

# A third of children with history of social care face school exclusion

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Pupils in state secondary schools in England are much more likely to be excluded if they have a history of receiving social care or special educational needs services, finds a new study by UCL researchers.

The research, published in *Child Abuse & Neglect*, used anonymized data from the Department for Education's National Population Database, which covered all children starting state [secondary school](#) in September 2011 and 2012 across the country—equating to around one million students.

The team examined the proportion of pupils who had been excluded—either temporarily suspended or permanently expelled—during their time at secondary school, according to whether they had a history of receiving [social care](#) or [special educational needs](#) (SEN) services.

Social care services are wide ranging and help children who need [social support](#) or safeguarding from harm—including those who require a child protection plan or foster care.

Meanwhile, SEN services support children with additional learning needs, including autism, developmental issues and physical disabilities.

The researchers found that 13% of all children were excluded at least once in secondary school.

However, among children with social care involvement, this figure was much higher. A third (33%) of children with a history of any form of social care in years 4 to 6, faced exclusion during their time at secondary school.

Meanwhile, around 40% of children who had had a child protection plan or were looked after in state care in Years 4 to 6 were excluded at least once across secondary school.

If children also received SEN services, their probability of being excluded was even higher. For example, 46% of children who had had

both a child protection plan and a history of SEN services were excluded at least once across secondary school.

Lead author, Dr. Matthew Jay (UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health), said, "These findings speak to the intersecting problems that many children and families face that mean they cannot access education—something which is a fundamental human right."

"We examined two different groups of children, whom the state has recognized as needing extra help with education and staying in school. And yet, they are still being excluded very frequently—and much more frequently than other children."

"Many children who receive social care services also receive SEN provision at some point throughout their school career. A large part of this is due to social, emotional and mental health needs—which is not surprising given the adversity they faced earlier on in life."

"However, when schools are under resourced and teachers don't have the training or time to help these children and families the way that they need to be helped, problems can escalate, leading to children being excluded."

The findings showed that there was a lot of variation across [local authorities](#)—this may be due to differences in the way some local authorities and schools respond to the needs of their pupils.

Researchers are now calling for an inclusive education policy backed up by adequate resources for schools and teachers to ensure that the needs of vulnerable young people, such as those who are involved with [social care services](#), are properly met.

Dr. Louise Mc Grath-Lone (UCL Social Research Institute), a co-author

of the study and former secondary school teacher, added, "This problem won't be resolved until school policies acknowledge that, through no fault of their own, trauma can impact the behavior of children in care. Zero tolerance behavior policies can mean that relatively minor things, such as acting out in class, can set children on a path of escalating sanctions that ultimately ends in exclusion."

## Study limitations

The research only looks at children who receive social care/SEN provisions. However, there is also a number of children who require these services but don't have access to them—meaning that the true level of exclusion from school is likely higher.

The findings also don't include illegal exclusion or off-rolling, where children are removed from a school when it is not in their best interest.

**More information:** Matthew A Jay, Risk of school exclusion among adolescents receiving social care or special educational needs services: a whole-population administrative data cohort study, *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106325](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106325)

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