

# Protecting young children at risk of abuse and neglect

The changing face of early  
childhood

Jordan Rehill and Carey Oppenheim



# Scope and aims

- Explores the changing circumstances of young children at risk of abuse and neglect
- Focuses on the main systems designed to identify and support children at risk of abuse and neglect— the **child welfare and protection system and the family justice system**
- Highlights key insights from the work the Nuffield Foundation has funded in this area.
- Focuses on **England and Wales.**
- Focuses on ‘**early childhood**’, which we define as babies and children under the age of five.

# How many young children are at risk of abuse and neglect?

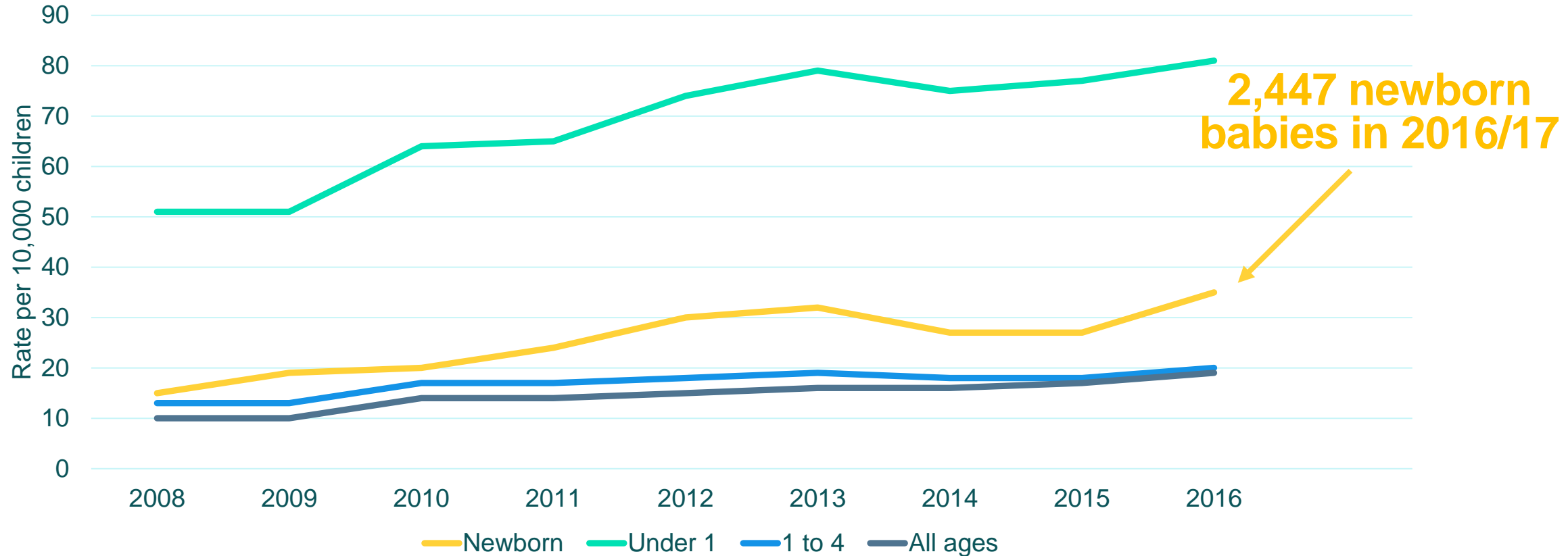
In 2019, it was estimated that....

**557,512** children **under five** lived in household with domestic abuse, parental mental health problems or parental drug/alcohol abuse.

**17%**

# More young children and newborns are in care proceedings

Care proceedings (s.31) per 10,000 children, England, 2008–2016



Broadhurst et al. (2018).

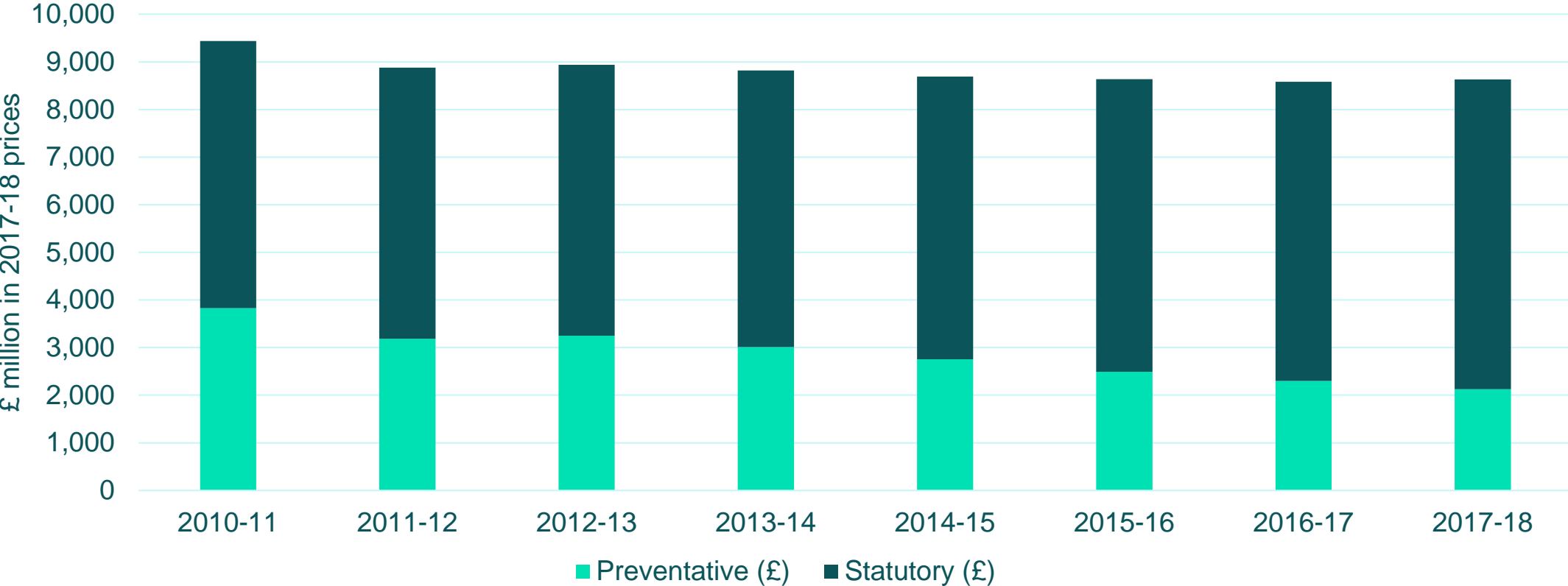
# Why are we seeing this rise in child welfare interventions?

A complex mix of...



# A sustained reduction in preventative services (children's centres, other 'early help').

Changes in spending on children's services, 2011–2018, England.



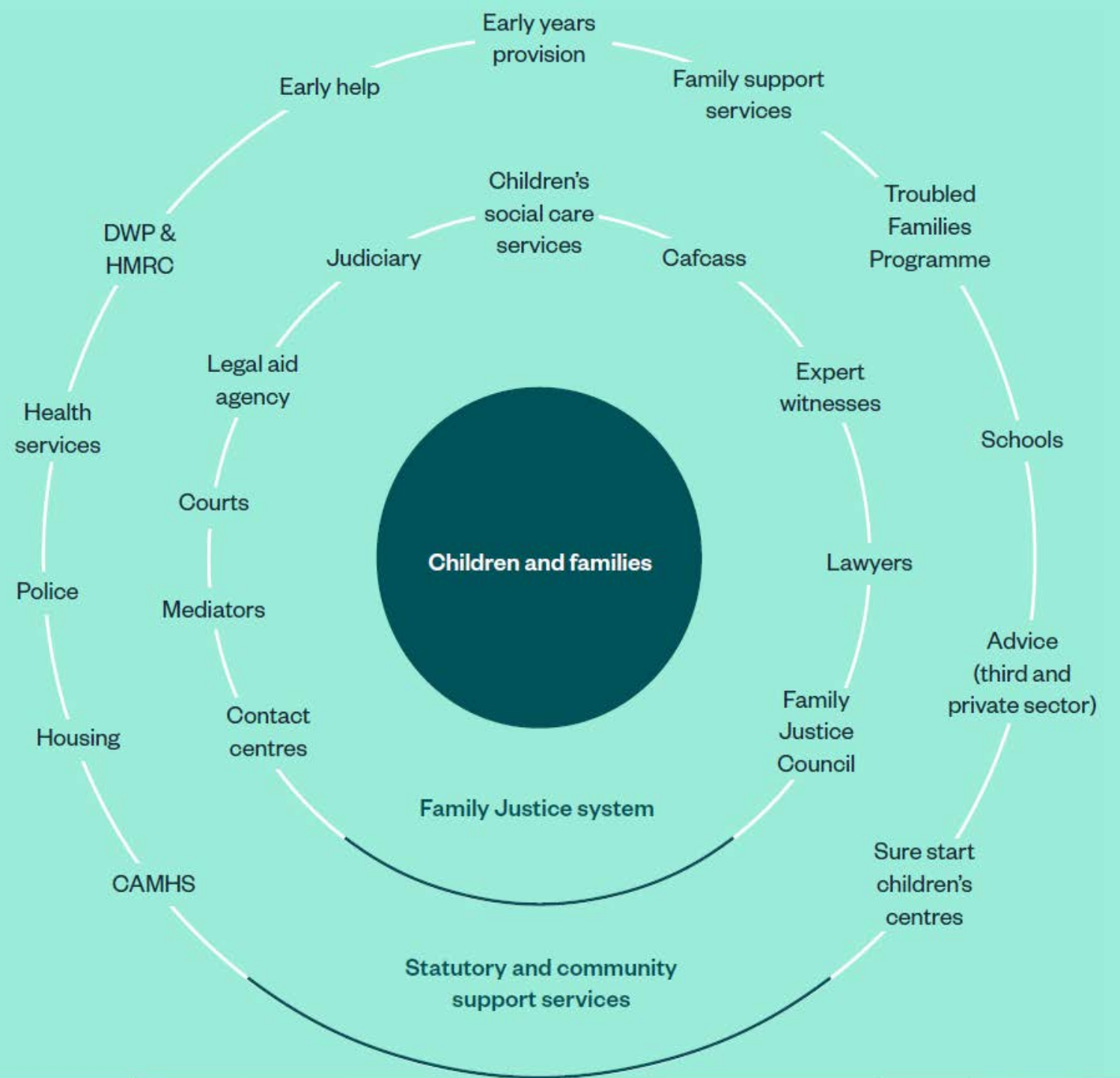
National Audit Office. (2019).

# Children living in the poorest neighbourhoods are more likely to be in care than children in the most affluent neighbourhoods.

- Roughly **one in every 60** children in the most deprived communities was in care compared to **one in every 660** in the least deprived
- Large differences in child welfare intervention rates **between** and **within** ethnic groups.
- We need **better data** to understand what may reduce inequalities.



# A fragmented system of support





## What don't we know enough about yet?

- Deficiencies in **administrative data** and lack of linkage.
- Lack of representation in longitudinal surveys.
- Few qualitative studies tracking processes and journeys.



# Key messages – what have we learned?

1. A **startling rise** in the rate and number of children under 1 in state protection.
2. A **reduction in funding** for preventative services.
3. **Significant inequalities** in rates of care and child welfare according to local deprivation and ethnicity.
4. **Fragmented wider support** for young children and their families.
5. Significant **data and evidence gaps** related to these children

## Points for reflection – what next?

- There is ongoing debate as to whether **too many young children are being taken** into state protection, or whether **too many are being missed**.
- Is this the right question to be asking?
- Should we instead be asking if children are being supported in the right way?



