



Children and Young People's
Centre for Justice

Secure Care in Scotland:

Comparative Analysis of Trends
Across 2023/24 and 2024/25

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Contents

1. Introduction.
2. Children admitted to Secure Care.
 - 2.1 Placement prior to admission.
 - 2.2 Key comparative findings.
3. Children leaving Secure Care.
 - 3.1 Destination following discharge.
 - 3.2 Key comparative findings.
4. Secure authorisations through the Children's Hearings System
 - 4.1 Contextual findings from SCRA Official Statistics.
5. Legal routes of children entering Secure Care.
6. Overall conclusions.
 - 6.1 Summary of key data.
 - 6.2 Implications for Practice and Policy.
7. References.



1. Introduction

National statistics provide important information about children entering and leaving secure care, however there is limited analysis that brings together the different routes into secure care, children's circumstances before admission, and their destinations on discharge. This makes it more difficult to understand what may be contributing to changes in the use of secure care and what these changes may mean for practice and planning across the secure care estate.

Particular attention is given to the impact of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024 (referred as 2024 Act), which introduced significant changes to the remand, sentencing and detention of children in Scotland, including ending the use of Young Offenders Institutions (YOIs) for under-18s and establishing secure care as the primary setting for children deprived of their liberty through justice routes (Scottish Government, 2024). Considering the extent to which these legislative changes have contributed to changes in patterns of admission into secure care, including increased arrivals through justice-based pathways and potentially greater demand for secure care placements. This paper provides a comparative overview of trends in secure care in Scotland across 2023/24 and 2024/25. These years provide an important point of comparison, with the data covering the period immediately before and around the implementation of the 2024 Act. As further data become available for 2025/26, it will be possible to build on this analysis and consider longer-term changes in the use of secure care.

This paper considers the following areas:

1. The number of children admitted to secure care and their previous living arrangements.
2. The number of children leaving secure care and their destinations on discharge.
3. The use of secure care authorisations within the Children's Hearings System.
4. The legal routes to secure care.

The analysis primarily uses:

- Scottish Government Secure Care Statistics [2023/24](#) and [2024/25](#)
- Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) Official Statistics [2023/24](#) and [2024/25](#)
- Related contextual publications including education, child protection, justice, residential care, fostering and adoption statistics



2.Children admitted to Secure Care

During 2024/25 there were on average 58 children in secure care accommodation, compared with an average of 60 in 2023/24 (Scottish Government, 2025). The number of beds available has fluctuated due to a reduction in capacity in some of the secure centres and an increase in other centres, currently there are 74 beds across the secure estate with current details found on [Secure Accommodation Network Scotland](#) (SANS).

Admissions to secure care continued a longer-term downward trajectory across the two reporting periods. The total of 128 admissions in 2024/25 compared with 149 from 2023/24, represents the lowest level recorded since 2016 (256), reflecting continuing changes in both the availability and use of secure care in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2025).

2.1. Placement prior to admission

Table 1	2023/24	2024/25	Change
Residential school	40%	23%	-16%
Parental home / relatives / friends	30%	40%	10%
Foster care/ children’s home	21%	16%	-4%
Other	10%	20%	12%

2.2. Key comparative findings

There has been a significant shift in where children were admitted from:

- In 2023/24, residential schools were the largest source of admissions (40%).
- In 2024/25, the largest group came from parental homes, relatives or friends (40%).
- Admissions from residential schools fell substantially from 40% to 23% in 2024/25. With the residential population remaining consistent over these periods with a slight increase from 11% to 12% of the children looked after in the community.
- Admissions from foster care or children’s homes also decreased slightly from 21% to 16% in 2024/25. The number of children in foster care has decreased from 31% to 28% across these years which contributes to this decline.

These changes are likely to reflect a combination of wider system pressures, changing patterns of need and policy developments linked to implementation of the 2024 Act (Scottish Government, 2026a). The increase in children arriving from parental or family homes may be particularly relevant to justice-related admissions, as some children may have had less prior involvement with social work or residential care before coming into conflict with the law. The 'Other' category also includes children moving from secure care and Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), with the increase likely to reflect, in part, the transfer of children from YOIs following implementation of the 2024 Act (Scottish Government, 2026b).

These changes should also be considered alongside Scotland's wider commitments to [the promise](#) and the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC). The promise emphasises that children who require secure care should be supported in environments that are small, secure, safe and trauma-informed, while also recognising the need for more community-based alternatives and that secure care should only be used when necessary (The Promise Scotland, 2020). Article 37 of the UNCRC establishes that deprivation of liberty must be lawful, used only as a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time (Scottish Government, 2024b). Scotland's youth justice priorities similarly commit to smaller, trauma-informed settings where detention is required and to ensuring that detention is used only as a last resort and for the shortest possible period (Scottish Government, 2024c).

The reduction in overall admissions therefore needs to be considered alongside the changing profile of children entering secure care. The move away from YOI accommodation towards secure care represents an important shift towards age-appropriate, rights-based and trauma-informed environments. However, it also places a responsibility on the secure care sector to ensure that children transferred from the justice system experience an environment that is fundamentally different from custody and is able to respond to their individual needs. The findings may also indicate increased emphasis on early intervention and attempts to prevent escalation into highly restrictive environments, although this continues to take place within a context of reduced placement availability and increasing complexity of presentation.



3.Children leaving Secure Care

Discharges from secure care have also continued to decrease. The Scottish Government reported that 2024/25 recorded the lowest number of discharges since 2017, with 136 children moving on from secure care, compared with 150 in 2023/24 (Scottish Government, 2025). This reduction is consistent with the decrease in the number of children admitted to secure care.

3.1. Destination following discharge

Table 2	2023/24	2024/25	Change
Residential school	35%	32%	-3%
Foster Care	15%	12%	-3%
Parental home/ relatives/ friends	25%	30%	5%
YOI's	3%	12%	9%
Secure Care	2%	4%	2%
Other	19%	11%	-8%

3.2. Key comparative findings

- Discharges reduced from 150 in 2023/24 to 136 in 2024/25.
- Residential schools remained the most common destination after discharge in both years.
- The proportion returning to parental homes, relatives or friends increased from 25% to 30% in 2024/25.
- The proportion leaving to YOIs increased substantially from 3% to 12% in 2024/25. This reflects the small number of children turning 18 while in secure care whose legal status requires this transfer.

The data points towards increasing complexity in transitions out of secure care, particularly for older children approaching adulthood and moving between child and adult systems (Scottish Government, 2025; CYCJ, 2024).

This is reflected in the Care Inspectorate's Secure Care Pathway Review, which identified challenges including a reduction in support following discharge, placement instability, unplanned endings and difficulties securing suitable accommodation. Almost one-third of the children in the review had experienced homelessness or were at significant risk of homelessness. The review also found that transitions were more likely to be successful where secure care and community-based services worked together to plan and coordinate the move. These findings reflect longstanding concerns across care and youth justice about continuity of support, placement stability and the need for transition planning that is responsive to children's individual needs and experiences of trauma (Care Inspectorate, 2023).



4. Secure authorisations through the Children's Hearings System

Official Statistics published by SCRA provide broader information about referrals and children's hearings activity. However, the published statistical summaries do not consistently isolate secure care authorisations across all hearing outcomes, which limits the extent to which public data can explain the relationship between hearings activity, authorisations and actual secure care placements.

4.1. Contextual findings from SCRA Official Statistics

Table 3	2023/24	2024/25	Change
Children referred to the Reporter	10,197	9,789	-408 / 4%
Non offence grounds *	8,196 (4,273 boys / 3,909 girls)	7,839 (4,075 boys / 3,741 girls)	-357 / 4%
Offence grounds *	2,701 (2,004 boys / 689 girls)	2,447 (1,840 boys / 603 girls)	-254 / 9% (-164 / -86)
Most common age of referral	14 girls 15 boys	14 girls 15 boys	same
Secure Authorisations made	110	83	-27 / 25%
Movement Restriction Conditions (MRCs)	17	28	+11 / 65%

*Referrals can be made more than once for the same child (SCRA 2024 & 2025)

The figures above highlight that there has been a reduction in referrals to the Children's Reporter for non-offence and offence grounds. There continues to be a higher number of boys reported for offence grounds. It is anticipated that when the 2024 Act is fully commenced, the number of children referred to the reporter will increase as all under 18s will be able to be referred to the reporter, on offence and non-offence grounds (where the criteria for referral are met). When they have been charged with an offence, the Lord Advocate's Guidelines on offences committed by children (which are being revised) will require the police to jointly report some children to the Procurator Fiscal (PF) and reporter.

When the 2024 Act is fully implemented and the police charge a child under 18 with an offence, the police will either:

- Jointly reported the child to the PF and reporter in terms of the revised Lord Advocate's Guidelines (not yet finalised)
- Refer the child only to the reporter.
- Not refer the child to the reporter and deal with the child through Early and Effective Intervention or Police direct measures.

The reduction in secure authorisations between 2023/24 and 2024/25 is consistent with the wider reduction in referrals to the Children's Reporter over the same period, however, is significant in that referrals reduced overall by 4% whereas the drop in secure authorisations was 25%, suggesting that other factors may have impacted this notable drop. At the same time, the increase in Movement Restriction Conditions (MRCs) may indicate greater use of community-based alternatives as opposed to secure care for some children (SCRA, 2024; SCRA, 2025).

Of greater significance are the clear shifts in secure authorisations (down by 25%) and much greater use of MRCs (up by 60%). The significant drop in secure authorisations is certainly curious and given there is no further data to help understanding this, we might draw conclusions that either significantly less children were assessed as meeting secure thresholds, or more likely, that alternative forms of less restrictive care were being more widely used. Given that over the last year, secure care capacity has been much less pressurised, it remains to be seen whether this trend continues or reverts to previous levels.

One (or another) limitation of this data is that published SCRA datasets do not currently provide a detailed breakdown of secure care authorisations across all hearing outcomes and not all secure authorisations are implemented by the local authority. In order to undertake a more detailed analysis, it would be necessary to receive access to operational or unpublished hearing decision data. It is hoped that we can work closely with SCRA to explore alternative ways to capture data around secure care and children on the cusp of secure care going forward.

Comparative data from the recent secure care census also found an increase in the proportion of boys and a corresponding reduction in the proportion of girls within the secure estate, with girls accounting for around one fifth of the secure care population on the day of the census. The census data also supports the increase in admissions to secure care through court-based routes, with children admitted through these routes accounting for 53% of the secure care population (CYCJ, 2026). As further data for 2025/26 becomes available further analysis will be undertaken.



5. Legal routes of children entering Secure Care

Table 4 details the legal routes of children entering secure care with the most significant development being the implementation of the 2024 Act, affecting these routes, when access to YOI for under 18s ended in late August 2024.

Table 4

Legislation	2023/24	2024/25	Change
Section 44 Criminal Procedures (Scotland) Act 1995 (detention for one year under summary proceedings)	2	5	150%
Section 51 Criminal Procedures (Scotland) Act 1995 (committal to place of safety or temporary detention)	2	42	2000%
Section 51 – remand to YOI	42*	11* (pre CCJ Act)	-74%
Section 208 Criminal Procedures (Scotland) Act 1995 (convicted on indictment, solemn proceeding)	3	5	67%
Section 143 Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011 (transfer of placement authorised by CSWO)	3	6	100%
Compulsory Supervision Order Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011	35	41	17%
Interim Compulsory Supervision Order Children’s Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011	26	11	-58%
Pending Reporter Decision	30	7	-77%
Other	44	11	-75%
Unknown	4	0	-100%
Total	149	128	

Source: Scottish Government ([2025a](#); [2026a](#)).

*figures not included in secure care totals as children went to YOI at this time.

The most striking change in terms of justice admission routes has been the increase in admissions to secure care under committal to place of safety or temporary detention. These two remand routes under s.51 of the Criminal Procedures (Scotland) Act 1995 whereby a child is committed to the local authority to be detained; (i) where the court so requires, in secure accommodation; and (ii) in any other case, in a suitable place of safety chosen by the authority (CYCJ, 2026). These routes saw an increase from 2 admissions in 2023/24 to 42 admissions in 2024/25.

This increase coincides with the implementation of the 2024 Act, which ended the use of YOIs for children under 18 in August 2024. For comparison, the data of children previously admitted to YOIs shows a reduction from 42 in 2023/24 to 11 in 2024/25 (noting children could only be admitted for part of this period). The combined total for secure care and YOI across these periods has seen an increase of 9 children deprived of their liberty having been remanded. This modest increase may be explained by a few serious violent incidents within the community involving groups during the year 24/25. While there has been some speculation that, since the ending of YOI for under 18s, courts are more likely to choose the remand option knowing that a child can only be placed in secure care, it is too early to identify data trends that would support that theory.

Under Section 44 of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995 when a child has pled guilty or been found guilty the court can order that child to be detained in residential care for up to one year which could include secure care with authorisation from the CSWO where the secure care regulations are met (CYCJ, 2025). The increase from two children in 2023/24 to five children in 2024/25, raises questions about the alignment between Scotland's wider efforts to reduce the use of custody and emerging patterns of deprivation of liberty for children. During the same period, measures were introduced to reduce pressures within the adult prison estate through early release arrangements, and sentencing policy has increasingly emphasised rehabilitation, recognising developmental maturity and avoiding detention wherever appropriate (Scottish Parliament, 2025; Scottish Sentencing Council, 2022; Scottish Sentencing Council, 2023). Against this backdrop, the increase in Section 44 admissions appears to reflect an ongoing tension between policy ambitions to minimise detention and the practical realities faced by courts and services when responding to children who present with significant risks, vulnerabilities and complex needs. While the numbers involved remain small, the findings stress the importance of continued monitoring to understand whether legislative change and sentencing policy are consistently translating into practice (Scottish Government, 2024; Scottish Government, 2026a).

This analysis should be read with caution as the available published data does not fully capture individual children's needs, placement decision-making, length of stay, unmet need, or the professional assessment and judgement involved in secure care admissions and discharges. As a result, the figures identify important patterns but cannot, on their own, explain why decisions were made for individual children.



6. Overall conclusions

The findings suggest that while overall admissions to secure care are reduced, secure care is increasingly operating at the interface between welfare and justice systems. This has implications for workforce development, placement capacity and the future role of secure care within Scotland's care and justice landscape.

6.1 Summary of key data

Between 2023/24 and 2024/25:

- Admissions to secure care decreased significantly.
- Discharges from secure care also reduced.
- There was a notable shift in the pathways into secure care, with fewer admissions from residential schools and more from family settings.
- Residential schools remained the most common transition destination.
- The number of children moving from secure care into YOI increased substantially.
- Referrals to the Children's Reporter has decreased with the number of secure authorisations also decreasing.
- An increase in MRCs may account for fewer children going to secure care.
- There continues to be a higher number of males referred to the Children's Reporter for offences compared to females.
- The increase in remand admissions may represent the earliest measurable impact of the 2024 Act on secure care admissions.
- Wider policy changes do not appear to be aligning with the practicalities faced in courts and for local authorities.
- Secure care capacity was reduced at the same time as there was increased demand for secure care for under 18s through justice routes due to the 2024 Act.

6.2 Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings indicate a secure care system continuing to adapt to a changing population and complexity of need. This reinforces the importance of understanding secure care within a broader continuum of care, protection and justice responses. Children entering secure care frequently present with overlapping experiences of trauma, adversity, placement instability, exploitation, mental health needs and involvement in the justice system (CYCJ, 2023). As such, trends in secure care cannot be understood in isolation from wider developments across residential childcare, community supports, child protection and youth justice services. As highlighted earlier, it is too early to know whether we will see a long term reduction in the use of secure care for children in need of protection, but this will need to be monitored, and work undertaken to assess the outcomes for those children that might have previously been deprived of their liberty.

The implementation of the 2024 Act represents a significant shift in Scotland's approach to children in conflict with the law and deprivation of liberty. Justice route admissions may form a greater proportion of secure care admissions than before August 2024, and secure care centres must be equipped to respond appropriately to the needs of older males who are increasingly represented within this group (CYCJ, 2026). This has implications for the delivery of education and wider support within secure care, including greater consideration of employability, practical work, life and relational skills. However, secure care operates within a fundamentally different model to a YOI, with a focus on care, relationships and responding to the individual needs of children. The challenge will be to ensure that secure care can respond to a changing population without losing this core purpose or compromising the needs, rights and safety of other children.

The future profile of secure care will also be influenced by the findings of the secure care consultation, the role of the Children's Hearings System, joint reporting decisions, diversion and the availability of appropriate community alternatives. Continued analysis should therefore consider not only the number of justice admissions, but who is entering secure care, why they are entering, and whether the model is meeting the needs of the children living there. This includes considering whether changes in the profile and complexity of children require secure care to further develop in line with the ambitions of [Reimagining Secure Care](#) (CYCJ, 2024) and [the promise](#) (Independent Care Review, 2020).

Realising these ambitions will require sustained investment across the wider system. Workforce capacity, trauma-informed practice, appropriate community alternatives, commissioning and funding, together with the infrastructure supporting children's living and learning environments, must be appropriately supported and quality assured. This should be underpinned by Scotland's commitments under The Promise and the UNCRC, including the principle that deprivation of liberty should be used only as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate period.

CYCJ plan to produce a similar report on an annual basis over the next few years in order to develop a clearer picture of longer term trends and the impact of future policy and legislative reforms.



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