

**The Experiences of Muslim-heritage Children in Care in the UK** by *Dr Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor & Dr Alison Halford (Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University)* (20<sup>th</sup> May 2021)

Muslim-heritage children enter care for the same reasons that other children come into care: due to abuse, neglect, or severe dysfunction in their biological homes. However, Muslim-heritage children are more likely to experience a significant delay in finding a fostering or adoptive placement. Our 2018 [study](#) finds that complexities in Muslim-heritage children's circumstances and identities influence how decisions are made about their lives; a better understanding of their journeys through care will improve outcomes for these children, their families, and society as a whole.

## Who are these children?

There are no reliable statistics around the faith identities of children in care. We estimate that there are approximately 4500 Muslim-heritage children in care, and this number is increasing every year. In addition to British-born children, [data](#) for the year ending March 2020 indicate that around 6% or 5000 children in care are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). It is not possible to determine how many UASCs are of Muslim-heritage, but our qualitative [research](#) suggests that up to 75% of UASCs may be of Muslim-heritage.

## The importance of faith in care

For Muslim-heritage children, faith is part of their complex identities. However, their experiences of faith vary—from pious conviction to Islamic beliefs, practices and values, through to vestiges of their parents' Islamic practice that children retain only as cultural habit. **Whatever form faith takes in their lives, when children enter care, they experience upheaval, displacement, and trauma. In such contexts, faith can be a constant that enables resilience. Some children are happier, more settled, and attach better if their faith and ethnic needs are provided for in their new home.** We emphatically do not suggest that ethnic or religious matches are always necessary. Instead, **in making decisions about children's futures, decision makers need to consider their 'whole needs', including children's faith needs.**

Where a child has complex needs, finding a permanent placement takes longer, which causes lasting harm for children. To reduce delays, policymakers have emphasised transracial placements. The [2014 Children and Families Act](#) removed the legal requirement for adoption agencies to provide for a child's religion, race and cultural birth heritage. Yet, data from the [National Adoption and Special Guardianship Board](#) shows that **Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) children continue to be among those who wait longest.** In 2020, the government [invested](#) in adopter recruitment. The impact of this investment in recruiting BME adopters needs to be assessed. In the meantime, further investment is needed to diversify the recruitment of foster carers.

Based on the finding that **religion is salient to the formation, evolution, and preservation of the identities of children in public care**, we suggest five recommendations for legislators:

1. **Include religion in the annual Department for Education census ([SSDA903](#)) of looked-after children to get a clearer sense of the religious identity of children in care.**
2. **Recognise the importance of faith in children's journeys through care and enhance the faith literacy of social work practitioners and policymakers by training them in child-led understandings of faith.**
3. **Foster outreach, information, and recruitment work with diverse British Muslim communities to increase the number of Muslim foster carers and adopters.**
4. **Form partnerships with religious groups to improve support networks and outcomes for looked after children and the families caring for them.**
5. **Evaluate the impact on children of the removal of ethnicity from adoption law and guidance.**

Visit <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/cop/> and [@SOASICOP](#) for further briefings. If you would like a clarification on any of the issues raised here please contact the author at [ac0967@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:ac0967@coventry.ac.uk). Do contact Professor Alison Scott-Baumann and the team for further briefings and access to other experts at [as150@soas.ac.uk](mailto:as150@soas.ac.uk). *The views expressed in SOAS ICOP Briefings are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of SOAS.*