



STATE of the NATION

Identifying Vulnerable Children and Young People and Supporting Them to Thrive

July 2025

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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.

- 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-sugar-products-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-most-need>

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

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. They 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

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-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>

¹⁷⁹ IPPR (2024) Who is Losing Learning? https://ippr-org.files.svdcdn.com/production/Downloads/Who_is_losing_learning_Sept24_2024-09-06-103617_euht.pdf?dm=1728042357

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 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

¹⁸⁰ 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>

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>

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Centre for Young Lives (2024) Too Skint for School: Breaking the link between poverty and attendance. <https://www.centreforyounglives.org.uk/news-centre/centre-for-young-lives-report-warns-poverty-and->

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.

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

[hardship-are-preventing-some-children-from-attending-school-amid-big-increases-in-persistent-and-severe-absence-among-children-receiving-free-school-meals](#)

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

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. [Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England, Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

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
- 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

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/young-peoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneetable1>

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

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/>

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
- 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

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.

²³¹ Ibid.

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.²³⁴ 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.²³⁵ 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).²³⁶

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.
- 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.

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 skills 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>

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

- 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

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

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

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

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>

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 sharp some improvement. However, too many remain unsure where to target resources, and thresholds for help remain too high.