *Keeping children safe: allegations concerning the abuse or neglect of children in care*, Research Report, Impact and Evidence Series (London: NSPCC, 2014).

Fostering Network Scotland published two linked reports which discussed a range of issues concerning the Scottish fostering system, one based on a survey of foster carers, and the other on an analysis of data provided by local authorities and independent fostering providers. Part One of the ***Caring for our Children report*** (2005) presented the findings of a survey of 693 fostering households in Scotland. Nearly one-third (31%) of the sample reported that they had experienced a complaint or allegation during their fostering careers, broadly similar to the rates of 34-35% reported by other UK prevalence studies. ***Caring for our Children: Part Two*** (2005) presented the results of a survey of the 32 Scottish local authorities and seven independent fostering providers in Scotland, which reported that in the year 2003-2004, allegations were investigated in 60 fostering households across Scotland. This represented an annual incidence rate of just under 3% of fostering households, slightly lower than the incidence rates of around 4% reported by the UK-wide *Keeping Children Safe* study, as discussed above.⁸⁹

More recently, the Fostering Network published ***The State of Scotland's Foster Care*** (2019), which reported an analysis of data from the 500 Scottish foster carers who participated in the UK-wide ***State of the Nation's Foster Care*** study. The reported prevalence of allegations was lower in Scotland, at 28% compared to 35% in other UK studies of prevalence.⁹⁰

Another Scottish study explored the reasons why foster carers cease to foster and, in this context, referred briefly to allegations of abuse.⁹¹ Its 1998 survey of agency records on 149 carers showed that 11% (17) had done so because of allegations of abuse, but there was no indication as to whether these allegations had been substantiated.

The same team subsequently published the ***Delivering Foster Care study*** (2000), a comprehensive study of foster care in Scotland in the late 1990s.⁹² The study investigated the operation of the fostering system during the year 1996-97, collecting data from fostering agencies on 2,149 fostering households across all 32 Scottish local authorities. During the year of the survey 74 allegations of abuse in

⁸⁹ Fostering Network, *Caring for Our Children. Part Two* (London: Fostering Network, 2005).

⁹⁰ Kate Lawson and Robert Cann, [*State of the Nation's Foster Care Full Report*](#) (London: The Fostering Network, 2019).

⁹¹ John Triseliotis, Moira Borland, and Malcolm Hill, "[Foster Carers who Cease to Foster](#)", *Adoption & Fostering*, 22, 1998.

⁹² John Triseliotis, Moira Borland, and Malcolm Hill, *Delivering Foster Care* (London: BAAF, 2000).

foster care were reported, concerning 3.5% of all fostering households. Allegations of physical abuse were made in relation to 2.2% of all fostering households and allegations of sexual abuse were reported for 1.3% of foster homes. Sixteen percent of the foster carers who were subject to allegations were subsequently de-registered, which suggests that some, or all of the allegations were substantiated, although this is not stated.

The study also analysed questionnaires completed by 835 of the foster carers surveyed—a 74% response rate—reporting that around one in 20 carers reported they had been the subject of allegations of abuse during the past year, an incidence rate of 5%. The study described decision-making processes and the actions that agencies took in response to the allegations. Much uncertainty surrounded the process of investigation and the support that could be made available to carers during an investigation. The study also reported that local authorities relied heavily on the police for advice regarding the continued involvement of staff with carers who were under investigation for abuse.

The *Delivering Foster Care study* also highlighted the range of points at which the decisions made influenced whether an allegation was upheld and explored where the threshold lay between behaviours thought to represent poor standards of care and those viewed as sufficiently serious to require carer de-registration. Depending on the nature of the allegation, a choice would be made between three forms of action: the instigation of child protection procedures for allegations of physical or sexual abuse, an internal inquiry into allegations of “incompetence” or “heavy-handedness”, or dismissing the allegation without investigation but looking into it at the carer’s annual review. If allegations of abuse were proved, they would lead to de-registration. However, decisions about de-registration made following internal inquiries into complaints of poor practice would depend on the seriousness of the allegation or its repetition. This suggests that agencies were, on the whole, trying to distinguish between abuse, on the one hand, and poor standards of care on the other, with the latter handled with a lighter touch.

The most recent study of abuse in foster care in Scotland was the *Keeping Children Safe study* (2014), which included a comparison of rates of allegations and substantiated abuse for Scotland, England, and Wales over three consecutive years. In each of these years, the mean numbers of total allegations and confirmed cases—for those local authorities which reported at least one allegation—were consistently

lower in Scotland than in England and Wales and these differences were statistically significant. During the year 2011-2012, for example, the mean number of allegations per 100 children in foster care was significantly lower in Scotland (0.98), than in England (3.91) and Wales (3.48). The pattern was similar regarding the rate of substantiated cases per 100 children in foster care, as the mean number of substantiated cases was again significantly lower in Scotland (0.14), compared to England (0.88) and Wales (1.06).

It is difficult to explain these differences between rates for these three countries in the UK. Although it is possible that these figures indicate real differences between countries in levels of abusive behaviour by foster carers, they are perhaps more likely to reflect different thresholds for recording behaviours or defining them as abusive or neglectful, rather than as poor standards of care.

Summary

- To sum up, much of the early research in the UK investigated the prevalence of allegations by means of surveys of foster carers. These reported that around one-third (31-35%) of all foster carers had experienced allegations of abuse at some point during their fostering careers. Most of these surveys were conducted by the NFCA and its successor, the *Fostering Network*, but a survey by the *York Carers'* study reported that only 16% of the foster carers it surveyed had ever experienced an allegation of abuse.
- Five UK studies have investigated the annual incidence of allegations of abuse through an analysis of agency records. As we might expect, these studies of patterns of intervention during a single year reported a much lower rate of allegations than the prevalence studies, ranging from 3% to 4.3% of fostering households per year.⁹³
- Only one UK study to date, *Keeping Children Safe*, has investigated the percentage of substantiated cases of abuse or neglect. This reported that less

⁹³ Nina Biehal, Jim Wade, Linda Cusworth, and Susan Clarke, [Keeping children safe: allegations concerning the abuse or neglect of children in care](#), Research Report, Impact and Evidence Series (London: NSPCC, 2014); John Triseliotis, Moira Borland, and Malcolm Hill, *Delivering Foster Care* (London: BAAF, 2000); Helen Clarke, *Allegations against foster carers: an exploration of pay levels and policies during an investigation* (London: The Fostering Network, 2011); Stephen Nixon and Pat Verity, "Allegations against foster families: carers' expectations", *Foster Care*, 84, 1996, 11-14; Fostering Network, *Caring for Our Children. Part Two* (London: Fostering Network, 2005).

than 1% of fostered children (0.83-0.88%) experience substantiated abuse each year. It is important to note, however, that although this is a tiny percentage of children in foster care, it nevertheless represents around 450-550 fostered children per year.

- The *Keeping Children Safe* study also compared rates of allegations and confirmed abuse in Scotland to those for England and Wales for three consecutive years. Analysis of data showed that rates of allegations and substantiated abuse were much lower in Scotland than in either England or Wales. These differences raise questions regarding thresholds for recording and for intervention.
- A small number of UK studies have pointed to the problems of decision-making that arise when allegations are unproven and may neither be substantiated nor dismissed.

The extent of the problem: international research

Much of the international research on abuse in foster care has been conducted in the USA but, at least until the mid-2000s, this has typically had a different focus to research in the UK. While much of the UK evidence on this issue has focused on the prevalence of allegations and their impact on foster carers, most studies in the USA—and a few in the UK—have sought to establish the incidence of substantiated abuse and their principal focus has been on the children concerned. This chapter first reviews the American research on abuse in care and then discusses two studies from other countries.

American studies of the incidence of abuse and neglect in foster care have typically used quantitative methods to investigate patterns of abuse, collecting data on hundreds or even thousands of fostered children. These quantitative studies used statistical methods to analyse data from agency records, such as administrative datasets and case files. In contrast, much of the UK research on abuse in foster care prior to the 2000s used qualitative methods, such as interviews with foster carers, to explore their experience of allegations of abuse.

This review identified only two US studies of abuse in foster care that used interviews to explore foster carer views. These focused principally on the problem of ‘false allegations’ against foster carers and, like their counterparts in the UK, the foster carers described their experience of allegations as traumatising, saying that they had felt isolated and unsupported by their social workers when allegations were made.⁹⁴

Incidence of abuse in foster care in the USA

The earliest American study of abuse in foster care was the ***Maricopa County study*** (1981) which analysed agency records on 50% of all investigations of child abuse, including investigations of abuse in foster care, in Maricopa County, Arizona from 1976 to 1978.⁹⁵ Drawing on this analysis, the study estimated that 228 (7%) of the 3,168 children fostered in the county during the study period had lived in foster families which were the subject of a report of suspected child maltreatment. The

⁹⁴ For example see, Rosemary Carbino, “Child Abuse and neglect reports in foster care: The issue for foster carers of “false” allegations”, *Child and Youth Services*, 5, 1991, 233-247; Ande Nesmith, “False allegations and caseworker conflict stressors among long-term foster parents”, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 2020, 118.

⁹⁵ F. G. Bolton, Roy Laner, and Dorothy Gai, “For better or worse? Foster parents and foster children in an officially reported child maltreatment population”, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 3, 1981, 37-53. [*Maricopa County study*]

authors were quick to point out that “reported” did not indicate “substantiated”. They reported that the allegations were substantiated in 30% of cases, but were reluctant to pay too much attention to the substantiation rate as, in their view, it was “based on the subjective nature of the social worker’s decision to substantiate a case and the large number of variables that are unpredictably involved in that decision”,⁹⁶ cautioning that the completion of agency records was subject to subjectivity and systematic bias.

The ***Hennepin County study*** (1983) evaluated the implementation of a new protocol for investigating abuse in foster care. It examined agency data on investigations of alleged maltreatment in a county with 570 foster homes. The study reported that 125 allegations of maltreatment were made over an 18-month study period in 1980-81, some of which involved multiple children.⁹⁷ Nearly one-quarter (23%) of the allegations were substantiated, with the outcome of the remaining investigations recorded as “unable to substantiate”.

As with the *Maricopa County* study, the authors distrusted the substantiation process, arguing that social workers appeared reluctant to make a finding of substantiated abuse without irrefutable evidence, instead relying heavily on facts which could be proved. This reluctance resulted in many of the investigations being recorded as “unable to be substantiated.” The researchers argued that these cases should be considered alongside the substantiated cases, believing that this approach would more accurately represent the true extent of the abuse. For this reason, the study did not report the percentage of allegations substantiated. However, it was possible to calculate substantiation rates for different types of maltreatment from the data presented. Allegations of sexual abuse were substantiated for 0.9% of foster families, neglect for 1.2%, and physical abuse for 2.8%, but at least as many cases of each type were classified as “unable to determine.”

Four studies of the incidence of allegations and/or substantiated maltreatment followed in the 1990s. The ***Colorado study*** (1991) examined 290 allegations of abuse in foster and residential care over a five-year period (1983-87), just under one-third

⁹⁶ F. G. Bolton, Roy Laner, and Dorothy Gai, “For better or worse? Foster parents and foster children in an officially reported child maltreatment population”, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 3, 1981, 45, [*Maricopa County study*].

⁹⁷ Marilyn Cavara and Carol Ogren, “Protocol to investigate child abuse in foster care”, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 7, 1983, 287-295, [*Hennepin County study*].

of which (101) involved children in foster care.⁹⁸ In all types of setting, allegations of physical abuse were the most common, followed by sexual abuse and then neglect. Over half of the allegations of maltreatment in foster care concerned physical abuse, 24% sexual abuse, and 21% concerned neglect. Over one third (38%) of the allegations were substantiated, but this outcome could only be determined if there was documented factual information that child abuse had occurred. Allegations of sexual abuse were reported less frequently than those concerning physical abuse but were more likely to be substantiated (56%) than allegations of physical abuse (24%) or neglect (21%).

Drawing on data from case records, the *Baltimore study* (1993, 1994 and 1996) investigated allegations of abuse and neglect concerning children placed in 296 foster homes in Baltimore City over a five-year period (1984-88).⁹⁹ Allegations were substantiated for 26% (78) of the children, who were living in 62 fostering households. Allegations of sexual abuse were the most likely to be substantiated, confirmed for half of the foster homes, with allegations of physical abuse and neglect each reported for 29% of foster homes.

Children were reported to be at increased risk of maltreatment if they shared bedrooms with others in the foster home, if their foster mothers were younger, or if social workers had expressed reservations about the carers. However, caution is needed in interpreting these results as maltreatment was confirmed in only a small number of foster homes.

A second article on this study compared types and frequency of maltreatment in the 62 foster homes in which the maltreatment occurred.¹⁰⁰ Like the *Colorado study*, it reported that allegations of physical abuse were most common type but these were the least likely to be substantiated. The opposite was true for allegations of sexual abuse, which were the least likely to be made (11% of allegations) but the most likely to be substantiated (55%). Foster carers were deemed to be the perpetrators of maltreatment in over 80% of allegations physical abuse and neglect, but in only 40%

⁹⁸ James Rosenthal, Janet Motz, Dorothy Edmonson, and Victor Groze, "A descriptive study of abuse and neglect in out-of-home-placement", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 15, 1991, 249-260, [*Colorado study*].

⁹⁹ Susan Zuravin, Mary Benedict, and Mark Somerfield, "Child maltreatment in family foster care", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 63, 1993, 589-596, [*Baltimore study*].

¹⁰⁰ Mary Benedict, Susan Zuravin, Diane Brandt, and Helen Abbey, "Types and frequency of child maltreatment by family foster care providers in an urban population", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 18, 7, 1994, 577-586, [*Baltimore study*].

of allegations of sexual abuse. In most other cases, other children associated with the placement were responsible for sexual abuse.

Patterns of alleged and confirmed maltreatment in foster homes were compared to those for non-foster families in the city. Foster families were almost four times more likely to experience an allegation of maltreatment (15% of foster families compared to 4% of non-foster families). Foster carers were seven times more likely to be reported for physical abuse than non-foster families, four times more likely for sexual abuse, and twice as likely to be reported for neglect. The likelihood that allegations of physical abuse would be substantiated was much lower for foster families (9%) than for families in the community (37%), but there was barely any difference in substantiation rates for sexual abuse between foster families and non-foster families.

In a third article, the *Baltimore study* compared the 78 children with histories of substantiated abuse in foster care to 229 fostered children with no recorded experience of abuse.¹⁰¹ Around half (38) of the children abused in foster care had experienced sexual abuse in their foster homes, a much higher rate than in most other studies. Children in both groups were reported to have numerous health, development and school problems, but those who had been sexually abused in foster care were significantly more likely to have these difficulties.

The *Indiana study* (1992) investigated rates of substantiated abuse over a seven-year period (1984-1990) through an analysis of administrative data on children who had been in foster care during this period, which ranged from 2,816 -3,626 children per year. Just over half (55%) of all allegations of abuse and neglect in foster care had been substantiated.¹⁰² On average, over the seven years of the study, allegations were substantiated for 1.7% of all fostered children. Physical abuse was the most common type of confirmed maltreatment. This was substantiated for 0.93% of all children in foster care, sexual abuse for 0.52% and neglect for 0.24% of fostered children.

The *Illinois study* (1999) study similarly drew on administrative data on children in care to investigate rates of maltreatment, analysing data for a five-year period (1992-

¹⁰¹ Mary Benedict, Susan Zuravin, Mark Somerfield, and Diane Brandt, "The reported health and functioning of children maltreated while in family foster care", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 20, 7, 1996, 561-571, [*Baltimore study*].

¹⁰² J. William Spencer and Dean D. Knudsen, "Out-of-home maltreatment: an analysis of risk in various settings for children", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 14, 1992, 485-492, [*Indiana study*].

97). Maltreatment was substantiated for 1.7-2.3% of all children in foster care per year, with an average of 2% for the five years of the study.¹⁰³ Physical abuse was substantiated for 14.5% of fostered children, sexual abuse for 37% and “lack of supervision” for 17%. However, the authors cautioned that the figures presented were likely to be over-estimated, as they discovered that nearly one-third of the reports on the administrative database referred to incidents that occurred before the child entered foster care. This study also examined rates of substantiated abuse for kinship and non-relative foster placements—see [Chapter 6](#).

The **California study** (2001) examined complaints and allegations about foster homes in the state of California over a one-year period, reporting that 26% of all 2,184 allegations of physical or sexual abuse or neglect during the year were substantiated.¹⁰⁴ The most common allegations concerned physical abuse, which accounted for 51% of all allegations, followed by neglect/lack of supervision at 37% of allegations and, much less frequently, sexual abuse at 12% of allegations. Allegations of neglect were the most likely to be substantiated (34%), followed by allegations of physical abuse (22%) and sexual abuse (20%). Neglect was substantiated for 1.4% of children in foster care, and physical abuse for 1.2% of these children, but substantiated sexual abuse was much less common, at 0.27% of children in foster care.

The **Oklahoma study** (2004) drew on the agency records of the Department of Child and Family Services in Oklahoma to investigate the maltreatment in foster care, comparing 753 children in foster care to a random sample of 805 children with no known history of maltreatment in foster care.¹⁰⁵ On average, 1.3% of fostered children in Oklahoma experienced substantiated maltreatment over the six years of the study (1998 – 2003), but the annual incidence varied considerably, ranging from 0.96-1.8% of all children in foster care.

¹⁰³ John Poertner, Marian Bussey, and John Fluke, “How safe are out-of-home placements?”, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 21, 1999, 549–563, [*Illinois study*]; Gail Tittle, John Poertner, and Philip Garnier, [Child maltreatment in foster care. A study of retrospective reporting](#) (Urbana, Illinois: School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: 2001), [*Illinois study*]

¹⁰⁴ California Department of Social Services, *Report to the legislature on investigation of complaints against certified family homes and foster family agencies* (Sacramento, California: California Department of Social Services, Community Care Licensing Division: 2001), [*California study*].

¹⁰⁵ Peggy Billings and Terry Moore, [Child maltreatment in Foster Care](#) (Kansas: Oklahoma Department of Human Services, 2004), [*Oklahoma study*].

Types of substantiated maltreatment were reported for a four-year period (1998-2001). On average, over this period, the most common types of maltreatment recorded were neglect (experienced by 51% of children maltreated in foster care) and physical abuse (39% of children abused in foster care), with far fewer cases of confirmed sexual (4%), or emotional abuse (3%) recorded. It is important to note that the figures presented in this study refer only to abuse and neglect by foster carers, with no mention of the possibility of abuse by others connected with the placement.

Issues in decision-making

As in the UK, several studies in the USA have highlighted concerns about the difficulties that arise when investigations are inconclusive and allegations of abuse can be neither confirmed nor dismissed.¹⁰⁶ The *California study* reported that the results of investigations were inconclusive in around 20% of cases,¹⁰⁷ while the *Colorado study* found that over half of all allegations of physical and sexual abuse, and over one-third of those concerning neglect could not be substantiated.¹⁰⁸ As noted earlier, researchers on the *Colorado study* reported that social workers were reluctant to substantiate allegations without “irrefutable evidence”, and considered that the true rate of maltreatment was higher than the number of substantiated cases would suggest. They argued that carers for whom allegations are unsubstantiated should be closely monitored, particularly as 27% of the families involved in this study had previously been investigated for maltreatment.

Like the *Maricopa County, Hennepin County, Colorado and California studies*, an American study of decision-making in response to alleged abuse in foster care raised concerns about the substantiation process. It reported that 25% of the foster carers investigated had been the subject of previous, often multiple, allegations and argued that, on the evidence available, one-third of the carers exonerated should have been de-registered.¹⁰⁹ The researchers considered that decisions that allegations of abuse

¹⁰⁶ Marilyn Cavara and Carol Ogren, “Protocol to investigate child abuse in foster care”, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 7, 1983, 287-295, [*Hennepin County study*]; Rosemary Carbino, “Policy and practice for response to foster families when child-abuse or neglect is reported”, *Child Welfare*, 71, 1992, 497-509.

¹⁰⁷ California Department of Social Services, *Report to the legislature on investigation of complaints against certified family homes and foster family agencies* (Sacramento, California: California Department of Social Services, Community Care Licensing Division: 2001), [*California study*].

¹⁰⁸ James Rosenthal, Janet Motz, Dorothy Edmonson, and Victor Groze, “A descriptive study of abuse and neglect in out-of-home-placement”, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 15, 1991, 249-260, [*Colorado study*].

¹⁰⁹ Diane DePanfilis and Heather Girvin, “Investigating child maltreatment in out-of-home care: barriers to effective decision-making”, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27, 4, 2005, 353-374.

were unsubstantiated were made without proper investigation and argued that the quality of investigations was undermined by the heavy workloads of the staff responsible and because workers avoided facing up to the seriousness of the reported concerns because no other placement was available for the child. They also suggested that some social workers appeared to be prepared to accept the negative treatment of children, especially when children were placed in kinship care.

Evidence from Australia and the Netherlands

The ***Children in Foster Care study*** (2008) in Australia was a prospective, epidemiological study of all 347 children aged four to 11 years, who were in court-ordered non-relative or kinship foster care in the state of New South Wales.¹¹⁰ Drawing on data from agency records and interviews with foster carers, the study identified a number of retrospective and concurrent predictors of mental health problems among these children, one of which was maltreatment in foster or kinship care. Allegations of maltreatment were made regarding 32% of all children in foster care (including children in kinship placements), and the alleged maltreatment was confirmed for 19% of these children.

The study focused principally on the mental health of children in foster care, highlighting the impact of exposing children to chronic and multiple adversities, including abuse prior to and in foster care and recent adverse events. It found that three types of maltreatment accounted for the high rate of children's mental health problems, independent of other influences, namely physical abuse, "classic emotional abuse" (which excludes verbal threats and exposure to domestic violence) and contact sexual abuse.

The majority of allegations concerned carers who were coping poorly with children's behavioural and relationship disturbances. These carers tended to respond positively to the provision of support, such as counselling, respite or more effective casework, but a smaller group of carers were reported to be abusive, neglectful and, in some cases, predatory.

In the Netherlands, the ***Sentinel study*** (2013 and 2014), compared rates of physical and sexual abuse for children in residential and foster care.¹¹¹ This study collected

¹¹⁰ Michael Tarren-Sweeney, "Retrospective and concurrent predictors of the mental health of children in care", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 2008, 1-25.

¹¹¹ Saskia Euser, Lenneke R. A. Alink, Anne Tharner, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, and Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg, "The Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse in Out-of-Home Care: A comparison

retrospective data from 264 'sentinels'—professionals working in foster or residential care randomly selected from 82 institutional locations. The sentinels were asked to provide information on children who they 'suspected' had experienced abuse in foster or residential care in 2010, prior to the study. Evidence from the sentinels suggested that 2% of children in foster care had experienced sexual abuse during the year, a rate that was close to that for the general population of children in the Netherlands.

The study also conducted a survey of 329 adolescents in foster or residential care, who provided retrospective self-reports of any sexual or physical abuse they experienced during 2010. Their responses suggested that the prevalence of abuse could be much higher than the 2% figure indicated by the sentinel reports, as 16.8% of the adolescents surveyed reported that they had experienced sexual abuse while in foster placement during 2010 and a similar percentage (16.4%) reported physical abuse in foster care.

Caution is needed in interpreting these results as it is possible that young people who had experienced abuse may have been over-represented in the group which agreed to participate in the study, which would inflate the rates of abuse reported by this group. It is also difficult to know whether the children identified by the sentinels were broadly representative of the wider population of fostered children in the Netherlands.

Comparing rates of abuse in foster and residential care

Studies in three countries have compared rates of abuse in foster and residential care. The *Sentinel study* in the Netherlands reported that rates of reported sexual and physical abuse were lower in foster care than in residential institutions. As noted above, 329 adolescents in care provided retrospective self-report data on their experience of abuse in care, if any, during the year 2010. Nearly one-third (30.4%) of the participants reported that they had been physically abused in a residential placement during the year in question, which was almost double the rate for young people abused in foster care during the same year (16.4%). However, it is important

between abuse in residential and in foster care", *Child Maltreatment*, 18, 4, 2013, 221-231, [*Sentinel study (a)*]; Saskia Euser, Lenneke R. A. Alink, Anne Tharner, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, and Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg, "Out of home placement to promote safety? The prevalence of physical abuse in residential and foster care", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 37, 2014, 64-70, [*Sentinel study (b)*].

to note that these results were age-specific, as all the young people who participated in the study were adolescents.

In the USA, the *Indiana study* also compared rates of substantiated abuse for children in foster and residential care, drawing on an analysis of administrative data on child protection services for the years 1984-1990. It found that, on average, the percentage of children who experienced maltreatment was much higher in residential placements (12%) than in foster care (1.7%).¹¹²

In the UK, the *Keeping Children Safe* study compared data on all recorded cases of abuse in care reported by a large sample (74%) of local authorities across the UK. It too, found that children were more likely to experience abuse in residential care than in foster care. Rates of substantiated abuse ranged from 2.15–2.59% of children in residential care, more than double the rate for children in foster care (0.80–0.88%).

These studies, from three different countries, all concluded that abuse was more common in residential institutions than in foster care. However, comparisons of this kind are difficult because child characteristics, such as age, and other factors may vary systematically between foster and residential settings, resulting in one group being at greater risk of experiencing abuse in care. For example, young people in residential placements are typically exposed to a larger number of caregivers and peers than those living in foster homes, which may increase the risk of abuse. It may also be the case that abuse in group care settings is more likely to be witnessed and reported by others, whereas there may be no witnesses to abuse that occurs in the private domain of a foster home. Children in both types of care setting may be reluctant to disclose abuse for fear of the consequences, but younger children—who constitute much of the foster care population—may lack the capacity to do so due to their age.

¹¹² J. William Spencer and Dean D. Knudsen, "Out-of-home maltreatment: an analysis of risk in various settings for children", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 14, 1992, 485-492, [*Indiana study*]; Saskia Euser, Lenneke R. A. Alink, Anne Tharner, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, and Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg, "The Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse in Out-of-Home Care: A comparison between abuse in residential and in foster care", *Child Maltreatment*, 18, 4, 2013, 221-231 [*Sentinel study (a)*]; Saskia Euser, Lenneke R. A. Alink, Anne Tharner, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, and Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg, "Out of home placement to promote safety? The prevalence of physical abuse in residential and foster care", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 37, 2014, 64-70, [*Sentinel study (b)*]; Nina Biehal, Jim Wade, Linda Cusworth, and Susan Clarke, [Keeping children safe: allegations concerning the abuse or neglect of children in care](#), Research Report, Impact and Evidence Series (London: NSPCC, 2014).

Some studies have been excluded from this review because their samples include both children in both foster and residential care, and the researchers concerned have not distinguished between the two types of placement in their analysis and reporting of results—for example, Ellonen and Poso’s study in Finland and the *Midwest study* in the USA.¹¹³

Summary: international evidence on the extent of abuse in foster care

- Most of the international research on abuse in foster care published in English has been undertaken in the USA.
- The principal focus of most of the international studies identified has been on establishing the extent of the problem of abuse in foster care and investigating patterns of maltreatment. American studies of abuse in foster care have investigated the incidence of allegations of abuse during specific time periods, which have ranged from one to six years.
- Reported rates of substantiated abuse have varied over time and between states and counties, ranging from 0.27% of fostered children in the *California study*, to 1.3% in Oklahoma, 1.7% in Indiana, and 2.3% in Illinois.
- A few studies have expressed concerns about patterns of decision-making, including the accuracy of the substantiation process, and some have argued that social workers may sometimes be reluctant to substantiate allegations of maltreatment.
- Several studies have reported that allegations of physical abuse in foster care are more commonly reported than allegations of sexual abuse. However, evidence from the USA suggests that although physical abuse is more common, allegations of this type of abuse are less likely to be substantiated than allegations of sexual abuse.
- *Children in Foster Care*, an Australian study of the mental health of fostered children, reported that almost one in five experienced substantiated abuse in foster care. The study also found that abuse in foster care was one of a

¹¹³ Noora Ellonen and Tarje Poso, “Violence Experiences in care: some methodological remarks based on the Finnish Child Victim Survey”, *Child Abuse Review*, 20, 2011, 197-212; Judy Havlicek and Mark Courtney, “[Maltreatment Histories of Foster Youth Exiting Out-of-Home Care Through Emancipation: A Latent Class Analysis](#)”, *Child Maltreatment*, 19, (3-4), 2014, 199-208, [*Midwest study (a)*]; Judy Havlicek and Mark Courtney, “Maltreatment histories of aging out foster youth: A comparison of official investigated reports and self-reports prior to and during out-of-home care”, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 52, 2016, 110-122, [*Midwest study (b)*].

number of factors that accounted for the high rate of children's mental health problems.

- Three studies—the *Sentinel study* in the Netherlands, the *Indiana study* in the USA, and the *Keeping Children Safe study* in the UK—compared the incidence of abuse in foster and residential care, reporting that rates of abuse were consistently higher in residential care than in foster care.

Abuse in kinship, private and informal foster care

Kinship care may be a formal arrangement in which the local authority assesses and approves families or friends as kinship foster carers or an informal, private arrangement. Analysis of micro-data from the 2001 UK Population Census revealed that most children in kinship care are growing up in informal/private, unregulated arrangements, with less than 10% in formal kinship care.¹¹⁴ Although the terms informal/private fostering are often used interchangeably, it is important to note that private fostering is, to some extent, regulated; while informal arrangements are not. Little is known about the circumstances of these children and the extent to which they may experience abuse or neglect in informal and private fostering arrangements.

Abuse and neglect in kinship care: evidence from the UK

Although there have been many studies of kinship care, few have addressed the question of maltreatment in kinship placements. No UK studies have focused specifically on abuse in kinship care, but two wider studies of kinship foster care in England briefly noted evidence of abuse in kinship placements. Hunt's study of all 113 children in kinship placements in two English local authorities reported that 10% had experienced maltreatment while living in these placements.¹¹⁵ In most cases, the allegations focused on neglect, but confirmed abuse was reported for 4% of the children. In some cases, kinship carers had left children with relatives who were known to be abusive and there were also concerns about children's exposure to sexual activity. Farmer and Moyer's study in 2008 compared 270 children in kinship or non-kinship foster placements, reporting that "well-founded" allegations concerning physical and emotional abuse and neglect had been made against the foster parents of 4% of the children in kinship placements and also against 4% of non-relative foster carers (NRFC).¹¹⁶

Comparing patterns of abuse in kinship and non-kinship foster care

There has been more research attention to abuse in kinship care in the USA. Caution is needed in generalising from the findings of studies of kinship care from North

¹¹⁴ Julie Selwyn and Shailen Nandy, "Kinship care in the UK: using census data to estimate the extent of formal and informal care by relatives", *Child and Family Social Work*, 19(1), 2014, 44-54.

¹¹⁵ Joan Hunt, Suzette Waterhouse, and Eleanor Lutman, *Keeping Them in the Family: Outcomes for Children Placed in Kinship Care through Care Proceedings* (London: BAAF, 2008).

¹¹⁶ Elaine Farmer and Sue Moyers, *Kinship care: fostering effective family and friends placements* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008).

America to the UK as the background characteristics of kinship carers in the two countries and the social contexts in which they are located differ in some respects. While most kinship carers in US studies have been single African-American or Hispanic grandmothers, most of those in the UK are white couples.¹¹⁷ There are nevertheless some similarities between kinship carers in these countries, as the majority are grandparents, many of whom are in poor health, experiencing financial hardship, living in overcrowded accommodation and lacking support.¹¹⁸

In 2014, a systematic review of the research compared outcomes for maltreated children placed in kinship care to those for others in NRFC, investigating a range of possible outcomes for the two groups of children, including the risk of abuse in foster care.¹¹⁹ The review identified 102 relevant studies, only three of which included data on abuse in care. One of the studies identified for review was Winokur's *Colorado Kinship Care study* but, on closer inspection, the other two publications identified proved to be two articles on a single study—the *Baltimore study*—rather than two different studies.¹²⁰ The evidence for the review's key finding that children in NRFC had 3.7 times the odds of experiencing abuse in foster care as children in kinship care is therefore questionable.¹²¹ However, this finding is consistent with findings

¹¹⁷ Jill Duerr Berrick and Richard Barth, "Research on kinship foster care: What do we know? Where do we go from here?", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 16, 1-2, 1994, 1-5; Maria Scannapieco and Rebecca Hegar, "[Kinship Care Providers: Designing an Array of Supportive Services](#)", *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 19, 2002, 315-327; Elaine Farmer and Sue Moyers, *Kinship care: fostering effective family and friends placements* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008); Jennifer Sykes, Ian Sinclair, Ian Gibbs, and Kate Wilson, "Kinship and stranger foster carers: how do they compare?", *Adoption and Fostering*, 26, 2, 2002, 38-48.

¹¹⁸ Hilary Saunders and Julie Selwyn, "Supporting informal kinship care", *Adoption and Fostering*, 32, 2, 2008, 31-42.

¹¹⁹ Marc Winokur, Amy Holtan, and Keri Batchelder, "[Kinship care for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children removed from the home for maltreatment](#)", Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, 2014: CD006546. doi:10.1002/14651858.CD006546.pub3.

¹²⁰ Marc Winokur, Graig Crawford, Ralph Longobardi, and Deborah Valentine, "Matched comparison of children in kinship care and foster care on child welfare outcomes", *Families in Society*, 89, 3, 2008, 338-346; Mary Benedict, Susan Zuravin, Mark Somerfield, and Diane Brandt, "The reported health and functioning of children maltreated while in family foster care", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 20, 7, 1996, 561-571, [*Baltimore study*]; Susan Zuravin, Mary Benedict, and Mark Somerfield, "Child maltreatment in family foster care", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 63, 1993, 589-596, [*Baltimore study*].

¹²¹ The reviewers appear to have wrongly believed that the articles by Zuravin *et al.* (1993) and Benedict *et al.* (1996) referred to two separate studies, rather than just one. They may therefore have double counted the numbers of children and foster homes in its meta-analysis of data from the three articles.

from the small number of other US studies which compared rates of abuse in kinship and non-relative placements.

Drawing on an analysis of individual case records, the ***Colorado Kinship Care study*** (2008) compared allegations of abuse for 318 children in kinship placements to those for a matched sample of 318 children in NRFC. The study found that allegations of abuse of children in kinship care were far less frequent than allegations regarding the abuse of children in NRFC. Allegations of abuse were significantly less likely to be made in relation to children in kinship care (2.2% of all those in kinship placements) compared to those in NRFC (18.5% of children in NRFC).¹²² However the study provided no information on rates of substantiated abuse for the two groups.

The *Baltimore study* investigated patterns of substantiated abuse in foster care for all 296 foster homes in Baltimore City through an analysis of administrative data, including records of child protection investigations and information on the characteristics of the city's foster homes.¹²³ Just over one-third (34%) of all foster homes in the city were provided by kinship carers.

At least one form of maltreatment was confirmed in relation to 21% (62) of fostering households. Comparing kinship and "regular" foster care, the study found that children in kinship placements were at significantly reduced risk of maltreatment, as children in NRFC were 2.7 times more likely to be maltreated in foster care than those placed with kinship carers.

The *Illinois study* also focused on confirmed maltreatment, analysing administrative data on substantiated cases over a five-year period.¹²⁴ The study compared rates of confirmed maltreatment for children in kinship care, who accounted for 45% of all fostered children in the state of Illinois, to those for children in NRFC. Children in NRFC were found to be twice as likely to experience substantiated maltreatment as those in kinship care. Just 1.2% of children in kinship placements experienced abuse

¹²² Marc Winokur, Amy Holtan, and Keri Batchelder, "[Kinship care for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children removed from the home for maltreatment](#)", Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, 2014: CD006546. doi:10.1002/14651858.CD006546.pub3; Marc Winokur, Graig Crawford, Ralph Longobardi, and Deborah Valentine, "Matched comparison of children in kinship care and foster care on child welfare outcomes", *Families in Society*, 89, 3, 2008, 338-346.

¹²³ Susan Zuravin, Mary Benedict, and Mark Somerfield, "Child maltreatment in family foster care", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 63, 1993, 589-596, [*Baltimore study*].

¹²⁴ John Poertner, Marian Bussey, and John Fluke, "How safe are out-of-home placements?", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 21, 1999, 549-563, [*Illinois study*].

in care, compared to 2.5% of children in NRFC placements, but this difference between the two groups was not tested for statistical significance. The average rate of substantiated abuse or neglect over five years was 1.9% for children in kinship care, somewhat lower than the rate of 2.5% for NRFC, and 1.6% for children in pre-adoptive placements.

The *Wisconsin study* (2015) analysed state-wide administrative data on the 56,238 children who had been in foster care over an eight-year period, to establish whether children were safer in formal kinship care (FKC), informal kinship care (IKC) or non-relative foster care (NRFC).¹²⁵ FKC was defined as court-ordered placements with kin, and IKC as placement by voluntary arrangement with kin, in which relatives may receive some financial support from government. Children in IKC were more likely to be black and were significantly less likely to have a pre-care history of maltreatment than those in the other two groups. It is important to note that the use of these terms differs from their usage in the UK, where formally-ordered placements—including those that are court-ordered—and those made by voluntary agreement with families would both be defined as kinship care.¹²⁶

The probability of substantiated abuse in foster care was very low and, unlike other studies which compared rates of abuse for kinship and non-kinship placements, there was barely any variation in abuse rates between the three placement types. No more than 0.5% of children in foster care experienced substantiated abuse in their placements, a rate that is not dissimilar to the mean rate of 0.83% reported for the UK in 2011/12.¹²⁷ The author commented that differences in rates of substantiated maltreatment between the three groups (FKC, IKC, and NRFC) were so small that the likelihood of substantiated maltreatment was “essentially equal across groups.”

In another analysis of the same dataset, the *Wisconsin study* drew on administrative data on 43,320 children to examine patterns of investigation into the abuse of children in care in that state.¹²⁸ Although rates of substantiated abuse were similar for all three groups, the probability of an investigation was higher for IKC households

¹²⁵ Sarah Font, “Are Children Safer with Kin? A Comparison of Maltreatment Risk in out-of-Home Care”, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 54, 2015, 20-29, [*Wisconsin study*, (a)].

¹²⁶ In Scotland most placements are ordered by the Children’s Hearings rather than the courts.

¹²⁷ Nina Biehal, Jim Wade, Linda Cusworth, and Susan Clarke, *Keeping children safe: allegations concerning the abuse or neglect of children in care*, Research Report, Impact and Evidence Series (London: NSPCC, 2014).

¹²⁸ Sarah Font, “[Child Protection Investigations in Out-of-Home Care: Perpetrators, Victims, and Contexts](#)”, *Child Maltreatment*, 20, 4, 2015, 251–257, [*Wisconsin study* (b)].

than for FKC and NRFC, or even for residential care. Nearly 15% of IKC carers experienced an investigation, roughly double the rates for FKC and NRFC. Investigations into IKC placements were also more than twice as likely to substantiate allegations of maltreatment.

While evidence from the *Colorado*, *Illinois* and *Baltimore* studies suggests that allegations or confirmed maltreatment may be less common in kinship care than in NRFC, the *Wisconsin study* found no clear evidence that rates of maltreatment were lower for children in kinship care. Lower rates of maltreatment in kinship care may reflect positive family relationships for these children. However, lower rates of reported maltreatment might also reflect a greater reluctance to disclose maltreatment by the relatives they live with.

Abuse in informal and private foster care

Informal fostering arrangements are used in a diverse range of circumstances. Some parents may make informal arrangements with relatives or friends to look after their children when they cannot do so themselves, for example, because they are working abroad. Alternatively, parents may make informal fostering arrangements if they send their children to the UK to pursue their education. Families may also make informal arrangements when children need support because of parental physical or mental health problems or when young people, such as adolescent “sofa-surfers”, are estranged from their families. A desire to provide a better life for their children may drive families making these private arrangements, but the outcome may prove to be different.¹²⁹

Children in private and informal fostering placements may be particularly vulnerable to abuse, as local authorities are often unaware of how many such placements exist in their area. Although private fostering arrangements for children under 16 years old must be registered with local authorities, few are registered in practice. Many such arrangements are likely to be unknown to child protection authorities and operate without their sanction and support. It has therefore been extremely difficult for local authorities to establish the number of children and young people living in private fostering arrangements and, importantly, how many of them experience abuse and neglect in these settings.

¹²⁹ Laura Wirtz, *Hidden Children – separated children at risk*, Research Report (London: The Children’s Society, 2009).

In 2013, Scottish Government guidance on private fostering reported that only a very small number of notifications are made each year and that the number of children privately fostered remains mainly unknown.¹³⁰ As a review of the available evidence on private fostering observed in 2010, some privately fostered children are at high risk of abuse, neglect and exploitation but may fall beneath the radar of local authorities.¹³¹ Concerns about the opportunity for maltreatment that private foster care may afford have been evident since at least the 1990s, leading the *Utting Review* of safeguards for children living away from home in 1997 to describe private fostering as “a honey pot for abusers.”¹³² Just a few years later, the Victoria Climbié Inquiry, chaired by Lord Laming, also acknowledged that some private fostering arrangements may be unsafe for children and recommended a review of the legislation on private fostering.¹³³

Research on informal and private fostering is very limited and such research as there is mainly takes the form of small local studies, so it is not possible to estimate the proportion of private or informal arrangements that are positive. These small studies suggest that instances of abuse occur in some private foster homes and may persist over a number of years, but they have been unable to establish the prevalence of these arrangements.¹³⁴ Specific concerns have also been expressed concerning the use of informal fostering arrangements to conceal the true status of children who are trafficked to the UK or are Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) or refugees, making them less visible to professionals who might otherwise intervene to protect them. Children who have been trafficked for the purpose of domestic servitude, benefit fraud, illegal adoption, and criminal or sexual exploitation may therefore be hidden from the authorities in informal fostering arrangements and may be abused while living in these contexts.

¹³⁰ Scottish Government, *Be safe, be sure. Private Fostering in Scotland. Practice Guidance for local authority Children's Services* (Edinburgh: Scottish Government, 2013). Legislation on private fostering in Scotland is covered by the [Foster Children \(Scotland\) Act, 1984](#) and the [Foster Children \(Private Fostering\) \(Scotland\) Regulations, 1985](#).

¹³¹ Catherine Shaw, Isabelle Brodie, Anthony Ellis, Berni Graham, Amanda Mainey, Savita De Sousa, and Natasha Wilmott, *Research into Private Fostering* (London: DCSF, 2010).

¹³² William Utting, *People like us: the report of the review of the safeguards for children living away from home* (London: HMSO, 1997).

¹³³ Herbert Laming, *The Victoria Climbié Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Lord Laming* (London: HMSO, 2003).

¹³⁴ Bob Holman, “Private fostering: old problems, new urgency”, *Adoption & Fostering*, 27, 1, 2003, 8-18; Charlie Owen, Sonia Jackson, Sofka Barreau, and Edwina Peart, *An Exploratory Study of Private Fostering* (London: Institute of Education, Thomas Coram Research Unit, 2007).

In 2006, a report on child trafficking in Scotland noted that several agencies considered that informal foster care was one of the key elements of child trafficking. Moreover, the number of trafficked children was rising at that time, including some who were trafficked to Scotland from elsewhere in the UK and then abandoned outside a railway station, often in Glasgow. While only a few trafficked children had presented in Scotland in 2000, by 2006 the number had risen to 50-75 children a year.¹³⁵ Although much of the evidence on informal fostering is anecdotal, the report noted that there were now sufficient studies to indicate these children are being trafficked into and within the UK.

The risks facing UASC in informal foster care appear to be similar, including physical and emotional neglect, vulnerability to abuse and discriminatory treatment from the carers' children, trafficking and exploitation in the form of domestic servitude, sexual exploitation, benefit fraud, financial exploitation such as being forced to steal or beg, and forced marriage.¹³⁶ Bokhari's discussion of children separated from their parents highlights the plight of some children from West and Central Africa sent to live with relatives or friends within the UK in the hope that they will gain a better education. Instead, some are forced into domestic servitude or benefit fraud and may be physically, sexually, and emotionally abused, but there appears to be no clear evidence as to the proportion of children who find themselves in these situations.¹³⁷ These children, along with those trafficked from other countries, may also be threatened, have their documents taken from them, be locked up and taught to distrust authority, and emotionally manipulated.

Other research has focused on the social work response to the rising numbers of UASC arriving in the UK from the mid-2000s, most of whom were 16-17 years old and therefore not subject to the regulations on private foster care.¹³⁸ Some local

¹³⁵ Sheila Arthur and Richard Morran, *A hidden trade. Child trafficking research in Scotland* (Glasgow: Save the Children, 2006).

¹³⁶ Wendy Ayotte and Louise Williamson, *Separated Children in the UK: An Overview of the Current Situation* (London: Save the Children, 2001); Jenny Pearce, "Working with Trafficked Children and Young People: Complexities in Practice", *British Journal of Social Work*, 41, 2011, 1424-1441; Laura Wirtz, *Hidden Children – separated children at risk*, Research Report (London: The Children's Society, 2009).

¹³⁷ Farrar Bokhari, "Falling Through the Gaps: Safeguarding Children Trafficked into the UK", *Children and Society*, 22, 2008, 201-211.

¹³⁸ Jim Wade, Fiona Mitchell, and Graeme Baylis, *Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children: The Response of Social Work Services* (London: BAAF, 2005); Fiona Mitchell, "The social services response to unaccompanied children in England", *Child & Family Social Work*, 8, 3, 2003, 179-189.

authorities have used what were effectively hybrid kinship/private foster placements for UASC, placing these young people with friends or extended families, and then withdrawing from any further monitoring and support, placing undue reliance on the carers' presumed sense of familial or community obligation. The often rudimentary nature of assessments of potential family carers and the inadequate monitoring of these placements has raised concerns that these young people were being exposed to the risk of abuse and neglect. Although several commentators have highlighted the potential risk of maltreatment in foster care, they did not appear to uncover evidence of actual harm. As one director of Social Services explained the dilemmas at the time: "Children may arrive in Kent with details of relatives or friends already in Britain and it is appropriate that they are put in contact with them. However, some placements may well further increase the possibility of abuse if they are not adequately investigated."¹³⁹

Connolly's small qualitative study described how private fostering arrangements can disguise relations of trafficking and exploitation for children.¹⁴⁰ In-depth interviews with 11 UASC and refugee children who had spent time in private foster care settings revealed that most of them had been accompanied to the UK by adults who claimed to be "aunts" or "uncles" or other members of their extended family. Despite their tenuous connections to them, these adults could move children through customs and on to places of danger, uncertainty, and neglect. The study illustrates the early experiences of children living in private foster care in these circumstances. Four of the girls were moved into domestic servitude, two were forced into selling sex and the other was living with adults who were neglectful; while the placements of two of the boys were characterised by emotional and material deprivation, and another had been placed in the hands of traffickers. The children and young people also described how some of these private fostering arrangements could end, including through luck, chance encounters with astute professionals who realised that something was amiss, or following a dramatic tipping point event. Despite its small sample, this study provides important evidence of the vulnerability of UASC in private fostering arrangements to abuse, neglect, exploitation and material hardship, and

¹³⁹ Peter Gilroy, "[Away from home, alone](#)", *Community Care*, 8 August 2001, 26–27.

¹⁴⁰ Helen Connolly, "[For a while out of orbit': listening to what unaccompanied asylum-seeking/refugee children in the UK say about their rights and experiences in private foster care](#)", *Adoption & Fostering*, 38, 4, 2014, 331–345.

highlights the need for more effective systems of monitoring and protection for UASC and trafficked children.

Although we have been unable to identify any studies on the prevalence of abuse in informal and private foster care, it is nevertheless clear from the available evidence that children may experience abuse and neglect within these arrangements.

Furthermore, informal and private foster care may be used to conceal the abuse and exploitation of children who are trafficked or are seeking asylum, or both, who are likely to be at particularly high risk of harm.

Nature and severity of the maltreatment

Most studies of abuse in care have provided insights into the nature of abuse in residential institutions, but there has been little research on the nature and severity of maltreatment experienced by children in foster care. The *Keeping Children Safe study* (2014) included a survey of fostering social workers in 24 local authorities across Scotland, England, and Wales, which collected detailed information on 87 cases of substantiated maltreatment in care involving 118 children.¹⁴¹ The most common types of confirmed maltreatment identified were physical abuse (experienced by 37% of the children) and emotional abuse (30%), with neglect (14%), and sexual abuse (11%) reported for smaller proportions of children. This sub-sample of the wider *Keeping Children Safe study* was small and possibly unrepresentative, so these findings on proportions of different types of maltreatment reported should be viewed as exploratory. As in most American studies discussed above, physical abuse was more commonly reported than either neglect or sexual abuse. However, emotional abuse was not reported in the older American studies, possibly because this type of abuse was less widely recognised at the time these studies were conducted (1980s-1990s).

In three of the cases of physical abuse identified by this study, the foster carer was said to have exercised excessive physical restraint while attempting to control a young person's behaviour. In England, official examples of acceptable physical restraint have included blocking children's movement to stop them hurting themselves or others, or from seriously damaging property.¹⁴² A further 14% of the children were reported to have experienced poor standards of care. However, thresholds for defining behaviours as abusive or neglectful, rather than as poor standards of care falling short of abuse, may vary between local authorities.

Children's reports of maltreatment

Although few studies have collected data on abuse in foster care directly from fostered, or formerly fostered, children; those that have done so have reported evidence of emotional abuse in foster care as well as physical and sexual abuse. Two organisations providing information and support services for children collected

¹⁴¹ Nina Biehal, Jim Wade, Linda Cusworth, and Susan Clarke, [Keeping children safe: allegations concerning the abuse or neglect of children in care](#), Research Report, Impact and Evidence Series (London: NSPCC, 2014).

¹⁴² Ofsted, [Fostering services quality assurance and data forms 2011-12](#) (London: Ofsted, 2012).

valuable information on experiences in foster care from self-selected groups of children.

Just over one-quarter of the 217 fostered children who returned a survey questionnaire enclosed in an issue of the *Who Cares? Trust* magazine complained of being treated differently from their foster carers' own children and of being scapegoated when things went wrong.¹⁴³ An analysis of calls made to the *Childline* telephone helpline by another group of 162 children in care also reported that some children voiced similar concerns about being treated less favourably than the foster carers' own children and experiencing a general lack of warmth and care.¹⁴⁴

Twelve percent of callers to *Childline* reported physical abuse, which some foster carers appeared to use as a form of discipline, as well as sexual and emotional abuse. As the *Childline* data was drawn from calls to a helpline, its sample was likely to be largely composed of children who were unhappy in their placements. While the *Childline* report provides insights into the experiences of children living in poor-quality or abusive placements, it cannot tell us the frequency of such experiences. A subsequent survey by *Childline* in 2009-10 analysed data from calls to the helpline from 3,196 looked after children in the UK, in which children raised concerns about a range of issues, including their experience of abuse and neglect while they were looked after. Like the earlier *Childline* survey, these calls included the accounts of a small number of fostered children who described being emotionally abused by their foster carers.¹⁴⁵

Nature of the maltreatment

As noted in [Chapter 5](#), the *Children in Foster Care study* of 347 children in court-ordered foster or kinship care in Australia reported that nearly one in five of all foster children in the state of New South Wales had experienced substantiated maltreatment while they had been in foster care.¹⁴⁶ Analysis of substantiated cases indicated that maltreatment in foster care fell into two categories, although the percentage in each was not reported. The majority of cases related to carers coping

¹⁴³ B. Fletcher, *Not Just a Name: The Views of Young People in Foster and Residential Care* (London: National Consumer Council, 1993).

¹⁴⁴ Sally Morris, Helen Wheatley, and Barbara Lees, *Time to listen: the experiences of young people in foster and residential care* (London: Childline, 1994).

¹⁴⁵ D. Hutchinson, *Looked after children talking to Childline* (London: NSPCC: 2011).

¹⁴⁶ Michael Tarren-Sweeney, "Retrospective and concurrent predictors of the mental health of children in care", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 2008, 1-25.

poorly with children's behavioural and relationship difficulties and, in this context, maltreatment frequently comprised inappropriate discipline or scapegoating, which ranged from smacking to serious emotional or physical harm. A smaller group of children experienced abusive, neglectful or predatory care that was not attributed to poor coping by carers under stress.

In England, the *Belonging and Permanence* study (2010) investigated outcomes for 196 children in long-term foster care or adopted from care.¹⁴⁷ Abuse in foster care was not the focus of this study but, when asked for the reasons for children's placement moves, the social workers or foster carers of 10 of the children explained that the child moved as a result of abuse in a previous placement. For all but one of these children, the maltreatment had been extremely serious, including practices such as keeping a disabled child locked in her bedroom, forcing a child to have cold showers if he wet himself and then stand shivering in the garden, hitting children, forcing them to sleep on the floor in filthy conditions, denying them food, and beating them if they ate any scraps from the dustbin. These reports referred to the actions of a minority of foster carers who clearly should never have been allowed to foster.

Two other studies in the UK concluded that most allegations against foster carers concerned poor standards of care rather than serious abuse. The *Delivering Foster Care study* of fostering services, conducted in the late 1990s, identified three main kinds of allegations against foster carers.¹⁴⁸ These included not only serious physical and sexual abuse but also "heavy-handedness" by a carer and "incompetence, neglect, or misbehaviour e.g. a drink problem." However, this study did not indicate the proportion of more serious allegations. From the data presented, it appeared that all 75 of the foster carers subject to allegations had been accused of physical or sexual abuse, possibly alongside allegations of less serious kinds. In England, reports by the social workers of 596 children in foster care included in the *York Outcomes study*, indicated that 3% of the children had experienced abuse in a previous foster

¹⁴⁷ Nina Biehal, Sarah Ellison, Claire Baker, and Ian Sinclair, *Belonging and Permanence: Outcomes in long-term foster care and adoption* (London: BAAF, 2010); Nina Biehal, "A sense of belonging: meanings of family and home in long-term foster care", *British Journal of Social Work*, 44, 2014, 955-971.

¹⁴⁸ John Triseliotis, Moira Borland, and Malcolm Hill, *Delivering Foster Care* (London: BAAF, 2000).

placement. The authors considered that most of the incidents of concern appeared to be examples of poor practice rather than clear-cut cases of abuse.¹⁴⁹

Two *Fostering Network* surveys on allegations of abuse reported that 25% of the allegations in the 2004 survey and 16% of allegations in a subsequent survey in 2006 concerned poor standards of care rather than abuse.¹⁵⁰ The 2006 survey reported that for 13% of carers, the allegations against them included verbal abuse, preventing contact, or withholding allowances. However, as noted earlier, the foster carers who took part in these surveys were unlikely to include any that had been de-registered due to serious maltreatment.¹⁵¹ These studies in the UK suggest that some allegations may concern behaviours defined as poor standards of care rather than abuse or neglect, but do not indicate the percentage of foster children who experienced more serious maltreatment.

In the USA, the *Hennepin County study* provided 29 case examples of substantiated abuse and neglect. Physical abuse was substantiated in 16 cases but was judged to be “unable to be substantiated” in 26 others.¹⁵² The authors observed that physical abuse tended to be less severe than other types of maltreatment and was “usually a result of discipline that has been carried too far”. However, the abuse described in the article paints a picture of serious physical and emotional abuse, including threatening behaviour, slapping, punching a four-year-old in the face, and leaving children with black eyes and handprints on their faces.

Five cases of substantiated sexual abuse were identified by this study, but six other cases were deemed “unable to determine.” Examples of sexual abuse ranged from inappropriate touching to sexual intercourse. In most cases of sexual abuse, there had been no outward signs of distress or behaviour change among the children and the foster carers concerned were well-liked and respected by the children’s social

¹⁴⁹ Ian Sinclair, Claire Baker, Kate Wilson, and Ian Gibbs, *Foster Children: Where They Go and How They Get On* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005).

¹⁵⁰ Fostering Network, *Fostering Can Never Feel the Same for Us: A Study of Foster Families that Have Been the Subjects of an Allegation* (London: The Fostering Network, 2004); Vicki Swain, [Allegations in Foster Care: A UK study of Foster Carers’ Experiences of Allegations](#) (London: The Fostering Network, 2006).

¹⁵¹ Vicki Swain, [Allegations in Foster Care: A UK study of Foster Carers’ Experiences of Allegations](#) (London: The Fostering Network, 2006).

¹⁵² Marilyn Cavara and Carol Ogren, “Protocol to investigate child abuse in foster care”, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 7, 1983, 287-295, [*Hennepin County study*]. It is possible that children in these ‘cases’ had experienced more than one type of substantiated abuse, but this is unclear from the article.

workers. None of the children disclosed this abuse to their social workers, even when specifically asked about it. Neglect was described mainly as a lack of supervision resulting in injury to a child, leaving the child in the care of an inadequate carer or medical neglect. This was substantiated in eight cases, but recorded as “unable to substantiate” in 20 others.

Emotional abuse in foster care

There has been relatively little attention to emotional abuse in foster care, possibly because it is more difficult to define and identify than other forms of maltreatment, but a few studies have reported evidence of this type of maltreatment in recent years. Emotional abuse generally refers to a relationship rather than an event and may involve acts of omission, such as non-nurturing behaviour, as well as commission.¹⁵³ The term emotional abuse is not usually used to describe isolated events, instead describing situations where parents or carers either fail to respond to a child, or react in a hostile or dismissive manner, making children feel unloved and unwanted.¹⁵⁴

An American study of fostered children in New York provided a broadly similar definition of psychological/emotional neglect, describing it as “a severe lack of cognitive and social stimulation implicated in delayed cognitive development and school failure as well as a lack of affection, touch, cuddling, interest, and comfort when distressed that communicates to the child that he or she has little worth and may not be cared for or protected.”¹⁵⁵ Drawing on existing definitions of psychological maltreatment (PM), the researchers developed a 19-item measure of PM that was administered to 112 fostered children in New York as part of their routine mental health screening. Nearly one-quarter (24%) of the children reported that their current or past foster carers had displayed one or more of the behaviours characteristic of PM described, the most common being “spurning”. The percentage of children who had experienced PM by a parent was much higher, at 68%. However, the authors acknowledged that some children might have downplayed their

¹⁵³ Danya Glaser, Vivien Prior, and Margaret Lynch, *Emotional Abuse and Emotional Neglect: Antecedents, Operational Definitions and Consequences* (York: British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, 2001).

¹⁵⁴ David Howe, *Child Abuse and Neglect: Attachment, Development and Intervention* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

¹⁵⁵ Amy Baker, Marla Brassard, Mel Schneiderman, and Lauren Donnelly, “Foster children’s report on psychological maltreatment experiences”, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 2013, 7, 3, 235-252.

experience of PM, as they may have been fearful of the possible consequences, such as a move to a new placement.

Emotional abuse in foster care has also been identified by two English studies of adoption, which came across evidence that children had experienced emotional abuse in their pre-adoptive foster placements. The ***Adoption Outcomes study*** (2006) followed up 80 children who had previously had a plan for adoption, reporting that around one in 10 of them had experienced maltreatment by past foster carers.¹⁵⁶ Six children had been rejected or emotionally abused and three were over-chastised or physically abused.

A subsequent study by the same team, ***Beyond the Adoption Order*** (2016), investigated the stability of adoptive placements in England and Wales.¹⁵⁷ In the qualitative phase of this study, researchers undertook in-depth semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of 86 adoptive parents who had either experienced challenges in caring for their children or the disruption of adoptive placements. The researchers reported that half of the adoptive parents interviewed had serious misgivings about the quality of the care provided in their children's pre-adoption foster placements.¹⁵⁸ Fourteen percent of all parents were certain that their child had been abused and/or neglected while in pre-adoption foster care and a further 13% thought that abuse and/or neglect had probably occurred.

The adoptive parents described foster carers who were disengaged emotionally from the children and provided very little in the way of nurture, although they had provided adequate physical care. The care shown to children by some foster carers was described by adopters as "cold", "clinical", and "professional". Some foster carers had been reluctant to cuddle children or let them sit on their laps. As two parents reported: "she was a foster carer who didn't give cuddles because she didn't want to make the attachment." For some parents, the lack of emotional warmth shown to children while in foster care was also evident in their derogatory remarks about the child during the introductions, including harsh comments about the child's physical

¹⁵⁶ Julie Selwyn, Wendy Sturgess, David Quinton, and Catherine Baxter, *Costs and Outcomes of Non-Infant Adoptions* (London: BAAF, 2006).

¹⁵⁷ Sarah Meakings and Julie Selwyn, "[She was a foster mother who said she didn't give cuddles: The adverse early foster care experiences of children who later struggled with adoptive family life](#)", *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 21, 4, 2016, 509–519.

appearance or lack of potential, and one adoptive family reported that the child's foster carer had told them that their child (still a baby) was unlovable.

In Australia, the *Children in Foster Care study* of 347 children in foster care identified a strong association between emotional abuse and a specific eating disorder.¹⁵⁹ Children who experienced emotional abuse in foster care were significantly more likely to display a specific pattern of aberrant eating termed Food Maintenance Syndrome (FMS), a condition which involves food acquisition and maintenance behaviours including storing, stealing and hiding food, without concurrent obesity. The study reported that emotional abuse in foster care was an exceptional risk factor for FMS. Children with a history of confirmed maltreatment in foster care—and who were no longer living with the carers who had abused them—were 4.5 times more likely to develop FMS than other children in foster care. The odds of developing FMS were even higher for children being abused in their current placement at the time of data collection, who were 17.5 times more likely to display FMS than other children in foster care. Although data on the children's mental health had been collected before the abuse came to light. The author, Michael Tarren-Sweeney, hypothesised that this syndrome is primarily triggered by acute stress, as most confirmed cases were living in placements that were abusive when this behaviour was reported.

¹⁵⁹ Michael Tarren-Sweeney, "Patterns of aberrant eating among pre-adolescent children in foster care", *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 34, 5, 2006, 621-632. Michael Tarren-Sweeney, "Retrospective and concurrent predictors of the mental health of children in care", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 2008, 1-25.

Perpetrators and children who have experienced abuse

Evidence on perpetrators

It is important to distinguish maltreatment *in* foster care from maltreatment *by* foster carers. While foster carers may often be the perpetrators of abuse and neglect, adults and young people connected with the placement may also be responsible for abuse. As older studies in the UK show, there has long been evidence that children in foster care may be abused by a variety of perpetrators.

Four UK studies have provided evidence that other adults or children may be responsible for the abuse of children in foster care. None of these studies had representative samples, but nevertheless provide useful descriptive data on the perpetrators of maltreatment. The **Leeds study** (1999) examined the circumstances of a sample of 133 children who were abused in foster care over a 6-year period (1990-1995).¹⁶⁰ The most common perpetrators of abuse were the children's foster carers (41%). Nearly one-quarter (24%) were abused by birth parents, often during contact sessions. A further 20% were abused by other children or young people; including children fostered in the same placement, birth family siblings, the foster families' own children, or unrelated children connected to the foster family. For 6%, the abuse occurred in the homes of other relatives, who were sometimes the children's kinship carers. Most cases of abuse by foster carers involved physical abuse while most cases of abuse by parents, other children or young people involved sexual abuse. In 15% of cases, birth parents were responsible for both physical and sexual abuse.

The **Sexually Abused and Abusing Children study** (1998) reported evidence of peer abuse in foster care for a sample of 60 children. Just over one in 10 of the fostered children had sexually abused other children in the placement or involved them in sexual activity.¹⁶¹ An analysis of children's reports to the *Childline Helpline Report* also provided evidence of peer abuse, stating that children and young people were the abusers in half of the reported cases of sexual abuse in foster care. Twelve girls reported they had been sexually abused by the older sons of their foster carers and

¹⁶⁰ Georgina Hobbs, Christopher Hobbs, and Jane Wynne, "Abuse of children in foster and residential care", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23, 1999, 1239-1252, [*Leeds study*].

¹⁶¹ Elaine Farmer and Sue Pollock, *Sexually Abused and Abusing Children in Substitute Care* (Chichester: Wiley, 1998).

the others were abused by the husbands/boyfriends of their foster mothers, who were apparently unaware of the abuse.¹⁶²

The most recent UK data on the perpetrators of abuse in foster care in the UK comes from the *Keeping Children Safe study*, which included an analysis of detailed data on a sub-sample of 87 confirmed cases of abuse or neglect in foster care.¹⁶³ This information was gathered by means of a survey of fostering social workers in 24 local authorities across the UK. The study reported that children's foster carers were responsible for the maltreatment in the vast majority (88%) of substantiated cases. In four cases (4.5%), the perpetrator was the carer's adult child living in the foster home, and in one case it was another child living in the placement. In five other cases, the perpetrator was another person linked to the placement.

Although the evidence from these four UK studies is limited, it is clear that fostered children may be at risk of abuse not only by their foster carers but also by birth parents, other relatives such as kinship carers or other children or young people.

In the Netherlands, the *Sentinel study* provided more detailed evidence on the perpetrators of abuse against children in foster care. It reported that, in 57% of cases of sexual abuse in foster care, the perpetrators were foster carers or other adults in the foster family.¹⁶⁴ In 14% of cases, the perpetrators were adolescents in the same placement and in 29% of cases they were people unknown to the sentinel.¹⁶⁵ Almost half of the adolescents who reported sexual abuse did not wish to disclose the name of the perpetrator. Among those who did, 27% reported that they were sexually abused by their foster parent or another adult member of the foster family. A further 27% were sexually abused by a young person in the same foster home and 40% by another adult. Foster carers were also the main perpetrators of physical abuse (in

¹⁶² Sally Morris, Helen Wheatley, and Barbara Lees, *Time to listen: the experiences of young people in foster and residential care* (London: Childline, 1994).

¹⁶³ Nina Biehal, Jim Wade, Linda Cusworth, and Susan Clarke, [Keeping children safe: allegations concerning the abuse or neglect of children in care](#), Research Report, Impact and Evidence Series (London: NSPCC, 2014).

¹⁶⁴ Saskia Euser, Lenneke R. A. Alink, Anne Tharner, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, and Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg, "The Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse in Out-of-Home Care: A comparison between abuse in residential and in foster care", *Child Maltreatment*, 18, 4, 2013, 221-231, [*Sentinel study (a)*].

¹⁶⁵ Saskia Euser, Lenneke R. A. Alink, Anne Tharner, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, and Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg, "Out of home placement to promote safety? The prevalence of physical abuse in residential and foster care", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 37, 2014, 64-70, [*Sentinel study (b)*].

67% of reported cases) and other (unspecified) adults within or outside the placement were responsible for all other incidents of physical abuse.

Studies in the USA have similarly identified a range of perpetrators responsible for the abuse of children in foster care and, consistent with the UK evidence, the most common perpetrators were the children's foster carers. An analysis of 71 incidents of substantiated abuse by the *Illinois study* showed that foster carers were the perpetrators of 61% of children abused in foster care. In other incidents, the children's parents had abused them during contact (11%), 14% were abused by other adults, and 3% were abused by babysitters or other children.¹⁶⁶ The *Indiana study* reported that foster carers were responsible for the maltreatment of 78% of the children in the sample, and other children were responsible for the abuse in 6% of incidents.¹⁶⁷ The *Baltimore study* similarly found that foster carers were the most common perpetrators of abuse, with foster carers responsible for 86% of confirmed cases of sexual abuse and virtually all cases of physical abuse or neglect.¹⁶⁸

However, the *Wisconsin study*, which analysed investigations into the reported maltreatment of over 50,000 children in foster care reported that, unlike most other studies, less than half of these investigations involved allegations against the children's foster carers. This study also reported a much lower rate of substantiated maltreatment by foster carers than other studies. For children in non-relative foster care, only 9% of substantiated cases involved a foster carer, 20% concerned abuse by peers, and 23% concerned pre-placement caregivers. A smaller proportion of investigations concerned allegations against children's peers who were, in most cases, their siblings or other foster children. Over one-third of investigations involved allegations against a pre-placement caregiver; biological, step, or adoptive parent. This may reflect either the (mistaken) inclusion of retrospective reports of

¹⁶⁶ John Poertner, Marian Bussey, and John Fluke, "How safe are out-of-home placements?", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 21, 1999, 549–563, [*Illinois study*]; Gail Tittle, John Poertner, and Philip Garnier, [Child maltreatment in foster care. A study of retrospective reporting](#) (Urbana, Illinois: School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: 2001), [*Illinois study*].

¹⁶⁷ J. William Spencer and Dean D. Knudsen, "Out-of-home maltreatment: an analysis of risk in various settings for children", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 14, 1992, 485–492, [*Indiana study*].

¹⁶⁸ Susan Zuravin, Mary Benedict, and Mark Somerfield, "Child maltreatment in family foster care", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 63, 1993, 589–596, [*Baltimore study*]; Mary Benedict, Susan Zuravin, Mark Somerfield, and Diane Brandt, "The reported health and functioning of children maltreated while in family foster care", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 20, 7, 1996, 561–571, [*Baltimore study*].

maltreatment that occurred prior to children's placement in foster care or new maltreatment that occurred during contact visits by parents.¹⁶⁹

Most studies that included information on the perpetrators of child maltreatment, therefore, have indicated that the most common perpetrators were the children's foster carers. The next most likely perpetrators of abuse were other children or young people connected to the placement. A small number of studies have also reported that some children may be abused by their parents during contact sessions.

Characteristics of foster carers responsible for maltreatment

Since fostering is essentially a private activity, some fostered children may be isolated and therefore particularly vulnerable, especially as many of them are very young. In the USA, evidence from the both the *Colorado study* and DePanfilis and Girvin's study of decision-making suggests that some foster carers found to be responsible for abuse have a history of previous allegations.¹⁷⁰ In the UK, the *Keeping Children Safe study* found that 43% of foster carers who had confirmed to have maltreated a foster child had been the subject of previous allegations concerning either the same child or another. In some of these cases, there had been a string of low-level complaints during the carers' fostering careers. Ten of the children in the study had made previous complaints about their foster carers and nine had made allegations against previous foster carers.¹⁷¹ These research findings echo the *Utting Review* of safeguards for children living away from home, which noted that inquiries into abuse in foster care often uncover a background of previous allegations that had not been taken seriously.¹⁷²

Three studies have examined the behaviours of concern in cases of abuse in foster care, reporting that they range from inappropriate discipline by carers in response to

¹⁶⁹ The inclusion of many cases of pre-placement abuse partly explains the low rate of abuse by foster carers compared to other studies, as it increased the size of the denominator used in these calculations. See Sarah Font, "[Child Protection Investigations in Out-of-Home Care: Perpetrators, Victims, and Contexts](#)", *Child Maltreatment*, 20, 4, 2015, 251–257, [*Wisconsin study, (b)*].

¹⁷⁰ James Rosenthal, Janet Motz, Dorothy Edmonson, and Victor Groze, "A descriptive study of abuse and neglect in out-of-home-placement", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 15, 1991, 249–260, [*Colorado study*]; Diane DePanfilis and Heather Girvin, "Investigating child maltreatment in out-of-home care: barriers to effective decision-making", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27, 4, 2005, 353–374.

¹⁷¹ Nina Biehal, Jim Wade, Linda Cusworth, and Susan Clarke, [Keeping children safe: allegations concerning the abuse or neglect of children in care](#), Research Report, Impact and Evidence Series (London: NSPCC, 2014).

¹⁷² William Utting, *People like us: the report of the review of the safeguards for children living away from home* (London: HMSO, 1997).

children's behavioural difficulties, to inflicting serious physical and emotional harm.¹⁷³ In Australia, the *Children in Foster Care study* of all fostered children in the state of New South Wales reported that most cases of abuse by foster carers concerned inappropriate discipline from carers under stress coping poorly with children who had challenging behaviour. The author—a child psychologist—also argued that a smaller group of foster carers displayed “neglectful or predatory behaviour”. He argued that social workers' descriptions of carers' motivations and the nature of their engagement with others suggested that they had “emotional, personality, or relationship difficulties that are incompatible with fostering.”¹⁷⁴

Both the *Hennepin County study* and the *Maricopa County study* observed that foster carers who experienced allegations had often been fostering for many years, and this may have enhanced professional trust in the care they provided.¹⁷⁵ The *Maricopa County study* also reported that the alleged perpetrators of sexual abuse had often been well-liked and respected by their social workers before the abuse came to light. However, the *Edinburgh Inquiry* warned of the danger of social worker's over-optimism about the quality of care provided by carers who were well known to them.¹⁷⁶ The *Wakefield Inquiry* into two foster carers' sexual abuse of young children, which persisted over a lengthy period of time, also highlighted concerns regarding social workers' interaction with foster carers, reporting that some social workers had been intimidated by them.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ Michael Tarren-Sweeney, “Retrospective and concurrent predictors of the mental health of children in care”, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 2008, 1-25; John Triseliotis, Moira Borland, and Malcolm Hill, *Teenagers and the Social Work Services* (London: HMSO, 1995); Ian Sinclair, Claire Baker, Kate Wilson, and Ian Gibbs, *Foster Children: Where They Go and How They Get On* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005).

¹⁷⁴ Michael Tarren-Sweeney, “Retrospective and concurrent predictors of the mental health of children in care”, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 2008, 1-25.

¹⁷⁵ Marilyn Cavara and Carol Ogren, “Protocol to investigate child abuse in foster care”, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 7, 1983, 287-295, [*Hennepin County study*]; F. G. Bolton, Roy Laner, and Dorothy Gai, “For better or worse? Foster parents and foster children in an officially reported child maltreatment population”, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 3, 1981, 37-53, [*Maricopa County study*].

¹⁷⁶ Kathleen Marshall, Cathy Jamieson, and Alan Finlayson, [*Edinburgh's Children: The Report of the Edinburgh Inquiry into Abuse and Protection of Children in Care*](#) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh City Council, 1999).

¹⁷⁷ Brian Parrott, Annie McIver, and June Thoburn, *Independent Inquiry Report into the Circumstances of Child Sexual Abuse by Two Foster Carers in Wakefield* (Wakefield: Wakefield Metropolitan District Council, 2007).

Child characteristics and types of abuse

Where studies have provided details of the maltreatment children may experience in foster care, they have tended to focus mainly on sexual and physical abuse, but this evidence comes from only a small number of studies, all of which had small samples. The limited evidence available from these studies suggests that girls may be more likely to be sexually abused in foster care than boys.¹⁷⁸ For example, the *Colorado study* reported that allegations of sexual abuse more often involved girls than boys and the *Baltimore study* reported that the majority of confirmed cases of sexual abuse involved girls.¹⁷⁹ A few studies have also reported that boys are more likely to be physically abused in foster care than girls.¹⁸⁰ Some studies have suggested that children who have previously been abused in their home environment may be particularly vulnerable to further abuse in foster care, as they may be particularly challenging to care for or display highly sexualised behaviour.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ Sally Morris, Helen Wheatley, and Barbara Lees, *Time to listen: the experiences of young people in foster and residential care* (London: Childline, 1994); Bernard Gallagher, "[The Extent and Nature of Known Cases of Institutional Child Sexual Abuse](#)", *British Journal of Social Work*, 30, 6, 2000, 795-817; James Rosenthal, Janet Motz, Dorothy Edmonson, and Victor Groze, "A descriptive study of abuse and neglect in out-of-home-placement", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 15, 1991, 249-260, [*Colorado study*]; Mary Benedict, Susan Zuravin, Mark Somerfield, and Diane Brandt, "The reported health and functioning of children maltreated while in family foster care", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 20, 7, 1996, 561-571 [*Baltimore study*]; Georgina Hobbs, Christopher Hobbs, and Jane Wynne, "Abuse of children in foster and residential care", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23, 1999, 1239-1252, [*Leeds study*]; Saskia Euser, Lenneke R. A. Alink, Anne Tharner, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, and Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg, "The Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse in Out-of-Home Care: A comparison between abuse in residential and in foster care", *Child Maltreatment*, 18, 4, 2013, 221-231, [*Sentinel study (a)*].

¹⁷⁹ James Rosenthal, Janet Motz, Dorothy Edmonson, and Victor Groze, "A descriptive study of abuse and neglect in out-of-home-placement", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 15, 1991, 249-260, [*Colorado study*]; Mary Benedict, Susan Zuravin, Mark Somerfield, and Diane Brandt, "The reported health and functioning of children maltreated while in family foster care", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 20, 7, 1996, 561-571 [*Baltimore study*].

¹⁸⁰ James Rosenthal, Janet Motz, Dorothy Edmonson, and Victor Groze, "A descriptive study of abuse and neglect in out-of-home-placement", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 15, 1991, 249-260, [*Colorado study*]; Mary Benedict, Susan Zuravin, Mark Somerfield, and Diane Brandt, "The reported health and functioning of children maltreated while in family foster care", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 20, 7, 1996, 561-571 [*Baltimore study*]; Georgina Hobbs, Christopher Hobbs, and Jane Wynne, "Abuse of children in foster and residential care", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23, 1999, 1239-1252, [*Leeds study*]; Marilyn Cavara and Carol Ogren, "Protocol to investigate child abuse in foster care", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 7, 1983, 287-295, [*Hennepin County study*]; Saskia Euser, Lenneke R. A. Alink, Anne Tharner, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, and Marian J. Bakermans-Kranenburg, "Out of home placement to promote safety? The prevalence of physical abuse in residential and foster care", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 37, 2014, 64-70, [*Sentinel study (b)*].

¹⁸¹ Mary Benedict, Susan Zuravin, Mark Somerfield, and Diane Brandt, "The reported health and functioning of children maltreated while in family foster care", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 20, 7, 1996,

Studies of child maltreatment in the wider community have found that disabled children are at greater risk of all forms of abuse and neglect.¹⁸² Four studies have suggested that children with physical, sensory or learning disabilities may be at particular risk for maltreatment in foster care. The *Keeping Children Safe study* noted that over one-quarter of a sample of 116 children who experienced abuse in foster care had a disability of some kind, and the *Leeds study* reported that one-quarter of a sub-sample of children abused in care had significant learning difficulties or special educational needs.¹⁸³ In the USA, the *Oklahoma study* similarly found that children known to have experienced maltreatment were more than three times more likely to have learning disabilities than those who had not been maltreated in foster care.¹⁸⁴ A similar pattern was identified by the *Baltimore study* in the USA that suggested that children with developmental or mental health problems were at greater risk of maltreatment.¹⁸⁵

It has been difficult to find any published research on children's experience of disclosing abuse and the factors that may make it difficult for them to do so. However the *Why Historic Abuse?* study provided retrospective accounts of why some children may find it hard to disclose the abuse they suffer, drawing on interviews with adults who had experienced abuse in foster care when they were children.¹⁸⁶ However, only two of the 21 participants in the study had experienced abuse in foster care. The experiences described highlighted the barriers children may experience in disclosing the abuse at the time it occurs; such as the lack of a trusted adult to confide in; fear of further harm and inappropriate reactions from some adults, such as ignoring, disbelieving, or even blaming children for the abuse.

561-571 [*Baltimore study*]; Georgina Hobbs, Christopher Hobbs, and Jane Wynne, "Abuse of children in foster and residential care", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23, 1999, 1239-1252, [*Leeds study*].

¹⁸² Carol Hooper, *Child Maltreatment* (London: Save the Children Fund, 2005).

¹⁸³ Nina Biehal, Jim Wade, Linda Cusworth, and Susan Clarke, [Keeping children safe: allegations concerning the abuse or neglect of children in care](#), Research Report, Impact and Evidence Series (London: NSPCC, 2014); Georgina Hobbs, Christopher Hobbs, and Jane Wynne, "Abuse of children in foster and residential care", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23, 1999, 1239-1252, [*Leeds study*].

¹⁸⁴ Peggy Billings and Terry Moore, [Child maltreatment in Foster Care](#) (Kansas: Oklahoma Department of Human Services, 2004), [*Oklahoma study*].

¹⁸⁵ Mary Benedict, Susan Zuravin, Mark Somerfield, and Diane Brandt, "The reported health and functioning of children maltreated while in family foster care", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 20, 7, 1996, 561-571, [*Baltimore study*].

¹⁸⁶ Samina Karim, "[Why 'historic' abuse? Experiences of children reporting abuse historically](#)", *Scottish Journal of Residential Foster Care*, vol.16, 3, 2017. See also Samina Karim, [Power and the historic abuse of children in care](#), PhD thesis, 2020.

As this chapter shows, more evidence is available on the characteristics and fostering histories of the perpetrators of maltreatment in foster care than on the children who experienced this abuse. Studies which investigate the perpetrators of abuse have typically found that in the majority of cases foster carers are responsible for the maltreatment. However, in other cases, the perpetrator may be another child or adult associated with the placement, including foster carers' own children or other fostered children, or in some cases, children's birth parents or other relatives. The limited evidence available on children who experience abuse in foster care suggests that girls are more likely to experience sexual abuse, boys are more likely to experience physical abuse, and children with physical, sensory, or learning disabilities may be at greater risk for maltreatment in care.

Discussion

As Scottish newspaper reports on the trials of foster carers accused of the “ill-treatment” of children in their care attest, there have been concerns about abuse in foster care in Scotland since at least the 1930s and almost certainly before then. Although our searches of Scottish newspaper archives from 1930 uncovered only a few such court cases, there were likely to have been other cases that were not reported in the newspapers or, if they were, the fact that the child was in foster care may not have been reported.

In view of the paucity of UK research specifically on abuse in foster care, this review has also drawn on a small number of wider UK studies of children in foster care, which have included findings on abuse in foster care.¹⁸⁷ The research literature on abuse in foster care is nevertheless quite limited in the UK in comparison with the USA, where twelve studies of abuse in foster care have been published since 1981.

Evidence from surveys of foster carers in the UK suggests that 31-35% of foster carers may experience one or more allegations of abuse during the course of their fostering careers, while studies which have analysed agency records have reported that 3-4.3% of foster carers experience allegations during a single year.¹⁸⁸ The *Keeping Children Safe study* has been the only UK study to date which has investigated patterns of *substantiated* abuse and neglect. Drawing on data from 156 local authorities, it found that abuse was substantiated for less than 1% of fostered children per year, ranging from 0.80-88% of fostered children over three consecutive years. As we saw earlier, there was considerable variation between local authorities in the number of substantiated cases per 100 children in foster care. While 19 local authorities reported no substantiated cases in all three years of the study, one reported 78, and only seven reported more than five substantiated cases per 100 each year.

Although the percentage of fostered children who experience substantiated abuse appears low, at less than 1% of all children in foster care each year, it is important to

¹⁸⁷ Further information has come from the grey literature, in the form of membership surveys of foster carers undertaken by the fostering charity The Fostering Network, which have included questions about members’ experience of allegations of abuse, see [Chapter 4](#).

¹⁸⁸ Stephen Nixon and Pat Verity, “Allegations against foster families: carers’ expectations”, *Foster Care*, 84, 1996, 11-14; Nina Biehal, Jim Wade, Linda Cusworth, and Susan Clarke, [Keeping children safe: allegations concerning the abuse or neglect of children in care](#), Research Report, Impact and Evidence Series (London: NSPCC, 2014).

note that this figure equates to 450-550 children fostered children each year.¹⁸⁹ The true number of children abused in foster care is likely to be higher still, as children may not always disclose the abuse or neglect (or at least, not until they have left their placements) and allegations may not always been taken seriously.¹⁹⁰ Even when they are, it may be difficult for professionals to come to clear conclusions as to whether or not the abuse occurred and the level of risk to the child, especially when the evidence is limited or unclear. Moreover, the *Keeping Children Safe* study did not include children in private fostering arrangements, many of which are unregistered, so the total number of children abused in private or informal placements is likely to be higher. The use of private arrangements to foster children who have been trafficked is particularly concerning as this group is, *de facto*, at exceptional risk of harm.

Somewhat surprisingly, the *Keeping Children Safe study* identified striking differences in patterns of substantiated maltreatment between Scotland and both England and Wales. During the year 2011-2012, for example, the mean number of children with substantiated allegations of abuse was 1.06 per 100 children in foster care in Wales, 0.88 for England, but only 0.14 per 100 children in foster care in Scotland. This is perplexing as, in the absence of relevant research, we have no reason to assume that children in Scotland are either more, or less, likely to experience maltreatment in foster care than those in other parts of the UK. It seems more likely that the lower rates of allegations and confirmed abuse in foster care in Scotland, compared to England and Wales, may reflect differences in patterns of recording, in protocols for investigating and responding to maltreatment in care and, possibly, higher thresholds for recording behaviours as abusive or neglectful, rather than as poor standards of care.

Abuse in foster care has received far more research attention in the USA, where estimates of the incidence of substantiated maltreatment have ranged from 0.27% of fostered children in the *California study*, to 1.3% in *Oklahoma*, 1.7% in *Indiana*, and 2.3% in *Illinois*.¹⁹¹ However researchers on two of the early American studies chose

¹⁸⁹ Nina Biehal, Jim Wade, Linda Cusworth, and Susan Clarke, [Keeping children safe: allegations concerning the abuse or neglect of children in care](#), Research Report, Impact and Evidence Series (London: NSPCC, 2014).

¹⁹⁰ William Utting, *People like us: the report of the review of the safeguards for children living away from home* (London: HMSO, 1997).

¹⁹¹ California Department of Social Services, *Report to the legislature on investigation of complaints against certified family homes and foster family agencies* (Sacramento, California: California

not to report the percentage of cases substantiated as they did not trust the substantiation process.¹⁹² These differences in rates of substantiated abuse may to some extent reflect variations in study design, sampling and approaches to analysis. They may also reflect real differences in the experiences of children and the nature and availability of support to foster carers. However, the marked variation in rates of substantiated abuse between Scotland, England and Wales, between individual local authorities in the UK and between states and counties in the USA suggests that local policies, institutional systems, and local agency practices may also help to determine thresholds for investigation and intervention. Differences in patterns of recording may also explain observed differences in rates of confirmed abuse.

Where substantiation rates are low, this may be because thresholds for investigation or for defining behaviours as abusive are higher in some agencies than in others. Some agencies may also be more likely than others to dismiss allegations if investigations are inconclusive, with many allegations recorded as unproven rather than dismissed as unfounded.¹⁹³

Uncertainty surrounding the conclusions of investigations may have serious consequences for children. Some may be unwittingly left in abusive placements, while in others settled placements may be unnecessarily disrupted. Unproven allegations raise difficult dilemmas for professionals, particularly when children are in settled long-term placements. On the one hand, children in long-term foster care may be harmed by the possibly unwarranted disruption of long-term placements but, on the other hand, some children in long-term placements may be at increased risk of harm because contact with social workers may become less frequent over time. As the *Utting Review* reported in 1997, warning signs were sometimes missed for children who appeared to be settled in long-term placements, some of whom

Department of Social Services, Community Care Licensing Division: 2001), [*California study*]; Peggy Billings and Terry Moore, *Child maltreatment in Foster Care* (Kansas: Oklahoma Department of Human Services, 2004), [*Oklahoma study*]; J. William Spencer and Dean D. Knudsen, "Out-of-home maltreatment: an analysis of risk in various settings for children", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 14, 1992, 485-492, [*Indiana study*]; John Poertner, Marian Bussey, and John Fluke, "How safe are out-of-home placements?", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 21, 1999, 549-563, [*Illinois study*].

¹⁹² F. G. Bolton, Roy Laner, and Dorothy Gai, "For better or worse? Foster parents and foster children in an officially reported child maltreatment population", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 3, 1981, 37-53 [*Maricopa County study*]; Marilyn Cavara and Carol Ogren, "Protocol to investigate child abuse in foster care", *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 7, 1983, 287-295, [*Hennepin County study*].

¹⁹³ Gilliam Plumridge and Judy Sebba, *The Impact of Unproven Allegations on Foster Carers* (Oxford: Rees Centre, University of Oxford, 2016).

only disclosed persistent sexual and emotional abuse after they had left the placement. It is therefore important to maintain an accurate record of concerns and allegations so that any future incidents can be placed in context and emerging patterns of behaviour detected.¹⁹⁴

Evidence from studies in both the UK and the USA suggests that, in most cases, foster carers are the most common perpetrators of the maltreatment. However, research has shown that children may also be abused by children or adults connected with the placement, or by their birth families during contact, or other relatives. Several studies have suggested that while some children suffer severe abuse and neglect, the majority of cases concern relatively minor incidents. For example, the Australian *Children in Foster Care study* of all children in foster care in the state of New South Wales, reported that in most cases the maltreatment consisted of inappropriate discipline or scapegoating, but in a smaller number of cases children experienced severely abusive, neglectful, or predatory care by foster carers who, the author argued, should never have been allowed to foster.¹⁹⁵ Examples of extreme cruelty on the part of a small number of foster carers were also documented by the *Belonging and Permanence* study and have been reported in court cases and inquiries.¹⁹⁶

Some relatively minor types of harm are sometimes defined as poor standards of care rather than abuse or neglect.¹⁹⁷ However, the boundary between poor standards of care and actual maltreatment may not always be clear. These definitional difficulties are part of the more general lack of agreement regarding the thresholds for defining behaviour as abusive or neglectful in any context, not only in relation to foster care.

¹⁹⁴ William Utting, *People like us: the report of the review of the safeguards for children living away from home* (London: HMSO, 1997); Sally Morris, Helen Wheatley, and Barbara Lees, *Time to listen: the experiences of young people in foster and residential care* (London: Childline, 1994).

¹⁹⁵ Michael Tarren-Sweeney, "Retrospective and concurrent predictors of the mental health of children in care", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 2008, 1-25.

¹⁹⁶ Nina Biehal, Sarah Ellison, Claire Baker, and Ian Sinclair, *Belonging and Permanence: Outcomes in long-term foster care and adoption* (London: BAAF, 2010).

¹⁹⁷ Ian Sinclair, Claire Baker, Kate Wilson, and Ian Gibbs, *Foster Children: Where They Go and How They Get On* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005); John Triseliotis, Moira Borland, and Malcolm Hill, *Delivering Foster Care* (London: BAAF, 2000); Michael Tarren-Sweeney, "Retrospective and concurrent predictors of the mental health of children in care", *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 2008, 1-25.

Valuable insights into children's views and experiences have been provided by the *Who Cares? Trust*, which conducted a survey of children's experiences of being looked after away from home, and by a survey of callers to *Childline*.¹⁹⁸ Both of these reports noted that a number of the children who agreed to participate in these surveys described patterns of persistent emotional abuse in foster care. They painted a picture of a general lack of warmth and care in their placements and also complained about being treated differently from the carers' own children. However, other than these reports, there has been barely any exploration of the views of children who experience abuse in foster care, perhaps because of the sensitivity of the issue.

As Part 1 of this review has shown, official inquiries, reviews and press reports on court cases have provided important insights into children's disclosure of abuse and also to the barriers to disclosure. However, most of the press reports identified by this review were brief and, as noted earlier, tended to focus on the evidence presented during court cases or the outcome of court cases, with only passing mention of how social workers and other professionals had responded. Nevertheless, a number of newspaper articles made clear children's fear of the consequences if they disclosed the abuse, including direct reprisals from the carer or worrying (and sometimes carers explicitly threatening) that they would be moved somewhere "worse" and would lose connections with other people and places that were important to them.

A number of reports have been published on learning from case reviews. As noted earlier, the data aggregation in some reports from Scotland meant it was difficult to identify whether children had experienced maltreatment in foster care or in a different care context. However, the good practice guide *Safeguarding children living with foster carers adopters and special guardians* identified learning for practice from 52 care reviews in England, Scotland and Wales, including 39 cases involving children in foster care.¹⁹⁹ The learning includes important messages for carer recruitment, such as interviewing couple applicants separately as well as together, and the need for rigorous critical appraisal and analysis; placement planning, such as careful

¹⁹⁷ B. Fletcher, *Not Just a Name: The Views of Young People in Foster and Residential Care* (London: National Consumer Council, 1993); Sally Morris, Helen Wheatley, and Barbara Lees, *Time to listen: the experiences of young people in foster and residential care* (London: Childline, 1994).

¹⁹⁹ Hedy Cleaver and Wendy Rose, *Safeguarding Children living with Foster Carers, Adopters and Special Guardians: Learning from case reviews 2007-2019* (London: CoramBAAF, 2020).

consideration of the number and potential vulnerability of children living in the same household; support for carers with different legal status in relation to the child(ren) in their care; and review and oversight of placements, such as maintaining “respectful uncertainty” and avoiding assumptions that children in care are always safe from harm.

A summary of the learning from inquiries and reviews in Scotland is set out in [Chapter 3](#). To reiterate one of the main points, a striking feature throughout the reports identified was that maltreatment in foster care has rarely been the primary focus of inquiry. As a result, although many of the messages arising from these reports apply to foster care, they were often derived from other contexts, primarily from residential care. It is worth remembering how these different contexts shape children’s day-to-day lives. In residential care, children are likely to be cared for by a number of different adults, and there are usually other professionals present in the children’s home on a semi-regular basis. For children in foster care, there are usually one or two carers in the household, and possibly other members of the household such as carers’ children, but social workers’ visits are likely to reduce significantly once a child is settled into the family. The opportunities for children to disclose abuse, or for other people in their lives to pick up on potential signs that something is wrong, may therefore differ, as may the processes for dealing with disclosures and decisions about what happens next for children. Given these differences between care environments, it is not clear why the recurring call for specific research into maltreatment in foster care—arising from both regional and national reports, including the recommendation in the *Children’s Safeguards Review*, which was accepted by the Scottish Office—has yet to translate into action.

Gaps in the research

Research in the USA has provided insights into patterns of abuse and investigation to protect children in foster care, drawing on data on large samples of fostered children. However, it is important to take account of the different policy and institutional contexts in which studies are located. These may vary considerably between the UK and other countries, for example, in the use of foster care *vis à vis* residential care and in thresholds for intervention in work on child protection. As this review shows, very little quantitative research on large samples of children has been conducted in the UK policy and practice context.

It would also be helpful to compare patterns of decision-making and outcomes for fostered children who become the subject of allegations of abuse, including decisions to remove children from their placements and the timing of this removal. This would include an exploration of the circumstances in which the alleged behaviours are defined as evidence of poor standards of care or as actual abuse or neglect and the drivers and consequences for intervention of representing cases in each of these ways.

The disparity in rates of allegations and confirmed abuse between Scotland, on the one hand, and England and Wales on the other, also requires exploration. Either children in Scotland are less likely to experience abuse in foster care, compared to those in England and Wales, or services in Scotland are less likely to identify and record such abuse. There may, of course, be other explanations too. In view of the marked disparity between local authorities in reported patterns of abuse identified by the *Keeping Children Safe* study, research is also needed to explore the ways in which different local authorities respond to allegations of abuse, the local policies and procedures that inform the way that allegations are handled and how the definitions of 'poor standards of care' and decisions about intervention are negotiated.

Children's voices were missing from most of the studies identified by this review. We have identified one study that aimed to explore this issue in some depth, but only two of its participants had experienced abuse in a foster placement.²⁰⁰ There is a clear need for qualitative research that sensitively explores the experiences of older children and care-experienced adults who have been unhappy in past foster placements. Studies of this kind might explore whether children felt listened to, the nature of any support they received, and the circumstances in which they may have attempted to disclose the abuse or neglect they were experiencing or felt unable to do so.

This review found little evidence on risk and protective factors for abuse in foster care, perhaps because the research base is limited and investigations of predictors of behaviour generally require fairly large sample sizes. In particular, no research studies have investigated risk and protective factors for abuse in the Scottish fostering system, taking account of the specific policy and legal landscape in Scotland, for

²⁰⁰ Samina Karim, "[Why 'historic' abuse? Experiences of children reporting abuse historically](#)", *Scottish Journal of Residential Foster Care*, 16, 3, 2017.

example, the use of Permanence Orders. The review was also unable to identify any research evidence on the role of assessments and supervision in protecting children from abuse. Further research is needed to explore these important issues.

Appendix A: Tables

Table 1: Research in the UK²⁰¹

Study	Sample	Incidence / Prevalence	Allegations	Substantiated abuse	Types of maltreatment
<i>NFCA Agency Survey</i> Nixon & Verity 1996	7,619 foster carers	Annual incidence	4% of carers	<1% of fostered children/year	-
<i>Delivering Foster Care</i> Triseliotis et al/2000	2,149 foster carers	Annual incidence	3.5% of carers	16% of the carers investigated were de-registered	Alleged physical abuse 2.2% of all carers, alleged sexual abuse 1.3% of carers
<i>York Carers' study</i> Wilson et al., 2000	950 foster carers	Prevalence	16% of carers	3% of foster carers	
<i>York outcomes study</i> Sinclair et al., 2005	596 children	Prevalence	-	3% of fostered children abused in a previous foster placement	-

²⁰¹ Cells are left blank where relevant information has not been provided by a study

Study	Sample	Incidence / Prevalence	Allegations	Substantiated abuse	Types of maltreatment
<i>Caring for Our Children 2.</i> The Fostering Network 2005	2,161 foster carers	Annual incidence	3% of fostering households	-	-
<i>Costs and Outcomes of Adoption</i> Selwyn <i>et al.</i>, 2006	80 adopted children	Prevalence	-	11% abused in pre-adoptive foster placements	Mainly emotional abuse
<i>Kinship care study</i> Hunt <i>et al.</i>, 2008	113 children in kinship care	Prevalence	10% of children in kinship care	4% of children in kinship placements	Abuse, neglect, and exposure to sexual activity
<i>Belonging and Permanence</i> Biehal <i>et al.</i>, 2010	196 children in foster care or adopted from care	-	-	5% of sample children	Physical and emotional abuse, and neglect
<i>Allegations Against Foster Carers</i> Clarke (The Fostering Network) 2011	3,500 foster families	Annual incidence	Allegations: 4.3% of foster families. Child protection investigation: 1.4%	-	-

Study	Sample	Incidence / Prevalence	Allegations	Substantiated abuse	Types of maltreatment
<i>Keeping Children Safe</i> Biehal et al 2014	59,005- 63,914 children in foster care per year	Annual incidence	3.5-4% per year	0.80-0.88 per year	Physical abuse 37%; emotional abuse 30%; sexual abuse 11%; neglect 14% (data on 87 substantiated cases)
<i>Beyond the Adoption Order</i> Meakings & Selwyn 2016	Adoptive parents of 86 children	Prevalence	-	14% of adoptive parents 'certain' child had been abused by pre-adoption foster carer	Emotional abuse and neglect

Table 2: Research in the USA

Study	Sample	Incidence / Prevalence	Allegations	Substantiated abuse	Types of maltreatment
<i>Maricopa County study</i> Bolton <i>et al.</i>, 1981 (USA)	3,168 fostered children	3 year incidence	7% of fostered children at risk of abuse by carers	30% of allegations substantiated	-
<i>Hennepin County study</i> Cavara & Ogren, 1983 (USA)	570 foster homes	Incidence	125 allegations	-	Reported physical abuse 2.8%; neglect 1.2%; sexual abuse 0.9% (% of foster homes)
<i>Colorado study</i> Rosenthal et al 1991	101 children reported for abuse in foster care	Incidence	-	38% of allegations substantiated	Allegations of abuse: physical abuse 55%; sexual abuse 24%, neglect 21%
<i>Indiana study</i> Spencer & Knudsen 1992	2,816–3,626 fostered children	Incidence	55% substantiated	1.7% of fostered children (on average over 7 years).	Substantiated physical abuse; 0.93%; of children in foster care, sexual abuse 0.52%; neglect 0.24%

Study	Sample	Incidence / Prevalence	Allegations	Substantiated abuse	Types of maltreatment
California Report California Dept, 2001	2,184 allegations	Incidence	0.27% - 1.45% of fostered children	26% of allegations substantiated	Substantiated neglect 1.4% of fostered children; physical abuse 1.2%; sexual abuse 0.27%
Baltimore study Zuravin et al., 1993 Benedict et al., 1994; & 1996	443 allegations against 296 foster families	Incidence	Foster carers 3x more likely to be reported for abuse than other families	Sexual abuse confirmed for 48% (of 62) foster homes, physical abuse for 29%.	Reported physical abuse 60%; neglect 17%; sexual abuse 11%
Oklahoma Inquiry Billings & Moore, 2004	753 children maltreated by foster carers	Incidence	-	Maltreatment substantiated for 1.3% of fostered children (average over 3 years)	Percent of children maltreated in foster care by abuse type: physical abuse 39%; sexual abuse 4%; emotional abuse 3%; neglect 51%
Illinois study Poertner et al., 1999	5,395 allegations over 5 years	Incidence	-	2% of fostered children per year (1.2% in kinship care, 2.5% in non-relative foster care)	Percent of children maltreated in foster care by abuse type: physical abuse 14.5%; sexual abuse 37%; neglect 7%; lack of supervision 17%

Study	Sample	Incidence / Prevalence	Allegations	Substantiated abuse	Types of maltreatment
<i>Colorado kinship care study</i> Winokur <i>et al.</i>, 2008	636 children	Prevalence	18.5% of children in 'regular' foster care; 2.2% of those in kin care	-	-
<i>Wisconsin kinship care study</i> Font 2015(a)	56,238 children over 8 years	Prevalence	4% of foster homes investigated for abuse	0.5% of children. Rates were similar for kin and non-kin care	-
<i>Wisconsin perpetrators study</i> Font 2015 (b)	43,320 children	Prevalence	4% of all carers investigated for abuse (rate was 15% for informal carers).	9% of all allegations were substantiated	Over one-third of investigations concerned pre-placement caregivers; biological, step, or adoptive parent

Table 3: Research in Australia and the Netherlands

Study	Sample	Incidence / Prevalence	Allegations	Substantiated abuse	Types of maltreatment
<i>Children in Foster Care</i> Tarren-Sweeney 2008	347 children in foster care, incl. 14% in kin care	Prevalence	32% of fostered children	19% of children	Physical, emotional or contact sexual abuse accounted for the poor mental health of many of the children
<i>Sentinel study</i> Euser et al 2013 & 2014	329 adolescents in foster care during 2010	Prevalence	16.8% of fostered adolescents reported sexual abuse in foster care; 16.4% reported physical abuse	Estimated that 2% of adolescents in foster care were sexually abused in 2010	Study focused on sexual and physical abuse

Appendix B: Review aims and methods

Aims of the review

The aims of this review were:

- To update an earlier review of research on abuse and neglect in foster care conducted by the University of York, which covered the period up to September 2009.²⁰²
- To review the available evidence on maltreatment in foster care in Scotland from 1930 to 2020.

More specifically, the review aimed to identify and assess the available evidence on:

- *Allegations* of maltreatment by foster carers and their families, other children in the placement, as well as other adults that may come in contact with children whilst they are in the foster home.
- *Substantiated* maltreatment by foster carers and their families, other children in the placement, as well as other adults that may come in contact with children whilst they are in the foster home..
- The nature and severity of maltreatment in foster care.
- The characteristics of perpetrators and of the children who experience maltreatment in foster care.
- The risk and protective factors for abuse in foster care, in particular the role of assessments and supervision in protecting children from abuse.
- The reporting of abuse and responses to that.

Review methods

The review:

- Identified and reviewed research published in the UK and other English-speaking countries since October 2009, which broadly met the quality standards set out in the protocol for this review (see below); and

²⁰² Nina Biehal, "Maltreatment in foster care: a review of the evidence", *Child Abuse Review*, 23, 2014, 48-60.

- Identified and reviewed any publications on abuse and neglect in foster care in Scotland since 1930, including not only published research but also historical and legal accounts and the grey literature.

Literature search

Our search strategy drew on the strategy devised for our previous review of research in foster care, which covered the period until September 2009.²⁰³ This was devised in collaboration with the York Health Economics Consortium (YHEC), which has extensive expertise in conducting rigorous literature reviews.

Searches were undertaken to identify publications on abuse in foster care since 1930 in Scotland, and international English-language publications since October 2009. The literature search involved searching electronic databases, citation searches, and internet searches of relevant websites. The search strategy used the terms foster care, foster carers, kinship care, foster parents, boarding out, and boarded out; in combination with the terms abuse, neglect, and maltreatment.

The search strategy drew on the learning from the lead author's previous review of research in foster care, for which the team included an information scientist from YHEC. That review identified a number of problematic issues when devising its search strategy, which have been taken into account in relation to the proposed resources and timelines in the current review. For example, the search term of abuse proved to be very *noisy*, which meant that most the records retrieved were irrelevant. This was because studies investigating foster care/carers invariably included a description of why children had been placed in foster care in the title and/or abstract, which was usually due to abuse or neglect. For the current review, the team therefore needed to check the abstracts of many apparently eligible publications that subsequently proved to be irrelevant, as attempting to remove non-relevant studies by adding or removing search terms might lead to a failure to identify potentially useful studies. Another issue identified in the previous review was that in the USA the care of older people and residential care may be defined as foster care. However, attempts to remove this subset of results might mean missing potentially useful studies. The team therefore needed to devote considerable time sifting through the search results

²⁰³ Nina Biehal, Jim Wade, Linda Cusworth, and Susan Clarke, *Keeping children safe: allegations concerning the abuse or neglect of children in care*, Research Report, Impact and Evidence Series (London: NSPCC, 2014).

to remove the obviously irrelevant literature and identify the potentially relevant studies for review.

The following databases were searched:

- Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)
- British Newspaper Archive
- PsycINFO
- Scopus
- Social Care Online
- Social Services Abstracts
- SocIndex
- Web of Science

Citation searches were also undertaken using the SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) and Google Scholar.

Contacting Key Informants

We emailed Scottish fostering professionals and selected academics with a background of research on foster care in Scotland to:

- Inform them of the aims of the review we are conducting for the SCAI; and
- Ask for their help in identifying any research studies, official inquiries, legal or journalistic texts and grey literature, including PhDs, published in Scotland since 1930 that might be relevant.

We aimed to include informants whose knowledge and experience span the latter part of the period since 1930. Professionals in foster care were identified through the *Adoption and Fostering Alliance Scotland's* networks using a snowballing approach; including current and former staff at local authorities, independent agencies and third sector organisations; foster carers; academics; and policy-makers.

Narrative synthesis was used to assess and present the findings of the review.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ Annette Boaz, Deborah Ashby, and Ken Young, *Systematic Reviews: What have they got to offer evidence based policy and practice?*, ESRC Working Paper 2 (London: ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice, Queen Mary, University of London, 2002).

Review Protocol

Selection criteria

The review focused on abuse by foster carers; including kinship carers; their partners, if partners are not registered carers; their children; other children in the placement; and other adults who came in contact with the child as a result of the placement, such as neighbours. It excluded research on abuse by birth parents during contact visits.

Research studies were included in the review if they meet the inclusion criteria set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Selection criteria for research studies published since 2009

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Location of studies	Publications from English-speaking countries	Studies not from English-speaking countries
Timing of studies	Published since October 2009	None
Population of interest	Children in foster care, including those with related and unrelated carers, and private foster care	Children in other placements
Types of evidence	Research studies and official inquiries into abuse in foster care	Historical or legal accounts and grey literature, including any relevant PhDs

In the context of the ongoing Scottish inquiry into abuse in care, it was particularly important to identify as wide a range of evidence from Scotland as possible to inform the Inquiry. However, experience conducting our previous research review on this topic suggested that the Scottish research on this issue was likely to be relatively limited. The selection criteria for evidence from Scotland was therefore broader than those for other countries, and included legal and historical accounts and grey literature, for example government or local authority reports. Any concerns regarding

the quality of the evidence presented in the studies and reports included was noted in the report. The review of evidence from Scotland also had a much wider date range and included all studies and reports published since 1930, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Selection criteria for evidence from Scotland

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Location studies and reports	Scotland	Outwith Scotland
Timing of studies	Published since 1930	Published before 1930
Population of interest	Children in foster care, kinship care and private foster care	Children living in informal kinship arrangements
Types of evidence	Research studies, official inquiries, historical, legal or journalistic accounts and grey literature, including PhD theses	Private correspondence, blogs and social media.

Quality appraisal

Although this was not a systematic review, research studies were nevertheless assessed against a broad set of pre-defined quality criteria, as shown in Table 3. Research studies from countries other than Scotland published since October 2009 were selected if they broadly meet the quality criteria set out in Table 3. Given the potentially limited volume of research on this topic in Scotland, it was agreed in advance that all relevant research studies since 1930 identified would be included irrespective of whether these met our quality appraisal criteria, but any serious concerns regarding the quality would be noted.

Table 3: Criteria for appraisal of study quality

Criterion	Qualitative research	Quantitative research
Clarity of research question	Is the research question clear?	

Appropriateness of design	Are the study design and methodology appropriate?	
Sampling	Is the sample adequate to explore the range of subjects or settings?	Is the sample appropriate and its size adequate for the analysis used?
Data collection	Was the method of data collection clearly described?	Is the response rate sufficient and has non-response been analysed?
Data analysis	Was the mode of data analysis explicit?	Were the analysis techniques clear and appropriate?
	Are the findings substantiated by the data?	