



CHILDREN IN THE PUBLIC CARE

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A REVIEW OF
RESIDENTIAL
CHILD CARE

London: HMSO

2.4 As figure 3 shows, all these figures were lower than at the same point in 1985 and much lower than in 1980. They cannot reveal, however, the extent of use throughout the year. All the indications are that many more young people experience residential care during the course of a year than are in residence on any particular day.

2.5 Research by Rowe and others (7) on placement patterns in six local authorities established that residential care was still a significant part of the child care service. Placements were much higher than the "static picture provided by the annual returns" had suggested:

"Residential establishments of one kind or another provided a third of all the placements made during the project and half of the placements of adolescents. Two out of five children and young people admitted to care during the project had their first placement in a residential establishment".

CHILDREN IN RESIDENTIAL CARE

2.6 The population of residential child care presents some interesting differences from the overall population of children in care in relation to such matters as gender balance (see figure 4), duration in care and factors precipitating entry into care. The principal difference, however, is one of age. Children in residential placements are generally much older than children in care as a whole (as figure 5 shows). The proportion of children over 16 in residential care has gone up from 22 per cent in 1980 to 35 per cent in 1990, compared with 24 per cent in the child care population. Seventy per cent of the children in residential care are over 13, compared with 42 per cent of all children in care. The older the child is on admission to care, the more likely it is that he or she will be placed residentially: 35 per cent at age 11, increasing to 50 per cent for those who begin care at 17. Berridge's study of children's homes in 1985 (8), along with the Rowe study, confirmed the statistical picture of a child population in residential care which was becoming increasingly older.

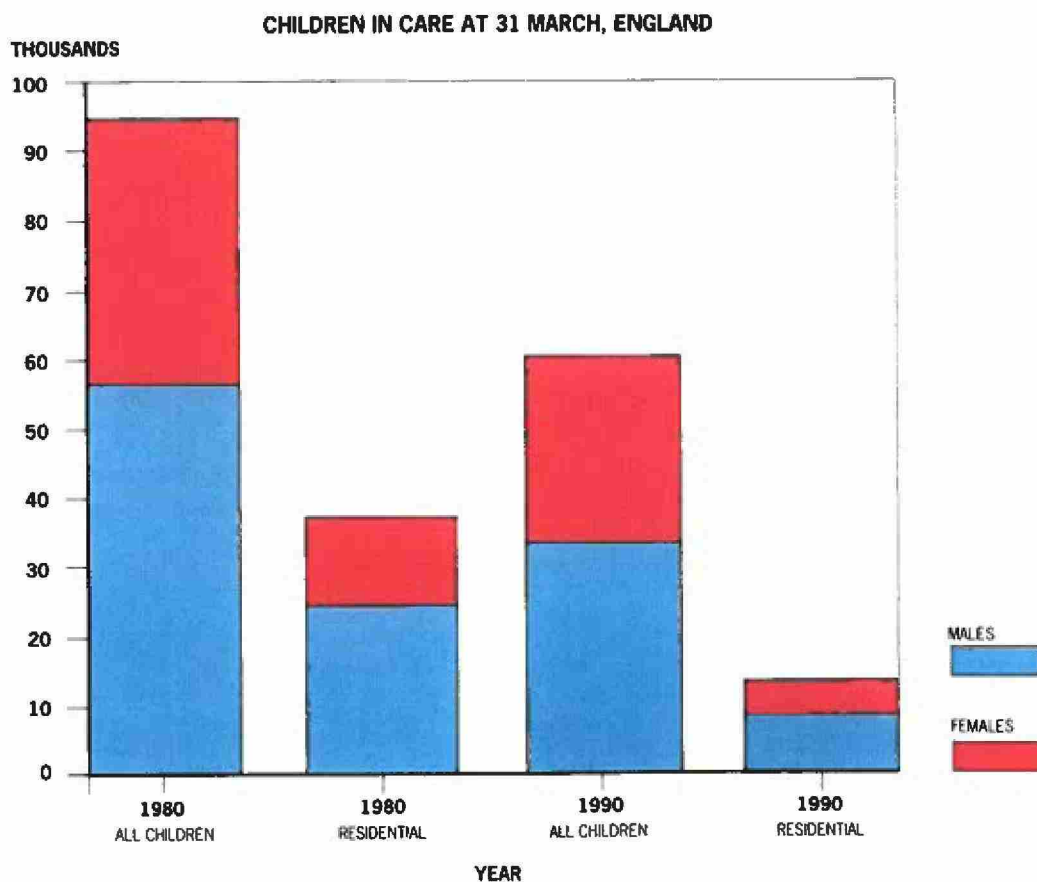


figure 4 (paragraph 2.6)

CHILDREN IN CARE AT 31 MARCH BY AGE

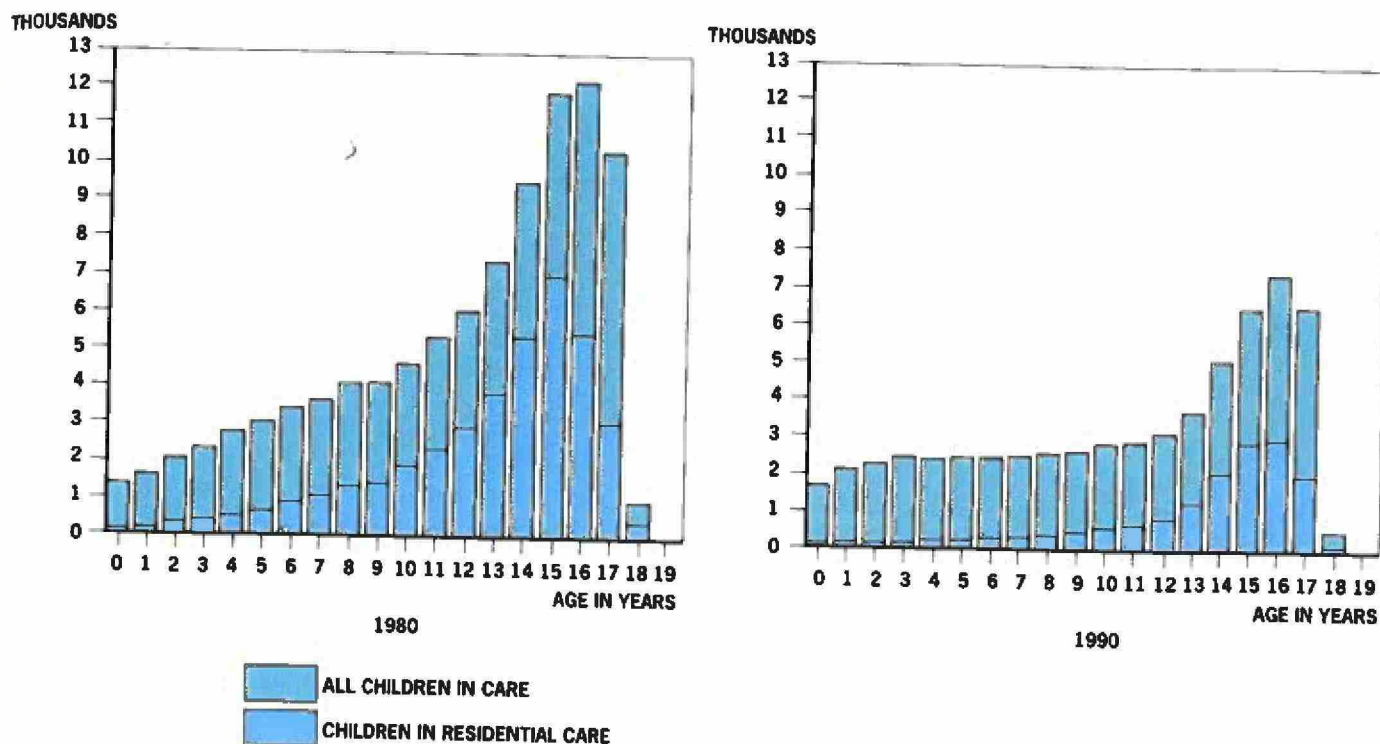


figure 5 (paragraph 2.6)

2.7 As numbers in residential care have declined, and authorities have increasingly emphasised placing as many children as possible in families, the impression has grown of homes becoming somehow residual, accommodating those children with behavioural or other characteristics which make them intrinsically hard to place. Rowe's study (7) reached the clear conclusion that:

"residential establishments do indeed accept the more difficult youngsters We found that many problems were between 2 and 3 times more likely to be reported as "serious" for children and young people going into Children's Homes than into ordinary foster homes".

Berridge (8) found in some cases a long history of neglect or abuse and broken relationships.

2.8 Recent evidence collected from a sample of London authorities and voluntary organisations by the SSI suggests that, while some residents of children's homes do indeed present considerable difficulties in terms of behaviour and motivation, the extent of the problem can be overstated in relation to the general characteristics of the relevant age-group. At the same time research has shown that the residential care population is "a very diverse group in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and prior experiences" (9) although an experience of poverty is likely to be one thing the children have in common with each other and with the remainder of the care population. It appears nevertheless that children with long histories of disturbance or neglect, or with behavioural problems, are over-represented in homes.

2.9 Residential child care is now a service mainly for adolescents, and should be so organised, managed and provided. At the same time, there are important minority needs among its clientele. I deal elsewhere with the needs of children with disabilities and with young offenders. Considerations of race and culture run through all issues of child care in many urban authorities, and are therefore addressed here in general terms.