

Lifetime histories of out-of-home care among children in England: Sequence analysis of administrative social care data

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Introduction

- Children who experience multiple placement moves while placed in out-of-home care are at risk of poorer outcomes.
- However, national statistics focus on placement moves within a single year for children in England.
- No study has explored the stability of longitudinal care histories.

Objective of this analysis

To identify sub-groups of care histories among children in England based on placement number, duration and timing.

Method

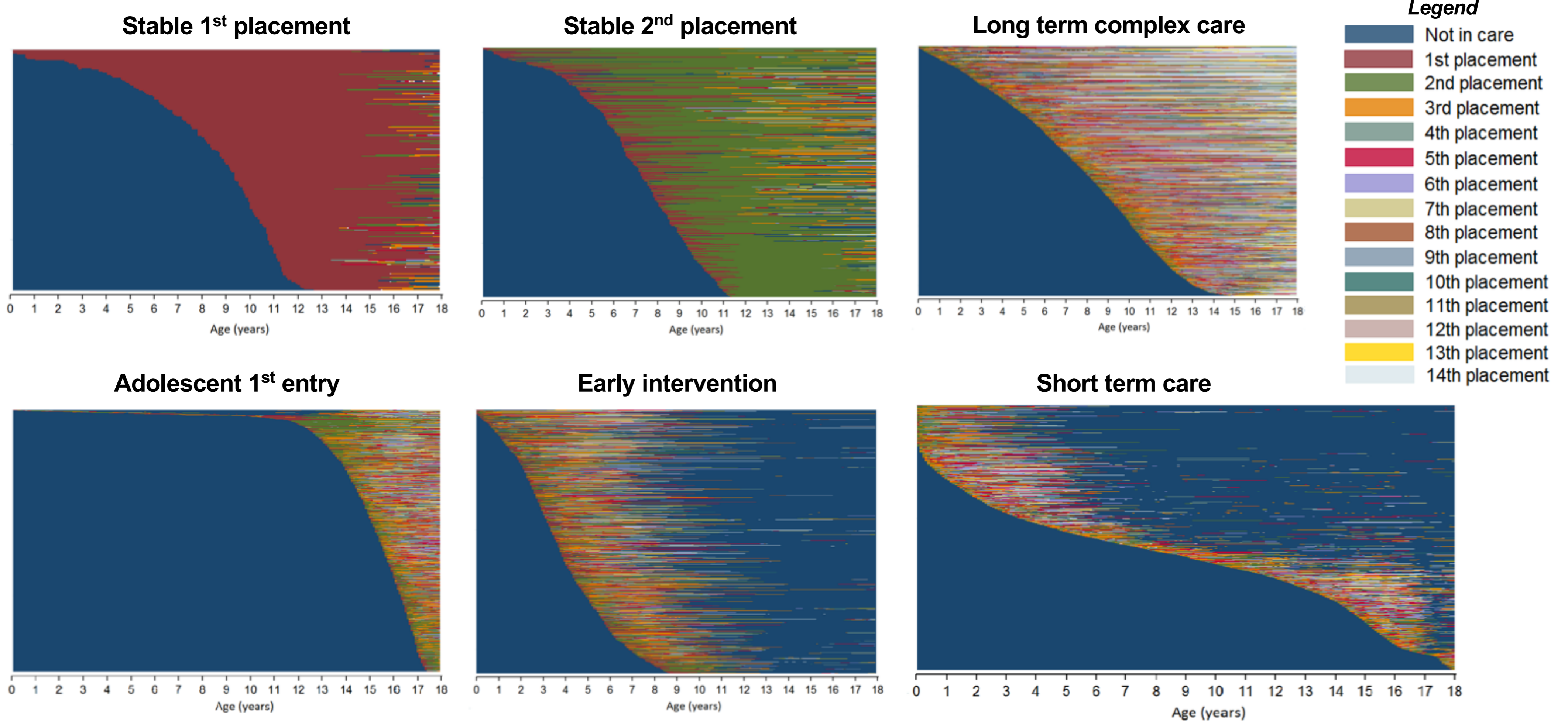
- We analysed a national administrative dataset from the Department for Education - the Children Looked After Return.
- This extract included complete care histories, from birth to 18 years, for a representative sample of children born 1992 to 1994 ($N=16,000$).
- Using sequence analysis, we explored whether there were sub-groups of care history based on the timing, number and duration of children's placements in out-of-home care.

Results

Sub-groups of care history among children in England

- Based on the number, duration and timing of placements, we identified six distinct sub-groups of care history.
- Figure 1 presents the sequence index plots for each sub-group. In these plots, each row represents the care history of an individual child from birth to age 18 years.

Figure 1: Sequence index plots of care history sub-groups ($N=16,000$)



- One in six children (13.1%) had complex, long term care histories. These children spent almost 9 years in care and experienced 7 placement changes (Table 1).
- Few children (4.0%) had a care history that could be described as long-term stable care.
- Overall, most children (58.4%) had a care history that could be classified as short-term care, lasting 4 months in total.

Table 1: Median statistics by sub-group of care history ($N=16,000$)

Sub-group	Stable 1 st placement	Stable 2 nd placement	Complex long term	Adolescent 1 st entry	Early intervention	Short term care
Age at first entry to care	6 years	8 years	7 years	15 years	6 years	8 years
Age at final exit from care	18 years	18 years	18 years	18 years	8 years	13 years
Total time in care	9 years	10 years	101 months	27 months	49 months	4 months
Total number of placements	1	3	7	2	3	2
Prevalence	1.6%	2.4%	13.1%	17.6%	6.9%	58.4%

Conclusions

Sequence analysis can describe variation in care histories that cannot be captured by cross-sectional statistical 'snapshots'.

It was possible to identify distinct sub-groups of out-of-home care histories, despite the heterogeneity at an individual level.

For most children in this cohort, out-of-home care appeared to be used as a short-term intervention.

Considering children's care histories from a life course perspective could enable service providers to better understand and address the needs of looked after children.

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