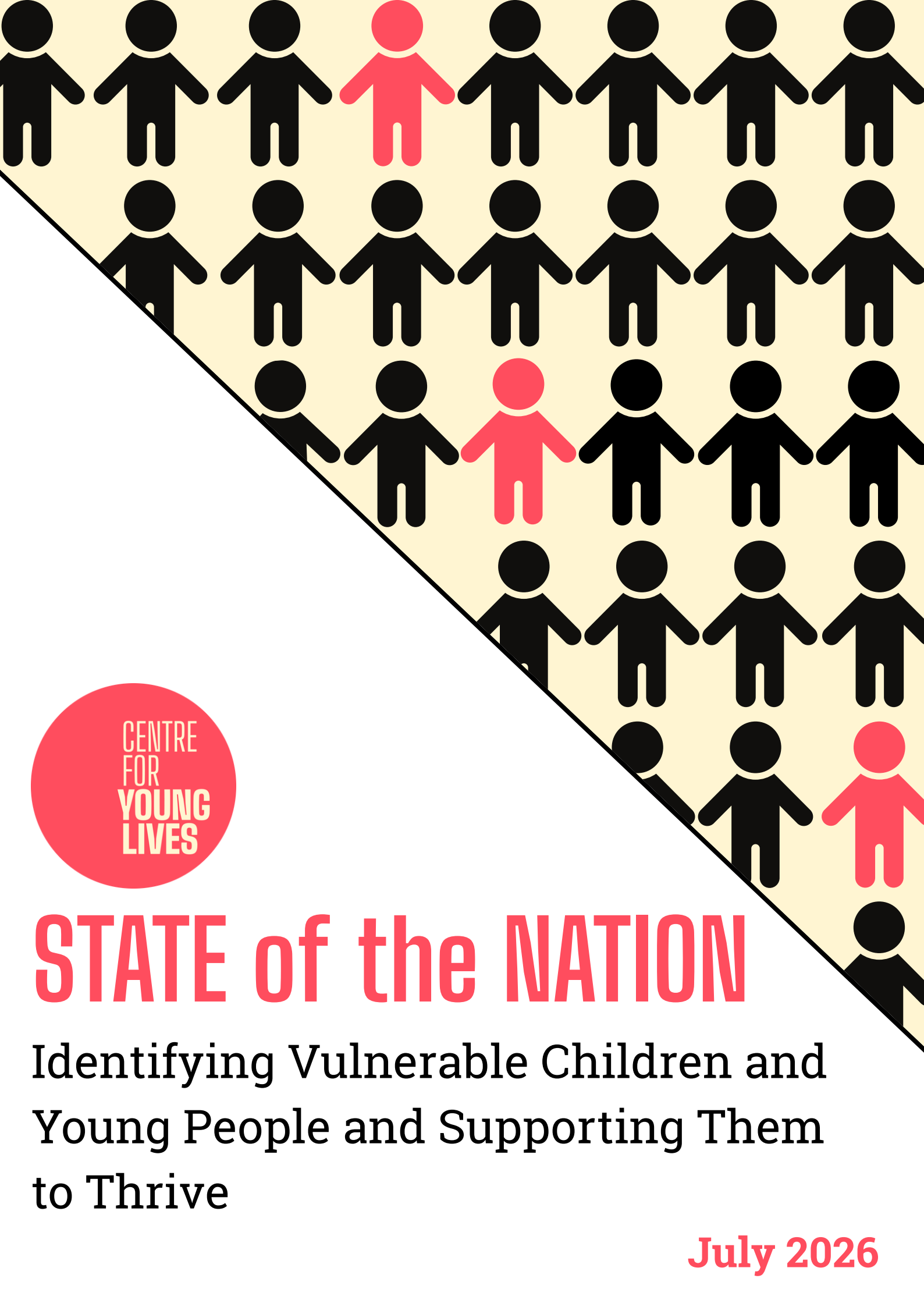




STATE of the NATION

Identifying Vulnerable Children and
Young People and Supporting Them
to Thrive

July 2026

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge support from the Lindley Foundation and the JABBS Foundation for Women and Girls for this report.

Any opinions, inaccuracies, omissions or errors remain the responsibility of the authors.



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Foreword

Most children in England are doing well. At home, they benefit from the stability, relationships and enough of the resources they need to have a good start in life. They have a safe and enjoyable childhood. Their needs are met by services. They stay in school, get a good education, and successfully move into adulthood.

In a country as developed and resourceful as ours, this is a basic standard that every child, in every postcode, ought to be able to expect. But, as this year's State of the Nation report shows, far too many children are denied it.

The devastating impact of growing up in deep poverty or without a secure home is a daily reality for millions of children. Levels of anxiety and poor mental health remain at crisis level, while too many children continue to risk losing learning or falling out of education. Some of the country's most vulnerable children – those taken into care by the state – are increasingly living in potentially inappropriate homes or places. And more than a million young people are not in education, employment or training. This is holding back not only their own life chances but our country's social cohesion and future prosperity.

If left unaddressed, the consequences will continue to ripple through generations: limiting opportunity, weakening communities, and storing up further social and economic costs for the future.

For years, everyone has agreed that this situation is morally, fiscally and economically unacceptable. For years, everyone has agreed that we need to shift away from crisis response to prevention: helping children and families thrive with early on before their problems become entrenched. Yet these issues persist, and in some cases are getting worse. It is time to be honest and admit that whatever we were doing to fix this clearly has not worked.

We cannot claim ignorance: these figures are based on the government's own data. Nor can we claim a lack of evidence: we know what the downstream consequences of these problems are, and we know what works to help children and families thrive. And nor can we claim impotence: many of these issues have been tackled before, and they can be tackled again.

The uncomfortable truth is that this is not the sign of a country that genuinely values all children and genuinely puts their interests first.

Despite some welcome action from the Government, much more work needs to be done to support children, address vulnerability and disadvantage, and prevent any problems they face from reaching crisis level.

What does that look like? Not more of the same – an announcement here, an initiative there, and a couple of pilot programmes. Incremental change will not cut it anymore.

Instead, we need a national grand ambition for children and young people.

The new Prime Minister, Andy Burnham, has set out his intention to bring forward a ten-year plan for the country. He has spoken repeatedly about rewiring the state. This must include a mission to transform the lives of children and young people.

That means recognising that the basic security of a decent home and being able to afford the essentials is the foundation for everything else. It means making sure every child is attending education and engaged in meaningful learning that sets them up to thrive. It means committing to eradicate the number of children growing up in vulnerable circumstances who are not getting the kind of support that will turn their lives around. And it means making sure that no child ever falls through the gap between different services because they are seen as someone else's problem.

There must also be an acknowledgement that this is everyone's business across the whole of government. It is too big to be a schools problem, or an NHS problem, or a social services problem, or a criminal justice problem, and so on. This is about people's lives, not bureaucratic boundaries.

Devolution, if done properly, can begin to unlock this – joining up local services in a place to work collectively around the needs of children, using shared resources, data, outcomes and accountability. This will help them identify and support children much earlier on and prevent crisis.

There is a future in which a reset is possible. A country in which children do not have to reach crisis before receiving help. By focusing relentlessly on prevention, investment and transformation, we can move from managing childhood vulnerability to reducing it – giving every child the foundations for a safe, healthy and hopeful future.

But it starts with real commitment from the top – not only to make this a priority, but also to chart a fundamentally different course.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'H. Chowdry'.

Haroon Chowdry

Chief Executive, Centre for Young Lives

Introduction

The 2026 State of the Nation report provides a snapshot of the scale of need and vulnerabilities facing children and young people in England. Building on the [2025 State of the Nation](#), it collates data and indicators from a range of sources and domains, covering:

- Economic and material deprivation
- Housing-related vulnerability
- Involvement with children's social care
- Experiences of crime, violence or exploitation
- Educational disengagement
- Special educational needs and disabilities
- Health-related vulnerabilities

By combining all of these different types of data, the State of the Nation aims to provide a comprehensive picture of the issues and needs among today's children – and the scale of need where further investment in support is required.

This year's report highlights three interconnected trends. First, more children are growing up in difficult circumstances, with rising poverty and housing insecurity increasing levels of vulnerability. Second, these challenges are increasingly shaping children's experiences, contributing to educational disengagement, poor mental and physical health, growing safeguarding concerns and rising risks of exploitation. Third, the systems designed to support vulnerable children are under sustained pressure, with growing demand outstripping capacity across many services. For some children, the combination of these trends is creating a perfect storm.

Alongside this briefing, a technical appendix containing further detail has been published [here](#).

An interactive online dashboard, where key data can be explored, has also been launched and is available [here](#). This is an initial beta version which will be updated in future with more features, including more indicators and local area data.

Section 1: Children growing up in challenging circumstances

The circumstances that children are growing up in have become more difficult. Sustained poverty, housing insecurity and family adversity are creating more complex forms of vulnerability, with many children and young people now experiencing multiple challenges simultaneously. These pressures can have profound consequences for children's wellbeing, development and life chances.

Poverty continues to shape the lives of millions of children

Child poverty in England has seen a steady rise since 2010, with over 3.5 million children in England living in relative poverty in 2024/25. This equates to around 28% of children – around 8 or 9 children in a typical classroom of 30. In 2024, 2 million children across the UK were living in deep material poverty. This reflects a broader range of financial pressures, including high costs and debt burdens.¹

Across the UK, families with children have been hit particularly hard by the cost-of-living crisis. In 2023, families with children were three times more likely to have fallen behind on bills (27% compared to 9% of families without children) and debt repayments (25% compared to 7%).²

In 2025, the Government published its Child Poverty Strategy, which aims to lift 550,000 children out of relative low income in the final year of the parliament by removing the two-child limit, expanding free school meals, and opening up Free Breakfast Clubs and Best Start Family Hubs across the country.³ However, children's charities have argued that further long-term investment – particularly through strengthening social security and family support – will be required to reduce both the scale and depth of child poverty.⁴

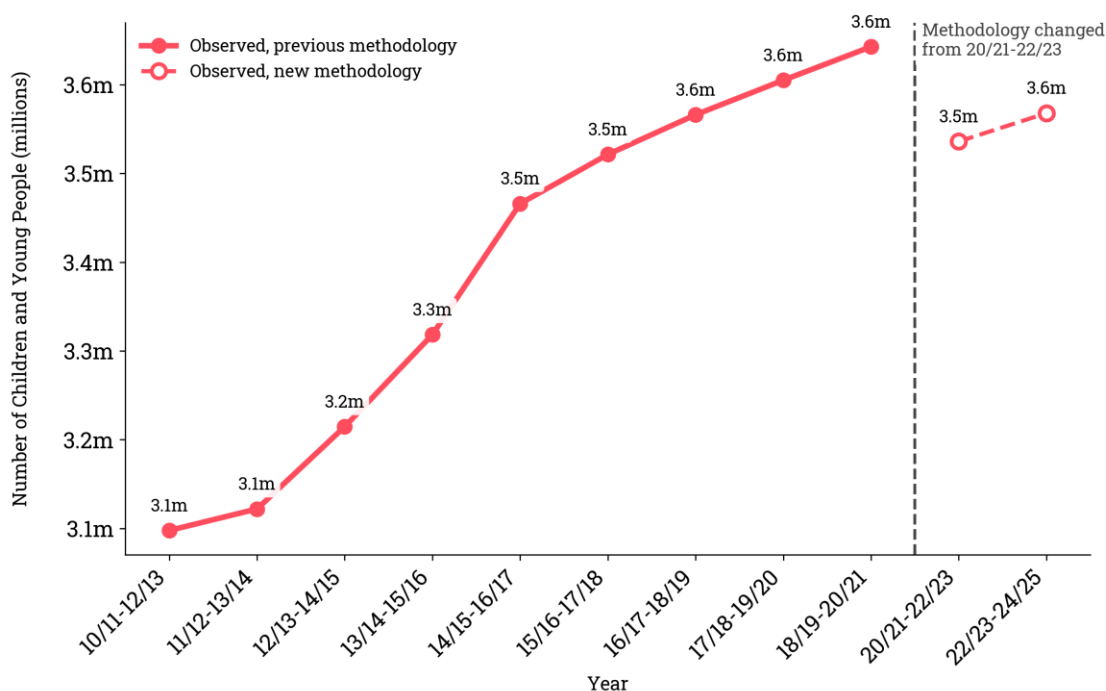
¹ Department for Work and Pensions (2026) [Deep material poverty: Financial year ending 2024](#)

² Action for Children (2023) [A cost of children crisis? The heightened impact of the cost of living crisis on families with children](#)

³ Department for Work and Pensions, Cabinet Office and Department for Education (2025) [Child Poverty Strategy](#)

⁴ Child Poverty Action Group (2025) [CPAG's response to the child poverty strategy](#)

Children Living in Relative Low Income (After Housing Costs, England)



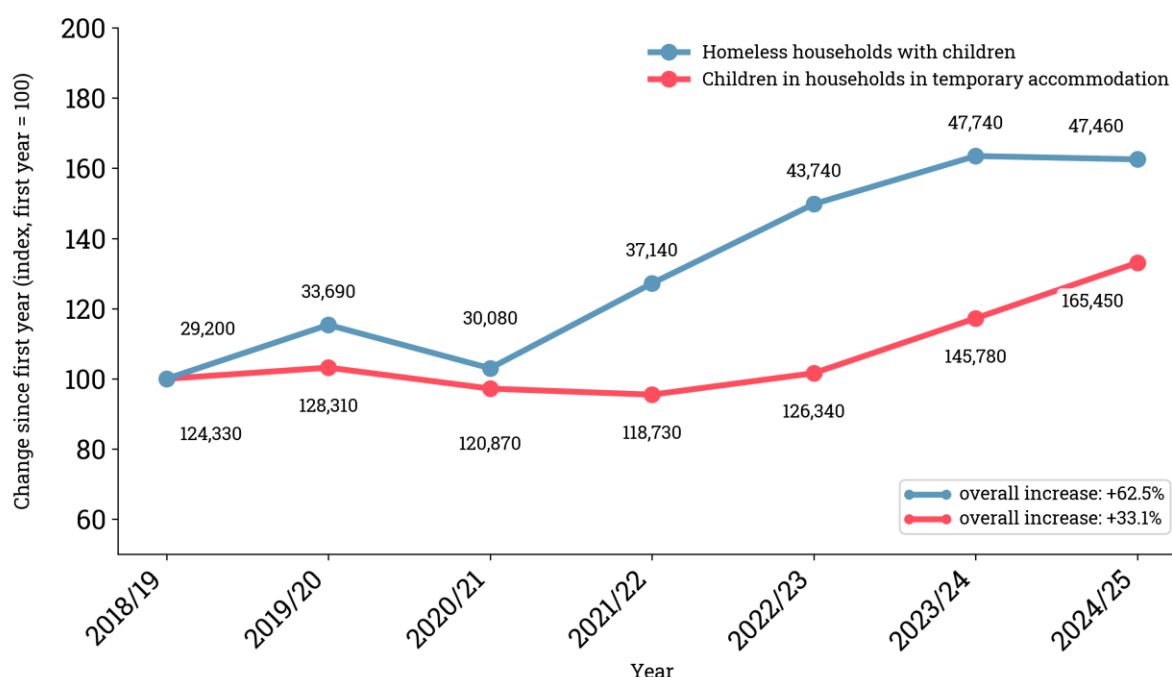
Source: HBAI 2026
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

Housing insecurity is becoming more common

Rising housing costs have meant that growing numbers of children are experiencing homelessness or housing instability.⁵ Between 2018/19 and 2024/25, the number of homeless households with children increased by 62.5%, rising from 29,200 households to 47,460. Since 2021, the number of children living in temporary accommodation has continued to rise, reaching 165,450 children in 2024/25, an increase of 33.1% compared to 2018/19.

⁵ Centre for Homelessness Impact (2026) [The futures we are quietly breaking](#)

Housing-related vulnerability among children in England



Source: Statutory Homelessness Tables (Collection)
 Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

Children in temporary accommodation are often living in extremely poor conditions, with reports of serious damp and mould, excessive cold, and mice infestations. The Housing Communities and Local Government committee found that between 2020 and 2025, temporary accommodation had been a contributing factor to the deaths of at least 74 children, including 58 babies under one.⁶

Households with children are more likely than adult households to live in a cold or damp home.⁷ Children are also the age group most likely to be overcrowded, with one in six living in overcrowded conditions – 1.9 million children in England.⁸

Living in unstable housing can lead to poorer wellbeing and life outcomes. People who have faced housing insecurity as children are more likely to experience anxiety and depression in later childhood, and more likely to have depression into adulthood.⁹ Poor quality housing also plays a role in children's educational outcomes. Research had found that living in damp and overcrowded conditions is strongly associated with lower school attendance, particularly during primary school, and that children living in cold and overcrowded homes have poorer school test results.¹⁰

⁶ Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee (2025) [England's Homeless Children: The crisis in temporary accommodation](#)

⁷ House of Commons Library (2023) [Health inequalities: Cold or damp homes](#)

⁸ National Housing Federation (2023) [Briefing: Overcrowding in England](#)

⁹ Simon on the Streets. [Two crises interlinked – child homelessness and mental health](#)

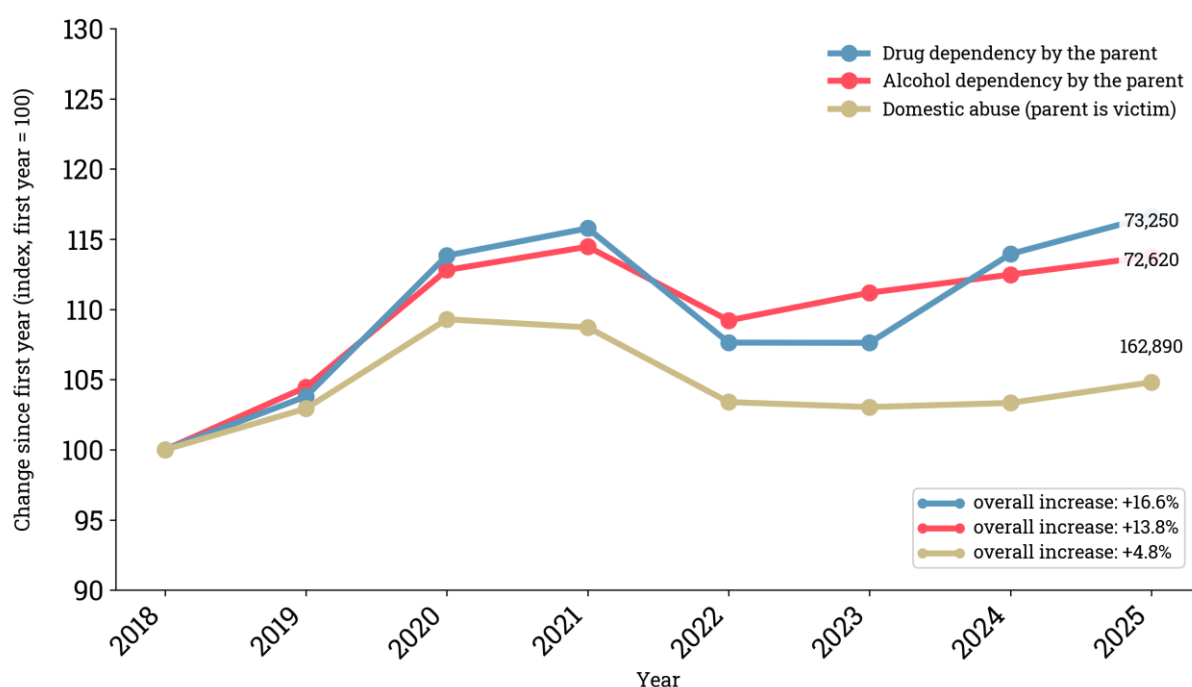
¹⁰ Centre for Longitudinal Studies (2025) [Children in poor quality housing miss more school](#)

Local authorities are reporting parental substance abuse more frequently

Child in Need (CiN) assessments indicate that the number of episodes involving parental drug dependency has returned to levels seen during the pandemic, rising by 16.6% between 2018 and 2025 to 72,620 assessed episodes. Reports of parental alcohol dependency and domestic abuse experienced by a parent have also increased since 2022.

Domestic abuse remains one of the most commonly recorded factors in CiN assessments, with 162,890 CiN assessment identifying the presence of domestic abuse in the household in 2024/25. Yet many families are going without appropriate specialist support. In 2021, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner found that less than a third (29%) of victims and survivors who wanted specialist support for their children were able to access it.¹¹

Children in families with complex needs (n.º of CiN episodes)



Source: Children in Need, reporting year 2025
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

¹¹ Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2025) [Tell Nicole "Our feeling matter" Children's views on the support they need after experiencing domestic abuse](#)

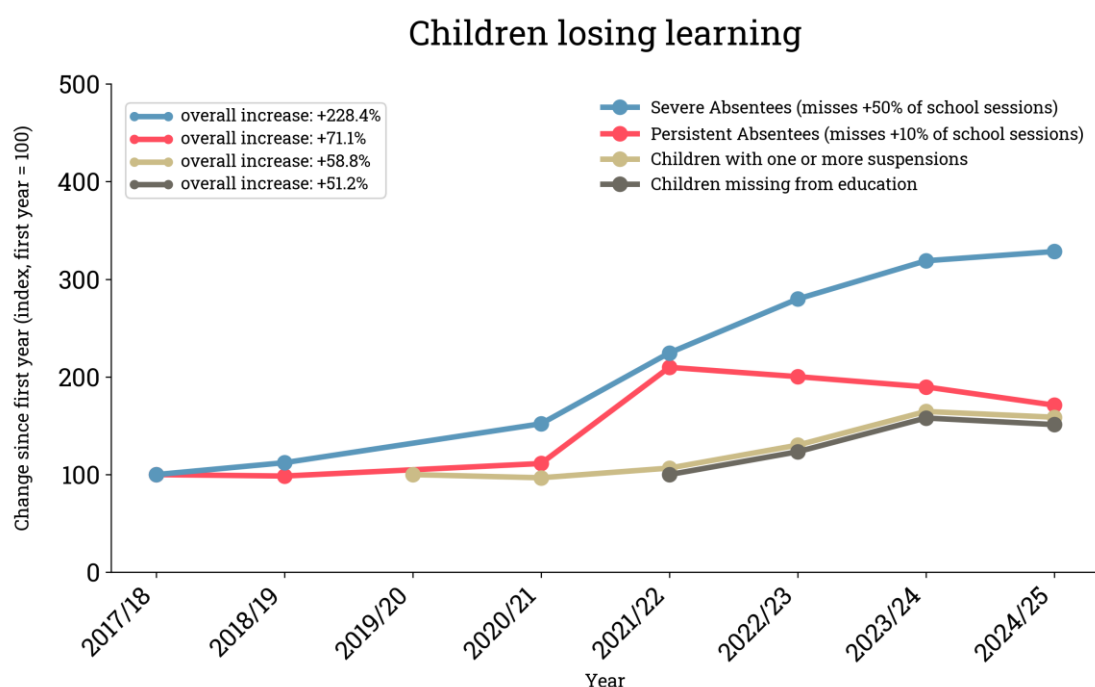
Section 2: Children showing early signs of being at risk

The challenges children experience at home and in their communities do not remain isolated from other areas of their lives. Poverty, family adversity and unmet support needs can affect children's health, educational engagement and vulnerability to harm. Increasingly, these pressures are reflected in the ways that children engage with school, their physical wellbeing, and their exposure to safeguarding risks such as criminal exploitation.

Too many children are missing out on education

Since the pandemic, high levels of pupil absence have been one of the most significant challenges facing schools in England. The government aims to improve attendance to over 94% by 2028/29.¹²

While the number of children who are persistently absent (defined as missing more than 10% of school) has been decreasing since 2021, levels of severe absence (defined as missing more than half of school) have continued to rise, more than tripling between 2017/18 and 2024/25, to almost 180,000 children. This suggests a growing group of children facing significant and entrenched barriers to engagement with education.



Source: Pupil Absence in School in England (2024/25); Suspensions and Permanent Exclusions in England (2024/25); Children Missing Education (Autumn Term, 2024/25) Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

The number of children suspended from school remains high, even though it has dipped in the most recent year. Since 2017/18, the number of children with one or more suspensions increased by over 70%, reaching 326,674 children in 2024/25. Children who are repeatedly

¹² Department for Education (2026) [Every child thriving and achieving](#)

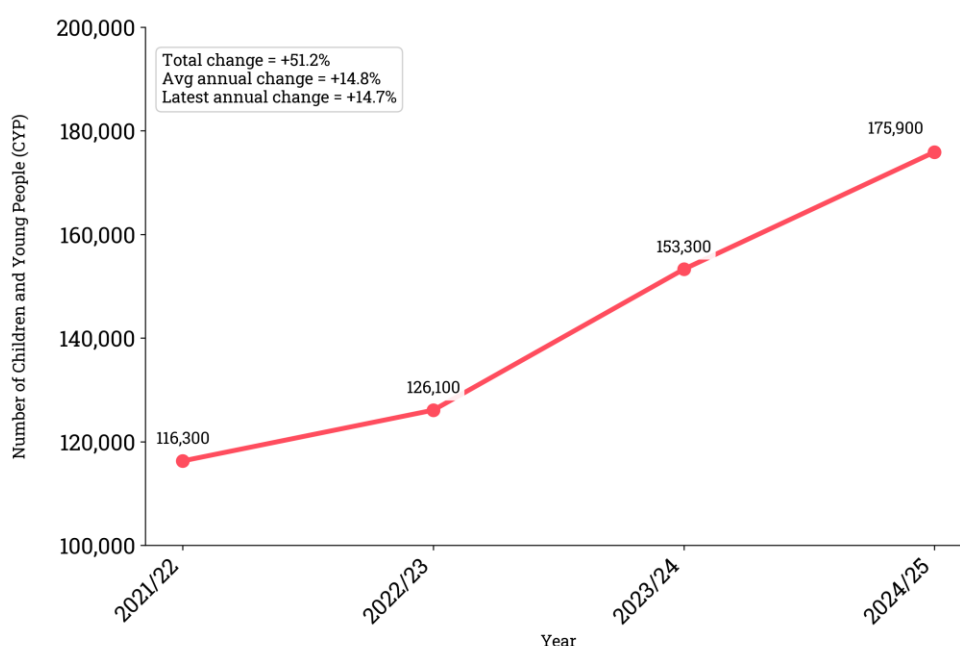
suspended often miss significant time in school and are at greater risk of becoming involved in violence.¹³ There is evidence that some groups of children are suspended from schools at much higher rates, including those eligible for free school meals, those identified as having special educational needs, and children from Gypsy/Roma, Traveller or Irish Heritage, White and Black Caribbean, and Black Caribbean ethnic groups.¹⁴

More children are being home educated

The number of children in elective home education has been sharply increasing since 2021 and now stands at record levels. While children can be home-educated for aspirational and philosophical reasons, it becomes a concern where it occurs as a result of issues at school (including unmet needs or threat of exclusion) – or if there are safeguarding issues as a result. Mental health concerns, general school dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction over SEND support were the most cited reasons parents gave for withdrawing their children for home education.¹⁵

However, the number of Elective Home Education Officers in place within local authorities to support home educating families has not grown proportionately to enable them to safeguard and support this larger cohort of children.¹⁶

CYP who are electively home educated at any point in the academic year (England)



Source: Children in Need, reporting year 2025
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

Guidance by the Department for Education states that local authorities, schools and other key professionals should work together to coordinate a meeting with parents or carers electing to

¹³ Youth Endowment Fund (2025) [More suspensions and exclusions mean more children at risk of violence](#)

¹⁴ Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (2024) [Permanent exclusions and suspensions: The stories behind the data](#)

¹⁵ Department for Education (2026) [Elective home education](#)

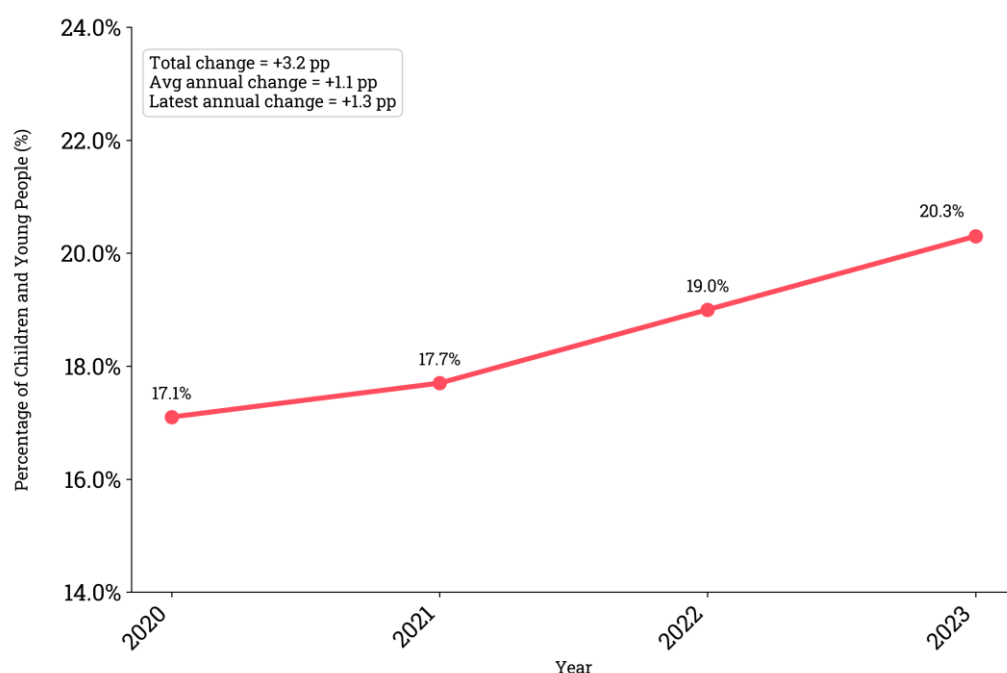
¹⁶ NSPCC (2025) [Tipping point: tackling the challenges in safeguarding children educated at home](#)

home educate. In 2024, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel found that in 27 cases where children educated at home died or were seriously harmed, these meetings had not taken place.¹⁷

One in five children has a mental health issue

In 2023, one in five children and young people (20.3%) was reported to have a probable mental health disorder. The severity of cases has also been increasing in the years since the pandemic.¹ Children and young people are now rarely seeking help for a single mental health difficulty, but are presenting with multiple, complex needs which require specialist help.²

CYP aged 8 to 16 with significant emotional and mental health issues (England)

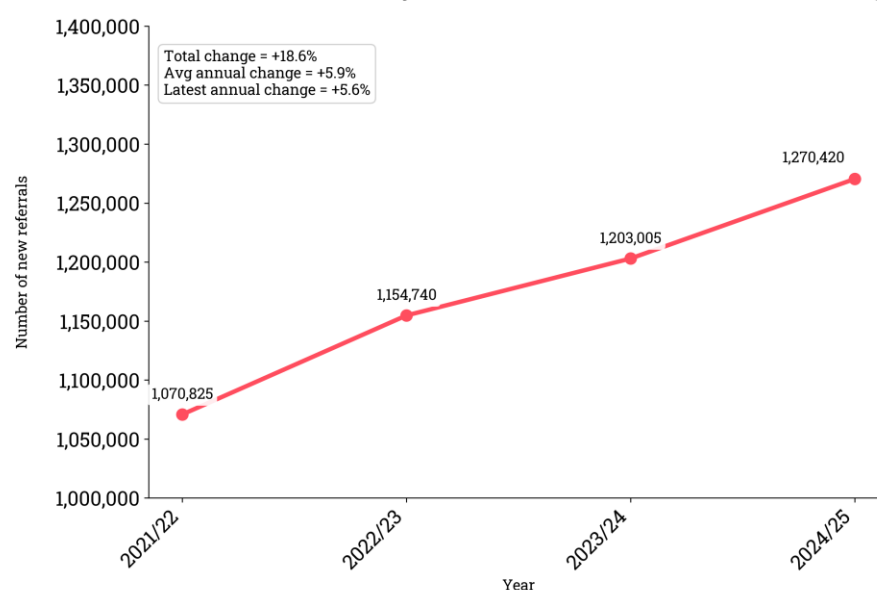


Source: Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2023 (Wave 4 Follow Up Survey)
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

Demand for mental health services has been rising, and services have been unable to keep up, leading to a treatment gap in children's mental health services, with the NHS only able to support around 40% of those in need.³ In 2024/25, over a million children had an active referral for Children and Young People's Mental Health Services – almost double the number recorded in 2018/19.⁴

¹⁷ Association of Directors of Children's Services (2025) [ADCS Safeguarding Pressures Research – Phase 9](#)

Number of new referrals to secondary mental health services from CYP aged 0-17 (England)



Source: Mental Health Act Statistics, Annual Figures
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

Over the past two decades, psychological distress has increased most clearly among young people, a change from previous age-based patterns.¹⁸ Rising distress among young people is linked to educational disruption, school absence, disengagement from work and training, and high rates of young people not in education, employment or training.

Childhood obesity remains stubbornly high

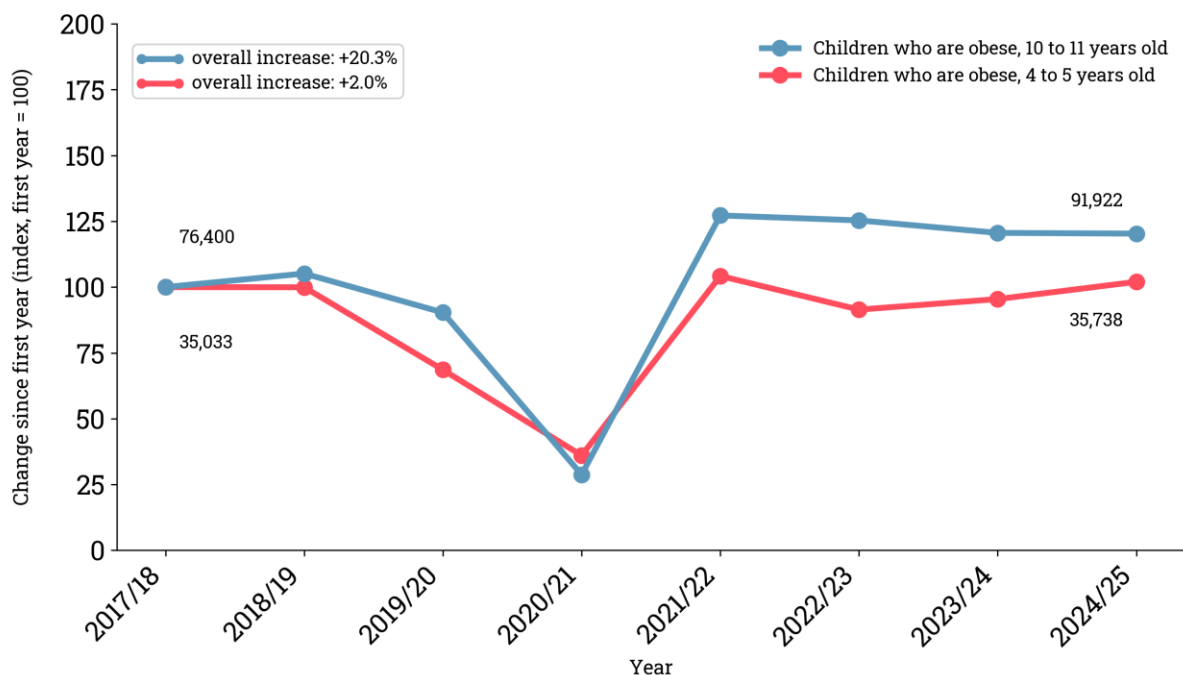
Childhood obesity continues to exceed pre-pandemic levels. The prevalence of obesity has increased with age, with obesity affecting nearly 92,000 children aged 10 to 11 in 2024/25. Obesity rates disproportionately impact children living in deprived communities, with the gap between the most and least deprived groups widening across the last ten years.¹⁹ These figures demonstrate urgent need for preventative action. In 2025, the Government outlined steps it was taking to remove these inequalities and improve children's health, including restrictions on junk food advertising and high-caffeine energy drinks, expanded free school meals, and universal free breakfast clubs.²⁰

¹⁸ Department of Health & Social Care (2026) [Independent review into mental health conditions, ADHD and autism: interim report](#)

¹⁹ Ochoa-Moreno et al (2024) [Projected health and economic effects of the increase in childhood obesity during the COVID-19 pandemic in England: The potential cost of inaction](#) PLoS ONE 19(1) e0296013.

²⁰ Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England, Department for Education (2025) [Government acts to tackle rising childhood obesity epidemic](#)

Childhood Obesity in England



Source: National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) annual report, academic year 2024 to 2025, England
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

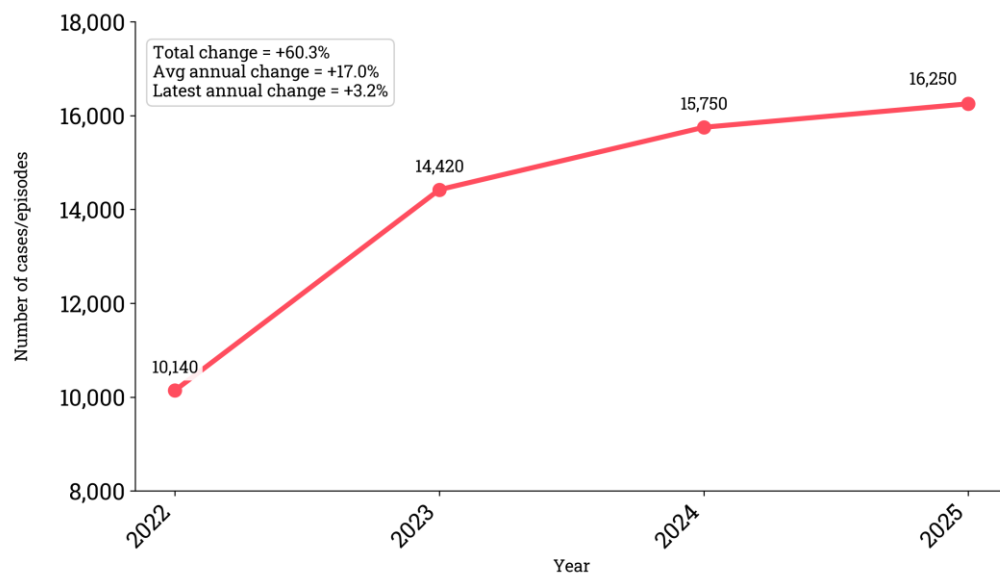
Recorded child criminal exploitation has been rising

Between 2022 and 2025, the number of Child in Need assessments reporting child criminal exploitation increased by 60%. With no statutory definition of Child Criminal Exploitation, and no crime code associated with it, the true scale of Child Criminal Exploitation remains unknown, and these figures are very likely to be an underestimate.²¹ Gendered understandings of criminal exploitation also mean that girls are often not properly identified as victims.²² In a 2023 survey of Barnardo's practitioners, almost half (45%) of practitioners felt that children and young people were at a greater risk of being sexually and/or criminally exploited due to the cost-of-living crisis.

²¹ Barnardo's (2023) [Child Exploitation: A Hidden Crisis](#)

²² The Guardian (2026) [Rise in numbers of girls being identified as victims in county lines exploitation, data shows](#)

CiN episodes with child criminal exploitation as an assessment factor (England)



Source: Children in Need, reporting year, 2025
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

Section 3: Pressures on services for vulnerable children

As more children experience poverty, poor mental health, family adversity and other vulnerabilities, demand for support services has increased significantly. Rising numbers of children with complex and overlapping needs have created additional pressure on local authorities, who have simultaneously seen a reduction in their spending power since 2010.⁵

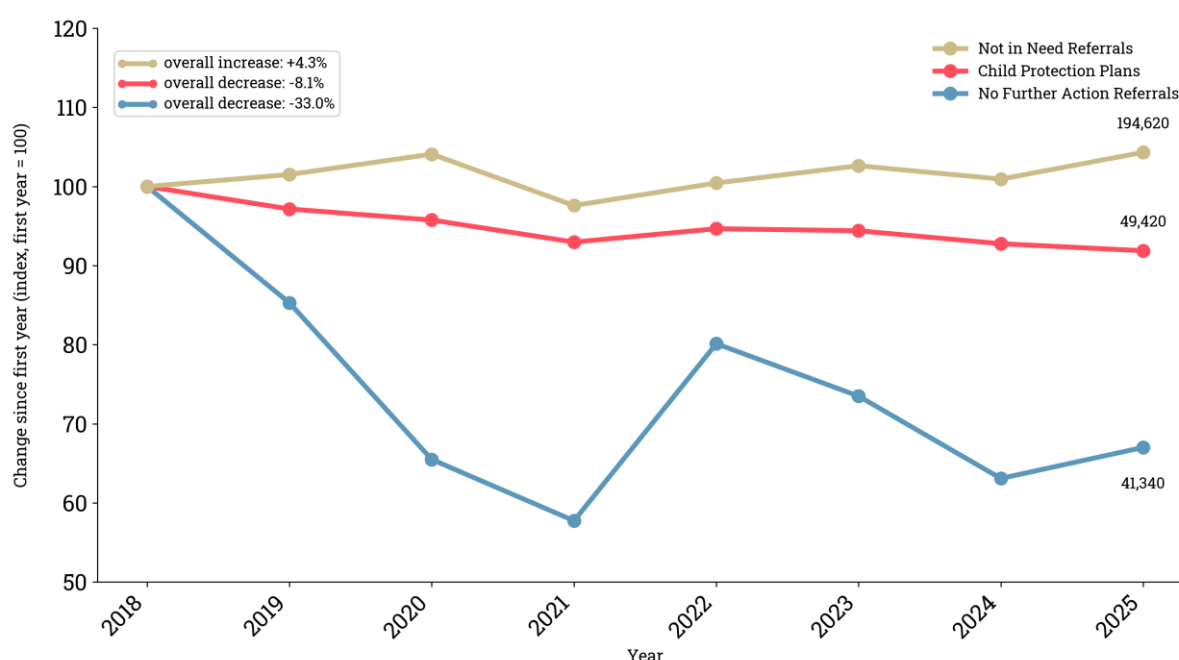
Service provision has not kept pace with growing demand, leaving many services struggling to respond to children's needs at the earliest opportunity. Over the past 15 years, children's services spending has shifted away from early intervention – including family support, children's centres, youth services, parenting programmes and community-based help – towards late intervention, including social care, child protection and youth justice.⁶ As a result, many services are now supporting children with more complex needs while operating under growing financial and capacity pressures.

Many vulnerable children are missing out on timely support

The number of Child in Need referrals resulting in 'no further action' decreased by 33% between 2018 and 2025. This may reflect fewer inappropriate referrals and improved identification of need. However, referrals resulting in assessments that children are not in need of statutory support are now above pre-pandemic levels, and increased by 3.4% between 2024 and 2025. Alongside fewer child protection plans, this may also suggest increasing demand among children whose vulnerabilities warrant assessment but do not meet thresholds for ongoing support, particularly in the context of sustained financial pressures on local authorities and wider pressures on safeguarding services.⁷

Data published by the Department for Education revealed that 49% of children referred to social care services in 2019 were re-referred by 2024.⁸ The data also highlighted that children who exit the system following lower levels of intervention are more likely to be re-referred, and when they return, are more likely to require higher levels of support. The high level of re-referrals raises questions about whether support is being provided early enough, for long enough, or at the intensity required to prevent circumstances from worsening.

Children at Risk of Harm



Growing SEND is placing pressure on support systems

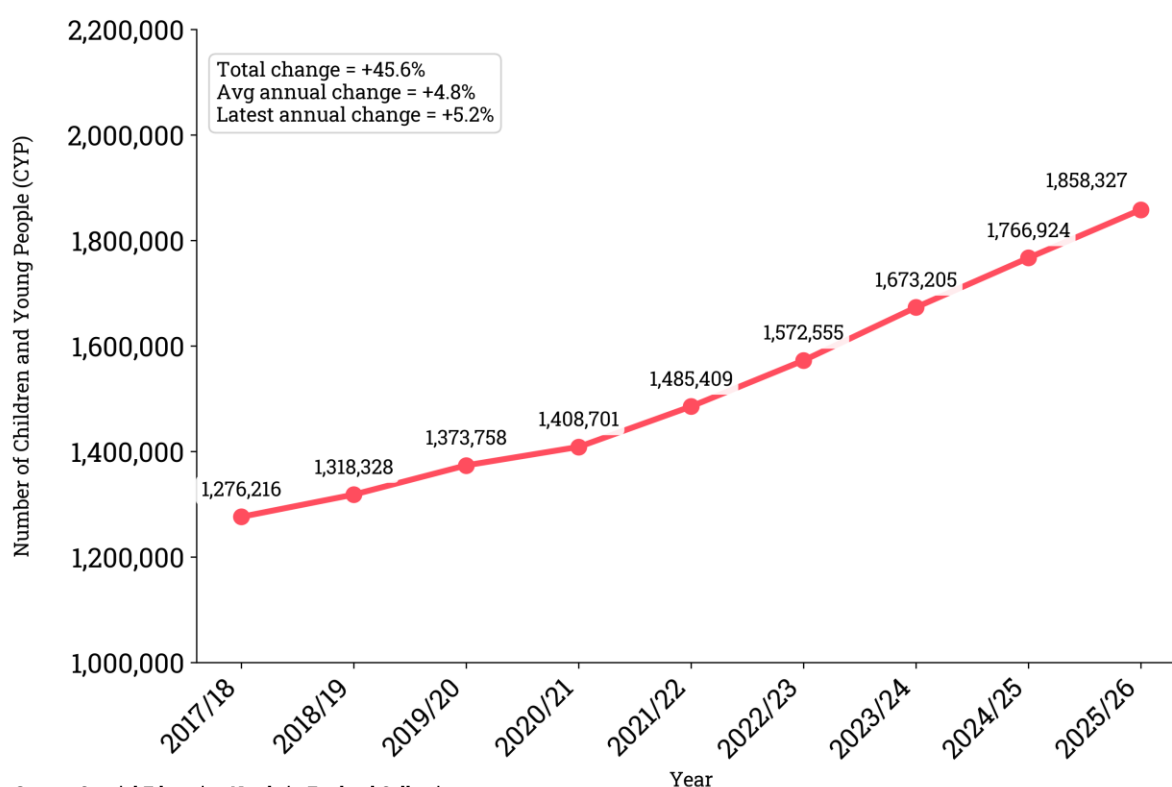
Since 2017, the number of children identified with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) has continued to rise. Latest figures reveal that over 1.8 million children in England have SEND, the highest level on record, up by just under 100,000 in a single year. The number of children with an Education, Health and Care Plan, the highest level of support for children with SEND, has increased by over 110% over the last decade.

There is no single explanation for the growth in the number of children identified with SEND. Possible factors include improved awareness and identification of additional needs, greater cultural acceptance of neurodiversity and disability, and changes in children's needs following the COVID-19 pandemic.²³ In particular, increases in Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnoses are often cited as important contributors to the growth in identified SEND.²⁴

²³ Education Committee (2025) [Solving the SEND crisis](#)

²⁴ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2025) [Support for children with disabilities and special education needs](#)

CYP with Special Education Needs (SEN) (England)



Source: Special Education Needs in England Collection
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

Despite growing recognition of need, many children continue to face significant delays in accessing assessment and support. Children with neurodevelopmental conditions are sometimes waiting years for a diagnosis.²⁵ Within community health services, the median wait for a neurodevelopmental diagnosis was 2 years and 3 months.²⁶

Rising demand has placed significant pressure on local authority SEND budgets and education systems. Since 2016, costs have exceeded funding provided by central government, leading many councils to accumulate debts that are forecast to reach £8 billion by 2028.²⁷ Schools often struggle to provide high quality, consistent support, lacking the resources needed for specialist staff, tailored interventions and inclusive environments.²⁸

More children are waiting for mental health support

Growing demand for mental health services is placing pressure on support for children. Waiting times for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have grown significantly, driven by an increase in referrals to the service. More than 60,000 children and

²⁵ Children's Commissioner (2024) [Waiting times for assessment and support for autism, ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions](#)

²⁶ [Ibid](#)

²⁷ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2025) [Rapid rise in children receiving support for special educational needs and disabilities drives spending ever higher](#)

²⁸ Education Committee (2025) [Solving the SEND crisis](#)

young people referred to CAMHS waited over two years for support in 2024/25, an increase from over 44,000 the previous year.²⁹

The number of children in residential care continues to rise

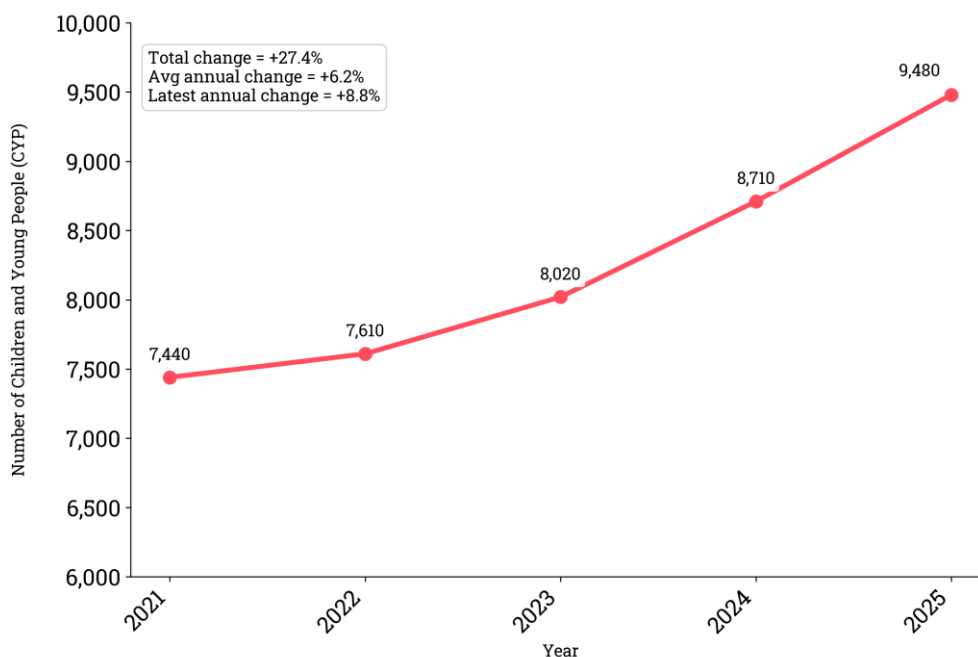
The growth in the number of children in residential care reflects the perfect storm of increasing vulnerability and growing pressure on support services. Rising poverty, family adversity, mental health challenges, exploitation and reduced access to preventative support can all contribute to children reaching a point where more intensive intervention is required.

Between 2021 and 2025, the number of children in secure homes and children's homes in England rose from 7,440 to 9,480 – a 27.4% increase overall, and an 8.8% increase from 2024 to 2025.

The increasing reliance on residential settings reflects a number of challenges, including a shortage of foster carers, increases in the number of older children in care, and greater complexity of need.³⁰

Evidence shows that compared to children in other types of care, those living in residential care have more emotional and behavioural issues, poorer educational outcomes, and are more likely to have psychiatric disorders.³¹

Number of looked after children in secure homes and children's homes (England)



Source: Children Looked After in England Including Adoptions 2025
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

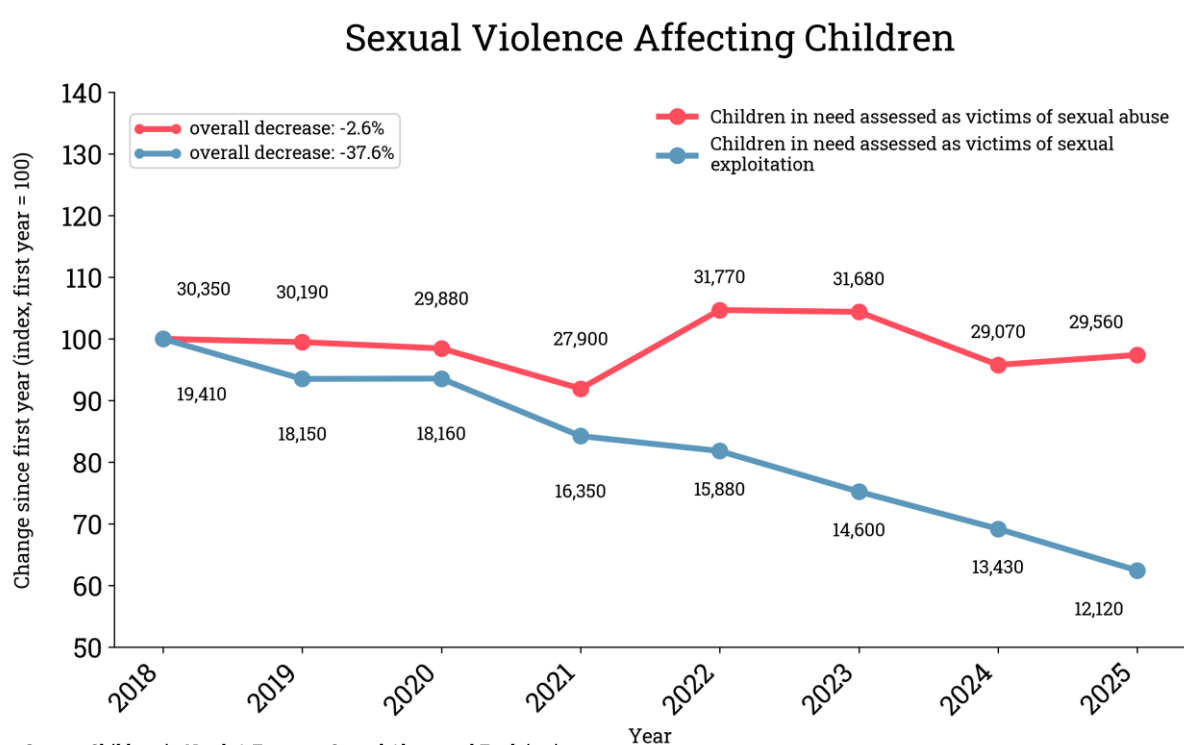
²⁹ Children's Commissioner (2026) [Over a million children referred to mental health services, with highest annual referrals as demand rises faster than systems can respond](#)

³⁰ Institute for Government (2026). [Fixing the children's social care market: Available placements do not meet the needs of children in care.](#)

³¹ Foundations (2022). [Understanding residential care for children in care in England.](#)

Child sexual abuse continues to be poorly identified

The number of children in need assessed as victims of sexual exploitation has consistently decreased, falling 33.7% between 2017 and 2025. On the other hand, the number of children in need assessed as victims of sexual abuse has been relatively stable since 2018, at around 30,000 children per year. However, evidence suggests that under-identification continues to be the norm, undermining reliable conclusions about the real prevalence of indicators measuring sexual violence affecting children. In 2024, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel found practitioners frequently lacked the skills, knowledge and confidence to recognise sexual abuse.³²



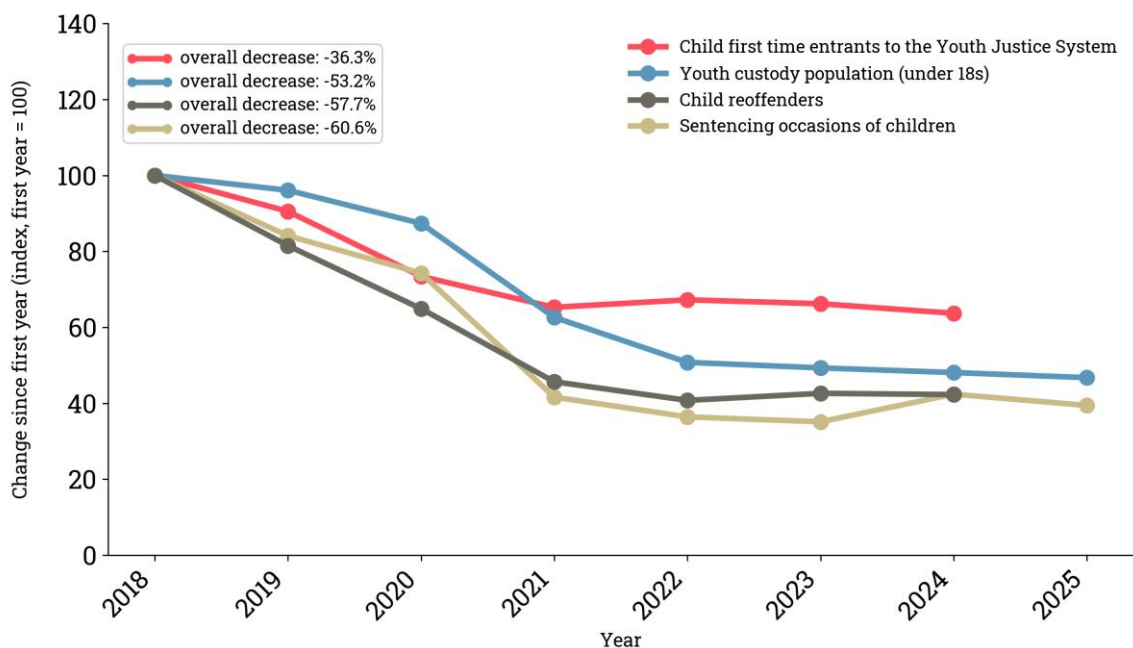
Fewer young people are entering the youth justice system – but this cohort is increasingly complex and disadvantaged

In 2024, the number of young people across England and Wales entering the youth justice system for the first time fell to 8,110, dropping by over a third since 2018. Between 2017 and 2025, the number of young people in youth custody decreased by over 50%, falling from 868 young people to 418.

³² The Child Safeguarding Review Panel (2024) [“I wanted them all to notice” Protecting children and responding to child sexual abuse within the family environment](#)

While youth justice outcomes have improved overall, significant inequalities remain. The decline in the number of young people in the justice system has been attributed by many to the success of alternative routes such as out-of-court disposals.³³ However, while these diversion schemes are considered to have played a part in reducing the number of children being formally processed, White children may have benefitted more than children from other ethnic backgrounds.³⁴ The over-representation of children from Black and Mixed ethnicities in youth custody remains a significant concern, with Black and Mixed ethnicity children more likely than White children to receive a custodial remand outcome.³⁵ Between 2014 and 2024, the proportion of children with a Mixed ethnicity in custody doubled.³⁶

Children in the Youth Justice System



Source: Youth Justice Statistics: 2024 to 2025
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

³³ House of Commons Justice Committee (2020) [Children and Young People in Custody \(Part 1\): Entry into the youth justice system](#)

³⁴ [Ibid](#)

³⁵ Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (2025) [The evolving response to ethnic disproportionality in youth justice](#)

³⁶ [Ibid](#)

Section 4: The result – young people experiencing harm or diminished life chances

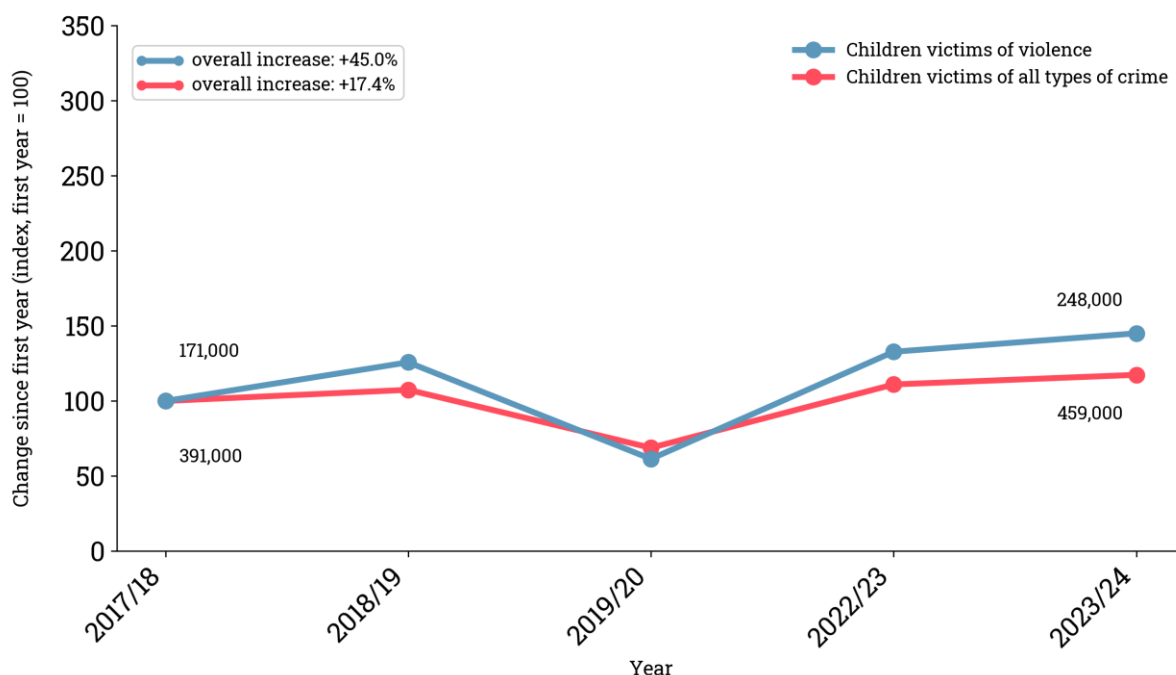
For some children, the combination of these trends is creating a perfect storm. Where children have multiple vulnerabilities and support is not available early enough, needs can escalate and become entrenched, increasing the likelihood of poor outcomes and more intensive intervention later on.

Youth crime and violence is rising

Rising levels of youth crime and violence also reflect the interaction of multiple vulnerabilities. Children who experience poverty, poor mental health, educational disengagement, exploitation and unmet support needs are often exposed to increased safeguarding risks. Where challenges are not identified and addressed early, some children can become both victims and perpetrators of harm.

Between 2017/18 and 2023/24, the number of children across England and Wales who were victims of crime rose from 391,000 to 459,000, based on the Crime Survey for England and Wales (see below). Across the same period, the number of children who were victims of violence increased by 45%, from 171,000 to 248,000.

Children victims of crime (England & Wales)



Source: Crime in England and Wales: Annual Supplementary Tables
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

Youth violence disproportionately affects children and young people with unidentified or unmet needs, particularly those who may be neurodivergent.³⁷ In 2024, the Government launched the Coalition to Tackle Knife Crime, bringing together campaign groups, families, community leaders and survivors. Since the start of this Parliament, knife crime has fallen by 8%, and knife homicides by 27%.³⁸ Sustaining this decline will require continued investment in evidence-based approaches to preventing youth violence.

Victimisation and perpetration often go hand in hand. A survey of children's experiences of violence found that 39% of 13–17-year-olds who had been victims of violence in the previous year also reported perpetrating violence. Among those who had experienced serious violence (i.e. requiring medical treatment), 57% reported perpetrating violence of any type and 37% reported perpetrating serious violence.³⁹

More children in care are living in inappropriate places

The number of children being placed away from home has been increasing since 2018. Though local authorities are legally required, where practical, to provide accommodation within the local area so children in their care can live near home, many cannot meet this duty because of local shortages in provision.⁴⁰ Between 2020/21 and 2023/24, there has also been a growth in the number of children in unregistered children's homes.

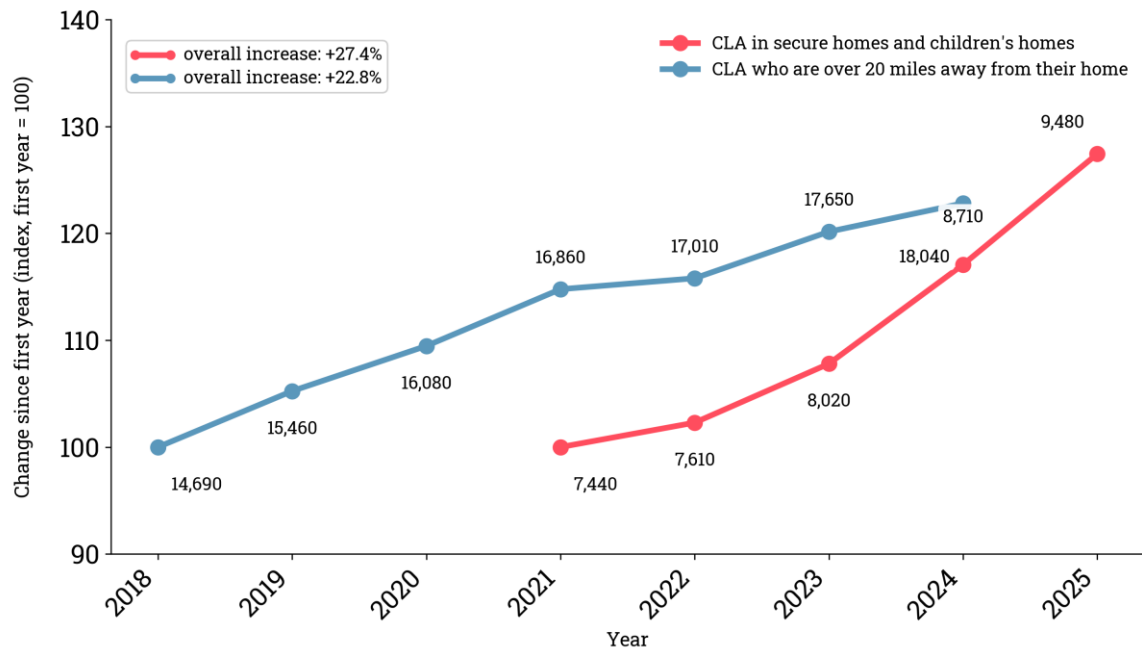
³⁷ Ofsted, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, HM Inspectorate of Probation & Care Quality Commission (2024) [Serious youth violence more far-reaching than many realise](#)

³⁸ Home Office (2026) [Protecting lives, building hope: a plan to halve knife crime](#)

³⁹ Youth Endowment Fund (2025) [Children, violence and vulnerability 2025: The scale of violence affecting children](#)

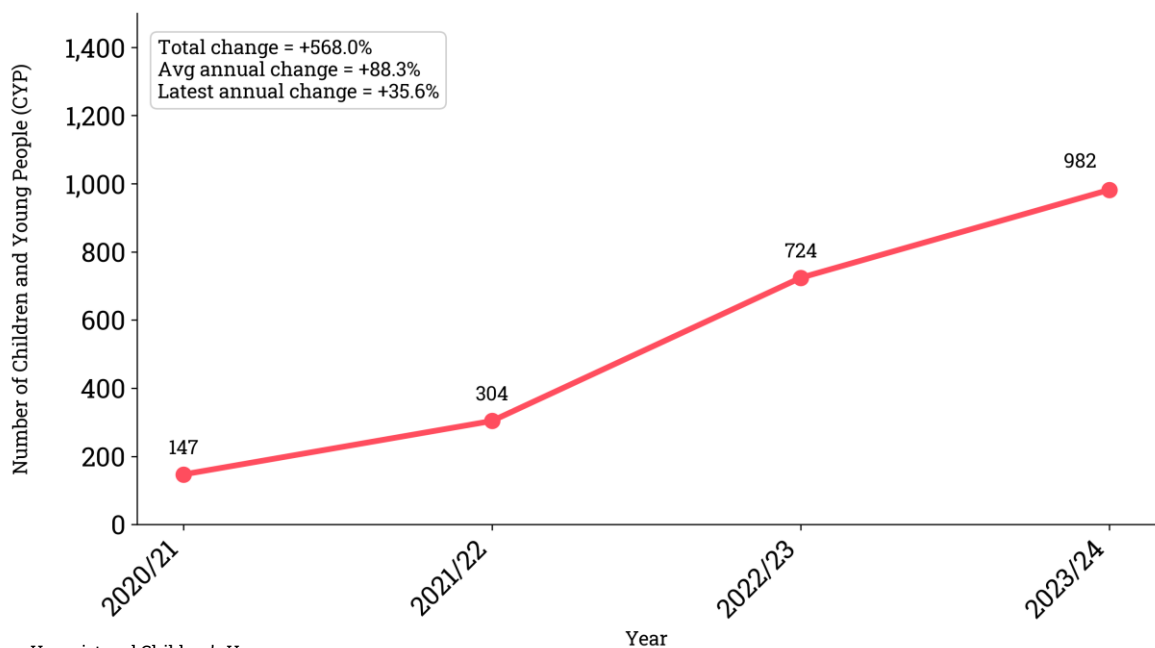
⁴⁰ Institute for Government (2026) [Fixing the children's social care market: Available placements do not meet the needs of children in care](#)

Children Looked After (CLA)



Source: Children Looked After in England, including adoptions 2025; CLA who are over 20 miles away from their home: Children Looked After, a focus on placement location
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

Number of children in unregistered children's homes (England)



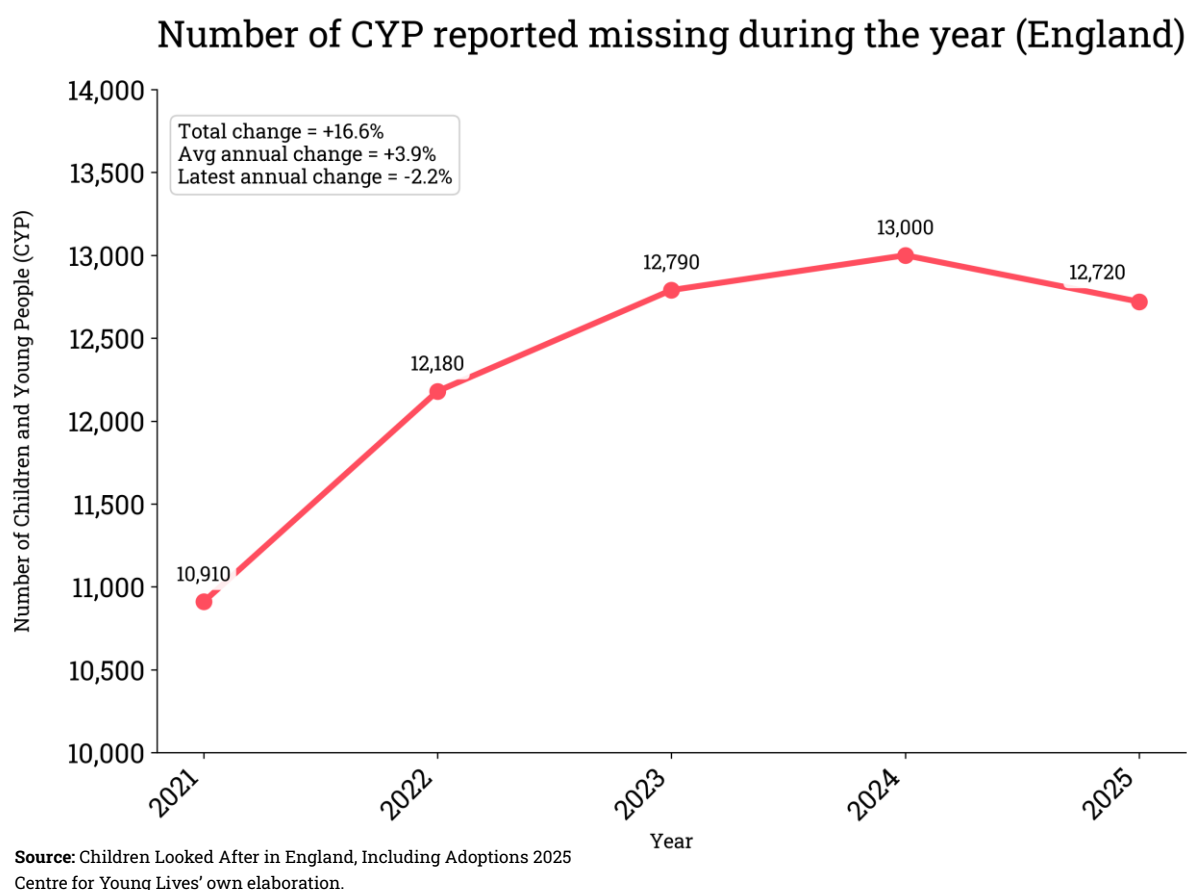
Source: Unregistered Children's Homes
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

Both the rise of children being placed away from home, and the rise of numbers of children in unregistered children's homes, suggest wider supply shortages in the children's care market.

However, evidence also suggests that a key driver may be related to the lack of provision for children with complex needs.⁴¹

Too many children in care are going missing

The number of children going missing from care remains high. In 2025, 12,720 children in care were reported missing, a slight decrease from 13,000 in 2024. Children who go missing are at risk of harm or danger, including sexual exploitation or grooming.⁴²



A worsening NEET crisis

The rise in young people who are not in education, employment or training represents one of the clearest examples of how the perfect storm of vulnerability can affect later outcomes.

For some young people, unmet needs during childhood contribute to difficulties making the transition into adulthood. In 2025, an estimated 839,893 young people aged 16–24 were not in education, employment or training in England (NEET). Many young people in this group would have experienced a range of challenges that contribute to vulnerability, including poor mental

⁴¹ Public First (2026) [Hidden Children: An investigation into Unregistered Children's Homes](#)

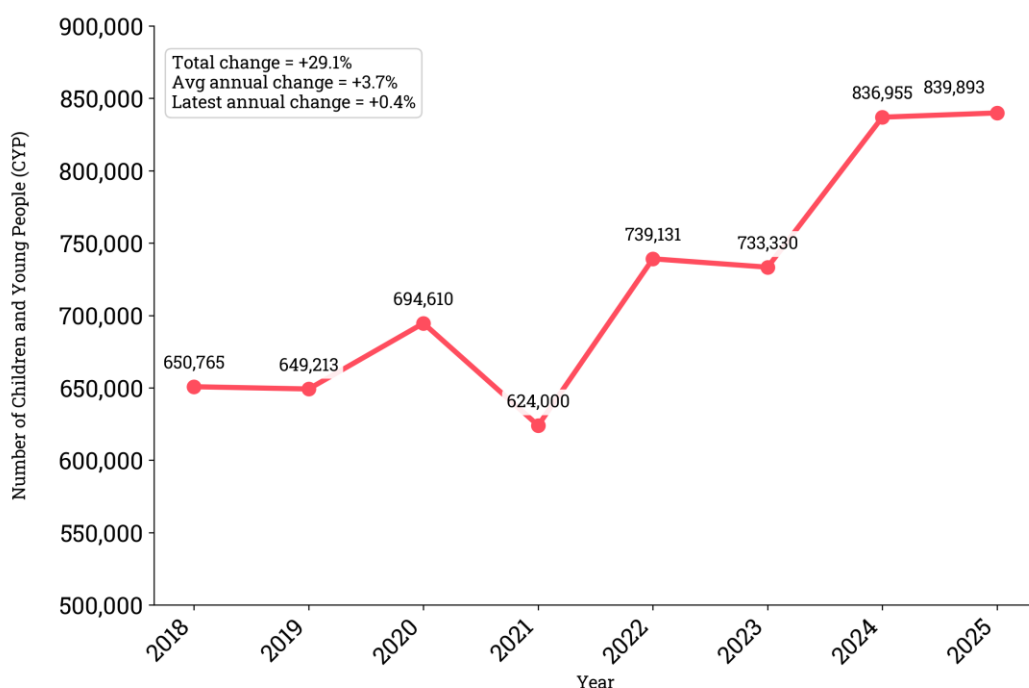
⁴² Safeguarding Network (2025) [Missing Children](#)

health, special educational needs and disabilities, persistent absence from education and family instability.

Our recent report found that across the UK, young people who are economically inactive now make up the majority of the NEET population, while over a quarter are NEET because of long-term sickness or disability. Poor mental health is increasingly cited as a significant barrier to participation in education and employment.

These trends suggest that rising NEET levels are not solely a labour market issue. Rather, they may reflect the cumulative impact of childhood vulnerabilities that have not been identified early enough, or for which support has not been available at the right time. The growth in the NEET population illustrates how the perfect storm of poverty, poor mental health, educational disengagement and unmet need can continue to shape opportunities and outcomes long after childhood.

CYP identified as NEET (aged 16-24) in the Q4 of the respective year (England)



Source: NEET and NET Estimates from the LFS
Centre for Young Lives' own elaboration.

Conclusions and recommendations

Children and young people need our help

Many forms of childhood vulnerability have become more widespread in the years since the pandemic. More children are growing up in difficult circumstances, with rising poverty, housing insecurity, and poor mental health placing increasing pressure on children, young people and their families.

These challenges are increasingly shaping children's experiences and behaviours. More children are disengaging from education, spending time outside mainstream school settings, and becoming vulnerable to exploitation and other safeguarding risks.

At the same time, the systems designed to support vulnerable children are struggling to keep pace with rising demand. Long waiting times for mental health and SEND support, shortages of specialist provision, and increasing pressures on children's social care mean that many children are not receiving help early enough. As a result, needs that might once have been addressed through early intervention are increasingly becoming more complex and entrenched.

The Government has taken some important steps to respond to these challenges, including its Child Poverty Strategy, the expansion of Family Hubs, reforms to improve school attendance, the Youth Guarantee, proposals to reform the SEND system, and measures aimed at improving children's safety and wellbeing online. The ongoing Milburn Review into youth inactivity, and the Prevalence Review into rising demand on services for ADHD, autism and mental health reflect a welcome focus on understanding the root causes of these trends. Together, these initiatives signal a renewed focus on prevention and early intervention.

While these programmes and initiatives are welcome, they are not enough on their own. Across all of the issues touched on in this report – including safeguarding, social care, mental health, youth justice, youth employment, and others – we see chronic institutional problems that make joined-up early intervention and prevention harder and more piecemeal than it should be. These include:

- Departments working in silos, with accountability for the same children split across agencies who do not communicate or work with each other enough
- Public services focus on firefighting, 'core business' and managing current acute spend
- Budgets and outcomes not being shared underneath a single overarching framework
- Services being accountable for narrow operational performance rather than working together in children's best interests
- Data and information not shared across departments and services to build a holistic understanding children's needs or enable early identification of need

A vision for the future

We need to move away from a ‘crisis state’ that intervenes in fragmented ways when it is obligated to do so; to an ‘investment state’ that works holistically from the outset to ensure children, young people and families are supported to thrive – addressing disadvantage before it translates into vulnerability, harm or adverse outcomes. At a national level, this looks like:

- A national government strategy and accountability for children young people’s outcomes
- A cross-government children’s outcomes framework that all departments work in support of
- A live, evidence-based picture of how many children need early intervention and the effectiveness of that support.
- Tracking of population wide outcomes data for children, young people, and families
- A fundamental shift in how the Treasury thinks about spending on children and prevention, moving from crisis spending to long-term investment, with long-term returns tracked across departments

At a place level locally, this looks like:

- A whole-place approach to prioritising and investing in children and young people that brings together public services, the third sector, and children and young people themselves
- Shared accountability, priorities and outcomes across so that no child falls through the gap between services
- Data shared across education, health, housing and social care, so that no child is ‘invisible’
- Early identification of needs using all available data sources to ensure children are helped before crises develop, not after
- Holistic, person-centred support that meets children and families where they are

This is not a small adjustment to policy and practice. It is a vision of a state that is fundamentally rewired to work for all children – especially the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Recommendations

1. Make reducing childhood vulnerability a national mission

The Prime Minister should make childhood vulnerability a national priority, driving a cross-departmental ambition to support all children to thrive and reduce childhood vulnerability over the next decade. This mission should sit alongside goals on economic growth, health and opportunity, recognising that childhood vulnerability is both a cause and consequence of wider social challenges.

A Cabinet-level Children and Families Taskforce is needed to provide national leadership and pull the rest of the state – including education, health, justice, housing, employment and local government – in the same direction to help children thrive.

This taskforce should be tasked with bringing down the drivers of rising vulnerability by reducing child poverty, ending child homelessness, and supporting parents facing challenges like domestic abuse, substance use, and poor mental health.

It should own an overall national outcomes framework for children, which the whole of government works towards. These outcomes could include, for example:

- Reduced numbers of children growing up in vulnerable family circumstances.
- Reduced numbers of children whose needs require them to receive formal intervention from children's social care (especially being taken in to care).
- Improved child wellbeing development outcomes.
- Reduced numbers of children not engaged in education and learning.
- Reduced numbers of young people who have mental health needs.
- Reduced numbers of young people who are at risk of becoming NEET.
- Reduced numbers of children requiring specialist, high-cost late intervention.

2. Drive a new local place-based agenda to improve accountability for vulnerable children

Too often, vulnerable children become the responsibility of many agencies but the accountability of none. A new settlement is needed – making the most of any future devolution – which places clear responsibility and levers for vulnerable children in the hands of local leaders, equipped with the authority, influence and mandate to drive change.

Under this model, local leaders would work in partnership to deliver the mission to reduce childhood vulnerability. For example, mayors could provide strategic leadership across the whole system - bringing together health, policing, housing, employment, transport and education.

To enable this, local areas should be given greater freedom and responsibility to redesign services around children rather than institutions. Mayors and/or DCSs should lead integrated local partnerships that combine data, budgets and expertise across agencies, creating a single view of vulnerability and a shared plan for action. Instead of children being passed between services, services would come together around the child and family. Local leaders would be expected to identify vulnerable children earlier, coordinate support more effectively and tackle the structural drivers of vulnerability within their communities.

3. A Treasury mandate to rethink public spending on children and shift from crisis response to prevention

A prevention-first approach should become the organising principle of national policy and our approach to public spending. This approach should be led by the Treasury, which should be tasked with finding new ways to unlock additional investment in early intervention and prevention. This should include explicitly recognising the unique value of spending on prevention and investment in human and social capital as distinct from other current spending, and treating it accordingly. The case for this has already been made in important work by IPPR,⁴³ the Institute for Government,⁴⁴ and Demos and the Health Foundation.⁴⁵

This work should be supplemented by a cross-departmental Spending Review for vulnerable children and families, which would enable the government to expand and sustain investment in:

- Family hubs
- Early help services
- Parenting support
- Early help mental health support for children and young people
- Youth services and community provision

¹ British Medical Association (2026) [Children and young people's mental health services in England](#)

² Ibid

³ Future Minds (2025) [Why investing in children's mental health will unlock economic growth](#)

⁴ Children's Commissioner (2026) [Over a million children referred to mental health services, with highest annual referrals as demand rises faster than systems can respond](#)

⁵ Institute for Government (2026) [Local government funding in England](#)

⁶ Action for Children (2026) [Rebalancing children's services spending: what the latest data tells us](#)

⁷ Association of Directors of Children's Services (2025) [ADCS Safeguarding Pressures Research – Phase 9](#)

⁸ Department for Education (2026) [Children in need: A focus on re-referrals](#)

⁴³ IPPR (2024) [Mission-driven government: Delivering for the British public in an age of distrust and disruption](#)

⁴⁴ Institute for Government (2024) [A preventative approach to public services](#)

⁴⁵ Demos & Health Foundation (2025) [The Preventative Shift: How can we embed prevention and achieve long-term missions?](#)

