**Does public ownership protect children in care? A longitudinal analysis of unregulated placements for children in care in England.**

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**Abstract:**

**Background**

Children in care in England are increasingly subjected to unregulated placements without protected standards or availability of care – with asylum seeking children largely affected. A mixed market of public and private sector provision is supposed to deliver sufficient placements to avoid these often-illegal practices – ultimately protecting children from potential harm. We aim to examine how levels of public sector ownership might impact the extent of unregulated care experienced by children in care.

**Methods**

In this observational study of XX local authorities in England, we analyse novel data shared by the Department for Education on the number of unregulated placements for children in care between 2019-2023 (n = 109,773). We combine this with available data on children’s placement providers, sufficiency and their sector (xxx public sector; xxx for-profit sector, xxx third sector). Using two-way fixed effects regression models, and controlling for trends of children entering care and the proportion of children in foster care, we estimated the association of changing levels of provider availability and the proportion of publicly owned placements with the number of children placed in unregulated care. Our primary outcome was the annual rate of children in care placed in unregulated settings at the Local Authority level.

**Findings**

We find that

**Interpretation**

When the

**Introduction**

Children’s social services have the vital job of protecting children from exploitation, abuse and criminalisation – experiences which are substantially more common for children in care than children without care experience (cite). One-way children in care are intended to be protected by social services is by giving them a residence with a registered caregiver. Children are placed, often without their input, with children’s homes, foster families, or community settings (often family members). However, over the last decade, the number of children who have not had access to such settings in England has risen year on year (cite). Raising the crucial question of why the system is failing to provide regulated care settings for children – risking their health, safety, and wellbeing in the process.

What happens to children in these situations? Qualitative accounts inform us of children sent to caravan parks, hostels, bedsits, campsites – without access to regular care and living in precarious situations. Indeed, reports include children xxx. It is for these reasons that the practice of using unregulated services has been incrementally outlawed in England for children in care over the last 5 years. And so it is against the legal requirement that unregulated placements are rising. An investigation as to why they are increasing is then of vital importance for the wellbeing of children in care.

Meanwhile, the means of providing children’s social care settings has drastically changed in England over the last 30 years. Local Authorities’ responsibility has shifted from being primarily responsible for providing care services - to acting as a commissioner, purchasing services from a competing pool of privately and publicly owned providers (self-cite). Children’s homes are now largely run by for-profit companies, while (privately owned) Independent Fostering Agencies deliver xx% of foster placements (cite). The outsourcing of services to the private sector has displaced public provision – which is declining year on year.

Previous studies have found this transition to for-profit provision has resulted in worse quality services and worse placement outcomes – with children increasingly sent long distances from their home to receive care. However, little is known about the impact on the most dramatic result from insufficient levels of services – when there are no registered providers available at all. This gap in evidence is what we aim to fill – to answer if the shit to for-profit provision has worsened the extent of unregulated care, and whether areas which have maintained publicly owned services have protected children from risks associated with unregulated care.

**Methods**

We show A) local authority provision is key to keeping unregulated placements down. B) that it’s still… and even especially important in areas with lots of asylum seeking children.

**Findings**

**Figure 1: the rise of unregulated placements for children in care**

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**Table 1: Interaction effect**