



Institute for  
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The  
Difference

# WHO IS LOSING LEARNING?

THE CASE FOR REDUCING  
EXCLUSIONS ACROSS  
MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

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# FOREWORD

The statistics in this report on school exclusions suggests we have lost sight of what we should care about the most: the wellbeing and success of those children who experience hardship of one form or another. For too long as a system we've considered the needs of these young people last rather than first. Young people have one chance at a good education and if we are to improve their attainment and their life chances, we must reduce exclusions of all kinds. Whether out of class, out of school or away from their peers, young people are missing out on opportunities to prosper.

Many teachers and school leaders are stepping towards this challenge, and innovating in their classrooms and communities. But too often they are doing this against the tide of the incentives around them, without the professional development and practice sharing they most need or at a remove from the services they need most to collaborate with.

In the months ahead, I am proud to be chairing a council of advisors drawn across education and civil society to hear from these teachers, their students and their families and to build together a response to the shocking picture in this report. We will advise on the way forward to ensure the children who we should care about the most get more of what they need from the schools that serve them.



**Pepe Di'Iasio**

**ASCL general secretary and chair of the  
Council for Solutions to Who is Losing Learning**

# SUMMARY

**We must address the alarming numbers of children losing learning.** Schools cannot give children the opportunities they deserve if they are not in lessons. Lost learning is a risk to education standards and a loss of potential. And there is a stark social injustice in who is affected: the children losing the most learning are those facing the greatest challenges in their lives.

Alongside the social case there is a clear economic case to redress this problem in England's schools. As more children lose more learning, mainstream schools increasingly struggle to provide the support that these children need to catch up and stay on track. When opportunities for early intervention are missed, or services don't exist, children go unsupported and their needs escalate. Despite the best endeavours of families and schools, learning is disrupted further. This leads to a growing rate of children flowing into the special and alternative provision (AP) sector. And despite increases in funding, councils are at risk of going bankrupt, in part due to the unprecedented reduction in the use of mainstream schools. Meanwhile, the impact of permanent exclusion casts a lifelong shadow on the potential of children affected, and a lifelong cost to the exchequer due to reduced earnings, unemployment and involvement in violence and crime.

It is possible to change this story.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE LOSING LEARNING?

We are for the first time providing a full definition of 'losing learning' that schools, councils, and policy makers can use to encapsulate the scale of this crisis. In this report, 'lost learning' refers to the academic and social education missed by children when they are out of class, out of school, or moved out of their local community setting. Our 'exclusions continuum' identifies the formal and informal ways in which children lose learning. From modes we can all identify with, such as absence or permanent exclusion, to lesser researched experiences, such as off-site direction and internal truancy. The gaps in public data tracking children with these experiences and – in some cases – basic markers of safety and quality can make it challenging to see the full extent to which children are losing learning. For example, it is hard to monitor the level of lost learning across elective home education (which is on the rise) and in the independent and non-maintained special school sector. The continuum provides a new common language to begin to identify, discuss and start to address this corrosive issue.

**This report explores the rising tide of lost learning.** We introduce an 'exclusions continuum' that brings together different datasets and presents an overview of the rising prevalence of children losing learning, whether through absence, suspension, internal exclusion or the 11 other types of lost learning we have identified.

The exclusions continuum sheds light on types of lost learning currently invisible in the official data. This includes the following.

- **Up to the Easter holidays, we estimate there has been a rise of over 20 per cent in suspensions and exclusions compared to the same time in the previous year.**

- **32 million days of learning lost to suspension and unauthorised absence** in 2022/23 (latest national data) – up from 19 million pre-pandemic (2018/19).
- **95 per cent of secondary schools concerned about internal truancy** (where children arrive at school but don't attend lessons). Half of secondary teachers surveyed believe this to be an even bigger challenge than absence from school, according to analysis provided by Teacher Tapp for this report.
- **Nearly one in five schools using part-time timetables** to adjust for children struggling with school, according to the same Teacher Tapp survey.

**There is a social case for supporting mainstream schools to reduce the prevalence of lost learning.** Across the continuum – from less to more severe forms of exclusion – we see that children facing the most challenges in their lives are disproportionately more likely to be losing learning. New data for this report shows that these inequities are also reflected in the allocation of negative 'behaviour points' in schools. Specifically, we find that across different types of exclusion, lost learning is disproportionately experienced by the following.

- **Children growing up in poverty:** Have behaviour points which are twice as high as their peers – one of the early signs of struggle. Those eligible for free school meals were nearly five times more likely to be permanently excluded than their non eligible peers in 2022/23.
- **Children in contact with social services:** Children on child protection plans are permanently excluded at eight times, and severely absent from school at over five times, the national rate.
- **Children with special educational needs:** Children with special educational needs receive, on average, twice as many behaviour points as their peers, according to ImpactEd Evaluation's analysis. Those with special educational needs, but without an education, health and care plan (EHCP), are over five times more likely to be permanently excluded than their non SEN peers.
- **Children facing a mental health crisis:** Two in three children educated in alternative provision have mental health needs so acute that they are recognised as a special educational need. Children with mental health needs are over-represented in these schools, at 17 times the rate they appear in the general population.
- **Children experiencing racism:** Children with Black Caribbean or Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller heritage disproportionately experience permanent exclusion, managed moves and suspension. They are also more likely than the national average to be in alternative provision; with those with Black Caribbean heritage by a factor of 2.5; with Romani (Gypsy) and Roma heritage a factor of 4; Irish Traveller heritage a factor of 3; and children with mixed Black and white heritage by a factor of 2.5.

**Councils are spending increasing amounts on educating children outside mainstream schools, where quality and safety is less guaranteed.** While we know that many special and alternative provision schools deliver quality provision, this is often in spite of the system, not because of it. Too often children are let down by an under-regulated, unappreciated, and overworked sector. This report reveals the following.

- **Money flowing away from state-funded placements into private-run alternatives:** There has been a 56 per cent rise in children leaving state-run provision for privately-run provision paid for by the state (2018/19 to 2023/24). In addition, the average cost of private provision can be double the cost of a placement in a state setting. Costs have been known to soar to £111,000 a year per child.
- **Money flowing away from schools serving more disadvantaged cohorts:** Poorer children are twice as likely to be in an alternative provision school than in an expensive special school which is paid for but not run by the state. The funding

they will receive from their council will be less than a third (£18,000 compared with £58,500).

- **Low quality provision in non-state-run alternatives:** Children in registered alternative provision not run by the state are almost three times more likely to be in provision of poor or unknown quality than the national average.
- **Rising numbers of children in unregistered alternative provision:** There has been a 49 per cent rise (2018/19 to 2022/23) in children educated in unregistered alternative provision where quality and safety cannot be known.
- **Unsustainable cost to local authorities:** According to recent research, local authorities exceeded their high needs budget by a cumulative £890 million in 2023/24 and half said they could be insolvent by 2025–27.

**This report sets out a strong economic case to invest in reducing escalations of lost learning.** We draw together evidence suggesting that reducing exclusions across the continuum could reduce the following.

- **The cost to the state.** New analysis for this report by Pro Bono Economics finds at least £170,000 lifetime costs per child directly associated with permanent exclusion, made up of extra education and youth justice costs, alongside reduced earnings and raised unemployment.
- **Youth violence.** Existing Ministry of Justice data shows how periods of absence and suspension from mainstream school pre-date first offending and serious violent offences. This suggests that there are opportunities for intervention while the child is still in a mainstream school.
- **The attainment gap.** The poorest children are losing the most learning, making up, for instance, over half (55 per cent) of suspensions.
- **Youth unemployment.** There are overwhelmingly poor outcomes for excluded children, with over half of children not entered for maths and English GCSEs in alternative provision schools and fewer than five per cent gaining a standard pass.

The new government has already shown serious intent to get to grips with some challenges presented in this report. Mandatory local authority registers of children not on school rolls, youth hubs to address violence, a restructuring of the Department for Education to bring special educational need and alternative provision into the school's remit, and the introduction of free breakfast clubs in every primary school have all been promised. But they face strong headwinds: in the changed relationships between families and schools post-pandemic; and in the disruption that a decade of austerity has brought to bear on children's lives, in rising rates of child poverty and stripped-back support by cash-strapped local government.

Central government must now go further to tackle the injustices across the exclusions continuum. To reduce lost learning and pressure on council spend, mainstream schools must be better equipped to support children with a wider range of needs. A new Who is Losing Learning Solutions Council will respond to the analysis in this report in spring 2025. Hearing evidence from school leaders, parents and organisations working with children losing learning, the council will identify promising work currently happening in pockets across the country and advise on how this ought to be translated into national policy solutions across the next two parliaments.



# GLOSSARY

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<b>Alternative provision (AP)</b>	All educational provision outside of mainstream and special educational needs schools. This includes state-maintained pupil referral units as well as independent and non-registered schools.
<b>Children in need (CIN)</b>	Children in need refers to children interacting with social services but excludes those on a child protection plan and children that are looked after.
<b>Child protection plan (CPP)</b>	A plan drawn up by social care services to protect a child who they feel is suffering or is likely to suffer from significant harm.
<b>Classroom removal</b>	When a child is removed from class.
<b>Education, health and care plan (EHCP)</b>	An education, health and care plan (EHCP) sets out the provision required for a child with educational needs or disabilities.
<b>Elective home education</b>	Where a child is educated at home – or at home and with support from an additional provider – rather than being educated at a school full-time. Some parents make the free choice to home educate but others do so because they feel their child’s needs are not being met at school. These figures are reported to central government by local authorities from 2022.
<b>Ethnicity</b>	A group that shares a common and distinctive culture, religion, language, history, traditions, and sometimes a common genetic heritage.
<b>Flexi-schooling</b>	A medium- to longer-term agreement where a child attends fixed days or sessions in school rather than full time. They are home educated for the rest of their week.
<b>Free school meals (FSM)</b>	A child may qualify for free school meals when their family receives certain benefits, asylum support or has no recourse to public funds. Schools with higher proportions of FSM-eligibility serve more disadvantaged communities.
<b>Internal exclusion</b>	When a school removes a child from their typical learning environment into a different designated space within the school. Internal exclusion is often used as a sanction and/or as an alternative to suspension. The spaces may be referred to as isolation or behaviour units.
<b>Internal truancy</b>	When a child attends school but is unsupervised and does not attend lessons.
<b>Lateness to lessons</b>	When a child attends a lesson after the normal start time and misses some learning.

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<b>Looked after child (LAC)</b>	A child who is formally under the care of the local authority (also known as a 'child in care').
<b>Managed move</b>	When a child is removed from the roll of their current school and transferred to a new school. This may be a mainstream school, or a pupil referral unit.
<b>Off-rolling</b>	When a child is removed from the roll of a school without using a permanent exclusion.
<b>Off-site alternative provision</b>	A school can direct a child off-site for their education to improve their behaviour, or for any other reason, for a period of time.
<b>Part-time timetables</b>	When a child does not attend school for a full day.
<b>Permanent exclusion</b>	When a child is no longer allowed to attend a school in response to a serious breach or persistent breaches of the school's behaviour policy. This may also take place where allowing the child to remain in school would seriously harm the education or welfare of that child or others.
<b>Persistent absence</b>	When a child misses 10 per cent of the school year.
<b>Pupil referral unit (PRU)</b>	A type of alternative provision, maintained by the local authority.
<b>Social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH)</b>	A type of special educational need and disability.
<b>Special educational needs and disabilities (SEN)</b>	A legal term referring to a child with a learning difficulty or disability which calls for education provision that is additional to, or different from provision made generally available for other children of the same age.
<b>SEN support</b>	School-identified special educational needs support. Mainstream schools are required to use their best endeavours to secure the special educational provision required.
<b>Severe absence</b>	When a child misses 50 per cent or more of the school year.
<b>Suspension</b>	When a child is sent home for a period of time, up to a maximum of 45 days in a school year.
<b>Unregulated alternative provision</b>	Alternative provision in settings which are not schools or colleges and are therefore not subject to a national registration scheme or the national inspection framework.

# 1. A NEW EPIDEMIC OF CHILDREN LOSING LEARNING

Children are losing learning at record rates. During the pandemic, there was great concern over lost learning: children were unable to access classrooms, learn in person with qualified teachers, be supported to study for qualifications, and interact with their peers. Post-pandemic, schools reopened to all students, but children are struggling in greater numbers to access that learning.

It can be easy to feel overwhelmed by what appear to be disparate challenges: sky-high persistent absenteeism and suspensions; concern over off-rolling or time spent in isolation; newly-named challenges like ‘emotionally-based school avoidance’; truancy from lessons; and increased demand for in-house alternative or special educational needs provision – all alongside a teacher retention crisis. This chapter will put these disparate challenges into a continuum of escalating lost learning. The following chapter will draw together commonalities in *who* is losing learning to see a pattern emerge: children struggling the most outside the school gates are increasingly struggling to learn inside school. They are functionally excluded.

## EXCLUSION AS A CONTINUUM

Exclusion from school happens in multiple forms. There are permanent exclusions (where children are told to leave their school and become the responsibility of the local authority) and suspensions (where children are sent home for a fixed period). We can think of these as ‘accountable’ exclusions because they are formal statutory processes, which are recorded and published in national datasets.

We know, however, that exclusion happens in many other forms. Some exclusions are directed by schools, while others can be a form of self-exclusion often directed by children themselves, and at times their families.

Any cause which prevents a child from being in the classroom or where they are withdrawn from their mainstream school community, can be seen as a form of exclusion. This is a radical re-conception that brings together every child who misses out on their right to an education because they are not in class, in school, or they have been moved out of their local community setting. Only by focusing on solutions that encompass the whole continuum of exclusion will we fully realise the potential of all children. Therefore, reference to exclusion throughout this report will be with this wider definition across the continuum in mind.

We use the term ‘**exclusions continuum**’ to refer to traditional ‘**accountable**’ forms of exclusion (permanent exclusions and suspensions), including examples of self-exclusion (severe and persistent absence) through to ‘**unaccountable**’ forms (such as internal exclusions, managed moves between schools, internal truancy or internal isolation) which are not included in national datasets, and very often are not subject to a formal reporting process.

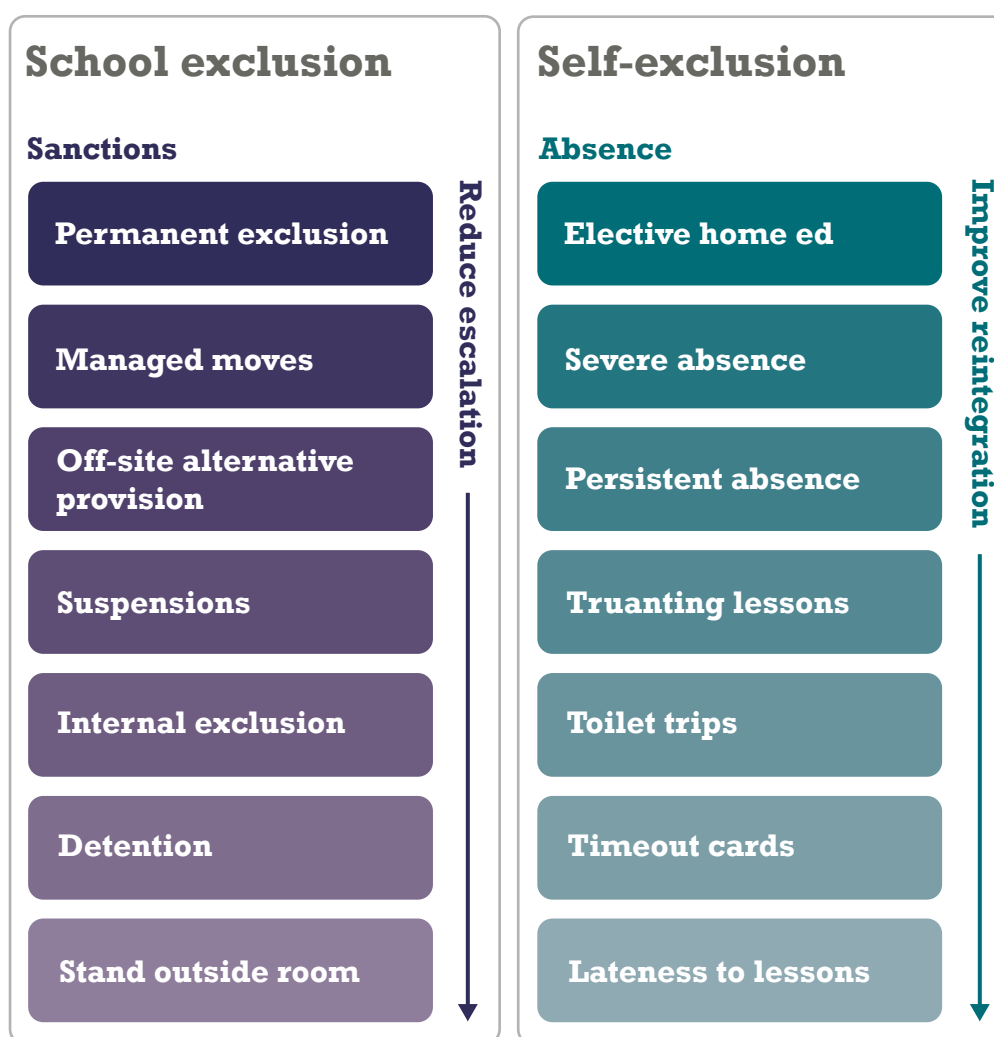
It is important that we engage purposefully with all forms of exclusion across the continuum for three reasons.

1. Less severe and less accountable forms of exclusion are often precursors to later exclusions (for example, Timpson 2019, Social Finance UK 2020).
2. Some forms of exclusion are used as direct alternatives to accountable forms of exclusion. For example, many schools use internal exclusion as an alternative to suspension, and managed moves (agreed transfers between schools) are widely recognised as an alternative to permanent exclusion, whether between mainstream schools or into alternative provision.
3. All forms of exclusion can involve children losing learning, engagement and a sense of belonging.

Only when we look across the continuum – and crucially at the quality of education and learning outcomes – can we get a full picture of *who* is losing learning, the true scale of the challenge, and the windows of opportunity to change the trajectory for individual learners.

**FIGURE 1.1**

The exclusions continuum



Source: The Difference (unpublished)

The exclusions continuum was developed by The Difference school leadership charity to help school leaders make connections between headline ‘accountable’ exclusion experiences and the exclusion experiences that sit below them, which can often precede and feed them.

### **CASE STUDY: ENSURING HIGHER LEVELS OF ACCOUNTABILITY FOR A WIDER RANGE OF EXCLUSION**

“It’s a really simple thing. We’ve just put focus in centrally to make [different forms of lost learning] visible” says Tom Draper, Head of Inclusion at Ark Schools, of the new weekly ‘B-D dashboard’.

Tom was introduced to the exclusions continuum through The Difference’s inclusive leadership course. The dashboard he’s referring to collates trust-wide data on children educated off-site in alternative provision, or dual-registered in an alternative provision school (attendance codes ‘B’ and ‘D’). Previously, there was less visibility of these types of absence/exclusion, hampering a full view of inclusion.

Tom says, “it helped us identify some training issues on correct coding, and then exposed a few things we wanted to look into further.” Through the regular practice of review at a network and regional level, the ‘B-D dashboard’ has seen this type of exclusion reduce, in some cases dramatically. “In one school we went down from 48 to eight children dual registered,” says Tom.

Each type of exclusion on the continuum has its part to play in a school’s approach to behaviour. Sanction exclusions, such as suspensions and permanent exclusions, can be used sensitively to ensure that schools are safe and supportive places to learn for all children. By focusing on reducing repeat exclusions and escalations up the continuum, and attempting to reintegrate students who have experienced each exclusion, schools can support earlier recognition of need and intervention.

### **INTERNAL ALTERNATIVE PROVISION – SUPPORT OR SANCTION?**

Schools are increasingly responding to rising needs by setting up provision on site to support students at risk of exclusion and/or those with persistent absence. This provision has a host of names within schools and is beginning to be defined in policy terms as ‘internal alternative provision’. It is worth noting that, among the widely varied practice in this area, some forms of internal alternative provision can be a form of exclusion as defined above. However, the strongest practice in this area supports exclusion prevention by including a diagnosis of needs, curriculum and/or emotional intervention, and support with reintegration into mainstream classes. For this reason, internal alternative provision is not included in the exclusions continuum.

## **HOW MANY CHILDREN ARE LOSING LEARNING?**

### ***Out of school: suspended or absent***

The numbers of children known to be missing school has continued to rise dramatically post-pandemic – the equivalent of 32 million days of lost learning through unauthorised absence and suspension in the 2022/23 academic year, compared to 19 million days in the last complete year before the pandemic (authors’ analysis of Department for Education datasets: DfE 2024r, DfE 2024s).

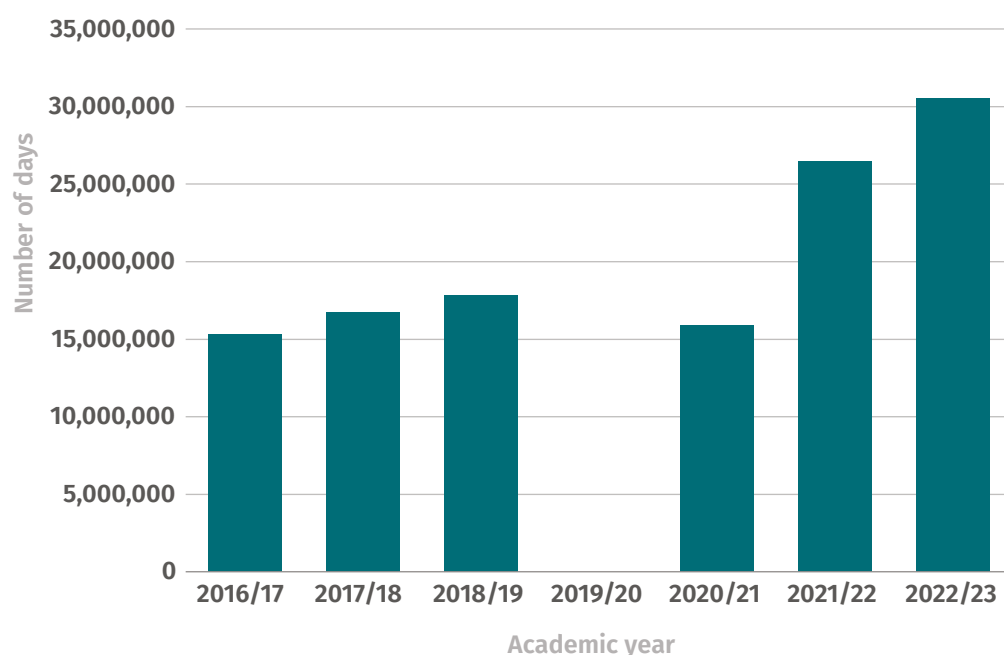
Persistent absence continues to affect more than one in five pupils (DfE 2024b). Meanwhile, the number of children missing more than 50 per cent of schooling has become so acute that a new category – severe absence – has been created. This refers to when a child misses 50 per cent or more of their schooling. In the 2022/23 academic year, over 150,000 children lost learning through severe absence (DfE 2024j). Research with parents suggests children’s mental ill health, special educational needs and poverty are key drivers in absence (Burtonshaw and Dorrell 2023).

Over one and a half million days of learning were lost through suspensions in 2022/23 (DfE 2024a), compared to 900,000 in 2018/19. New data suggests that for the past academic year records will be broken again. Though exclusion and suspensions data from national government is lagged and published a year later, analysis in this report by FFT Education Datalab of a live sample of schools suggests rises in autumn and spring term 2023/24. This predicts an overall exclusion and suspension rate<sup>1</sup> hitting 7.8 per cent for all year groups and 17.0 per cent for secondary-age children – equivalent to nearly one in five secondary school children. This new estimate predicts that exclusions rose by over 20 per cent between 2022/23 and the most recent academic year.<sup>2</sup>

**FIGURE 1.2**

**Days lost to unauthorised absence**

*Number of days lost to unauthorised absence (gap in government data for the 2019/20 academic year)*



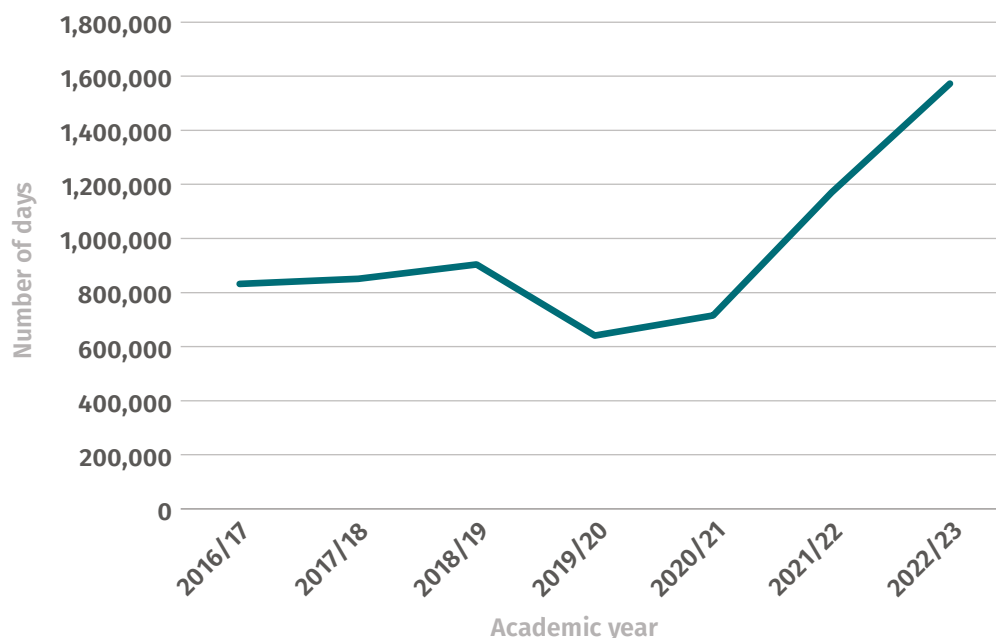
Source: Authors’ analysis of Department for Education absence data, 2018/19 to 2022/23 (DfE 2024b). Data unavailable for 2019/20.

- 1 Suspension and exclusions ‘rates’ refer to the way the Department for Education describe the prevalence of suspensions and exclusions. This is calculated by taking the number of suspensions or exclusions, dividing it by the number of pupils, and multiplying it by 100. This gives a ‘rate’ per 100 pupils. This is not the same as the number of children who have experienced suspension or exclusion, as a single child may experience multiple suspensions or exclusions.
- 2 Department for Education data is lagged, showing 2022/23 as the latest available data. This new estimate provided by FFT Education Datalab of a live sample of schools’ attendance for spring and autumn terms in 2023/24 predicts an overall exclusion and suspension rate hitting 7.8 per cent for all year groups and 17.0 per cent for secondary-age year groups. National figures for the same period in 2022/23 were 6.4 per cent and 14.3 per cent respectively.

**FIGURE 1.3**

**Sharp rise in suspensions post-pandemic**

*Trend of the total number of days lost to suspensions from 2016/17 to 2022/23*



Source: Authors' analysis of Department for Education data (DfE 2024f)

***Inside school: suspended or absent***

We cannot track how many children may be experiencing alternatives to suspension (such as internal isolation) or absence (such as skipping lessons) inside school. However, new survey data carried out by Teacher Tapp analysed for this report gives us an indication that the latter is high. Ninety-five per cent of secondary schools reported grappling with internal truancy (not attending lessons when in school). Nearly half of secondary school teachers said that this was a bigger challenge than external truancy. Schools are increasingly making substantial adaptations to traditional schooling in an effort to reduce absence and exclusion. A large proportion of schools have, or are in the process of establishing, internal alternative provision for children who are at risk of exclusion or persistent absence, according to forthcoming research (NFER and The Difference, unpublished). And nearly one in five schools (18 per cent) are providing flexi-schooling, according to the same Teacher Tapp survey.

***Leaving school rolls altogether***

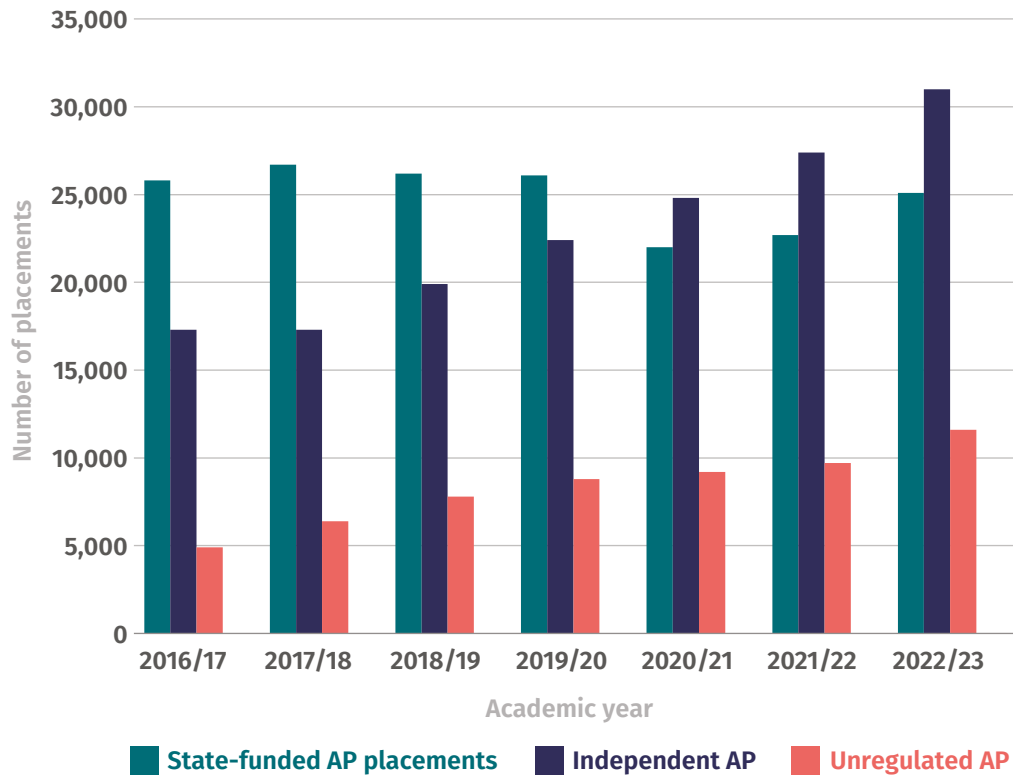
The numbers of children leaving mainstream school rolls have risen worryingly post-pandemic, with permanent exclusions at record high rates (see table 1.1).

Despite this rise, fewer children are educated in state-run alternative provision (pupil referral units and alternative provision academies) than they were pre-pandemic (see figure 1.4). Many of these schools had places de-commissioned by local authorities through lockdown, when exclusions were low. This may have been restricting councils' choices when commissioning places, pushing them towards commissioning in the non-maintained sector (see chapter 3). We know the lack of available places is also leaving many vulnerable children on waiting lists, with limited or no education provision (Hill 2023).

**FIGURE 1.4**

**Increased reliance on private alternative provision providers**

*Steadily growing number of placements in independent and/or unregulated alternative providers*



Source: Authors' presentation of data from Ofsted and Care Quality Commission 2024<sup>3</sup>

Many more children are entering alternative provision schools not run by the state. There has been a 56 per cent rise (2018/19 to 2022/23) in children – and their funding – leaving state-run schools for regulated independent provision, paid for by the state (DfE 2024g). With more children whose special educational needs are deemed beyond the capacity of mainstream schools, and limited places in state-run provision, many local authorities are paying for costly privately-run provision without a guarantee of educational standards (Isos Partnership 2024, Booth 2023, Evans and Newlan 2024). Between the academic years 2018/19 and 2022/23, there has been a 49 per cent rise in children educated in unregistered alternative provision. This is concerning given the lack of regulation and oversight for these placements and the vulnerability of the population (Ofsted and Care Quality Commission 2024).

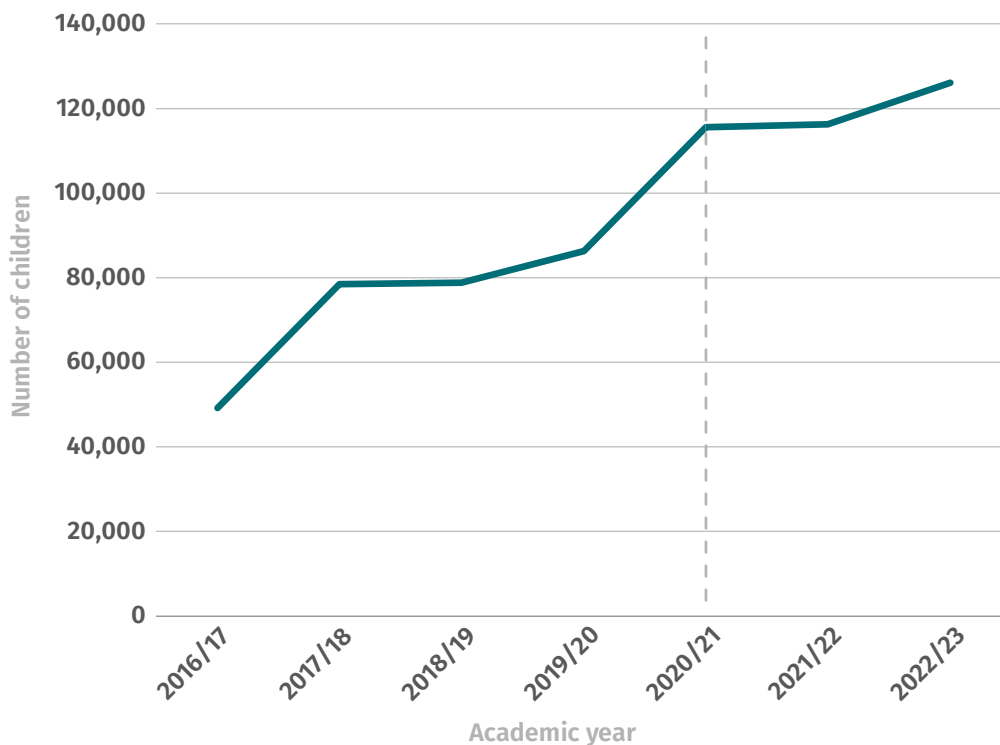
3 Raw data was shared by Ofsted with the authors for this report to allow rise calculation.



**FIGURE 1.5**

**Rise of elective home education**

Consistent rise in the numbers of children being home educated since 2016/17<sup>4</sup>



Source: Authors' analysis of ADCS 2021, DfE 2024h

There has also been a 60 per cent rise post-pandemic (2018/19 to 2022/23) in families choosing to remove children from mainstream schools for home education (DfE 2024i, ADCS 2019). This may be part of a growing challenge of a breakdown in school-family relationships post-pandemic (Whittaker 2024). In both academic years 2021/22 and 2022/23 (latest available data), the majority of children electively home educated through the year did not begin the year home educated – in other words they left the roll of a mainstream school (ibid). New government data shows 70 per cent of those home educated in the autumn term 2023/24 were of secondary school age, with children most likely to be home educated in the year of their GCSEs (authors' analysis of DfE 2024i). 'Unknown' was the most common reason recorded for home education (40 per cent), followed by 'philosophical reasons' (16 per cent) and 'mental health' (13 per cent) (ibid).

*"In my borough, the number of children being home educated has tripled. I am meeting families whose child's anxiety is sky high, and they can't manage attending anymore. It is forced home education really. These are families trying to avoid getting fined, many living in poverty, desperate for more help, which I am not able to give them in my role."*

Home education advisor, London borough with high levels of deprivation

4 Utilising ADCS data from 2016/17 to 2020/21 and DfE data from 2021/22 onwards, when it commenced publication of this dataset.

### **CASE STUDY: SEREN'S STORY OF EMOTIONALLY-BASED SCHOOL AVOIDANCE**

Seren is a year 10 pupil with a diagnosis of autism and a history of high attainment. She has never had an education, health and care plan (EHCP), as her school advised it wasn't necessary, given her academic success.

But Seren is no longer in school. She is one of the growing number of children exhibiting 'emotionally-based school avoidance' (EBSA) post-pandemic.

This began long before the pandemic in year 3, but escalated in secondary school. Seren increasingly struggled to get into school or to stay in lessons. While she achieved well academically, she found the school environment overwhelming. In difficult classes, Seren scratched open wounds to give herself relief.

School provided respite in an internal unit when needed. This safe haven and the trusting relationships she found there helped her to attend 80 per cent of her classes.

In year 10, the school restricted access to and eventually closed the in-school support unit. As a result, Seren's wellbeing deteriorated and her attendance plummeted to 25 per cent. She spent the majority of her time in bed, and self-harm and suicidal ideation escalated. Her GP diagnosed anxiety disorder and depression but explained that a referral to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) would be pointless due to the waiting times and Seren's lack of immediate suicide risk meaning she would not pass the threshold for support.

Due to school being a source of distress, Seren stopped attending altogether. Her parents felt they had to prioritise her mental health. Seren is still without any provision, while her two younger siblings maintain near perfect attendance. Her parents have tried to find suitable provision, but have been let down by the local authority who felt there was "insufficient evidence of need". Seren worries about her future but still hopes she'll one day study for the science degree that's been her long-held ambition.

**TABLE 1.1****Prevalence across the exclusions continuum**

The following table shows the prevalence of different kinds of exclusion. Where this data is not officially recorded, estimates are drawn from referenced research

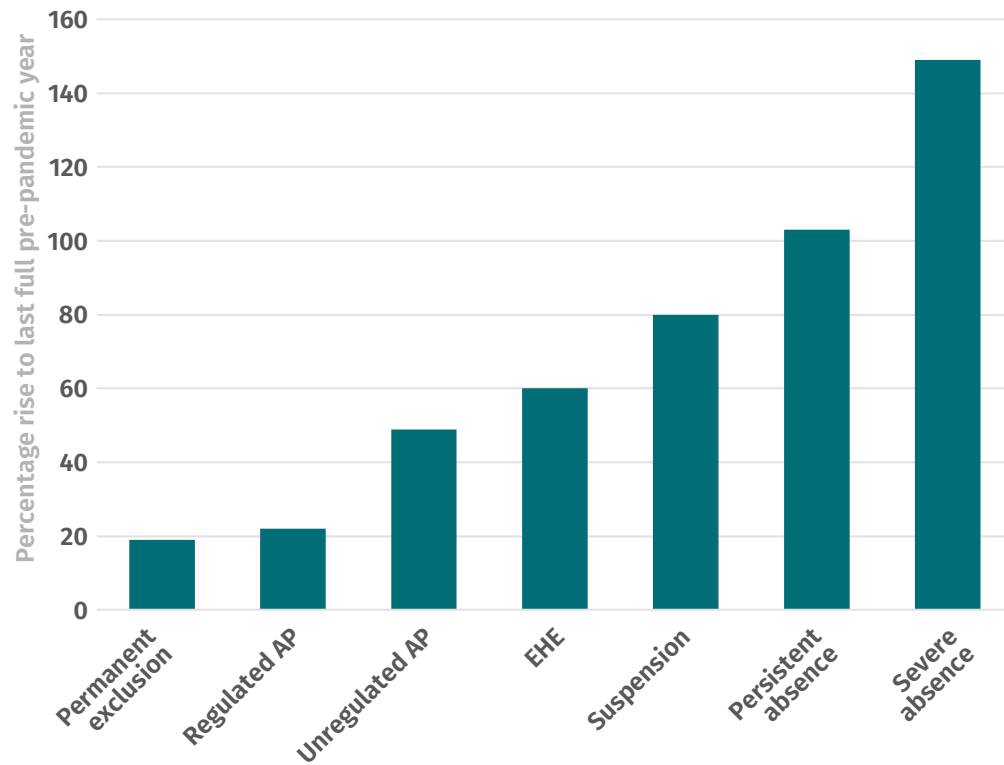
Exclusions continuum	
School exclusion	Self-exclusion
<p><b>Disappearing from the school roll</b> 19,000 disappeared entirely from rolls – we don't know where they are (Thomson 2024d).</p>	<p><b>Elective home education</b> 126,100 children were home educated at some point in the year (DfE 2024c).</p>
<p><b>Permanent exclusion</b> 9,376 children (DfE 2024a)</p>	<p><b>Severe absence</b> 150,256 children missing half the school year (DfE 2024j)</p>
<p><b>Alternative provision</b> 25,100 placements in state-run APs 31,000 in regulated private APs 11,600 in unregulated private APs (Ofsted and Care Quality Commission 2024)</p>	<p><b>Persistent absence</b> 1,569,303 children missing the equivalent of one day a fortnight (DfE 2024j)</p>
<p><b>Suspension</b> 304,040 children sent home from school (DfE 2024a)</p>	<p><b>Internal truancy</b> 95 per cent of secondary schools surveyed by Teacher Tapp said internal truancy is a challenge in their school. One in three staff surveyed said this was a bigger issue than off-site truancy.</p>
<p><b>Managed moves and unexplained school transfers</b> 30,600 secondary pupils experienced an unexplained school transfer during the 2018/19 academic year. These transfers were not due to a child moving area. (Crenna-Jennings and Hutchinson 2024)</p>	<p><b>Part-time timetables</b> 34,000 pupils are estimated to be on part-time timetables (Thomson 2023a)</p>
<p><b>Internal isolation</b> Unknown</p>	<p><b>Flexi-schooling</b> 18 per cent of schools surveyed by Teacher Tapp are using flexi-schooling.</p>

Sources: References in table, all 2022/23 data unless specified otherwise

**FIGURE 1.6**

**Percentage rise post-pandemic**

Percentage rise from 2018/19 to 2022/23



Sources: Authors' analysis of DfE 2024a, 2024b, 2024h, Ofsted and Care Quality Commission 2024

## 2. WHO IS LOSING LEARNING?

The impact of lost learning is not experienced equally. Poorer children, children known to social services, those with special educational needs and mental ill health, and children from certain ethnic backgrounds disproportionately experience exclusion across the continuum. This leads to some of the children who stand to benefit most from schools receiving the least teaching. Yet teaching is the best lever schools have to improve pupil attainment, particularly for the most disadvantaged (EEF 2021).

This chapter examines the disparities that are evident across the exclusions continuum and acknowledges the key nuances in the debate. For example, not all the challenges children face beyond the classroom are visible in the data or to schools and those more visible challenges (such as having an education, health and care plan [EHCP]) can be protective factors against permanent exclusion. Plus, we can also consider early forms of exclusions as a powerful early warning system to help us support children with unseen challenges before it is too late.

### WHO IS STRUGGLING TO FEEL SAFE AND WELL IN SCHOOL?

New analysis of approximately 150 school partners by ImpactEd Evaluation showed which groups of children are more likely to struggle with a lower sense of school membership, sense of safety, and wellbeing. This found that children eligible for pupil premium (a proxy of poverty in schools) have the lowest sense of school membership, while children with special educational needs had the lowest sense of safety, and female pupils had the lowest wellbeing. Low senses of safety, wellbeing and belonging were also associated with higher levels of both school absence and suspension.

### WHO IS MOST LIKELY TO BE LOSING LEARNING?

Children from all communities and backgrounds are impacted by exclusions across the continuum, but not all groups experience lost learning equally. The link between vulnerability, marginalisation, discrimination and permanent exclusion has been long established (Gill et al 2017). Now new data from ImpactEd Evaluation shows us that this link extends right across the exclusions continuum into the children with the highest behaviour points, who may be most likely to be sent out of class (see table 2.1).

## LOOKING BENEATH BEHAVIOURAL CHALLENGES

The most common reason for both suspensions and permanent exclusions is persistently disruptive behaviour. For nearly half of all suspensions and over a third of permanent exclusions, this is cited as the primary reason (DfE 2024a). Other reasons include verbally and physically abusive behaviours (ibid).

School leaders need sanctions to maintain boundaries and safety in school. However, understanding what may be prompting undesirable behaviours at school is key to reducing them. Strong demographic patterns in who experiences sanction exclusions at school (alongside other types of exclusion) suggest children's health, happiness and safety are drivers of undesirable behaviours across schools. Earlier experiences of losing learning are predictive of later lost learning, looking beneath suspensions on the exclusions continuum can give us a window into which children might be supported earlier.

### **Poverty**

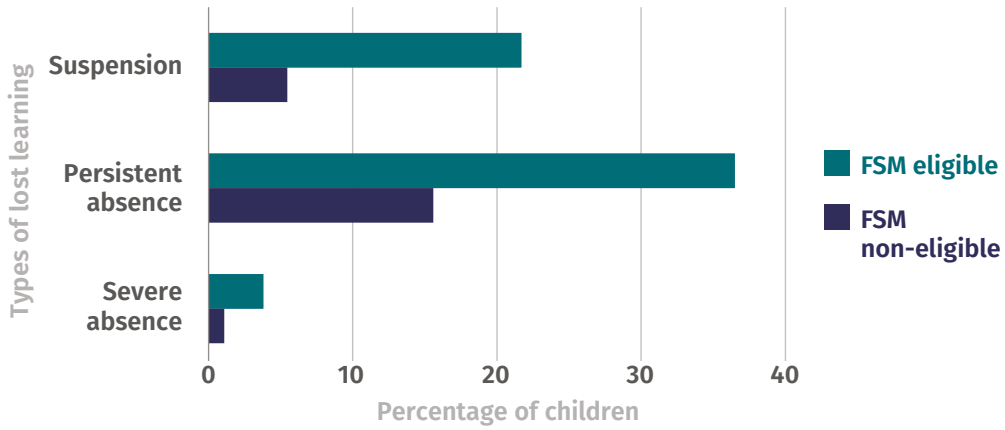
Poverty is one of the most powerful factors increasing a child's risk of permanent exclusion and it heightens risk across the continuum (see table 2.1 and figure 2.1). While one in four of all children are eligible for free school meals, three in five permanently excluded children live in poverty by this measure, experiencing exclusion at more than double the national average. When we compare these children to their peers who are not FSM-eligible, they are permanently excluded at five times the rate. We see this disproportionality persist across the country, with some of the most income deprived local authority areas experiencing the highest rates of unauthorised absence and suspension (see appendix).

Not all children affected by poverty are visible – in the data or in schools. Those in persistent poverty – spending 80 per cent of their childhood or more in poverty – are not marked out in national datasets, nor more visible to school leaders. Yet they have much worse educational outcomes such as the attainment gap between them and wealthier peers that has remained stubbornly wide across the past decade and a half (FFT Education Datalab 2023 EPI 2023). Meanwhile, changes to free school meals eligibility has resulted in those receiving free school meals including some children who may no longer be in poverty, and missing out others who may be (EPI 2023, CPAG 2022).

**FIGURE 2.1**

**Disproportionate lost learning among children eligible for free school meals**

*Exclusion and self-exclusion rates for those eligible for free school meals in comparison to their peers*



Source: Authors' presentation of DfE (2024a, 2024b, 2024g)

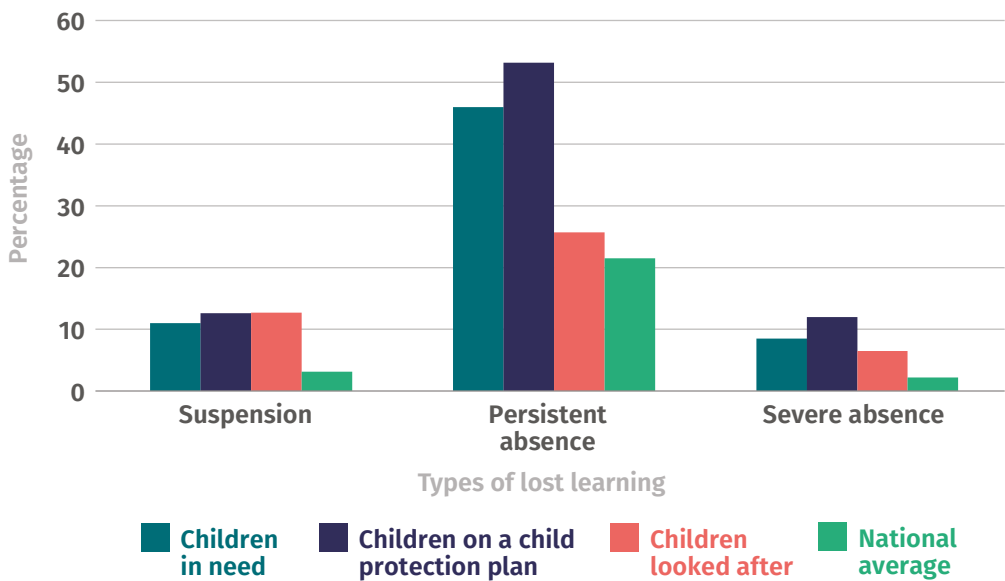
**Interaction with social services**

Children with known social care interaction have higher rates of exclusion across the continuum. Children in need (those whose families need support) and on child protection plans are around five times more likely to be suspended, up to eight times more likely to be permanently excluded, and over twice as likely to be persistently absent. Children on child protection plans are over five times more likely to be severely absent.

**FIGURE 2.2**

**Disproportionate lost learning of children known to social services**

*Comparative exclusion and self-exclusion rates between children known to social services and their peers*



Source: DfE (2024)

Children living in an unsafe environment, such as domestic violence, where a parent has a serious mental health problem, or where a child is experiencing emotional abuse, are most likely to be struggling to stay in school. These are the three biggest reasons that children are allocated a social worker to protect them from harm (DfE 2023a).

Children in need are those whose families need support. Children on a protection plan are assessed as at risk of harm, and children looked after by the state have been removed from the family home as it is deemed unsafe. In 2023 there were 403,090 children in need, roughly one in every class of 30 (Children’s Commissioner 2023c). Worryingly, datasets do not clearly share outcomes for children who have historically had a social worker, despite a recent Department for Education review showing that these children’s likelihood in experiencing lower outcomes persisted six years after their social service interaction (DfE 2019b).

Once a child is looked after by the state, some of these disproportionalities reduce. This may be due to higher levels of safety and wellbeing, but also potentially due to more advocacy – especially given the historical role of virtual school heads in championing these pupils’ outcomes, including reduced experience of exclusion.<sup>5</sup>

### **Special educational needs**

Being identified with special educational needs heightens the risk of exclusion across the continuum – from receiving twice as many behaviour points as their peers according to (ImpactEd 2024) analysis (on average), to experiencing permanent exclusion at three times the rate of their non-SEN peers. Children with education, health and care plans (EHCPs) experience permanent exclusion at nearly three times the rate, and those with special educational needs below the EHCP threshold experience it at over five times the rate of their non-SEN peers.

Despite having an elevated risk of exclusion, having special educational needs recognised in an EHCP is a protective factor against permanent exclusion and suspension (Thomson 2023b, Hutchinson 2021). This is significant as some children are less likely to have their special educational needs recognised at this level. In disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the least disadvantaged are more likely to be identified as having special educational needs, which may suggest a “capturing of resources” by better-off families (Hutchinson 2021: 8). Those who are absent and those on child protection plans are also under-recognised (ibid).

## **HOW SPECIAL ARE SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS?**

There are a number of challenges with the term ‘special educational needs’.

Though ‘special’ can imply rare, that is not the case. Nearly one in five children nationally (18 per cent) currently have recognised special educational needs (DfE 2024k). As many as two in five may have needs recognised at some point in their school career (Hutchinson 2017). The majority of these students are in mainstream schools: pupils with special educational needs make up 17 per cent of the primary population and 16 per cent of the secondary population (DfE 2024k).

The term groups together children in very different circumstances. ‘Special needs’ can imply a homogenous group needing a similar school or policy response. Yet there is a vast range in the type and level of needs and the expected impact on learning and the reasons why a child has their special needs recognised, or not. While some special needs will have lifelong implications for rates of learning (which some parents have argued might

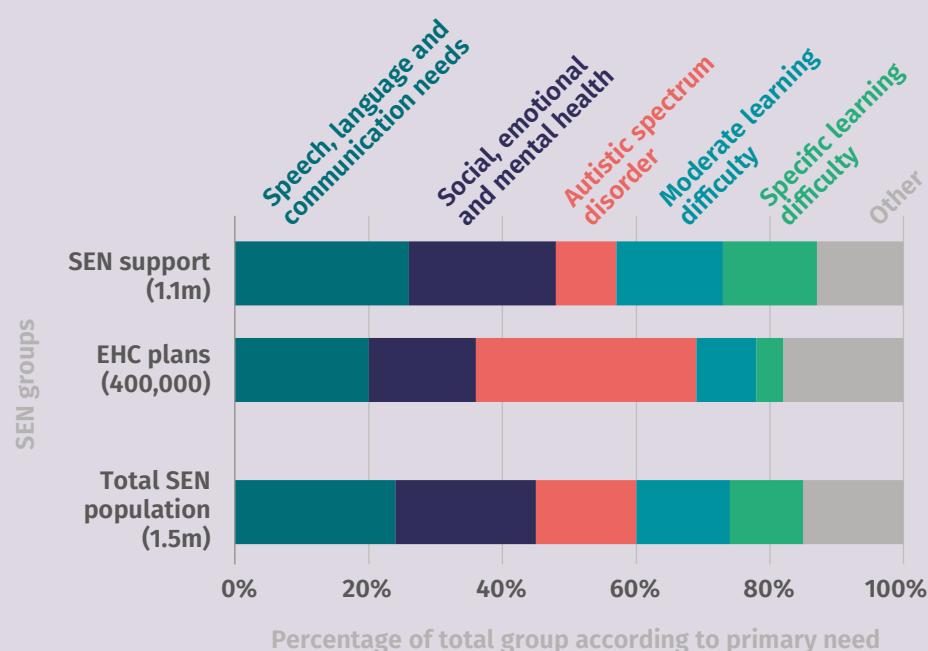
5 Virtual school heads had their remit extended to children on protection plans in 2022.



be better thought of as ‘identities’), the impact of some other special needs on learning can change dramatically with the right support (Newmark and Rees 2022).

Some needs in and of themselves don’t necessarily negatively affect learning at all and the parents of higher performing neurodiverse children can struggle to get their needs recognised formally and adjusted to if they are not academically behind their peers. Yet these learners may still need adjustments and expertise to reduce levels of anxiety and maintain school attendance to avoid lost learning. Meanwhile, the need to access a paid-for educational psychologist for an EHCP results in some schools being less able to access diagnoses for their pupils than others, leading to a local lottery in whose needs get recognised (Hutchinson 2021).

**FIGURE 2.3**  
**The most common special educational needs**  
*Percentages according to primary need*



Source: DfE (2024k)

The biggest challenge with the term ‘special educational needs’ is that it implies that working with children with additional needs is not a routine part of a teacher’s job to be mastered and continuously improved. There can be a problematic perception inside and outside of mainstream schools that only someone with ‘specialist’ qualifications can work most successfully with children with special educational needs – and that these experts are ‘elsewhere’ and separating those children out will get them the ‘specialist’ input they need.

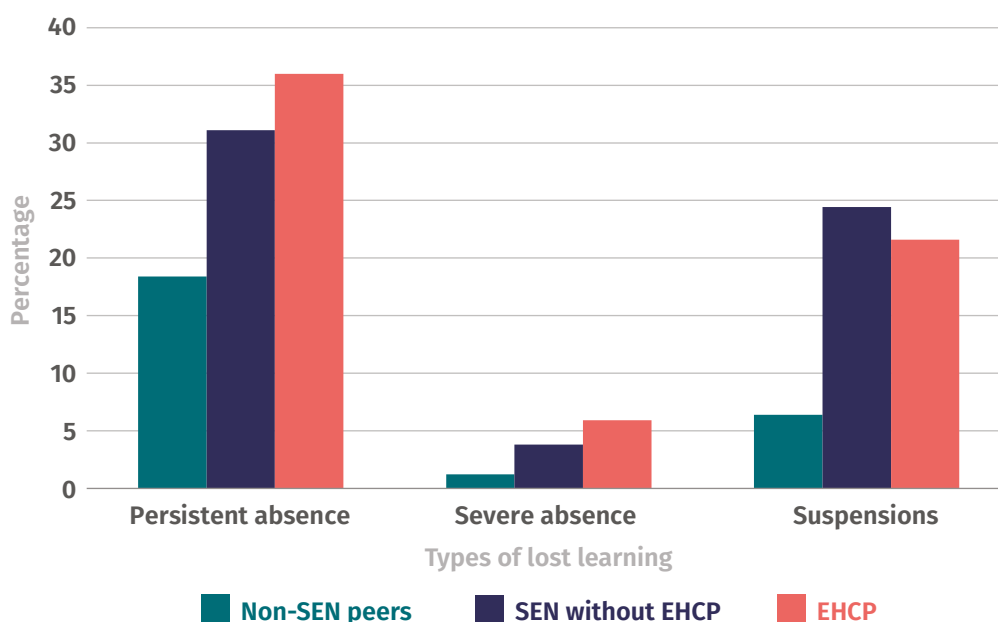
There are, undeniably, some highly skilled and high performing special and alternative provision schools that are able to provide the specialist input that some children need (see Oh-Young and Filler 2015 and Cullen et al 2020). However, this is not the case with all provision outside the

mainstream. As we will see in chapter 4, teacher qualifications, breadth of academic opportunity and Ofsted’s measures of quality are not necessarily better in many of the specialist settings children are being educated in. Despite greater expense (as seen in chapter 3), many of these ‘special’ children may be getting a worse learning experience than their peers in mainstream. We also know that including children with special educational needs in mainstream settings improves outcomes of children *without* identified special educational needs, so promoting inclusion benefits all pupils, not just a minority (Cullen et al 2020).

**FIGURE 2.4**

**Disproportionality of lost learning based on special educational needs and disabilities**

*Comparison of exclusion and self-exclusion between SEN pupils with and without an EHCP and their non SEN peers*



Source: DfE (2024a; 2024b).

**Mental health needs**

There is a real and growing mental health crisis for children. NHS England’s prevalence surveys estimate 23 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds have mental health needs (NHS England 2023). If nearly one in four secondary school aged children have a mental health need, then schools need to be equipped to routinely meet these needs and adapt their approaches to deliver inclusion by design, rather than as an add on.

Some mental health needs may also be recognised as special educational needs, in around four per cent of children nationally. This, however, rises to 62 per cent, or two-thirds, of all children in state-run alternative provision schools (author’s analysis of DfE 2024k). Children with these needs are in AP at 17 times the rate they appear in the general population. Recent research into suspensions reveals that mental health needs were the most common type of special need for suspended pupils (in pre-pandemic data) (Joseph and Crenna-Jennings 2024). This research

also found patterns which reinforce the benefit of looking at exclusions data as a continuum. The study discovered that persistently absent pupils who were also suspended were more likely to be persistently absent *before* their first suspension than after.

Mental health needs are a significant factor in the growing numbers of children leaving school to be home-educated. 89 per cent of surveyed elective home educators described their children's mental health as a factor in their decision to home educate, with many believing that the school system is unable to meet their children's mental health needs (House of Commons 2023, Whittaker 2023a).

Children leaving mainstream schools for privately run regulated schools paid for by the state overwhelmingly have recognised special educational needs (93 per cent have an education health and care plan, recognising a higher level of special need) (Thomson 2023d). For 40 per cent of these, their primary special educational needs are social, emotional and mental health needs (known as SEMH) (ibid).

## DISCRIMINATION

### GAPS IN THE DATA

We do not have the data on all the forms of discrimination that children face at school. This does not mean that discrimination doesn't take place. For example, we know that children often face anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination, including homophobia and transphobia, harming their sense of belonging at school. School leadership charity, The Difference, has begun supporting its partner schools to collect regular wellbeing, safety and belonging data. Among the first 8,000 students surveyed, it found a clear pattern among children with LGBTQ+ identities and particularly low school belonging and wellbeing.

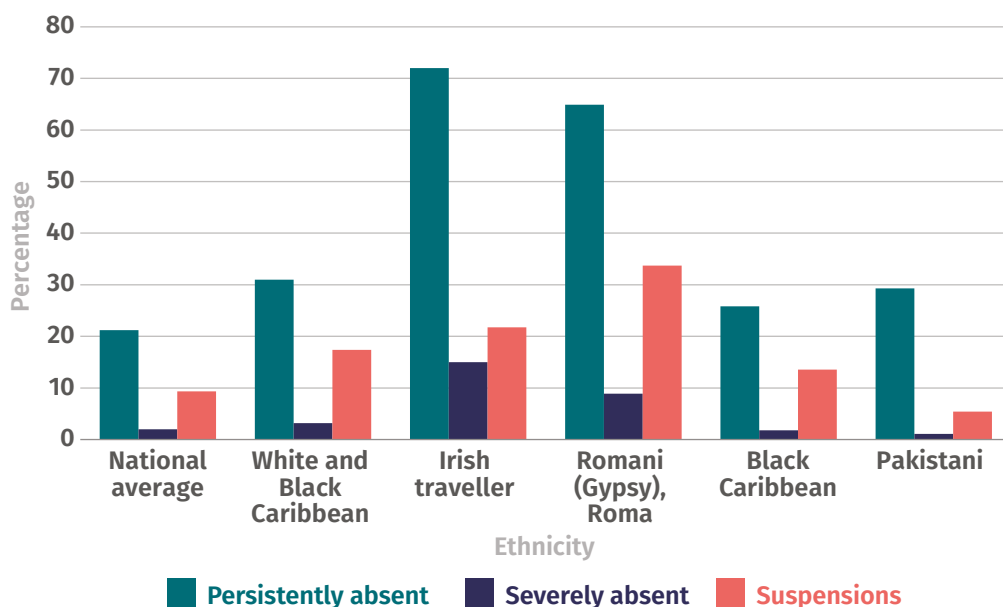
### Racism

Navigating structural racism in Britain affects children's safety and mental health (Agboola 2024). Black children and those from Romani (Gypsy), Roma, or Irish Traveller heritage are disproportionately more likely to be known to social services (DfE 2023a) and experience lost learning across the exclusions continuum (as seen in table 2.1). Those same children experience disproportionately more violent interactions with the police (Children's Commissioner 2023a, Home Office 2024, The Traveller Movement 2018), discrimination in the health service (Kapadia et al 2022, ONS 2022a), and interact with a range of services where the under-representation of professionals who share their ethnicity contribute to stereotypes and misinformation (Firmin et al 2021, Bardowell 2022). While the school workforce continues to under-represent the ethnic communities schools serve (Sharp and Aston 2024), the impact of daily experiences of racism in society at large are likely to be under-estimated within schools.

**FIGURE 2.5**

**Disproportionate lost learning of children of racialised identities**

*Comparative exclusion and self-exclusion rates between children of different ethnic backgrounds*



Source: DfE (2024a, 2024b)

Racism within schools may be much more prevalent than school leaders realise – as Ofsted discovered was the case with sexual harms in 2021 (Ofsted 2021). In a post-pandemic survey of Black children, 95 per cent said they have heard and witnessed racist language at school. Fifty per cent felt that teacher perceptions of young Black people (for example, perceptions of children as being ‘too aggressive’) were the biggest barrier to their success in school (YMCA England & Wales 2020). Similarly, a 2020 survey of the experience of young Travellers found that two-thirds reported being discriminated against by their teachers and 40 per cent by their peers (The Traveller Movement 2020).

An underestimation of racism experienced outside and within school, combined with adultification bias (explored in the case study below), are partly why vulnerability among children from ethnic minorities may go under-recognised, and why behaviour stemming from such vulnerabilities may be read as poor and maliciously-motivated – and met with sanctions rather than investigation (Davis 2022). Furthermore, wider research suggests that teachers’ perceptions of who is a ‘good learner’ in classrooms is shaped by gender, race and class, which in turn shapes which pupils are perceived to be less able to learn (Bradbury 2021).

### **CASE STUDY: ADULTIFICATION AND ‘CHILD Q’**

“Someone walked into the school where I was supposed to feel safe, took me away from the people who were supposed to protect me and stripped me naked, while on my period. On top of preparing for the most important exams of my life. I can’t go a single day without wanting to scream, shout, cry or just give up.”

These are the words of the child known as Child Q, whose case shocked families of colour nationally (Kempton 2022). The independent review carried out on the case identified adultification bias as key to this safeguarding failure.

Adultification is a form of bias where “children from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities are perceived as being more ‘streetwise’, more ‘grown up’, less innocent and less vulnerable than other children, who might be viewed primarily as a threat rather than as a child who needs support” (NSPCC Learning 2022).

Adultification bias contributed to Child Q being criminalised, an experience that she says has caused long-term damage to her mental health. An independent review found there was “insufficient focus on the safeguarding needs of Child Q when responding to concerns about suspected drug use.” (Gamble and McCallum 2022).

After Child Q was strip-searched, teachers returned her to her mock exam “without any teacher asking how she felt, knowing what she had just gone through.” She was “primarily being seen as ‘the risk’ as opposed to being ‘at risk’.” The review found Child Q’s treatment was “unlikely to have been the same” had she not been Black (ibid).

### **Sexism**

Boys are twice as likely to be permanently excluded as girls. Symptoms of mental ill health play out differently on average for boys and girls – whether through differences in socialisation or hormonal differences. ‘Externalising’ symptoms of aggression are more common in boys over ‘internalising’ symptoms such as eating disorders, self-harm and withdrawal which are more common in girls (NHS England 2023, Gill et al 2017). This may explain why boys are over-represented in sanctions across the continuum (as seen in table 2.1), but girls are more evenly matched in lost learning through absence, and slightly over-represented in some analyses of unaccountable exits from school (like managed moves) (Crenna-Jennings and Hutchinson 2024). As central government does not collect data for unaccountable exits, we don’t have the reasons for these moves to compare them against those for permanent exclusions, but this gender pattern may lead us to better understand why they may be used in cases of less violent transgressions of the school behaviour policies than permanent exclusions.

### **Disability**

Although not interchangeable, there is significant overlap between disability and special educational needs – particularly the most complex end – and we know that children with special educational needs are more likely to be losing learning than their peers (table 2.1). There is also evidence that disability discrimination in schools is rising. In 2022/23, there were 330 registered appeals against schools by parents in relation to disability discrimination, a 71 per cent increase on the previous year (DfE 2023g). Of these appeals, 20 (6 per cent) were related to suspension from school (ibid).

**TABLE 2.1**

**Disproportions across the exclusions continuum**

*Across the continuum, children with certain demographics appear at much higher rates (disproportions) in excluded groups than they do in the national population*

Exclusions continuum	National average rate	Poverty	Special educational needs	Known to social services (DfE 2024l)	Ethnicity <sup>6</sup>	Gender (comparison between male and female)
Permanent exclusion (DfE 2024a)	0.11%	Free school meals (FSM) 2.5x more likely	SEND support 3x more likely EHCP 2x more likely	Child in need (CIN) 7x more likely Child protection plan (CPP) 8x more likely Child looked after (CLA) 2x more likely (2021/22)	Irish Traveller 3x more likely Romani (Gypsy) and Roma 4x more likely Mixed white and Black Caribbean 2x more likely Black Caribbean 1.5x more likely	Males 2x more likely
Managed move (2018/2019) (Crenna-Jennings and Hutchinson 2024)	5.8%	FSM 1.5x more likely	Social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs 3x more likely	CIN 2x more likely CLA 2x more likely	Black Caribbean 1.5x more likely Mixed white and Black Caribbean 1.5x more likely	Females 1.1x more likely
State-funded alternative provision schools (2023/24) (pupil referral units and alternative provision academies) (DfE 2024g)	0.2%	FSM 2.5x more likely	EHCP 5x more likely SEND support 4x more likely	CPP 12x more likely CLA 10x more likely CIN 8x more likely	Black Caribbean 2.5x more likely Romani (Gypsy) and Roma 4x more likely Irish Traveller 3x more likely Mixed white and Black Caribbean 2.5x more likely	Males 2x more likely
Suspended (DfE 2024a)	9.33%	FSM 2x more likely	EHCP 2x more likely SEND support 2.5x more likely	CLA 6x more likely CPP 5x more likely CIN 4x more likely (2021/22)	Romani (Gypsy) and Roma 3.5x more likely Irish Traveller 2x more likely Mixed white and Black Caribbean 2x more likely Black Caribbean 1.5x more likely	Males 1.7x more likely
Behaviour points (ImpactEd Evaluation 2024)	95.26 average per pupil	Pupil Premium (FSM in last six years) 2x higher on average	EHCP or SEND support 2x higher on average	Unknown	Unknown	Males 1.6x higher on average
Elective home education (DfE 2024i)	1%	Unknown	EHCP or SEND support 2x more likely <sup>7</sup>	Unknown	Unknown	No significant difference
Severe absence (DfE 2024b)	2%	FSM 2x more likely	SEND support 2x more likely EHCP 3x more likely	CPP 5.5x more likely CIN 4x more likely CLA 3x more likely	Irish Traveller 7x more likely Romani (Gypsy) and Roma 4.5x more likely Mixed white and Black Caribbean 1.5x more likely	No significant difference
Persistently absent (DfE 2024b)	21.2%	FSM 2x more likely	SEND support 1.5x more likely EHCP 2x more likely	CPP 2.5x more likely CIN 2x more likely	Romani (Gypsy) and Roma 3x more likely Irish Traveller 3x more likely Mixed white and Black Caribbean 1.5x more likely Pakistani heritage 1.4x more likely	No significant difference

Source: References in table. All referenced data refers to the 2022/23 academic year unless stated otherwise.

6 Table 2.1 notes the four classified ethnic backgrounds that experience the highest rates across the exclusion continuum when examining persistent absence, enrolment in state funded AP, permanent exclusion, and suspension. Table 2.1 notes two groups that experience highest rates of severe absence due higher relative rate versus other groups [authors added in the third highest group Mixed White and Black Caribbean due the level of disproportionality experienced across the continuum]. Table 2.1 notes two ethnic groups when examining disproportionate experience of managed moves according to the referenced report by EPI.

7 18 per cent of all children have special educational needs (in 2023/24, 4.8 per cent had an EHCP and 13.6 were SEND without an EHCP), while according to a House of Commons (2023) report, 40 per cent of home educators said one or more of the children they educate have special educational needs, with many saying their child was autistic or has ADHD. This is an approximate estimate based on available data.

### WHAT'S MISSING FROM OFFICIAL DATA?

Some forms of lost learning are tracked through official statistics – but these offer only a partial picture.

Figures published by the UK government give a count of suspension, permanent exclusion, and severe and persistent absence. They include some demographic data, offering insights into risk of lost learning by geography, income (via free school meal eligibility), special educational needs status, and ethnicity. But there is much still uncounted on who might be most at risk of losing learning.

Some of the children within the demographics most at risk – such as those in persistent poverty (defined as 80 per cent of their childhood in poverty) or those who had a social worker in the past six years – are not sufficiently visible in these datasets. Special educational needs are not broken down against type of need in terms of these experiences, obscuring the picture of which needs may be more or less strongly associated with different forms of lost learning and where intervention from schools and services beyond should be focused.

Meanwhile many types of lost learning remain untracked and their demographics unknown, with no government data on managed moves or sanctions like internal isolation.

What is measured matters as these statistics enable us to track patterns of lost learning, and are a tool by which schools, school groups, and government can be held to account. Here, the new government's commitment to creating a register of children out of school is a welcome first step towards ensuring no child falls between the cracks. But there is more to do to better understand who is losing learning.

### *Invisible identities and traumas*

As with lost learning, where not all experiences are visible in the data to be tracked, so too are some types of vulnerability to exclusion, which go unseen or not fully recognised. School leaders cannot always know the challenges faced by their pupils, such as whether they are currently struggling due to bereavement, financial struggles or caring responsibilities. Children's lack of visibility can be shaped by thresholds for support or access to diagnosis, or insight into and recognition of trauma in the lives of children with identities different to their teachers. Much adversity in childhood and adolescence goes undisclosed and unknown (as with child M's experience of sexual harm in the case study below). This points to the need for more universal support in schools which will benefit all children, regardless of what is known about them.

A child is more at risk of exclusion if their needs are not recognised. In undertaking qualitative research for this report, we consistently heard about the extraordinary efforts of schools for children with recognised vulnerabilities. This included making adjustments for their mental health or neurodiversity,<sup>8</sup> and being proactive in targeting interventions at those known to be in poverty.

On the other hand, we also heard stories of children whose neurodiversity was only recognised after exclusion, whose unsafe relationships with older children were only picked up after they had begun truanting regularly, and whose everyday

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8 Neurodiversity frames positively the different ways the brain can work and interpret information. As a term, it highlights that people naturally think about things differently. To be neurodivergent means that the brain functions, learns and processes information differently. Some people with neurodiversity will be given special educational needs status in their school.

experiences of racism, misogyny or homophobia – and its impact on their mental health – were invisible to the adults around them.

It can be easy to inadvertently build two-tier responses in schools: one for those whose needs are recognised, and one for everyone else. However, it is in these contexts that the many vulnerable children can fall through the gaps.

The challenge is not always being able to know and recognise vulnerability points to a need for more universal support in schools which will affect all children, regardless of what we know about them, as well as quantitative and qualitative tools which can support schools to examine which groups are more likely to have low wellbeing or safety in their specific year group and school context.

### **SILOES IN SCHOOLS**

Schools want to provide the best support for children who present with significant vulnerabilities and complex needs. This can result in children being referred to specialist practitioners and/or offers of specialised support from certain staff inside the school. This approach does however present some challenges. In particular, the emphasis on specialists can distance the majority of staff from supporting these children. Where the main body of staff lack the incentives or skills to engage with vulnerability and disadvantage in their day-to-day work, a gap opens up in recognising and supporting children whose needs are just emerging or are perhaps hidden.

Specialisms can also be narrow in focus – for example, a pastoral team might address mental health across the school, trying to drive up attendance and deal with behaviour, while the SEND team supports those with recognised special educational needs, and the designated safeguarding leads work on those with known threats to their safety. Working in this siloed way, however, can mean that children with multiple needs do not always receive joined-up support, or children whose needs fall outside of these defined categories may fall between the gaps of individual specialists and their specific interventions.



### **CASE STUDY: UNRECOGNISED VULNERABILITY**

M is in year 10. He has had the highest behaviour points in his year group for several years, often accumulated for not being able to line up quietly, play fighting, and being hard to de-escalate after becoming upset. This has seen him spend a lot of time out of class. In year 9, his behaviours began escalating and they culminated in him spending six weeks in 'respite' in local alternative provision.

During year 10, two things came to light. Firstly, M was diagnosed with ADHD and put on medication. Recently, behaviour points for M have reduced. This is partly because his medical needs are being met, but also because he is now labelled as having special educational needs, so staff respond differently by using the flexibility in the system available for students with special educational needs. Staff now recognise some behaviours as symptoms of special educational needs (for example children with ADHD struggling to be still) (NHS 2021) rather than as a choice best addressed with escalating sanctions.

Secondly, the school now knows about historic sexual abuse that happened while M was at primary school. The process of disclosure and investigation happened in Year 9 and was intrusive and distressing. This made coming to school and maintaining composure (sometimes in the face of sanctions) harder than normal – leading to over-reactions.

M's mental health crisis was prompted by the police investigation and worsened by use of isolation at school – long days spent staring at a wall and alone with his thoughts. There are some good pastoral resources in the school. For instance in year 10, M meets with his tutor at the beginning of every day, setting him up for a good start. But there has not always been a joined-up approach on data about M. Despite the safeguarding team knowing about the police investigation, neither M's head of year nor his tutor (running the behaviour system) were made aware.

When researchers asked M what he is proud of and looks forward to in the school year ahead, he described his ambition as being quiet and not engaging with others, because he sees this as the only way to stay out of trouble. His GCSEs are soon, and although a range of staff describe him as bright, he has missed a lot of learning.

### **EXCLUSIONS CONTINUUM AS AN EARLY WARNING SYSTEM**

Some forms of exclusions act as a powerful early warning system, signalling that a child needs more support. Thomson (2023c) found that previous suspensions were a strong predictor of later permanent exclusions, holding other characteristics constant. In fact, this factor was more predictive than many of the demographic factors explored above. Early experiences and escalations on the continuum may help shed light on invisible vulnerabilities, by providing a window into the children struggling most in school.

Many schools are evolving their use of data to track early exclusion experiences (like children with the highest levels of behaviour points) and try different approaches. Others are gathering data on pupils' self-reported sense of belonging, wellbeing and safety.

## CASE STUDY: STUDENT EXPERIENCE DATA DRIVING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

“She wrote us a letter and we met with her. That was a really hard listen,” said headteacher Jemima Reilly, recalling the events which prompted radical shifts in approach at her school.

Emerging from the pandemic, George Floyd’s murder and the Black Lives Matter movement, the murder of Sarah Everard and the MeToo movement all created a broader international context shaping students’ political awareness and experiences of discrimination. Reilly describes a string of incidents at the school: a letter written by a year 10 child about homophobia; year 8 boys sexually harassing year 11 girls; and some year 13 children coming forward about their experiences of racism.

Jemima’s school won’t be alone in children experiencing such harmful behaviours, but perhaps may be unusual in the way they listen and respond.

These issues weren’t siloed and delegated to middle leadership level as might be common in schools, with heads of year treating them as isolated pastoral instances of bullying. Jemima reflected how their work with the school leadership charity The Difference encouraged them to take a strategic approach: “We’d begun understanding Inclusion in the wider sense, not just the narrow sense of special educational needs.” Leading from the top, she and her deputy endeavoured to join the dots, to hear more, and to set out a strategic response to this challenge.

“We decided to treat it in the same way we would school improvement on teaching and learning, or curriculum,” says deputy head teacher John. “Let’s get some data. We devised our own surveys and had interviews with groups of pupils. We looked at other data: suspensions, attendance, achievement, celebrations/awards, negative behaviour points. We then had a ‘holding up the mirror’ moment with all the staff. It was really important that it was all the staff as it was about all our engagement. That was an institutionally chastening experience.”

A host of changes followed: involving students in safeguarding each other; a pupil-made video to clarify what is and is not ‘banter’; and a move towards an educational rather than sanction-based approach to discrimination.

The leadership team leaned into areas where “we felt as a predominantly white team, at times [would be] ill-informed, unequipped” and asked for help from others. They invited a local community organisation to train staff on the local history of the relationships between ethnic communities and supported a staff-run anti-racist group and a student-run human rights group. They also hired a Somali family liaison officer who mediated between the school and the Somali community, who felt most under-represented.

John and Jemima are clear that these school improvements will be iterative. As part of The Difference’s alumni, they now use a student experience survey which allows them to benchmark experiences against pupils in other schools. And each year, this is leading to new areas of staff development, policy reflection and continuous improvement.

### 3.

## SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN CRISIS

The existing crisis in special educational needs is well documented (see Isos Partnership 2024, Harnden J and Mulholland M 2023, Centre for Young Lives 2024). We have already established that children with special educational needs are more likely to be losing learning across the continuum, with children with an EHCP being nearly three times as likely as their peers to be permanently excluded, and children receiving SEND support over five times as likely (table 2.1).

As more and more children cannot be supported by provision available in their mainstream school, EHCP rates increase, as do placements in special and alternative provision schools. This results in more children leaving their local school community, often following a difficult period of disruption where their mainstream school has been unable to meet their needs. Many of these placements are for schools outside of the state sector, and some are for-profit private schools, backed by private equity investors. Poorer children are twice as likely to be in an alternative provision school than they are in a privately-run special school; and the funding they receive is less than a third of the average non-maintained special school place (£18,000 compared with £58,500).

This chapter explores the rising rates of special educational needs, reduced capacity in mainstream schools to meet these needs, and the unsustainable strain SEND spend is placing on council budgets.

### RISING SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Since the last SEND reforms in 2014<sup>9</sup> there has been a huge rise in identified special educational needs. While the number of pupils in schools has grown by 6 per cent (2015/16 to 2023/24), the number of children with an EHCP has grown by 83 per cent and the number of children identified for SEND support has grown by 25 per cent (DfE 2024g; 2024k). Schools are seeking more support – and funding – via EHCPs as they are unable to meet the educational needs of children from their own resources and expertise.

The rising numbers of children with special educational needs may be driven by a greater recognition of conditions such as autism and increasing levels of child poverty. Child poverty can cause or exacerbate some learning delays such as speech, language and communication and can go hand in hand with increased risk of traumatic experiences (such as domestic violence). Plus, the legacy of the pandemic is understood to be contributing to higher levels of social, emotional mental health needs (Perera 2019, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists 2019, Doyle and Thomas 2022).

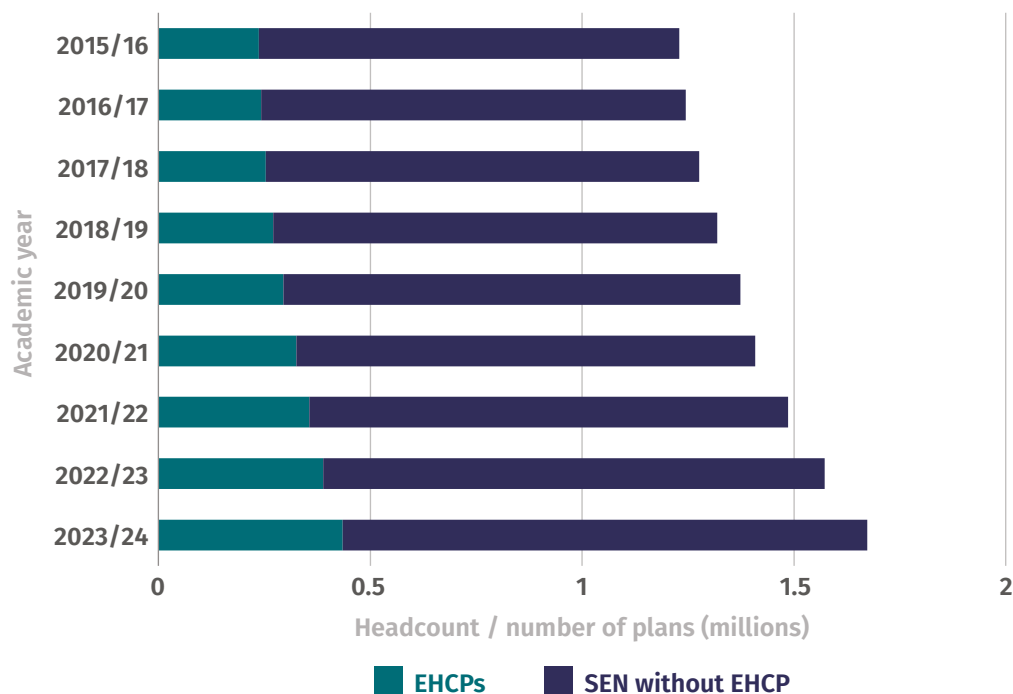
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9 Part 3 Children and Families Act (2014) <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/part/3>

**FIGURE 3.1**

**Rising demand for additional support**

Tracking the rise in the number of EHCP plans and the number of children requiring SEN support from 2015/16 to 2023/24



Source: Authors' analysis of DfE 2024k, DfE 2024g

**INSUFFICIENT CAPACITY IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS**

As the levels of need rise, the capacity of mainstream schools to support a breadth of need may be falling. Dissatisfaction among parents of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools is also rising (Carr 2020, ITV News 2023). Over a third of teachers report not feeling equipped to identify a student with a mental health issue and do not know how to help them access support offered by their school (IFF Research 2023). Additionally, half of schools reported that they were unable to effectively support pupils with special educational needs, a drop of 30 per cent between 2022 and 2023 (ibid).

This reduction in mainstream capacity to support additional needs has been coupled with a reduction in wider early intervention services (Williams and Franklin 2021). We know that Sure Start centres were effective at reducing need for specialist support, including reducing the likelihood of having an EHCP by 9 per cent at age 16 (Carneiro et al 2024), yet these services have been gutted. This creates a vicious cycle, where fewer needs are met early, meaning schools face higher levels of need, which they in turn struggle to support, and schools and families seek EHCPs to secure additional provision that is not available elsewhere.

EHCPs are often the gateway to extra levels of support, including recourse via tribunals. Rising EHCPs, which provide the legal basis for a placement in a special school, may indicate not only higher levels of need but also higher levels of parent dissatisfaction with mainstream special educational needs support. It is notable that the demand for EHCPs has risen at over three times the rate of children being identified with special educational needs (from 2015/16 to 2023/24 (DfE 2024n)).

Since 2014/15, the number of special school places has increased by 60 per cent and the number of places in independent and non-maintained special schools<sup>10</sup> has increased by 132 per cent (Isos Partnership 2024). As we've seen in chapter 1, places in registered and unregistered alternative provision for children with special educational needs has also risen.

This rapidly increasing spending on specialist SEND placements does not necessarily lead to better outcomes. While councils struggle for special school places, a wide range of agile providers have been able to step in, including for-profit organisations “making tens of millions of pounds” from the public purse while operating without scrutiny (Booth 2023). There have been recent exposés into abusive treatment of children in these types of under-regulated settings (Evans and Newlan 2024). Ofsted asserted in its 2022/23 annual report that some of these providers are “led by profoundly unsuitable people, including some with criminal convictions” (Ofsted 2023).

Expanding the capacity of mainstream schools is key to improving this financial spiral and improving outcomes and experiences for children. Special schools or alternative provision will always be needed as they provide a valuable service for some of the most vulnerable children. However, we must identify how we can better equip and support the universal service of mainstream schools to meet a greater range of children's mental health and other special educational needs.

## RISING LOCAL AUTHORITY SPEND

Local authorities in England have begun declaring bankruptcy. In recent years, a combination of rising levels of statutory need (particularly in adult social care), lower levels of funding from central government, and governance and accounting oversights have contributed to 14 councils issuing section 114 bankruptcy notices (Hoddinott 2024). In 2024/25, 50 per cent of local authorities were not confident they had finances to fulfil their statutory duties (Local Government Association 2023).

Rising special educational needs are driving rising school spend for councils. These include the following.

- **Education, health and care plans** for students in mainstream schools have risen by over 100 per cent from 2016 to 2024 (DfE 2024u).
- **Places in special schools**, where requested in an EHCP. Since before the pandemic, there has been a 60 per cent rise in places in special schools run by the state and a 132 per cent rise in those not state-run (Isos Partnership 2024).
- **Transport costs** to taxi students to schools farther away. Last year, this cost £1.2 billion – a 23 per cent year-on-year rise (Whittaker 2023b analysis of DfE 2023d).
- **Tribunal costs.** Faced with spiralling costs, a record number of applications for EHCPs have resulted in tribunals between parents and local authorities. Local authorities often dispute the need for a place outside a mainstream school but often lose. An estimated £60 million of public money was wasted in 2021/22, considering lost cases, £46 million of which came from council budgets for SEND tribunal costs (Jemal and Kenley 2023).

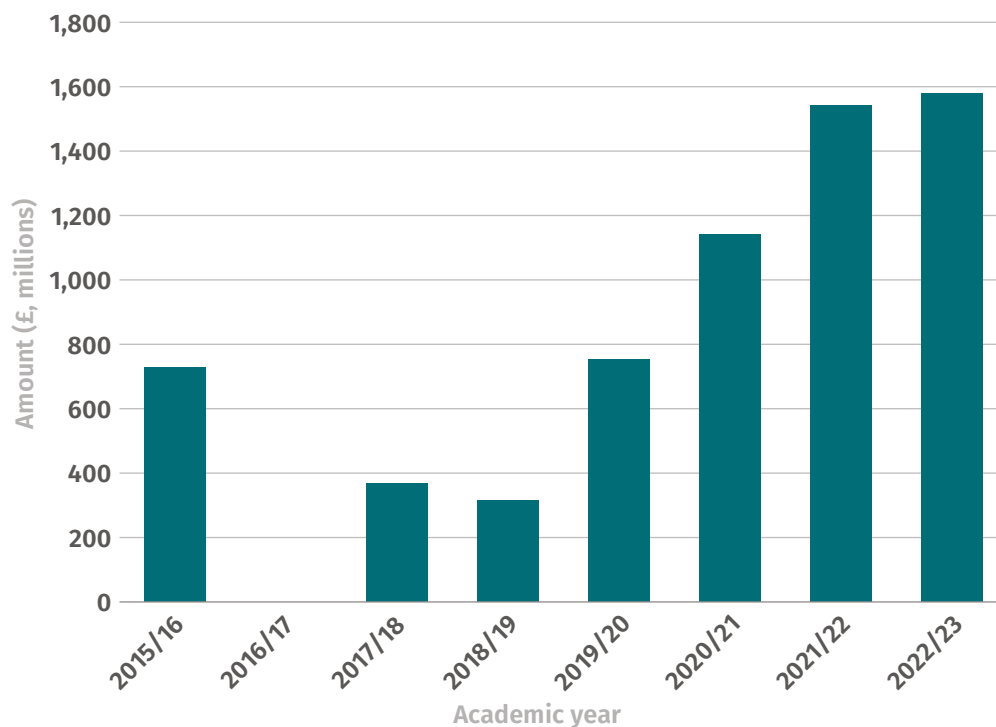
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10 This refers to the independent and non-state-run special sector as a whole. There is variation in this sector. Non-maintained special schools (NMSS) are not-for-profit settings which meet a set of national standards despite not being run by the state. Independent special schools can be profit-making and privately run. Where ‘state-run’ schools are referred to, these include pupil referral units and academies.

**FIGURE 3.2**

**Soaring school budget deficits**

*Cumulative school budget deficit of local authorities with a deficit, 2015/16 to 2022/23 (2022/23 prices)<sup>11</sup>*



Source: Authors' presentation of analysis of school expenditure (Nye 2024)

Council deficits are set to increase from March 2026. In 2020, a decision was made by central government to create a 'statutory override' for the part of council budgets that protects school spending. Therefore any overspend in this area does not appear on the overall council balance sheet. However, this suspension of normal financial responsibility for schools spending is due to end in March 2026 (Knott 2022).

During the period of suspended financial responsibility, the pressure on local authority school spending has increased enormously. In a recent survey of local authorities, 85 per cent were recording an overall cumulative deficit for 2023/24 (Isos Partnership 2024). Scaling up from surveyed local authorities shows that the national cumulative high needs deficit currently stands at an estimated £3.16 billion. In 2026, these deficits are due to be added back into councils' balance sheets, tipping many into effective bankruptcy (Nye 2024). Over 25 per cent of surveyed local authorities reported that they would become insolvent in the next year if the statutory override was removed (Isos Partnership 2024).

Money invested in the special and alternative provision sector does not support all children equally. State-funded alternative provision has a higher concentration of poorer children and children with social service interaction than special schools – yet receives the least funding per head. Schools serving more affluent students (on average) receive higher funding per head (on average). In parts of the local authority commissioned sector, where private special schools are operating,

11 Data unavailable for 2016/17.

average costs hide cut-price lows and dizzying highs, with some documented fees reaching £111,000 per year (Booth 2023).

**TABLE 3.2**

**Mismatch of funding for those most in need**

*This table shows that those most disadvantaged are more likely to be in SEND settings with lower levels of funding*

Type of school	Percentage of children with disadvantage			Average cost per place
	SEND [SEND support and EHCP]	Free school meals	Social care <sup>12</sup> (DfE 2024) <sup>13</sup>	
Mainstream school	16.5	24.0	4.0	£8,200 <sup>14</sup>
State-funded alternative provision school <sup>15</sup>	82.3	60.7	42	£18,000 (Bryant et al 2018)
State-funded special school	100	47.4	27	£25,000 (Isos Partnership 2024)
Non-maintained special school	100	30.1	Unknown	£58,500 (ibid)
Local authority funded alternative provision	Unknown	22	Unknown	£19,000 – £20,400 <sup>16</sup> (Bryant et al 2018)

Sources: References in table. Academic year 2023/24 (DfE 2024g) unless stated otherwise

12 Child in need at any point

13 Latest available data for the 2022/23 academic year

14 Isos Partnership 2024

15 This includes pupil referral units and alternative provision academies run by the state.

16 Cost estimates for unregistered independent alternative provision and independent alternative provision registered as a school respectively.

## 4.

# WHAT WE HAVE TO GAIN FROM REDUCING EXCLUSION

Beyond the impact on children, their families and schools directly, there is also an economic case for reducing exclusion in the form of wider societal benefits. Exclusions across the continuum feed the worsening challenges affecting children which negatively impact on society.

- The widening attainment gap.
- Growing youth unemployment.
- Youth violence.

Preventing a child's challenges from escalating to permanent exclusion at age 14 could save the state at least £170,000 over their lifetime in costs associated with these negative outcomes.

### REDUCING A WIDENING ATTAINMENT GAP

Post-pandemic, the widening of the attainment gap between children who are eligible for free school meals and those who are not has escalated rapidly, though it was beginning to widen pre-pandemic (EPI 2023).<sup>17</sup>

Evidence shows a strong link between exclusion and attainment. When children aren't in class or school, they are losing learning. Recent research has found that pupils with just one suspension are, on average, not achieving a standard pass in GCSE English and maths (Joseph and Crenna-Jennings 2024). Evidence also shows that children placed in alternative provision are even less likely to achieve good GCSE outcomes, or even be entered for the exams at all. We know that improving GCSE grades does matter, with Department for Education analysis finding a 'global'<sup>18</sup> improvement in overall GCSE performance is associated with an increase in lifetime earnings of approximately £100,000 (Hodge et al 2021). Improving attainment means reducing exclusion, and the benefits to the child could be transformative.

Despite the best endeavours of the alternative provision sector, good practice is not as widespread as it is across the mainstream sector. Where practice is good, it is in spite of the system, not because of it. This means that once children leave mainstream school, the quality of education can reduce dramatically, affecting the likelihood of gaining key literacy skills and passport qualifications.

- **Setting quality.** Ofsted report that alternative provision is "less likely to be offering an equally good or better quality of education than its mainstream counterparts" (Ofsted and Care Quality Commission 2024). Places in privately-run alternative provision and special settings have risen much faster than state-run alternative provision post-pandemic, as seen in chapter 1. New freedom of information (FOI) request data for this report shows these placements are of much lower quality. This data shows that almost one in three children in privately run alternative provision are in low or unknown quality (inadequate, require improvement, or ungraded). Regarding alternative

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<sup>17</sup> However, the *persistent* disadvantage gap has not narrowed across the last decade.

<sup>18</sup> Global refers to an estimate of a pupil improving their GCSE grades across the board which is calculated as one standard deviation from the mean (which is calculated to be 11.2 GCSE grades).



provision commissioned specifically by schools, two out of three children are in settings of low or unknown quality.

- **Quality of teaching.** Children in pupil referral units/alternative provision and special schools are now over three times more likely to be taught by an unqualified teacher than their peers in mainstream, as seen in table 4.1 (DfE 2024t).
- **Qualifications and curriculum.** Over half of children are not entered for maths and english GCSEs in alternative provision schools (DfE 2024m). Of those who are, fewer than 5 per cent have a standard pass (ibid). Meanwhile, we do not know how many, if any, children completing their education in independent alternative provisions, unregistered alternative provisions, or elective home education are entered for these qualifications.

**TABLE 4.1**  
Quality across the exclusion continuum

Exclusions continuum	Quality/safety <i>Placements that 'require improvement', are 'inadequate' or 'ungraded'</i>	Teaching <i>Percentage of unqualified teachers in each type of setting</i>
All children	12%	3% <sup>19</sup>
Permanent exclusion		
Managed move		
Suspensions		
State funded alternative provision schools (for example, pupil referral units and alternative provision academies)	26%	9% <sup>20</sup>
Non state-run alternative provision (for example, local authority funded independent special school)	30%	No requirement
Other commissioned alternative provision (unregistered)	100% (all ungraded)	Unknown
Elective home education	100%	No requirement
Severe absence		
Persistently absent		
Source	Freedom of information data from DfE, unpublished.	DfE 2024t

Sources: References in table.

## REDUCING RATES OF ECONOMIC INACTIVITY AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

There is a correlation between children who have experienced some form of exclusion along the continuum and economic inactivity. Mental ill health, alongside poor qualification levels, are the biggest threats to youth employment (McCurdy and Murphy 2024). The rate of 18- to 24-year-olds out of work due to poor health has nearly doubled in the last decade (Murphy 2023).

19 Of teachers in state funded schools

20 Of teachers in state-funded special schools and pupil referral units

Excluded children are the most likely to drop-out of college and be locked out of the labour market longer-term.

- By age 18, fewer than one in five mainstream-educated children have dropped out of education, but two in three children in alternative provision have (Thomson 2021c).
- By age 19, only 15 per cent of children who never experienced a permanent exclusion or alternative provision were yet to achieve five passes at GCSE. Comparatively, among alternative provision/excluded children this figure rises to 78 per cent (Beynon 2022).
- By age 21, fewer than one in 10 (9 per cent) never-excluded young people are yet to maintain a positive destination, compared to one in two formerly excluded children (ibid).
- Long-term data shows heightened unemployment and low earning risks of exclusion persisting to the age of 26 (Madia et al 2022).

### **CREATING VULNERABILITY TO CRIMINAL INVOLVEMENT**

The hours spent not in school contribute to more vulnerability and susceptibility to criminal exploitation (Ofsted et al 2018, Hill 2023). Half of the children referred to local authorities due to concerns of criminal exploitation had been persistently or severely absent from school (The Centre for Social Justice 2024).<sup>21</sup>

Suspension could be a key intervention point in reducing youth violence. Descriptive statistics on offending and education point to suspension as a risk factor in serious violence (ibid). The majority of children cautioned or sentenced for serious violence (89 per cent) received their first suspension *before* the offence (DfE 2023c). Alternative provision schools are often accused of exacerbating or even causing youth violence (as in the popular phrase of “PRU to prison pipeline”), but this data runs against that perception. It shows that a significant proportion of excluded children (38 per cent) who are involved in serious violence and attended alternative provision, began attending *after* their first serious violent offence (ibid). If time outside of school contributed to the risk of criminal involvement and youth violence, then this is as likely to have come through absence or suspension from mainstream school.

Early criminal exploitation is predictive of criminal activity in later life. Most young people imprisoned by 24 were known to the police at 16 (ONS 2023). Half of those young people serving custodial sentences were persistently absent from school and three-quarters had at least one suspension (ONS 2022b).

### **SAVINGS TO THE TAXPAYER BY REDUCING PERMANENT EXCLUSIONS**

As outlined in this report, the impact of losing learning can be life-changing for children and the adults they become. These impacts for individuals also represent additional economic costs to the state over their lifetimes. There could be significant savings to the taxpayer if the universal service of mainstream schools could be strengthened to reduce escalations up the exclusions continuum, and thereby reduce permanent exclusion.

We can separate the impact of permanent exclusion on the negative outcomes above. We know that many of the poor outcomes for excluded children will also be correlated to the wider circumstances of their lives, for instance poverty or special educational needs. However, there is a growing body of causal analysis which helps isolate the effect of permanent exclusion in poor outcomes, over and above the background factors and circumstances. Researchers at Pro Bono

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<sup>21</sup> Out of 23 local authorities.

Economics have used this literature to make a new conservative estimate of the benefits to taxpayers specifically from reducing permanent exclusion.

The evidence on the scale of these long-term savings to the taxpayer is currently incomplete for other forms of lost learning. To be able to calculate more accurately, we would need to better understand the scale of all forms of lost learning and be able to isolate their impact on long-term outcomes such as qualifications, lifetime earnings, involvement in criminal activity and health service use.<sup>22</sup> Instead, we focus here on only officially recorded permanent exclusion data.

This analysis suggests that permanently excluding a 14-year-old could have a lifetime cost to taxpayers of approximately £170,000.<sup>23</sup> Broken down, this is: £125,000 of costs from reduced taxation and increased benefits due to lower earnings and higher risks of unemployment; £30,000 of costs from increased risks of receiving custodial sentences in the youth justice system; and £10,000 of additional costs of providing placements in alternative provision settings. This means lifetime costs of £1.6 billion alone for the 2022/23 excluded cohort.

**TABLE 4.2**  
**Cost to the state of permanently excluding a 14-year-old**

Cost type	Lifetime cost	Notes/assumptions
<b>Reduced earnings potential for those who do find work</b>	£110,000	The children who are excluded but still find work experience a reduction in wages compared to similar children who have not been excluded. This cost covers lost income tax and national insurance contributions, as well as additional costs from higher universal credit payments, due to the lower wages linked to permanent exclusion (Haigney 2023).
<b>Costs for those who are not in education, training or work aged 18–24</b>	£15,000	Children who are excluded are more likely to be out of work between the ages of 18 and 24 than similar children who have not experienced a permanent exclusion. This estimate focuses on this group, estimating the cost of lost income tax and national insurance contributions, as well as the cost of higher universal credit contributions, from increased risk of being out of work aged 18–24. The estimate includes an expected long-term impact of being out of work during this critical period on lifetime earnings. <sup>24</sup>
<b>Costs of custodial sentences in the youth justice system</b>	£30,000	Based on the cost to taxpayers of providing a place in a youth custody centre and the increased risk of youth custodial sentences linked to permanent exclusion.
<b>Additional costs of alternative provision placement</b>	£10,000	The difference in the average cost of mainstream and alternative provision school placement for the average period an excluded 14-year-old spends in alternative provision. <sup>25</sup>
<b>Total estimated costs</b>	<b>£170,000<sup>26</sup></b>	

Source: References in table and footnotes.

- 22 Lost learning is correlated with a range of socio-demographic factors that also have a direct impact on long-term outcomes such as academic attainment, labour market outcomes, involvement in the criminal justice system and health outcomes. To provide a robust estimate of the costs of lost learning, it is important to draw on studies that control for these background characteristics.
- 23 This is a ‘present value’ in 2023/24 prices. This means that we have followed standard Treasury green book practice when comparing costs over a long period of time; weighing costs that occur today more heavily than costs that occur a long time in the future.
- 24 Note the “reduced earnings potential” estimate is focused on those in work aged 18 to 24, whereas this is focused on a separate group of those out of work, training or education aged 18 to 24. The long-term wage impact is based on evidence of the impact on being not in education, employment or training (NEET) from Madia et al (2022) and long-term impacts of being NEET on wages from Gregg and Tominay (2004).
- 25 The average cost of alternative provision is taken from Bryant et al (2018), and the average cost of mainstream placement from Sibieta (2018).
- 26 Totals may not sum due to rounding.

This analysis however is likely to represent an underestimate of the total costs to the state. The analysis focuses only on areas where there is sufficient evidence to isolate the impact of permanent exclusions, against the backdrop of other factors. It does not, for example, include the costs of crimes that result in non-custodial sentences. Nor does it reflect the likely impact on the adult criminal justice system, or the likely impacts on health or social care services.

These additional impacts could make a significant difference. For example, the overall reoffending rate of young people given a custodial sentence is around 60 per cent (Youth Justice Board for England and Wales 2024). At a cost of £54,000 per year for a place in an adult prison, the knock-on consequences of increased youth justice system involvement for the over-stretched adult prison service could be substantial (Ministry of Justice et al 2024).

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# APPENDIX

## NATIONAL VARIATION IN AN ELEMENT OF LOST LEARNING

**TABLE A1**

**Lost learning is not seen equally across the country**

*Local authority areas with the highest combined unauthorised absence and suspension rates, based on ranking all local authority areas on both measures independently, and allocating each a score for each measure from 152 to 1 depending on that ranking. The final ranking is based on combining these scores*

Local authority area	Unauthorised absence	Suspension rate
Middlesbrough	4.5%	28.18
Blackpool	4.2%	18.90
Stoke-on-Trent	4%	21.40
Bradford	4%	18.45
Newcastle upon Tyne	4.1%	16.68
Hartlepool	3.7%	19.81
Nottingham	3.7%	17.20
Barnsley	3.5%	20.85
Redcar and Cleveland	3.3%	32.79
Doncaster	3.3%	24.21
Sheffield	4.2%	14.12

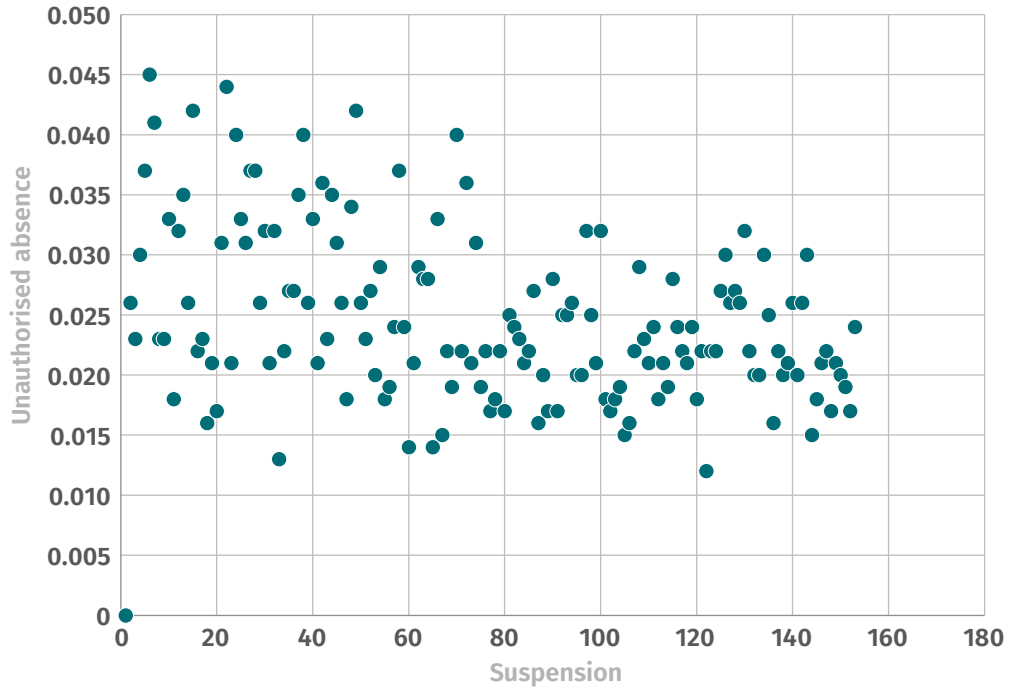
Source: DfE data for 2022/23 (the most recent available data)

There are large geographical discrepancies in the rates of unauthorised absence and suspensions (see table A1). While the national average for unauthorised absence was 2.4 per cent in 2022/23, it was 4.5 per cent in Middlesbrough, and over 4 per cent in Stoke-on-Trent, Blackpool, Bradford, Sheffield and Newcastle upon Tyne. There is a similar pattern of geographic difference on suspensions, with the national suspension rate of 9.33 in 2022/23, but one local authority – Middlesbrough – has a suspension rate of over three times the national average, at 28.18.

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**FIGURE A1**

**Unauthorised absence and suspension rates by local authority area over the 2022/23 period**  
Each dot represents a different local authority area



Source: DfE data for 2022/23 (the most recent available data)

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