

Identifying Vulnerable Children and Young People and Supporting Them to Thrive

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Authors: Rachael Powell, Anna Heuschkel, Connie Muttock, and Ben Firth.

FOREWORD BY ELLA LINDLEY

At The Lindley Foundation, we believe that every child should grow up with the opportunity to thrive. That means being safe, feeling connected, and having access to the support they need to realise their potential—whatever their starting point in life. Our support focuses especially on children and young people's wellbeing, and the relationships that help them to flourish. We support both hands-on projects and bigpicture research that can shape the systems around children for the better.

That's why we are proud to have funded the development of this State of the Nation report. It brings together the latest statistics to paint a clear and urgent picture of childhood vulnerability in England today. It shows us how many children are growing up in circumstances that hold them back—from poverty and homelessness, to early childhood traumas, and poor mental health. It also shows us that these challenges rarely exist in isolation. Many children face multiple, overlapping vulnerabilities that compound each other and deepen the risks to their health, learning, and life chances.

As someone working every day with children and families in the NHS, I know just how important it is to spot these challenges early and respond with care, skill and support. Too often, children come into services only when things have reached a crisis point. And even then, support can be hard to access or slow to arrive. This report reminds us why early intervention matters—not just in mental health but across the whole system of education, housing, and social care.

One in five children now experience common mental health difficulties. Absence from school is rising. More children are being suspended, excluded, or withdrawn from formal education altogether. There are more children living in temporary accommodation, and more at risk of homelessness. Many families are struggling with the aftershocks of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. These are not distant headlines. They are patterns I see reflected in some of the young people I meet daily—anxious, isolated, or overwhelmed—whose families deserve ongoing access to empowering services.

The strength of this report lies not just in the scale of the data it draws together, but in the clarity with which it presents the national picture. For policymakers in Whitehall and Westminster, it should serve as a wake-up call. Too many children are living vulnerable lives—many of them receiving little or no help. If we are serious about delivering opportunity for all, we have to start by identifying the needs of vulnerable children from the earliest years and building strong, connected systems of support around them.

That means reforming and investing in our public services. It means putting children at the heart of decisions on housing, schools, mental health, and family support. It means using data not just to describe the problem, but to drive action where it's most urgently needed.

This report shines a light on what too often goes unseen. I hope it is read not only by those in government, but by all of us who care about children's futures. Because if we want every child to thrive, we must begin by seeing them clearly—and acting early to support them.

Ella Lindley
Trainee Children's Wellbeing Practitioner (NHS)
Trustee, The Lindley Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Millions of children in England are growing up with challenges that make them more vulnerable. These challenges rarely occur in isolation. One child may experience several overlapping vulnerabilities each compounding the next and leading to a ripple effect of further challenges that, without the right help and support, can have a profound impact on the child's life and future chances.

This report examines the scale and nature of childhood vulnerability in England, drawing on the most recent national statistics in England available at the time of writing. It offers a snapshot of the numbers of children affected by factors such as poverty, struggling with a mental health problem, having Special Educational Needs or Disabilities, or growing up in care.

In 2019, the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England estimated there were around 2.3 million children growing up with a vulnerable family background, while 1.6 million children were in families with complex needs for which there was no established form of support. It was also found that 829,000 vulnerable children were 'invisible' to services.

But data only tells part of the story. Many vulnerable children remain hidden from view. Some are kept under the radar by the very nature of the vulnerability that they face. Some may need extra support, but their families do not know where to turn.

This report aims to provide a snapshot picture of the children experiencing different forms of vulnerability in England, while also recognising that many vulnerable children remain unseen and unrecognised.

A note on the data in this report

This report uses published datasets, primarily sourced from government departments or the Office of National Statistics. We use the latest available data as of June 2025. Where possible, data for England has been used. In some cases, data is only available for the UK or for England and Wales. We have stated where this is the case.

Children who live in poverty and material deprivation

- 4.5 million children in the UK were living in relative poverty in the year to April 2024 after housing costs, representing almost a third of children.
- ▲ This number has risen by 900,000 since 2010/11.

Food insecurity

2.6 million children were living in a family which had to reduce the quality, variety and desirability of their diets due to a lack of money in 2023/24.

Hygiene poverty

Children facing homelessness

Temporary accommodation

165,510 children were living in temporary accommodation in December 2024.

▲ This is a 33% increase since 2018.

Homeless households

34,150 households with children were homeless and qualified for support from the council under the main homelessness duty in the year ending March 2024.

▲ This is an increase of 78% from 19,210 in 2019.

Young people at risk of homelessness

Over 118,134 young people aged 16-24 are estimated to be homeless or at risk of homelessness between April 2023 and March 2024.

▲ This is a 10% increase of the previous year.

Children in Need

Children who are disabled, or at risk of harm, poor health or impaired development and require additional support are identified as a child in need. Children who are identified as experiencing, or are likely to experience, significant harm are placed on a child protection plan.

Children in Need

Just under 400,000 children were identified as children in need in 2024.

This is a slight increase since 2020.

Child protection plans

35,090 children were subject to a child protection plan in 2024.

▼ This is a slight decrease since 2018.

No further action

Of the 551,060 referrals to children's social care in 2024, 227,220 were found to not meet the requirements to identify as a child in need or no further action was taken.

Children who are looked after

Children looked after

83,630 children were looked after (including adoptions) in 2024.

▲ This has increased by 11% since 2018.

The number of children aged 16 and over entering care has more than doubled between 2013 and 2023.

Unregistered children's homes

Almost a thousand (931) children were placed in an unregistered and illegal children's home in 2024.

▲ This has increased by 500% since 2021.

Children from families with vulnerabilities

Domestic abuse

32.4% of adult victims of domestic abuse reported there were children under the age of 16 present in the household in 2023.

▲ This has risen from 30.4% in 2017/18.

Alcohol misuse

In 2023, 71,580 children were identified through children in need assessments as having a parent who misuses alcohol.

-- This number has remained consistently high in recent years.

Children who are victim of crime, exploitation, violence and abuse

Child criminal exploitation

Child criminal exploitation was identified in 15,600 children in need assessments in 2024.

▲ This has increased by over 50% since 2022.

Child sexual abuse

It is estimated that around 500,000 children are sexually abused every year.

Of the 101,199 child sexual abuse offences recorded by the police in England and Wales in 2024, 39,640 were child sexual abuse images. This has increased by 758% from 4,618 in 2013/14.

Victim of violence

One in five 13-17-year-olds have been a victim of violence in 2024.

▲ This has increased from 14% in 2022.

Youth violence

16% of 13-17-year-olds report perpetrating violence in 2024.

▼ This has fallen slightly from 19% in 2022.

Missing children

There were 700,000 cases of children going missing in 2023 in England and Wales.

Children in the secure estate

Children in the Youth Justice system

8,300 children entered the youth justice system for the first time in the year ending March 2024.

This is the lowest level on record.

Sentencing

660 children received custodial sentences in the year ending March 2024.

▲ This is 21% higher than the previous year.

Re-offending

32.5% of youth offenders re-offended in the year ending March 2024.

▲ This is a 0.3 percentage point increase on the previous year.

Deprivation of liberty

1,280 children were subject to a deprivation of liberty application in 2024.

This has decreased slightly since the previous year.

Children losing learning

Persistent absence

1,487,022 children were persistently absent in 2023/24.

▲ This has almost doubled since 2018/19.

Severe absence

171,269 children were severely absent in 2023/24.

▲ This has almost trebled since 2018/19.

Suspensions

There were 954,952 suspensions in 2023/24.

▲ This has increased by 118% since 2018/19.

Alternative provision

47,612 children were in alternative provision in 2023/24.

▲ This has increased by 82% since 2018/19.

Elective home education

At least 153,300 children were electively home educated in 2023/24.

▲ This has increased by 31% since 2021/22.

Children not in School

Up to 400,000 children were estimated to be not in school in 2023.

▲ This has increased by 50% since 2017.

Not in education, employment or training

More than 920,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 were not in education, employment or training in the UK between January and March 2025.

▲ This has increased by 19% from 775,000 between January and March 2019.

Children not reaching Good Level of Development

196,389 children did not achieve a Good Level of Development at age five in 2023/24.

▲ This has increased from 28.2% in 2018/19 to 32.3% in 2023/24 -- although the data is not directly comparable.

Children with special educational needs (SEN)

Special educational needs

Over 1.7 million children have SEN in 2023/24.

▲ This has increased by 34% since 2017/18.

SEN support

1,284,284 children with SEN do not have an Education, Health and Care plan, accounting for 73% of children with SEN.

▲ This has increased by 25% since 2017/18.

Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP)

426,640 children have an EHCP.

▲ This has increased by 90% since 2017/18.

Autism

263,989 children have been identified with autism in 2024/25.

▲ This has increased by 118% since 2017/18.

Children with poor mental and physical health

Mental health

1 in 5 children and young people aged 8-16 had a common mental health condition in 2023.

▲ This has increased from 1 in 10 in 2017.

Healthy behaviours

1 in 4 young people aged 11-15-years-old have ever vaped.

-- This has remained steady since 2018.

Obesity

- 2.5 million children and young people are overweight or obese in 2023/24.
- ▲ 36% of children aged 10-11-years-old are overweight or obese, which is 2 percentage points higher than in 2018/19.

Tooth decay

There were 30,600 hospital tooth extractions for children and young people aged 0-19-years-old in 2022/23.

This is an increase from 14,600 in 2020/21, but a decrease from 37,400 in 2018/19.

Health conditions

17% of children aged 0-15-years-old have a longstanding illness in 2022.

▲ This has increased by 2 percentage points since 2018.

A&E

Nearly 2.6 million children aged 0-4-years-old attend a hospital emergency department every year.

▲ This has risen by 42% over the past decade.

Child mortality

3,577 children died in the year ending March 2024.

▲ This has increased by 5% since 2020 but decreased by 4% since 2023.

Children from vulnerable migrant backgrounds

Asylum-seeking children

There were 7,380 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the year ending March 2024.

This has increased by 45% since 2021.

Children affected by no recourse to public funds

There are an estimated 722,000 children affected by no recourse to public funds in the UK.

Conclusion

The data paints a concerning picture of rising numbers of children with challenging vulnerabilities in England in the period since COVID-19 in 2020.

Since 2018, more children are living in poverty, living in temporary accommodation, or in a household at risk of homelessness.

Since 2020, more children are identified as children in need, and slightly more were experiencing neglect or abuse. However, despite this, fewer children are on child protection plans.

More children are looked after by the state compared to 2018, with a growing number placed in unregistered or illegal children's homes since 2021. There has also been a rise in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children living in England.

Reports of children being victims of violence have increased since 2022. During the same time frame, fewer children are reporting perpetrating violence, and fewer children are entering the youth justice system for the first time. However, more children have been sentenced since 2023, and the reoffending rate has also increased.

Educational participation and attainment are also worsening. Persistent absence, severe absence, suspensions, permanent exclusions, and use of alternative provision have all risen sharply since 2018. More children are missing from school rolls altogether, and more children are not in education, employment, or training. More

families are choosing elective home education, many making the decision because of their child's unmet needs in mainstream schools.

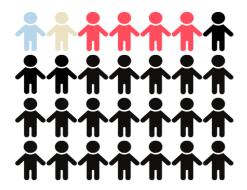
Developmental and health outcomes are also deteriorating. Fewer children are achieving a good level of development by age five compared to 2018. More are being identified with special educational needs, and more are needing the highest level of support.

The prevalence of children with a diagnosable mental health problem has risen to one in five. Obesity rates have increased since 2018, and the rate of A&E admittances for infants has increased in the past decade.

Taken together, these indicators reveal a generation of post-Covid children facing vulnerabilities that threaten to shape their futures long into adulthood. Of course, behind every number is a child who needs support – often facing multiple, overlapping challenges that can be rooted in poverty, instability, and inequality.

It is important to note that there are many children that the data does not capture. Some of the most vulnerable children are continuing to slip under the radar entirely. Not only do they not appear in the data, but often they are not receiving any support at all.

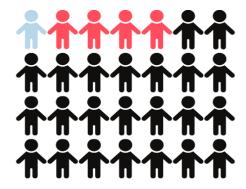
In a typical class of 28...



Six will be persistently absent, one will be severely absent and one child will be missing from education.



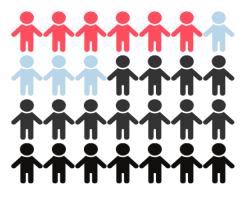
Six will have a probable mental health condition.



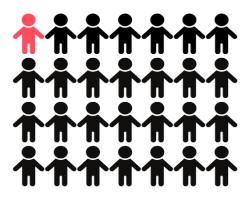
Five will have a special educational need, only one of which will have an EHC plan.



Nine will live in poverty.



Six will be overweight or obese in reception year, rising to ten by year six.



One will be a child in need.



Alex is 2. Alex lives with his Mum and Dad. They are living on a low income and do not always have enough money to cover the basics, including food and hygiene products. This uncertain home life has had an impact on Alex's development. Life at home can feel turbulent and unstable.

4.5 million

Children were living in relative poverty after housing costs in the UK in 2023. 72% of children in poverty live in working families.

2.6 million

Children were living in a food-insecure household in 2023/24.

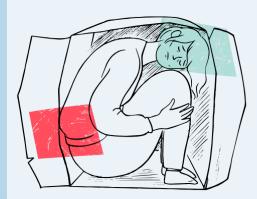
Almost **2.2 million**

Households with children were living in hygiene poverty in 2024 Alex is 5. Alex has not reached a good level of development by the time he starts at primary school. He finds it difficult to communicate in class and he has tooth decay that is painful and distracting. Despite growing up in poverty, Alex's family is not eligible for free school meals, and he often feels hungry and unhappy at school.

196,389 (32%) Children did not recieve a good level of development in 20223/24, rising to more than half of children living in poverty

Almost **146,000**

5 year old had any decay experience in 2022/23



Alex is 7. Alex is diagnosed with a special educational need. but does not have an education, health and care plan. He finds engaging with school and learning increasingly difficult. Alex's parents are also finding it harder to cover the cost of his transport to school, and he often arrives at school without the right uniform or PE kit. He starts to miss more days of school and eventually becomes severely absent. His teacher refers him to children's services. Alex is assessed but he does not reach the high threshold for intervention, and no further support is provided.

Just under 1.3 million	Children have identified SEN but do not have EHCP
33,747	Children were severely absent from school
551,060	Children were referred to children's social care
227,220	Referrals to children's scoial care did not meet the requirement to identify a child as in need or no further

action was taken

Alex is 9.
While absent from school,
Alex starts spending time with a group of older boys



who encourage and reward him to start hiding drugs in his bedroom for them. His parents discover the drugs, and they tell his school. Alex is referred again to children's social services. Following a second assessment, he is identified as a child in need. Three months later, due to heightened concerns of child criminal exploitation, Alex is put on a child protection plan.

115,550

400.000

35.090

Children were rereferred to children's social service within 12 months

Children were identified as children in need. 232,000 child in need assessment has a primary need of abuse or neglect, and 15.570 identified

child criminal

exploitation Children we

Children were subject to a child protection plan Alex is 11. Alex is provided with more support at school and his attendance improves. He is moved back to a child in need plan. He moves up to secondary school but he finds the transition difficult. Nothing is familiar and he does not have the same support he had before. His parents split up, and his mum's new partner misuses alcohol. Alex's behaviour at school deteriorates and he is suspended and spends time in Alternative Provision.

30,865	treatment for substance misuse live with children
78,961	Suspensions took place in 2022,23
16,643	Children were in alternative provisior in 2024/25





Alex is 13.

Alex is being neglected at home, and he is moved back on to a child protection plan.

When his mum's new partner is physically abusive, Alex is taken into care.

Child protection

15,330	plans were a child's second or subsequent
32.4%	Of adult victims of domestic abuse reported that children under the age of 16 were present in the household in 2023
83,630	children were looked after in 2024
931	Children were placed in an unregistered and illegal children's home in 2024
1 in 5	In care are homed 20 miles or more from their home

Alex is 15. Alex's complex needs are not being met in the children's home, and he does not settle. He feels powerless and lonely and repeatedly goes missing and stops attending school. He is often found back in his local area. Alex becomes involved with his local gang again and is arrested following a violent incident involving a rival gang. Alex enters the youth justice system.



700,000	Children are missing in England and Wales in 2023
16%	Of 13-17 year old report perpetrating violence
8,300	Children entred the youth justice system for the first time in 2024

Alex is 17. In a year, Alex will become a care leaver. After that, he does not know where he will live. or what he will do. He has no qualifications and no employment prospects, and he feels uncertain about what his future holds.

1 in 3

Care leavers become homeless within 2 years of leaving care

More than **920,000**

Young people between the ages of 16 and 24 were not in education, employment or training between January and March 2025



INTRODUCTION

There are millions of children growing up with vulnerabilities in England. Children living with domestic abuse, addiction or poor mental health in the home. Children who are suffering neglect or abuse at home or at risk of grooming and exploitation in their community. Children who are homeless or in temporary accommodation. Children who are growing up in care or the edge of care. Children with special and complex needs, with disabilities. Children struggling with their own mental health, struggling at school and sometimes not in school. Throughout all these groups of children, a disproportionate number are growing up in poverty.

These are children who grow up with the greatest challenges that can hold them back in all aspects of their life. With support they can often flourish, but many go without the help they need to support or protect them.

Identifying these children and shaping and reforming the services they need to keep them safe and allow them to flourish requires us to know the scale of the problem and where resources would be best targeted. Early identification and early help are crucial if we are to open opportunities for these most vulnerable children and support them to thrive. This is central to the success of Government's Opportunity Mission.

Over recent years, a scattergun approach, driven by budget cuts and the decimation of early support and youth services in the early 2010s, has left us with a creaking care system, a postcode lottery of Special Educational Needs support, children's Mental Health services unfit for demand or purpose, and an education system straining with the increased demands outside of teaching.

The recent Spending Review was a welcome change in direction, with a greater emphasis on investing in early help to prevent costly crisis. There has been extra investment for children's social care, into family hubs, children's mental health support, and signalled intention towards a more inclusive education system that puts a greater emphasis on preventing some children slipping out of sight and into harm or low attainment. The forthcoming Unique Identifying Number for children will also make a positive difference.

Yet we believe that there is still a vitally important missing piece in the jigsaw – an accurate understanding of the scale and nature of child vulnerability in England. This report is our first step in our ambition to estimate how many children are vulnerable in England, where are they, and what support – particularly early support - they need to reduce the impact of those vulnerabilities.

Between 2017 and 2021, during my period as Children's Commissioner for England, my team published an Annual Vulnerability Index revealing a picture of the numbers of children at risk in England, initially on a national level and latterly at a local level. It was devised to pin down the group of children who are facing risks and difficulties which make it much harder for them to succeed in life, to be happy and healthy and have a chance at a positive future. We were able to identify important trends such as the number of children starting school having missed their early years development goals, how many children are not in mainstream education, and estimate how many children were involved with gangs, and how many were homeless or facing homelessness.

Crucially, by estimating the number of vulnerable children, and identifying the number receiving some sort of support (either statutory or non-statutory support) we are also able to establish that many vulnerable children are not receiving any support at all.

This initial 'State of the Nation' report brings together existing key data sets and surveys along with a review of recent literature, to provide an initial overview of the scale of vulnerabilities and assesses the status, challenges, and trends affecting vulnerable children. This report is not a Vulnerability Index, and we are not yet able to estimate the level of child vulnerability in England. It is more a snapshot of child vulnerability a year on from the General Election. In doing so, it is shining a light on the challenges facing the Government and highlighting the areas of greatest concern and focus for policy action.

What this report does show us is that childhood vulnerability and need has risen sharply in recent years across a range of measures as the combined impact of rising poverty, austerity, and the pandemic has shaken the foundations for millions of families and children. Without further reform, investment and intervention, these trends may continue to rise.

We believe the Government, driven by an Opportunity Mission to improve the life chances of vulnerable children, is better placed to tackle the vulnerabilities that hold back children's life chances if they understand the extent of these problems.

In my introduction to the first Annual Vulnerability Index, I quoted AA Milne: "Before beginning a hunt, it is wise to ask someone what you are looking for before you begin looking for it." Almost a decade on, those words are as pertinent as ever. As this first State of the Nation report shows, the life chances of millions of children continue to be held back by a range of vulnerabilities. It's time to rediscover our curiosity for identifying where and how we support them.

Baroness Anne Longfield CBE
Executive Chair of the Centre for Young Lives

CHILDREN WHO LIVE IN POVERTY AND MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

Child poverty has been on an upward trend year on year since 2010, rising particularly through the recent cost of living crisis. This chapter takes a broader snapshot of poverty by including other measures of poverty and material deprivation such as food insecurity, Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility and hygiene poverty. The data highlights the rise in the number of in-work families living in poverty, and how more families with young children are experiencing poverty.

Growing up in poverty can have both short and long-term consequences for a child's futures, as well as their immediate wellbeing, making childhood harder rather than what it should be for every child – happy, safe and care-free. Growing up in poverty can also rob children of future life chances. Children from disadvantaged families are less likely to do well at school compared to their peers, and to have worse health outcomes across a range of metrics.

In the year to April 2024, 4.5 million children in the UK were living in relative poverty (after housing costs). This represents almost a third (31%) of children.¹

In the year to April 2024, 3.9 million children were living in absolute poverty (after housing costs) - that's 26% of children living in families that do not have enough money to meet their basic needs of food, shelter, and sanitation.²

In 2023/24, 4 million children lived in material deprivation.

Trends: Poverty levels over time

Child poverty is rising:

- There are 900,000 more children living in relative poverty in 2023/24 compared to 2010/11.
- Child poverty saw the biggest increases between 2022/23 to 2023/24, rising from 4.3 million in 2022/23 and increasing across all four measures: relative and absolute poverty, both before and after housing costs.
- An equivalent of 109 children each day have been pulled into poverty between July and October 2024.³

¹ HM Government (2025) Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2024. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-for-financial-years-ending-1995-to-2024

² There are two commonly used measures of poverty based on households' disposable incomes. Relative poverty, or relative low income, refers to people living in households with income below 60% of the median in that year, while absolute poverty or low income refers to people living in households with income below 60% of median income in a base year, usually 2010/11 (measurement adjusted for inflation).² Household income is also measured before and after housing costs are deducted, to acknowledge that some households may choose to spend more on housing to acquire better quality accommodation.

³ Child Poverty Action Group (n.d.) 10,000 children dragged into poverty by two-child limit since Labour took office. https://cpag.org.uk/news/10000-children-dragged-poverty-two-child-limit-labour-took-

Poor families have fallen deeper into poverty:

There are 3.1 million children in deep poverty (household income below 50% of after-housing-costs equivalised median income), compared to 2.9 million children in the previous year.

Child Poverty Action Group predict that 4.8 million children will be in poverty by the end of this Parliament, 2029/30 without further intervention from the Government to raise incomes.⁴ The Resolution Foundation predict a relative child poverty rate of 33% in 2029/30.⁵ ⁶

Closer look: what are the experiences of families in poverty and who is at most risk?

- 72% of children living in poverty live in working families
- 48% of all children in poverty were in families with a youngest child aged under five
- 44% of all children living in poverty are living in a household where someone is disabled
- 44% of children in families with 3 or more children are in poverty, far higher than families with 1 child (21%) or 2 children (25%)
- 43% of children in lone parent families were in poverty, compared to 26% of children of couples.

Children from some ethnic minority groups were more likely to be living in poverty:

- 49% of children in Asian and British Asian families are in poverty
- 49% of children in Black/African/Caribbean and Black British families are living in poverty
- 24% of children in white families are living poverty

Children poverty rose in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, but fell in Scotland:

- Child poverty rates are much higher in England at around 30%, compared to Scotland (24%), Northern Ireland (23%). Wales has a child poverty rate of 29%.8
- Since introducing child poverty reduction targets in 2017, Scotland has seen a 12% drop in child poverty – a reduction of 21,000 children living in relative poverty, while England and Wales saw a 15% rise in that time.

office#:~:text=As%20MPs%20return%20to%20Parliament%20today%2C%20new%20analysis,of%20Child%20Poverty%20Action%20Group%20Alison%20Garnham%20said%3A

⁴ Child Poverty Action Group (n.d.) Child poverty rises - warning of worse to come on this government's watch. https://cpag.org.uk/news/child-poverty-rises-warning-worse-come-governments-watch#:~:text=But%20new%20analysis%20from%20Child%20Poverty%20Action%20Group,poverty%20strategy%20and%20stepping%20back%20from%20benefit%20cuts.

⁵ Resolution Foundation (2024) The Living Standards Outlook 2024, 29 August 2024. https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-living-standards-outlook-2024/

⁶ Resolution Foundation (2025) Turning the tide, What it will take to reduce child poverty in the UK, 26 February 2025. https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/turning-the-tide/
⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025) UK Poverty 2025, Annual Report. https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2025-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk

Children in The North of England are more likely to be living in poverty than the South:

- Child poverty rates are highest in the urban areas of the North of England and the Midlands and also some coastal areas.
- 36% of children in the West Midlands are living in relative poverty, and 35% in the Northwest and 31% in the Northeast.
- This compares to 23% of children in the East of England and 25% in the Southeast
- In some constituencies in the West Midlands and the North West, over 1 in 2 children are in poverty.9

Outcomes for Children living in poverty

Impact of poverty on Child outcomes

Children living in poverty have poorer educational outcomes: 10

- In 2023, the disadvantage attainment gap at the end of primary school was 10.3 months – over one month wider than it was prior to the pandemic.
- In 2023, the disadvantage attainment gap at the end of secondary school 19.2 months – up from 18.8 months in 2022, and 1.1 months larger than prior to the pandemic. The gap in 2023 was at its largest since 2011.

Children growing in poverty have poorer health related outcomes:

- There is a clear association between the risk of infant death and the level of deprivation. In England, infants in the most deprived areas are twice as likely to die in infancy as those in the least deprived. 11
- Five-year-olds living in the most deprived areas in England are 2.5 times more likely to advance tooth decay compared to those from the least deprived areas.¹²
- Obesity rates are over twice as high for children living in the most deprived areas, compared with those living in the least deprived areas. 13
- Young people in deprived areas are also more likely to not receive, or be waiting for the mental health support they need (39%) compared to the most affluent areas (28%).14

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Educational Policy Institute (2024) Annual Report 2024. https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024/

¹¹ NCMD (2023) Child Death Review Data Release: Year ending 31 March

^{2023.} www.ncmd.info/publications/child-death-data-2023/ [Accessed 28.05.24]

¹² Child of the North, Centre for Young Lives (2024) An evidence-based plan for improving children's oral health with and through education settings. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CotN_Oral-Health Report 8.pdf

¹³ RCPCH (2024) RCPCH: Action needed on poverty and high sugar products as childhood obesity rates persist; Article. https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/news-events/news/rcpch-action-needed-poverty-high-sugarproducts-childhood-obesity-rates-persist

¹⁴ Barnardos (2023) New figures reveal the impact of poor mental health provision on those most in need. https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/new-figures-reveal-impact-poor-mental-health-provision-those-mostneed

Food Insecurity

Nearly one in five children - 2.6 million - were living in a food insecure household in 2023/24, up to 18% from 17% the previous year. 15

Food insecurity can be defined broadly by 'low food security - when a household reduces the quality, variety and desirability of their diets - and 'very low food security' when household members disrupt eating patterns to reduce food intake due to a lack of money or other resources. 16 Food insecure children are at higher risk of being under or overweight and it can also impact on a child's dental health, mental health and wellbeing.17

Closer look: Food insecurity is rising for families with children

- Over one million emergency food parcels were provided for children in between April 2024 and March 2025.
- Families with children under five saw a 32% rise over the past 5 years. 18
- In 2023/24, 2.8 million people in the UK lived in households which had used a food bank in the previous 12 months, 4% of the population. This included 8% of children. 19

Free School Meal Eligibility

It is important to note that while Free School Meal eligibility is often used as a marker for children living in poverty, it does not include 900,000 children living in poverty not eligible for FSM.²⁰

¹⁵ UK Parliament (2025) Households Below Average Income: Statistics Release; Statement UIN HLWS551, 27 March 2025. https://guestions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-03-27/hlws551

¹⁶ UK Parliament (2025) Poverty in the UK: Statistics; House of Commons Library Briefing.

https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07096/SN07096.pdf

¹⁷ UK Parliament (2023) Child food insecurity and Free School Meals; Briefing. https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0704/POST-PN-0704.pdf#:~:text=Food%20insecurity%20increases%20mental%20and%20physical%20health%20risks,pupi ls%20with%20nutritious%20meals%20on%20weekdays%20during%20term-time.

¹⁸ Trussell Trust (2025) More than 1.8m emergency food parcels provided for families with children in past year. https://www.trussell.org.uk/news-and-research/news/more-than-1.8m-emergency-food-parcelsprovided-for-families-with-children-in

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Child Poverty Action Group (2024) The number of children in poverty not eligible for free school meals, by nation and region. https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-09/Free_school_meals_nation_region.pdf

In 2024/25, 2,172,000 Pupils were known to be eligible for Free School Meals (FSM).²¹

Trends: Children eligible for Free School Meals has increased over time.

25.7% of children were known to be eligible for FSM in 2024/25²²

- This is an increase of 77,700 pupils since from 2023/24, when 2.1 million (24.6%) pupils were eligible for FSM and continues the increasing trend that began in 2018/19.²³
- Since 2015/16, eligibility for FSM has increased from 14.3% of pupils to 25.7% in 2024/25.

The continuing year on year increase in the number and rate of pupils eligible for FSM reflects the continuation of the transitional protections. There is an increasing number of pupils who are FSM eligible as pupils flow on to free school meals when becoming eligible, but protections mean pupils do not flow off in similar quantities.

The Government's announcement that FSM eligibility will be expanded to anyone receiving Universal Credit means an estimated 500,000 additional children will be eligible for FSM from September 2026.

Closer look: Who is most likely to be eligible for Free School Meals?²⁴

Children in the North East are most likely to be eligible for Free School Meals:

• The North East has the highest rate of FSM eligibility (32.3%). This compares to the lowest in the South East, where 20.6% of pupils are eligible for FSM.

Children from the Gypsy Roma and Traveller community are most likely to be eligible for Free School Meals.

- 67.3% of pupils from Irish Traveller backgrounds were eligible, and 61.2% of pupils from Gypsy/Roma ethnic group.
- Rates of FSM eligibility were lowest among pupils of Indian and Chinese ethnic groups, both at 7.5%.

²¹ HM Government (2025) Schools, pupils and their characteristics: Pupil characteristics – number of pupils by FSM eligibility. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/e5cbc9be-77df-4911-18d4-08ddb31a2461

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Hygiene Poverty

Almost 1 in 4 (23% or 2.2m) households with children live in hygiene poverty.²⁵

Households living in hygiene poverty are defined as those going without one or more hygiene products because they aren't able to afford them. These products can include nappies, washing products and oral hygiene products.

Children are among the most vulnerable to the long-term impact of hygiene poverty and it can be linked to experiences of bullying, feelings of low-self-esteem and school absence.²⁶ Research from InKind Direct has found that of households with children facing hygiene poverty, 14% reported their children feeling more anxious, 10% said their children avoided socialising, and 7% say their child had missed school.²⁷

CHILDREN FACING HOMELESSNESS

The numbers of children facing homelessness and in temporary accommodation has been rising year on year, with children in London or other urban cities most likely to be affected. At least 1 in 24 primary school children in London are living in temporary accommodation. Most shocking is the stark number of infant deaths that designate living in temporary accommodation as a contributing factor.

There are long-lasting and life-changing impacts of facing homeless as a child, with many children living in squalid conditions or facing instability at crucial periods of their development. Young people facing homelessness are likely to face poorer mental health, poor health and nutrition, difficulty finding employment, disrupted education, and more likely to experience violence and abuse.²⁸

As of December 2024, there were 165,510 children living in Temporary Accommodation in England.²⁹

34,150 households with children were homeless and qualified for support from the council under the main homelessness duty in the year ending March 2024.

This is an increase of 78% from 19,210 in 2019.³⁰

²⁵ In Kind Direct (2025) Hygiene Poverty Briefing: Spring 2025. https://www.inkinddirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Hygiene-Poverty-Briefing-Spring-2025-3.pdf

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Centre Point (n.d.) The Impact of Youth Homelessness. https://centrepoint.org.uk/ending-youth-homelessness/impact-youth-homelessness

²⁹ HM Government (2025) Statutory homelessness in England; October to December 2024. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statutory-homelessness-in-england-october-to-december-2024

³⁰ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Gov.Uk (2025) Tables on homelessness.

https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness

Over 118,134 young people aged 16-24-years-old are estimated to have presented to their local authority as homeless or at risk of homelessness between April 2023 and March 2024.³¹

This represents a 10% increase compared to the previous financial year.

Trends: Children living in Temporary Accommodation has been growing.

The number of children living in temporary accommodation has increased by 33% from 124,330 in 2018.³²

In the year to December 2024, there was a 14% increase and the eighth record high in two years. Overall, 81,060 households or 63.3% of households in temporary accommodation included dependent children, with 165,510 dependent children living in temporary accommodation in England. Households with children increased 0.7% from the previous quarter and increased 13.7% from 31 December 2023.³³

Children living in London and other 'urban hotspots' are more likely to be living in temporary accommodation.

- At least 1 in 24 primary school children in London were living in temporary accommodation in 2024.³⁴
- In Birmingham, there are 7,394 school children (5-17-years-old) who have nowhere permanent to call home the highest in England and equivalent to 15 children in every school. This is an increase on 28% on the previous year.

Analysis by Shelter estimated that 206,000 children will be facing homeless by 2029.35

https://centrepoint.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-

https://centrepoint.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-

³¹ Centre Point (2024) The Youth Homelessness Databank 2023-24: Summary Report.

^{02/}Centrepoint%20Databank%20Summary%20Report%202023-2024.pdf

³² Centre for Young Lives analysis of Gov.Uk (2025) Tables on homelessness.

https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness

³³ Centre Point (2024) The Youth Homelessness Databank 2023-24: Summary Report.

^{02/}Centrepoint%20Databank%20Summary%20Report%202023-2024.pdf.

³⁴ HM Government (2024) Statutory homelessness: Temporary Accommodation, 31 March 2024. https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fassets.publishing.service.gov.uk%2Fmedia%2F66fd337430536cb927482aa4%2FAdditional_temporary_accommodation_breakdowns__31_March_2024.ods&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK

³⁵ Shelter England (2025) Eighth record in a row of children in temporary accommodation, as one in three homeless households placed out of area.

https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_release/eighth_record_in_a_row_of_children_in_temporary_accommodation_as_one_in_three_homeless_households_placed_out_of_area_#:~:text=165%2C510%20children_%20were%20recorded%20to%20be%20living%20in,the%20highest%20number%20since%20records%20began%20%28June%202004%29.

Closer look: Child Deaths in Temporary Accommodation³⁶

In 2023/24, 80 children died while living in Temporary Accommodation. This accounts for 3% of the total amount of child deaths in that period in England.

Between 2019 and 2024, 74 children have died with temporary accommodation marked as a contributing factor to their vulnerability, ill-health or death. Of those, a significant majority (58 children) were under 1 years old (78%), compared to 5% of the wider population (Population 2021 Census).

There are a disproportionate number of children from deprived areas represented in the figures:

- 72% of deaths affecting families living in the 1st and 2nd deprivation quintiles.
- 38% of deaths were children from within ethnic minority families, despite making up only 27% of the population.

CHILDREN IN NEED

Local authorities have a legal duty to support and protect vulnerable children who are at risk of harm, poor health, or impaired development. The term 'children in need' refers to children identified as requiring additional support to achieve a reasonable standard of health or development, which can include children experiencing neglect or abuse, or those living with a disability. This is assessed after a child is referred to children's services. If a child is identified as in need, a local authority then has a duty to provide services for that child and family. Some children in need have a child in need plan, which is a voluntary plan outlining the support a child and their family will be provided.³⁷

Among this group, some children are placed on a child protection plan when there are concerns that they are experiencing, or are likely to experience, significant harm.

There are just under 400,000 children who are identified as children in need in England. Of these children, 35,090 are subject to a child protection plan.³⁸

https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2024/03/Childreninneedreport.pdf

³⁶ Households in Temporary Accommodation APPG (2025) Child Mortality in Temporary Accommodation; Data from Child Mortality Database. https://householdsintemporaryaccommodation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Child_Mortality_in_TA_2025_APPG_Report.pdf

³⁷ Children's Commissioner (2024) Children on child in need plans.

³⁸ Department for Education (2024) National time series of children in need by gender, age and primary need. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/cceae9d9-4d98-4b42-831f-08ddada1b946; Department for Education (2024) Child Protection Plans at 31 March by category of abuse

Trends: How has the number of children in need changed over time?

- The number of children identified as children in need has decreased slightly since 2018 (404,710) but has increased since 2020 (388,490).39
- This may be partly driven by number of referrals to children's social services also decreasing by 5% from 655,630 in 2018 to 621,880 in 2024 but increased by 4% since 2021 (from 597,760). This accounts for 551,060 children who have been referred at least once.⁴⁰
 - o During the same time frame, the number of referrals from schools has increased by 6% since 2018, and by 56% in 2021. All other referral sources have decreased: from housing it has decreased by 18%, and from police by 5% since 2018.41
- For children in need assessments:42
 - Abuse or neglect was identified as the primary need in 58% of assessments in 2024, which has increased by 5 percentage points since 2018.
 - The next largest primary need is 'family dysfunction' defined as children who live in a family where the parenting capacity is 'chronically inadequate', such as poor relationships with the child, domestic abuse between parents, or low stimulation for the child⁴³ at 12%, which has decreased by 3 percentage points since 2018
- The number of child protection plans has also decreased slightly by 7%, from 53,790 to 49,900⁴⁴ between 2018 and 2024.⁴⁵

Closer look: Who are the children in need?

and local authority. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/81ca68fb-0bda-437d-0034-08ddada48db5

³⁹ Department for Education (2024) National time series of children in need by gender, age and primary need. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/cceae9d9-4d98-4b42-831f-08ddada1b946

⁴⁰ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2024) Referrals and re-referrals to children's social care services by local authority. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/datatables/permalink/e5e0d14c-68f2-4649-8320-08ddada1b946

⁴² Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2024) National times series of children in need by gender, age and primary need. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/datatables/permalink/f8cfec47-674d-42e8-1849-08ddb31a2461

⁴³ Department for Education (2023) Children in need census 2024 to 2025 Guide for local authorities. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65256511244f8e000d8e734e/Children_in_need_census_202 4 to 2025 guide V1.1.pdf

⁴⁴ The number of child protection plans is different to the number of children with a child protection plan.

⁴⁵ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2024) Child Protection Plans at 31 March by category of abuse and local authority. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/datatables/permalink/81ca68fb-0bda-437d-0034-08ddada48db5

- Boys make up 55% of children in need, and girls 43%.⁴⁶
- Almost a third (32%) of children are between the ages of 10 and 15, and 106,780 are 16+.47
- Children in need are two times more likely to have SEN although this is to be expected as children with disabilities can be eligible for a child in need plan.48

Overview of child protection

Of the 551,060 referrals to children's social care in 2024, 227,220 were found to not meet the requirements to identify as a child in need or no further action was taken.⁴⁹ Some children may instead be directed to early help services. Of all children, an estimated 185,100 received early help services in 2022.50 Many children are re-referred to children's services. In 2024, 115,550 children were re-referred within 12 months.

If a child is identified as experiencing significant harm, or is at risk at experiencing significant harm, they will be assessed through a Section 47 and an Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) to determine whether a child requires a child protection plan (CPP). Harms or risks of harm can include different types of abuse, neglect, domestic abuse, as well as extra-familial harms such as exploitation from criminal gangs, trafficking, online abuse, and influences of extremism. 51 There were 35,090 children subject to a CPP in 2024, and 15,330 of those had had at least one CPP previously.⁵²

A CPP is a statutory agreement that outlines how a child will be protected, and their welfare promoted across multiple agencies, led by a designated social worker, and are regularly reviewed. CPPs can be put in place to prevent a child being taken into care and

⁴⁶ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2024) National time series of children in need by gender, age and primary need. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/datatables/permalink/cceae9d9-4d98-4b42-831f-08ddada1b946

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Department for Education (2025) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-forchildren-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2024

⁴⁹ Department for Education (2024) National time series of children in need, referrals and assessments. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/f3d50834-1829-4837-4802-08ddaf19e179

⁵⁰ Children's Commissioner (2024) What is the plan for? The purpose and content of children in need plans. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/what-is-this-plan-for-the-purpose-and-content-ofchildren-in-need-plans/

⁵¹ HM Government (2023) Working Together to safeguard Children 2023. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6849a7b67cba25f610c7db3f/Working_together_to_safeguar d_children_2023_- statutory_guidance.pdf

⁵² Department for Education (2024) Child Protection Plans at 31 March by category of abuse and local authority. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/34c9c36e-20bd-43ec-9cfb-08ddb0dc3d3b

to keep families together, but for some children, it may be decided that moving them into care is in their best interest.⁵³

All children who are identified as a child in need, a looked after child, or a child with a CPP are classified with the umbrella term of 'children in need'. Around 1 in 30 children are a child in need, and 1 in 240 are on CPPs.⁵⁴ 1 in 10 children have been in need in the last 6 years.⁵⁵

Harms that children face

More than one factor can be identified in a child in need assessment. In 2024, concerns about the mental health of the child's parent or carer, and the child's parent or carer being a victim of domestic abuse were the most common factors – each making up almost a third of episodes where assessment factors were recorded. Concerns where the parent is the perpetrator of domestic abuse made up about 5% of episodes. Emotional abuse, neglect, concerns about the child's mental health, and concerns about a parent's alcohol misuse were also common factors. ⁵⁶

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse found that there is a lack of coherent data, and the local authority data relating to child protection plans only present a partial picture of the scale of child sexual abuse⁵⁷ – and likely, other abuse such as neglect.

Neglect

One in ten children in the UK have experienced neglect.

Neglect is the persistent failure to provide for a child's fundamental needs and is the most widespread form of child abuse. Neglect can be physical, educational, emotional, or medical.⁵⁸

Trends: How has child neglect changed over time?

⁵³ HM Government (2023) Working Together to safeguard Children 2023. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6849a7b67cba25f610c7db3f/Working_together_to_safeguar_d_children_2023_-_statutory_guidance.pdf

⁵⁴ Department for Education, (2024) Children in need. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-in-need/2024

⁵⁵ Department for Education (2025) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2024

⁵⁶ Department for Education, (2024) Children in need. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-in-need/2024

⁵⁷ House of Commons (2022) The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/634febd6d3bf7f618eda953d/the-report-independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-abuse-october-2022.pdf

⁵⁸ NSPCC, Neglect. https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/neglect/#what. Accessed: 24.06.25

- There were 83,400 cases of neglect identified at the end of children in need assessments in 2024. This was slightly higher than the 82,300 cases in 2023 but 9% lower than a peak in 2020.59
- There were 29,300 child cruelty offences recorded by the police across the UK in 2024/25. This was 52% higher than in 2018/19 but 19% lower than the 36,400 recorded offences in 2023/24.60

Closer look: Who is more likely to experience neglect?

- Younger children are more likely to be on a child protection plan because of neglect than older children, although the neglect of older children is more likely to go overlooked given they are often more difficult to identify. 61
- Child neglect does not vary significantly by gender.⁶²

Statistically, neglect and emotional abuse are the only recorded forms of maltreatment that have not declined over the past 10 years.

It is important to iterate that many children who are experiencing harm, abuse or neglect are not on the radar of children's services or other agencies. While neglect is the most common concern on CPPs, it can be difficult to identify and provide evidence for reaching a threshold for support. The NSPCC has found that the child protection system focuses on thresholds and recording specific incidents, whereas the nature of neglect often presents as a "patchwork of concerning lower-level reports built up over time to form a picture of cumulative harm." Sometimes, social workers need to wait until cases increase in severity before intervening, but if the case does not reach higher thresholds, cases may be closed only to be opened again following another assessment. The NSPCC writes that this means that "early opportunities to identify and respond to neglect are being entirely missed and neglect is allowed to become chronic." They highlight that almost three quarters of serious case reviews identify neglect as a contributing factor.63

⁵⁹ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2024) Children in need: 2023 to 2024. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/2639cd0b-15e6-41af-16c5-08ddbed4c851

⁶⁰ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Home Office. Police recorded crime and outcomes open data tables. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/police-recorded-crime-and-outcomes-open-datatables

⁶¹ NSPCC (2024) Statistics briefing: neglect. https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/hukmdrp2/statisticsbriefing-neglect-august-2024.pdf

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ NSPCC (2024) Too little, too late: The multi-agency response to identifying and tackling neglect. https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/cfanzypa/too-little-late-multi-agency-response-neglect.pdf

Extra-familial harms

Child in need plans and CPPs are used when a child is identified as being at risk of harm from outside of the home, such as child criminal exploitation, gangs, trafficking, or sexual exploitation. However, as statutory data returns do not have a category for extra familial harms, practitioners often classify this as abuse and neglect, which can stigmatise parents. Some areas will use a child in need plan, even if the child is facing significant harm, to avoid stigmatising parents.⁶⁴ This may lead to under-reporting of extra-familial harms, as well as appropriate support for children facing these harms.

Serious incident reviews

In the year to 31st March 2025, there were 338 serious incident notifications, almost half of which concerned a child death. This is a decrease of almost a third since 2019, and a decrease of 17% since 2024.⁶⁵

Following a serious incident, such as the death or serious harm of a child where abuse or neglect is known or suspected, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel may commission or oversee a review to examine the circumstances and the safeguarding response. Themes including poor information sharing, lack of critical thinking, insufficient analysis of risk and need, and failing to understand a child's daily life are often present in analysis of serious incidents. Poor risk assessment and decision making occurred in 41% of serious incidents in 2018/19, suggesting that there are gaps in practitioner knowledge and skill.⁶⁶

Variation in local authorities

The Children's Commissioner for England found that guidance for child in need plans is less clear than CPPs, and there is no national guidance that sets thresholds of need to prompt intervention, nor how often children should receive help. The rate at which a referral to children's services results in no further action, meaning the child was deemed as not requiring support or intervention from the local authority, ranged from 1.6% to 63% across local authorities in 2021/22.⁶⁷ The report also found that in most of the published local authority procedures that were reviewed, there was no specified

⁶⁴ Josh MacAlister (2022) The independent review of children's social care, Final report.

https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122535mp_/https://childrenssocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf

⁶⁵ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2025) Serious incident notifications. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/14e1b02e-559e-4e77-379e-08ddb8728388

⁶⁶ Josh MacAlister (2022) The independent review of children's social care, Final report. https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122535mp_/https://childrenssocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf

⁶⁷ Children's Commissioner (2024) Children on child in need plans. https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2024/03/Childreninneedreport.pdf

frequency as to how often a child should be visited by social workers. The Children's Commissioner also concluded that many of the actions in child in need plans lack clear measures and timeframes, and that reasons for closing a child in need plan can vary, with some closing due to wider level of need in the local area.⁶⁸

There is also a variation in the ratio of child in need plans to child protection plans between poorer and more affluent areas. The least deprived quarter of neighbourhoods have 3.6 times as many children on child in need plans as children on CPPs, whereas in the most deprived quarter, the difference is only 1.9 times. This could suggest that thresholds differ between richer and poorer areas, or that richer areas may be providing support for a larger group of children with relatively lower needs.⁶⁹

Josh MacAlister's 2022 review into children's social care also found considerable variation in the reasons for child in need plans being used, and inconsistency in the level of risk included at child in need.⁷⁰

Outcomes for children in need

Children in need have lower attainment than children who are not identified as in need. At KS2, the percentage of children meeting expected levels in reading, writing and maths is roughly half that of the overall pupil population.

Children in need are more likely to miss education, with 44% of children in need and over half (57.2%) of those with CPPs persistently absent from school, compared with 20.3% of the pupil population. 11% of children in need and 15.6% of children with CPPs are severely absent, compared to 2.5% of all pupils. Children in need are also more likely to be suspended, affecting 14.1% of children in need and 16% of children with CPPs, and 3.7% of all pupils.⁷¹

Tragically, children in need are estimated to be over 7 times more likely to die than the general population of children, accounting for 1 in 4 child deaths, while only representing 1 in 30 children – although there are data quality concerns about this data. Children in need were almost 5 times more likely to have died from deliberately inflicted injury, abuse or neglect than children without any social care involvement, increasing to 6 times as likely for children who were previously known to social services but not at the

⁶⁸ Children's Commissioner (2024) What is the plan for? The purpose and content of children in need plans. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/what-is-this-plan-for-the-purpose-and-content-of-children-in-need-plans/

⁶⁹ Children's Commissioner (2024) Children on child in need plans. https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2024/03/Childreninneedreport.pdf

⁷⁰ Josh MacAlister (2022) The independent review of children's social care, Final report.

https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122535mp_/https://childrenssocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf

⁷¹ Department for Education (2025) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2024

time of the death. This may be because children with intensive types of social care involvement are being effectively safeguarded.⁷²

CHILDREN WHO ARE LOOKED AFTER

Looked after children, sometimes referred to as children in care, are children and young people who are cared for by a local authority. Sometimes they live with foster carers, in residential homes, with adoptive parents, or with extended family members (kinship care). They are taken into care to ensure their safety and wellbeing when it is no longer safe or possible for them to remain with their families.

Most children enter care due to experiences of abuse, neglect, or family dysfunction. Some are looked after due to illness or disability of a parent or the child.

There were 83,630 looked after children (including adoptions) in 2024.⁷³

Trends: How has the number of children looked after changed over time?

- Since 2018, the number of children looked after has increased by 11% from 75,370 to 83,630 in 2024.⁷⁴
- The number of children placed for adoption has decreased by 24% between 2018 and 2024.⁷⁵
- In the past decade (2013 to 2023), the number of children aged 16 and over entering care has more than doubled.⁷⁶
- Since 2018, the number of children in secure homes and children's homes has increased by 31%.⁷⁷

https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/deaths-of-children-in-need/

statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/a26303b9-e616-40c7-4da2-08ddb873f6c0.; Department for Education (2018) Children looked after in England including adoption: 2017 to 2018.

https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2017-to-2018https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2017-to-2018

⁷² Children's Commissioner (2024) Deaths of children in need.

⁷³ Department for Education (2024) CLA on 31 March by characteristics. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/d95f8dc4-d325-4d4a-c6ae-08ddaa184212%20%20

⁷⁴ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2024) CLA on 31 March by placement type, distance and locality of placement. ②HYPERLINK "https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/datatables/permalink/a26303b9-e616-40c7-4da2-08ddb873f6c0.;"https://explore-education-

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Become (2024) Education Select Committee Inquiry, written evidence.

https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/127723/html/

⁷⁷ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2024) CLA on 31 March by placement type, distance and locality of placement. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/a26303b9-e616-40c7-4da2-08ddb873f6c0; Department for Education (2018) Children looked after in England including adoption: 2018 to 2019. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2018-to-2019

- The number of children put into foster placements has changed very little since 2018, increasing by 3%. However, as an overall percentage of all looked after children, it has decreased by 6 percentage points from 73% to 67%.⁷⁸
- Between 2021 and 2024, the number of unregistered care homes increased by 500% from 144 to 931.⁷⁹

Closer look: What are the experiences of looked after children?

- 65% of looked after children are aged older than ten, with almost two-fifths (38%) between the ages of 10 and 15. The number of children aged 16 and over entering care each year more than doubled between 2013 and 2023.
- The largest category of need, accounting for two-thirds of children, is abuse or neglect. For 12% of children, the category of need is 'family dysfunction', and for one in ten it is 'absent parenting'.⁸¹
- Most looked after children are White (71%), which is broadly in line with their share of the under-18 population (73%), but they are over-represented among adopted children (84%). Black children who account for 5% of the under-18 population are over-represented among looked after children (7%) and under-represented among those adopted (2%). For Asian children, who represent 12% of the under-18 population, they are under-represented among looked after children (5%) and those adopted (1%).82
- Slightly more boys (57%) are looked after than girls (43%).
- 9% of looked after children are unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). The number of UASC who go into care has increased by 45% since 2020 (from 5,080 to 7,380).
- Children in the most 10% deprived neighbourhoods are more than 10 times more likely to be put into care or protection plan than the least deprived 10%.⁸³

Children in care

Over the decade 2013-2023, the number of children aged 16 and over entering care has more than doubled. The reasons for this include an increase in harms such as criminal or sexual exploitation, and an increase in the number of UASC entering the care system,

⁷⁹ Become (2024) Press release. https://becomecharity.org.uk/content/uploads/2024/11/Become-Press-Release-Ofsted-Unreg-childrens-homes.pdf

https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/127723/html/

figures.service.gov.uk/health/social-care/adopted-and-looked-after-children/latest/#by-ethnicity-looked-after-and-adopted-children

https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/127723/html/

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Become (2024) Education Select Committee Inquiry, written evidence.

⁸¹ Department for Education (2024) CLA on 31 March by characteristics. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/c71ddca2-7665-4b5d-380c-08ddb8728388

⁸² Gov UK (2024) Adopted and looked-after children. https://www.ethnicity-facts-

⁸³ Become (2024) Education Select Committee Inquiry, written evidence.

which rose 42% between 2019 and 2023.⁸⁴ In a review by the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, almost all older children and young people who were placed into care had been known to children's services for several years beforehand, and more pro-active and consistent early intervention approach may have prevented care proceedings.⁸⁵

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

Of all children who are looked after, 7,380 are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Most are either placed in independent and semi-independent living arrangements (44%) or foster placements (37%).⁸⁶

UASC are particularly vulnerable. Since July 2021, over 4,600 UASC have been accommodated in hostels. During the same time frame, there have been 440 missing occurrences, and 200 remain missing as of 2023. Of these children,13 are under 16, and all but one are female.⁸⁷

Children's social care system in crisis

The crisis in the children's social care system has been well documented, including by Josh MacAlister in his Review of Children's Social Care in 2022.

Private providers operate over 83% of all children's homes.⁸⁸ Over recent years, there has been a reduction in the number of care placements provided by local authorities and an increase in private sector placements, often run by for-profit organisations. This has meant that placements can be astronomically costly for local authorities and councils also have less control over the type of provision and location of private children's homes.⁸⁹

In some cases, local authorities say they have no option but to place a child in an unregistered and illegal children's home. In the past three years, the number of unregistered children's homes has increased by 500% from 144 and 931 in 2021.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Become (2024) Education Select Committee Inquiry, written evidence. https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/127723/html/

⁸⁵ Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2021) Why are older children and young people in care proceedings? A case file review. https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/wp-

content/uploads/2021/09/why are older children and young people in care proceedings a case file review report 0921.pdf

⁸⁶ Department for Education (2024) CLA on 31 march who were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children – National. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/323b5d95-e8db-4c07-47c1-08ddaf19e179

⁸⁷ Hansard (2023) Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children. https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-01-24/debates/290AF292-5D7E-411C-8FB8-A6E0F288365C/UnaccompaniedAsylum-SeekingChildren

⁸⁸ Become, (2024) Still Too Far. https://becomecharity.org.uk/content/uploads/2024/08/Still-Too-Far-report-FINAL-v1.pdf

⁸⁹ Become (2024) Education Select Committee Inquiry, written evidence.

https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/127723/html/

⁹⁰ Become (2024) Press release. https://becomecharity.org.uk/content/uploads/2024/11/Become-Press-Release-Ofsted-Unreg-childrens-homes.pdf

The lives of care-experienced children and young people

Children who experience care are often vulnerable and can face further vulnerabilities if their needs are not identified and supported.

Care-experienced children can experience a high degree of disruption throughout their childhood. Almost a third (31%) of children in care move placements multiple times, ⁹¹ and seven in ten experience a change in either where they live, where they go to school, or who their social worker is. ⁹²

As private children's homes often favour locations where land is cheapest, there is a mismatch between where there is need and where there are homes. For instance, 24% of private children's homes are in the North East, compared to just 7% in London.

This has had an impact on where children are placed. One in five children in care are placed 20 miles or more from their home. This number has increased by 62% since 2013. While moving a child away from home may be in their best interest, usually it is due to a lack of appropriate options and has an impact on children's wellbeing. For those who live 20 miles or more away from home, they have significantly lower wellbeing due to being separated from people and places they know, experiencing disruptions to their education or mental health support, feeling a lack of agency over their own lives, and are at increased risk of sexual and criminal exploitation.⁹³

There is an increased risk of children in care going missing, particularly if they are moved far from home. Half of all reports of missing children are from children's homes, secure children's homes, and semi-independent accommodation. One in ten children in care went missing at least once last year, averaging six missing incidents per child in 2018. Between 2015 and 2018, the number of children reported missing from a registered children's home more than doubled.⁹⁴

<u>Siblings</u>

For children who experience disruption to their lives, siblings can provide a sense of stability, be a source of love and trust, and provide a protective effect. However, over a third (37%) of children in care are separated from their siblings – 39% of whom are split between two different local authorities. For children in semi-independent

⁹¹ Become (2024) Education Select Committee Inquiry. Written evidence https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/127723/html/

⁹² Become (n.d.) Why the care system has to change. https://becomecharity.org.uk/about-us/about-the-care-system/

⁹³ Become (2024) Education Select Committee Inquiry, written evidence. https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/127723/html/

⁹⁴ All Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing children and Adults (2019) No Place at Home: Risks facing children and young people who go missing from out of area placements. https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/no-place-at-home.pdf

accommodation or children's homes, this separation is far more likely, rising to 93% and 78% respectively. 95

Future life chances

Children in care are more likely to be absent from school, have lower attainment, and have higher exclusion rates than the general pupil population. Children who have been in care for more than 12 months have slightly better educational outcomes than children whose most recent period of care is much shorter. This suggests that continuous and stable care may protect children educationally, and particularly from school absence.

Children who have been in their most recent care placement for less than 12 months are more likely to be persistently and severely absent than children who have been care for longer. 42.2% and 12.6% of children in care less than 12 months were persistently and severely absent respectively, compared with 20.8% and 5.7% for those in care for longer, which is closer to the pupil population (20.3% are persistently absent and 2.5% are severely absent).⁹⁶

While children who are looked after are more likely to be suspended than the general pupil population, children who have been in longer term care are just as likely to be permanently excluded as the pupil population.⁹⁷

At the end of Key Stage 2, only 29% of children who have been in care for less than 12 months meet expected standard in reading, writing and maths, rising slightly to 34% for those who have been in care 12 months or more, compared to 61% of all pupils. This is similar to the percentage of pupils achieving grades 5 or above in English and Maths GCSE, at 4.4% for those in care less than 12 months, 9% for those in care more than 12 months, and 45.9% of the general pupil population in 2023/24.98

Children in care are also more likely to experience challenges with their mental health: 45% are estimated to have a mental health problem, rising to 72% for children who live in residential care.⁹⁹

Once a young person reaches the age of 18, placements are no longer required to provide care, so many young people experience a 'cliff edge' of support where they are

https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/01/cc-siblings-in-care.pdf

⁹⁵ Children's Commissioner (2023) Siblings in Care.

⁹⁶ Department for Education (2025) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2024

⁹⁷ Department for Education (2025) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2024

⁹⁸ Department for Education (2025) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2024

⁹⁹ Become, (2024) Still Too Far. https://becomecharity.org.uk/content/uploads/2024/08/Still-Too-Far-report-FINAL-v1.pdf

expected to become independent overnight.¹⁰⁰ 40% of young people leave care on their 18th birthday, and more than a third of care leavers feel they left care too soon.

Comparatively, half of young people have moved out of their parent's home by age 24.¹⁰¹

This can have a profound impact on care leavers' future life chances. Almost four in ten (38%) care leavers are not in education, employment or training (NEET),¹⁰² only 15% go on to higher education (compared to 47% for young people who have not experienced care), one in three become homeless within two years of leaving care,¹⁰³ and one in three feel they do not know where to get help or support.¹⁰⁴

CHILDREN OF VULNERABLE FAMILIES

Closer look: Children of vulnerable families

- In 2023, 32.4% of adult victims of domestic abuse reported there were children under the age of 16 present in the household.
- In 2019/20, 34.2% of children were living in a home where at least one parent was reporting symptoms of emotional distress.¹⁰⁵
 - This was up from 29.0% in 2016-17, 30.4% in 2017-18, and 31.6% in 2018-19.¹⁰⁶
 - For 5.6% of children, this applies to both parents a figure that has also risen from 3.5% in 2016-17.¹⁰⁷
- In 2024, 72,410 children were identified through Child in Need assessments as having a parent who misuses alcohol. This figure has remained consistently high in recent years, with more than 70,000 cases being recorded each year since 2019/20.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁰ Become (2024) Education Select Committee Inquiry, written evidence.

https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/127723/html/

¹⁰¹ Office for National Statistics. National Statistical. https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2024/04/12/our-changing-population-is-there-for-all-to-see/

¹⁰² Become (2024) Education Select Committee Inquiry, written evidence.

https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/127723/html/

¹⁰³ Become (n.d.) Why the care system has to change. https://becomecharity.org.uk/about-us/about-the-care-system/.

¹⁰⁴ Ofsted (2022) 'Ready or not': care leavers' views of preparing to leave care.

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ready-or-not-care-leavers-views-of-preparing-to-leave-care/ready-or-not-care-leavers-views-of-preparing-to-leave-care#executive-summary

¹⁰⁵ Office for Health Improvement & Disparities. Data tables: children living with parents in emotional distress, March 2022 update. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-living-with-parents-in-emotional-distress-march-2022-update/data-tables-children-living-with-parents-in-emotional-distress-march-2022-update

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Department for Education (2024) Children in Need: 2023 to 2024. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/2b7d9f32-5411-45fd-8b2d-08ddbed6edd3

 Growing up in a household where parents have multiple vulnerabilities like poor mental health substance use and domestic abuse can have significant long-term impacts on children. Maternal and paternal depression is associated with an increased risk of later behavioural and emotional difficulties in children.¹⁰⁹ 110

Domestic abuse was reported in nearly half (47%) of Serious Incident Notifications, Rapid Reviews and Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews occurring from 2023 through to 2024.¹¹¹ Domestic abuse was more likely to be present in incidents where the child died (52%) compared to serious harm incidents (43%).¹¹² There is also a correlation between exposure to domestic abuse and the use of physical chastisement with children: in homes where the mother's abusive partner has been present in the children's life since birth, 26% of children at age two have been smacked by the mother's abusive partner.¹¹³

One of the most notable impacts on children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse is that on their mental health. Being subject to domestic abuse among patients in CYPMHS is at least twice of that in the general population, with almost 50% of the patients in CYPMHS reporting exposure to domestic abuse or child abuse, and 22% reporting double victimisation.¹¹⁴

CHILDREN VICTIM OF CRIME, EXPLOITATION, VIOLENCE, AND ABUSE

Children who are victims of crime, exploitation, violence and abuse face stark risks to their life and wellbeing. The total number of children affected is underreported by their very nature. Abuse, exploitation and violence are often not isolated problems, but symptoms of broader systematic challenges, such as inequality, under-resourced services, and barriers to early intervention. Groups already marginalised, such as

experiences-of-domestic-abuse-victims-in-their-own-right-babies-children-and-young-peoples-experiences-of-domestic-abuse-accessible#fn:74

¹⁰⁹ Scottish Government. Growing Up In Scotland: Maternal mental health and its impact on child behaviour and development.

https://www.gov.scot/publications/growing-up-scotland-maternal-mental-health-impact-child-behaviour-development/

¹¹⁰ Ramchandani, P. et. al. (2008) The effects of pre- and postnatal depression in fathers: a natural experiment comparing the effects of exposure to depression on offspring. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2008.02000.x

¹¹¹ Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2024) Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel: annual report 2023 to 2024. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-safeguarding-practice-review-panel-annual-report-2023-to-2024

Home Office (2025) Victims in their own right? Babies, children and young people's experiences of domestic abuse. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/babies-children-and-young-peoples-

¹¹⁴ Hultmann, O. et al (2022) Child Psychiatric Patients Exposed to Intimate Partner Violence and/or Abuse: The Impact of Double Exposure. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520978186

children from multi-ethnic backgrounds or those excluded from school, are disproportionately affected.

The data highlights worrying trends: rising rates of exploitation, high levels of youth violence, and a persistent climate of fear among young people. Yet many of these children remain invisible to services until crisis point.

Child criminal exploitation

Child criminal exploitation was identified in 15,750 children in need assessments in 2024. 115

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) is the coercion of a child into committing criminal acts. This includes 'county lines', a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks who use vulnerable children to transport drugs across the country.

The 2024 Jay Review highlighted how the lack of formal definition of criminal exploitation of children makes it difficult to paint a comprehensive picture of the scale of CCE. This is now being addressed in new legislation in the Crime and Policing Bill. The data that is available does however show CCE was identified in 15,570 children in need assessments in 2024.

Trends: How has CCE changed over time?

- The number of cases of CCE being identified in children in need assessments has increased by over 50% from 10,140 in 2022 to 15,750 in 2024. 118
- In 2024, there were 2,613 children in England referred to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for potential victims of modern slavery because of CCE.
- 1,503 child NRM referrals across the UK were for county lines, a 127% increase from 2018 but lower than the peak of 1,932 in 2022.

Data also reveals several vulnerabilities that increase a child's risk of exploitation.



¹¹⁵ Department for Education (2024) Children in Need: 2023 to 2024. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/2b7d9f32-5411-45fd-8b2d-08ddbed6edd3

¹¹⁶ Action for Children (2024) The Jay Review of Criminally Exploited Children

¹¹⁷ Department for Education (2024) Children in need: 2023 to 2024. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/2b7d9f32-5411-45fd-8b2d-08ddbed6edd3

https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/2b7d9f32-5411-45fd-8b2d-08ddbed6edd3
https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/2b7d9f32-5411-45fd-8b2d-08ddbed6edd3
https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-nrm-and-dtn-statistics-end-of-year-summary-2024#documents

¹²⁰ Home Office (2024) Modern Slavery: national Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, Table 19. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-nrm-and-dtn-statistics-end-of-year-summary-2024#documents

- Of the 2,613 child referrals to the NRM for CCE in 2024, 95% were male.¹²¹
- In comparison to children referred to social care for other reasons, children referred to social care due to gang involvement are:¹²²
 - 48% more likely to have experienced neglect.
 - o 48% more likely to have parental mental health identified as a concern
 - 41% more likely to have a parent or carer misusing substances.
 - o 39% more likely to have been the victim of domestic abuse.
 - Five times more likely to have been permanently excluded from mainstream education in the year before referral.

Child sexual abuse and exploitation

Approximately 500,000 children are estimated to have been sexually abused every year, however the rates are likely to be much higher.

The significant under-reporting and under-identification of child sexual abuse (CSA) means that it is difficult to precisely establish the prevalence of CSA in England. Organisations such as the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse have raised concerns that data pertaining to levels of child sexual abuse – and therefore identification of cases by authorities – are only the tip of the iceberg. They have highlighted the significant gap between the number of cases recorded by the police, the number of children attending sexual assault referral centres, and the number of children on protection plans as a result of child sexual abuse, and the 500,000 children they estimate to have been the victim of child sexual abuse each year. 123

Trends: How has CSA changed over time?

 There were 101,199 CSA offences recorded by the police in England and Wales in 2024.¹²⁴

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¹²¹ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Home Office (2024) Modern Slavery: national Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics, Table 4. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-nrm-and-dtn-statistics-end-of-year-summary-2024#documents

¹²² Children's Commissioner (2019) The characteristics of gang-associated children and young people. https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2019/02/CCO-Characteristics-of-Gang-Associated-Children-and-Young-People1.1.pdf

¹²³ Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (2025) Child sexual abuse in 2023/24: Trends in official data. https://www.csacentre.org.uk/app/uploads/2025/03/Child-sexual-abuse-in-2023-24-Trends-in-official-data.pdf lbid.

- \circ Of which, 39,640 were child sexual abuse images, 125 up from 4,618 in $2013/14.^{126}$
- There were 13,860 case of child sexual exploitation (CSE) identified in children in need assessments in 2024, down from 20,000 in 2018.¹²⁷
- There are 1,760 on child protection plan due to CSA in England, which has fallen or stayed the same every year since 2020, from a high of 1,970.¹²⁸

Young people and violence

One in five 13-17-year-olds have been a victim of violence

Crime - and the very real fear of becoming a victim - is limiting the opportunities and futures of far too many young people. The systems and services designed to prevent youth from entering the criminal justice system are often under-resourced, mistrusted by the very people they aim to support, or unequipped to meet the complex and growing needs of a generation facing extraordinary challenges.

The Youth Endowment Fund's *Children, violence and vulnerability 2024* series provides a comprehensive picture of youth violence and who it impacts. It reveals how experiences of violence are becoming more common and concentrated among the most vulnerable young people.¹²⁹

Trends: How has youth violence changed over time?

• There were 64 victims of homicide aged 13-19 in the year ending March 2024, up from 39 in March 2014 but down from a high of 87 in 2017. Of these 64 homicides, 53 were with a "sharp instrument". 130

https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-in-need-2023-to-2024

¹²⁵ Classified as 'obscene publications' in Home Office data, some of which do not include images of children. This figure is used as a measure of child sexual abuse images by the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse. https://www.csacentre.org.uk/app/uploads/2025/03/Child-sexual-abuse-in-2023-24-Trends-in-official-data.pdf

¹²⁶ Home Office. Police recorded crime and outcomes open data tables.

https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/police-recorded-crime-and-outcomes-open-data-tables

¹²⁷ Department for Education (2024) Children in need: 2023 to 2024.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Youth Endowment Fund. Children, violence and vulnerability 2024.

https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/who-is-affected/

¹³⁰ Office for National Statistics. Homicide in England and Wales: year ending March 2024.

https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/homicideinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2024

- 20% of 13-17-year-olds were a victim of violent crime in 2024, up from 14% in 2022. 131,132
- 55% of 13-17-year-olds witnessed violence in 2024, up from 39% in 2021. 133
- 509 children were admitted to hospital due to assault by a knife in 2023/24. This was 9% higher than in 2022/23 and 28% higher than 2013/14. 134

Over two-thirds of young people say they fear becoming victims of peer violence - a concern that climbs to 74% among Black young people. This fear alone is taking a serious toll: many are facing declining mental health, struggling with disrupted sleep, loss of appetite, and have trouble focusing at school. The serious content is taking a serious toll: many are facing declining mental health, struggling with disrupted sleep, loss of appetite, and have trouble focusing at school.

Closer look: Who is most likely to be a victim of violence?

- 25% of young people from a multi-ethnic background have been a victim of violence, the most of any ethnic group.¹³⁷
- Nearly one in four boys have been a victim of violence, compared to 14% of girls, although girls are known to experience particular vulnerabilities and their experiences are often hidden.¹³⁸
- In England, young people in London are most likely to have been the victim of violence, with one in four suffering from violence.¹³⁹

Young People who commit acts of violence

16% of 13-17-year-olds report committing violence

Recent trends have shown a slight overall decline in self-reported committing of violence, but a rise in formal sanctions, and clear patterns emerging around the profile of age, ethnicity, school exclusion status, and socio-economic disadvantage of those committing violence.

¹³¹ Youth Endowment Fund (2024) Children, violence and vulnerability survey – a survey of 10,000 13-17-year-olds across England and Wales, conducted between May and July 2024.

https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/

¹³² Youth Endowment Fund. Children, violence and vulnerability 2022.

https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2022/

¹³³ Youth Endowment Fund (2024) Children, violence and vulnerability survey – a survey of 10,000 13-17-year-olds across England and Wales, conducted between May and July 2024.

https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/

¹³⁴ Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (2025) Child sexual abuse in 2023/24: Trends in official data. https://www.csacentre.org.uk/app/uploads/2025/03/Child-sexual-abuse-in-2023-24-Trends-in-official-data.pdf

¹³⁵ Youth Endowment Fund (2024) Children, violence and vulnerability 2024: Report 1, Who is affected by violence?. https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CVV24 R1 OverallViolence.pdf
¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Youth Endowment Fund (2024) Children, violence and vulnerability survey – a survey of 10,000 13-17-year-olds across England and Wales, conducted between May and July 2024.

https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

Trends: How has youth violence changed over time?

- The percentage of 13-17-year-olds who have committed acts of violence has fallen slightly over recent years, from 19% in 2022 to 16% in 2024. 140,141
- 15,500 children aged 10-17-years-old were convicted or cautioned for violent offences in 2023/24, up 9% on 2022/23.¹⁴²

Closer look: Who is more likely to commit acts of violence?

- 74% of those who have committed violence have been excluded from school.¹⁴³
- Younger teenagers aged 13-15-years-old are more likely to carry weapons compared to those aged 16-17.¹⁴⁴
- Perpetrators of youth violence are getting younger: recent figures in London show a rise of 38% in the number of 10-14-year-olds suspected of serious violence between 2020 and 2023.¹⁴⁵
- Young people who are eligible for free school meals are nearly four times as likely to carry a weapon or join a gang because of fears about violence.¹⁴⁶

The Youth Endowment Fund's *Children, violence and vulnerability 2024* survey reveals a stark correlation between children committing violence and the viewing of violence online. Nine in ten young people who carry out acts of violence aged 13-17-years-old have viewed any form of violence online, compared to two-thirds of those who have not committed any form of violence.¹⁴⁷

Young people committing acts of violence with weapons are nearly twice as likely to have viewed social media content featuring weapons online and, similarly, those

¹⁴⁰ Youth Endowment Fund (2022) Children, violence and vulnerability 2022.

https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2022/

¹⁴¹ Youth Endowment Fund (2024) Children, violence and vulnerability survey – a survey of 10,000 13-17-year-olds across England and Wales, conducted between May and July 2024.

https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/

¹⁴² Youth Endowment Fund (2025) Statistics update: Trends in violence affecting children.

https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fassets.publishing.service.gov.uk%2Fmedia%2F67ee7f049eae202448299c81%2FKnife_Crime_Evidence_Insights_Feb25.pptx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINKhttps://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/YEF-Statistics-update-April-2025.pdf

¹⁴³ Youth Endowment Fund (2024) Children, violence and vulnerability survey – a survey of 10,000 13-17-year-olds across England and Wales, conducted between May and July 2024.

https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/

¹⁴⁵ BBC. Child violent crime suspects 'getting younger'. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5y6l36q6pqo ¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

committing sexual violence are more than twice as likely to have viewed sexual violence online. 148

Missing children

There were 70,000 cases of children going missing in 2023 in England and Wales¹⁴⁹

This figure is likely to be much higher; as many as seven in ten children are not reported to the police when they go missing.¹⁵⁰

Closer look: Who is more likely to go missing?

- 60% of all missing person incidents (including adults) involve children aged 12-17.¹⁵¹
- One in ten looked-after children are reported missing, compared to 1 in 200 children.¹⁵²
- More than half of missing children have experienced conflict, abuse, and neglect at home.¹⁵³
- Seven in ten young people who have been sexually exploited have also been reported missing.¹⁵⁴
- One in five children who completed return home interviews with Missing People disclosed information about mental health issues.¹⁵⁵
- One in four trafficked children who are looked after in local authority care have gone missing.¹⁵⁶

CHILDREN IN THE SECURE ESTATE

For a small but highly vulnerable group of children, involvement with the justice system or being subject to deprivation of liberty results in being placed in the secure estate.

¹⁴⁹ National Crime Agency (n.d) UK Missing Persons Unit. Missing Persons Data Report 2022/23. https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/images/mpu/downloads/UKMPU%20Annual%20Data%20Report%202022-23.pdf

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Missing people. Key statistics and figures. https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/policy-and-research/information-and-research/key-information.

¹⁵¹ National Crime Agency (n.d.) Missing Persons Data Report 2022/23. <u>UKMPU Annual Data Report 2022-23.pdf</u>

¹⁵² Missing people. Key statistics and figures. https://www.missingpeople.org.uk/for-professionals/policy-and-research/information-and-research/key-information.

¹⁵³ Ibid

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

Children in the Youth Justice system

In the year ending March 2024, there were about 8,300 child first entrants to the youth justice system. This was 3% lower than the previous year and is the lowest level on record.¹⁵⁷

The number of first time entrants from a White ethnic background has fallen at the fastest rate (71%) over the last 10 years, so they now comprise 77% of all first time entrants.¹⁵⁸

In the year ending December 2023, boys comprised 84% of total child FTEs, while making up 51% of the general population of 10-17-year-olds.¹⁵⁹

There was an average of 430 children in custody at any one time in the year ending March 2024.

Closer look: Who is more likely to be in custody?

- 24% of children in custody are Black, down from 28% in 2019/20 but higher than the rate of 22% in 2013/14. Black children remain four times more likely to be in custody compared to their share of the population. ¹⁶⁰
- Mixed ethnicity children account for 8% of the average monthly custodial population, despite making up only 6% of all 10-17-year-olds in England and Wales.¹⁶¹
- White children account for 49% of the children in custody, which has fallen from 60% in the last 10 years.¹⁶²

Sentencing

660 children received custodial sentences in the year ending March 2024

There were 660 custodial sentences in the year ending March 2024, 21% higher than the previous year. This was the first time in ten years that there had been a year-on-year increase in custodial sentences.¹⁶³

https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024/youth-justice-statistics-2024-to-2024/youth-justice-statistics-2024-to-2024-to-2024-to-2024-to-2024-to-2024-to-2024-to-2024-to-2024-to-2024-to-2024-to-2024-to-2024-to-2024-to-2024-t

¹⁵⁷ Youth Justice Board (2025) Youth Justice Statistics: 2023 to 2024.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

The average time from offence to completion at court is now the highest level on record, with children waiting 225 days on average. This was 16 days higher than the previous year and four days higher than the year ending March 2021 which was, at the time, impacted by court closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. 164

In the year ending March 2024, there were around 11,100 remand episodes of which the majority (81%) were bail remands, with 11% being community remands with intervention, and youth detention accommodation remands accounting for 8%. 165

Of the 430 children (on average) in custody, 43% were on remand. This remand population of 190 children per month were predominantly in Youth Offender Institutions (68%) and were almost all boys (98%). 59% were from an ethnic minority. 166

Re-offending

A third of youth offenders re-offended in year ending March 2024.¹⁶⁷

The proven reoffending rate for children increased to 32.5%, a 0.3 percentage point increase on the previous year¹⁶⁸ – whereas for adults, the reoffending rate is 26.4%. 169 The frequency of reoffending also increased by 7%, with children who reoffend now committing 4.34 reoffences on average. This is the highest this rate has been in the past 10 years. 170

Closer look: Who is more likely to re-offend?

- Boys make up 94% of prolific young offenders, compared to 79% of nonprolific offenders. 171
- More than one in four prolific offenders live in the 10% most deprived areas of England and Wales, and nearly half (45%) of prolific young offenders live in the 20% most deprived areas. 172

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 168 Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ministry of Justice (2024) Proven reoffending statistics: October to December 2022.

https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/proven-reoffending-statistics-october-to-december-2022/provenreoffending-statistics-october-to-december-2022

¹⁷⁰ Youth Justice Board (2025) Youth Justice Statistics: 2023 to 2024.

https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024/youth-justice-statistics-2023-to-2024#main-points

¹⁷¹ Ministry of Justice (2025) A Profile of Repeat Offending by Children and Young People in England and Wales. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-profile-of-repeat-offending-by-children-and-youngpeople-in-england-and-wales/a-profile-of-repeat-offending-by-children-and-young-people-in-england-andwales#executive-summary

¹⁷² Ibid.

Deprivation of Liberty

Deprivation of liberty (DoL) orders are legal authorisations granted by the Family Court that allow a local authority to lawfully restrict a child's freedom of movement when they are considered to be at serious risk – either to themselves or from others – and no less restrictive means are available to keep them safe. These orders are intended to be a measure of legal last resort. However, evidence suggests that DoL orders are now being routinely used instead of secure placements, due to the lack of availability of secure children's homes.¹⁷³

1,280 children were subject to deprivation of liberty applications in 2024

Trends: How have the number of deprivation of liberty applications changed over time?

 There were 1,280 DoL applications in England and Wales in 2024, down from 1,368 in 2023.¹⁷⁴

Closer look: who is more likely to be subject to a DoL?

- Between July 2022 and June 2023, there were 15.26 DoL applications per 100,000 children in the East of England, the lowest rate of any region in England and Wales. By contrast, the highest rate of DoL applications was in the North West of England, at a rate of 40.83.¹⁷⁵
- The majority of applications (57.3%) in 2024 were for children aged 13-15, with 10.3% made for children aged 0-12 and 32.3% for 16-18-year-olds. 176
- There was only a small gender gap in DoL applications in 2024, with girls the subject of 51.5% of applications, and boys 48.4%.¹⁷⁷

For some children with complex needs, including mental health needs, lack of specialised secure provision has also led to them being placed in supported accommodation under deprivation of liberty orders – when they should be in a registered children's home.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ Become, (2024) Still Too Far. https://becomecharity.org.uk/content/uploads/2024/08/Still-Too-Far-report-FINAL-v1.pdf

¹⁷⁴ Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. Data tracker. https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/data-tracker/type/deprivation-of-liberty.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ofsted (2022) How local authorities plan for sufficiency of accommodation that meets the needs of children in care and care leavers. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-local-authorities-plan-

The use of deprivation of liberty and secure settings highlights deep and persistent inequalities in how vulnerable children are treated across the care and justice systems. Children from ethnic minority backgrounds, boys, and those living in the most deprived areas continue to be disproportionately represented in custody and reoffending statistics. These patterns point to systemic gaps and an urgent need to focus on these children.

CHILDREN LOSING LEARNING

Children missing school are losing out on a protective factor in their lives and are often vulnerable – which can be both a cause and consequence of losing learning. Thousands of vulnerable children and young people are falling through the gaps in the education system and losing out on future life chances. These children have lower educational attainment and are at risk of further social exclusion. The are also missing the protective factors that schools can provide.

This crisis that has grown since Covid. In 2022/23, there were 32 million days of learning lost due to suspension and unauthorised absence. This number has increased by 68% since 2019, where there were 19 million days of lost learning.¹⁷⁹

Absence

1,487,022 children persistently absent in 2023/24.180

Trends: How has absence changed over time?

Since the Covid pandemic, the number of children missing education through absence has rocketed.

- The number of children who are persistently absent, meaning they are missing 10% or more of their education, has almost doubled (93% increase) from 771,863 in the 2018/19 academic year to 1,487,022 in 2023/24 over just five years, with a peak in 2021/22 where 1,643,876 children were persistently absent (113% increase since 2018/19). 181
- The number of children who are severely absent, meaning they are missing more than 50% of their education, has almost trebled (184% increase) since

for-sufficiency-children-in-care-and-care-leavers/how-local-authorities-plan-for-sufficiency-of-accommodation-that-meets-the-needs-of-children-in-care-and-care-leavers

org.files.svdcdn.com/production/Downloads/Who_is_losing_learning_Sept24_2024-09-06-103617_euht.pdf?dm=1728042357

¹⁷⁹ IPPR (2024) Who is Losing Learning? https://ippr-

¹⁸⁰ Department for Education (2025) Pupil absence in schools in England. https://explore-education-statistics.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2023-24

¹⁸¹ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2025) Pupil absence in schools in England. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2023-24

before the pandemic. It has continued to rise since the pandemic, with an increase of 42% since 2021/22. 182

Closer look: Who is more likely to be absent from school?¹⁸³

- Children who receive Free School Meals are about 2.5 times more likely to be persistently absent than their peers not in receipt of Free School Meals. This has risen by 11 percentage points.
- Children with an EHC Plan are more than twice as likely to be absent than those without SEN.
- Children from the traveller community have the highest rate of persistent absent at 70%.

There is a clear link between children living in poverty and persistent absence. The rate of persistent absence for children eligible for free school meals has risen by more than double the percentage points compared to the rise among those not eligible for FSM – at 8.3 percentage points and 4 respectively. For severe absence, the rate has grown by more than three times more percentage points for children eligible for FSM and those not eligible. 184

For some areas of the country, the correlation between poverty and absence is even starker. In Bradford, which has the third highest persistent absence rate of local authority areas, over half (56.9%) of those identified as persistently absent were eligible for free school meals. This meant that children eligible for free school meals were more than three times more likely of becoming persistently absent at some point during their school career.¹⁸⁵

Suspensions & Permanent exclusions

954,952 suspensions in 2023/24.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Centre for Young Lives (2024) Too Skint for School: Breaking the link between poverty and attendance. <a href="https://www.centreforyounglives.org.uk/news-centre/centre-for-young-lives-report-warns-poverty-and-hardship-are-preventing-some-children-from-attending-school-amid-big-increases-in-persistent-and-severe-absence-among-children-receiving-free-school-meals
¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

Like absence, permanent exclusions and suspensions have grown since the pandemic. The main reason for suspensions and exclusions is persistent disruptive behaviour, which can be a result of poor mental health or unmet special needs.¹⁸⁶

Trends: How has permanent exclusions and suspensions changed over time?

- Between 2018/19 and 2023/24, suspensions have increased by 118% from 438,000 to 955,000. In the last year alone, they have increased by 21%. 187
- During the same time frame, permanent exclusions have increased by 38% from 7,900 to 10,900.¹⁸⁸

Exclusions disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged children and young people. Excluded children are more likely to be in the care of the state, to have grown up in poverty, and are more likely to have an educational need.

Closer look: Who is missing school through permanent exclusions and suspensions?

Compared to their peers, children:

- With SEN but without an EHC plan are more than five times more likely to be permanently excluded than their peers without SEN, and nearly four times more likely to be suspended.¹⁸⁹
- Who are eligible for Free School Meals are 5.5 times as likely to be excluded than those not eligible,¹⁹⁰ and more than 4.5 times as likely to be suspended.
- Who are boys are more than 1.5 times more likely to be suspended than girls.¹⁹¹

Vulnerable children are more likely to be excluded or suspended, which in turn puts young people at greater risk of exploitation, harm and wider lost life chances. Without the protective factors of schools, children are highly visible and vulnerable to those who wish to exploit them. Being excluded or moved out of school can often trigger a downward spiral for the child.

Exclusions and suspensions are correlated with contact with the criminal justice system. The Youth Endowment Fund found that, after controlling for factors including

¹⁸⁶ The Guardian (2024) Sharp increase in pupils suspended or excluded from schools in England. https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/jul/18/sharp-increase-in-pupils-suspended-or-excluded-from-schools-in-england

¹⁸⁷ Department for Education (2025) Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England. <u>Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England</u>, <u>Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK</u>

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

child's previous behaviour, family circumstances, and poverty, those who are suspended or excluded from school are 2.5 times more likely to perpetrate violence and 4.5 times more likely to offend. 192

Similarly, evidence from the Department for Education (DfE) and Ministry of Justice (MoJ) found that 71% of all children who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence, and 82% of those cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence, had received a suspension. For permanent exclusions, 44% of children had their first exclusion more than a year before their first serious violence offence, and for suspensions 74% of children had their first suspensions more than a year before. 193

Alternative provision

47,612 children in alternative provision. 194

Trends: How has the number of children in alternative provision changed over time?

 The number of children in alternative provision has increased by 82% between 2018/19 and 2023/24.195

Closer look: Who attends alternative provision?

- The most common reason for AP placement is due to EHC plan, accounting for 78% of reasons. Permanent exclusions accounted for 5% of reasons. 196
- Evidence suggests that there is a strong correlation between areas of high deprivation and areas that have a high proportion of the school population educated in AP full time. 197

While there are some excellent examples of alternative provision (AP), the number of children in AP has grown, and for many of these children this has meant further barriers

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹² Youth Endowment Fund (2025) Association between school exclusion, suspension, absence and violent crime. https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Association-between-schoolexclusion-suspension-absence-and-violent-crime.pdf

¹⁹³ Department for Education (2022), Education, children's social care and offending. Descriptive statistics. March 2022.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6227a9b58fa8f526dcf89e17/Education_children_s_social_ca re_and_offending_descriptive_stats_FINAL.pdf

¹⁹⁴ Department for Education (2025) Schools, pupils and their characteristics. https://explore-educationstatistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/769a255f-e7d7-4ad1-a976-08dda66b96f5 195 Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Centre for Social Justice (2020), Warming the Cold Spots of Alternative Provision. https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CSJJ8057-Cold-Spots-Report-200507-v1-WEB.pdf

to opportunity. For some children, alternative provision can suit them well – but for many, children go to AP because they lacked support in their school life. Many disadvantaged children and young people and those with SEN would thrive in mainstream education if their needs were properly identified and supported.

Education in AP is often lower quality than mainstream education. In 2020, the Centre for Social Justice found that in 13 LAs, not a single child educated in AP passed their English and Maths GCSE in the three years prior. This impacts their future; in the entire country, there is no area where the rate of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) after leaving AP is equivalent to the very-worst performing area for children in mainstream 35% of excluded students who finish their education in AP go on to become NEET, compared with only 5% of those leaving mainstream schools. 198

Children who have attended AP are also significantly overrepresented among those who go on to offend – particularly in cases of serious violence and prolific offending. While children who attend AP make up 3% of the overall cohort, they account for one in four (26%) of all children who offend, over one in three (37%) of those who commit serious violence, and more than half (57%) of prolific offenders.¹⁹⁹

Being educated in AP, then, can signify often unaddressed vulnerabilities and needs, and can lead to further disadvantages.

Elective home education

At least 153,300 children were electively home educated at any point in 2023/24.200

Trends: How has elective home education changed over time?

• The number of children who were electively home educated at any time during the school year has grown by 31% between 2021/22 and 2023/24. Data for previous years is not available.²⁰¹

https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CSJJ8057-Cold-Spots-Report-200507-v1-WEB.pdf

¹⁹⁸ Centre for Social Justice (2020) Warming the Cold Spots of Alternative Provision.

¹⁹⁹ Department for Education (2022) Education, children's social care and offending. Descriptive statistics. March 2022.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6227a9b58fa8f526dcf89e17/Education_children_s_social_care_and_offending_descriptive_stats_FINAL.pdf

²⁰⁰ Department for Education (2024) Elective home education at any point in the academic year. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/dbd2bbf0-dc1e-49f2-380f-08ddb8728388

 $^{^{201}}$ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2024) Elective home education at any point in the academic year. $\frac{https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/dbd2bbf0-dc1e-49f2-380f-08ddb8728388$

Closer look: Who is being electively home educated?

- Official statistics for the number of children who are EHE on census date is divided only by gender, age, and reason given.
- The majority (71%) of children and young people who are EHE are in secondary school age.²⁰²

The number of electively home educated children on census date is shown termly and is broken down into characteristics and reasons. The overall numbers are lower than the number of EHE at any time of year.

Without a register of children who are not in school, it is difficult to have an accurate number of the number of children who are electively home educated (EHE) or not in school for other reasons. The Government has committed to introduce a children not in school register as part of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

Most reasons for EHE are not known, accounting for 42% of reasons. The most common known reason for EHE is philosophical or mental health, each accounting for 14% of the reasons. Mental health given as a reason for EHE has risen by 5 percentage points since 2022/23 Autumn term.²⁰³

While there are many parents who provide high quality home education for their children, there is evidence to suggest that some children are pushed into home education due to their school being unable to cope with the child's behaviour, underachievement or special educational needs that are not being properly supported.²⁰⁴

Research suggests that parents may be unable to make a free choice, and may feel like they are coerced into taking their child off the school roll. 205 According to DfE data, reasons for EHE due to school satisfaction, including 'general', bullying and SEN, account for 13% of reasons. 206

²⁰² Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2024) Number of EHE children on census data. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/933c16da-7e16-4bc4-3810-

²⁰³ Department for Education, (2025) Elective home education at census date 2022/23 Autumn term to 2024/25 Autumn term. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/5826e705-0821-4d8e-aa59-08ddaa406206

²⁰⁴ Commission on Young Lives, (2022) Hidden in Plain Sight. https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2022/11/COYL-FINAL-REPORT-FINAL-VERSION.pdf

²⁰⁵ Centre for Social Justice, (2022) Out of sight and out of mind.

https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/CSJ-Home-education-report.pdf

²⁰⁶ Department for Education, (2025) Elective home education at census date 2022/23 Autumn term to 2024/25 Autumn term. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/5826e705-0821-4d8e-aa59-08ddaa406206

At least 400,000 children missing from education.

Trends: How has the number of children missing education changed over time?

- According to DfE statistics, the number of children missing from education has increased by 58% between 2021/22 and 2023/24 from 94,900 to 149,900. Data before 2021/22 does not exist.²⁰⁷
- By comparing GP registrations with school registrations, and data on pupils who are EHE, Education Policy Institute estimates that up to 400,000 children are estimated to not be in school – more than double DfE's statistics. EPI reports that this is a 50% increase since 2017.²⁰⁸
- EPI also estimates that 300,000 children may be missing from education entirely, which has increased by 40% since 2017.²⁰⁹

Closer look: Who is missing education?

- According to DfE statistics, there is a slightly higher percentage of boys missing education (54%) than girls (45%).²¹⁰
- Like EHE, the percentage of children missing from education steadily increases as they get older, with 13% of CME in Year 11, and just 2% in Reception.²¹¹
- According to EPI's research on children missing from education:²¹²
 - 75% of Traveller pupils and 50% of Gypsy/Roma pupils exited the English education system.
 - 18% of children missing from Education were persistently disadvantaged (eligible for free school meals for at least 80% of relevant terms).
 - 18% had been permanently excluded.
 - 13% are care-experienced.
 - o 10% had an EHCP.

Children missing education are not on a school roll and are not otherwise receiving a

²⁰⁷ Department for Education (2024) Children missing education. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/3a372fcf-1527-4381-1725-08ddbed4c851

²⁰⁸ Education Policy Institute (2024) Children missing from education. https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/CME-report_final-1.pdf

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Department for Education (2025) Children missing education at census date. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/e2651b3f-31a9-422b-3812-08ddb8728388

 $^{^{212}}$ Education Policy Institute (2024) Children missing from education. $\underline{\text{https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/CME-report_final-1.pdf}}$

suitable education. According to DfE statistics, over a quarter (28%) of children missing education are missing for over half the year, and 17% are missing for over a year.²¹³ However, as EPI's report demonstrates, the scale of children missing education are likely to be much higher than DfE's data indicates.

Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

After compulsory education, many young people can face difficulties finding further education, training, or employment. This can be a result of the lack of opportunity for education or entry-level jobs, especially in some regions; a lack flexible jobs, employment or education for a young person's needs or other responsibilities; or challenges that a young person faces making them unable to work, such as mental health.

National Centre for Social Research identified five risk factors that are strongly associated with young people being NEET: not having an academic qualification above level one; having a limiting disability; having a child; having poor mental health; and having SEN.²¹⁴

In the UK, more than 920,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), accounting for one in eight.²¹⁵

Trends: how has the number of NEET young people changed over time?

 The proportion of young people who are NEET has increased from one in ten pre-pandemic to one in eight in 2024.²¹⁶

Closer look: Who are the NEET young people?

 More NEET young people are economically inactive (569,000) than unemployed (354,000). A person is defined as unemployed when they are actively seeking work and are able to work but do not have a job, whereas someone who is economically inactive either have not been seeking work or are unable to work.²¹⁷

²¹³ Department for Education (2025) Children missing education at census date. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/e2651b3f-31a9-422b-3812-08ddb8728388

²¹⁴ National Centre for Social Research (2023) Risk factors for being NEET among young people.

https://natcen.ac.uk/publications/risk-factors-being-neet-among-young-people

²¹⁵ ONS (2025) Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET).

https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/datasets/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneettable1

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

- Young men are slightly more likely to be NEET than young women, with almost half a million young men NEET, compared to 425,000 young women.
- However, young women are more likely to be economically inactive than young men, meaning that they are not or are unable to seek employment.²¹⁸
- A quarter of young people who are NEET experience some form of mental health problem, compared with 9% of those in employment.²¹⁹

Young people who are NEET can face long-term difficulties and can be 'stuck' being NEET. Almost half (48%) of young people are still NEET a year after they first become NEET,²²⁰ and 75% of young people who are NEET for three months have been NEET for 12 months.²²¹ Being unemployed can lead to feelings of social exclusion and isolation, and is linked to poorer physical and mental health – particularly for young people.²²²

Unemployment can also impact future life chances. Being unemployed for even a week can reduce the probability of securing a leadership role in the future by 2%, an effect referred to as 'early-career unemployment scarring'. Long-term unemployment can have further impact on future employment.²²³

CHILDREN NOT REACHING A GOOD LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT ON STARTING SCHOOL

The early years of a child's life are pivotal for building the foundations for their development and life chances into adulthood. The long-term impact of children starting school behind their peers are well-evidenced, as well as the benefit of sufficient early years support in mitigating those impacts.

In 2023/24, only 67.7% of children reached a Good Level of Development. The Government has set a target for 75% of children to be reaching a GLD by 2028 as part of

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²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ The King's Trust (2022) Soaring mental health conditions locking unemployed young people out of the job market, warns new report. https://www.kingstrust.org.uk/about-us/our-research/the-power-of-potential-supporting-the-future-of-young-people

²²⁰ Learning and Work Institute (2025) Young people who are not in education, employment or training – what does the data tell us? https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/young-people-who-are-not-in-education-employment-or-training-what-does-the-data-tell-us/

²²¹ Impetus (2019) The long-term NEET population. <u>https://impetus-</u>

org_files.svdcdn.com/production/assets/publications/Youth-Jobs-Gap-The-Long-Term-NEET-Population.pdf ²²² Public Health England (2014) Reducing the number of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET).

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7dd2a040f0b65d88634a03/Review3_NEETs_health_inequalities.pdf

²²³ Durham University (2024) Impact of early career unemployment: even a week can harm future leadership potential. https://www.durham.ac.uk/business/news-and-events/news/2024/may/impact-of-early-career-unemployment/

their 'Early Years Milestone'. To reach this goal, a further 40,000-45,000 children will need to reach a good level of development.²²⁴

A Good Level of Development, or 'school readiness', considers a range of skills and capabilities that reflect a child's ability outside of just academic measures, providing the earliest snapshot of a child's overall development. Children are defined as having reached a Good Level of Development at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage if they have achieved, by the end of Reception, the expected level for the Early Learning Goals (ELGs), which are: communication and language; personal, social and emotional development; physical development; and the specific areas of mathematics and literacy. ²²⁵

196,389 children did not achieve a Good Level of Development (GLD) in 2023/24.²²⁶

Trends: How has it changed over time?

Since 2021/22, the proportion of children reaching a Good Level of Development has slightly increased.

- In 2023/24, 32.3% of children did not achieve a Good Level of Development.²²⁷
- In 2021/22, 34.8% of children did not achieve a Good Level of Development.²²⁸

However, when compared to pre-pandemic levels, a smaller proportion of children are achieving a Good Level of Development.

- In 2018/2019, 28.2% of children did not achieve a Good Level of Development on starting school.²²⁹
- Before 2018/19, children achieving a Good Level of Development had been steadily rising since 2012/13 (no earlier data).²³⁰

²²⁴ Prime Minister's Office. Break Down Barriers to Opportunity;

https://www.gov.uk/missions/opportunity#:~:text=This%20is%20an%20increase%20from%2067.7%25%20c urrently%2C%20and%20would%20mean%20an%20additional%2040%2C000%20to%2045%2C000%20chil dren%20a%20year%20hitting%20developmental%20goals.

²²⁵ Department for Education (2024) Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Handbook; November 2024. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6747436ba72d7eb7f348c08b/Early_years_foundation_stage_profile_handbook.pdf

²²⁶ Department for Education (2024) Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results, Academic Year 2023/24; Analysis by Centre for Young Lives. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results/2023-24

²²⁷ Ibid

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Department for Education (2021) Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results, Academic Year 2018/19; Analysis by Centre for Young Lives. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results/2018-19
²³⁰ Ibid.

 The current proportion of children not achieving a Good Level of Development (32.3%) is similar to levels recorded in 2013/14 – 2014/15.²³¹

Note here that we are comparing current data to a previous dataset published before EYFS reforms introduced in September 2021. As a result, it is not an entirely direct comparison to assessment outcomes published since 2021/22.

An Education Endowment Foundation report published in 2022 revealed a 13-percentage point difference between the proportion of children being school ready before and after the pandemic, highlighting the impact of the pandemic on the development of children under five.²³² A further study found that children aged 4-7 years old were 10 percentage points more likely to have seen their social and emotional development worsen when compared to 12-15-year-olds during the pandemic.²³³

A report by UNICEF revealed that children living in areas of higher levels of deprivation and child poverty have poorer outcomes across a range of health and developmental problems, including being less likely to reach a 'good level of development' or to have access to a childcare place. Their analysis found a strong correlation between deprivation and proportion of children reaching a GLD, with the most deprived areas being more than twice as far from meeting the Government's early years target when compared with the most affluent areas. Concerningly, UNICEF found that currently just four local authorities meet the Government's Early Years Milestone, two of which have exceptionally low numbers of children and therefore not statistically significant (City of London, Isles of Scilly).

Closer look: Who is more likely to not be achieving a Good Level of Development?²³⁷

Boys are less likely to achieve a Good Level of Development than girls.

• In 2023/24, 75% of girls achieved a GLD compared with only 60.7% of boys.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Tracey, L. et al (2022) The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children's Socio-Emotional Wellbeing and Attainment during the Reception Year'; Education Endowment Fund.

https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-childrens-socioemotional-well-being-and-attainment-during-the-reception-year

²³³ Cattan, S. et al (2023) Almost half of children saw their emotional sills worsen during the pandemic – and economic turbulence played a role; Institute for Fiscal Studies. https://ifs.org.uk/news/almost-half-children-saw-their-social-and-emotional-skills-worsen-during-pandemic-and-economic

²³⁴ Jenkins, S. (2025) Held Back from the Start: The Impact of Deprivation on Early Childhood; UNICEF UK. https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Embargoed-09.06.25-Held-Back-From-the-Start-UNICEF-UK-FINAL.pdf

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Department for Education (2024) Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results, Academic Year 2023/24; Generated Table. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/33873e05-7fc1-41e7-9d01-08ddb0dc3d3b

 Since 2021/22, girls achieving a GLD has risen by 3.1%, compared to only 2% for boys.

Children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) are less likely to achieve a Good Level of Development than those not eligible for FSM.

- In 2023/24, 51% of children eligible for FSM achieved a GLD, compared to 72% of those not eligible for FSM.
- Since 2021/22, the gap in the proportion of children eligible for FSM achieving a GLD, compared to their non-eligible peers, increased by 0.1 percentage points (pp), from 20.4pp to 20.5pp.

Children with SEND are less likely to achieve a GLD.

- In 2023/24, 24.9% of children with SEN Support achieved a GLD.
- For children with an EHCP, only 3.8% reached a GLD.

In 2023/24, the percentage of children achieving a GLD increased across all Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) deciles.

• However, the difference between the 10% most deprived areas and the 10% least deprived is 18.6pp, compared to a difference of 20.0pp in 2021/22.

Children from certain ethnic backgrounds are less likely to achieve a Good Level of Development.

- In 2023/24, only 35.4% of children from Gypsy, Roma and 35.3% of children from Irish Traveller communities were achieving a GLD.
- Children from Black/African/Caribbean background achieving a GLD was 7.8pp lower than the national average.

Children born in the Autumn Term are more likely to reach a Good Level of Development than in the Summer Term.

• In 2023/24, 75.6% of children born in the Autumn term reached a GLD, compared to only 60% of children born in the Summer Term.

There are also significant regional disparities in the proportion of children reaching a Good Level of Development.

 In 2023/24, 59.6% of children in Manchester achieved a GLD, compared to an average of 70% across Inner and Outer London Boroughs (above the national average).²³⁸

The longer-term impacts of not being 'school ready'.

The impacts of a child not reaching a good level of development can be long lasting and wide reaching. Good academic achievement, even in a child's first few

²³⁸ Department for Education (2024) EYFSP, Academic Year 2023/24; Generated Table. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/16ea95fc-31b9-4f4d-1829-08ddb31a2461

years, lays the foundation for later academic success, employment opportunities and psychosocial outcomes.²³⁹

- Over half of the children who were not school ready performed below expected in their Key Stage 1 reading assessment, compared to only 6% of children who were considered school ready performing below expected.²⁴⁰
- Children who are not school ready are nearly 2.5 times as likely to be persistently absent from school. This increases to three times when considering persistent absence over several academic years.²⁴¹
- Children starting school 'not school ready' are found to be three times as likely to be Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) at 16-17.²⁴²

Early Years Support

Access to high-quality childcare in the early years has been linked to improved impact on children's cognitive, social, emotional and health metrics, alongside their future wellbeing, resilience and self-esteem.²⁴³ ²⁴⁴ Similarly, evaluations of the impact of integrated family support delivered through Sure Start have formed a strong evidence base showing the benefit of early years support across a range of outcomes.²⁴⁵

However, early years provision faces significant challenges with closing nurseries and 'childcare deserts' becoming increasingly more common, especially in more deprived areas.

A recent report by UNICEF UK found that there are 50% more childcare places available per young child in the most affluent areas, when compared to the most deprived.²⁴⁶ They found that there were just 19 childcare places available for every 100 children under seven in the most deprived areas of England, compared with 31 for every 100 in

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²³⁹ Child of the North, Centre for Young Lives (2024) An evidence-based approach to supporting children in the preschool years; N8 Partnership; Health Equity North. https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/65b6b3c3bd2e7d160db2dbc0/66fec552d5159812bc01ff6d_Pre-School%20Report%20Digital.pdf

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Warburton, M. et al (2024) Risk of not being in employment, education or training (NEET) in late adolescence is signalled by school readiness measures at 4-5 years; BMC public health. 24, 1375. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-18851-w

²⁴³ Department for Education (2021) Study of Early Education and Development (SEED). https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/study-of-early-education-and-development-seed

²⁴⁴ Meluish, E., Gardiner, J. (2023) Equal Hours? The impact of hours spent in early years provision on children's outcomes at age five, by socio economic background; The Sutton Trust.

https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Equal-Hours.pdf

²⁴⁵ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2025) The short- and medium-term effects of Sure Start on children's outcomes. https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-05/IFS%20Report.%20The%20short-%20and%20medium-

term%20effects%20of%20Sure%20Start%20on%20children%E2%80%99s%20outcomes.pdf

²⁴⁶ Jenkins, S. (2025) Held Back from the Start: The Impact of Deprivation on Early Childhood; UNICEF UK. https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Embargoed-09.06.25-Held-Back-From-the-Start-UNICEF-UK-FINAL.pdf

the most affluent areas. Similarly, recent research from UCL found privately owned nurseries formed the biggest childcare provider group in more deprived areas, arguing that the monopolisation of nursery care leads to a lack of choice and availability for low-income families living in deprived areas.²⁴⁷

Similarly, cuts to health visiting have been linked to rising rates of babies in A&E. Babies under the age of one have the highest rate of A&E or Emergency Department attendance compared with any other group in the England. The Institute for Health Visiting suggest that this comes as a result of cuts to health visitors, suggesting that a large proportion of those attendances would have been avoidable with better early years provision in the community that included health visiting.²⁴⁸

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Children are identified as having a special educational need (SEN) if they have a learning difficulty or disability that requires special educational provision beyond the provision provided to most children of the same age. In 2021, it was estimated that almost a third (30%) of children were identified as having SEN at some point between the ages of 5 and 16.²⁴⁹

Children with SEN are vulnerable to missing out on learning, particularly in a school environment that may not have the capacity to provide sufficient support for a child to enjoy an inclusive education. More children are being identified with SEN, and many are requiring statutory support in the form of an education, health and care plan (EHC plan). This is putting pressure on local authorities to produce timely EHC plans, and on teachers to provide support for those pupils. Children with SEN are at risk of slipping through the gaps in the education system, as they are more likely to lose learning through exclusion, absence, and poor AP settings.

Over 1.7 million pupils in England have special educational needs.

²⁴⁷ Simon, A. et al (2025) Nursery Closures and Openings in England since 2018: Does ownership type matter; UCL Institute of Education.

https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10209993/1/JRF%20Nursery%20Closures%20and%20Openings_24.06. 2025.pdf

²⁴⁸ Institute for Health Visiting (2025) State of Health Visiting, UK survey report. https://ihv.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/State_of_Health_Visiting_Report_2024_FINAL_VERSION_22.01.25_compressed.pdf

²⁴⁹ Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024), A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for addressing the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) assessment and support crisis. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CotN_SEND-AP_Report_6.pdf

1,284,284 of these children do not have an EHC plan – the highest level of support (73%).²⁵⁰

Trends: How has the number of children with SEN changed over time?

- The number of children with SEN has increased by 34% since 2018/19, when there were just over 1.3 million children with SEN.²⁵¹
- The number of children with an EHC plan has increased by 90% since 2017/18,²⁵² and by 140% since 2015.²⁵³
- The number of children with SEN who are without an EHC plan has also increased but at a smaller rate, by 25% since 2017/18.²⁵⁴
- The number of children identified with autism has increased by 118% since 2017/18. The number of children receiving SEN support with no specialist assessment of type of need has increased by 47% over the same period.²⁵⁵
- The only SEN provision to decrease during this time are profound & multiple learning difficulty, other difficulty or disability, and moderate learning difficulty.²⁵⁶

Closer look: Who are the children with SEN?

- Almost half of children with identified SEN (46%) have either a speech, language and communications needs or social, emotional and mental health needs. 16% have autism.²⁵⁷
- 15% have either moderate, severe, or profound & multiple learning difficulty.²⁵⁸
- Of the children identified with SEN, 43.8% and 39.3% of children who have an EHC plan or SEN support, respectively, are also eligible for free school meals. In the general population, 25.7% of children are eligible. The

²⁵⁰ Department for Education (2025) Special educational needs in England. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/20892243-cf4a-46ab-4db7-08ddb873f6c0

²⁵¹ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2025) Pupils in all schools, by type of SEN provision. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/special-educational-needs-in-england/2024-25?subjectId=27403e26-aca1-4ef2-3b3f-08dd97c89364

²⁵² Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2025) Age and gender, by type of SEN provision and need. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/1aa99b26-ecc0-4fd8-3d6a-08ddae36ea5c

²⁵³ NAO (2024) Support for children and young people with special educational needs.

https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/support-for-children-and-young-people-with-special-educational-needs/

254 Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2025) Age and gender, by type of SEN provision and need. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/1aa99b26-ecc0-4fd8-3d6a-08ddae36ea5c

²⁵⁵ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2025) Special educational needs in England. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/b638e11a-d367-4ee0-a871-08ddb31391cd

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

- proportion of children identified with social, emotional and mental health needs and who are eligible for free school meals is particularly high, with almost half (47.6%) eligible.²⁵⁹
- While there is a roughly even distribution in the number of girls and boys who do not have SEN (52% for girls, 48% for boys), boys make up 71% of EHC plans, and 61% of SEN support. This suggests that girls are less likely to have SEN identified, and are less likely to receive higher level of support.²⁶⁰
- For most ethnicities, the proportion of children without SEN and those with SEN support is around the same.
- Black Caribbean and White and Black Caribbean children are slightly more likely to be identified with SEN.²⁶¹
- White British children are much more likely to be identified with SEN especially those with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. Three-quarters of children with SEMH are White British.²⁶²

Overview of the SEN system

For children who have an identified special educational need, there are two levels of support for their education. Children who need some extra support are usually provided with SEN support. For children with more complex needs, an EHC request can be made to the local authority, where the child is assessed for their needs. An EHC plan is a statutory document that outlines the provision and how education, health and care services will work together to meet the child's needs.²⁶³

While the number of EHC plans and SEN support have both increased, EHC plans have increased much more. This may be due to more children being identified with more complex needs, having better awareness of needs and support available, as well as financial incentives for schools that face strained budgets.²⁶⁴

The statutory deadline for producing an EHC plan is 20 weeks, which many local authorities do not meet, signifying the pressure on local authorities. Less than half (46%) of EHC plans were produced within 20 weeks in 2024, a drop from 60% in 2021

²⁵⁹ Department for Education (2025) Special educational needs in England. https://explore-educationstatistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/c58ad76f-4f52-4644-3d7e-08ddae36ea5c

²⁶⁰ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2025) Age and gender, by SEN. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/0659a401-12b0-49b1-1a38-

²⁶¹ Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2025) Special educational needs in England. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/c58ad76f-4f52-4644-3d7e-08ddae36ea5c

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ House of Commons (2025) Special Educational Needs: Support in England. https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07020/SN07020.pdf

²⁶⁴ IFS (2024) Spending on special educational needs in England: something has to change. https://ifs.org.uk/publications/spending-special-educational-needs-england-something-has-change

and from 50% the previous year. 7% of EHC plans were produced after a year of referral in 2024.²⁶⁵

Children and young people living in the most deprived areas are less likely to have an EHC plan than in the least deprived areas. This implies that there is possible rationing of resources and the threshold for EHC plans may be higher than other local authorities.²⁶⁶

Identifying SEN

Some children are more likely to be identified with SEN than others, by virtue of the school they attend. The EPI has found that the school a pupil attends has the largest contributing factor to whether a child is identified with SEN – more so than anything about the child as an individual, their experiences, or the local authority they live in. Schools account for two thirds of the total variation in primary and secondary SEN support and EHC plans.²⁶⁷

Children who attended primary schools in academies were less likely to be identified with SEN.²⁶⁸ Analysis from 2021 found that children with more severe needs and living in an area with few academy schools were ten times more likely to be identified with SEN.²⁶⁹ This suggests that children attending academies may have their needs overlooked, and a school's ability to identify a child who many need further support is key to ensuring those children can access an inclusive education. The Special Educational Consortium has also found that there are inconsistent approaches to SEN support across schools with many not meeting the needs of children.²⁷⁰

Summer-born children, who are the youngest in a school year, have an increased likelihood of being identified with SEN, but previous research suggests that this is mostly explained by the age difference itself that assessments may have failed to take into account.²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ EPI (2021) Identifying pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/identifying-send/

²⁶⁵ Department for Education, Education, health and care plans. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/fe38ebc2-0fc1-4be5-18a3-08ddb31a2461

²⁶⁶ Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024) A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for addressing the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) assessment and support crisis. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CotN_SEND-AP_Report_6.pdf

²⁶⁷ EPI (2025) Identifying SEND: Final Report on Special Educational Needs & Disabilities and contact with CAMHS. https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/SEND-Final-Report-version-FINAL-04.02.2024-2.pdf

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Special Educational Consortium (2025) The Special Educational Consortium's response to the 'Solving the SEND Crisis' Call for Evidence from the Education Select Committee.

 $[\]frac{https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/\%5BFINAL\%5D\%20SEC\%20response\%20to\%20ESC\%20CfE\%20Solving\%20the\%20SEND\%20Crisis.pdf$

²⁷¹ EPI (2025) Identifying SEND: Final Report on Special Educational Needs & Disabilities and contact with CAMHS. https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/SEND-Final-Report-version-FINAL-04.02.2024-2.pdf

Waiting lists for autism assessments

Autism is the most common type of need for those with an EHC plan, making up a third of EHC plans. ²⁷² The waiting list for receiving an autism assessment is large and has grown in recent years. In four years since the pandemic (April 2020 to April 2024), there has been a staggering 341% increase in the number of children waiting for an autism assessment. Of the 114,200 children waiting for an assessment in April 2024, 85% (96,945) have been waiting for at least 13 weeks. ²⁷³

In 2023, it was estimated that three-quarters of girls with autism may not have been identified as having autism. Boys are referred for a diagnostic assessment at a rate 10 times the rate for girls. These differences are likely due to awareness and diagnostic criteria of autism being based on boys, and girls' ability to often mask their autistic traits.²⁷⁴

Outcomes for children with SEN

Attainment

There is an attainment gap between children with SEN and without SEN. By the end of secondary school in 2023, the attainment gap is almost 2 years (22 months). This is even starker for children with EHC plans compared to those without SEN – in 2023, the attainment gap at the end of secondary school was 40 months, or 3 years 4 months. However, these gaps have shrunk in recent years – both are the lowest since analysis began in 2011.²⁷⁵

Children and young people with SEN are more likely to have further vulnerabilities such as living in poverty and being eligible for free school meals, with 42.2% of pupils with an EHC plan and 38.3% of pupils with SEN support being eligible for FSM compared to 21.4% of all pupils without SEN.²⁷⁶ For those young people who have both SEN and receive FSM, only 16% achieve Grade 4 or above in English and Maths, compared to 38% of those with SEN but no FSM.²⁷⁷

²⁷² Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2025) Year group, by type of SEN and type of need. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/7a9218f4-b7bd-4fc3-a877-08ddb31391cd

²⁷³ Centre for Young Lives analysis of NHS (2025) Autism Statistics, April 2024 to March 2025. https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/autism-statistics/april-2024-to-march-2025

²⁷⁴ Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024), A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for addressing the autism assessment and support crisis. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CoTN_Autism_Report_1.pdf

²⁷⁵ EPI (2024) Annual Report 2024: SEND. https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-send-2/

²⁷⁶ Department for Education (2024), Special educational needs in England. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england

²⁷⁷ Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024), A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for addressing the special educational needs and

Attendance

Children with SEN are over 3 times more likely to be suspended from school,²⁷⁸ and children with autism are excluded at twice the rate than children without SEN.²⁷⁹

The growing waiting times for autism assessments increases the risk of exclusion and poorer attainment. Evidence shows that when support is in place following a diagnosis, children and young people with autism are less likely to be excluded.²⁸⁰

Justice

Children with SEN are more likely to be involved in the justice system. Evidence from the MoJ and DfE shows that 80% of those who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence had ever been recorded as ever having SEN. Similarly, 87% of those cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence, had ever been recorded as having SEN. 95% of those whose offending had been prolific had ever been recorded as having SEN.²⁸¹

Wellbeing

Children with SEN are also more likely to experience challenges with their mental health. In 2021, over half (57%) of children with SEN faced challenges with their mental health, compared to 13% for those without SEN.²⁸² 4 in 5 young autistic people have a co-occurring mental health condition. People with autism also have a shorter life expectancy by up to 30 years.²⁸³

disabilities (SEND) assessment and support crisis. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CotN_SEND-AP_Report_6.pdf

²⁷⁸ Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024), A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for addressing the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) assessment and support crisis. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CotN_SEND-AP_Report_6.pdf

²⁷⁹ Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024), A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for addressing the autism assessment and support crisis. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CoTN_Autism_Report_1.pdf

²⁸⁰ Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024), A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for addressing the autism assessment and support crisis. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CoTN_Autism_Report_1.pdf

²⁸¹ Department for Education (2022), Education, children's social care and offending. Descriptive statistics. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6227a9b58fa8f526dcf89e17/Education_children_s_social_care_and_offending_descriptive_stats_FINAL.pdf

²⁸² Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024), A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for addressing the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) assessment and support crisis. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CotN_SEND-AP_Report_6.pdf

²⁸³ Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024), A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for addressing the autism assessment and support crisis. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CoTN_Autism_Report_1.pdf

Children with autism may face particular barriers, with less than half of autistic children feeling happy in school, and three quarters of parents saying their child's school place did not fully meet their needs.²⁸⁴

CHILDREN WITH PHYSICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Children and young people in the UK have some of the worst health outcomes in Europe when considering factors such as infant mortality, hospital admissions and mental health outcomes.²⁸⁵ Yet, children's health is often treated as an afterthought within the NHS. Despite accounting for over a quarter of the population, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has long warned of the systemic deprioritisation of children's health services.²⁸⁶

We welcome this Government's commitment to raising the happiest and healthiest generation ever in Britain, but there is a steep hill to climb. The Darzi Review of the NHS highlighted a number of specific challenges facing children's health and related services, including falling vaccine rates, increasing rates of child obesity, long waiting lists for accessing treatment and more children attending A&E. There are also persistent and growing health inequalities, especially linked to poverty and deprivation. In 2010, the Marmot Review highlighted that "health inequalities result from social inequalities", and recommended to give every child the best start in life as the highest priority.²⁸⁷

The three shifts central to the 10 Year Plan, in particular the focus on prevention and moving care into the communities are welcome ambitions for the future of our NHS. Investing in the health of children and young people is essential to driving a long-term shift towards prioritising prevention and should be a top priority for government as it implements and delivers on the 10 Year Plan.

Healthy behaviours

One in four young people aged 11 to 15, an estimated 878,000,²⁸⁸ vaped in 2023.

²⁸⁴ National Autistic Society (2021), School Report 2021. https://s2.chorus-mk.thirdlight.com/file/24/0HTGORW0HHJnx_c0HLZm0HWvpWc/NAS-Education-Report-2021-A4%20%281%29.pdf

²⁸⁵ RCPCH (2025) MP Briefing: Children's Health Debate. <a href="https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-07/MP_Briefing_Children%27s_Health_Debate_June2025.pdf#:~:text=RCPCH%20has%20long%20warned%20of%20the%20systemic%20deprioritisation,some%20of%20the%20worst%20health%20outcomes%20in%20Europe.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Michael Marmot et al. (2010) Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Marmot Review. https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report-pdf.pdf

²⁸⁸ Centre for Young Lives estimates based on Department for Education (2024) Schools, pupils and their characteristics. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/af76dbb0-07c1-

Over a third of young people aged 11 to 15, an estimated 1,299,000, have drank alcohol.²⁸⁹

Over one in 10 (11%) of pupils aged 11 to 15 have ever smoked.²⁹⁰

Almost 4 million children are not physically active for the recommended 60+ minutes a day, and 2.2 million children do not even get 30 minutes of activity a day.²⁹¹

8 in 10 (82%) of children aged 5 to 15 do not consume the recommended five daily portions of fruit and vegetables.²⁹²

In 2017, almost half (47%) of sexually active young people said they have had sex with someone new for the first time without a condom, and 1 in 10 have said they never used a condom.²⁹³

Trends: how have these behaviours changed over time?

- Smoking tobacco cigarettes, drinking, and taking drugs have all steadily decreased in recent years. In 2023, only 1% of young people aged 11 to 15 smoked regularly, compared to 2% in 2018 and 3% in 2016. The proportion of young people who ever had an alcoholic drink dropped from 44% in 2018 to 37% in 2023. Taking drugs has decreased from 24% in 2018 and 13% in 2023.
- Vaping has remained steady since 2018, where 25% of young people vaped. However, the prevalence among boys and girls has flipped in recent years; in 2018, 23% of girls and 27% of boys had ever vaped, but in 2023 it is now 27% of girls and 22% of boys. 9% of young people vape regularly 11% of girls and 7% of boys.

In 2024, the Government introduced the Tobacco and Vapes bill, which includes a provision to prohibit the sale of tobacco to people born on or after 1 January 2009 and provisions to control the advertising and promotion of tobacco and vapes including restrictions on flavours, packaging and display to make them less

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<u>43ec-18db-08ddb31a2461</u>; and NHS (2024) Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England. https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/smoking-drinking-and-drug-use-among-young-people-in-england

²⁸⁹ NHS (2024) Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England. https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/smoking-drinking-and-drug-use-among-young-people-in-england ²⁹⁰ Ihid.

²⁹¹ Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024) A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for supporting physical activity and healthy nutrition with and through education settings. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CoTN_Physical-Activity-Nutrition_Report_5.pdf

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Public Health England (2017) Campaign to protect young people from STIs by using condoms. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/campaign-to-protect-young-people-from-stis-by-using-condoms

appealing to children. This is part of the Government's ambition to create the first smoke-free generation.

Obesity and nutrition

2.5 million children and young people in England are affected by excess weight or obesity, with 1.2 million living with obesity-related complications.²⁹⁴

In 2023/24, almost a quarter (22%) of reception year children (aged 4-5) were overweight or obese.

36% of year 6 children (aged 10-11) were overweight or obese.²⁹⁵

Trends: How has this changed over time?

- The proportion of children aged 4-5 who are overweight is the same as in 2018/19, and has decreased from its peak of 28% in 2020/21.
- The proportion of children aged 10-11, while lower than the peak of 41% in 2020/21, is still higher than 2018/19 where 34% were overweight or obese.²⁹⁶

Closer look: Who are most likely to be affected by obesity?

- Children living in the most deprived areas were more than twice as likely to be living with obesity than those living in the least deprived areas
- Boys have a slightly higher rate of obesity than girls.²⁹⁷

Obesity affects many children, and it is estimated that 55% of children who were obese will continue to be obese into adolescence – which brings further health consequences and challenges.²⁹⁸

The UK Chief Medical Officer recommends that children and young people should engage in "moderate-to-vigorous physical activity" for an average of 60 minutes per day.

²⁹⁴ Lord Darzi (2024) Independent Investigation of the National Health Service in England.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66f42ae630536cb92748271f/Lord-Darzi-Independent-Investigation-of-the-National-Health-Service-in-England-Updated-25-September.pdf

²⁹⁵ Department of Health and Social Care (n.d.) Fingertips, Public health profiles. https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/search/obesity

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ NHS (2024) National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 school year. https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2023-24-school-year

²⁹⁸ Simmonds et al. (2016) Predicting adult obesity from childhood obesity: a systematic review and meta-analysis. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/obr.12334

Almost 4 million children do not achieve this.²⁹⁹ Children and young people from the most deprived backgrounds are more likely to be inactive, with only 44% reaching the recommended 60 daily minutes, compared to 47% of all children and 55% of those from the least deprived backgrounds.³⁰⁰

Diet and nutrition also play a key role in physical health. 4 in 5 children aged 5 to 15 do not consume enough fruit and vegetables, and children aged 4 to 10 are consuming almost double their recommended daily sugar limits.³⁰¹

With 2.4 million children living in 'food insecure' households,³⁰² meaning that the "quality, variety, and desirability of their diets" is limited, and for some their eating patterns are disrupted, it can be harder to eat healthily.³⁰³ Consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) is linked to a greater risk of becoming overweight or obese.³⁰⁴ UPF consumption has been shown to be higher in households with a higher level of food insecurity, with one piece of research finding the two to be "inextricably linked".³⁰⁵ The King's Fund writes that food poverty has resulted "in poor diets that lack essential nutrition", and these trends coincide with austerity measures.³⁰⁶

However, it is not just food insecure households that consume UPFs; on average, toddlers consume almost half (47%) and 7-year-olds consume 59% of their daily calorific intake from UPFs in the UK.³⁰⁷

Failing to address this early stores up problems for the future. Children with obesity are five times more likely to become adults with obesity than their peers, and those with a

²⁹⁹ Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024) A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for supporting physical activity and healthy nutrition with and through education settings. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CoTN_Physical-Activity-Nutrition_Report_5.pdf

Sport England (2023) Active Lives Children and Young People Survey. <u>Active Lives | Sport England</u>
 Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024) A country that works for all

child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024) A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for supporting physical activity and healthy nutrition with and through education settings. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CoTN_Physical-Activity-Nutrition Report 5.pdf

³⁰² Department for Work & Pensions (2024) Households Below Average Income: an analysis of the UK income distribution: FYE 1995 to FYE 2023. <u>Households Below Average Income</u>: an analysis of the UK income distribution: FYE 1995 to FYE 2023 - GOV.UK

³⁰³ Francis-Devine, B (2024) Who is experiencing food insecurity in the UK? https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/who-is-experiencing-food-insecurity-in-the-uk/

Chang K., et al. (2021) Association Between Childhood Consumption of Ultraprocessed Food and Adiposity Trajectories in the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children Birth Cohort
 Parnham, JC. Millett, C. Vamos, EP. (2023). School meals in the UK: ultra-processed, unequal and

³⁰⁶ The King's Fund (2025) Ten actions the government can take to improve children's health, https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/briefings/ten-actions-government-improve-childrens-

³⁰⁷ The King's Fund (2025) Improving children's health: the critical role of nutrition and the impact of ultra-processed foods, https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/blogs/improving-childrens-health-nutrition

high BMI (40%) more likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease in midlife.³⁰⁸ Diets containing UPFs are also linked to anxiety, depression, type 2 diabetes, and increase in cancer.³⁰⁹

Tooth decay

Almost 146,000 5-year-olds had any decay experience in 2022/23, accounting for over 1 in 5 (22%) of all-5 year-olds.³¹⁰

For the most deprived areas, this rises to one in three. For the least deprived, this falls to one in seven.

Trends: How has tooth decay changed over time?

- The percentage of 5-year-olds who have had any tooth decay experience has reduced by 1 percentage point since 2018/19.³¹¹
- In 2022/23, there were 30,600 hospital tooth extractions for children and young people aged 0 to 19, an increase from 14,600 in 2020/21, but a decrease from 37,400 in 2018/19.³¹²

Closer look: Who is affected by tooth decay?

- Boys are slightly more likely than girls to have had any decay experience (23.4% and 22% respectively).³¹³
- Children living in deprived areas are much more likely to have decay experience. In the most deprived quintile in England, almost a third (32.2%) of children have had any decay experience. In the most affluent quintile, this falls to about 1 in 7 (13.6%) -- an 18.6 percentage point difference.³¹⁴
- 15% of children have reported toothache, rising to 25% of children who are eligible for free school meals.³¹⁵

³⁰⁸ MedicalXpress (2023) How to stop obese children from having heart disease in adulthood.

³⁰⁹ The King's Fund (2025) Improving children's health: the critical role of nutrition and the impact of ultra-processed foods, https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/blogs/improving-childrens-health-nutrition

³¹⁰ Centre for Young Lives analysis of NHS (2022) Oral health survey of 5 year old children 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/oral-health-survey-of-5-year-old-schoolchildren-2024

³¹¹ NHS (2024) Oral health survey of 5 year old children 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/oral-health-survey-of-5-year-old-schoolchildren-2024

³¹² Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2025) Hospital tooth extractions in 0 to 19 year olds, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hospital-tooth-extractions-in-0-to-19-year-olds-2024/short-statistical-commentary-for-hospital-tooth-extractions-in-0-to-19-year-olds-2024#main-findings

³¹³ NHS (2024) Oral health survey of 5 year old children 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/oral-health-survey-of-5-year-old-schoolchildren-2024
³¹⁴ Ihid

³¹⁵ Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024) A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for improving children's oral health with and through education settings, https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CotN_Oral-Health_Report_8.pdf

- Gypsy/Irish Traveller and Roma children are most likely to experience decay, with 58.9% and 46.8% having decay respectively. Asian children are also more likely to experience decay, with 43.2% of Pakistani children in particular experiencing decay. 316
- Black Caribbean and Black African children are slightly less likely than average to experience decay (21.6% and 20.2% respectively). White British, White and Black Caribbean and White Irish are the least likely (17.7%, 17.4%) and 11.8% experiencing decay respectively).³¹⁷

Obesity, along with poor nutrition, can lead to tooth decay. The most common reason for a child aged 6-10 years being admitted to hospital is to have rotting teeth removed a condition that is entirely preventable. 318 Only 39% – less than two in five – children have good oral health.319

In 2023, the average waiting time for children to receive dental treatment under general anaesthetic was 80 weeks. Hospital admissions for decay-related tooth extractions in children cost the NHS £40.7 million.320

Children with health conditions

Living with a health condition and requiring treatment can be distressing for anyone, particularly for children and young people. Children with health conditions can be vulnerable for a range of reasons, that can relate to their particular health condition and to the treatment and management of it.

1 in 10 (11%) of children have a disability. 321

In 2022, 17% of children aged 0 to 15 had a longstanding illness, defined as any physical or mental health condition or illness lasting longer than 12 months.³²²

Over 33,000 children and young people have type 1 or type 2 diabetes in the year ending March 2025.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁶ NHS (2024) Oral health survey of 5 year old children 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/oralhealth-survey-of-5-year-old-schoolchildren-2024

³¹⁸ The King's Fund (2024) If prevention is better than cure then we need to prioritise children's health, https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/blogs/prevention-better-cure-need-prioritise-childrenshealth

³¹⁹ Child of the North, N8 Research Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024) A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for improving children's oral health with and through education settings, https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CotN_Oral-Health_Report_8.pdf 320 Ibid.

³²¹ House of Commons (2024) UK disability statistics: Prevalence and life experiences, https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9602/

³²² NHS Digital (2024) Health Survey for England, 2022 https://digital.nhs.uk/data-andinformation/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/2022-part-1/health-survey-for-england-2022part-1-data-tables

Trends: How has this changed over time?

- The number of children with 8 or more chronic conditions nearly doubled from 7.6% in 2012/13 to 14% in 2018/19.³²³
- The proportion of children with a longstanding illness has increased by 2 percentage points between 2018 and 2022.³²⁴
- 12% of children have a limiting longstanding illness, meaning that their longstanding illness reduces their ability to carry out day to day activities. This has increased by 4 percentage points between 2018 and 2022. 325
- The number of children receiving long-term ventilation more than doubled between 2013 and 2020.³²⁶

Closer look: Who is affected by health conditions?

- About 1.1 million children and young people live with asthma and it is one
 of the top 10 causes for emergency hospital admissions for children and
 young people.³²⁷
- While the prevalence of asthma is evenly distributed, children and young people who live in deprived areas are more likely to be emergency admitted to hospital for asthma.³²⁸
- In 2022, children aged 13-15 are particularly affected by longstanding illnesses, as over a quarter (28%) have a longstanding illness, and 1 in 5 (20%) have a limiting longstanding illness.³²⁹
- Almost 1 in 10 (9%) of children aged 0 to 15 had an acute sickness in the
 past two weeks that caused them to cut down on things they usually do.
 Children aged 11-12 are slightly more likely than other age groups to have
 an acute sickness, with 13% affected.³³⁰

326 Lord Darzi (2024) Independent Investigation of the National Health Service in England.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66f42ae630536cb92748271f/Lord-Darzi-Independent-Investigation-of-the-National-Health-Service-in-England-Updated-25-September.pdf

³²³ Lord Darzi (2024) Independent Investigation of the National Health Service in England. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66f42ae630536cb92748271f/Lord-Darzi-Independent-Investigation-of-the-National-Health-Service-in-England-Updated-25-September.pdf

³²⁴ NHS Digital (2024) Health Survey for England, 2022. https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/2022-part-1/health-survey-for-england-2022-part-1-data-tables

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁷ RCPCH (2021) Asthma. https://stateofchildhealth.rcpch.ac.uk/evidence/long-term-conditions/asthma/
³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ NHS Digital (2024) Health Survey for England, 2022. https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-survey-for-england/2022-part-1/health-survey-for-england-2022-part-1-data-tables

³³⁰ Ibid.

Children who require hospital treatment

Nearly 2.6 million children aged 0-4 attend the emergency department every year.³³¹

Trends: how has this changed over time?

 Over the past decade, A&E attendances for 0-4 year-olds has risen by 42%.³³²

Closer look: Why are children going to A&E?

- The most common presenting conditions for 0-4 year-olds attending the emergency department are: coughs and colds, tonsilitis, sickness and diarrhoea, and bronchiolitis or nothing found to be wrong.³³³
- Five causes make up 90% of unintentional injury hospital admissions: choking, suffocation and strangulation; falls; poisoning; burns and scalds; and drowning.³³⁴

In recent years, with worsening nutrition and reduced physical exercise, children's physical health has been deteriorating. While the NHS strains under pressure, children and young people are requiring emergency services more and more.

The King's Fund reported that during conversations with professionals, many highlighted that the health service considers children in narrow terms of a clinical speciality and set of services, rather than as a population group with unique challenges. This is backed by paediatrics not being a requirement of doctors' training at foundation level, and only 25% of GPs receiving paediatric training. Lord Darzi's review of the NHS highlights that a centralisation pf paediatric surgery to specialist

³³¹ Institute of Health Visiting (2023) Understanding the rise in 0-4-year-old Emergency Department (ED) attendances and changing health visiting practice. https://ihv.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Understanding-the-rise-in-0-4-year-old-Emergency-Department-ED-attendances-and-changing-health-visiting-practice-FINAL-VERSION-18.12.23.pdf
³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid.

Office for Health Improvement & Disparities (2021) Early years high impact area 5: Improving health literacy, managing minor illnesses and reducing accidents.

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/commissioning-of-public-health-services-for-children/early-years-high-impact-area-5-improving-health-literacy-managing-minor-illnesses-and-reducing-accidents

³³⁵ The King's Fund (2024) If prevention is better than cure then we need to prioritise children's health. https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/blogs/prevention-better-cure-need-prioritise-childrens-health

centres during the pandemic has led to some surgeons feeling less confident to operate on children.³³⁶

Children and young people's health spending is under resourced compared to adults. While children and young people make up for a quarter of the population, only 11% of NHS expenditure goes towards them.³³⁷

In the absence of accessible support, families with young children are treating A&E as a first port of call more and more. Under 1-year-olds are the highest users of A&E, and in London there are 908 attendances per 1,000 infants. Over the past decade, A&E attendances for 0-4 -ear-olds has risen by 42%, and short stay emergency admissions for infants rose by a third.³³⁸

Hospitals are under immense pressure to meet demand. Paediatric intensive care unit beds are regularly over 90% occupied, and the length of stay is also increasing, leading to cancellations of planned procedures. Almost half a million children aged 3 to 17 waited more than four hours in A&E, and 225,000 waited for more than six hours.

There is evidence that prevention of diseases has reduced. Darzi's review highlighted that childhood vaccination rates have been declining since 2013-14.³⁴¹ 16.1% of children who turned 5 by March 2024 had not received both doses of the MMR vaccine, and 11.1% who turned 2 had not had the first dose.³⁴²

Child mortality

Every child death is a tragedy. Child deaths are more likely to occur within the 27 days of a child's life, often as a result of sudden or unexplained infant death. Certain factors such as ethnicity and levels of deprivation can impact the risk of child mortality.

Beyond the first 28 days, the leading causes of death among children are due to health conditions or physical problems that a child is born with, such as birth defects or

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³³⁶ Lord Darzi (2024) Independent Investigation of the National Health Service in England. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66f42ae630536cb92748271f/Lord-Darzi-Independent-Investigation-of-the-National-Health-Service-in-England-Updated-25-September.pdf ³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Institute of Health Visiting (2023) Understanding the rise in 0-4-year-old Emergency Department (ED) attendances and changing health visiting practice. https://ihv.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Understanding-the-rise-in-0-4-year-old-Emergency-Department-ED-attendances-and-changing-health-visiting-practice-FINAL-VERSION-18.12.23.pdf

³³⁹ Lord Darzi (2024) Independent Investigation of the National Health Service in England. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66f42ae630536cb92748271f/Lord-Darzi-Independent-Investigation-of-the-National-Health-Service-in-England-Updated-25-September.pdf ³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴² RCPCH (2024) Paediatricians concerned by yet another annual decline in childhood vaccination coverage. www.rcpch.ac.uk/news-events/news/paediatricians-concerned-yet-another-annual-decline-childhood-vaccination-coverage

genetic conditions, making up 20% of deaths. This is followed by cancer, which was the cause of 16% of child deaths in 2023.³⁴³

In the year ending 31st March 2024, there were 3,577 child deaths (ages 0 to 17). 1,512 of these deaths occurred within the first 27 days of a child's life.³⁴⁴

The UK has one of the highest rates of asthma deaths among 10-24-year-olds in Europe.³⁴⁵

Trends: How has this changed over time?

 The number of child deaths has increased by 5% since 2020 but decreased by 4% since 2023.³⁴⁶

Closer look: Who is most affected?

- The child mortality rate was highest for children of Black or Black British ethnicities (a rate of 55.4 per 100,000 population) and Asian or Asian British (46.8 per 100,000 population), compared to the national rate of 29.8.³⁴⁷
- The child mortality rate was more than double in the most deprived quintile compared to the least deprived (42.9 and 17.2 respectively).³⁴⁸
- 61% of all child deaths were of babies under 1 year old. For all infants, the infant death rate is 3.9 deaths per 1,000 live births. It is lower for infants who were born at 24 weeks or over, at 2.7.³⁴⁹

Teenage Conceptions

In 2022, conception rates rose to 17.6 per 1,000 for girls aged 16-17, and 2.2 per 1,000 for girls aged under 16. 350

https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/childhodinfantandperinatalmortalityinenglandandwales/2023

https://cy.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/conceptionandfertilityrates/bulletins/conceptionstatistics/2022#:~:text=The%20conception%20rates%20rose%20to%202.2%20per%201%2C000,rates%20have%20remained%20below%20pre-coronavirus%20%28COVID-

19%29%20pandemic%20levels. For Conceptions for England and Wales 2022, this dataset represents the most recent data available.

³⁴³ ONS (2023) Child and infant mortality in England and Wales: 2023.

³⁴⁴ National Child Mortality Database (2024) Child Death Review Data Release: Year ending 31 March 2024. https://www.ncmd.info/publications/child-death-review-data-release-2024/

³⁴⁵ RCPCH (2021) Asthma. https://stateofchildhealth.rcpch.ac.uk/evidence/long-term-conditions/asthma/

³⁴⁶ National Child Mortality Database (2024) Child Death Review Data Release: Year ending 31 March 2024. https://www.ncmd.info/publications/child-death-review-data-release-2024/

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid

³⁵⁰ Office of National Statistics (2025) Conceptions in England and Wales: 2022.

Trends: How has this changed over time?

- Despite remaining lower than pre-pandemic levels, continuing an overall downwards trend, the rate of teenage conceptions rose in 2022.
- Prior to COVID-19, there had been a long-term decreasing trend in conception rates among those aged under 18 years.³⁵¹
- In 2019, there were 19.8 conceptions per 1,000 aged 16-17 and 2.5 conceptions per 1,000 aged under 16 years old.
- This fell again in 2020, with 16.2 per 1,000 aged 16-17 and 2.1 per 1,000 for under 16-year-olds.

CHILDREN WITH POOR MENTAL HEALTH

There is a profound crisis in children and young people's mental health in England. The proportion of children with poor mental health has risen considerably in recent years and has been exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic. However, the NHS does not have capacity to support all children and young people who face challenges with their mental health and is only able to support around 40% of those in need.³⁵²

1 in 5 (20.3%) of children and young people aged 8-16 had a common mental health condition in 2023.³⁵³

1 in 4 (25.8%) of 16-24-year-olds had a common mental health condition in 2023, rising from 17.5% in 2007.³⁵⁴

Trends: How has this number changed over time?

Rates of probable mental health problems have risen dramatically over the last decade.

- Rates of probable mental health problems in children and young people doubled from 1 in 10 to 1 in 5 between 2017 and 2023.
- Suicide is the main cause of death in young people under the age of 35 in the UK.

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³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Centre for Mental Health, Centre for Young Lives, Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, Prudence Trust and Young Minds (2025) Future Minds: Why investing in children's mental health will unlock economic growth. https://cypmhc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Future-Minds-Report-2025-WEB.pdf
³⁵³ NHS England (2023) One in five children and young people had a probable mental health disorder in 2023. https://www.england.nhs.uk/2023/11/one-in-five-children-and-young-people-had-a-probable-mental-disorder-in-2023/

³⁵⁴ NHS England (2025) Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, England 2023/24. https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/adult-psychiatric-morbidity-survey/survey-of-mental-health-and-wellbeing-england-2023-24

Closer look: Who is most affected?

Girls are more likely than boys to have a Common Mental Health disorder as they get older, however boys and young men are more likely to die by suicide:

- In 2023, 1,840 young people under the age of 35 died by suicide, around three quarters of those were boys and young men.³⁵⁵
- Among 8-16-year-olds, rates of probable mental health problems were similar for boys and girls, while for 17-25-year-olds, rates were twice as high for young women compared to young men.³⁵⁶
- Rates of hospital admissions for girls as a result of self-harm (ages 10-24) rose by 40% between 2010 and 2021, while the admissions rate for boys decreased by 22%.³⁵⁷
- Eating disorders were identified in 12.5% of 17-19-year-olds with girls four times more likely to have an eating disorder (20.8%) than boys (5.1%) in 2023.³⁵⁸

There are more children and young people being admitted to acute medical wards for mental health reasons in England:

- There was a 65% increase in the number of acute hospitalisations of 5-18 between 2012 and 2022.³⁵⁹ This is in comparison to a 10.1% increase in all cause admissions in the same time period.
- This includes a 112.8% increase among young girls aged 11-15.
- Admissions for eating disorders saw a 514% increase.

Children living in poverty were more likely to experience a mental health problem:

 Of the 8-16-year-olds with a probable mental disorder in 2023, 15.3% lived in a household that could not afford to buy food or had to use a food bank, compared with 3.5% of those unlikely to have a mental disorder.³⁶⁰

Mental Health Services

Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) were introduced to create a joined-up approach to health and wellbeing – however, children and young people are often treated as an afterthought. Mental health funding is not ring-fenced, so the allocation of budgets sits

³⁵⁵ Papyrus (n.d.) Latest Statistics; Article. https://www.papyrus-uk.org/latest-statistics/

³⁵⁶ NHS England (2023) One in five children and young people had a probable mental health disorder in 2023. https://www.england.nhs.uk/2023/11/one-in-five-children-and-young-people-had-a-probable-mental-disorder-in-2023/

³⁵⁷ Nuffield Trust (2025) Hospital admissions as a result of self-harm in children and young people; Nuffield Trust Quality Watch. https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/hospital-admissions-as-a-result-of-self-harm-in-children-and-young-people

³⁵⁹ Ward, Joseph L et al. (2025) Admission to acute medical wards for mental health concerns among children and young people in England from 2012 to 2022: a cohort study; The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health. 9 (2): 112 – 120. 0.1016/S2352-4642(24)00333-X

at a local level with ICBs. Centre for Young Lives research through FOI data requests found that less than 1 in 10 of the NHS's ICBs in England have a dedicated strategy for children and young people's mental health, and none of the ICBs examined had identified children's mental health as one of the key priorities. Moreover, ICBs and Mental Health Trusts are spending less than 20% of their commissioning budget on non-specialist, community-based mental health services for children and young people. ³⁶¹

Despite the current epidemic of poor mental health, there continues to be a lack of prioritisation and investment into tackling the crisis. The RCPCH found that even though children and young people make up 30% of the demand for mental health provision, only 8% of mental health spending is allocated to children and young people. While we welcome the 10 Year Plan's focus on a move to neighbourhood health models and prevention, recent cost-cutting requirements on Integrated Care Boards are likely to create difficult financial contexts in which these new plans will be delivered.

Waiting lists

The number of children on waiting lists for support for their mental health – and the length of time children have to wait to be seen – has increased dramatically in recent years. In June 2024, 80% of the 500,000 people who had been waiting for over a year for community services were children and young people.³⁶³

The increase in demand for children's mental health services outstrips the increase in demand for adults'

Less than half (47%) of the 1.4 million children with a mental health disorder had at least one contact with CYMPHS.³⁶⁴ Boys waited longer than girls for their second contact with the NHS, waiting on average 46 days compared to girls' 29 days.³⁶⁵

This wait further escalates challenges that children face, with over three-quarters of parents saying their child's mental health deteriorated while waiting for CYPMHS.³⁶⁶

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³⁶¹ Centre for Young Lives (2025) Growing Up Well: Ambitious for the future of Children and Young People's Mental Health Support. https://www.centreforyounglives.org.uk/news-centre/growing-up-well-report

³⁶² RCPCH (2024) From left behind to leading the way: a blueprint for transforming child health services in England. https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-09/rcpch_child_heath_blueprint_2024.pdf

³⁶³ Lord Darzi (2024) Independent Investigation of the National Health Service in England.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66f42ae630536cb92748271f/Lord-Darzi-Independent-Investigation-of-the-National-Health-Service-in-England-Updated-25-September.pdf

³⁶⁴ Child of the North, N8 Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024) A country that works for all children and young people: Improving mental health and wellbeing with and through education settings. https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CoTN_Mental-health_Report_3.pdf
³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

Outcomes

Children and young people with unmet mental health needs are more likely to have poor academic outcomes, poor health, and more likely to abuse drugs, self-harm, or attempt suicide. These challenges can persist into adulthood, with half of mental health conditions in adulthood starting by the age of 14.³⁶⁷

Children facing challenges with their mental health are more likely to experience sleep problems, which are further associated with depression, anxiety, and behavioural problems.³⁶⁸

Poor mental health can also have great impacts on children's education. NHS data shows that children with a probable mental health condition are more than seven times more likely to miss more than 15 days of school than those unlikely to have one.³⁶⁹

The economic cost of childhood mental health problems is astronomical, estimated to £1 trillion in lost earnings across the generation.³⁷⁰

CHILDREN FROM VULNERABLE MIGRANT BACKGROUNDS

7,380 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK as of March 2024.

There are an estimated 722,000 children affected by no recourse to public funds in the UK.³⁷¹

Trends: How have the statistics changed over time?

 There were 7,380 looked after unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in year ending March 2024, a 45% increase from 2020. This may be partly due to the number of forcibly displaced people globally is at record high, at 123.2 million at the end of 2024, an increase of 7 million since the previous year.³⁷²

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ NHS Digital (2023). Mental Health of Children and Young People in England - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey. Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey - NHS England Digital

³⁷⁰ Centre for Mental Health, Centre for Young Lives, Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition, Prudence Trust and Young Minds (2025) Future Minds: Why investing in children's mental health will unlock economic growth. https://cypmhc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Future-Minds-Report-2025-WEB.pdf ³⁷¹ Whitaker-Yilmaz J and Mort L (2025) Every child is equal: Bridging the childcare gap for families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), IPPR and Praxis. https://every.child.is.equal: Bridging the childcare gap for families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) | IPPR

³⁷² UNHCR (2025) Global Trends. https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends Accessed: 30.06.2025

• 5,051 children granted asylum in year ending March 2023, a 64% increase on the previous year and almost identical to the figure in 2019 when 5,055 were granted asylum. This is an 111% increase on year ending March 2014.

Closer look: Who is most affected?

- 96% of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children were boys, in comparison to 2020 when 90% were boys.
- UASC are also usually older, with only 11% aged under 16 years.
- 40% of UASC are from 'other ethnic groups', including from the Middle East and North Africa. A quarter were of Black or Black British ethnicity, and another quarter were Asian or Asian British.³⁷³

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children face unique and often acute vulnerabilities, shaped by the dual challenges of seeking asylum and being separated from their families. The reasons driving their forced migration, such as violence, persecution or extreme poverty, can have a profound and detrimental impact to children's wellbeing and development. Many have faced traumatic experiences and lost relationships to family and friends. They may feel isolated in a country with a different language and culture.³⁷⁴

There is a lack of comprehensive data on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. A global review found that unaccompanied children face physical health challenges, including nutritional deficiencies, dental caries, infections, as well as mental health challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety. They often lack protective child experiences such as belonging, relationships and appropriate accommodation.³⁷⁵

Asylum-seeking children are vulnerable to exploitation. The NSPCC highlights children coming from an area with poverty, war, or low education levels as a risk factor for child

³⁷³ Department for Education (2024) Children looked after in England including adoptions. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2024

³⁷⁴ Ott, E. and O'Higgins, A. (2019) Conceptualising educational provision for unaccompanied asylumseeking children in England. Oxford Review of Education. 45 (4): 556-572. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2019.1607274

³⁷⁵ Maioli et al. (2021) International migration of unaccompanied minors: trends, health risks, and legal protection. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(21)00194-2/fulltext#sec-3

trafficking.³⁷⁶ The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who have been trafficked is unknown.³⁷⁷

Impacts on education

Refugee and asylum-seeking children can also face barriers to accessing education, and further barriers once they are in the classroom. Refugee children can face long delays in accessing school places, particularly at secondary school. Once in school, children with English as an Additional Language can face challenges in accessing learning. The EPI found that there is a considerable gap in attainment between unaccompanied asylum-seeking pupils and non-migrant children of over three years (37.4 months) at GCSE level – which is a similar size gap for pupils with severe special educational needs and disabilities. The service of the

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are also more likely to be suspended, with a rate of 7.1% compared to non-migrant children's rate of 5.2%. 380

Children who are more supported have better attainment. Resettled refugee children and asylum-seeking children living with family members financially supported by the government have a smaller attainment gap of a year and a half (17.3 months).³⁸¹

Children of migrant parents

People who move to the UK from abroad may not be eligible for benefits. Those who have been granted leave to remain may be subject to a 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) condition, meaning they cannot claim benefits listed as public funds. This includes universal credit, child benefit, housing benefit, and disability living allowance for children. In England, all parents of three and four year olds are entitled to 15 hours of funded care, but an additional 15 hours are conditional on income and immigration status. Migrant parents affected by the NRPF condition are often excluded from extra childcare support, regardless of income or whether their child is a British citizen. In the support of the excluded from extra childcare support, regardless of income or whether their child is a British citizen.

³⁸² CPAG (2025) No recourse to public funds, person subject to immigration control and benefit entitlement. https://cpag.org.uk/welfare-rights/benefits-scotland/more-info/benefits-migrants-factsheets/no-recourse-public-funds

³⁷⁶ NSPCC (2024) Protecting children from trafficking and modern slavery. https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-trafficking-and-modern-slavery#article-top

³⁷⁷ Research in practice (2022) Hidden and unheard: unaccompanied and separated migrant children who become trafficked in the UK — An evidence briefing. https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/2790_TCE_MSHT_full_briefing_52pp_v2.pdf

³⁷⁸ EPI (2023) What Impact will the Nationality and Borders Act have on the educational outcomes of refugee and migrant pupils? https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/EPI_PHF_Impact-of-the-NABA_summarypaper_Apr23_-1.pdf

³⁷⁹ EPI (2021) The educational outcomes of refugee and asylum-seeking children in England. https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Refugee_asylum_working_paper_-EPI.pdf ³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸³ Whitaker-Yilmaz J and Mort L (2025) Every child is equal: Bridging the childcare gap for families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), IPPR and Praxis. http://www.ippr.org/publications/every-child-is-equal

Research by IPPR and Praxis has found that this lack of access to childcare impacts migrant parents' working hours and income – particularly concerning as migrant parents rely only on income and do not have access to public funds, such as child benefits.³⁸⁴

This can have detrimental downstream effects on children of migrant parents. A survey found that about half of parents affected by no recourse to public funds (NRPF) were concerned that their children were missing out on opportunities available to other children. Children of migrant households are more likely to face poverty, with around one third of children living in deepest poverty from migrant households. Their unequal access to early education and care can magnify this disadvantage.³⁸⁵

384 Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Since the Children's Commissioner's final Vulnerability Index in 2021, the state of childhood vulnerability has changed significantly, a change that is likely to have been driven by both the Covid pandemic and the cost of living crisis. Many of our public services are struggling to cope with the scale of demand.

There are now more than 4.5 million children living in poverty. Growing up in poverty touches so many parts of a child's life, and its ripple effects can be felt in so many other measures of vulnerability in this report.

Particularly stark is the mental health crisis, which, while steadily growing in the 2010s, has reached unprecedented levels with significant knock-on impacts for young people's futures. However, other wider health conditions like obesity, poor oral health and nutrition have started to fall slightly.

In schools, we are still seeing a significant increase since 2020 in the number of children missing from education, and there remains a school attendance crisis. Suspensions, permanent exclusions, and use of alternative provision have all risen sharply since 2018 and a small but growing population are increasingly educating their children from home.

Since 2020, more children have been identified as children in need, and slightly more are experiencing neglect or abuse. Despite this, fewer children are on child protection plans.

Despite a recent fall, more children are looked after by the state compared to in 2018, with a growing number placed in unregistered or illegal children's homes since 2021. There has also been a rise in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children living in England.

Reports of children being victims of violence have increased since 2022. However, fewer children are entering the youth justice system for the first time, though the reoffending rate has also increased.

Many of our public services are struggling or in crisis mode, too often reaching children too late, when intervention can only be costly and ineffectual. National and local services are still often failing to work together to wrap around the same child, and systems for support can be confusing, hard to engage with, and distrusted.

The Government's commitment to breaking down the barriers to opportunity is welcome, and extra investment into some of these services following the Spending Review should shape some improvement. However, too many remain unsure where to target resources, and thresholds for help remain too high.

To address a complex social issue, we must first be able to understand the scale and nature of the challenge. It was on this principle that the previous Children's

Commissioner's Vulnerability Index was first established. This paper provides a snapshot of childhood vulnerability but is only a small first step towards providing a unified measure of childhood vulnerability.

We want to see the establishment of a new data dashboard on childhood vulnerability of the scale of the Children's Commissioner's Vulnerability Index published in 2021. We also want to see central government departments make use of a single unified definition of childhood vulnerability, considering the same datasets and providing joined-up solutions to the challenges facing children and young people. Both are a crucial part of targeting help where it is needed most and ensuring more children are both protected from harm and supported to succeed.

