

# INSIGHTS

BARRIERS TO OPPORTUNITY



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Understanding Society is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (part of UK Research and Innovation) and various government departments, with scientific leadership by the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, and survey delivery by the National Centre for Social Research, Verian, and Ipsos MORI. The research data are distributed by the UK Data Service.

Published by the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, 2026.  
Views expressed are those of the authors.

With thanks to our young illustrators: Sophie, Jan Marc, Agnes, Naomi, William and Nathan.

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# IS BACKGROUND DESTINY?

It's not a simple question.

“ Life shouldn't come down to luck

Bridget Phillipson MP, Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities, launching the government's 'opportunity' mission, 2025<sup>1</sup>

The government's statement launching its mission to “Break Down Barriers to Opportunity” is clear that “background can have a decisive impact on the life [children] are able to build” – but the size and challenge of the problem is emphasised by the fact that the mission statement alone is around 1,000 words long.

In recent years, Insights has tackled major single themes from multiple perspectives – such as housing and political participation – but in seeking to address barriers to opportunity, we need to explore an array of subjects. The factors which influence our life chances include:

- early years funding
- childhood emotional and behavioural difficulties
- parental education and employment
- training and soft skills
- regional inequalities.

We will also see how background can shape not just our chances of *achieving* what we wish for, but also the *nature* of what we wish for.



“ If people actually had more opportunity and more choice, maybe they would be choosing the right path and actually find fulfilment within life

A 17-year-old girl responding to The Children's Commissioner's 'Big Ask'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister's Office, *Break down the barriers to opportunity*, December 2024: <https://www.gov.uk/missions/opportunity>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/about-us/the-big-ask/>



The government adds that “underpinning all of these” is family security. “This means tackling the scar of child poverty.” This is not only a mission to improve childcare, education, and skills to “break the link between a child’s background and their future success”, then. Child poverty was on its own a first-term aim of a previous Labour administration<sup>3</sup>, and the fact that it is only an element of this mission underlines the scope of these ambitions.

Tackling all this will require not just knowledge of how children development and educational outcomes interact with their environment, but also who is most at risk of being left behind. Data gathered over decades, following families and households, with insights into their whole lives, can show us not just the nature of what needs to be done, but how it might be achieved. This report will look at what we know about opportunity and inequality, about early years funding, schooling, higher education and skills, and about sometimes deep and persistent poverty.

It will also raise concrete policy proposals – because if the country is to separate life chances from the luck of where you are born, we will need to know: what works? And, because nothing in policymaking is straightforward, we need more than that. We need to understand what works, for whom, and in what contexts?

To begin with, though: what do we know?

<sup>3</sup> PM’s 20-year target to end poverty, *Guardian*, 19 March 1999  
<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1999/mar/19/politicalnews.politics>

## INEQUALITY ACROSS GENERATIONS

Although this report, and the government's mission, is focused more widely than on child poverty alone, that issue inevitably runs like a thread through much of what follows. We begin, then, by looking at how inequality persists over generations, and at how the UK compares internationally. As our first piece of research says: "Poor children are more likely to become poor adults, but less so in some countries compared with others."<sup>4</sup>

This is one of the most recent papers on this issue, and also one of the most comprehensive, comparing five wealthy countries by examining Understanding Society alongside panel data from Australia, Denmark, Germany, and the United States. It considered data from survey participants during childhood (from birth to 17) and from 25 to 35 to see where they started out, and where they had got to in early adulthood.

To put the results in the very simplest terms, we are similar to Australia. Denmark and Germany perform better than the UK, but America does worse. Spending all of one's childhood in poverty in the United States is associated with a 42 percentage point increase in the mean poverty rate during early adulthood. This is more than four times higher than in Denmark and more than twice as high as in Australia or the UK.

The factors which account for intergenerational poverty include family background, education, employment, family structure in adulthood, and the country's tax and welfare model. Family background is a factor in all countries, but is the most decisive influence in Denmark, because its welfare state and labour market do more to equalise matters. In the UK and US, the state does less to equalise opportunities in education and employment than the other three countries, which means these inevitably play a greater role in shaping life chances.

Single parenthood, and whether parents were in full-time employment, were important in shaping outcomes in the UK, but our tax and welfare system almost counteracted their effects by reducing the intergenerational persistence of poverty by around 16 percentage points. In all countries, though, a "residual poverty penalty" remained – that is, poverty which could not be explained by any of the other mediating factors.

There is, the researchers point out, an argument that "state aid reduces the incentive to acquire more education or employment" and that "governments may prefer that adults achieve economic self-sufficiency rather than receiving state income transfers". But "what matters with respect to poverty", they add, "is the total level of resources that households command in order to consume basic necessities and participate fully in society". They conclude that what is needed is research into specific tax and transfer policies to see how they affect intergenerational poverty – the knowledge, that is, of which approaches are the most efficient and effective in helping those households which need it while also not removing incentives to be economically self-sufficient.

Which approaches are the most efficient and effective?



<sup>4</sup> Zachary Parolin, Rafael Pinto Schmitt, Gøsta Esping-Andersen and Peter Fallesen, The intergenerational persistence of poverty in high-income countries, *Nature*, October 2024: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-024-02029-w>

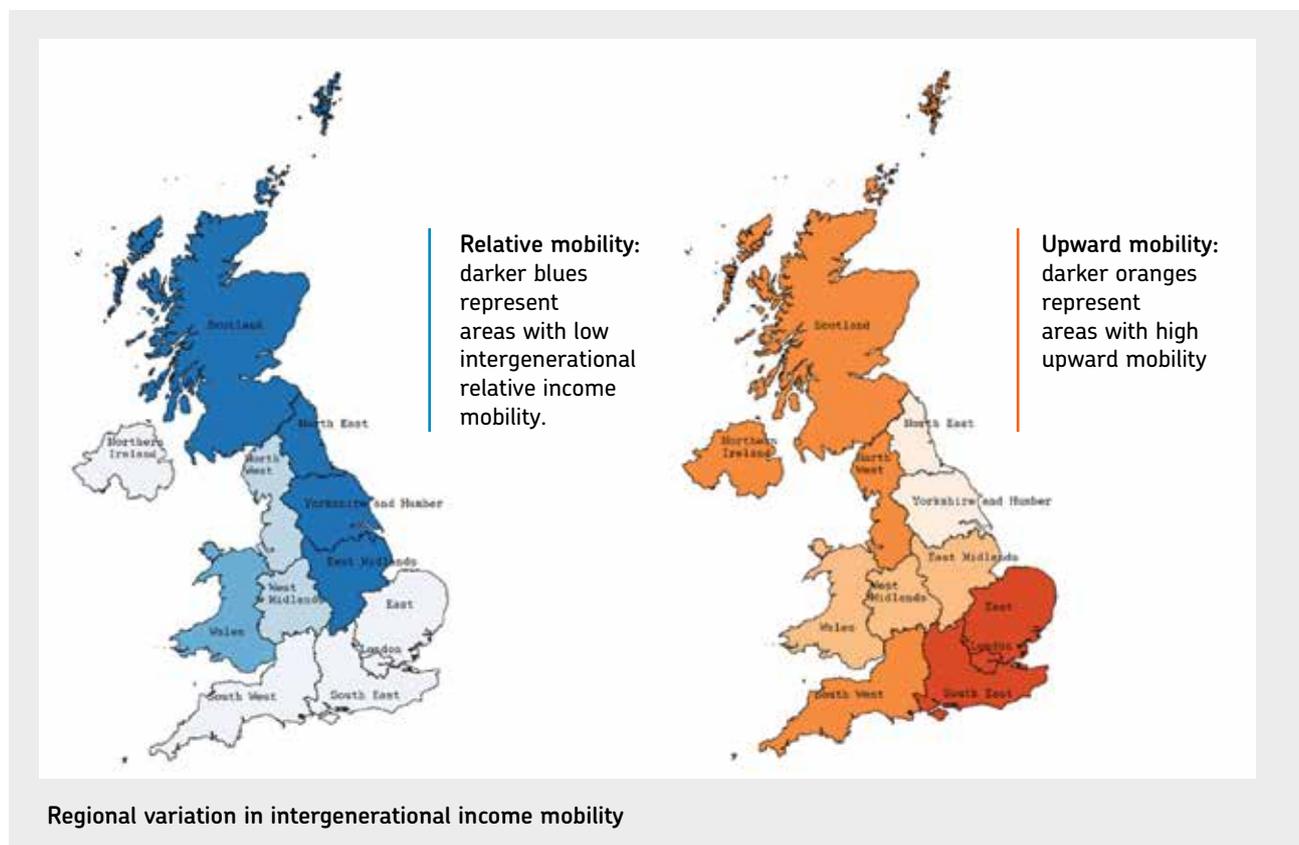
## PARENT'S INCOME, CHILD'S INCOME

If we look specifically at income, recent research<sup>5</sup> has used combined data from Understanding Society and its predecessor, the British Household Panel Survey, to look at income inequality across several decades. This, the paper says, “rose rapidly in the 1980s and early 1990s and has remained persistently high since. [raising] concerns that opportunities are becoming increasingly concentrated, with family background playing a larger role in determining adult outcomes while individual efforts play a smaller role”.

The research considered people born between 1973 and 1992, and found that – even though gaps between young people from higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds have narrowed in terms of their education and employment outcomes – this has not translated into better income mobility.

For every additional 10% of parental income advantage, it says, around a quarter (2.6%) will be passed on to the next generation. Similarly, for every extra 10% of disadvantage, 2.6% will be passed on.

It also showed that place still matters in the UK, with a “postcode lottery” determining outcomes. This, the research says, has “a strong north-south gradient”. Income gaps between children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds are found to be smaller in the south of England, where children from poorer parents have better opportunities for upward mobility than those who grow up in the north.



Ultimately, the UK “stands out as one of the most regionally unequal countries among the OECD, with significant disparities in GDP per capita, productivity, and disposable income. These regional inequalities have been rising rapidly over the past two decades, suggesting that opportunities may also be unequally distributed across regions.”

<sup>5</sup> Bertha Rohenkohl, Intergenerational income mobility: new evidence from the UK, *Journal of Economic Inequality*, December 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10888-023-09577-7>

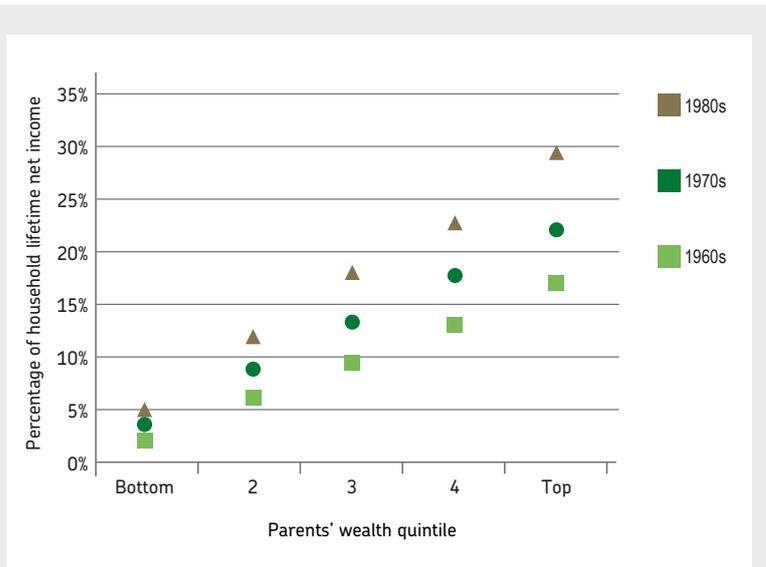
## THE IMPORTANCE OF INHERITANCE

Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies<sup>6</sup> has shown that older generations “hold more wealth than their immediate predecessors but younger generations have no higher incomes than the generations born just before them”. As a result, inheritances will make an increasingly important contribution to people’s lifetime income and wealth.

For those born in the 1980s, for example, inheritances are expected to be worth 16% of lifetime income on average, almost double the 9% of lifetime income they represent for those born in the 1960s. People’s finances, in other words, are increasingly being determined by what they receive from their parents rather than what they earn themselves – a “profound social and economic change over a relatively short period of time”.

This will make it harder for people with poor parents to move up the income distribution – smaller inheritances mean they have fewer resources with which to create opportunities for themselves – more ground to make up, in other words.

This chart shows the growing size of inheritances as a share of lifetime income. Those with wealthier parents are expected to receive much more as a share of their lifetime income, and this gap between those with poorer and richer parents is expected to increase for later-born generations.



Median inheritance as a percentage of lifetime net income, by parental wealth quintile and decade of birth



While governments may want people to “achieve economic self-sufficiency” and “acquire more education or employment”<sup>7</sup>, as inheritances grow in importance, it will be increasingly likely that those born to the poorest fifth of parents will end up in the poorest fifth themselves.

<sup>6</sup> Pascale Bourquin, Robert Joyce and David Sturrock, *The growing size of inheritances is set to reduce social mobility for younger generations*, IFS, April 2021: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/inheritances-and-inequality-over-life-cycle-what-will-they-mean-younger-generations>

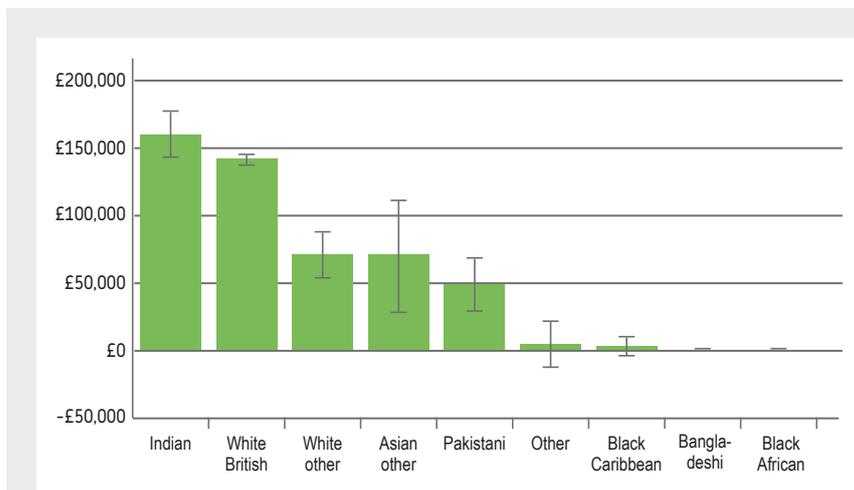
<sup>7</sup> Zachary Parolin, Rafael Pinto Schmitt, Gøsta Esping-Andersen and Peter Fallesen, *The intergenerational persistence of poverty in high-income countries*, *Nature*, October 2024: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-024-02029-w>

## THE DIVISIVENESS OF INEQUALITY

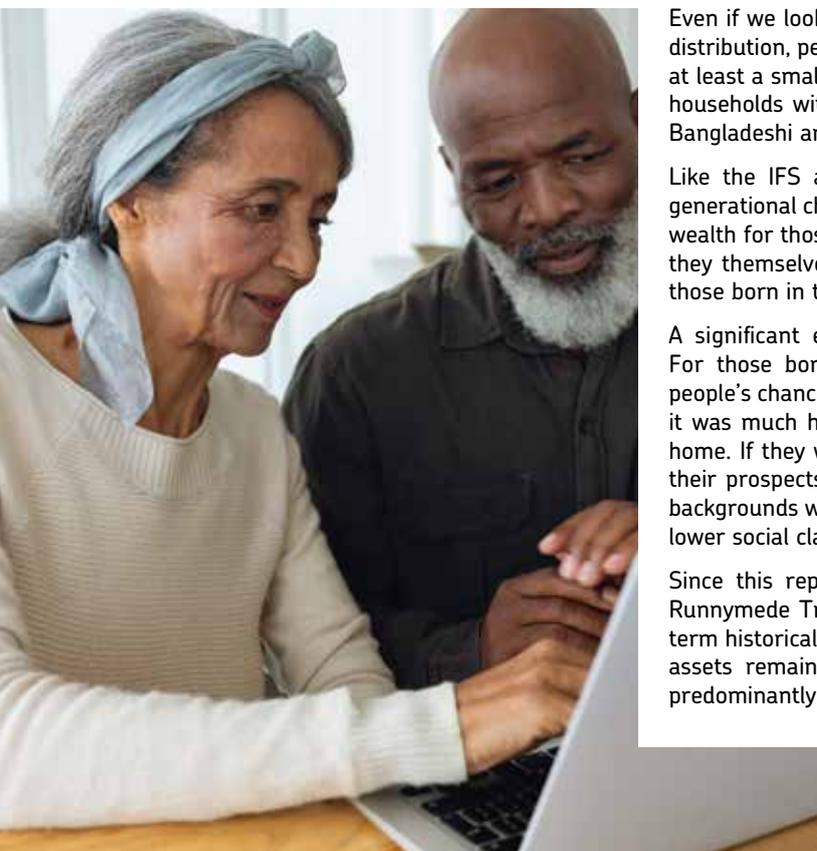
Wealth inequality such as this is increasingly seen as divisive. Research from the LSE’s International Inequalities Institute<sup>8</sup> suggests that, because wealth is more abstract than income, it does not always appear so divisive. “People often don’t exactly know how much wealth they may have tied up in their owner-occupied home, in their pension pots, or in their investments, and they may not be able to immediately access these resources. Wealth is therefore often opaque, invisible, and of course in some cases deliberately hidden.” It is, they argue, the “inequality iceberg”.

Their report found that an average individual in a Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean or Black African household had no significant wealth assets, while a similar Indian person had a household net worth of £160,000, and a White person £138,000. (Household net worth is the sum of total net household financial and net household housing wealth.)

People from all ethnic groups live in households with negative net worth, but the depth of their debt is much greater for people from Bangladeshi, ‘Asian Other’, Black Caribbean, Black African and Other ethnic groups.



Median net worth by ethnic group



Even if we look only at the poorest people, in the bottom quarter of wealth distribution, people in White and Indian ethnic groups live in households with at least a small positive net worth, compared to all other groups who live in households with close to zero net worth, or negative net worth. People in Bangladeshi and Black African ethnic groups fare particularly badly.

Like the IFS analysis above, this report also emphasised the impact of generational change – which was not necessarily change for the better. Adult wealth for those born in the 1960s was predominantly driven by how much they themselves earned, rather than their class background. However, for those born in the 1980s, class background played a much greater role.

A significant element here has been the imbalance in housing wealth. For those born in the 1960s, class origin played little role in affecting people’s chances of becoming homeowners. But for those born in the 1980s, it was much harder for those born into routine class origins to own their home. If they were in the top 40% of earners, it was easier, but even here, their prospects had fallen. Those from upper professional and managerial backgrounds were much more able to become homeowners than those from lower social classes, even if they were badly paid.

Since this report, the same institute has also carried out work for the Runnymede Trust<sup>9</sup>, which adds to the evidence on inheritance: “The long-term historical trajectory of wealth assets left at death indicates that wealth assets remain strongly skewed towards white Britons and a few other predominantly European ethnicities”.

<sup>8</sup> Mike Savage, Mina Mahmoudzadeh, Elizabeth Mann, Michael Vaughan and Sacha Hilhorst, *Why wealth inequality matters*, LSE International Inequalities Institute, May 2024: <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/123529/> and <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/123529/5/Why-wealth-inequality-matters.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Esiri Bukata, Mina Mahmoudzadeh, Adèle Oliver and Mike Savage, *Why the UK racial wealth divide matters: a call for action*, Runnymede Trust, June 2025: <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/why-the-uk-racial-wealth-divide-matters-a-call-for-action>



## THE STRUCTURE OF OUR REPORT

This, then, is where we are now. What follows is a deeper look into some of the crucial life stages where government intervention (and partnerships with stakeholders) will matter. We consider childhood, from the very youngest ages, then adolescence and schooling, before turning to a consideration of the continuing importance of regional imbalance to our prospects in life in the UK.



“wealth is  
the inequality  
iceberg”



# CHILDHOOD



Setting “every child up for the best start in life”, in the government’s words, will require knowledge of how the very earliest days can shape children, even by the age of five. Research can also show us how early years provision affects children through to adolescence.

Also, if every child is to achieve and thrive at school, policy will need to take into account the factors which influence children’s achievements – including social class, parental employment, ethnicity, and children’s own aspirations. Understanding Society data can illuminate all of this in detail.

## EARLY DAYS

Childhood emotional and behavioural difficulties can have a profound impact on later life, making it crucial to identify risk factors early. However, existing research has tended to concentrate on diagnosing rather than predicting these problems, focusing on teenagers rather than younger children. Data launched in 2023 (and updated each year since) has been helping to change that. Understanding Society's Pregnancy and Early Childhood (PEACH) data file brings together most of the important data reported at specific ages by parents or responsible adults for all children under 10, plus information on pregnancy and parenting styles, from all waves of our main survey. (Other data, too, will help in this field, not least the Generation New Era birth cohort study<sup>10</sup>, which launches this year.)

Recent research<sup>11</sup> using PEACH has emphasised the importance of parents investing time and money in mitigating emotional and behavioural difficulties for their children's development. Crucially, this investment starts before birth.

Lower birthweight was linked to greater emotional and behavioural difficulties at the age of five. Common causes of low birthweight include smoking during pregnancy and poor nutrition, although other health problems for the mother can also play a part. Existing evidence<sup>12</sup> suggests that the consequences for children may be due to "physiological immaturity at birth affecting brain development and increasing vulnerability to cognitive and emotional disorders".

Another factor is what are known as 'regulatory problems' during infancy, which include difficulties in calming a very young child, and the amount of crying and 'fussing' they do. These are also predictors of emotional and behavioural difficulties later on – and again, previous research has shown that two or more regulatory problems can be a sign of mental disorders in early childhood.



## findings point to a need for comprehensive prenatal and postnatal care

The research also found gender differences, with smoking during pregnancy being a more important predictor for boys' emotional and behavioural difficulties. The amount of 'fussing', though, had a stronger effect on girls than boys. So, policies which reduce smoking during pregnancy may be particularly important for boys – and early intervention to promote emotional regulation and encourage caregivers to respond to distress could help mitigate long-term behavioural difficulties for girls. The researchers suggest that paediatricians and caregivers can monitor children's behaviour and intervene when it's necessary.

However, the single most important predictor of children's emotional and behavioural difficulties was found to be lack of breastfeeding. Children who were not breastfed showed more emotional and behavioural difficulties, reinforcing previous research into breastfeeding's nutritional, psychological, and developmental benefits.

Ultimately, all the findings point to a need for 'screening' for vulnerability to emotional and behavioural difficulties in children, and for comprehensive prenatal and postnatal care.

<sup>10</sup> UKRI announces first UK-wide birth cohort study in 25 years, September 2025: <https://www.ukri.org/news/ukri-announces-first-uk-wide-birth-cohort-study-in-25-years/>

<sup>11</sup> Xu Zong, Yan Li, Can Liu, and Edith Aguirre, Predicting children's emotional and behavioral difficulties at age five using pregnancy and newborn risk factors: Evidence from the UK Household Longitudinal Study, *Journal of Affective Disorders*, September 2025: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2025.04.167>

<sup>12</sup> Summarised by Xu Zong, Yan Li, Can Liu, and Edith Aguirre



## SCHOOL MEALS

Moving ahead a few years, another form of support for children comes in the form of Universal Free School Meals, introduced in England in 2014 (although means-tested free meals have been available since 1944). The scheme applies to all children in their first three years of primary school, although in some areas, it's been extended to other year groups.

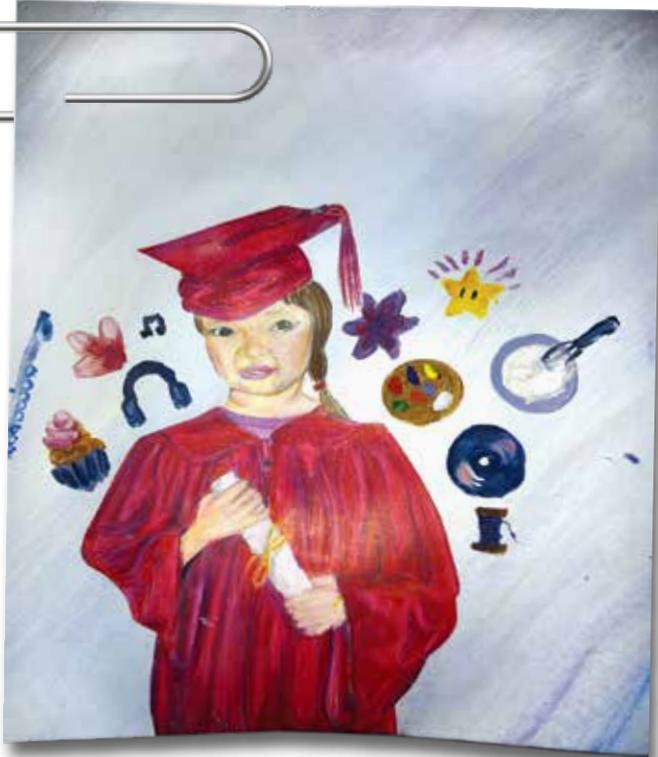
Research has found<sup>13</sup> that introducing Universal Free School Meals increased take-up among those already eligible for means-tested free meals – moving around 8% of non-takers into taking up their entitlement. Making the scheme universal seems to have increased its attractiveness, helping more households with the cost of living.

Introducing Universal Free School Meals led to one in three children newly eating a school lunch, mostly those not already eligible for free meals, and it has had a significant impact on their education. The scheme causes children to make approximately two weeks of additional progress in reading by the end of primary school. It may also mean that children newly taking up a free meal exhibit less disruptive behaviour, potentially benefiting other children in their class.

The improvement in nutrition also has health benefits, reducing obesity rates in Reception-age children by between 7 and 11%, and between 5 and 8% among Year 6 children who got free meals throughout primary school. However, these falls were not seen in schools with the highest pre-existing obesity rates, which may need extra support.

<sup>13</sup> Angus Holford and Birgitta Rabe, *The impacts of Universal Free School Meal schemes in England*, Institute for Social and Economic Research, February 2024: <https://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/misc/reports/Impact-of-the-UFSM-schemes-in-England.pdf>

## WORKING PARENTS

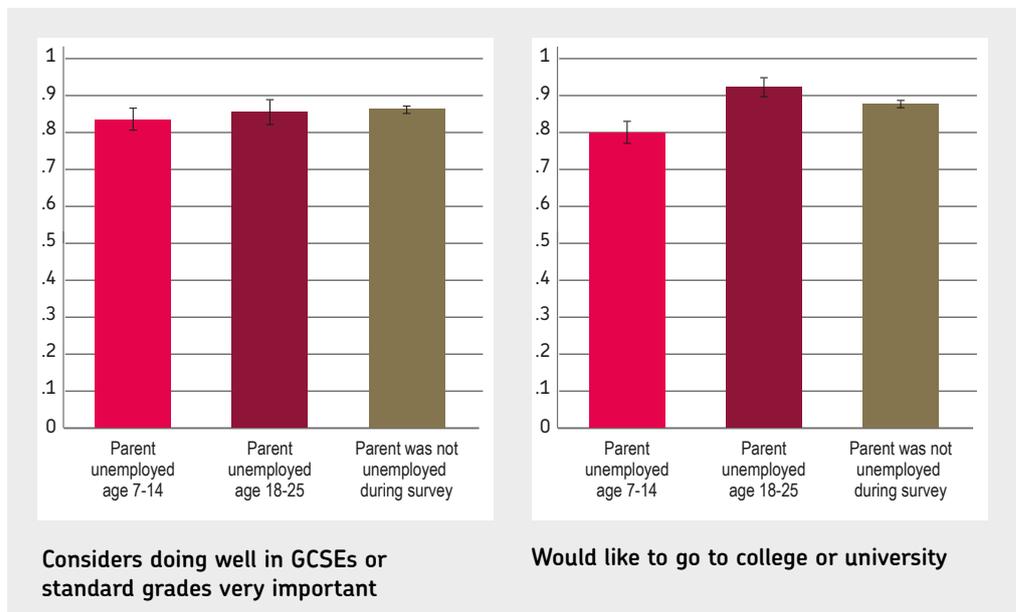


Another factor shown to affect school-age children and their educational results is their parents being unemployed. We know that children whose parents experience unemployment lag behind in school, but don't definitely know why yet. Research from the Department of Work and Pensions in 2017<sup>14</sup> highlighted parental conflict and poor parental mental health as possible factors. One theory is that parental unemployment may dampen children's aspirations to do well, and research using Understanding Society data<sup>15</sup> has looked into this.

It found that the vast majority of 14-15-year-olds in the UK aspire to do well in their GCSEs and to go into higher education, regardless of whether their parents are unemployed. However, children who have seen their parents become unemployed before they reach 14 fall behind. Eighty per cent of those who see their parents unemployed before this age report that they want to go into higher education – a high proportion, but the figure is around 92% for children exposed to parental unemployment when they're 18 or older.

When the figures were adjusted to give all children an equal desire to go into higher education, it only made a modest dent in the negative link between parental unemployment and GCSE results, which suggests that the parents' unemployment is a significant factor in the fall in grades. When parents face spells of unemployment before the children take GCSEs, the children are around six percentage points less likely to attain any GCSE qualification.

This makes sense when we consider that previous research<sup>16</sup> has shown that, while the policy of widening participation raised aspirations among children from disadvantaged backgrounds by an average of five percentage points, it had no effect on college enrolment.



<sup>14</sup> *Improving lives: Helping Workless Families*, DWP, April 2017: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-lives-helping-workless-families>

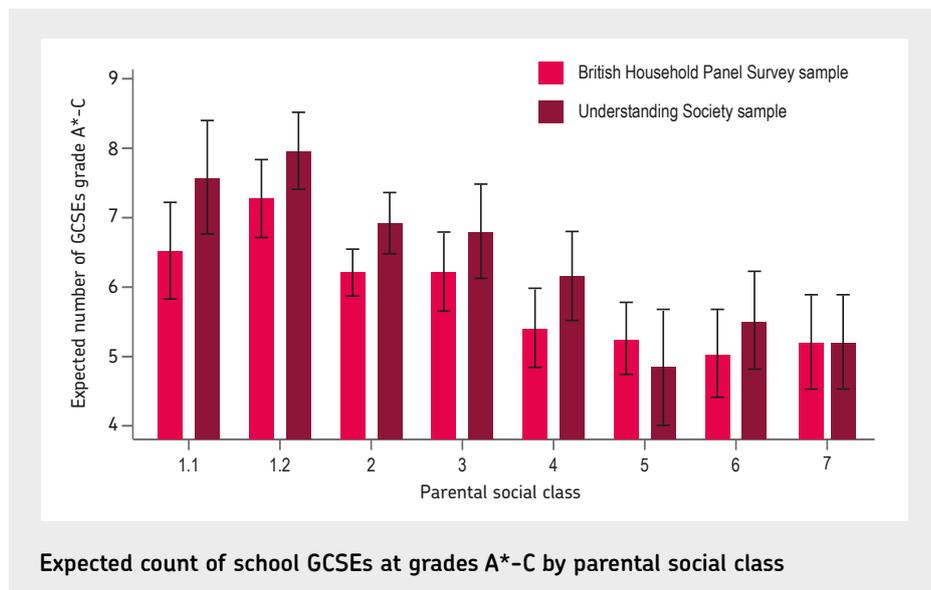
<sup>15</sup> Gabriele Mari, Parental unemployment and children's educational attainment: how big is the role of aspirations? *British Journal of Sociology*, June 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.13037>

<sup>16</sup> Lucia Rizzica, Raising aspirations and higher education: Evidence from the United Kingdom's widening participation policy, *Journal of Labor Economics*, January 2020: <https://doi.org/10.1086/704571>

The research clearly shows that children whose parents are unemployed (or have periods of unemployment) still fall behind at school. It may be that aspirations are more important for children whose families are better off, and who are therefore more cushioned from the financial and psychological effects of unemployment.

If we look at socioeconomic background, research using Understanding Society which looked at results over a 22-year period from the early 1990s to the early 2010s<sup>17</sup>, shows that pupils with parents in higher professional occupations did better in their GCSEs than those whose parents were in routine occupations. The ones from more advantaged backgrounds got an average of eight GCSEs at grades A\*-C, compared with those from less advantaged families who got half as many GCSEs at those grades. Many of the less advantaged children also fell short of the national policy benchmark of five or more GCSE passes at grades A\*-C.

The effects of parents' social class were important even when other factors were taken into account, such as parents' level of education, gender, ethnicity, and whether they owned their own home. So, although GCSE results have improved over time, there is still a persistent gap between pupils from the most advantaged and less advantaged social classes. This is true despite a range of policies to tackle social inequalities in the decades since comprehensive secondary schools were introduced. Despite changes to the curriculum, assessment, qualifications, and the structure and organisation of schools, parental social class still affects educational outcomes.



there is still a persistent gap between pupils from the most advantaged and less advantaged social classes

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Stopforth, Vernon Gayle and Ellen Boeren, Parental social class and school GCSE outcomes: two decades of evidence from UK household panel surveys, *Contemporary Social Science*, July 2020: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21582041.2020.1792967>

## EARLY YEARS AND LATER EFFECTS

We close this chapter by bringing things full circle and asking: if we look back at interventions in the early years, what effect do they have on teenagers? For one project, the answers are clear, and positive. The Institute for Fiscal Studies says<sup>18</sup> that, while “Sure Start was not a ‘silver bullet’”, it did improve young people’s physical and mental health.

Young people who had greater access to Sure Start than their older siblings were 18 percentage points more likely to report being in ‘very good’ or ‘excellent’ health, and also reported significantly fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties. Early access to Sure Start seemed to reduce ‘internalising’ behaviours such as emotional difficulties.

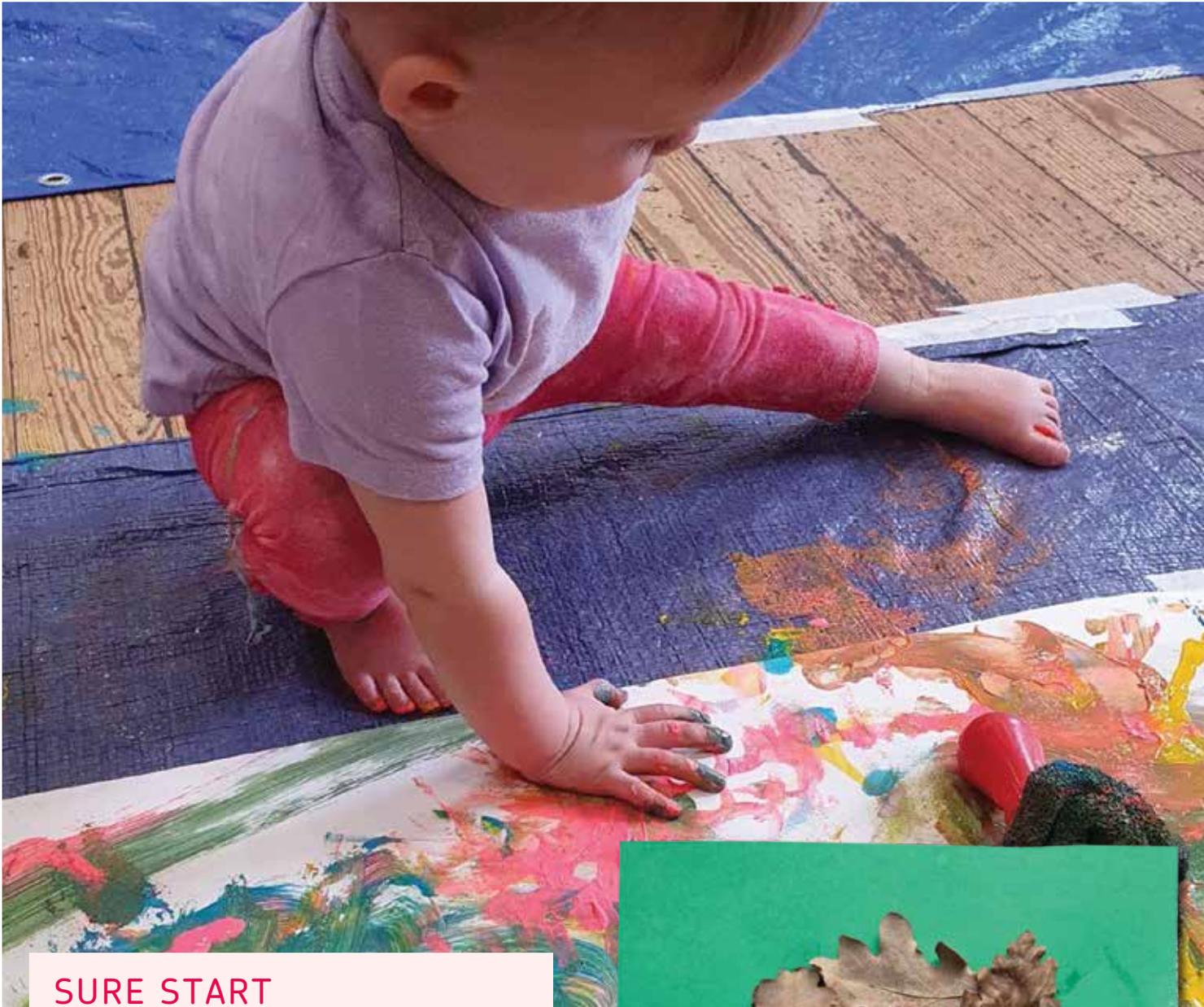
Ultimately, Sure Start influenced not just the probability of seeking healthcare, but also underlying health (physical and mental) – all of which is significant for future prospects. IFS says “better mental health is a meaningful outcome in its own right, but could also be a channel through which Sure Start affected other long-term outcomes”. Better mental health can mean better exam results, less need for special educational needs support, and reduced serious youth offending.

Other IFS research<sup>19</sup> supports these findings, highlighting other measures of improving health, such as reduced hospital admissions and a fall in truancy.



<sup>18</sup> Pedro Carneiro, Sarah Cattan, Gabriella Conti, Claire Crawford, Christine Farquharson, and Nick Ridpath, *The short- and medium-term effects of Sure Start on children’s outcomes*, IFS, May 2025: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/short-and-medium-term-effects-sure-start-childrens-outcomes>

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Cattan, Gabriella Conti, Christine Farquharson, Rita Ginja, *The health effects of Sure Start*, IFS, June 2019: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/health-effects-sure-start>



## SURE START

Introduced in 1999, Sure Start initially targeted highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The later 10-Year Strategy for Childcare aimed to see “a children’s centre in every community”.

By 2010, there were over 3,000 centres, and Sure Start accounted for what IFS describes as “£2.7 billion of public spending (in 2023-24 prices), around 30% of overall spending on programmes for the under-5s”.



Young adults

Family

Background

Secondary school



# Adolescence

The government also wants to address “attainment at the end of secondary school”, “young people’s sense of belonging”, and “skills for opportunity and growth”<sup>20</sup>, so this chapter looks at the importance of family background for teenagers and young adults.

To tackle the impediments that people face, we need to understand the social forces shaping families, and in turn affecting their children’s aims and chances in life. At least as far back as 1954<sup>21</sup>, there has been research showing that people tend to have partners with a similar social status to their own in terms of class, income and education, which can reinforce inequalities between families.



<sup>20</sup> Prime Minister’s Office, *Break down the barriers to opportunity*, December 2024: <https://www.gov.uk/missions/opportunity>

<sup>21</sup> David Glass, *Social Mobility in Britain*, Routledge, 1954

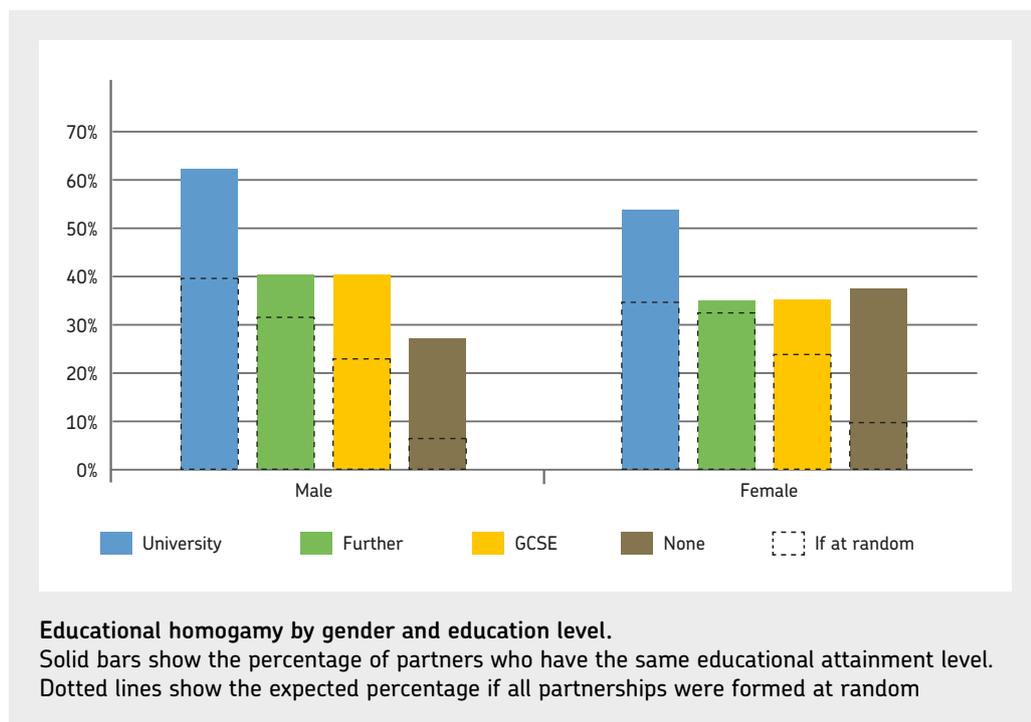
## SIMILARS ATTRACT

The Institute for Fiscal Studies used Understanding Society to examine educational similarities between parents born after 1973<sup>22</sup>, allowing them to consider people who benefited from education reforms in 1992 which expanded access to university education. They found that there is still “a large degree of educational homogamy” – in other words, having a partner with a similar level of education to your own. This is true for men and women, and in all educational categories, and is particularly noticeable in the highest and the lowest educational groups.

“Highly educated men and women”, the report says, “are ... much more likely to have partners with similar levels of education. Around 62% of men and 53% of women with degrees have partners who also have a university-level education, in both cases around 1.6 times more than a random partnership would predict.” By contrast, “among men with no qualifications, 27% partner with someone who also has no qualifications, compared with an expected 6% if partnerships were made at random”. Women with no qualifications were nearly four times more likely than expected to partner with a man with no qualifications.

Because education is linked to income, these patterns are likely to reinforce inequality. The report cites other research<sup>23</sup> which has shown that inequality would have been substantially lower in the UK if this pattern of finding socially similar partners did not exist. There is therefore “a double disadvantage” for children whose parents both left school with few qualifications compared to those whose parents are both highly educated.

highly educated men and women are much more likely to have partners with similar levels of education



<sup>22</sup> Kathleen Kiernan, Sam Crossman and Angus Phimister, *Families and inequalities*, IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities, June 2022: <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/families-and-inequalities/>

<sup>23</sup> Lasse Eika, Magne Mogstad, and Basit Zafar, Educational Assortative Mating and Household Income Inequality, *Journal of Political Economy*, 2019: <https://doi.org/10.1086/702018>

## ASPIRATIONS BEYOND SCHOOL

We considered aspirations in the last chapter, but of course our hopes for the future don't stop in childhood. How do class, gender, and ethnicity affect teenagers' wishes for education or other options beyond school? Some detailed findings<sup>24</sup> on these questions have shown that White, working-class boys have the lowest aspirations of any group.

Although 66% of 10-15-year-olds said they wanted to go to college or university, even just looking at gender on its own showed differences. Boys (58%) were significantly less likely to aspire to further education than girls (74%). Also, a smaller percentage (66%) of White children aspired to higher levels of education compared to all other ethnic groups. These wishes were highest for Black-Caribbean (86%), Black-African (81%), Indian (82%) and Bangladeshi (78%) teenagers. All boys in minority ethnic groups reported higher educational aspirations than their White male peers and most tended to have higher aspirations than White girls.

### White, working-class boys have the lowest aspirations of any group

There were similarly large differences when considering parents' occupational class. For boys, positive aspirations are much higher among those from managerial and professional backgrounds (67%) compared to those with intermediate (57%) or routine class backgrounds (50%). Among girls, those from the most advantaged class backgrounds were also more likely to have high aspirations (80%), but the difference between this group and those in intermediate occupations (74%) was smaller. Also, 69% of girls from routine backgrounds aspired to attend college or university – significantly more than the 50% of boys from those backgrounds.



This research also reinforced what we saw earlier in terms of parents' employment status and level of education. In households where neither parent was working, teenagers had the lowest ambitions for college or university (48% boys, 63% girls). Three-quarters of teenagers from professional and managerial backgrounds had at least one parent with a degree, compared to two-thirds of those from an intermediate class background and half of those from a working-class background. Only one in five children living in non-employed families had at least one parent with experience of higher education.

There are also differences by ethnicity in terms of parents' attitudes to education. Between 82% and 92% of Black and south Asian minority parents thought A-levels were very important, but only three-quarters of White parents did. Black, Indian and Pakistani teenagers were also more likely than White teenagers to report that their parents were always interested in how well they were doing at school. Again, there were differences by social class – 82% of parents from a managerial or professional-class background said A-levels were very important, compared to 72% of those in intermediate occupations, 71% of those in semi-routine and routine occupations, and 74% for those not working.

The researchers believe that the three elements of being White, male, and working class “combine in an additive fashion to encourage lower aspiration”, but they add that even though the figure of 50% for those in the group who wanted to go to college or university was low, it was still “higher than the percentage of working-class boys who go to university”.

They concluded that “focusing on aspirations alone will not on its own reduce ethnic differences in higher education participation”. There are class and ethnic differences in parents' attitudes to education, how engaged they are with their children's schoolwork, and in the quality of parent-child relationships, and all these are important factors, too.

<sup>24</sup> Ann Berrington, Steven Roberts and Peter Tammes, Educational aspirations among UK young teenagers: exploring the role of gender, class and ethnicity, *British Educational Research Journal*, October 2016: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/berj.3235>

## ASPIRATIONS V. EXPECTATIONS

Moving on from young people’s hopes, though: what do they expect from life? A recent study<sup>25</sup> used multiple waves of Understanding Society to look at thousands of 16-year-olds’ answers to questions about typical life experiences – including studying, finding work, marrying, and having children – and how likely they thought each outcome was. The researchers then looked at whether aims at 16 matched achievements at 21.

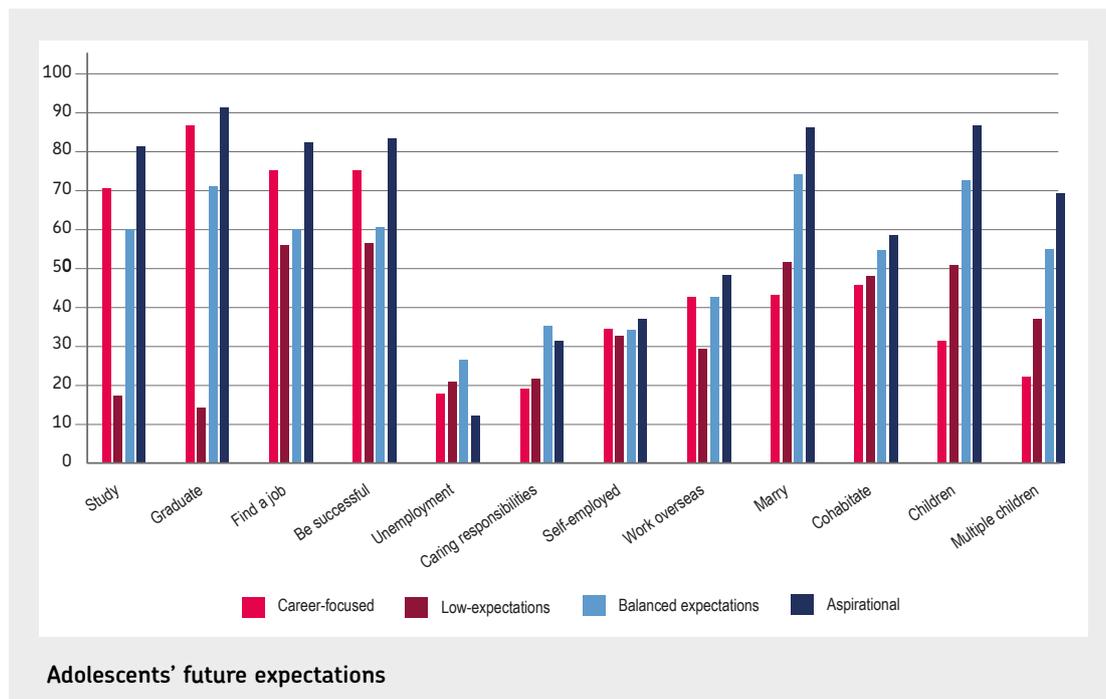
Looking at people born from 1993 to 2004, they found that socioeconomic factors played a significant role, and identified four distinct groups of teenagers in terms of their expectations:

- Aspirational – just over half the sample, with the strongest likelihood of studying, finding work, marrying, and having children
- Balanced Expectations – around a quarter of the sample, broadly following the pattern of the aspirational group, but expressing the likelihood of each event less strongly
- Career Focused – about 18% of the sample, with similar career expectations to the aspirational group, but more likely to have low expectations of marriage, living together and children
- Expectation-less – 6% of the sample, with low expectations for working, studying and parenting.



Those in the first two groups had a “realistic and informed outlook”, the researchers said. They anticipated potential career disruptions, for example, and the possibility of working overseas. They tended to come from more affluent households, with an average weekly income between £200 and £400 higher than the rest of the sample. Those in the fourth group were the least affluent. In fact, every £100 increase in weekly household income raised a person’s likelihood of belonging to the aspirational group by 5% (compared to their chance of being in the expectation-less group).

Moving on to the reality at 21, the expectation-less group was significantly less likely to report finishing their studies than the other groups. About half as many of the expectation-less



<sup>25</sup> Alexander W. O’Donnell and Alexandra Wake, Future Expectations amongst Young People in the United Kingdom: Prevalence and Patterns across Generations and Socioeconomic Groups, Understanding Society, July 2025: <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/documentation/mainstage/syntax/user-deposited-syntax/future-expectations-amongst-young-people-united-kingdom/>

teenagers said they'd finished their studies compared to the aspirational group. The aspirational group was also more likely to report finishing their studies than the career-focused and balanced expectations groups, but by smaller margins.

The expectation-less group was the most likely to report long-term unemployment between the ages of 17 and 21 – six times more likely to report this than the aspirational group. Also, despite saying they had few plans to become parents, the expectation-less were more likely to have a child before the age of 21 compared to the other groups.

The career-focused group is something new. We know fertility rates have been dropping in developed nations – with the UK failing to achieve replacement rates of 2.01 children per couple since the 1970s. Some of the delay in having children is down to the difficulty of achieving other life goals (such as owning a home) in challenging social and economic circumstances (unsurprisingly involving, for example, unaffordable housing). Some can also be attributed to concerns about climate change. Whatever their motivations, though, they are a group to watch and for government to think about.

Overall, however, the results show that household income is clearly an important factor shaping teenagers' expectations, and their outcomes in life. The aspirational group – the most optimistic – had the highest average household income, giving them access to better education, extracurricular opportunities, and a supportive school environment. The researchers said it was also very likely that their parents (both explicitly and implicitly) conveyed the idea that success is the norm, something they could achieve themselves.

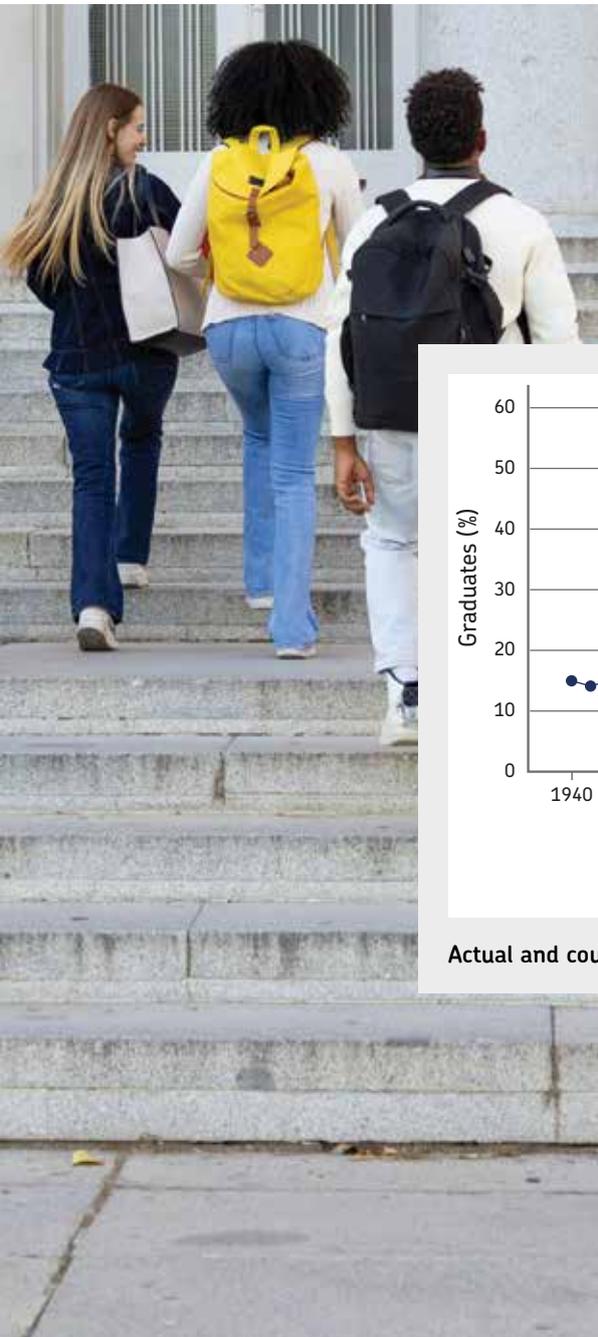
And, while the great majority of 16-year-olds have a positive outlook, and high expectations, socioeconomic disadvantage is still a significant and systemic barrier to success.

The economically disadvantaged and expectation-less group has uniformly low expectations for education, career, and family, which suggests disengagement or disenchantment with traditional pathways of success. They didn't have significantly different rates of psychological distress than the other groups, though, so their low expectations are unlikely to be down to poor mental health. Household income was the largest and most consistent predictor of being in this group.

This again raises concerns about government plans to reduce inequalities, because it points up the scale of the problem. The researchers conclude that policy, especially in education, should be geared towards identifying who is most and least likely to report high expectations, and targeting resources appropriately.

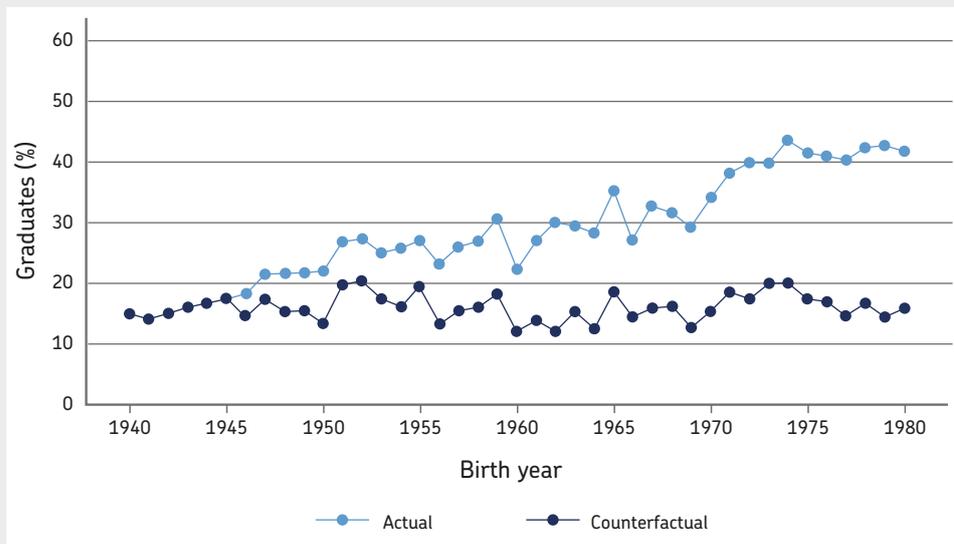


## HIGHER EDUCATION AND INEQUALITY



All this begs a further question: if school-leavers do go into higher education, is this having the effect on inequality it's traditionally expected to have? Another study<sup>26</sup>, using Waves 1-9 of Understanding Society, examines the expansion of higher education in the UK since the Robbins Report of 1963, and its consequences for household income, and for physical and mental health.

The researchers compared graduation rates as they would have been without university expansion (counterfactual) to the rising rates post-WWII (actual)<sup>27</sup>, and found no substantial difference in income inequality between the two scenarios – although there was a small reduction in inequality in both physical and mental health.



Actual and counterfactual university graduation rates (%) by birth cohort

Looking at parents' education, university graduation rates go up for those whose parents had a degree or other post-school qualification and those whose parents had no higher education. However, the gap in rates of graduation between the higher and lower groups did not get any narrower.

In other words, university expansion triggered a large increase in the proportion of graduates in the UK, irrespective of their parental background, but there is still a "persistent socioeconomic gradient in participation in higher education". The increase in the likelihood of having a degree is more pronounced in absolute terms for those whose parents had a higher socioeconomic background. "University expansion", they conclude, "has barely affected inequality of opportunity in income".

<sup>26</sup> Vincenzo Carrieri, Apostolos Davillas and Andrew M. Jones, Equality of opportunity and the expansion of higher education in the UK, *The Review of Income and Wealth*, August 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1111/roiw.12613>

<sup>27</sup> Achieved by "holding constant the likelihood of being a university graduate and having different levels of circumstances – in effect, fixing the opportunity set in terms of the likelihood being a graduate. This provides a hypothetical benchmark in which the proportions of people holding a degree and having each level of circumstances is rolled forward from the pre-Robbins period, all else held constant."

## EDUCATION V. TRAINING

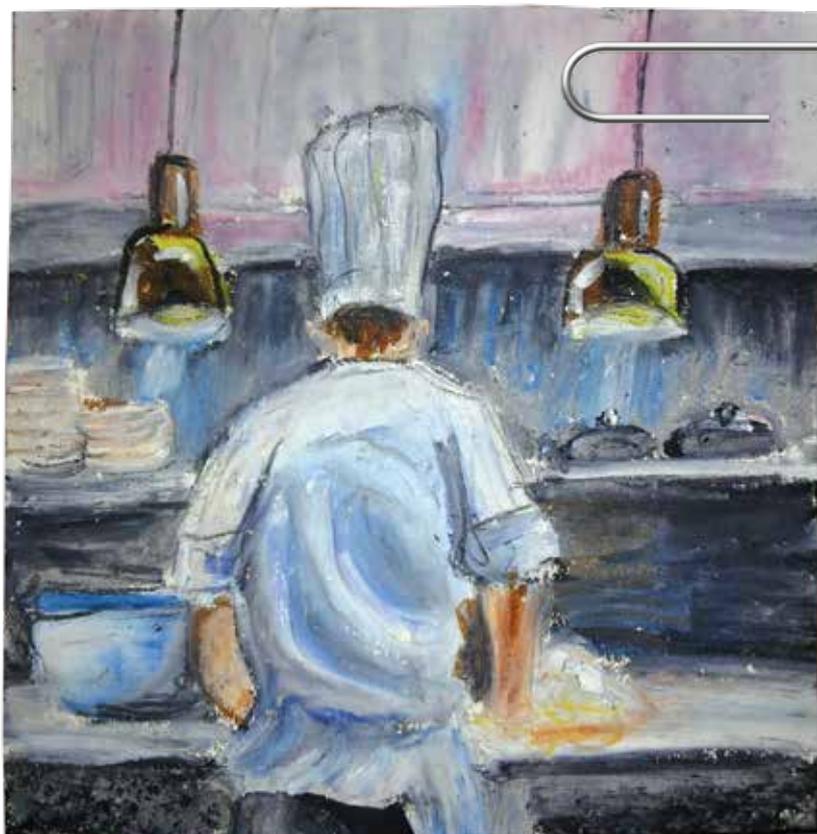
The government is not simply focused on university, though. Its opportunity mission mentions “skills for opportunity and growth so that every young person can follow the pathway that is right for them”, which might involve “high-quality apprenticeships, colleges or universities”.

More education does not lead to improvements in all outcomes. Research using Understanding Society<sup>28</sup> has shown that raising the school leaving age in Britain in 1972 did not improve the mental health of some young people. “Extending the duration of compulsory schooling comes at the expense of a year of work experience or vocational training. For young people who benefit little from formal schooling, the returns to one extra year of schooling may be lower than the returns to one year of work experience.”

Also, the research cited earlier about teenagers’ aspirations<sup>29</sup> found that, while about two-thirds of 10-15-year-olds aim for college or university, that’s a larger proportion than actually go. The researchers also point out that “raising educational aspiration further still may be problematic from an employability perspective because the economy cannot accommodate more graduates without corresponding demand”.

All this supports the importance of people having opportunities that suit them, raising the subject of training and skills. Again, though, background, gender, and ethnicity are significant. Each can affect people’s chances of being not in education, employment, or training (NEET).

One piece of research looked at 16-29-year-olds who were either born in the UK or arrived here before they were 10 (and therefore had their secondary education here)<sup>30</sup>. This found that having had, at a young age, parents who weren’t working increased the chance of being NEET. Having had two working parents reduced the chance of being NEET compared to families where neither parent was working, and to having one working parent.



There were differences by gender, though. Men who grew up with a single parent who worked were worse off than those who had two parents (with at least one working), and had almost the same chance of being NEET as men who lived in workless households. By contrast, women who grew up with a single parent who worked had the same chance of being NEET as those who lived with two parents, where one of them was working.

There were also ethnic differences. Indian, Bangladeshi and African young men who lived in workless households when they were 14 did better than their White British counterparts. On average, they were around 20 percentage points less likely to be NEET. Bangladeshi women were around 15 percentage points less likely to be NEET than their young White British counterparts.

The researchers say the fact that “some ethnic minority groups with poor social origins manage to avoid becoming NEETs to a much greater extent than white British individuals with similar backgrounds – and after controlling for education – is an important finding. This becomes even more striking once one acknowledges the fact that groups such as Bangladeshis have very high rates of worklessness.” It may be that attitudes to education, and aspirations, make a difference to young people in these communities.

<sup>28</sup> Mauricio Avendano, Augustin de Coulon, Vahé Nafilyan, Does longer compulsory schooling affect mental health? Evidence from a British reform, *Journal of Public Economics*, March 2020: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104137>

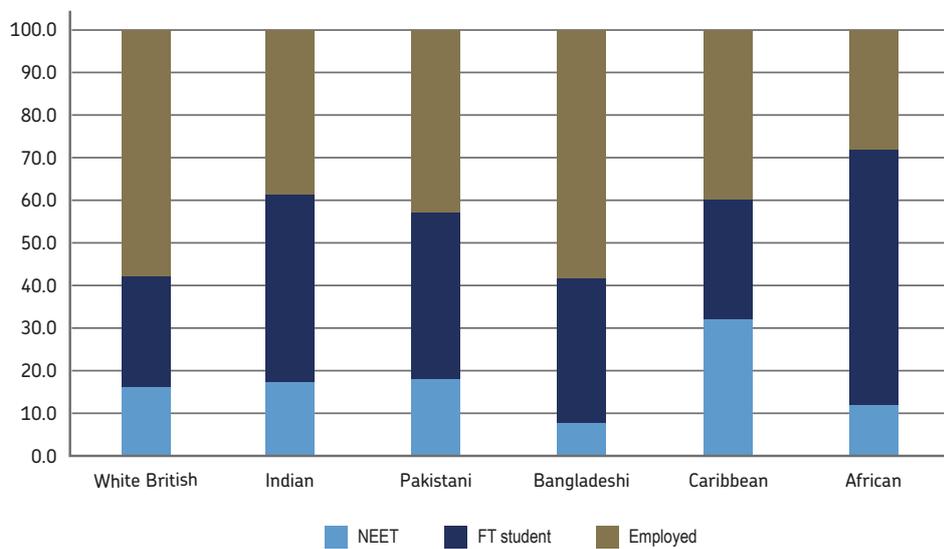
<sup>29</sup> Ann Berrington, Steven Roberts and Peter Tammes, Educational aspirations among UK young teenagers: exploring the role of gender, class and ethnicity, *British Educational Research Journal*, October 2016: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/berj.3235>

<sup>30</sup> Carolina V Zuccotti and Jacqueline O'Reilly, Ethnicity, Gender and Household Effects on Becoming NEET: An Intersectional Analysis, *Work, Employment and Society*, January 2018: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0950017017738945>

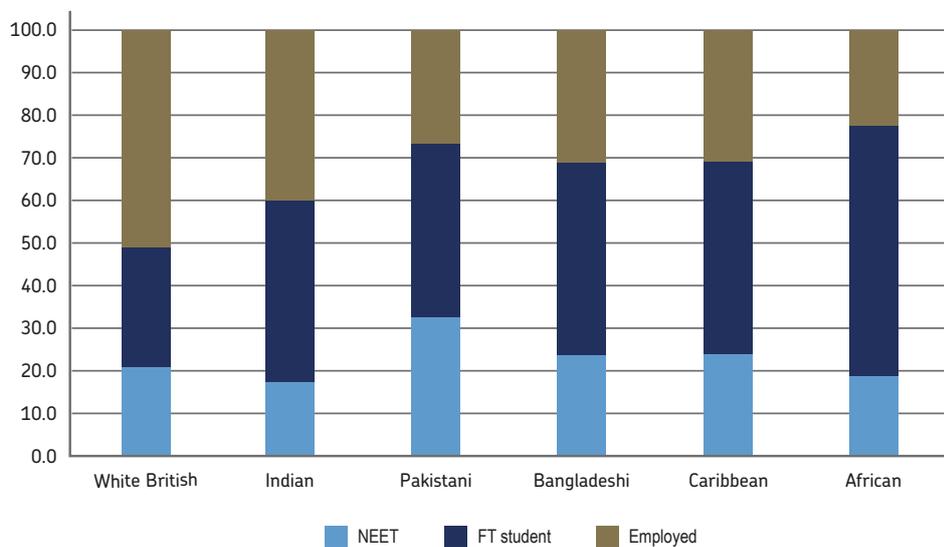
## ADOLESCENCE

The study also shows that young Caribbean men raised in two-earner households were more likely to be NEET than their White British counterparts, suggesting greater difficulties for this group in transferring their socio-economic and cultural capital. Also, there was some evidence that in families with more patriarchal values, young women may benefit less from having a working parent (usually the father) – a pattern observed among Bangladeshi women.

Ultimately, having workless parents, or being from an Asian ethnic minority, were not enough on their own to explain education and labour market opportunities. How these factors combined was more important, and an understanding of these intersections is what should guide policy.



Distribution of NEET, full-time students and employed across ethnic groups – men, aged 16-29



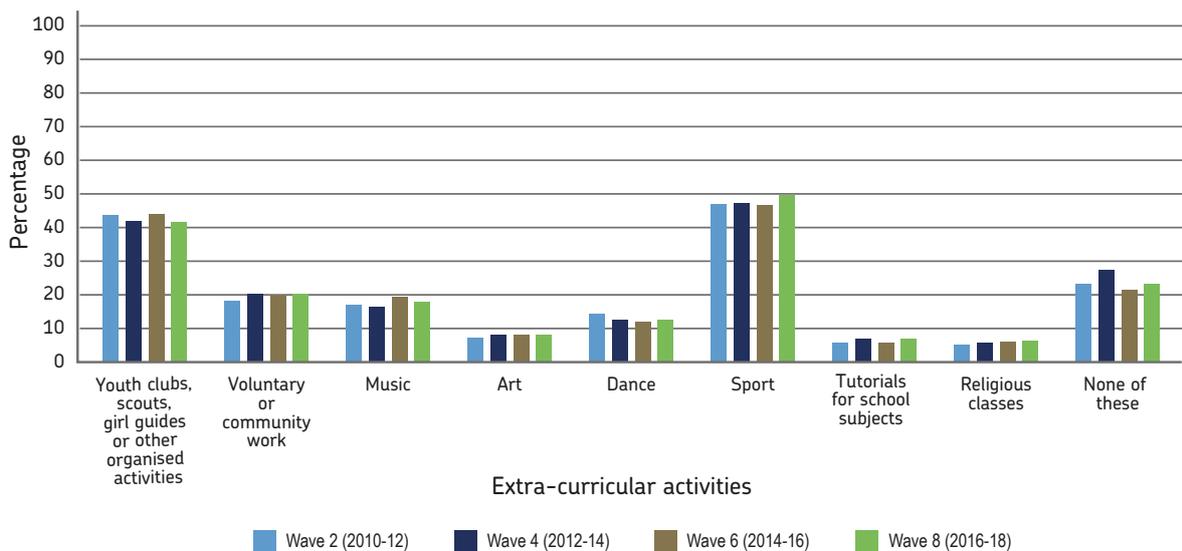
Distribution of NEET, full-time students and employed across ethnic groups – women, aged 16-29

## SOFT SKILLS



Research from the Social Mobility Commission<sup>31</sup> also looks at different types of learning: the ‘soft skills’ gained from extra-curricular activities such as youth clubs and sports. “As levels of education increase,” the Commission writes, “and more graduates enter the labour market, these non-educational skills and capabilities are likely to become increasingly significant in determining labour market success.” It refers to earlier findings which suggest that these activities have a positive impact on achievement, school attendance, soft skills, and the development of attributes such as independence and persistence.

Around 40% of young people in the UK attend youth clubs and organised activities such as girl guides, and scouts, and around 20% take part in music classes (for example learning a musical instrument). Smaller numbers get involved in art (8%), dance (13%), and religious classes (7%), and about 25% don’t do any extra-curricular activity.



Percentage of youth in the UK participating in various extra-curricular activities on a regular basis

<sup>31</sup> *An unequal playing field: extra-curricular activities, soft skills and social mobility*, Social Mobility Commission, July 2019: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility>

However, what is clear is that, as household income goes up, so do the numbers taking part in these activities. Music, the report says, “is clearly the preserve of more affluent family households, with 11% of the lowest income households taking part compared to 32% taking part from the highest income households”. But the gap for sport is just as big, “with 46% of young people from the lowest income households taking part, compared to 64% of youth from the highest”.

Again, there are ethnic differences. Sixty per cent of Black African youth go to a youth group, scouts, guides or another organised activity, but this is true of only 12% of Indian youth, around a fifth of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Asian youth, and about 44% of young White people.

Overall, though, the report says, “opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities are profoundly structured by socio-economic status, due to cost, especially activities with a high ‘up front’ cost”. Children at independent schools are likely to get the best opportunities, with not only “an unparalleled level of extra-curricular activities”, but also a wider range, “going beyond the more commonplace sports such as football and rugby, and offering more unusual activities like archery and sailing”.

Some state schools may have “a key figure”, possibly the headteacher, “driving a wide portfolio of extra-curricular activities”, but without significant investment, they will still be able to offer far less than independent schools can. Also, home life is important: “parents who work long unsocial hours, in jobs that offer little flexibility, may not be in a position to help their children access activities”.



All these activities, and the imbalance in who gets the opportunity to take them up, are important because they enhance life, regardless of their effect on education or later work. For example, research by Girlguiding using Understanding Society<sup>32</sup> has found that:

- girls who participate in Girlguiding between ages 4-10 are 8% more likely to exhibit pro-social behaviours
- girls who participate between ages 10-16 are 16% more satisfied with their appearance and 17% happier overall.

These results suggest that Girlguiding is protective of girls' and young women's social-emotional development. They highlight the importance of supporting inclusive, girl-led programmes that promote wellbeing and confidence.



Going back to the Social Mobility Commission's report, though, we know the effects on education are significant. Music classes and sports in particular can be a major pull in encouraging people to stay in education beyond what's compulsory – even when factors such as gender, ethnicity, parental education, and household income are taken into account.

The report makes specific policy recommendations, including:

- a national extra-curricular bursary scheme
- funding to develop and extend third-sector extra-curricular activity schemes
- supporting schools' organisational capacity to improve extra-curricular provision.

opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities are profoundly structured by socio-economic status

<sup>32</sup> Lisa Waddell, Freya Bills, The benefit of Girlguiding for girls aged 4-10: A comparative study using data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study and Girlguiding's yearly impact and evaluation survey, Understanding Society Conference presentation, July 2025: <https://understandingsocietyconference.co.uk/paper/the-benefit-of-girlguiding-for-girls-aged-4-10-a-comparative-study-using-data-from-the-uk-household-longitudinal-study-and-girlguidings-yearly-impact-and-evaluation-survey/>



# Places

It will not be a surprise to hear that there are regional inequalities in the UK, but research using Understanding Society can also focus on the specific importance of place for children's life chances.

The Social Mobility Commission report referred to in the previous chapter<sup>33</sup>, for example, found that in the north east of England, only 9% of young people take part in music classes, compared to 19% nationally – and 22% in the south east.



<sup>33</sup> *An unequal playing field: extra-curricular activities, soft skills and social mobility*, Social Mobility Commission, July 2019: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility>

## IDLE YOUTH

There has also been research on youth club provision<sup>34</sup>, carried out on London but with implications for any area where these services have closed. This found that teenagers whose nearest youth club was closed did worse at school, and that youth club closures led to an increase in criminal activity, especially theft, robbery, shoplifting, drug offences, and violent crimes.

The research compared offending rates and exam results among teenagers who lived in an area where all local youth clubs within a 40-minute walk had closed with those for teenagers whose nearest youth club stayed open. (It must be worth noting here that 40 minutes is not a short walk.)

Where young people lost access to a youth club, their GCSE performance declined – equivalent to roughly half a grade in one subject. The effects were worse for people from lower-income families (measured by being eligible for free school meals). These pupils' test scores fell by the equivalent of 1.5 grades. Before youth club closures, 14 youths in every 1,000 were accused of a crime each year. After closures, this went up to 16 per 1,000.

The research found that youth clubs were especially important in underprivileged areas, because they offered structured after-school activities which help teenagers to develop – and also simply stop them getting bored. When clubs closed, young people became less likely to attend any structured after-school activity. In other words, there are often no alternative places to go after school, either to relax or for homework support.

After a youth club closed, the researcher said<sup>35</sup> “local teenagers reported spending less time doing homework and more time playing videogames and on social media. This is likely due to youth clubs providing a good place for studying. But the results also suggest that youth clubs provide wider development benefits – perhaps through mentoring from youth workers – that spill over into school performance and wider life.”

Youth clubs were not just ‘holding spaces’ for teenagers. After a closure, crime didn’t only go up during hours when the club would have been open, but during the whole day – which suggests that “the positive activities and structured support provided by youth clubs helped keep young people out of trouble more generally”.

Finally, the research suggests that the cost to society of youth club closures will be higher than the amount saved from public spending. “Teenagers who do less well in their GCSEs go on to earn less over their lifetime – which is bad for them and bad for the taxpayer. Crimes are costly – to the victim, but also to communities and to the criminal justice system.” The research estimates that for every £1 saved, “there are societal costs of nearly £3”. Even if we only focus on government spending, the findings suggest that “around half of any initial savings from cuts to youth clubs are eventually offset by reduced tax revenues (due to lower educational attainment) and higher spending on criminal justice”.

Youth club closures, then, appear to have exacerbated inequalities. Investment in after-school activities would support education, reduce crime, help young people to develop skills and ‘human capital’, and make for a fairer society. The report suggests that “policy efforts should reconsider the provision of youth clubs and locate them in areas where after-school alternatives are lacking”.

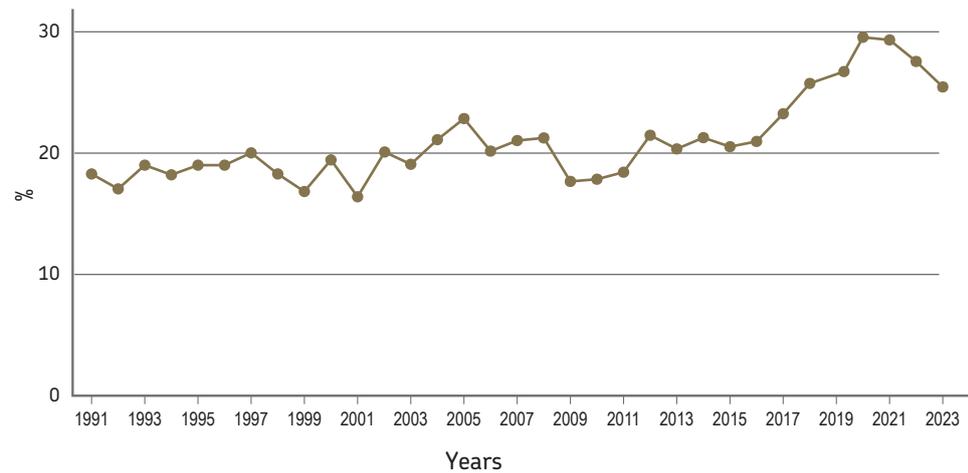


<sup>34</sup> Carmen Villa, *The effects of youth clubs on education and crime*, IFS Working Paper, November 2024: <https://doi.org/10.1920/wp.ifs.2024.5124>

<sup>35</sup> Carmen Villa, *How cuts to youth clubs affected teen crime and education*, IFS Comment, November 2024: <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/how-cuts-youth-clubs-affected-teen-crime-and-education>

# YOUTH SERVICES AND MENTAL HEALTH

The Youth Futures Foundation has identified<sup>36</sup> this “reduction in children and youth services” as one of four main factors in declining mental health among young people in recent decades.



Rates of mental distress in young people in England aged 16-24, 1991 to 2023

Its report, using data from Understanding Society and the Clinical Practice Research Datalink, says: “Funding for community services for children and young people in England has declined by 73% since 2010”, and that the evidence suggests these services had been “positively affecting mental health”.

They also tested the theory that “young people are reporting mental health symptoms at lower thresholds of distress” by examining “whether young people’s mental health has a similar impact on their functioning over time. If we find that this ‘impact’ has lessened over time, then we may conclude that what is being identified as mental ill health is less severe.”

In fact, there was “significant evidence that the association between mental distress and whether a young person reports drinking daily, smoking or is not in education, employment, or training was ‘increasing’ over time”. They interpret this as a sign that young people are not “reporting mental health problems at substantially lower thresholds in recent years”.

They also identify worsening sleep quality; employment precarity and affordability pressures; and social media and smartphone use as factors – and add that worsening mental health affects “domains such as school achievement, employment prospects, and social relationships”.



<sup>36</sup> Matthias Pierce, Yushi Bai, Vicky Taxiarchi, Sam Hugh-Jones, Kathryn M Abel, Praveetha Patalay, Ola Demkowicz, *Understanding drivers of recent trends in young people’s mental health*, Youth Futures Foundation, July 2025: <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/publication/report-understanding-drivers-of-recent-trends-in-young-peoples-mental-health/>

## BESIDE THE SEASIDE

One aspect of regional inequality is that it is not a simple case of a north-south divide. Nine of the top ten most deprived neighbourhoods in England are found above a line that might be drawn from the Mersey to the Humber, but the most deprived is in Essex. Not only that, but Jaywick, near Clacton, has been the most deprived place in the country consistently since the English Indices of Deprivation<sup>37</sup> began to be compiled in 2000. Most significantly, though, all ten have one thing in common: their proximity to the coast – eight are in Blackpool, and the tenth is Anfield, only a couple of miles from Liverpool’s docks.

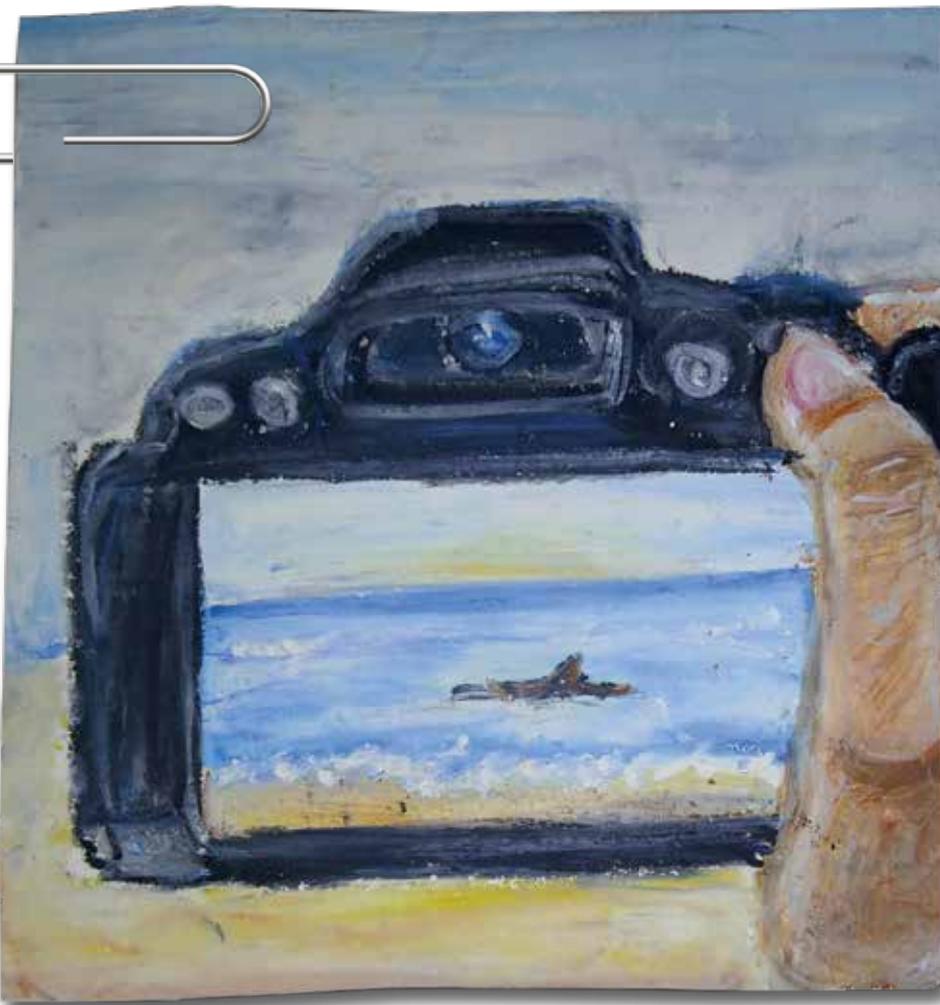
The Chief Medical Officer’s annual report 2021<sup>38</sup> was dedicated to the subject of health in coastal communities, and in 2024, the University of Essex (where Understanding Society is based, and the closest university to Jaywick) launched a Centre for Coastal Communities<sup>39</sup> to understand more about these places.

Research from the Centre, using Understanding Society, has found that coastal communities affect teenagers differently<sup>40</sup>, with implications for their adult lives. The research used data from 2009–22, making it possible to follow participants for up to 11 years. It assessed results from young people who took part in our youth survey when aged 10–15, and also completed the adult survey aged 16 or over.

The results showed that four out of five health outcomes – self-rated health, long-standing illness, psychological distress, and mental functioning – were worse in increasingly more deprived communities, but that this effect was amplified if the community was on the coast.

If a respondent had lived in one of the most deprived coastal communities as a teenager, their chance of a long-standing impairment, illness, or disability in young adulthood was almost nine times higher than in the least deprived inland communities. The results held when adolescent gender, ethnicity, household income, tenure, and life satisfaction were taken into account.

The results on physical health were consistent with the Chief Medical Officer’s Health in Coastal Communities report, although this research differed by also finding a link between coastal living and mental health. This may be because the Centre used mental health measures from the general health questionnaire (GHQ-12) and the short form health survey (SF-12), which capture a broader spectrum of psychological distress and wellbeing, rather than clinical mental health diagnoses.

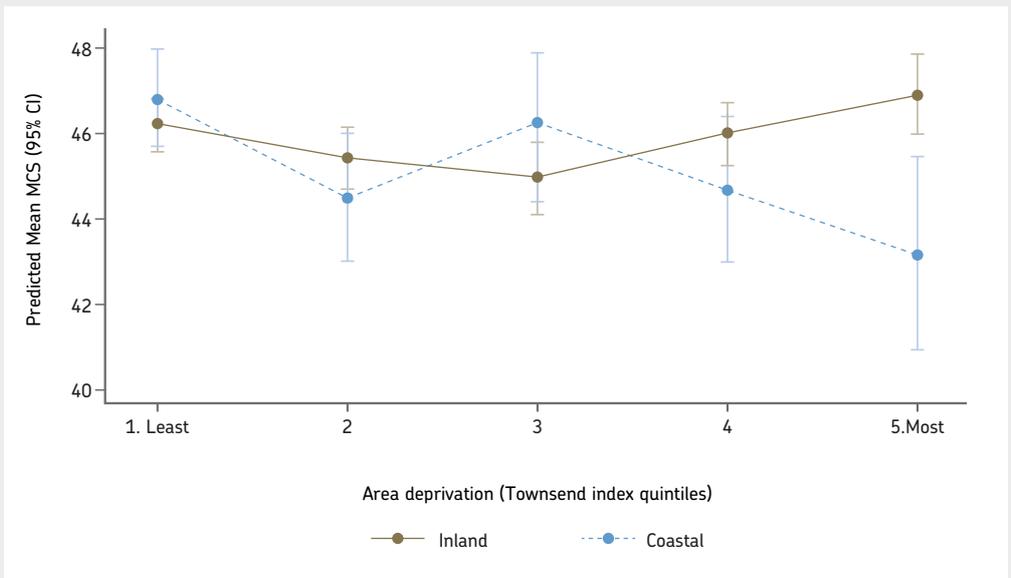


<sup>37</sup> *English indices of deprivation 2019*. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>

<sup>38</sup> *Chief Medical Officer’s annual report 2021: health in coastal communities*, Department of Health and Social Care, July 2021: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/chief-medical-officers-annual-report-2021-health-in-coastal-communities>

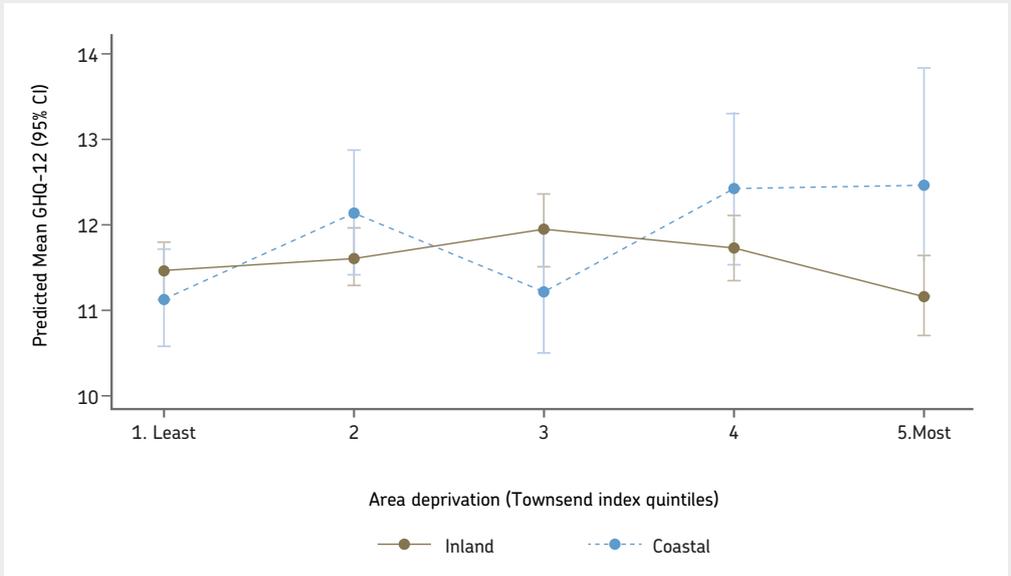
<sup>39</sup> *Centre for Coastal Communities launch explores challenges and opportunities*, University of Essex, June 2024: <https://www.essex.ac.uk/news/2024/06/20/centre-for-coastal-communities-launch-explores-challenges-and-opportunities>

<sup>40</sup> Emily Murray, Avril Keating, Claire Cameron, Rachel Benckekroun, Sam Whewall, Cara Booker, and Stephen Jivraj, *Residence in coastal communities in adolescence and health in young adulthood: an 11-year follow-up of English UKHLS youth questionnaire respondents*, *Health & Place*, May 2024: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2024.103239>



**Mental Component Summary (MCS) scores in adulthood (16+) by community type and deprivation level in adolescence (aged 10-15).**

In the less deprived areas, predicted health outcomes for coastal and inland community adolescents were broadly similar, but in the most deprived quintile, inequalities widen. (MCS scores are 'better' when higher.)



**General health questionnaire (GHQ-12) scores in adulthood (16+) by community type and deprivation level in adolescence (aged 10-15).**

In the less deprived areas, predicted health outcomes for coastal and inland community adolescents were broadly similar, but in the most deprived quintile, inequalities widen. (GHQ scores are 'worse' when higher.)

Coastal places have a number of characteristics that feed into mental and physical health. It may be that ‘blue space’ (being near water) reduces stress, restores people mentally, and encourages exercise, but that other aspects of coastal towns, such as lack of jobs – or lack of transport to get to a job – reduce health and wellbeing.

Research from New Zealand<sup>41</sup>, for example, has shown that young people in neighbourhoods with more fast-food outlets, takeaways, off licences, gambling sites, and convenience stores had higher odds of any mental health condition. It is likely that these factors are more prevalent in deprived coastal communities, or that escaping them is harder because there are fewer opportunities to promote health in places which are intrinsically isolated. As well as this isolation, coastal communities tend to have a higher proportion of low wage and insecure jobs, transient populations, poor quality housing, and a tendency of young people to move away.

Further UK research<sup>42</sup>, using the same 12 waves of Understanding Society, has investigated why young people in deprived coastal communities have worse mental health

than their peers inland. This found that “adolescents living in coastal neighbourhoods are being exposed to a whole host of adverse environmental exposures”. However, they were also exposed to lower levels of air pollution – “which has been linked to increased risk of depressive symptoms and incidence of suicide” – than their peers inland.

Also, their mental functioning was “related to the level of crime and higher education participation in their adolescent neighbourhoods”, but the household they grew up in was more important. The “demographic and socioeconomic circumstances of their adolescent households ... particularly household income and private renting ... explained more of the difference (16% versus 7.8%)”.



<sup>41</sup> Matthew Hobbs et al, The environment a young person grows up in is associated with their mental health: A nationwide geospatial study using the integrated data infrastructure, New Zealand, *Social Science & Medicine*, June 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.115893>

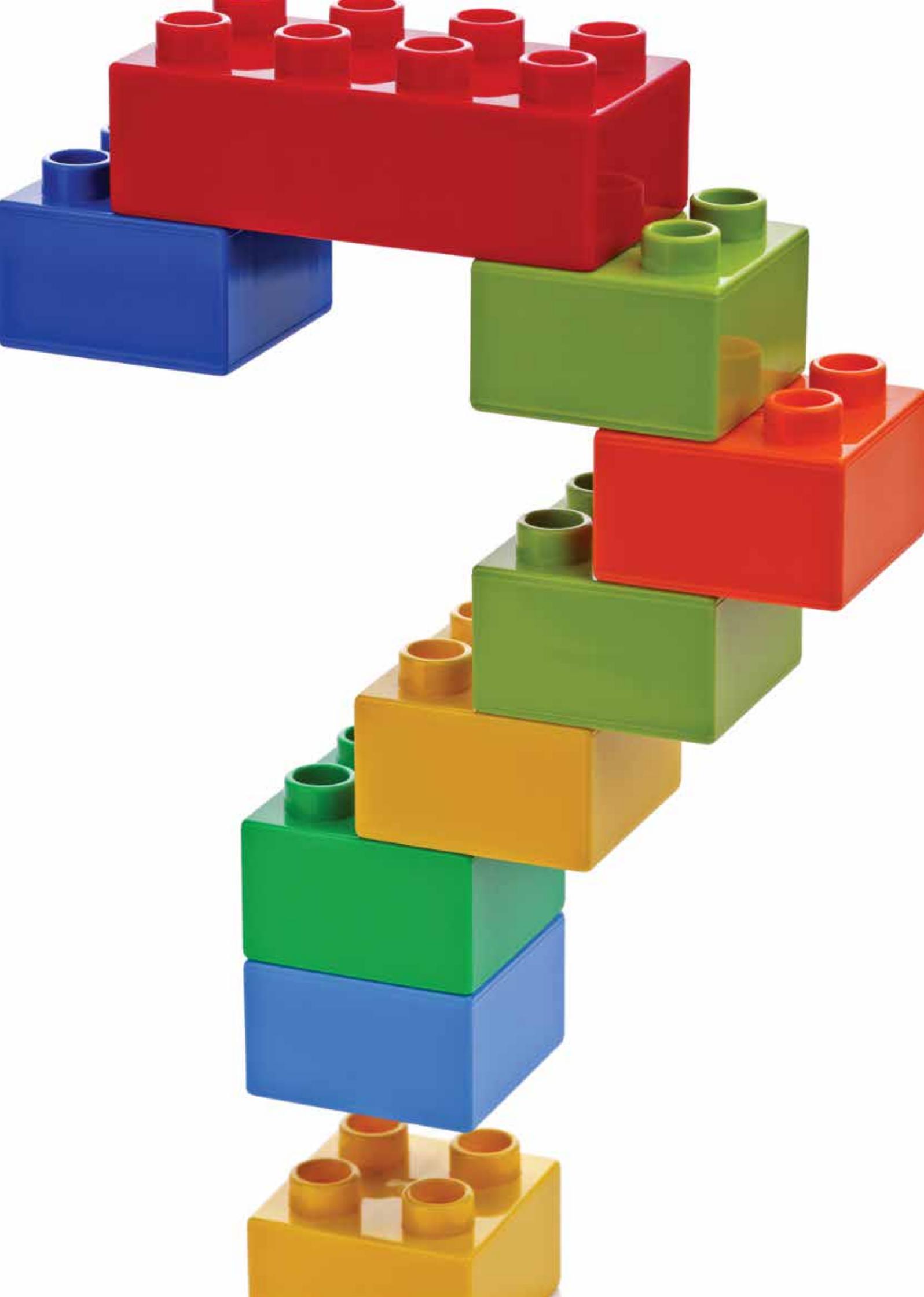
<sup>42</sup> Emily Murray, Avril Keating, Cara Booker, Claire Cameron, Sam Whewall, Stephen Jivraj, Is it the place or the people in the places? Exploration of why young people in deprived coastal communities of England have worse mental health than their peers inland, *Wellbeing, Space and Society*, October 2025: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wss.2025.100307>



When the researchers considered the built environment, they found that links to mental health were “due to clustering of similar kinds of people residing within the same neighbourhoods, rather than infrastructure”. Although there is “no research on how much internal migration contributes to the relationship between coastal residence and health outcomes”, we know that economic decline creates “a negative feedback loop of highly skilled and healthy individuals leaving these areas for better employment opportunities, leaving behind the sicker and more socio-demographically challenged”.

As a result, the researchers say, strategies to improve health in England need to pay particular attention to the health and socio-demographics of young people and their families in deprived coastal communities – and that evaluations of government-led programmes should have mental health outcomes built in. The Welsh government, for example, requires each public body listed in its Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 to create objectives, and act to improve economic, social, environmental, and cultural wellbeing. The researchers say, “Our results support creation of an English equivalent with specific funding”, dedicated to reducing inequalities in young people’s wellbeing across the country.

☁☁ adolescents living in coastal neighbourhoods are being exposed to a whole host of adverse environmental exposures



# POLICY

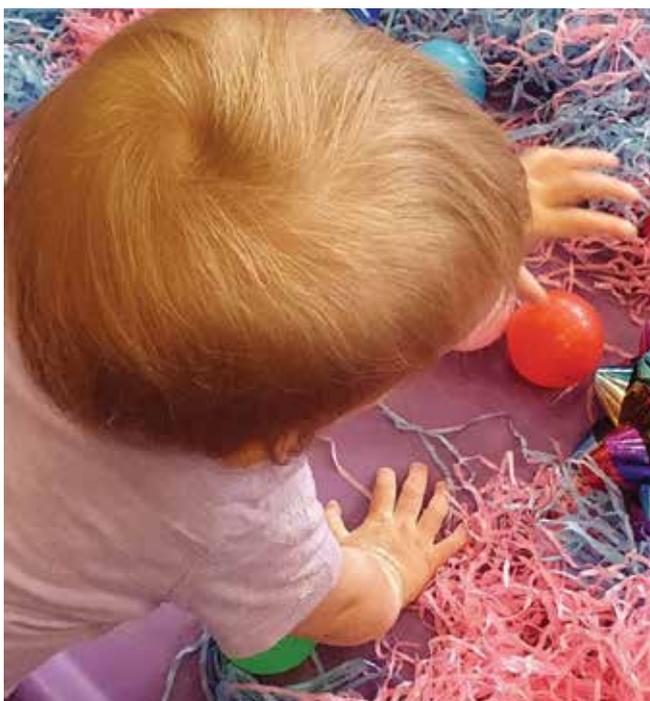
What does all this mean in concrete policy terms?

What specific actions can the government and devolved administrations, plus local government and partner organisations, take to tackle the issues raised and evidence presented through this research? Child poverty is inevitably one clear theme, but are there other policy actions that flow from the evidence?

## PARENTING SKILLS AND SUPPORT

Improving nutrition for the most disadvantaged during pregnancy, and combating smoking, can both help increase birthweight to give children a better start. Analysis of Understanding Society's PEACH data suggests that lack of breastfeeding is an important factor in children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. Beyond breastfeeding the research points towards gender differences, with smoking during pregnancy being a more important predictor for boys' emotional and behavioural difficulties and the amount of 'fussing' (e.g. clinging or crankiness) being more of a predictor for girls.

Recommendation: There is an ongoing need for education on breastfeeding and to discourage women from smoking while pregnant. Beyond this, there is a compelling case for better support for vulnerable families, defined in this context in terms of emotional and behavioural difficulties among children. This could be as part of a comprehensive system of supporting parents, so they are able to invest resources in mitigating their children's emotional and behavioural difficulties.



## A Surer Start

While Sure Start may not have been a 'silver bullet', children who had greater access to Sure Start than their older siblings were 18 percentage points more likely to report 'very good' or 'excellent' health and had significantly fewer emotional and behavioural difficulties at ages 11-15. Sure Start reduced hospitalisations for adolescents, with the greatest positive impact in the poorest areas. Benefits are linked to a mix of health support, parenting, and educational services, suggesting universal early childhood interventions have sustained mental health and wellbeing effects, especially for disadvantaged children.

Recommendation: There is good case for rolling out and improving programmes of universal early childhood interventions, with particular attention given to making sure the most deprived communities are prioritised first.

## SCHOOL MEALS

We know that free school meals have educational and health benefits to those from the poorest backgrounds. Research that looked at what happened when free school meals were offered to all children found that one in three children newly ate a school lunch, and that this had a significant impact on their education and levels of obesity. The research also found that offering free school meals universally increased take-up among those already eligible for means-tested free meals – moving around 8% of non-takers into taking up their entitlement.

**Recommendation:** Eligibility for free school meals differs across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, with each home nation applying specific rules based on age and family circumstances. Some areas such as London have also extended universal free school meals across state funded or council run primary schools. There is a compelling case to maintain and extend this policy throughout primary school to support the education and health of children. Additional targeted obesity support is needed in areas with the highest prevalence of child obesity rates.



## OUTSIDE THE CURRICULUM

Youth clubs, sports, and other cultural activities are all good for so-called ‘soft skills’. The research shows that young people who live in areas where youth clubs have closed have suffered more than those in areas where these facilities stayed open, and that the cost to society of closing these youth clubs is higher than the financial saving.

**Recommendation:** There is an economic case to invest in extra-curricular activities for young people. The Social Mobility Commission recommends that this could be delivered via:

- a national extra-curricular bursary scheme
- funding to develop and extend third-sector extra-curricular activity schemes
- supporting schools’ organisational capacity to improve extra-curricular provision.

“ Child poverty is a straightforward equation: if you give money to families, you can reduce poverty

Sara Ogilvie  
Director of Policy, Rights and Advocacy at the Child Poverty Action Group

<sup>43</sup> Families and benefit cuts, Understanding Society, May 2025: <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/podcasts/families-benefit-cuts-stress/>

## REDUCING INTERGENERATIONAL POVERTY

Poor children are more likely to become poor adults, but the evidence demonstrates that policy can act to mitigate this. At one extreme, spending all of one's childhood in poverty in the United States is associated with a 42 percentage point increase in the mean poverty rate during early adulthood. The tax and welfare systems in the UK only mitigate intergenerational persistence of poverty by around 16 percentage points. However, the lower levels of intergenerational persistence of poverty in the UK compared to some other countries do indicate that a family investment model can provide a credible pathway to breaking the cycle of poverty.

Recommendation: There are choices and models of different tax and cash or in-kind transfers for reducing intergenerational poverty, and their relative costs and benefits. The government should commission cost-benefit analysis of different approaches and prioritise robust evaluation of family investment and intervention strategies.



## PREVENTION AND BETTER PATHWAYS TO TRAINING

When we look at the research on unemployment, we see that a healthier economy with more work for everyone supports children's achievements and GCSE results – for example, through higher rates of parental employment. However, certain groups of young people are at particular risk of poorer outcomes:

- being White, male, and working class “combine in an additive fashion to encourage lower aspiration”.
- having workless parents increases the chances of being NEET (not in employment, education, or training), but there are variations by gender and ethnicity.
- children whose parents both left school with few qualifications experience a long-term “double disadvantage”.

Recommendation: There is a need to develop pathways to training and qualifications for the significant numbers of young people who have poor educational attainment and lower expectations about their future. More targeted preventative intervention is needed for white, male, and working-class young people, starting at school and supporting the transition into the labour market. Alongside this, parents working with schools have a crucial role in ensuring that their children view qualifications as useful and success achievable. With health and labour market prospects intertwined for young people, increasing the risks of being NEET, the Youth Futures Foundation research “further reinforces the need for mental health to be prioritised and for preventative solutions that bring together health services, education, employers, civil society and other stakeholders.”

## FIRING UP LOCAL ECONOMIES THROUGH YOUNG PEOPLE

We know that the UK stands out as one of the most regionally unequal countries among the OECD, with a persistent 'north-south divide'. But the research on coastal communities highlighted inequalities that exist within regions, with areas characterised by low wage and insecure jobs, transient populations, and a tendency of young people to move away in search of better opportunities. Common with other evidence, the research also finds that more than two-thirds of mental illness begins by age 25 years - and that suicide rates and "deaths of despair" (which may involve alcohol or drugs), "are significantly higher in coastal areas compared to inland local authorities".

Recommendation: Deep regional inequalities need targeted investment in skills and employment support, with a sharp focus on coastal areas and high-risk youth to address the looming problems facing this generation. The 'Youth Guarantee' and other support programmes need to integrate mental health into their delivery and systematically evaluate the impact. Combined mayoral authorities and strategic authorities face difficulties in how to effectively deploy control and coordination over areas like skills, accessible transport, incentivising jobs for young people, and targeting individuals. Building a 'social and enterprise infrastructure' with partners offers one way to take targeted action to generate opportunities for young people.



## WEALTH, HOME OWNERSHIP AND RAISING A FAMILY

Analysis by the IFS points towards a generational change in terms of who, among those born since the 1980s, can come to own the house they live in and build the housing wealth that supports a stable family life. Adult wealth for those born in the 1960s was predominantly driven by how much they themselves earned. Since the 1980s, class and ethnicity have been playing a much stronger role in the opportunity to own a home. In the bottom quarter of wealth distribution, people in White and Indian ethnic groups live in households with at least a small positive net worth, compared to all other groups who live in households with close to zero net worth, or negative net worth. As inheritances grow in importance, it is increasingly likely that those born to the poorest fifth of parents will end up in the poorest fifth themselves. The lack of access to home ownership among the young may well be contributing to the delay and decline in the who is having children, and the apparent increase in the number of young people focusing more on careers.

Recommendation: Expand home ownership opportunities for young people through some form of long-term workable property or wealth tax. Getting onto the housing ladder will still not be feasible, or even the right choice, for many young people, who will need access to secure, high-quality social and private rental housing suitable for raising young families.



## A CALL TO ACTION

By necessity, the recommendations made in this report are far reaching and, in some cases, politically or operationally challenging. But when seen in combination, the insights offered in this report make a compelling case that we are facing a major generational challenge with long-term consequences. As we said at the outset, tackling inequality of opportunity, and significantly weakening the tie to destiny, is not simply a matter of knowing what works, and implementing it. It requires us to understand what is working, where, and for whom – a grasp, in other words, of audience, engagement and place.

Whatever happens in the coming years on this issue, where policy touches the household and cuts across issues or generations, our data will continue to shed light.

# AFTERWORD: BEHIND THE RESEARCH

Longitudinal data is vital for policy, especially when it captures life at the household level, and everyone who lives there, at all ages, as ours does. Understanding Society asks adults about children under 10, and 10-15-year-olds fill in their own youth survey. Then, at 16, participants are invited to join the main (adult) survey.

This allows us to build a rich picture of family life and background, and we also have (and are currently gathering more) biological data which gives us objective measures of people's health (such as cholesterol, blood pressure, and other measures of health from blood samples).

Our data can be linked to administrative and other sources, such as

- the National Pupil Database for educational results
- area data for context and other influences on lives
- international data for comparison with other countries.

Our Pregnancy and Early Childhood (PEACH) data file brings together most of the data reported by parents for children under 10, plus information on pregnancy and parenting styles, from all waves of the Main Survey – that's over 21,000 children in the 14 waves of Understanding Society that have been released so far.

This allows for research into family dynamics and child development, and it's simple to link to the Main Survey to see a child's journey in the family context. The data include:

- smoking or drinking during pregnancy
- birthweight
- whether they were premature
- how much they cried as an infant
- if they could speak in full sentences at age 3
- how often the parents read to the child.

All this can help to understand delays in development, and the influence of parenting, financial problems or illness, and inform policy to improve children's skills and abilities. Those with developmental disorders are likely to have health problems and perform less well at school, but early treatment can make a real difference.



However, youth data is challenging to gather. Response rates to surveys are declining worldwide, but most research into survey participation focuses on adults. Good quality, robust longitudinal survey data about children and young adults is crucial, though, because research shows significant associations between experiences, attitudes and behaviours in childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, and later in life.

We also need to understand more about the transition to adulthood, which is linked to social, emotional, identity and behavioural changes that happen in young people's lives. So Understanding Society carries out research to identify what drives young people's participation, including recruitment and retention, and what hinders engagement.

A researcher on an Understanding Society fellowship, for example, has found<sup>44</sup> that life events such as a change of job or expecting to move house are linked to a higher likelihood of dropping out of the survey, especially for 16-24-year-olds. Living with parents makes it easier to be in contact with young people, but also makes it more likely that they will not respond to the survey, and knowing this could help in developing ways to retain these participants. Parents could play a role in their children's participation by persuading them or helping to establish contact if the young adult has moved away.

Violetta Parutis, Understanding Society's Assistant Associate Director (Surveys), has done qualitative research<sup>45</sup> on this issue by carrying out in-depth interviews with some dormant 18-25-year-old members of the Understanding Society sample. The results point to strategies which could be used in recruitment and retention.

For example, young people prefer to take part in studies online, but think that personal contact with an interviewer is important at the start of a longitudinal survey. They want to feel connected to the research, possibly through social media or an app, and they want flexibility, autonomy and choice in order to incorporate the survey into a busy life. They also said incentives to take part should be mentioned prominently in survey materials.

Barriers to taking part included the length of the questionnaire, leaving the parental home, going to college, university or starting work – but one important factor in motivating them to answer the survey was their mother (or a mother figure). In many households, it is the mother who opens invitation letters, encourages them to respond, and sends completed questionnaires back. It is also important to give young people positive reasons for taking part, for example by setting out the aims of the study and the importance and usefulness of research findings.



## WORK WITH US

We can help you to use our data, and are happy to talk about ideas for collaboration. You could also join one of our research springboards, which bring people together from different disciplines and sectors to think together and shape research projects to answer policy questions.

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<sup>44</sup> Camilla Salvatore, Peter Lugtig, and Bella Struminskaya, Youth Nonresponse in Panel Surveys: Investigating the Impact of Life Events SocArXiv, August 2025: [https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/br9ng\\_v1](https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/br9ng_v1)

<sup>45</sup> Violetta Parutis, Recruiting and retaining young people in longitudinal surveys: lessons from Understanding Society: UK Household Longitudinal Study, Understanding Society Working Paper, December 2023: <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/publications/working-paper/understanding-society/2023-15/>



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