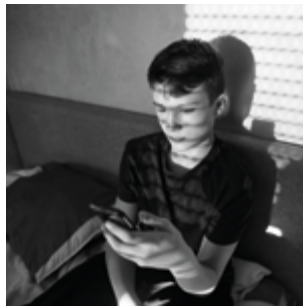


LOST BOYS

State of the Nation

March 2025



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About the Centre for Social Justice

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the UK who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five "pathways to poverty", first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report *Breakthrough Britain*. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in Government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report *It Happens Here* shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the Government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners, and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises, and other grassroots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2025 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to those organisations and individuals who have so generously given their time, expertise and experiences to contribute to our research over the past few months. Their work on the ground across the UK is inspiring. Innovation and an unflinching commitment in the belief of the inherent dignity of those whom they are working with and for should be a source of great pride for Britain. Alongside what is a fairly sober reflection of the state of boys in the UK, these stalwart supporters of boys and young men across Britain are inspiring. Firstly, we would like to thank those who hosted us for a visit including:

- › Betel UK;
- › The Ben Kinsella Trust;
- › LadsNeedDads;
- › Street Connect;
- › The Training Cave;
- › Building Futures Together;
- › Ascend Now;
- › Swinton Lock;
- › Rush House;
- › Families Need Fathers;
- › FAST London;
- › One Eighty;
- › New Beginnings Foundation;
- › Mentell;
- › Boathouse Youth;
- › Oasis Community Centre;
- › The Carpenters Arms;
- › and The Grace Foundation.

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We are especially grateful to our generous supporters who made this work possible, including Olga Polizzi - Lady Shawcross, Jon Moulton, Wade Newmark, Andy Preston, The Sequoia Trust, The Hadley Trust, Stoneygate Trust, Bird Song Trust and JLB Foundation. We are also grateful to The Stone Family Foundation for enabling our chapter on Families and Fathers.



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TRUST**



Disclaimer: Please note that the views and findings presented in this report are those of the CSJ alone, and not necessarily those of any organisation or individual who has fed into or enabled our research. Any errors remain our own.

Foreword

At the Centre for Social Justice, we have always asked: what is really going on in our homes and communities, and where can we make a difference? We listen to those working on the frontline - the teachers, youth workers, charities, and parents who see, day in and day out, the struggles playing out in the lives of young people. And in recent years, they've been telling us the same thing: something is going on with our boys.

Lost Boys is our attempt to find out what that is.

What we have uncovered is stark. Boys are struggling in education, more likely to take their own lives, less likely to get into stable work, and far more likely to be caught up in crime. The numbers don't lie - something has shifted, and we cannot ignore it any longer. It's not just about Andrew Tate or online influencers; they are the symptoms, not the cause. The deeper truth is that too many boys are growing up without the guidance, discipline, and purpose they need to thrive.

But let me be clear - this is not a message of despair. Boys and young men have enormous potential. They always have, and they always will. We must stop seeing masculinity as a problem to be solved and start seeing it as a strength to be nurtured. Strength, resilience, responsibility - these are not traits to be suppressed but harnessed for good.

This report, Lost Boys, is not just an exploration of the challenges young men face but the beginning of a journey to offer a hopeful, positive vision for masculinity in Britain. We need strong fathers, mentors, and role models. We need a culture that values the unique contributions of men and supports boys to grow into good, responsible adults.

This is just the first step, but it's an important one. It sets the scene for the next stage of our work where we will begin to offer solutions to the challenges outlined below.

We must be willing to listen, to act, and to restore hope for the next generation. Because when boys thrive, our whole society benefits.



Andy Cook

Chief Executive, Centre for Social Justice

Executive Summary

Boys and young men are in crisis. While the last hundred years have been marked by great leaps forward in outcomes and rights for women, in this generation it is boys who are being left behind. And by some margin.

From the day they start primary school, to the day they leave higher education, the progress of boys lags behind girls. The proportion of young men compared to young women failing to move from education into employment or training has been steadily growing for thirty years.¹ Since the pandemic alone, the number of males aged 16 to 24 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) has increased by a staggering 40 per cent compared to just seven per cent of females.² For those young men who are in work, the much-vaunted gender pay gap has been reversed. Young men are now out-earned by their female peers, including among the university educated.

The growing divergence in boys' and girls' outcomes does not only apply to education and employment. We are also seeing a growing divide in the social and political attitudes of the sexes. In Britain, as in countries across the developed world, young men are increasingly drawn to conservative, traditionalist or right-wing political movements, whilst young women become ever more liberal and left-progressive. In an increasingly online existence, boys and girls no longer walk the same path from childhood to adulthood, with their interests, values and aims in life increasingly incompatible with each other.³ As Britain grapples with an epidemic of family breakdown, millions of boys are deprived of any positive model of manhood.

Perhaps in response to this shift, nearly half of Britons say women's equality has gone 'far enough'. In the emerging generation, an international study revealed that fully 60 per cent of men across 31 countries think women's equality actively discriminates against them.⁴

In our own exclusive polling for this project, the Centre for Social Justice has found that more than four in ten agree that society does not value traditional masculine values, such as courage, resilience and competitiveness. At the same time, half of 18-24 men say that men are too often shown by the media as "a bit pathetic".⁵

For boys and young men in Britain—especially those who are poor—the picture is an increasingly bleak one. And, where the divergence is particularly apparent, we also highlight different outcomes across certain ethnic groups. Over the coming months, the CSJ will be looking for solutions to this growing problem. This report aims to paint a stark picture of what is happening in six significant areas of life. It makes the urgent case that action is needed.

This report will not cover every issue facing young men and boys, but it is a start.

1 'Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), UK - Office for National Statistics' (Office for National Statistics, November 2024), ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/latest.

2 *ibid.*

3 John Burn-Murdoch, 'A New Global Gender Divide Is Emerging', *Financial Times*, 26 January 2024.

4 'Nearly 1 in 2 Britons (47 per cent) Say Women's Equality Has Gone Far Enough | Ipsos' (Ipsos, March 2024), ipsos.com/en-uk/international-womens-day-survey-2024.

5 Polling conducted by Whitestone Insight of 2709 adults from 14 to 17 February 2025, including a boosted sample of 18 to 24 year-olds.

1) Employment

In July to September 2024, 15.1 per cent of men aged 16-24 were NEET, compared to 11.2 per cent of women.⁶ This is 550,000 men, an increase of over 150,000 compared to pre-pandemic levels. Young men aged 16-24 are also much more likely to be unemployed than young women. CSJ analysis of government data estimates that the government could save £16 billion over five years in tax contributions and welfare savings by tackling this problem.⁷

The gender pay gap has now reversed for those working full time between the ages of 16-24. In the Southern regions the pay gap has persisted for three years now, and the size of the wage gap is most stark in the Northern regions. This has significant wider social and cultural implications than for income alone.

Male-dominated industries such as manufacturing, agriculture and construction, which used to contribute over 40 per cent of UK output in 1970,⁸ now amount to just 16 per cent of UK GDP in 2023.⁹ In 1997 manufacturing employed 3.2 million men and this figure has shrunk by over 40 per cent to 1.9 million.¹⁰ While overall unemployment rates remain low, the secure, well-paid and meaningful jobs that used to be available to non-university educated young men are increasingly unavailable.

Research consistently finds that men being unemployed or earning relatively less than women has a significant impact on both partners' mental health and marriageability.¹¹

2) Education

From nursery to university, boys are falling behind girls. One of the Prime Minister's 'milestones' is to hit a target of 75 per cent of reception children to be school ready. Currently, school-readiness stands at 67 per cent. Yet when we break down this statistic by gender, we see that 75 per cent of girls are school ready compared to just 60 per cent of boys.¹² In their GCSE exams, boys on average achieve half a grade lower than girls across every subject.¹³ At A-level, girls outperform boys by an average of over a grade and a half across their best three subjects.¹⁴ Girls are also pulling ahead in the new 'T Level' qualification.¹⁵ In British universities female students outnumber males by three to two¹⁶.

Boys are twice as likely to be in the growing number of school exclusions than girls. And polling suggests that 41 per cent of sixth-form boys and girls have been taught in school lessons that boys are a problem for society.¹⁷

6 'Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), UK - Office for National Statistics'.

7 centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/discussions/skills-tax-break

8 Chris Rhodes, 'Historic Data on Industries in the UK' (UK Parliament, August 2016), researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06623/SN06623.pdf. p.6.

9 Georgina Hutton and Khadijah Zaidi, 'Industries in the UK' (UK Parliament, 12 February 2025), commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8353/.

10 'LFS: In Employment: Manufacturing: UK: Men: Aged 16 and over: Thousands: NSA - Office for National Statistics' (Office for National Statistics, January 2025), ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/timeseries/i4eh/lms.

11 Vanessa Gash and Anke C Plagnol, 'The Partner Pay Gap: Associations between Spouses' Relative Earnings and Life Satisfaction among Couples in the UK', *Work, Employment and Society* 35, no. 3 (1 June 2021), doi.org/10.1177/0950017020946657. p.579.

12 'Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results, Academic Year 2023/24', n.d., explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results.

13 'GCSE Results (Attainment 8)' (GOV.UK, 7 November 2024), ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/gcse-results-attainment-8-for-children-aged-14-to-16-key-stage-4/latest/.

14 'Annual Report 2024: Gender' (Education Policy Institute, n.d.), epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-gender-2/.

15 'Provisional T Level Results, Academic Year 2023/24' (GOV.UK, n.d.), explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/provisional-t-level-results#dataBlock-4d5e23f7-ae53-4dc6-b7e2-1b29a743b4c9-charts.

16 'Who's Studying in HE? | HESA' (HESA, n.d.), hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he.

17 Jo-Anne Nadler, 'Show, Tell and Leave Nothing to the Imagination' (Civitas, 14 May 2023), <http://civitas.org.uk/civitas.org.uk/publications/show-tell-and-leave-nothing-to-the-imagination>. p.45.

Our education system is not working for boys. While it is well known that boys and girls develop at different rates and have different preferences and abilities, it is clear that large numbers of boys are failing to reach their potential at school, and this will have far reaching consequences for society and the economy.

3) Families and Fathers

Britain is suffering from an epidemic of fatherlessness. 2.5 million children in the UK have no father figure at home, representing one in five of all dependent children.¹⁸ Almost half of first-born children by age 14 do not live with both natural parents.¹⁹ For those born in 1970, this figure was just 21 per cent.²⁰

Previous estimates have placed the cost to the state per year of family breakdown at £51bn²¹. Accounting for inflation this would now be at least £64bn. Some UK regions feel this much more acutely than others: of the top ten local authorities for non-partnered births, only two were not in the North East or North West.²²

The links between father absence and a range of outcomes are increasingly apparent. For example, 76 per cent of children in custody said they had an absent father.²³ With the annual cost of a prisoner being £50,000²⁴, father engagement is imperative for cost saving, reducing the prison population, and life-saving measures.

Fatherlessness in childhood also has a particularly stark impact on the mental health of young men, yet boys are more likely now to own a smartphone than to live with their dad.

4) Crime

Criminality has always been predominantly associated with men. As of September 2024, the prison population stood at 86,966 prisoners in England and Wales, of which 96 per cent were male²⁵. The gender disparity begins at a young age, with 529 male and only 11 female children in the Youth Estate.

Although males are - and always have been - more likely to commit crime, young men are disproportionately likely to be the victims of violent crime. Knife and gang crime in this country are increasing and primarily impacting on the lives of young men and boys.²⁶ In 2022/23, boys accounted for 87 per cent of homicide victims aged 16 to 24 and nine in ten victims of teenage violence were male. Men made up over 90 per cent of hospital admission for knife crime.²⁷

Previous CSJ research has shown that criminal exploitation represents half of all modern slavery in the UK²⁸ and the most likely victims are British boys aged 17 or under.

18 'Families and Households in the UK - Office for National Statistics' (Office for National Statistics, May 2023), ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/births-deathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2022. p.2.

19 Harry Benson, 'Source of Family Breakdown', *Marriage Foundation*, n.d., marriagefoundation.org.uk/research/source-of-family-breakdown/. Benson. p.1.

20 Kathleen Kiernan, Sam Crossman, and Angus Phimister, 'Families and Inequalities', *Oxford Open Economics* 3, no. Supplement_1 (1 July 2024), doi.org/10.1093/oec/odad031. p.i656.

21 'Why Family Matters: Comprehensive Analysis of the Consequences of Family Breakdown' (Centre for Social Justice, 6 April 2019), centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/why-family-matters-comprehensive-analysis-of-the-consequences-of-family-breakdown. p.4.

22 Kiernan, Crossman, and Phimister, 'Families and Inequalities'. p.i656.

23 'Punishing Disadvantage: A Profile of Children in Custody', Prison Reform Trust, n.d., prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/punishing-disadvantage-a-profile-of-children-in-custody/. p.50.

24 'Costs per Place and Costs per Prisoner by Individual Prison' (Ministry of Justice, March 2024), assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65f4229810cd8e001136c655/costs-per-place-per-prisoner-2022-2023-summary.pdf. p.3.

25 'Offender Management Statistics Quarterly: April to June 2024' (GOV.UK, n.d.), gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2024.

26 'Crime in England and Wales: Police Force Area Data Tables - Office for National Statistics' (Office for National Statistics, n.d.), ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/policeforceareadatatables.

27 'Youth Justice Statistics: 2022 to 2023' (GOV.UK, n.d.), gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2022-to-2023.

28 'Criminal Exploitation: Modern Slavery by Another Name' (Centre for Social Justice, 11 February 2024), centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/criminal-exploitation. p.8.

5) Health

British boys are less healthy than at any time in living memory. One in four boys in Year 6 is obese.²⁹ This is contributing to the £6.5 billion a year spent on treating obesity-related ill health, something which affects one in four of all those in the UK.

In a worrying trend, boys as young as 13 are now using steroids to enhance their appearance, oblivious to the enormous health risks.³⁰ In tandem, there has been an increase of boys grappling with eating disorders from a statistically negligible number in 2017 to 5.1 per cent in 2023.³¹

Every case of suicide is a tragedy and for young people between the ages of 15 and 19, for every girl that took their own life, almost three and a half boys did likewise. A man in the East Midlands is six times more likely to take his own life than a woman in London.

From suicide to obesity, a steroid crisis to eating disorders that have never before existed, boys and young men need support.³²

6) Tech and Pornography

The rise of online porn and digital technology has transformed the experience of childhood for boys and girls. Almost all children aged 12 now have a smartphone³³ and research suggests that the average age at which children first see online pornography is 13, although a quarter come across it by age 11, and one in ten are as young as nine.³⁴

Similar to the gaming industry, many have been quick to say that online violence does not translate into real world violence yet recent years have shown worrying trends. The Institute for Addressing Strangulation was established in 2023 in response to a worrying increase in asphyxiation, particularly within sexual encounters.³⁵ Two parliamentary reports have now been completed on the increasing number of female teachers reporting sexual harassment from male pupils in schools.³⁶ Over half of Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation is now child-on-child, with boys accounting for nine out of ten perpetrators. The first six months of 2023 had reports of 'sextortion'³⁷ increase by 257 per cent from the previous year, with boys again making up 91 per cent of those affected. This is all in the context of a quarter of young men likely watching porn every or most days and 88 per cent of pornographic scenes containing physical violence.

Aside from porn, boys are contending with social media algorithms pushing more violent content. They are much more likely to be engaging with AI than girls, many of whom will be "just chatting", "seeking advice" or even going to AI for "emotional support / therapy".³⁸ And they game to the extent that a National Centre for Gaming Disorder was set up in 2020³⁹ and 90 per cent of its service users were male.

29 'National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 School Year' (NHS England, n.d.), digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2023-24-school-year.

30 Steven Morris, 'Health Fears over Boys as Young as 13 Using Steroids for "Good Looks"', The Guardian, 22 January 2018, sec. Society, theguardian.com/society/2018/jan/22/health-fears-over-boys-as-young-as-13-using-steroids-for-good-looks.

31 N. H. S. England, 'NHS England » One in Five Children and Young People Had a Probable Mental Disorder in 2023', 21 November 2023, england.nhs.uk/2023/11/one-in-five-children-and-young-people-had-a-probable-mental-disorder-in-2023.

32 'Suicides in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics' (GOV.UK, August 2024), ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicidesintheunitedkingdom/2023.

33 'Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2023' (Ofcom, March 2023), ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/media-habits-children/children-and-parents-media-use-and-attitudes-report-2023, p.7.

34 'A Lot of It Is Actually Just Abuse - Young People and Pornography' (Children's Commissioner, January 2023), childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography.

35 'IFAS', Institute for Addressing Strangulation, accessed 6 February 2025, ifas.org.uk.

36 'Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Female Students and Staff a Serious Problem in Education, Find MPs - Committees - UK Parliament' (UK Parliament, n.d.), committees.parliament.uk/committee/328/women-and-equalities-committee/news/196197/sexual-harassment-and-abuse-of-female-students-and-staff-a-serious-problem-in-education-find-mps/; 'House of Commons - Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in Schools: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2016-17 - Women and Equalities Committee' (UK Parliament, n.d.), publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmwomeq/826/82602.htm.

37 Note: a form of blackmail in which criminals threaten to share sexual pictures, videos, or information about you. 'Sextortion', n.d., met.police.uk/advice/advise-and-information/sexual-offences/sextortion.

38 'Online Nation' (Ofcom, 28 November 2023), ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/online-habits/online-nation, pp.37-38.

39 'The National Centre for Gaming Disorders', n.d., cnwl.nhs.uk/national-centre-gaming-disorders.

In 2023, the third most Googled person in the world was Andrew Tate.⁴⁰ Boys are crying out for meaning, direction and role models but the first positive role model in a child's life is increasingly absent. All in, boys in Britain are struggling.

40 'Google Reveals What We Searched for the Most in 2023', Sky News, n.d., news.sky.com/story/google-reveals-what-we-searched-for-the-most-in-2023-13028024.

Introduction

Too many boys and young men in Britain are lost. Wherever we look we can see lost hope, lost aspirations, and isolation shaping the lives of many boys and young men across the UK.

The CSJ is undertaking this project to understand what is really going wrong for these “Lost Boys”, how these problems affect Britain’s future, and what we can do to fix it. This report represents the beginning of the journey as we lay out the “State of the Nation” for boys and young men in Britain today. From healthcare to homes, education to employment and prisons to porn, we have discovered that boys and young men are being left in the dust.

The aim of this initial report is to set out in clear detail how and where boys and young men are being failed. We have undertaken an initial ‘shallow dive’ into six categories of life that together build a picture of what life is like for boys and young men growing up in 2025.

When speaking to hundreds of boys and young men and dozens of charities about these themes, we discovered an overwhelming sense of hopelessness across Britain.

The data also reveals the uphill struggle facing many boys and young men, and Britain’s failure to address negative trends. We know that men are over three times more likely to commit suicide than women, yet we have failed to recognise and address the root causes of these deaths of despair. It is well known that girls are outperforming boys in the education system from nursery to university, yet we have stubbornly refused to introduce the necessary reforms to engage the boys who improperly fail in a system that was never right for them. It is common knowledge that men make up all but four per cent of the prison population, yet we don’t ask what started them on this path in the first place. It is increasingly evident that boys are likely to watch porn at ever younger ages, but we have turned a blind eye to what fruit our society will reap when young men’s sexual appetites are shaped by violent and degrading pornography. And we know that boys without dads have particularly poor mental health, yet very little institutional effort has been expended in trying to stem the tide of Britain’s family breakdown epidemic.

Of course, girls and young women face struggles. This report does not seek to minimise these challenges or experiences. To be pro-men is not to be anti-women; this is not a zero-sum game. A generation of unhappy and angry men is a disaster for both the sexes. We believe that we can champion and promote men’s issues to the benefit of everyone across the UK. And we must recognise that far more attention has been given in recent years to issues affecting women and girls. “Lost Boys” is an attempt to address the imbalance.

This initial report is just the first milestone; throughout this year we will be publishing further research, recommendations and evidence-based policy solutions to help give boys in Britain the best chance to succeed.

A mother of two boys from the Midlands:

“I have two teenage boys aged 18 and 19. I talk to them a lot about how they feel society views them. They feel that they are viewed as predators, lazy and toxic, but are told frequently that they are privileged.”

Employment

The decline in the traditional 'male industries' has had a stark impact on men. In the latter decades of the 20th century, there was a cutting back of the primary and secondary sector industries of Britain. The predominantly male industries of manufacturing, agriculture and construction used to contribute cumulatively over 40 per cent of UK output in 1970,⁴¹ but amounted to just 16 per cent of UK GDP in 2023.⁴² This decline has led to large parts of the country experiencing stagnant growth, decreasing productivity and fewer job opportunities.⁴³

Regions that had historically high employment in these sectors were especially vulnerable to this sharp decline and still suffer the consequences to this day. At the same time, the economy became increasingly reliant upon the services sector, with it particularly focussed on London and the Southeast. The CSJ Two Nations report highlighted this as the inheritance of Britain.

Where once working-class boys could expect a good job for life in the steel industry, for example, boys in many post-industrial areas today have limited opportunity for well-paid work. Beyond the numbers, youth unemployment among boys represents an existential issue for personal identity, societal cohesion, and economic stability. For men, work has historically been a core component of identity, status and purpose. When opportunities disappear, the consequences - ranging from mental health struggles and social isolation to relational fracturing - can be catastrophic.

41 Rhodes, 'Historic Data on Industries in the UK'. p.6.

42 Hutton and Zaidi, 'Industries in the UK'.

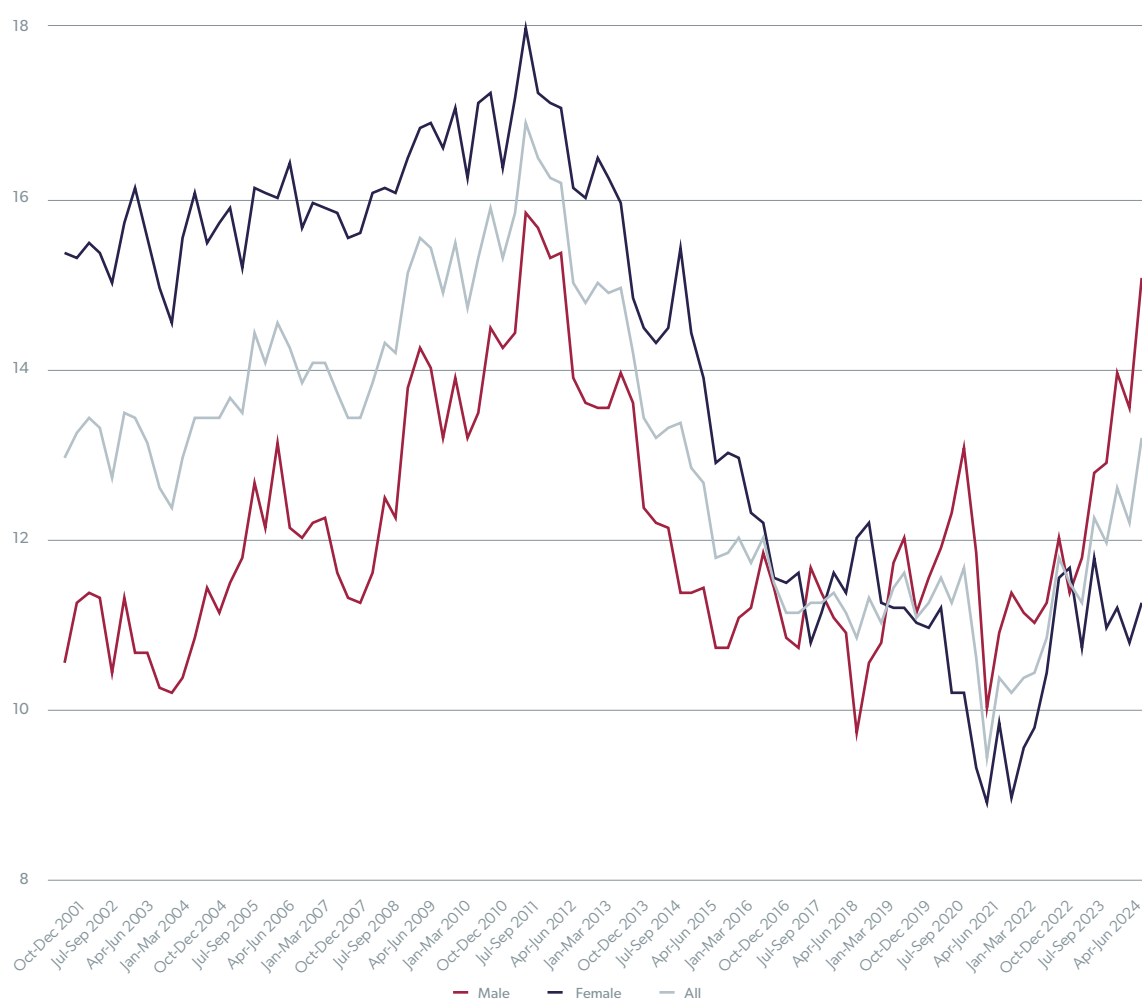
43 'Two Nations: The State of Poverty in the UK', The Centre for Social Justice, 10 December 2023, centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/two-nations. p.9.

Male inactivity

The employment challenges faced by boys and young men in Britain are stark. In comparison to women, the rate of male in Britain has been rising for the past thirty years. Young men are now the majority of those who are economically inactive between the ages of 16-24.

In July to September 2024, 15.1 per cent of men aged 16-24 were NEET, compared to 11.2 per cent of women.⁴⁴ This reflects a long-term divergence between men and women with the proportion of young men who are NEET growing consistently since the early 2000s. For example, between July and September 2024, 550,000 young men were NEET, an increase of over 150,000 compared to pre-pandemic levels. This same time period saw an increase of just 26,000 NEET women.⁴⁵

Figure 1: The Percentage of Men and women aged 16-24 who are NEET, 2001 - 2024.



Source: ONS

Young men now account for the majority of NEETs, a distinct reversal from earlier decades. The share of young men aged 16-24 who are NEET has climbed to over 58 per cent of all young NEETs.⁴⁶

44 'Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), UK - Office for National Statistics'.

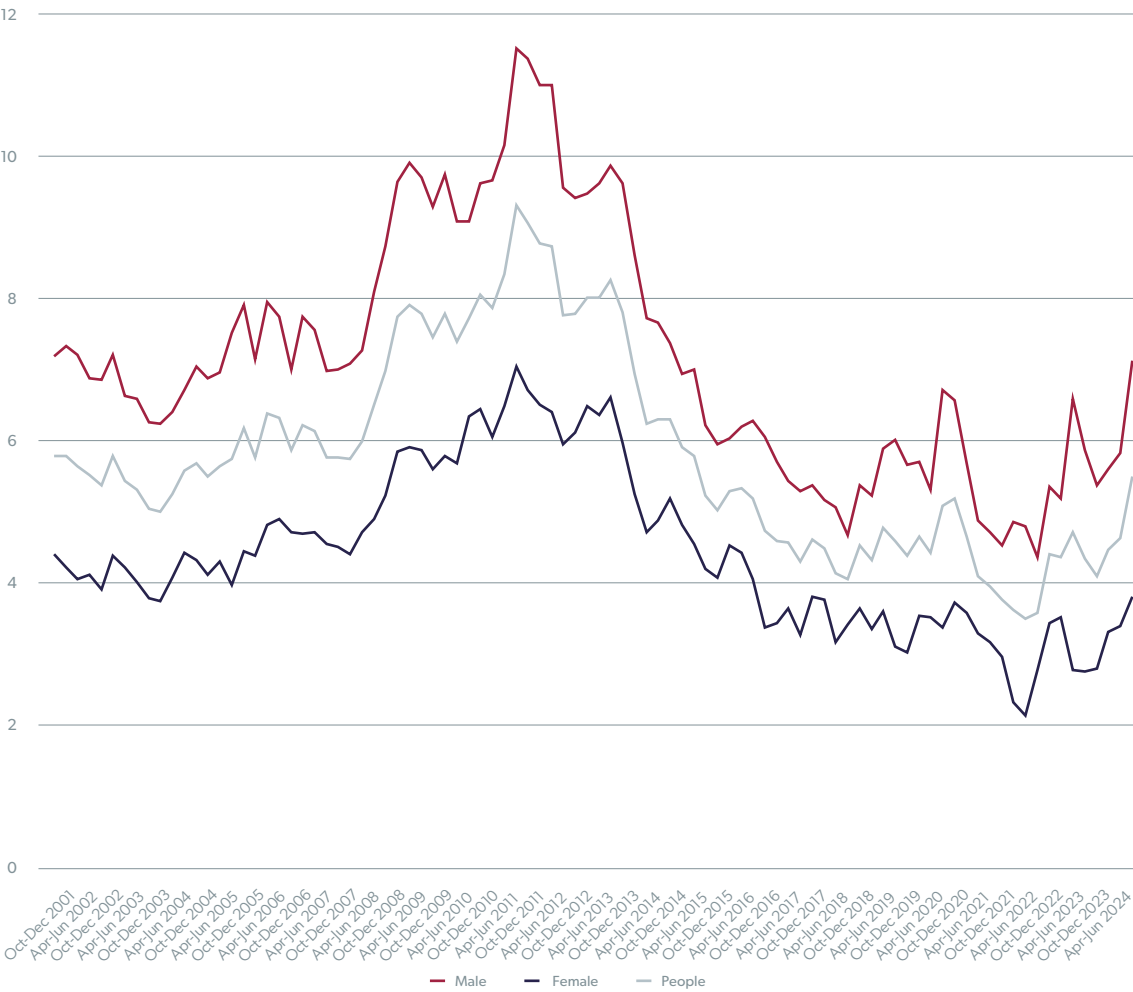
45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

Unemployment

In the past, young women were more likely to be NEET than young men, but young men were more likely to be unemployed, i.e. jobless and actively seeking work. The graph below shows young men and boys are now more likely to be an inactive NEET *and* more likely to be unemployed. In fact, of those aged 16-24 who were unemployed from July to September 2024, young men made up two thirds of the total (260,000 of the total 395,000).

Figure 2: The Percentage of Men and women aged 16-24 who are unemployed, 2001 - 2024.



Source: ONS

Digging deeper into the workplace, the shrinking goods industries are and were filled with vastly more men than women.

Manufacturing: 70 per cent of the UK's manufacturing industry is male. There are approximately 1.9 million men in the manufacturing sector, compared with 795,000 women. In 1997 there were 3.2 million men and 1.2 million women.⁴⁷

Agriculture: In 2024, 84 per cent of principle farmers and holders were male. This proportion was similar across all age groups.⁴⁸

Construction: One report from the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) stated that 97 per cent of its manual construction workforce was male, although this admittedly did not include office-based roles where women account around 11 per cent of roles.⁴⁹ Alternative data suggests that there are 1.76 million men employed in the construction industry compared to 303,000 women (or 17 per cent).⁵⁰

While employment drives for women to enter such typically male-dominated industries are important, men have unequivocally borne the brunt of industrial decline. Deindustrialisation has impacted families, communities and regions differently, but the foremost effect has been on male employment.

The consequences of unemployment for young men

Periods of unemployment during youth can cause long-term economic and personal harm. Research reveals that every additional week of unemployment reduces the likelihood of attaining leadership roles in the future by 2 per cent - a phenomenon often referred to as "early-career unemployment scarring"⁵¹. With more and more young men unemployed or inactive, it will only get harder and harder to pull them back in to employment. The ONS stated that between 2007 and 2020, 41 per cent of people who had been out of work for up to three months returned to work within the preceding three months. This proportion reduced to 28.5 per cent for those who had been out of work for up to six months, and 23.3 per cent for those who had been out of a job for six to nine months.⁵² In many ways, joblessness is a bottomless pit, and the further down the pit you go, the more likely you are to remain there.

Charity worker, Birmingham:

"We had a particular young man who joined us at 22 having left school at 16 and not attended college or worked since then, and when asked what he had done in that time it was being on a computer until early hours which got him into a pattern of late sleeping and this made it difficult to secure employment or a study opportunity, he lived with a parent in this case a father who didn't work so didn't have a good role model."

47 'LFS: In Employment: Manufacturing: UK: Men: Aged 16 and over: Thousands: NSA - Office for National Statistics'.

48 'Agricultural Workforce in England at 1 June 2024' (GOV.UK, June 2024), gov.uk/government/statistics/agricultural-workforce-in-england-at-1-june/agricultural-workforce-in-england-at-1-june-2023.

49 'Workforce Mobility and Skills in the UK Construction Sector 2022 - CITB' (citb, May 2023), citb.co.uk/about-citb/construction-industry-research-reports/search-our-construction-industry-research-reports/workforce-mobility-and-skills-in-the-uk-construction-sector-2022/.

50 'UK Construction Workforce by Gender 2024' (Statista, November 2024), statista.com/statistics/1023964/employment-in-the-uk-construction-industry-by-gender/.

51 Olga Epitropaki and Panagiotis Avramidis, 'Becoming a Leader with Clipped Wings: The Role of Early-Career Unemployment Scarring on Future Leadership Role Occupancy', *The Leadership Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1 August 2024): 101786, doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2024.101786, p.2.

52 'Which Groups Find It Hardest to Find a Job Following a Period out of Work? - Office for National Statistics' (Office for National Statistics, n.d.), ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/unemployment/articles/whichgroupsfindithardesttofindajobfollowingaperiodoutofwork/2021-03-30.

Prolonged unemployment, aside from creating enduring damage to economic mobility and career development, also has a major impact on mental health and relative wellbeing. There is a swathe of well-documented evidence that suggests that being out of work correlated strongly with worse mental health⁵³ Alongside this, men in relationships have disproportionately reduced life satisfaction when they are unemployed, irrespective of their partners employment status. This is a phenomenon that studies suggest is not the same for women who, “experience a large drop in happiness if the partner becomes unemployed (controlling for income), a drop that by far exceeds the one associated with own unemployment.”⁵⁴ So, men’s unemployment seems to more adversely affect relationships than women’s unemployment does. The consequences of such findings, which are reflected internationally, represent a challenge for gender dynamics and relationship formation for younger people.

One submission to our Call for Evidence noted how the unavailability of meaningful work had been affecting the young men and boys in his area.

Tim Page, Service Co-ordinator at Catch22:

“There is no trust or hope in the future, a young man from a disadvantaged background has no clear path towards making a future for themselves, the only options for hundreds of boys and young men I have worked with are crime or benefits.”

The pay gap

For the first time in 2022, gross pay for women aged 16-24 in full time work was higher than young men of the same socioeconomic group. CSJ analysis has corroborated this finding originally reported by the Financial Times which measured earnings amongst workers between age 21-26 in the Household Longitudinal Study.⁵⁵ This reversal of the traditional gender pay gap has now persisted for two years (and more in some regions) across two large-scale surveys and is therefore unlikely to be anomalous.

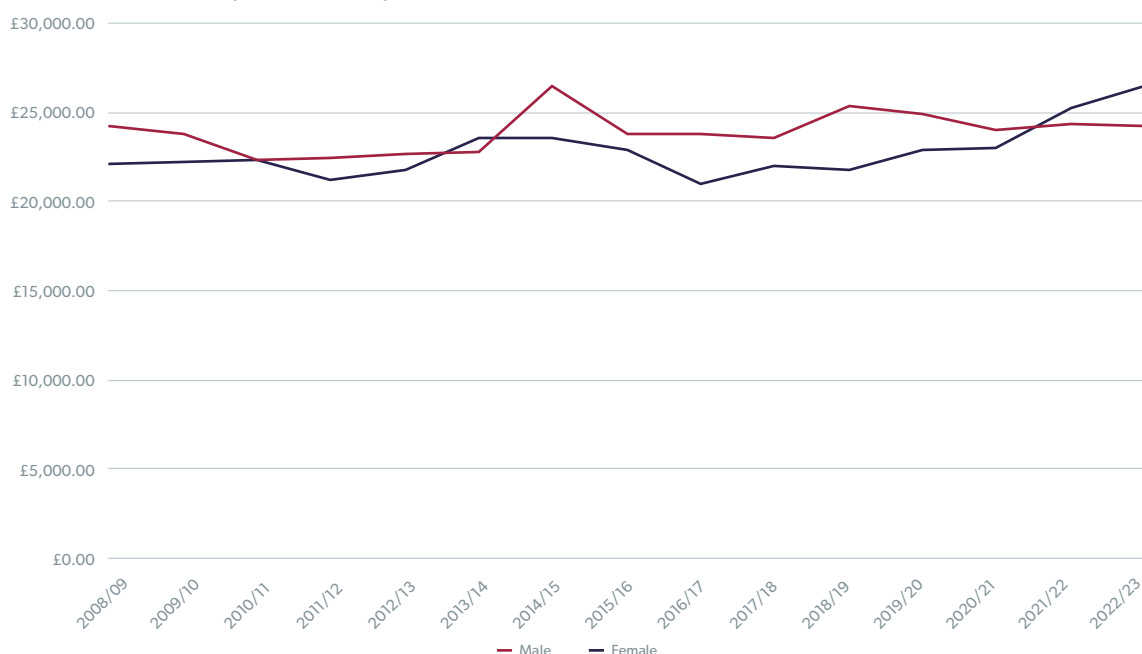
The evidence for this is found in the 5-Quarter Longitudinal Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Family Resource Survey (FRS); the latter suggests this phenomenon has been true for 2 years, 2021/22 and 2022/23. The CSJ’s analysis of the FRS shows this clearly in the figures below. These graphs are all real-terms values in 2022/23 prices.

53 ‘3. Employment and Income Spotlight’ (GOV.UK, n.d.), gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-mental-health-and-wellbeing-surveillance-spotlights/employment-and-income-spotlight.

54 Liliana Winkelmann and Rainer Winkelmann, ‘Happiness and Unemployment: A Panel Data Analysis for Germany’ (Duncker & Humblot, 1995), zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/1189/.

55 John Burn-Murdoch, ‘Young Women Are Starting to Leave Men Behind’, *Financial Times*, 20 September 2024.

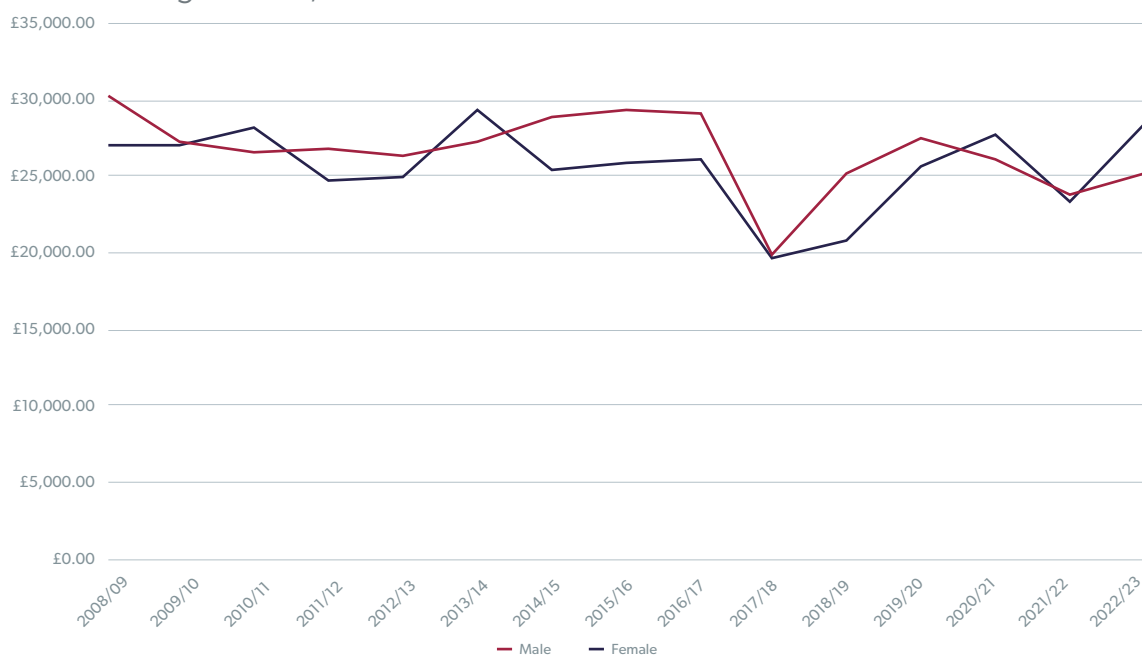
Figure 3: Gross Median earnings from full-time paid employment, aged 16-24, 2008/09 – 2022/23



Source: Family Resource Survey ⁵⁶

We also disaggregated the results from the FRS to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon. One of the most telling breakdowns was that even after Higher Education (HE), younger women still had higher paid earnings than men after HE. This trend is a new one. However, it is unstable because it has persisted for less time and reflects those aged 21 to 24, rather than the whole 16-24 sample, so should be viewed with caution.

Figure 4: Median earnings from full-time paid employment for the HE educated, aged 16-24, 2008/09 – 2022/23

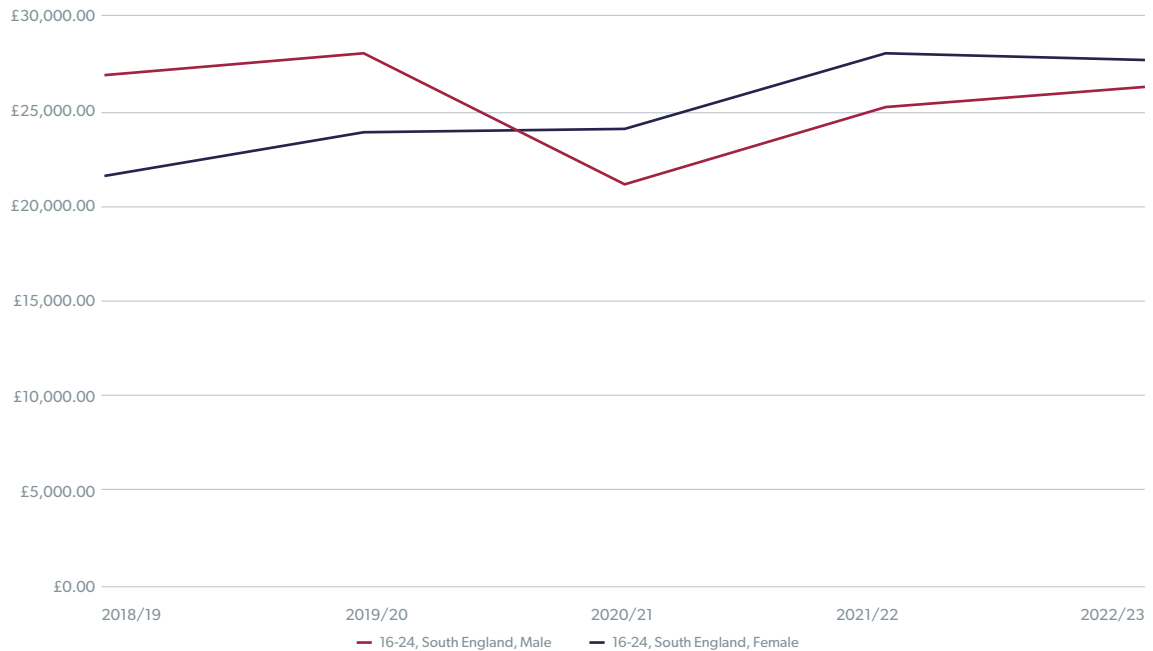


Source: Family Resource Survey

⁵⁶ 'UK Data Service Studies', 2025, beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/studies/?Search=Family+resource+survey. Note: gross earnings have been transformed into real-terms ones using ONS Average Weekly Earnings series wage inflation.

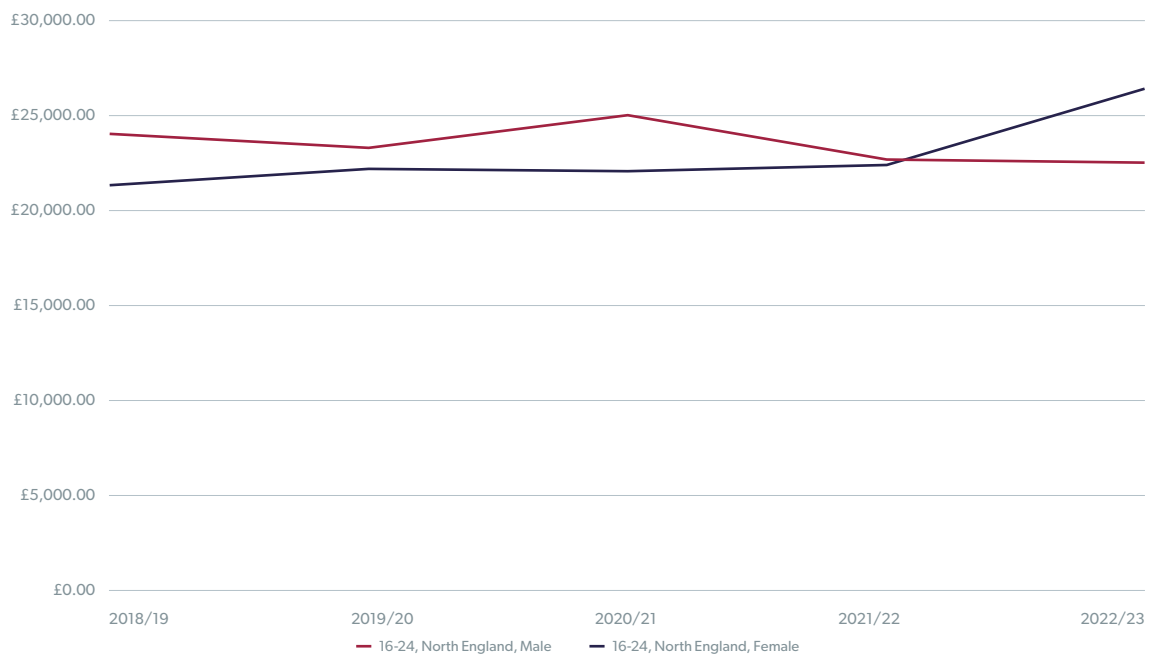
The Centre for Social Justice also examined whether this trend has a geographic component, again using the FRS. The Southern regions lead the way with three years of higher paid younger women. The widest disparity is seen in the Northern regions. The charts below show these two regional breakdowns.

Figure 5: Gross median earnings from full-time paid employment Southern regions, 2018/19 – 2022/23



South: London, South East and South West regions
Source: Family Resource Survey

Figure 6: Gross median earnings from full-time paid employment Southern regions, 2018/19 – 2022/23



North: North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humber regions
Source: Family Resource Survey

But why does this matter? A recent study of married Swiss couples revealed that mental health is positively associated with own and spousal income, but it is negatively linked to the wife's relative income. The paper argued, as the wife began to earn more, the chances of developing a mental health diagnosis rose by 8 per cent for the whole sample and 11 per cent for men.⁵⁷ This correlates with previous UK based studies which "found men to suffer when they earned less than their wives, while women's subjective well-being did not appear to be affected by being out-earned by their husbands."⁵⁸ So, is there a problem with young men now earning less? Until we can understand more about such dynamics we are heading into previously uncharted territory, especially if such trends begin to continue later into adulthood. Such studies warrant more careful thought about why relative income is so linked to wellbeing in relationships between men and women.

57 Demid Getik, 'Relative Income and Mental Health in Couples | The Economic Journal | Oxford Academic', *The Economic Journal* 134, no. 664 (November 2024), academic.oup.com/ej/article/134/664/3291/7718793, p.3291.

58 Gash and Plagnol, 'The Partner Pay Gap', p.579.

Education

In 1996, Tony Blair outlined his three main priorities for government: “‘education, education, education’”. Blair’s vision was of a socially mobile and aspirational Britain, of raising ambition and cultivating talent. The UK’s school system was his medium to achieve this.

Education remains one of the key vehicles for social mobility and aspiration today. It is how we raise the hopes and unleash the potential of children across the UK. Regardless of your background or characteristics, school can nudge you towards success. Educational reforms over the last fifteen years have seen the UK rise up the world rankings for both reading and maths. Despite this, it is apparent that boys seem unable to capitalise on educational opportunities when compared to girls. For some reason, the boys are being, and have long been, left behind.

KS1 Data

In the early years, at the start of Key Stage 1, boys begin with a disadvantage. The first year at school does nothing to close this gap. In 2023/24, teacher’s assessments of children’s development at the end of the early years foundation stage (EYFS), age 5, reveal that 75 per cent of girls achieved a good level of development. However, only 60.7 per cent of boys achieved this milestone, a gap that has now widened for three consecutive years. For context, children whose first language was not English were only 6.2 per centage points behind native speakers. It is important to note that the gender differential in educational outcomes was not much smaller than the gap between those who were eligible for free school meals (FSM) and those who were not (20.5 per centage points) and similar in outcome attributable to a child’s birth month (15.6 per centage points).⁵⁹ Sex is now almost as influential in educational outcomes as development and deprivation in the early stages of education. Furthermore, analysis of the Millenium Cohort Study found that 50 per cent of children who failed to achieve the expected standard at age 16 (grade 4 in English Language and Maths) were judged to be behind at age 5.⁶⁰ Failing to reach the expected standards in the early years increases the likelihood that a child will not pass English at a later stage.⁶¹ The importance of a strong start cannot be over-emphasised. If boys are consistently behind at this early stage, then they are very unlikely to close the gap in the years ahead.

This problem also represents one of the government’s most acute, self-imposed challenges. In late 2024, the Prime Minister, announced that one of his government’s key targets is to increase the proportion of children in England who are “school ready” when they start school at the age of five to 75 per cent. The success or failure of this ambition will be measured in 2028 through the EYFS framework.⁶² Given that the latest data suggests that only 60 per cent of boys are currently ready for school (compared to 75 per cent of girls), a boys strategy is needed. The girls are already there.

59 ‘Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results, Academic Year 2023/24’.

60 ‘CLS-Working-Paper-2022-6-The-Forgotten-Fifth.Pdf’, accessed 6 February 2025, cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/CLS-Working-Paper-2022-6-The-forgotten-fifth.pdf. p.3.

61 Swace Digital, ‘Early Language Development and Children’s Primary School Attainment in English and Maths: New Research Findings’ (Save the Children, n.d.), resource-centre.savethechildren.net/document/early-language-development-and-childrens-primary-school-attainment-english-and-maths-new-0/. p.1.

62 ‘Break Down Barriers to Opportunity’, GOV.UK, 10 January 2025, gov.uk/missions/opportunity.

KS2 Data

Boys are behind girls at Key Stage 2 (aged 11). Besides maths, where boys attainment exceeded girls by 1 per cent, boys were outperformed by girls in both reading, (a 7 per cent difference) and writing (a 13 per cent difference). When these measures are combined, 64 per cent of girls met the expected standard compared to only 57 per cent of boys.⁶³

Call for Evidence: Boy aged 11-17, Cumbria.

"If you want to do something different at school here you get bullied. I think school is hard for everyone right now. Boys have a hard time with trying to give an image that fits in so you don't get bullied or hurt, I think boys in school here have a really tough time with that, with social media and the pressure to not fail, for boys, if you fail at school, there's not much you can do".

Reading

The number of children reading for pleasure is plummeting in the UK, and the figure is, again, worse for boys. The National Literacy Trust (NLT) conducts annual reviews on the literacy of children and young people aged 8-18 across the UK. The 2024 review highlighted, alongside an overall decline in reading by children, the "plight of boys" was overwhelming. When asked if they enjoyed reading in their free time, 40.5 per cent of girls agreed, compared to only 28.2 per cent of boys.⁶⁴ Moreover, the gender gap "nearly tripled compared with the previous year, increasing from a 4.8-percentage-point difference in 2023 to a 12.3-percentage-point difference in 2024."⁶⁵ This was due to decline in reading enjoyment from boys (which plummeted 12.3 percentage points) rather than an increase in girls (who also dropped, but only by 4.8 percentage points). There is a strong correlation between time spent reading and academic achievement.⁶⁶ Therefore, boys decreasing reading levels could be a potential factor causing this educational imbalance.

We cannot have a serious discussion about declining reading levels, amongst boys and girls, without addressing the rise of screen use in childhood. Frankly, kids are not bored anymore. Where free time was previously occupied with playing or reading, it is now filled with smartphone usage. One commentator remarked, "The smartphone is, of course, the most formidable enemy the book has ever faced: a black hole of limitless entertainment".⁶⁷ If we want to support children to enjoy reading, in order to develop greater levels of cognition, then we must face the pressing issue of technology head on.

Finally, it is a tragedy that over half of prisoners are functionally illiterate with a reading age of lower than 11.⁶⁸ With the lowest daily reading levels for boys that the NLT has "ever recorded", it is conceivable that the 96 per cent male-concentrated prison population will become even more illiterate in the future. This would be a disaster for the already enormous challenge of finding employment for ex-offenders.

63 'Key Stage 2 Attainment, Academic Year 2023/24' (GOV.UK, n.d.), explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment.

64 'Reading For Pleasure Research' (National Literacy Trust, n.d.), literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2024/. p.6.

65 Ibid.

66 John Jerrim, Luis Alejandro Lopez-Agudo, and Oscar D. Marcenaro-Gutierrez, 'Does It Matter What Children Read? New Evidence Using Longitudinal Census Data from Spain', *Oxford Review of Education* 46, no. 5 (2 September 2020), doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1723516. pp.515-33.

67 Jemima Lewis, 'Children Just Aren't Bored Enough to Love Reading Books', *The Telegraph*, 9 November 2023, [telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/11/09/children-just-arent-bored-enough-to-love-reading-books/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/11/09/children-just-arent-bored-enough-to-love-reading-books/).

68 'Prison Education Statistics 2019 - 2020' (GOV.UK, n.d.), gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-education-statistics-2019-2020.

KS4 / GCSE Data

In examinations at age 16, boys are behind. Looking at attainment 8 scores, a measure of average academic performance across eight GCSE-level qualifications, reveals that boys averaged 44.0 but girls averaged 48.6.⁶⁹ With an average gap of 4.6, this means that girls will achieve roughly half-a-grade higher than boys per subject. For example, across the UK, if boys average a Grade 5 across their subjects, girls might average closer to a Grade 5.5 or Grade 6.

16-19 education

Following GCSEs, there are a variety of qualifications that pupils can aim for. Measuring equivalent A-level grades, female students achieved, on average across their best three qualifications, over a grade and a half higher than male students in 2022.⁷⁰ This gap was briefly exacerbated to just under a two-grade difference during the pandemic years.

The problem of gender disadvantage is also seen within the T Level curriculum, which was created in 2020 to provide a more vocational alternative to A Levels. In the summer of 2023, around 1000 students were given grades for this technical-based qualification as about a third of the cohort had dropped out over the two years. Performance data reveals that female students outperform males in T Levels, with 94.7 per cent of females achieving at least a pass compared to 83.9 per cent of males. The data on T Level dropouts doesn't specifically break down the sex of those who dropped out. However, the methodology highlights that students dropping out after the first year often don't complete components like industry placements. While this data set doesn't directly indicate gender differences in dropout rates, the significant performance gaps may suggest that males face greater challenges in completing T Levels, let alone doing well in them.

Of the 1000 students who did finish in this cohort, only nine achieved the top grade (distinction*), of which only one was a boy.⁷¹ Moreover, girls were twice as likely to achieve a normal distinction than boys were, with 70 per cent of overall distinctions going to girls, even though they only constituted 52.6 per cent of the overall number of students. This trend has softened slightly with last year's data but is still strongly reflected in the graph below.⁷² The higher grades are heavily skewed towards the girls. This divergence is especially noteworthy as more vocational pathways are typically seen as more attractive to boys than girls, and yet T Levels have also refused to buck the stubborn trend of boys being left behind.

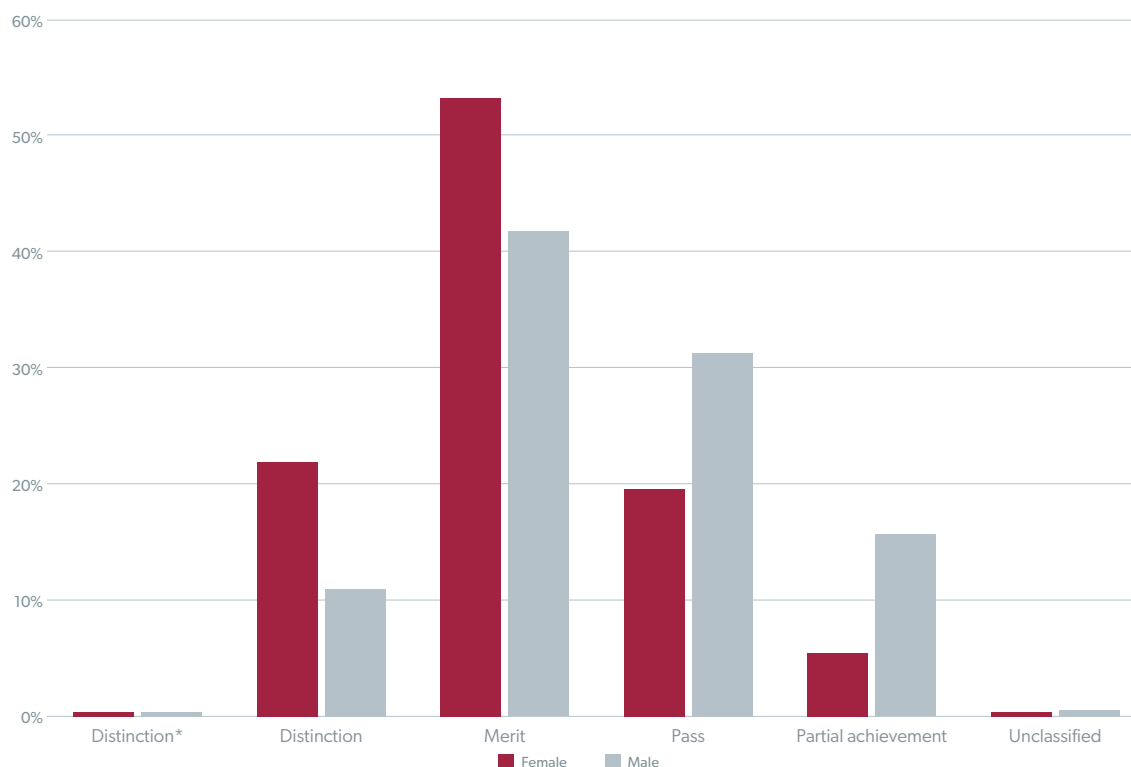
69 'GCSE Results (Attainment 8)'.

70 'Annual Report 2024', Education Policy Institute, 2024

71 'Provisional T Level Results, Academic Year 2022/23'.

72 'Provisional T Level Results, Academic Year 2023/24'.

Figure 7: T Level results 2023/24⁷³



It is worth noting that students are still required to achieve a grade 4 in both English and Maths GCSE to be eligible to apply for any of these courses, including courses titled ‘building services’, ‘digital production design and development’ or ‘onsite construction’. By referring to these, we are not arguing these are lower value, but rather that there are inconsistencies and barriers to certain pupils. One can easily picture deeply creative pupils with great potential who are barred from T Level courses, such as these, for lack of GCSEs. This is especially painful when the need for English and Maths GCSEs is less apparent for some than for others with, for example, ‘accounting’ or ‘finance’ being more obvious courses. The rigid necessity for a grade 4 has the potential to set children up to fail. Of course, this is a problem for boys and girls across many regions, ethnicities and different levels of disadvantage who are more likely to achieve lower grades, but within each of these categories, boys are the most adversely affected.

Building Self-Belief CIO, Founder, Peter Thomas

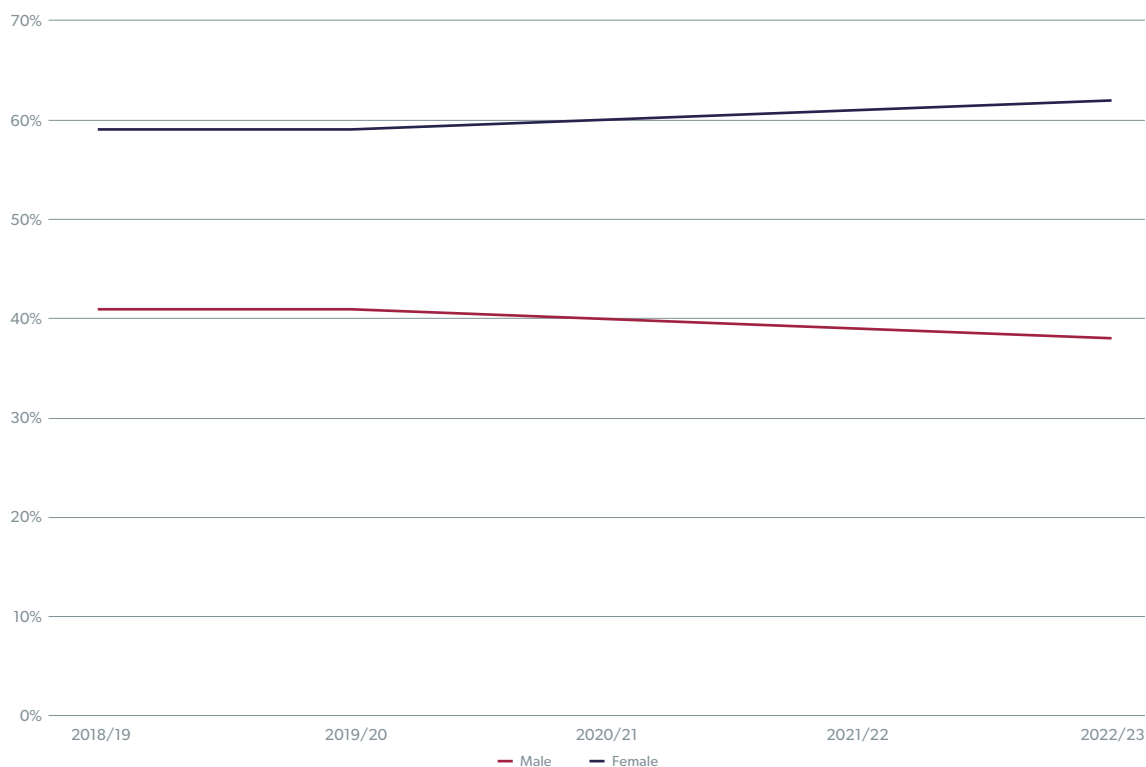
“This focus upon the importance of Grade 4s comes from successive governments and also Ofsted. Teenagers face many artificial barriers for their future progress if they do not attain these grades at the first attempt, especially around access apprenticeships, childcare and basic starter jobs. This is infuriating, demoralising and huge barrier to their next steps. There is also no real effort or obligation on schools to support children in retaking these exams, if they do not get 4’s. Ultimately, this ends up potentially blocking career paths for huge numbers of children, potentially for life.”

73 Ibid.

University

In 2022/23, the total undergraduate and postgraduate enrolment for those whose permanent address was in the UK was 882,225 men and 1,279,970 women.⁷⁴ The graph below shows the percentage, by gender, of domestic students enrolling in only postgraduate study. The highest stage of the education system represents one of the starkest divergences of outcomes. When looking at either undergraduate or postgraduate enrolments by domestic students, the pattern is the same with men fundamentally missing out.

Figure 8: The percentage of postgraduate taught enrolments by gender



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

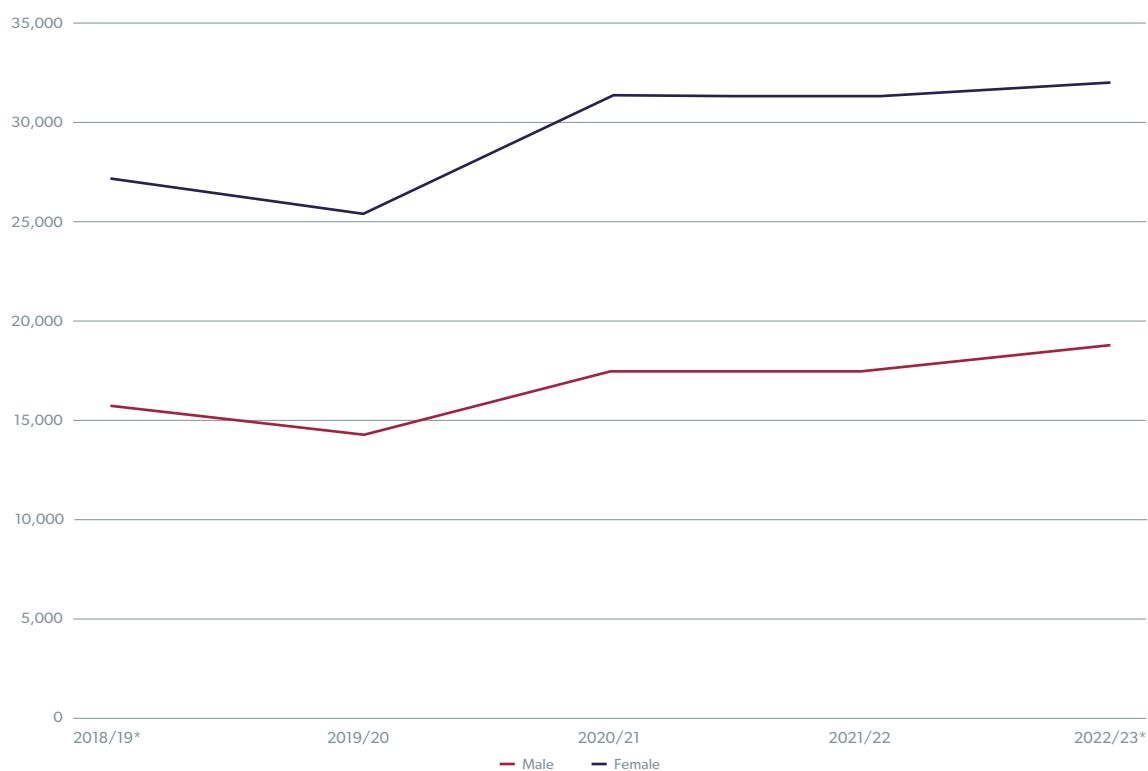
Of course, there are vast differences in the subjects that boys and girls are more likely to study. Some of the more striking subject differences are displayed below. However, the aggregate total for non-science CAH (Common Aggregation Hierarchy) Level 1 contains an almost two-to-one ratio of men to women and the total science CAH Level 1 also has over 15 per cent more girls (716,345 to 601,120).⁷⁵

More girls: E.g., Law, medicine and dentistry, total non-science.

⁷⁴ 'Who's Studying in HE? | HESA'.

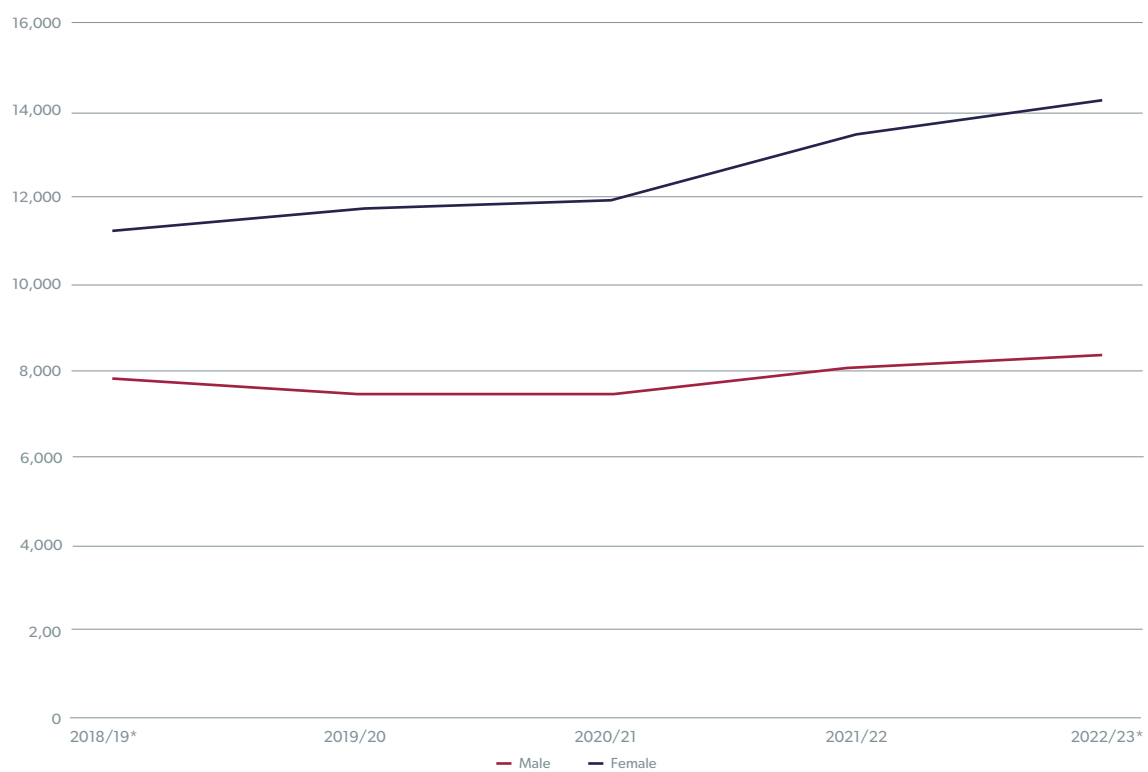
⁷⁵ Ibid. Note: this second reference also includes non-domestic students.

Figure 9: Law



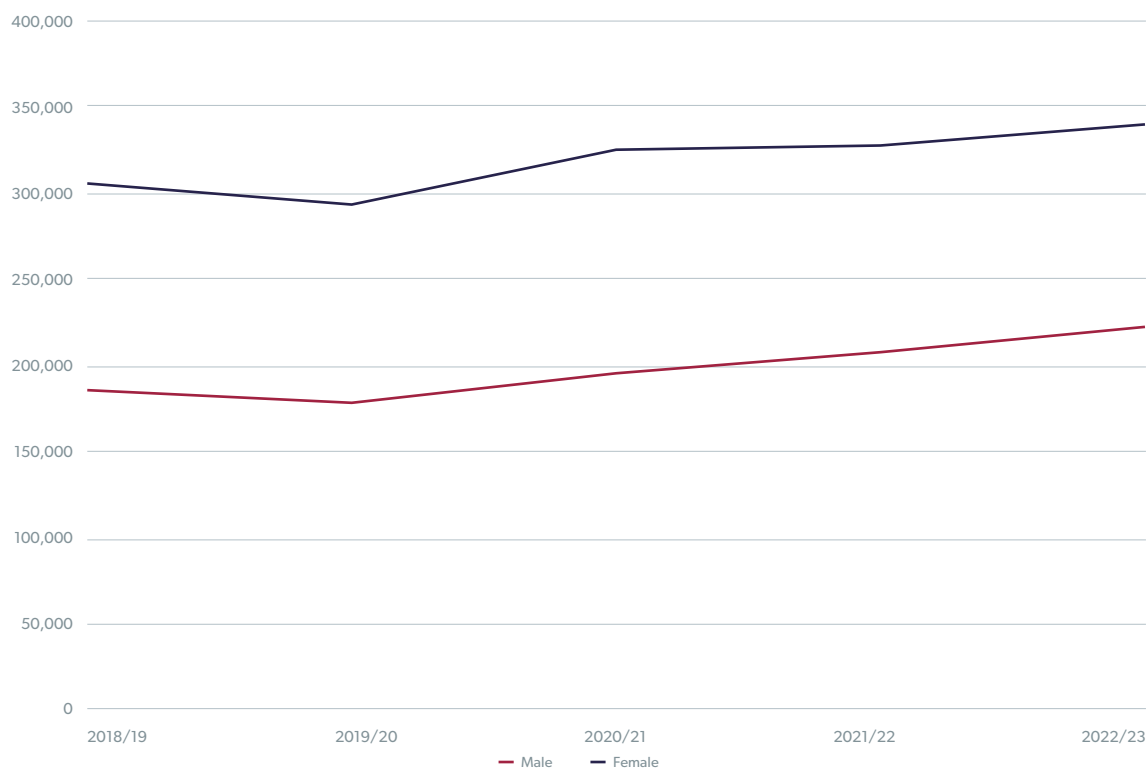
Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Figure 10: Medicine and dentistry



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

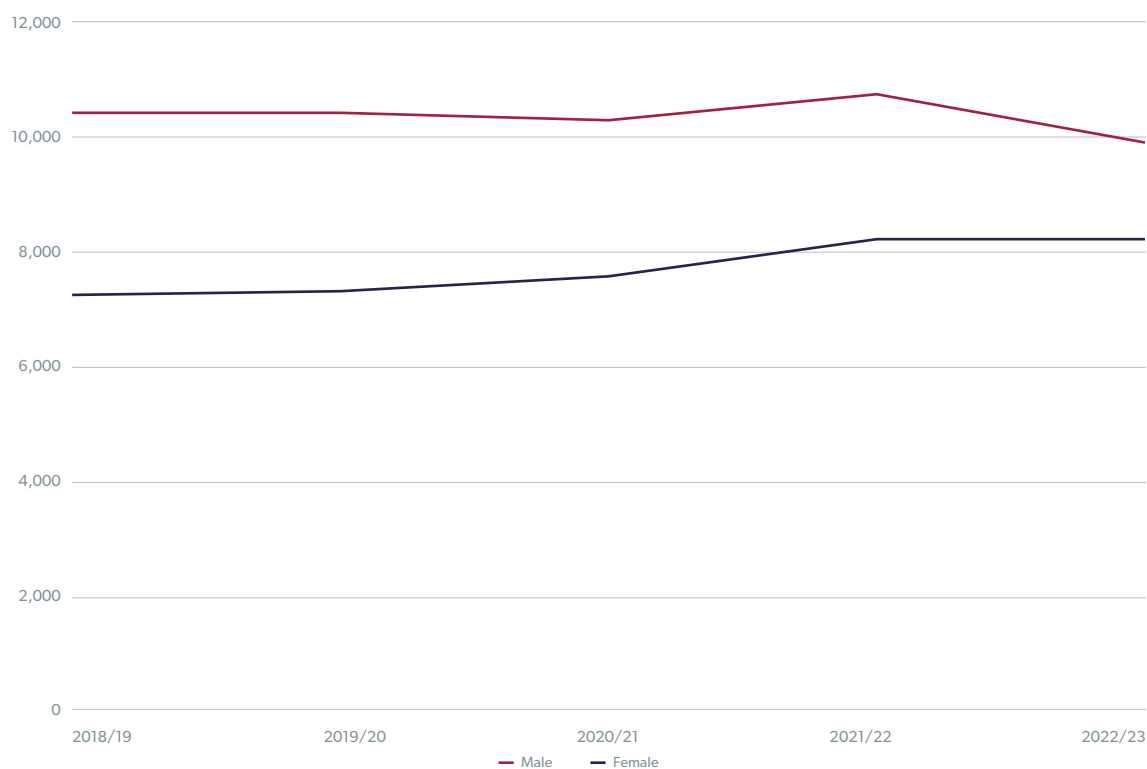
Figure 11: Total non-science CAH level 1 subject, gender



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

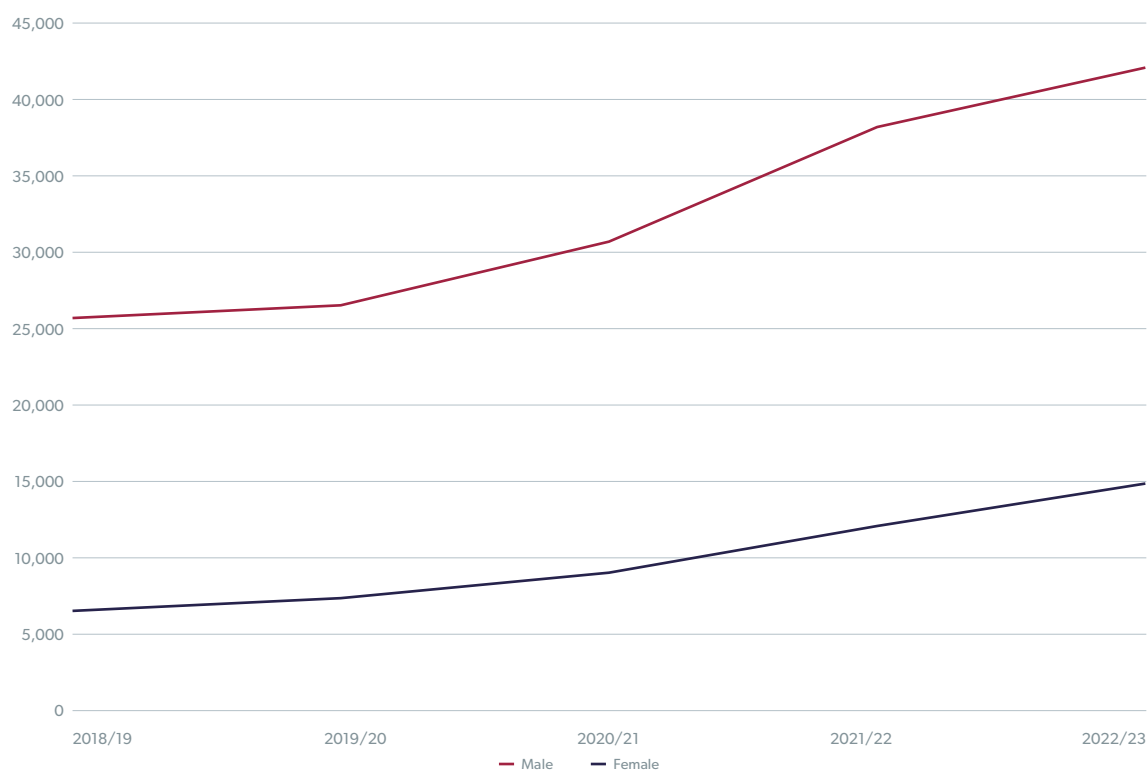
More boys: E.g., PE, Computing and engineering

Figure 12: Physical sciences



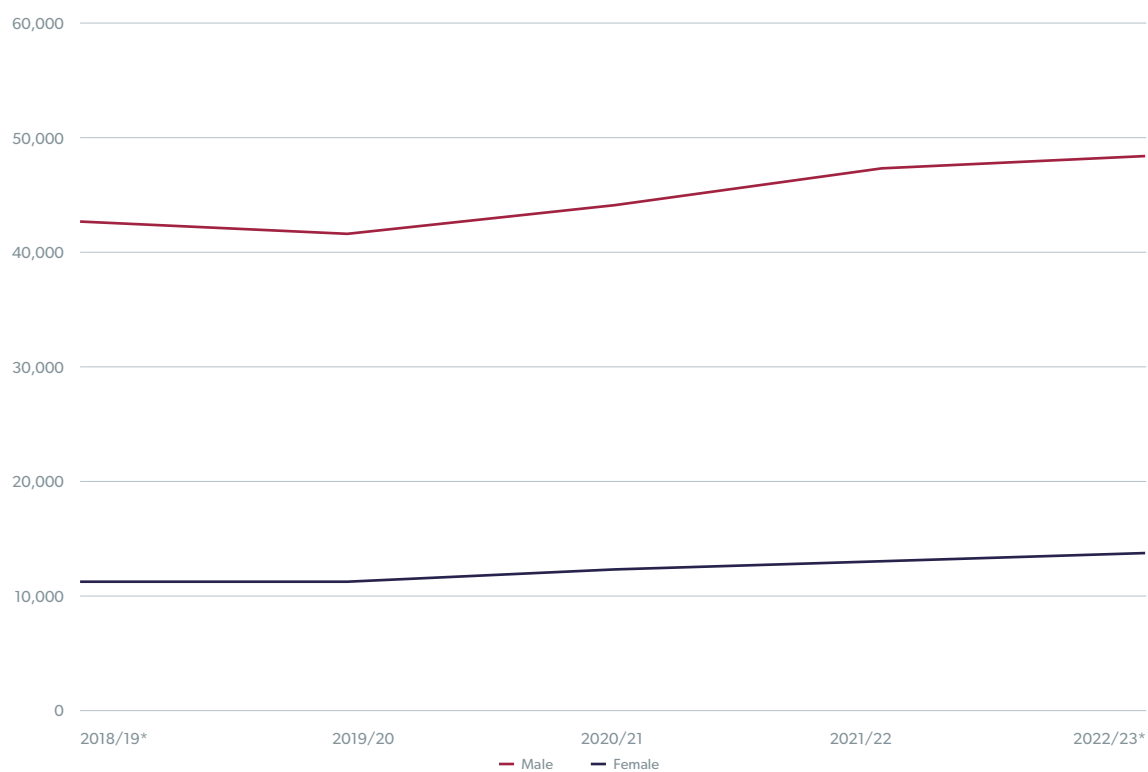
Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Figure 13: Computing



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Figure 14: Engineering and technology



Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Ethnicity and deprivation

It is clear so far that at all stages of our education system, boys are behind. Unfortunately, this pattern persists into deprivation. Using the blunt measure of free school meal (FSM) eligibility (blunt insofar as FSM does not include the “working poor”, those who are not entitled to or do not claim benefits, and who are not entitled to additional pupil premium, but who may need it just as much),⁷⁶ we can see how deprivation affects educational outcomes. In this section, we use FSM eligibility and deprivation interchangeably. Top level statistics show that in 2023/24 only 42.9 per cent of FSM eligible pupils achieved a grade 4 or above in English and Maths, compared with 71.6 per cent of non-FSM eligible pupils.⁷⁷ To find the children whose education is the most adversely affected by deprivation, using FSM eligibility is not necessarily the best method as outcomes vary across different ethnic groups. Instead, within those who are FSM eligible, we look at which ethnic group has comparatively worse outcomes in relations to their non-FSM peers for a more complete story. Secondly, it is necessary to look at those who, when FSM eligible, are the least likely to achieve a 4 or higher in English and Maths. This demonstrates the absolute and relatively worst affected, highlighting the real effect of deprivation upon certain groups and those who have been lost in the system. Although certain ethnic groups may be disproportionately more likely to be FSM eligible, when measuring the effects of deprivation on education, we must look at the rates of educational failure and the gap in outcomes, and not just the fact that they are more or less likely to be deprived. For example, 31.8 per cent of Bangladeshi pupils are eligible for FSM and yet 67.2 per cent of this group achieved the minimum outcome; only 7.5 per cent of Chinese pupils are FSM eligible, but 83.7 per cent of those achieved the minimum outcome. Despite their relative likelihood of being FSM eligible, the outcomes of both groups are very different to the 42 per cent average across all groups of pupils on FSM. While deprivation negatively affects the educational outcomes of all ethnic groups, we focus on the relative outcome gap between FSM and non-FSM within the same ethnic group, and the absolute FSM outcomes across ethnicities.

By far the worst educational performers are the Gypsy Roma and the Irish traveller communities, who together represent 0.3 per cent of the population. These groups, if there is an educational cliff edge, have fallen off it. They present a significant challenge of engagement, and work has been done in the past which has attempted to engage this community. Any attempt to solve this gap would require its own specific remit but sits outside the scope of this report.

For White British Pupils n FSM – hereafter, the White Working Class, only 35.9 per cent achieved a grade 4 or above in GCSE Maths and English, seven per cent lower than the overall average and the lowest of any group (besides the Roma and Irish traveller). The next most disadvantaged group is the Mixed White and Black Caribbean who pass at rates of 36.9 per cent. However, it is worth noting the major difference in the size of these groups. In the 2022/23 GCSE cohort, the White Working Class was compiled of 80,975 pupils, the Mixed White and Black Caribbean was 3,712. The next largest group was the Black African group, who are just over 10 per cent the size of the White Working Class (8,720) and have an FSM pass rate of 61.4 per cent.⁷⁸

Perhaps another reason why the problems affecting the White working-class have not been dealt with is because of the more politically apparent failure within the non-deprived Black communities. The overall Black category has a pass rate of 70.1 per cent, the lowest of the 5 major ethnic divisions (White, Black, Asian, Mixed and other), besides Unknown. Within the Black subdivisions there is a wide variation and the worst outcomes (not only in the Black group, but of all ethnicities too, besides the Roma and Irish traveller) are found in the Black Caribbean community with a non-FSM eligible pass rate of only 59.0 per cent. Two thirds of the Black Caribbean group are eligible for FSM, too, in comparison to only 25 per cent

76 ‘Q.167’ (UK Parliament, n.d.), committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1217/html/.

77 ‘GCSE English and Maths Results’, 7 November 2024, ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/a-to-c-in-english-and-maths-gcse-attainment-for-children-aged-14-to-16-key-stage-4/latest/#by-ethnicity-and-eligibility-for-free-school-meals.

78 Ibid.

of the White Working Class.⁷⁹ These are serious challenges that deserve proper analysis into how we can alleviate the problems facing these specific communities.

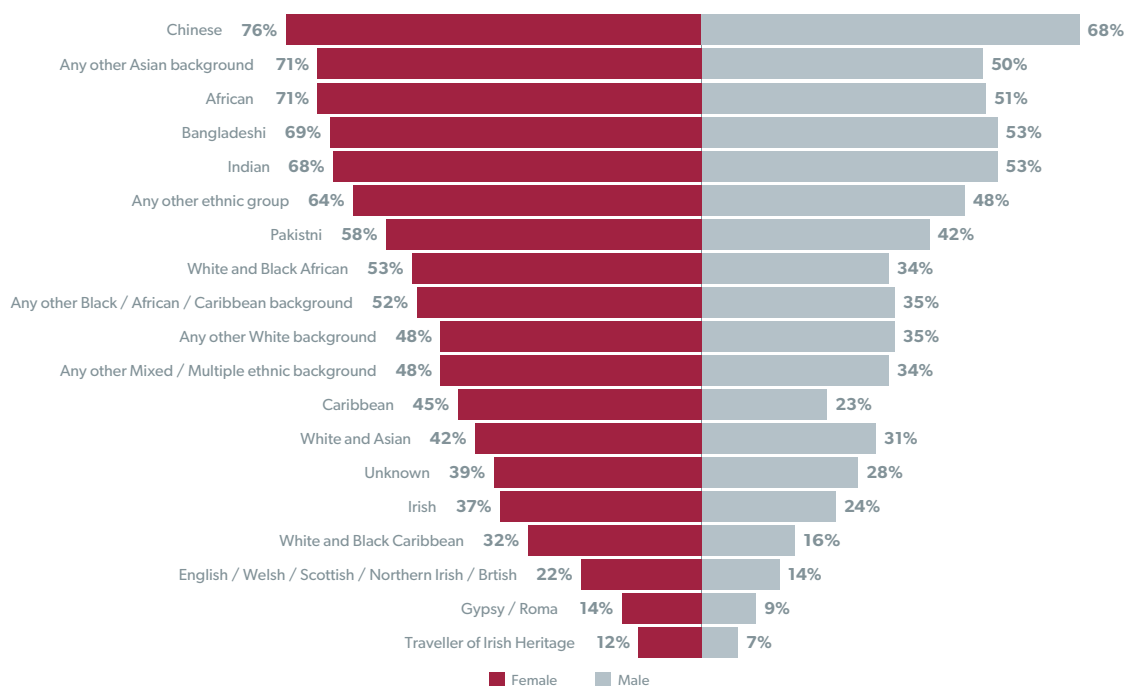
This does not change the fact that among deprived pupils, the White working-class are more likely to fail than black pupils. The percentage difference between an FSM eligible and a non-FSM eligible Black Caribbean pupil is 17.3. The same gap for the White working-class was 34.9 per cent.⁸⁰ The message is clear: it is worse to be poor if you are White working-class than any other group.

While this does not explicitly include sex, research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies Deaton review last year showed that, of those on FSM across all the major ethnic groups, boys were still significantly behind girls.⁸¹ Being from a deprived background and irrespective of ethnicity, boys do worse.

Boys are also markedly less likely to progress to university than girls, and, besides Gypsy / Roma and Irish Travellers, White Working-Class boys were again at the bottom. In 2022/23, FSM pupils progressed to HE at a rate of 29 per cent compared to a non-FSM progression rate of 49.8 per cent.⁸² However, when observing FSM eligibility, sex and ethnicity, White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British boys were much less likely to enter HE than most other groups with rates of 13.7 per cent for males in 2022/23. For comparison, other FSM eligible female groups progressed at rates of 76 per cent (Chinese), 71 per cent (African), 69 per cent (Bangladeshi), 68 per cent (Indian). The clearly least likely female to go to university, besides Gypsy/Roma and Irish traveller, was 22.2 per cent in the White British category.⁸³

See figure 15 below:

Figure 15: Progression to high tariff HE by age 19 by FSM eligibility, Sex and Ethnic Group - 2022/23



Source: GOV.UK

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Laura van der Erve et al., 'Intergenerational Mobility in the UK', *Oxford Open Economics* 3, no. Supplement_1 (1 July 2024), doi.org/10.1093/ooec/odad064. pp.i684-708.

82 'Widening Participation in Higher Education, Academic Year 2022/23' (GOV.UK, n.d.), explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2022-23.

83 Ibid.

Region

The region with the highest average Attainment 8 score in the country was Outer London (51.1) and the lowest was the North East (43.7).⁸⁴ In both these regions, boys were around 4.5 points behind girls. Furthermore, in 151 of the 152 local authorities (LAs), girls performed better than boys (with the Isles of Scilly being the anomaly). Looking more granularly, the LA with the lowest attainment 8 score was Knowsley (at 30.9 for boys and 36.8 for girls) and the highest was Kingston on Thames (with 56.8 for boys and 61.3 for girls). So, girls in Kingston on Thames, by virtue of their gender and location, will average twice as high an attainment 8 score as boys in Knowsley.

The link between educational outcomes, geography and ethnicity are very strong. Firstly, educational disparities tend to be smaller in more ethnically diverse areas. “The Long Shadow of Deprivation”, published by Boris Johnson’s administration in 2020, iterated this, by saying, “more generally, areas with smaller education gaps are more densely populated and have a higher proportion of non-white students.”⁸⁵ Additionally, the social mobility commission located 70 per cent of social mobility hotspot areas inside London and the Southeast, with none in the Northeast, Yorkshire and the Humber, or the West Midlands.⁸⁶

For Attainment 8 scores, the five worst performing LAs contain disproportionately high percentages of White British individuals and are found in the Northeast, Northwest or West Midlands.⁸⁷ These bottom five performers are, from the worst to the best: Knowsley, Blackpool, Stoke-on-Trent, Middlesbrough and Halton. Besides Middlesbrough, which is slightly over the average rate of White British, the other four LAs are made up of over 90 per cent white British (with the overall UK rate sitting at 74.4 per cent).⁸⁸ The top five performing LAs were in Outer London and the Southeast. Worst to best was: Barnet, Richmond upon Thames, Wokingham, Sutton and Kingston upon Thames. The average percentage of White British people in these areas was 56.6 (from 36.2 to 72.2 per cent).⁸⁹ It seems that ethnicity and geography are intimately linked, particularly in educational outcomes. Results like this give further credence to the notion that boys, particularly White British boys, are being left behind in education.

Exclusions

School exclusions are becoming increasingly prevalent across the UK and last year they hit the highest level in a decade. In the Autumn term, between 2023 and 2024, there were 4,200 permanent exclusions. This is an increase of 1,100 compared to the Autumn term of 2022/23. The previous highest termly exclusion rate was in the 2017/18 Autumn term where 3177 children were excluded.⁹⁰ Boys are over twice as likely to be excluded as girls.

84 ‘Key Stage 4 Performance, Academic Year 2023/24’ (GOV.UK, February 2024), explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance#dataBlock-ea3f53ef-d766-40ef-8749-2a93e94a8faa-tables.

85 ‘The Long Shadow of Deprivation: Differences in Opportunities across England (HTML)’ (GOV.UK, n.d.), gov.uk/government/publications/the-long-shadow-of-deprivation-differences-in-opportunities-the-long-shadow-of-deprivation-differences-in-opportunities-across-england-html.

86 ‘Social Mobility Commission’, GOV.UK, 14 October 2021, gov.uk/government/organisations/social-mobility-commission.

87 ‘Key Stage 4 Performance, Academic Year 2023/24’ (GOV.UK, February 2024), explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance#dataBlock-ea3f53ef-d766-40ef-8749-2a93e94a8faa-tables.

88 ‘Ethnic Group - Census Maps, ONS, n.d., n.d., ons.gov.uk/census/maps/choropleth/identity/ethnic-group/ethnic-group-tb-20b/white-english-welsh-scottish-north-ern-irish-or-british.

89 Ibid.

90 ‘Suspensions and Permanent Exclusions in England, Autumn Term 2023/24’ (GOV.UK, n.d.), explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england.

The situation is worse when accounting for disadvantage (those on FSM). Figure 16 shows that disadvantaged boys remain twice as likely to be permanently excluded as disadvantaged girls.⁹¹ But, compared to their non-disadvantaged peers, the situation is dire. In the year 2022/23, disadvantaged boys were almost five times more likely to be excluded than non-disadvantaged boys (0.08 to 0.38). Similarly, disadvantaged girls were over six times more likely to be excluded compared to non-disadvantaged girls (0.03 to 0.19).⁹² Clearly, disadvantage has a strong negative impact on the risk of exclusion for both sexes.

On top of this, disadvantaged boys had a steeper gradient increase in exclusion rates in Figure 16, as the absolute numbers for boys remain much higher. This indicates that, if trends persist, the gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils - particularly boys - is widening. Worryingly, recent termly data, as just mentioned, shows a sharp rise in overall exclusion number, meaning this trend could worsen further. On top of this, the impact of COVID-19 on school exclusions is evident, with numbers having dropped during the pandemic. It is likely that exclusion rates have not yet fully stabilised so these rates could keep on increasing.

Figure 16: Rate of permanent Exclusions



Source: FOI from the Department for Education

91 CSJ analysis of FOI data returned by the Department for Education

92 Ibid.

It is vital to recognise the trend since the likelihood of a multiplicity of negative outcomes increases when a child is excluded. This is particularly true with crime. Exclusions and criminal activity are too often intimately related. Those who were excluded multiple times are more likely to have a younger age of first conviction.⁹³ This is important given that in 2022, for example, the overall reoffending rate was a quarter, but certain sentences, such as those under 6 months, had a proven reoffending rate of 60 per cent.⁹⁴ Because exclusions have such a strongly correlated relationship with criminal activity, more recognition of the potential consequences of exclusion for boys is imperative. Other studies of children in custody have indicated that almost nine out of ten boys said they had been excluded from school.⁹⁵ When looking at adults, it is still above 40 per cent.⁹⁶ Similarly, the Prison Reform Trust found that 59 per cent of the prison population had been regularly truant from school, compared to the average of 5 per cent for the general population.⁹⁷ The impact is clear, being out of school, forced or otherwise, carries life-altering potential consequences.

One submission to the parliamentary commission on White Working Class boys:

"We note the findings of mental health researchers who observe that boys in emotional mental distress tend to use coping strategies which externalise into violence and destruction while girls are more likely to internalise into self-harm and depression. It is our contention that the routine practice of exclusions is discriminatory and used as an easier alternative to humane interventions on mental health and emotional distress, and that this must change."⁹⁸

Exclusions are a key part of the Lost Boys crisis. If we are serious about helping the Lost Boys, then we need to recognise that many are being lost at the nadir of the education system. There are boy shaped holes in the education net, and they are called permanent exclusions.

93 Hope Kent et al., 'School to Prison Pipelines: Associations between School Exclusion, Neurodisability and Age of First Conviction in Male Prisoners', *Forensic Science International: Mind and Law* 4 (1 December 2023): 100123, doi.org/10.1016/j.fsml.2023.100123. p.1.

94 'Proven Reoffending Statistics: October to December 2022' (GOV.UK, n.d.), gov.uk/government/statistics/proven-reoffending-statistics-october-to-december-2022/proven-reoffending-statistics-october-to-december-2022.

95 Rachel Prime, 'Children in Custody 2013–14' (London: HM Inspectorate of Prisons and Youth Justice Board, n.d.), justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisoners/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2014/12/HMIP-Children-in-custody-2013-14-web.pdf. p.16,92.

96 'Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile: Winter 2022' (Prison Reform Trust, Winter 2022), prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-winter-2022/. p.26.

97 Ibid.

98 'Submission to UK Parliament Education Committee: Left-behind White Pupils from Disadvantaged Backgrounds.' (UK Parliament, July 2020), committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/9076/html/.

Families and Fathers

There is a crisis of masculinity in this country, a search for what it means to be a young man growing up in Britain today. The root of this problem is in the home. 2.5 million children in the UK do not live with a father figure, representing one in five of all dependent children.⁹⁹

The UK is a major outlier compared to other OECD countries in terms of family breakdown.¹⁰⁰ In 2023, 46 per cent of first-born children aged 14-years-old did not live with both natural parents.¹⁰¹ This is an ever-worsening phenomenon. In 1970, the number of children who did not live with both their biological parents throughout their childhood (to age 17) was just 21 per cent.¹⁰²

One report stated that “British parents are not only more likely than their European counterparts to have a child outside of a union but ... these lone-mother families are more long-term arrangements than is the case in other European countries.”¹⁰³ With just shy of half of young Britons growing up with only one biological parent, and with close to nine out of ten of these being single mothers,¹⁰⁴ part of the systemic crisis of masculinity is simple: fatherlessness.

Boy, aged 11-17, Cumbria

“Not having a father figure is hard. There’s so many of us that don’t have that, and I see how it affects boys, the fights, not having a father to turn to and a lot of us don’t have any male role models to help. Teachers at school are no good for this. My mum does great and I see how hard she works to bring us up so that’s a positive.”

The problems of fatherlessness and family breakdown are acute. Fatherlessness is not just an issue affecting boys, with girls at serious detriment arising from the loss of their fathers. Girls are more likely to have lower self-esteem; develop eating disorders; suffer from depression; struggle to maintain and build relationships; and have an earlier age at menarche and sexually activity.¹⁰⁵ While many of these problems will be shared by both sexes, there are significant challenges that particularly impact boys.

99 ‘Families and Households in the UK - Office for National Statistics’, May 2023.

100 ‘Why Family Matters’. p.22.

101 Harry Benson, ‘Source of Family Breakdown’, *Marriage Foundation*, n.d., marriagefoundation.org.uk/research/source-of-family-breakdown/. Benson. p.1.

102 Kiernan, Crossman, and Phimister, ‘Families and Inequalities’. p.1656.

103 Ibid, p.i664.

104 ‘Families and Households in the UK - Office for National Statistics’, May 2023.

105 Mutia P.R., Amida Yusriana, and Moudy Poernomo, ‘(PDF) Phenomenological Study of Fatherlessness in the Lives of Daughters’, *ResearchGate* 23, no. 1 (2 November 2024), doi.org/10.14710/jis.23.1.2024.130-156; LaToya Jackson, ‘Where’s My Daddy? Effects of Fatherlessness on Women’s Relational Communication’, *Master’s Theses*, 1 January 2010, doi.org/10.31979/etd.xy86-vnm6; Julianna Deardorff et al., ‘Father Absence, BMI, and Pubertal Timing in Girls: Differential Effects by Family Income and Ethnicity’, *The Journal of Adolescent Health : Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine* 48, no. 5 (May 2011): 441–47, doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.07.032.

Fatherlessness, family breakdown and multigenerational scarring

Given the internationally exceptional state of family breakdown in Britain, one could hypothesise that the effects are becoming increasingly inconsequential. This is not the case: “parental separation lowers the economic and psychological well-being of parents and diminishes the resources available to children, as parental time, engagement and money are spread more thinly across households”.¹⁰⁶ The Child Poverty Action Group estimated that the total costs of raising a child to the age of 18 in 2023 was £166,000 for a couple and £220,000 for a lone parent¹⁰⁷. This shows clearly the diminished resources available for children who are not raised by both parents. Of course, there are increasingly common non-traditional set-ups, such as shared residency agreements or child support from the non-resident parent, but either way, the total “time, engagement and money” for children will be more thinly stretched. This is not about attributing blame to any parent and, in many circumstances, separation is unequivocally the right option. It is, however, important to recognise that when separation occurs, time and resources dedicated to the child are less readily available. It is also striking that intergenerational scarring from family separation remains as detrimental as ever, even as parental separation has become more commonplace.¹⁰⁸ Given that almost half of children in the UK will experience parental separation by the age of 14,¹⁰⁹ the government must consider more of the root causes of family breakdown.

Across the UK, 2.5 million children have no father figure at home, representing almost 1 in 5 of all dependent children. Given what we know about the cognitive, behavioural and protective influences of fathers on their children¹¹⁰ this is cause for concern. This is especially the case for young boys as, when measuring parental attachment and child delinquency, stronger “attachment-delinquency” links were present “if the parent and child had the same sex”.¹¹¹

Fatherless children are also at the highest risk of persistent generational scarring. If a cycle of fatherlessness continues, more boys and girls will suffer the adverse consequences that come with fatherlessness, and having an absent father figure will result in more absent fathers in the future.

The acknowledgment that fatherlessness is a negative phenomenon is not confined to academics. Previous CSJ polling found that 71 per cent of British adults agreed with the statement that the absence of fathers (or ‘fatherlessness’) in families has a negative impact on children growing up in poverty, with 29 per cent strongly agreeing and only 13 per cent disagreeing.¹¹²

106 Kiernan, Crossman, and Phimister, ‘Families and Inequalities’. p.i671.

107 ‘The Cost of a Child in 2023 | CPAG’ (Child Poverty Action Group, 14 December 2023), cpag.org.uk/news/cost-child-2023.

108 Kathleen Kiernan and Robert Joyce, ‘Families’, *Oxford Open Economics* 3, no. Supplement_1 (1 July 2024), doi.org/10.1093/oeec/odad078. p.i643.

109 Benson, ‘Source of Family Breakdown’. p.1.

110 Sarah Cattan et al., ‘Early Childhood Inequalities’, *Oxford Open Economics* 3, no. Supplement_1 (1 July 2024), doi.org/10.1093/oeec/odad072. p.i712; Kristin Berg Nordahl, Imac M. Zambrana, and Marion S. Forgatch, ‘Risk and Protective Factors Related to Fathers’ Positive Involvement and Negative Reinforcement With 1-Year-Olds’, *Parenting* 16, no. 1 (2 January 2016), doi.org/10.1080/15295192.2016.1116891. pp.1-21.

111 Machteld Hoeve et al., ‘A Meta-Analysis of Attachment to Parents and Delinquency’, *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 40, no. 5 (2012), doi.org/10.1007/s10802-011-9608-1. p.781.

112 ‘The Forgotten Role of Families – Why It Is Time to Find Our Voice on Families’ (Centre for Social Justice, 18 November 2017), centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/the-forgotten-role-of-families-why-it-is-time-to-find-our-voice-on-families. p.24.

Fathers and Crime

There is a well-established link between absent fathers and the criminal justice system. Previous reports have shown that three-quarters (76 per cent) of children in custody said they had an absent father and a third had an absent mother.¹¹³ CSJ estimates have calculated the total cost per year of family breakdown in the UK to be £64bn¹¹⁴. The criminal justice system constitutes a large proportion of this with the cost of keeping a prisoner standing at over £50,000 per annum.¹¹⁵ However, it is not just current prisoners who were plagued by fatherlessness. One study cited by the London Violence Reduction Unit estimated that 60 per cent of boys whose fathers are in custody go on to offend.¹¹⁶ Whether we measure the current outcomes of older men or the future outcomes of younger men, it is imperative that the influence of fatherlessness is addressed.

Fathers and mental health

Boys who lose their fathers within the first five years of their life have significantly worse mental health outcomes in their early to mid-twenties. One paper analysing the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children measured the depression and depressive symptoms of over 14,000 children between the ages of 10 and 24 years. They found that girls were overwhelmingly more at risk of depression at all ages and categories, and early father absence (ages 0 – 5) presented a greater risk to the depressive symptoms for both genders than middle father absence (5-10) or father presence. The fascinating piece of data to note is that, for boys who experienced early father absence, the depressive trajectory was nearly identical to boys who had present fathers, until the ages of 23-24. At this point, there was a sharp rise in depressive symptoms for males with absent fathers, resulting in the joint highest level of depressive symptoms in the study across boys and girls. This was vastly higher than for boys with present fathers, with whom they had been largely in step until this age.¹¹⁷ The authors suggest that at this age, boys may perceive a renewed sense of parental loss and a “lack of appropriate male role models or models of long-term intimate adult relationships at the time when the importance of interpersonal relationships becomes more salient”. To put it another way, in the years that these boys stepped out of the home and into manhood, they realised that they didn’t have any example to follow. Recognising this trend is vital for engaging with young men.

113 ‘Punishing Disadvantage’. p.50.

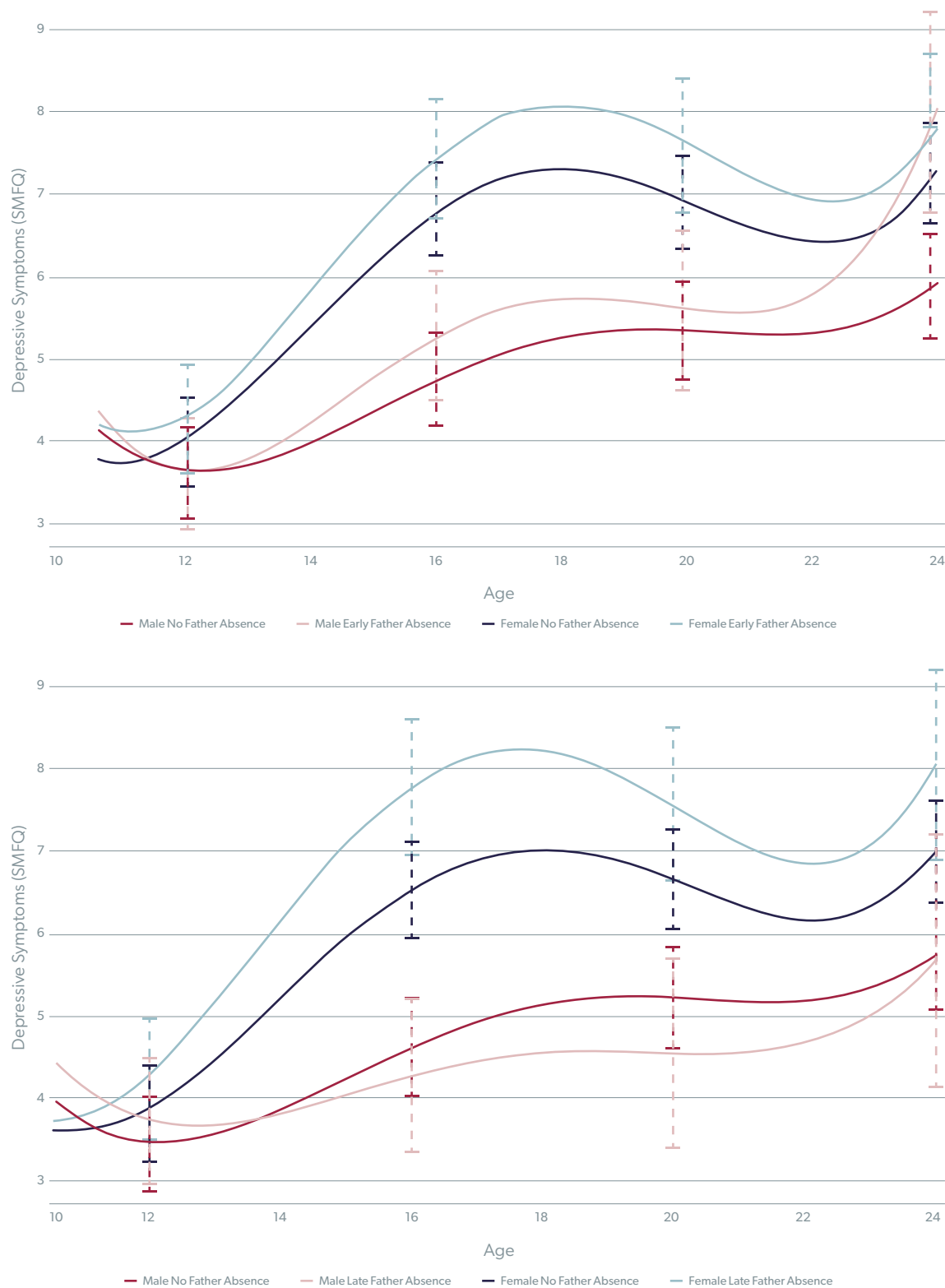
114 ‘Why Family Matters’. p.4. Note: 2019 estimates adjusted for inflation using the Bank of England Inflation Calculator to convert from 2019 prices to 2024 prices. bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator.

115 ‘Prison Performance Data 2022 to 2023’ (GOV.UK, n.d.), gov.uk/government/publications/prison-performance-data-2022-to-2023.

116 ‘Fatherhood: Parenting Support for Dads Aims to Cut Youth Violence’, BBC News, 10 December 2024, bbc.com/news/articles/c70425pkwxpo; ‘London’s Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) | London City Hall’, accessed 7 February 2025, london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/londons-violence-reduction-unit-vru.

117 Iryna Culpin et al., ‘Father Absence and Trajectories of Offspring Mental Health across Adolescence and Young Adulthood: Findings from a UK-Birth Cohort’, *Journal of Affective Disorders* 314 (1 October 2022), doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2022.07.016.

Figure 17: Main effect of early father absence (above; birth - 5 years) and later father absence in middle childhood (below; 5 - 10 years) on predicted trajectories of depressive symptoms across childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, stratified by sex.¹¹⁸



¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Studies differ on the relative impact that the timing of a father's departure has on children. For example, the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies argued that children whose parents split up in late childhood (aged from 7-14), were more adversely affected than those whose parents who split up earlier when compared to those living with both parents. However, this study did finish reporting at age 14, and as a result, if the first study is applicable, then we would not expect to see any significant diversion of boys with or without both parents until adulthood.

There are two important factors to note from these studies. Firstly, the second study concluded that "among older children, increased emotional problems were apparent for both boys and girls, but heightened behavioural issues were observed in boys only."¹¹⁹ Both studies found that a boy's behaviour was adversely affected by fatherlessness, regardless of age.

Living alone and moving out of the home

Young men are increasingly likely to still be living with their parent(s) later in life.¹²⁰

One-third of young men aged 20 to 34 years, (2.2 million in total), were living at home with their parent(s) in the UK in 2023, compared to less than a quarter of young women, (1.4 million in total). Of the 3.6 million 20–34-year-olds living at home, over 60 per cent were boys.¹²¹ The average age of moving out of a parent(s) house is now 25 for men and 22 for women (see figure 18). This has increased for both sexes over the past decade. This change has been attributed to an extended time spent in education, forming relationships and having children later in life, and the increased cost of rent and buying a home.¹²² Any young person growing up in Britain will generally experience most, if not all, these different milestones, but it does not explain why men should be consistently years behind in moving out the home. The independence of young men is reducing.

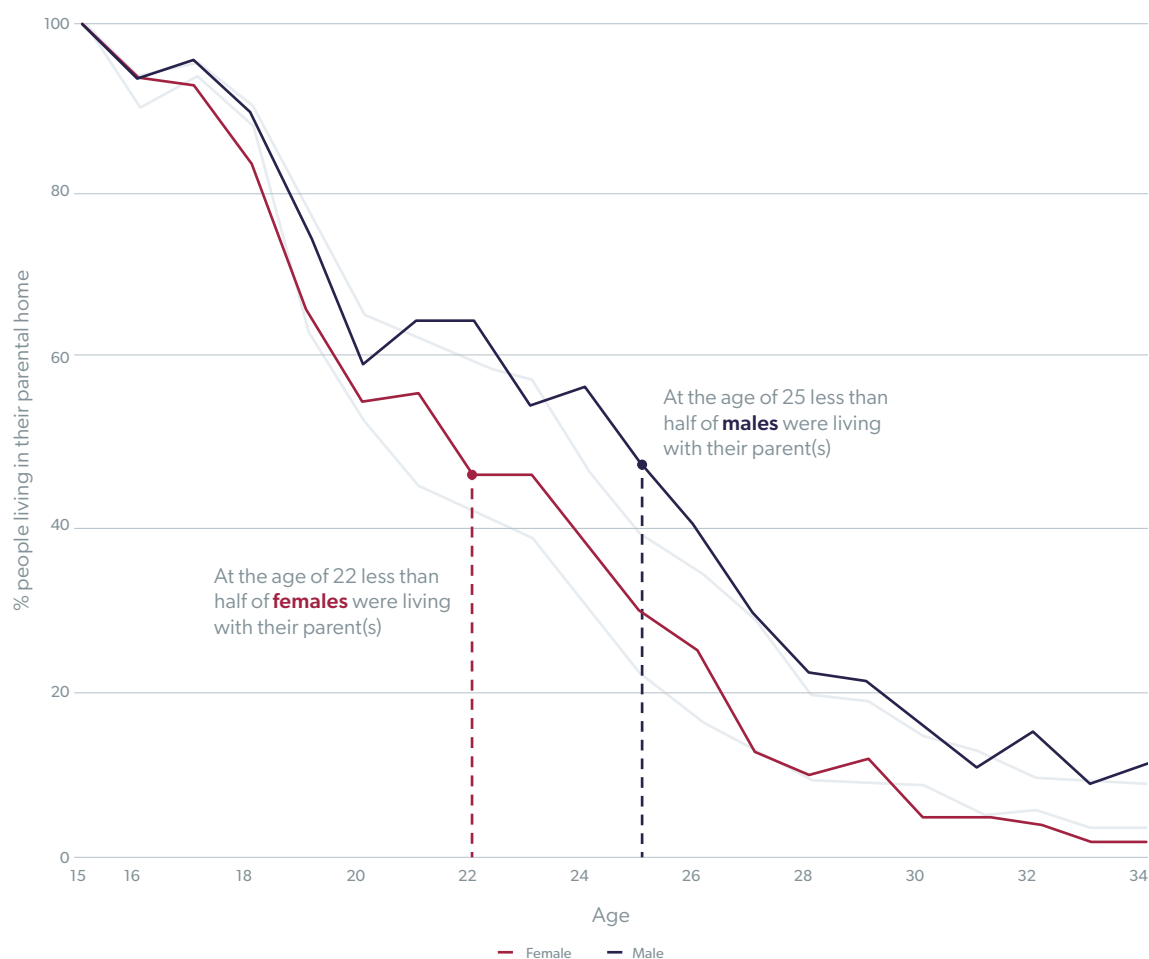
119 Ryan Bradshaw, 'Timing of Parents' Split Matters for Children's Mental Health, New Research Reveals' (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 17 January 2019), cls.ucl.ac.uk/timing-of-parents-split-matters-for-childrens-mental-health-new-research-reveals/.

120 'Families and Households in the UK - Office for National Statistics', May 2023. p. 9.

121 Ibid.

122 'Milestones: Journeying through Modern Life - Office for National Statistics' (Office for National Statistics, April 2024), ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/milestonesjourneyingthroughmodernlife/2024-04-08.

Figure 18: Young people living in their parental home as a percentage of young people living in households, by single year of age, separated by sex, UK, 2023 and 2013 ¹²³



Family breakdown, ethnicity and region

Family breakdown and fatherlessness are far more prevalent in some ethnicities than others. While the data is patchy, one small survey from the ONS suggested that, in 2019, the percentage of lone parent families among Black Caribbean children could be as high as 63 per cent. In comparison, one ethnic group was as low as 6 per cent (Indian).¹²⁴ However, of the ten LAs with the highest proportion of non-partnered births in the UK, they were overwhelmingly White British areas. The overall UK context for lone parents was 15 per cent, or 2.9 million.¹²⁵

In terms of geography, this is still a problem that massively affects the North East and North West. Hartlepool, Halton and Knowsley were the top three LAs for non-partnered births with Knowsley, the highest, at 34.94 per cent of births being non-partnered.¹²⁶ This statistic is also for all birth orders, and the rates for first births are likely to be higher.

¹²³ 'Families and Households in the UK - Office for National Statistics' (Office for National Statistics, May 2024), ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/births-deathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2023.

¹²⁴ 'Proportion of Children in Lone Parent Families by Ethnic Group, England and Wales, 2019 - Office for National Statistics' (Office for National Statistics, June 2021), ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/adhocs/12947proportionofchildreninloneparentfamiliesbyethnicgroupenglandandwales2019.

¹²⁵ 'Families and Households in the UK - Office for National Statistics' (Office for National Statistics, May 2024), ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/births-deathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2023.

¹²⁶ Kiernan, Crossman, and Phimister, 'Families and Inequalities'. p.9.

Kiernan et al hold that first births are around 25 per cent more likely to be non-partnered than all birth orders. So for first-born children in places like Knowsley the chance of their parents being non-partnered is 44 per cent.

Many young men are growing up without a positive and consistent male role model in their home. A man that they can seek support from and aspire to be. Many of our visits to more deprived areas of the UK highlighted this absence of aspiration. If boys cannot see older men holding down jobs and succeeding in their field, they are less prone to believe that these are things they can achieve. As one submission to our Call for Evidence noted:

Sean Soulsby, CEO of the Children's foundation:

"I think that in today's society it is difficult to understand what it means to be a man and navigate a very different world to that of 20/30 years ago. Little support is given to young men in particular to address and discuss this openly and safely... Knowing you are going to have a good job, money/future is key for anyone but in particular young men. A lot of the issues of today stem from the uncertainty of where young men see themselves in the future and a feeling that they don't quite 'fit' or 'belong'."

If young men cannot see personal examples of older men fitting into and thriving in society, how can they begin to imagine where they will end up themselves?

As the likelihood of a masculine presence in the home diminishes, it should come as no surprise that young men and boys across the UK are seeking new modes of masculinity. The first positive example of a man is increasingly being replaced by a poor counterfeit. The third most googled person in the world in 2023 was Andrew Tate.¹²⁷ In almost every research visit we conducted, Tate was bought up as a symptom of the too-often perverted nature of modern-day masculinity, and his rise aligns with the conservative shift of young men across the world. The male vacuum will be filled with something. And where better than through technology when children these days are more likely to have a smartphone than a father.¹²⁸

127 'Google Reveals What We Searched for the Most in 2023'.

128 'Children and Parents'.

Crime

One of the most serious manifestations of boys being left behind presents itself in and around the criminal justice system. 96 per cent of those in prison are men.¹²⁹ Currently the UK has a prison population problem. In October 2024 Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood stated:

“We cannot build our way out of this crisis. The prison population is rising by around 4,500 each year. The current Level of demand would see us need to build three mega-jails a year. The last Conservative government managed to build three prisons in the last 10 years. However fast we build, increasing demand will outstrip supply.”¹³⁰

Much like the Prime Minister’s need for a targeted strategy for boys to catch up with girls in the early years, Mahmood’s problem is almost entirely a male issue. The need to understand and deal with the interconnected root causes of crime and poverty on men are more pressing than ever. To understand how this affects the Lost Boys of Britain, we have investigated criminal exploitation and gangs, knife crime, fatherlessness, youth engagement strategies, and other potential disasters that are rearing their heads hoping that nothing changes.

The Youth Estate

The gendered problem of criminal justice begins within the Youth Estate (YE) - for those between the ages of 10 and 17. The YE has shrunk massively in the past two decades (it was just shy of 3000 in 2007/8 and has decreased steadily since then). Within the YE, there are inordinately more male children than female children. In March 2024, 529 male children were in custody in the YE. Comparatively, there were only 11 female children, or just 2 per cent.¹³¹ Black youths are also disproportionately represented here, making up 23 per cent of the entire estate in November 2024, where White youths were just 45 per cent.¹³² In 2007/8 Black youths constituted 14 per cent and White youths made up 71 per cent.¹³³

¹²⁹ ‘Offender Management Statistics Quarterly’.

¹³⁰ Sentencing Review and Prison Capacity Package, 22 October 2024, questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2024-10-22/hcws156

¹³¹ ‘Youth Custody Data’ (GOV.UK, 10 January 2025), gov.uk/government/publications/youth-custody-data.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ ‘Young People in Custody’ (GOV.UK, 11 May 2020), ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/crime-justice-and-the-law/courts-sentencing-and-tribunals/young-people-in-custody/latest/.

The prison population

As of 30 September 2024, the prison population stood at 86,966 prisoners in England and Wales, of which 96 per cent were male.¹³⁴ The most common age of a prisoner was between 30 and 39. While we do not include these in the term Lost Boys, many of these men became 'lost' during childhood. Consider that:

- › 57 per cent of those in prison in 2020 had the reading age of an 11-year-old;¹³⁵
- › 42 per cent of those in prison were excluded from school;¹³⁶
- › almost 60 per cent of prisoners were regularly truant from school, compared with only 5 per cent of the general population;¹³⁷
- › over one in ten prisoners have never had a job by the time they enter custody and two-thirds were already unemployed when entering custody;¹³⁸
- › prisoners are three times more likely than the general population to not have any qualifications;¹³⁹
- › estimates suggest around three quarters of prisoners had an absent father;¹⁴⁰
- › and they are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression or have attempted suicide at some point.¹⁴¹

These may not be the Lost Boys of Britain anymore, but they once were.

Criminal exploitation

Across the country, county lines and gangs were expressed as a major concern for young and vulnerable boys by youth workers. Our qualitative research reveals that those who are particularly vulnerable are the truants and the excluded, those from broken homes, and those who spent worrying amounts of time on the internet (particularly with gaming or social media). In other words, those whose family structure, educational system or in-person relationships have become fractured or broken. In the last decade, a study of eight prisons found that almost nine out of ten men (88 per cent) said that they had been excluded from school.¹⁴² More recently, prisoners surveyed had a truancy rate of 59 per cent, compared with the general population rate of just 5.2 per cent.¹⁴³ Young people online are at increasing risk too, with a previous CSJ report on criminal exploitation highlighting one charity's response to the risks the online world pose:

134 'Offender Management Statistics Quarterly'.

135 'Prison Education Statistics 2019 - 2020'.

136 'Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile', Winter 2022. p.26.

137 Ibid.

138 'Unlocking Aspirations' (Centre for Social Justice, 22 May 2023), csjfoundation.org.uk/unlocking-aspirations. p.42.

139 'The Pre-Custody Employment, Training and Education Status of Newly Sentenced Prisoners' (GOV.UK, March 2012), gov.uk/government/publications/the-pre-custody-employment-training-and-education-status-of-newly-sentenced-prisoners.

140 'Breakthrough Britain: Family Breakdown' (Centre for Social Justice, 9 July 2007), centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/breakthrough-britain-family-breakdown. p.3.; 'Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile: Autumn 2015', Prison Reform Trust, Autumn 2015, prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-autumn-2015. p.6.

141 Ibid.

142 Prime, 'Children in Custody 2013-14'. p.16, 92.

143 'Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile', Winter 2022. p.26.

Children and young people are reachable 24/7 these days, even alone in their room, the mobile phone can ping, online gaming and most apps have gift or chat functions. Mum and dad think everything's okay, because they are up in their room yet, two days later, you'll get a package to the door for like £2,000 worth of mobile phones or something like that, to hold.

Senior Service Manager County Lines Support & Rescue Service, Catch 22.¹⁴⁴

More widely, criminal exploitation (when someone is forced, coerced or groomed by someone else into committing crime for the benefit of another person) alone represents 50 per cent of all modern slavery in the UK, according to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), and 84 per cent of all modern slavery when alongside other types of exploitation (e.g., sexual or labour exploitation).¹⁴⁵ Of all identified victims of criminal exploitation in the UK, 89 per cent were male, and 64 per cent of those who were victims were British. Of these, the most likely victim of criminal exploitation in the UK were British boys aged 17 or under (8,879, or 45 per cent of those criminally exploited)¹⁴⁶. Moreover, younger children are being increasingly targeted with gangs now recruiting children as young as eight or nine years old because they are less likely to face charges. One quote from a police officer described it in this way,

"What the gangs have realised is, 'What we'll start doing is sending out younger and younger children,' to the point where eight- and nine-year-olds are now being recruited into gangs. They know these children will never be prosecuted and will always be looked after."¹⁴⁷

Therefore, it is important to realise the intense vulnerability of these young boys, and to recognise them as victims.

The charity, Action for Children, who have protected and supported over 500 children, young people and families at risk of criminal exploitation, analysed their internal safeguarding services between 2020-2024 and found a strong correlation between youth criminal exploitation and the above-mentioned Lost Boys characteristics. They found that 94 per cent of children involved in serious incidents were males between the ages of 15-18. Moreover, almost 70 per cent were NEET, 59 per cent were neurodiverse, and 80 per cent were homeless or living in temporary accommodation.¹⁴⁸ They were also frequently found carrying weapons or drugs, and likely to be engaged with their associated activities. In many ways the statistics are not surprising. Boys and young men are simply more likely to be NEET, homeless, carrying knives, and have ASD / ADHD.

¹⁴⁴ 'Criminal Exploitation'. p.13.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. p.15.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. p.17.

¹⁴⁸ Sharon Maciver and Martha Hampson, "'I Don't Want to Go down That Road': The Harms Inflicted on Criminally Exploited Children' (Action for Children, October 2024), actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/policy-work-campaigns-and-research/policy-reports/the-harms-inflicted-on-criminally-exploited-children. p.1-17.

Gangs

"Do you know the number one currency of gangs? Belonging."

Ben Kinsella Trust

Gang related violence is a regular feature in news across the UK. In 2022/23, males accounted for 83 per cent of children cautioned or convicted for violent offences and 87 per cent of homicide victims aged 16 to 24.¹⁴⁹ The social and economic costs of serious violence are enormous, especially for those personally impacted and left to pick up the pieces. In 2020, the Home Office estimated that the cost of one homicide in England was £3.2 million.¹⁵⁰ Adjusting for inflation to December 2024 prices, the social cost of a homicide now stands at £3.98 million.¹⁵¹

Knife crime in the UK is increasing alongside robbery and theft. The allure of gangs, despite law enforcement efforts, remains. They continue to provide boys with belonging, respect, money, work, and even role models. One Glaswegian study suggested that gang-fighting and masculinity partly occurred because it allowed poorer, working-class boys the opportunity to prove themselves in the only financially accessible way they knew how. They stated, "Gang fighting was a surrogate sporting event which for the working-class male meant the athleticism shown by middle-class counterparts in rugby or sky-diving could be easily displayed without the barrier of financial cost".¹⁵²

Andrew Percival, Service Manager at Action for Children

"Again, there is a lack of parental guidance (due to factors such as lone parent families etc. and no role models) gangs and exploiters play on these factors and look to highlight young males who are both vulnerable and wanting to have a belonging and a sense of purpose.

Their risk factors are greater as they don't want appear to be weak or showing that they aren't manly or strong, a lot of the time they are wanting to be what people perceive they should be instead of being who they actually are.

The crazy attitudes about respect and the negative role models in the media (reality TV, sports, music stars etc.) has had a real effect on how young males are now growing up and being influenced by the lifestyle.

Even such terms as "legend" are used to describe anything but a legend."

149 'Youth Justice Statistics'.

150 'Trends and Drivers of Homicide: Main Findings' (GOV.UK, 13 April 2020), gov.uk/government/publications/trends-and-drivers-of-homicide-main-findings.

151 Note: Using the Bank of England Inflation Calculator to convert from 2020 prices to 2024 prices. gov.uk/government/publications/trends-and-drivers-of-homicide-main-findings.

152 Robert McLean and Chris Holligan, 'The Semiotics of the Evolving Gang Masculinity and Glasgow', *Social Sciences* 7, no. 8 (August 2018), doi.org/10.3390/socsci7080125. p.17.

In 2022, a violence profile report of London revealed that 90 per cent of victims of teenage violence were male and 94 per cent of those accused of violence against teens were male.¹⁵³ Gangs and serious violent crime can affect anyone. However, young men, and particularly young black men in places like London, are consistently the targets and victims of recruitment and crime.¹⁵⁴

Knife and violent crime

Knife-enabled crime as recorded by the police in the year ending September 2024 increased by 12 per cent on the previous year to a total of 55,008 offences.¹⁵⁵ This has increased by 80 per cent in the past decade.¹⁵⁶ In 2022/23, 99 young people aged 16-24 were victims of homicide and 467 were treated in hospital for knife or sharp object injuries.¹⁵⁷ Over eight in ten of these homicides were the result of knife crime.¹⁵⁸ Men made up 91 per cent of hospital admissions for knife assaults.¹⁵⁹

Black people are disproportionately victims of violent crime and homicide. For every White victim of homicide aged 16 to 24 in 2018/19, there were 24 Black victims. However, the ten-year average was 1:11.¹⁶⁰ Over half of Black and Mixed ethnic victims since 2013 were between the ages of 16 and 24.¹⁶¹

Figure 19: Number of people killed in a homicide with the use of a knife or sharp instrument since 2013 and the share by ethnicity and age group.

Total	Under 1	1 to 4	5 to 15	6 to 24	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 54	55 to 64	65 to 74
1,160	0.1%	0.3%	2.4%	19.9%	22.5%	19.8%	17.1%	8.1%	5.5%
576	0.2%	0.5%	4.3%	50.9%	22.7%	10.8%	5.9%	3.8%	0.5%
237	0%	1.3%	1.7%	30.8%	23.6%	21.1%	10.6%	4.2%	3.8%
91	0%	0%	3.3%	42.9%	17.6%	14.3%	13.2%	4.4%	3.3%
14	0%	0%	0%	57.1%	21.4%	7.1%	0%	14.3%	0%

Source: The Times

Crime is a terrible blight on communities across the UK. Despite London making up the vast majority of violent offences committed by children, it was fourth when accounting for offences per 100,000 in 2021/22 and 2022/23.¹⁶² Nottingham, West Yorkshire and North Wales had 383, 363, and 324 violent offences per 100,000 respectively, compared to London's 320. However, in absolute terms, London had 2,707 ahead of the next highest which was West Yorkshire on 894.¹⁶³

153 'A Problem Profile of Violence, Gangs And Young People' (Metropolitan Police, September 2022), london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-10/Seriousper cent20youthper cent20violenceper cent20problemper cent20profile.pdf. p.23.

154 Ibid.

155 'Crime in England and Wales: Police Force Area Data Tables - Office for National Statistics'.

156 Ibid.

157 'Beyond the Headlines 2024 Summary' (Youth Endowment Fund, July 2024), youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/beyond-the-headlines-2024/summary/.

158 Ibid.

159 Ibid.

160 Sumit Kumar, Lawrence W. Sherman, and Heather Strang, 'Racial Disparities in Homicide Victimisation Rates: How to Improve Transparency by the Office of National Statistics in England and Wales', *Cambridge Journal of Evidence-Based Policing* 4, no. 3 (1 December 2020), doi.org/10.1007/s41887-020-00055-y. p.184.

161 'Knife Crime Is Rising — We Looked at the Data to Find out Why', accessed 12 February 2025, [thetimes.com/uk/crime/article/knife-crime-statistics-data-rates-b5z5swspq](https://www.thetimes.com/uk/crime/article/knife-crime-statistics-data-rates-b5z5swspq).

162 'Youth Justice Statistics'. Youth Justice Statistics'.

163 Ibid.

There is also a disparity in what young people understand about both the law and how to stay safe. The Ben Kinsella Trust found in a survey of almost 10,000 young people with an average age between 10 and 11 that two per cent of young people have carried a knife and eight per cent of young people have thought about carrying a knife.¹⁶⁴ The Trust is working to dispel the belief for young people that carrying a knife for self-defence is permissible (with one in ten children surveyed thinking it was) and educating children on related laws, such as the law of joint enterprise.¹⁶⁵ Interventions like Ben Kinsella are important upstream roots to counter such dangerous narratives. Their data, along with the wider context, demonstrates how fundamentally important such work is.

Child and Adolescent to Parent Violence and Abuse (CAPVA)

Some studies suggest that CAPVA is prevalent in almost 20 per cent of single parent homes.¹⁶⁶ This figure should be used with caution as it is notoriously difficult to gather accurate data. Research from the London Violence Reduction Unit reveals that 81 per cent of CAPVA perpetrators are male, and 69 per cent of victims are female, who are predominantly single mothers.¹⁶⁷ CAPVA often peaks during adolescence, with two thirds of incidents attributed to young men aged 19–25, a third to those aged 15–18, and just one per cent from those aged 12–14.¹⁶⁸ Estimates also suggest that 50 to 80 per cent of young people who engage in child to parent abuse have prior experience of domestic abuse in the family home.¹⁶⁹

Much like sextortion and online abuse, these young men are not just facing challenges; they are becoming the challenges. If we are going to reverse the alarming phenomenon of CAPVA, we must deal with the complex interconnecting issues of family breakdown, behavioural difficulties and, in many cases, a sub-culture of male youth violence. Before becoming perpetrators, these boys were often young victims. This is another reason why finding the Lost Boys is so key: it is for the mothers, sisters and grandmothers, too.

¹⁶⁴ Rob, 'Keeping Young People Safe & Teaching Them about Knife Crime', *The Ben Kinsella Trust* (blog), 21 May 2024, benkinsella.org.uk/keeping-young-people-safe-evaluation-shows-impact-of-ben-kinsella-trust/.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Gaylene S. Armstrong et al., 'Risk Factor Profile of Youth Incarcerated for Child to Parent Violence: A Nationally Representative Sample', *Journal of Criminal Justice* 58 (1 September 2018), doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2018.06.002.

¹⁶⁷ 'Comprehensive Needs Assessment of Child/Adolescent to Parent Violence and Abuse in London | London City Hall' (London City Hall, March 2022), london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/londons-violence-reduction-unit-vru/our-research/vru-evidence-hub/comprehensive-needs-assessment-childadolescent-parent-violence-and-abuse-london. p.37.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

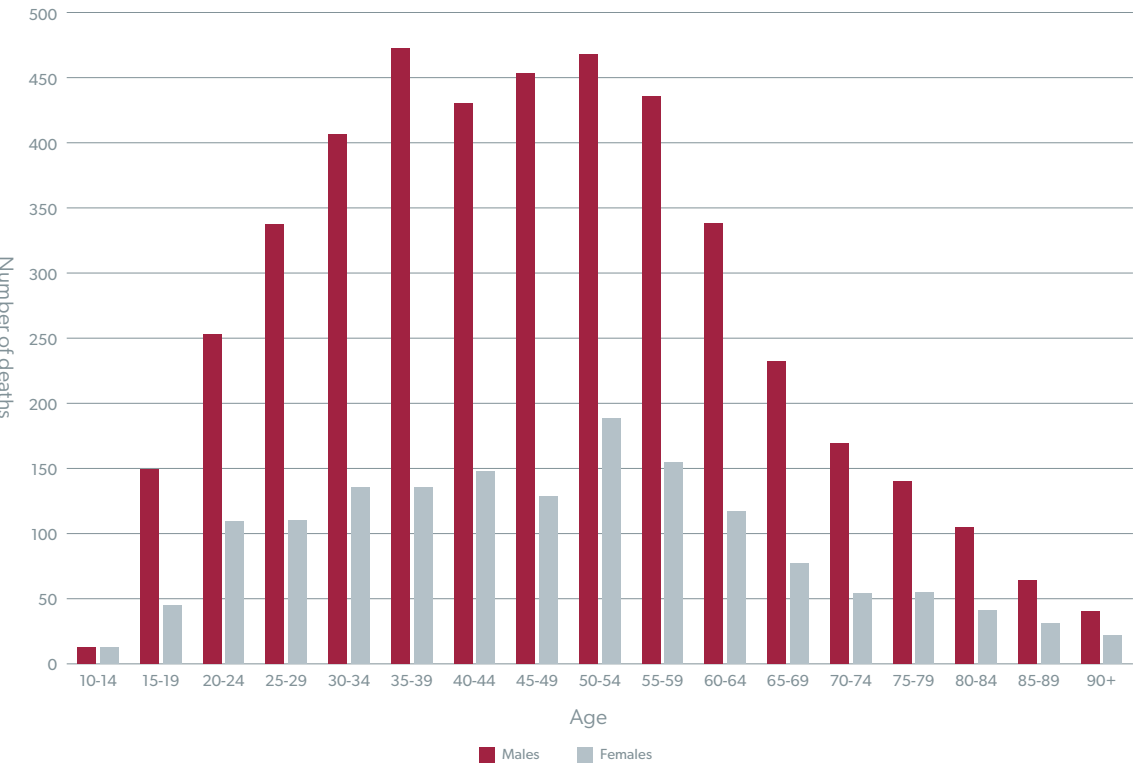
¹⁶⁹ Melanie Simmons et al., 'Sixty Years of Child-to-Parent Abuse Research: What We Know and Where to Go', *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 38 (1 January 2018), doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2017.11.001.

Health

Suicide

Men are three and a half times more likely than women to take their own lives and are acutely vulnerable to suicide at any almost all ages.¹⁷⁰ The suicide rate for males in England and Wales increased to 17.4 deaths per 100,000 in 2023, from 16.4 deaths per 100,000 in 2022. This is the highest rate for males since 1999. By comparison, the suicide rate for females in England and Wales increased to 5.7 deaths per 100,000 in 2023, from 5.4 deaths per 100,000 in 2022. This is the highest rate for females since 1994.¹⁷¹

Figure 20: the numbers of suicides across all age groups, men and women, 2023



In the most deprived areas, the overall suicide rate is double that of the least deprived areas.¹⁷² For example, a man in the East Midlands is six times more likely to take his own life than a woman in London.¹⁷³ Tees Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA), which represents an area acutely struggling with this problem, stated that “those who do kill themselves are, statistically, likely to be single men who live alone and are unemployed.”¹⁷⁴

170 ‘Suicides in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics’ (GOV.UK, August 2024), ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicidesintheunitedkingdom/2023.

171 Ibid.

172 Ibid.

173 Ibid.

174 Ian Johnson, ‘Work Being Done across Teesside to Prevent Suicide in the Region’, *Teesside Live*, 4 February 2018, sec. Health, gazettelive.co.uk/news/health/middlesbrough-uks-suicide-capital-what-14237618.

Data over the previous decade suggests that this problem is most acute for White British males and Mixed Multiple Ethnic males. Both of these groups averaged twice the rate of suicide per 100,000 compared to any other ethnic group and were also much more likely than women of any ethnicity or age to take their own life.¹⁷⁵

Suicide and prison

The suicide risk for the male prison population was nearly four times higher (3.9 times) than that of the general male population between 2008 and 2019.¹⁷⁶ In this period, there were 677 suicides in prison custody. This equates to approximately 56 suicides in prisons each year, of which an overwhelming 97 per cent were male (657 deaths). This closely reflects the prison population, as men make up 96 percent of prisoners. However, even within this context, it is still an unbelievably stark divergence. The ratio of male to female suicide in prison in this period averaged 1:27.¹⁷⁷

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Boys are significantly more likely to have a diagnosis of ADHD than girls. Estimates range from a ratio of 2:1 to 10:1.¹⁷⁸ By 2018, the proportion of ADHD diagnoses was 255 per 10,000 boys and 67.7 per 10,000 girls.¹⁷⁹ Prescription rates from 2000-2018 doubled for boys and quadrupled for girls.¹⁸⁰ Although this is an increasingly medicalised neurodevelopmental disorder for both boys and girls,¹⁸¹ it remains that boys are far more likely to have the condition.

Those with ADHD are eligible for Special Educational needs and Disability (SEND) support. Those receiving SEND support are over twice as likely to be excluded as the average boy, and over five times more likely to be excluded than the average girl.¹⁸² Boys make up over 60 per cent of those receiving Special Educational Needs (SEN) support and over 70 per cent of those on Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).¹⁸³ This report has considered the host of problems that manifest alongside an exclusion.

Anecdotally, many charities who run Capitalise Alternative Provision and parents who have children with ADHD have told the CSJ how misunderstood and badly recognised such conditions are, especially with aggressive or poor behaviour often displayed by these boys. They often relayed how isolated and internet obsessed these children can become.

175 'Sociodemographic Inequalities in Suicides in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics' (Office for National Statistics, March 2023), ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthinequalities/bulletins/sociodemographicinequalitiesinsuicidesinenglandandwales/2011to2021.

176 'Drug-Related Deaths and Suicide in Prison Custody in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics' (Office for National Statistics, January 2023), ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/drugrelateddeathsandsuicideinprisoncustodyinenglandandwales/2023-01-26.

177 Ibid.

178 Florence Mowlem et al., 'Do Different Factors Influence Whether Girls versus Boys Meet ADHD Diagnostic Criteria? Sex Differences among Children with High ADHD Symptoms', *Psychiatry Research* 272 (February 2019), doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2018.12.128. p.766.

179 Douglas G. J. McKechnie et al., 'Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Diagnoses and Prescriptions in UK Primary Care, 2000-2018: Population-Based Cohort Study', *BJPsych Open* 9, no. 4 (July 2023), doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2023.512. p.1.

180 Douglas G. J. McKechnie et al., 'Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Diagnoses and Prescriptions in UK Primary Care, 2000-2018: Population-Based Cohort Study', *BJPsych Open* 9, no. 4 (17 July 2023), doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2023.512.

181 'Change the Prescription: A New Approach to Mental Health' (Centre for Social Justice, 25 January 2025), centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/change-the-prescription. p.65.

182 'Suspensions and Permanent Exclusions in England, Autumn Term 2023/24'.

183 'Special Educational Needs in England, Academic Year 2023/24' (GOV.UK, n.d.), explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england.

Obesity and fatherlessness

Throughout primary school, boys are more likely to be obese. The difference is marginal for boys in reception as obesity prevalence is 9.9 per cent, compared with 9.4 per cent of girls. However, for boys in Year 6, obesity prevalence is one in four, compared with one in five girls.¹⁸⁴ This continues into adulthood where 69 per cent of men are overweight or obese, while 59 per cent of women are of the same category.¹⁸⁵ Moreover, for children living in the most deprived areas, obesity prevalence is over twice as high compared with those living in the least deprived areas.¹⁸⁶

This is of huge importance to the tax-payer funded NHS, which spends around £6.5 billion a year on treating obesity-related ill health across all age groups in England.¹⁸⁷ In addition to that, treatment at early stages is vital. One study among preschool children found that an obese child was almost twice as likely as a non-obese child to become an obese adult.¹⁸⁸ Additionally, adolescents who were overweight were almost 18 times more likely than their leaner peers to be obese in early adulthood.¹⁸⁹

As well as deprivation, regions with the highest rates of fatherlessness also have the highest rates of obesity. Single parent families have generally lower incomes, greater time demands which can lead to a reduction of homemade meals, shared family meals and physical activity, all of which are associated with higher childhood BMIs¹⁹⁰

One Australian study found that, when comparing fathers and mothers' parenting styles, the mothers had "little to no effect on obesity and fitness levels" when compared with the fathers.¹⁹¹ This is particularly pertinent given that almost nine out of ten single parent families are single mothers.

Will Benson, Chief Officer at KidsKabin, Middlesbrough & Newcastle:

"A disproportionate number of young men we work with experience challenges of motivation and ambition through school and employment and are spending too long indoors, online and away from exercise, fresh air, conversation and exploration."

The LAs with some of the highest per centages of overweight or obese adults are Stockton-on-Tees, Hartlepool and Knowsley.¹⁹² Knowsley and Hartlepool are also the LAs with the highest per centage of non-partnered births (35 and 30 per cent respectively, compared to a UK average of 16 per cent).¹⁹³ Stockton-on-Tees was the 17th highest.

184 'National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 School Year' (NHS England, n.d.), digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/national-child-measurement-programme/2023-24-school-year.

185 'Obesity Profile: Short Statistical Commentary May 2024', GOV.UK, accessed 12 February 2025, gov.uk/government/statistics/update-to-the-obesity-profile-on-fingertips/obesity-profile-short-statistical-commentary-may-2024.

186 'National Child Measurement Programme, England, 2023/24 School Year'.

187 NHS England, 'NHS England » Almost One in Ten Children Obese in First Year of School' (NHS England, 5 November 2024), england.nhs.uk/2024/11/almost-one-in-ten-children-obese-in-first-year-of-school/.

188 M. K. Serdula et al., 'Do Obese Children Become Obese Adults? A Review of the Literature', *Preventive Medicine* 22, no. 2 (1 March 1993), doi.org/10.1006/pmed.1993.1014. p.1.

189 Robert C. Whitaker et al., 'Predicting Obesity in Young Adulthood from Childhood and Parental Obesity', *New England Journal of Medicine* 337, no. 13 (25 September 1997), doi.org/10.1056/NEJM199709253371301.

190 David M. Duriancik and Courtney R. Goff, 'Children of Single-Parent Households Are at a Higher Risk of Obesity: A Systematic Review', *Journal of Child Health Care: For Professionals Working with Children in the Hospital and Community* 23, no. 3 (September 2019), doi.org/10.1177/1367493519852463.

191 Melissa Wake et al., 'Preschooler Obesity and Parenting Styles of Mothers and Fathers: Australian National Population Study', *Pediatrics* 120, no. 6 (1 December 2007), doi.org/10.1542/peds.2006-3707.

192 Sonja Stiebahl, 'Obesity Statistics' (UK Parliament, 12 February 2025), commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn03336/.

193 Kiernan, Crossman, and Phimister, 'Families and Inequalities'. p.i652.

Exercise

Our qualitative research, especially in Alternative Provisions outside mainstream education, highlighted the importance of exercise and physical activity for young boys within the education system. A common theme from youth workers was about how Physical Education (P.E) or outdoor games was often a boy's best experience of an otherwise negative time in school. One conversation with some boys from a LA that ranks in the top ten IDACI scores in the country went as follows:

We asked what the best thing about school was. The three immediate responses were 'nothing', 'P.E' and 'substitute teachers'. This not only exemplifies the great dissatisfaction of some of the boys and their potential antagonism with their regular teachers (one boy even cited how he felt that teachers at his previous schools seemed to constantly pick on him when he was struggling with English and Maths at primary school) but also how fundamental sport is to engaging young boys.

The Department for Education reported that in 2021/22, less than half (47.2 per cent) of children aged five to 16 met the Chief Medical Officer's guidance for being active for 60 or more minutes per day in the last seven days.¹⁹⁴ In 2021/22 males were more likely (49.8 per cent) than females (44.9 per cent) to have been physically active for 60 or more minutes per day in the previous week, in 2021/22. However, by the age of 15, just 11 per cent of girls and 16 per cent of boys in England undertook the recommended 60 minutes a day of moderate to vigorous physical activity, which included brisk walking, cycling or rollerblading.¹⁹⁵ Girls are evidently behind boys in take up and access to sports. The fact that physical activity is not even reaching 50 per cent for girls or boys is a mental and physical health challenge that will only escalate.

Nevertheless, sport remains of greater importance for boys regarding school engagement, (keeping boys in school) and biological differences, (keeping boys interested). Recent international examples highlight how more people are denying that boys and girls should be treated differently, including in sports and activities,¹⁹⁶ having access to sports is especially vital to boys.

Access to activity and sports are also linked to access to a father, especially for boys.¹⁹⁷ A study in Ireland discovered that men were more likely than women to have been introduced to sport by their fathers (16 per cent compared to 10 per cent). The fact that fathers were more likely to introduce sport to children is further highlighted for those who first took up sport under 16. In these cases, 27 per cent cited fathers as their first introduction to sport, followed by schoolteachers (17 per cent) and mother (11 per cent).¹⁹⁸ If these dynamics are comparable in the UK, they display once again the vital, and multifaceted importance of a father to their children.

194 'State of the Nation 2022: Children and Young People's Wellbeing' (GOV.UK, February 2023), gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2022-children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing. p.116.

195 Eleanor Hayward Editor Health, 'British Children Are World Leaders in Inactivity', 23 May 2024, thetimes.com/uk/healthcare/article/british-children-are-world-leaders-in-laziness-hb5nbmk2w.

196 See for example, Adam Sage, 'Pupils Will Be Tracked by GPS "to Make Playtime More Inclusive"', November 2024, thetimes.com/world/europe/article/pupils-will-be-tracked-by-gps-to-make-playtime-more-inclusive-np02qc6xx.

197 'IRISH SPORTS MONITOR 2023 / ANNUAL RESEARCH REPORT' (SPORT IRELAND, 2023), sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2024-.pdf. p.29.

198 Ibid.

Homelessness

Homelessness is chiefly a male problem. While it is difficult to gather accurate data on the number of homeless people in the UK, due to their lack of a fixed address, job or bank account, estimates suggest that between 80 and 85 per cent were men in places like London and Birmingham¹⁹⁹, and 85 per cent of all of those sleeping rough in the UK²⁰⁰. With a cost of almost one billion this year²⁰¹ and the human impact of a life expectancy of just 45,²⁰² it is vital to address these root causes that are pushing so many men into homelessness.

Steroids

The US²⁰³, UK²⁰⁴, and Australia²⁰⁵ are among those seeing a rise in younger men taking IPED (Image and performance enhancing drugs – also known as steroids). Estimates on the number of users range from 447,000²⁰⁶ to one million users²⁰⁷, of which at least 95 per cent are male.²⁰⁸

Research from the University of Lincoln reveals that social media influencers are promoting steroids that direct followers to third-party websites for purchases.²⁰⁹ On top of this, e-commerce platforms are listing performance-enhancing drugs as ‘research chemicals,’ thus bypassing regulations and heightening the risk of misunderstanding by uninformed users, especially younger men seeking to enhance their physique alongside an online fitness culture.²¹⁰ 13-year-old boys are among those previously cited as using these drugs.²¹¹ UK Anti-Doping Chief Executive, Nicole Sapstead, has also linked increasing steroid use to its origins online, “young men are being bombarded with imagery of the ideal sculpted body on social media and through high profile television programmes”,²¹² and she is far from alone in holding this view.²¹³ When asked to describe their mental health, some of the participants in our focus groups of young men described their mental health with physical characteristics as “want[ing] to bulk more”, “do more work outs”, and “more exercise”. Over a quarter of their responses (4 out of 15) related to fitness and appearance as influencing their health.

199 ‘People Sleeping Rough’, Trust for London, n.d., trustforlondon.org.uk/data/rough-sleeping-london/; ‘Rough Sleeping Needs Analysis’, January 2020, birmingham-beheard.org.uk/people-1/rough-sleeping-homelessness-prevention-strategy-co/supporting...

200 ‘“Hidden” Homelessness in the UK: Evidence Review - Office for National Statistics’ (Office for National Statistics, March 2023), ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/articles/hiddenhomelessnessintheuk/evidencereview/2023-03-29.

201 ‘Largest Ever Cash Boost to Turn the Tide on Homelessness’, GOV.UK, December 2024, gov.uk/government/news/largest-ever-cash-boost-to-turn-the-tide-on-homelessness.

202 ‘Deaths of Homeless People in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics’ (Office for National Statistics, November 2022), ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsofhomelesspeopleinenglandandwales/2021registrations.

203 ‘Teens Are Obsessed With This Dangerous Steroid. Experts Are Sounding the Alarm.’, Men’s Health, 5 September 2024, menshealth.com/fitness/a61941240/trenbolone-steroid-trend/.

204 ‘Why Is Steroid Use Rising among Male Bodybuilders?’, BBC News, 10 April 2022, sec. Gloucestershire, bbc.com/news/uk-england-gloucestershire-60765050.

205 ‘RACGP - Social Media Fuelling Rising Anabolic Steroid Use: Study’, November, 2024., n.d., www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/social-media-fuelling-rising-anabolic-steroid-use.

206 Vivian D. Hope et al., ‘Anabolic Androgenic Steroid Use Population Size Estimation: A First Stage Study Utilising a Delphi Exercise’, *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy* 30, no. 5 (3 September 2023): 461–73, doi.org/10.1080/09687637.2022.2070058.

207 Joseph Kean and Jim McVeigh, ‘Druglink Article 2014 – Nice of You to Notice: Image and Performance Enhancing Drugs by Joseph Kean and Jim McVeigh’ (DrugWise, 1 June 2016), drugwise.org.uk/druglink-article-2014-nice-of-you-to-notice-image-and-performance-enhancing-drugs-by-joseph-kean-and-jim-mcveigh/.

208 Emma Begley, Jim McVeigh, and Vivian D. Hope, ‘(PDF) Image and Performance Enhancing Drugs 2016 National Survey Results Survey Co-Ordinated By’ (Public Health Institute, Liverpool John Moores University, November 2017), researchgate.net/publication/321081832_Image_and_Performance_Enhancing_Drugs_2016_National_Survey_Results_Survey_co-ordinated_by p.6.

209 Hannah McGowan, ‘Research Studies Confirm Unauthorised Sale of Anabolic Steroids Via Social Media and E-Commerce Sites’ (University of Lincoln, March 2023), news.lincoln.ac.uk/2023/03/29/study-confirms-unauthorised-sale-of-anabolic-steroids-via-social-media-and-e-commerce-sites/.

210 Ibid.

211 Steven Morris, ‘Health Fears over Boys as Young as 13 Using Steroids for “Good Looks”’, *The Guardian*, 22 January 2018, sec. Society, theguardian.com/society/2018/jan/22/health-fears-over-boys-as-young-as-13-using-steroids-for-good-looks.

212 ‘UKAD Warns against IPED Use among Gen Z Males Looking to Get a Better Body in 2020’, UK Anti-Doping, 17 January 2020, ukad.org.uk/news/ukad-warns-against-iped-use-among-gen-z-males-looking-get-better-body-2020.

213 Nepheli Beos, Eva Kemps, and Ivanka Prichard, ‘Relationships between Social Media, Body Image, Physical Activity, and Anabolic-Androgenic Steroid Use in Men: A Systematic Review’, *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* 26, no. 1 (2025), doi.org/10.1037/men0000487.

The increasing self-consciousness of boys originating from this pressurised fitness culture may also link to the rising number of boys struggling with eating disorders.²¹⁴ While girls are far more likely to struggle with this issue, the past seven years have seen the number of boys grappling with eating disorders increase from 0.0 per cent to 5.1 per cent in 2023.²¹⁵ Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD)²¹⁶ is another worrying side-effect of steroid use with symptoms of it present in other psychiatric disorders, including eating related ones. This means BDD is often “misdiagnosed and under recognised”.²¹⁷

The overall likelihood of death when taking steroids triples versus non-users.²¹⁸ That’s about the same risk as cocaine, but less than a third of heroin use, as one commentator put it.²¹⁹ This risk also goes alongside conditions such as: gynaecomastia (man-boobs), genitourinary shrinking (shrinking of the testicles), erectile dysfunction, infertility, heart attacks, strokes, blood-borne virus risk (e.g. HIV, hepatitis B, hepatitis C) because of injecting, addiction, depression, and aggression and violence (commonly called ‘roid rage’).²²⁰ This is a growing public health crisis where young men are vastly overrepresented. We must be able to articulate the breadth and diversity of healthy versions of masculinity. If we continue to fail in robustly informing boys what their expectations should be in image, contribution, or relationships, someone else will do it instead.

214 Courtney C. Simpson and Suzanne E. Mazzeo, ‘Calorie Counting and Fitness Tracking Technology: Associations with Eating Disorder Symptomatology’, *Eating Behaviors* 26 (1 August 2017), doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2017.02.002.

215 NHS England, ‘NHS England » One in Five Children and Young People Had a Probable Mental Disorder in 2023’, 21 November 2023, england.nhs.uk/2023/11/one-in-five-children-and-young-people-had-a-probable-mental-disorder-in-2023/.

216 ‘BDD Statistics - BDDF’, 30 June 2023, bddfoundation.org/information/statistics/.

217 Holly R. Nicewicz, Tyler J. Torrico, and Jacqueline F. Boutrouille, ‘Body Dysmorphic Disorder’, in *StatPearls* (Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing, 2025), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK555901/>. Page number needed

218 Windfeld-Mathiasen J, Heerfordt IM, Dalhoff KP, Andersen JT, Horwitz H. Mortality Among Users of Anabolic Steroids. *JAMA*. 2024 Apr 9;331(14):1229-1230. doi: 10.1001/jama.2024.3180. PMID: 38483396; PMCID: PMC10941020.

219 Stephen Buranyi, ‘“Natty or Not?”: How Steroids Got Big’, *The Guardian*, 6 June 2024, sec. Society, theguardian.com/society/article/2024/jun/06/how-steroids-got-big-bodybuilding-influencers.

220 Anabolic Steroids and IPEDs, UK Anti-Doping, 2020, ukad.org.uk/anabolic-steroids-and-ipeds

Technology and pornography

97 per cent of children aged 12 now have their own smartphone. Unfettered and unsupervised access to this technology, which is still a relatively new creation, can be perilous for children. The overall effects of porn and technology on boys and boyhood has been transformational.

Porn

Research suggests that the average age at which children first see online pornography is 13, although a quarter come across it by age 11 (27 per cent), and shockingly, one in ten are as young as nine.²²¹ Anecdotal, we have reason to believe that this is younger, especially when split by sex. Many young men recounted how they had been shown porn by friends, had sexual content pushed to them on social media, or simply looked it up searched it themselves.

Boys are more likely than girls to be spending time online watching porn. Young men (aged 18-29) were far more likely to watch porn every day or most days than women (25 per cent compared to 2 per cent).²²² While there is less data for regular use of those under 18, the Children's Commissioner and other reports have consistently shown that teenage boys are much more likely than teenage girls to have seen porn intentionally.²²³ This ranged from 25 to 36 per cent of girls and 52 to 59 per cent of boys.²²⁴

But what is it that boys are watching? Analysis from the last decade suggested that, of the best-selling pornographic videos, 88 per cent contained acts of physical violence ("e.g., spanking, gagging or slapping"), half contained verbal aggression, and women were almost always the targets – where performers expressed pleasure in response to the abuse 96 per cent of the time.²²⁵

We spoke to Grace Foundation, who exist to transform young people's lives through holistic education, concerning their Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) work. Their boys group sessions begin with an RSE Support Worker dispelling rumours and reinforcing truths, fielding questions like the average penis size and the normal length of time for sexual intercourse. The specialist teacher, Luke, told us that in two and a half years of running these sessions, many of the boys thought it was true that "it is common to ejaculate on a woman's face after sex". These are boys who have learnt sex from porn and, according to their education, know the right answers. They, and their partners, are in for a horrible shock when they engage in sexual activity, and it is not their fault. It is all they know.

221 'Implementing the Online Safety Act: Protecting Children from Online Pornography' (Ofcom, 12 May 2023), ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/protecting-children/implementing-the-online-safety-act-protecting-children/.

222 'Pornography Polls & Surveys | YouGov', n.d., yougov.co.uk/topics/society/explore/issue/Pornography.

223 'Online Pornography: Young People's Experiences of Seeing Online Porn and the Impact It Has on Them' (NSPCC, Children's Commissioner, Middlesex University, 16 May 2017), assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2017/06/MDX-NSPCC-OCC-Online-Pornography-CYP-Version-16.5.17.pdf, p.4. Movie & TV reviews for parents, 'Teens and Pornography | Common Sense Media' (Common Sense Media, January 2023), commonsensemedia.org/research/teens-and-pornography, p.3.

224 *ibid*

225 Meagan J. Brem et al., 'Problematic Pornography Use and Physical and Sexual Intimate Partner Violence Perpetration Among Men in Batterer Intervention Programs', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36, no. 11–12 (June 2021), doi.org/10.1177/0886260518812806, p.2.

Of course, these boys were put forward by the schools as key individuals for intervention and are therefore not a representative sample. However, this section of boys – the at-risk-of-exclusion, the aggressive, the falling behind, the truant, the online – is growing.

With children, and particularly boys, engaging with this online content for over a decade, we are now dealing with the consequences. While the causal links between watching pornography and increasing violence are disputed by some, there are new, worrying trends that have begun to occur in the lives of young men and boys. The Institute for Addressing Strangulation, which was established in 2023, has highlighted that over a third of 16–34-year-olds reported being strangled or choked at least once during consensual sex (this compared to 16 per cent of 35–54-year-olds and 3 per cent of those aged 55+). Men were twice as likely as women to have strangled or choked a partner.²²⁶

In education, increasing numbers of female teachers and pupils are reporting sexual harassment from male pupils in school. The extent of this has resulted in multiple parliamentary reports from The Women and Equalities Committee²²⁷ and more popular traction with campaigns such as, Everyone’s Invited.²²⁸ This increasing awareness is not unique to the UK as similar reports are becoming commonplace in other nations, such as Australia²²⁹ and Germany.²³⁰ Levels of sextortion and child-on-child abuse have also risen to shocking highs.

Porn: stress and mental health

Before labelling these, adolescent boys as aggressive, toxic perpetrators, we *have* to recognise what they have been raised to believe about their own masculinity, the opposite sex and sexuality itself; many will have been watching pornography since before they were teenagers. Regardless of when they were first exposed to pornography, asking why young men watch porn shows equally shocking results. One study highlighted that the second highest ranked reason young men gave for watching porn was dealing with emotional factors – i.e., stress (which was cited by 50 per cent of respondents) and 40 per cent even cited boredom.²³¹ We now live in an age where bored or stressed pre-teens revert to pornographic content for anaesthesia and escapism.

Boy, aged 11-17, Barrow-in-Furness

“[regarding tech and social media] Positive and negative, I think. You can get more information faster and easier, but because there are no restrictions is a negative, even your mum has security settings at home you can still access some bad things and this affects your mental health and you don’t feel like you can talk to anyone” about it.

226 ‘Report on Strangulation During Sex in the UK’ (IFAS, December 2024), ifas.org.uk/report-on-strangulation-during-sex-in-the-uk/. p.1.

227 ‘Sexual Harassment and Abuse of Female Students and Staff a Serious Problem in Education, Find MPs - Committees - UK Parliament’.; ‘House of Commons - Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in Schools: Government Response to the Committee’s Third Report of Session 2016–17 - Women and Equalities Committee’.

228 Everyone’s Invited. Accessed: everyonesinvited.uk/

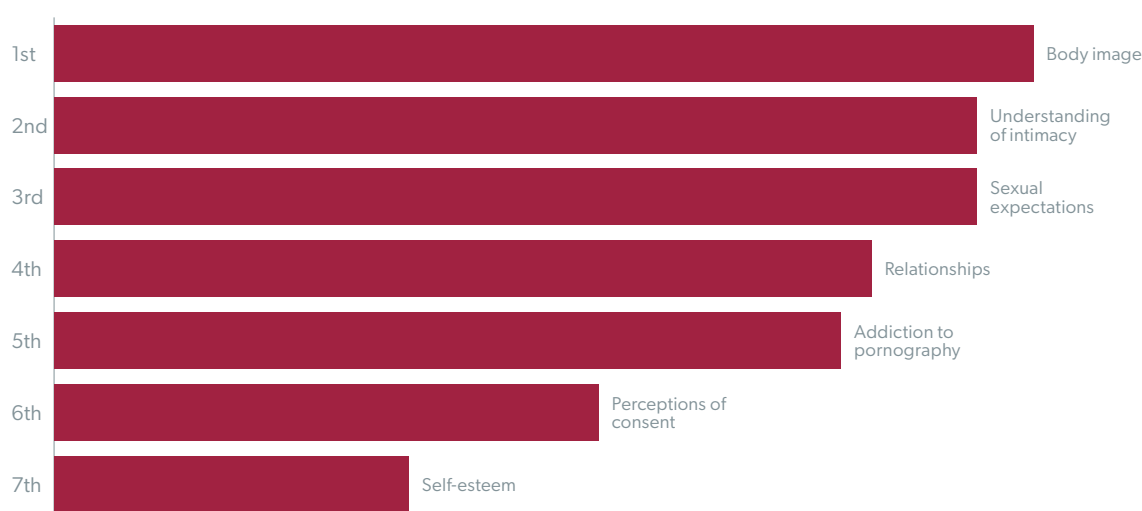
229 Collective Shout, ‘Sexual Harassment of Teachers Report’ (Collective Shout, n.d.), collectiveshout.org/shot-report.

230 ‘Speak Study Publications and Information’ (Speak, 30 May 2021), speak-studie.de/.

231 Tim Jacobs et al., ‘Associations Between Online Pornography Consumption and Sexual Dysfunction in Young Men: Multivariate Analysis Based on an International Web-Based Survey’, *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance* 7, no. 10 (21 October 2021), doi.org/10.2196/32542. p.8.

When asked about the biggest effect of pornography on young men, one focus group of young boys ranked body image. This was closely followed by an understanding of intimacy and sexual expectations as the highest. This same group also ranked Mental Health as the greatest challenge facing men and boys in Britain today. This fundamentally demonstrates the inextricably linked problems facing the Lost Boys in society. The challenges they face are rarely in isolation. The problems associated with mental health are legion and include the increasing prevalence of boys struggling with body image. The flood of videos on platforms like TikTok which advertise sculpted physiques and cheap, often dangerous, steroids; the often-unnatural bodies of pornstars; the ability to compare looks, styles and personalities in ways that would have been unthinkable 50 years ago. All these influences are crashing down on young, vulnerable minds. Waning mental health, poorer body image and confused or violent sexual lives are the consequence. Porn and its associated lackies have a lot to answer for.

Figure 21: One focus group question: How does pornography affect young men the most. (ranked)



Social media

Social media and its algorithms push engagement, regardless of its positive or negative nature. One Canadian study, published in 2023, explored the association between social media use and psychological distress. It found that, of those who used social media for over three hours a day, 54 per cent of females experienced psychological distress, compared with 31 per cent of males.²³² Studies hold this position widely.²³³ The CSJ's recent report, *Change the Prescription*, also found that "people in the UK are 1.73 times more likely to report having a diagnosed mental health condition if they use social media every day, compared with never using social media."²³⁴ This report also highlighted other updates in the UK context, including evidence from the Education Select Committee that between 2020 and 2022, 25 per cent of children and young people exhibited addictive behaviour in relation to their screen usage.²³⁵ Overall, it is clear that "social media use is a cause of anxiety, depression, and other ailments, not just a correlate."²³⁶

Qualitative research suggests that algorithms are feeding increasingly violent and misogynistic content.²³⁷ This provides fertile ground for not only violence against women and girls but also radicalisation. 13 per cent of all those being investigated by MI5 for involvement in UK terrorism are under 18, a threefold increase in the last three years. MI5 Director General Ken McCallum argued that this was "driven by propaganda that shows a canny understanding of online culture."²³⁸ Commenting on the rising number of young men being radicalised online (of the 43 juvenile arrests since 2016, 42 were boys), George Chesterton stated in the *Telegraph*:²³⁹

"As anyone who remembers their adolescent years will appreciate, they are not only influenced by family but peer groups; can become profoundly affected by social isolation, mental health challenges – or simply the warping of otherwise normal teenage preoccupations such as rebellion against authority. Often that search for belonging and identity ... is happening in almost exclusively digital spaces."

Social media is not only making young people sadder, it is exposing them to new modes of harm in an often completely unsupervised manner.

232 Fatima Mougharbel et al., 'Heavy Social Media Use and Psychological Distress among Adolescents: The Moderating Role of Sex, Age, and Parental Support', *Frontiers in Public Health* 11 (2023): 1190390, doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1190390.

233 Jean M. Twenge et al., 'Specification Curve Analysis Shows That Social Media Use Is Linked to Poor Mental Health, Especially among Girls', *Acta Psychologica* 224 (April 2022), doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2022.103512. Robert Svensson, Björn Johnson, and Andreas Olsson, 'Does Gender Matter? The Association between Different Digital Media Activities and Adolescent Well-Being', *BMC Public Health* 22, no. 1 (10 February 2022), doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-12670-7.

234 'Change the Prescription', p.65.

235 Ibid

236 Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin Books, 2024), cdn.penguin.co.uk/dam-assets/books/9780241647660/9780241647660-sample.pdf, p.14.

237 Marianna Spring, 'Social Media: Why Algorithms Show Violence to Boys', *BBC News*, 2 September 2024, sec. Technology, bbc.com/news/articles/c4gdqzxydpzo.

238 'Director General Ken McCallum Gives Latest Threat Update | MI5 - The Security Service', October 2024, mi5.gov.uk/director-general-ken-mccallum-gives-latest-threat-update.

239 George Chesterton, 'The Terrifying Rise of Child Terrorists in the UK', *The Telegraph*, January 2025, telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/01/10/the-shocking-rise-of-child-terrorists-in-the-uk/.

Sextortion

Sextortion, short for sexual extortion, is a form of blackmail in which criminals threaten to share a victim's sexual pictures, videos, or information. This comes in the wider context of the increasing precariousness of child safety online. The levels of child sexual abuse online that the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) have located has increased by 830 per cent since they began proactively working on this in 2014.²⁴⁰

Analysis from the IWF last year showed that 91 per cent of those targeted were boys²⁴¹ with an average age of 14-17. In the first six months of 2023, reports of confirmed child sexual abuse involving 'sextortion' surged by 257 per cent when compared with the whole of 2022.²⁴² Behind the numbers are vulnerable young teenagers who are often stuck in a pit of shame and guilt. They are caught in a meticulously laid out trap by criminals who are often domiciled in different continents. Murray Dowie's story is a tragic example of one such 16-year-old boy who was sextorted by a Nigerian gang that ultimately resulted in him ending his own life.²⁴³

As smartphones, social media and AI become endemic to childhood in Britain, such instances look unlikely to stop anytime soon.

Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE)

Child-on-child abuse now makes up over half of all cases of CSAE (52 per cent), according to the latest report from the Vulnerability knowledge and Practice Programme. Historically, it was estimated to account for a third. The most common age of a perpetrator was 14 years old and in 9 out of 10 cases, the victims knew the abusers. Males accounted for 87 per cent of perpetrators.²⁴⁴ There were 106,984 child sexual abuse offences reported in 2022, five times over the 20,000 recorded in 2013. This means that almost 50,000 of these cases were perpetrated by a boy under 18 last year.

The explosive proliferation of pornography shaping sexual expectations and the increase in young male involvement in rising levels of abuse must be addressed together.

Stacy Salt, CEO of M10 missions

"The combination of fatherlessness and unfettered internet access creates a perfect storm. Boys face challenges in discerning truth from falsehood, navigating healthy relationships, and understanding their role in the world. The absence of consistent and constructive guidance means they are left to piece together their identity from a patchwork of conflicting messages."

While it is legal for children to have sex at 16, it is illegal to take, share and possess indecent imagery of children at any age. Many children have no idea that this is the case, even if it is a photo of themselves.

240 '2024: Record Highs in Online Child Sexual Abuse | IWF Urge Action' (IWF, January 2025), iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/call-for-prime-minister-to-intervene-as-iwf-uncovers-record-levels-of-online-child-sexual-abuse-imagery/.

241 'Teenage Boys Targeted as IWF Sees Increase in Child Sextortion Reports' (IWF, March 2024), iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/teenage-boys-targeted-as-hotline-sees-heartbreaking-increase-in-child-sextortion-reports/.

242 'Hotline Reports "Shocking" Rise in the Sextortion of Boys', September 2023, iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/hotline-reports-shocking-rise-in-the-sextortion-of-boys/.

243 'Stop Sextortion - Bereaved Parents' Appeal to Nigerian Criminals', BBC News, 18 November 2024, sec. Scotland, bbc.com/news/articles/cz6jywx37dlo.

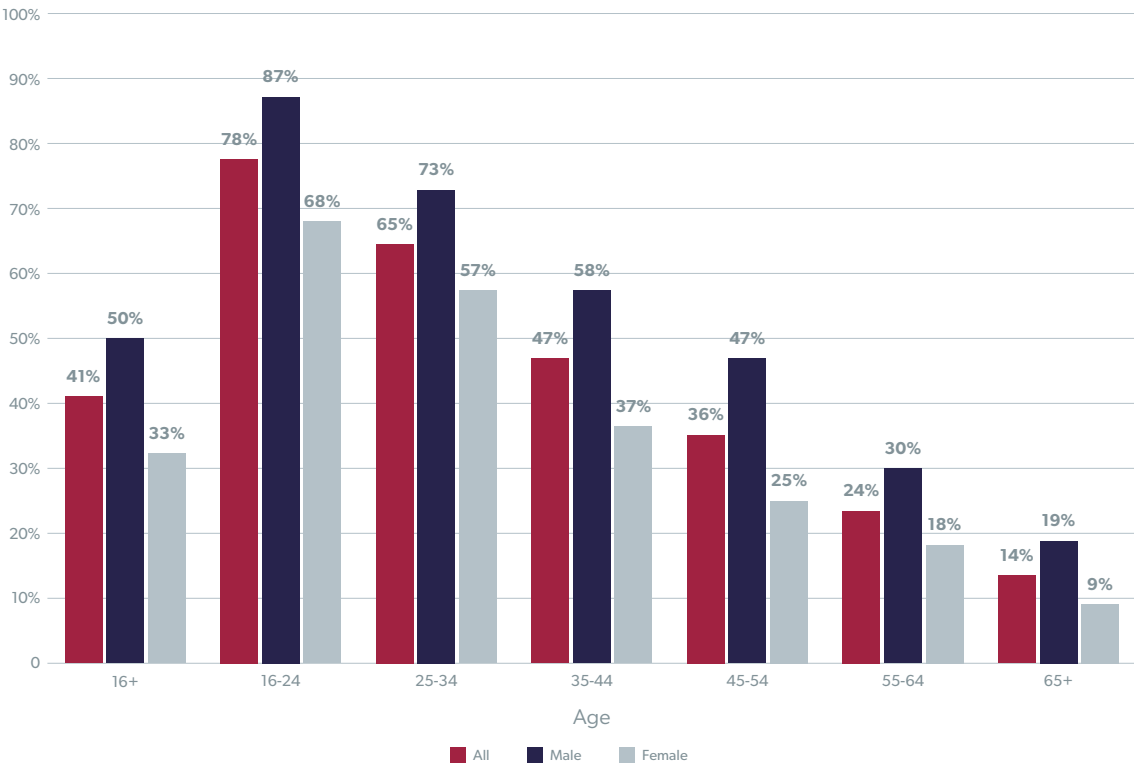
244 'National Analysis of Police-Recorded Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Crimes Report 2022' (Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme, 2022), vkpp.org.uk/vkpp-work/analytical-capability/national-analysis-of-police-recorded-child-sexual-abuse-and-exploitation-crimes-report-2022/.

This also leaves children intensely vulnerable to abuse and blackmail. In the online world, parents, guardians and teachers have much less control over what their children see, say or do. These actions have unintended consequences that children are unable to properly understand at the time. We must take more care to raise boys up to become men who understand healthy models of sex, relationships and intimacy. Naturally, the police often take common sense measures to see that children aren't criminalised inappropriately when engaging in experimental activity. But as the lines of the age of consent and what is appropriate becomes increasingly blurred, we risk making children more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, even from themselves.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Many young people are now spending their time talking to online bots. On a visit to The Training Cave, an Alternative Provision social enterprise working with at risk youth, we first heard concerns about the increasing role that AI chatbots are having with young people, particularly those who are more socially isolated. This will have more of an effect on boys than girls. While girls do spend, on average, more time online than boys, they focus on different areas. With AI in mind, men are significantly more likely than women to have used a generative AI tool in the past year (50 per cent vs 33 per cent). Women are also more likely than men to say they don't know what this technology is and that they don't know how to use it. Almost 9 out of ten boys aged 16-24 used a generative AI model in the past year.²⁴⁵

Figure 22: UK internet users aged 16+ who have used generative AI tool in the past, by age and gender: June 2024



245 'Online Nation', 2024 report, Ofcom. Accessed: ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/online-habits/online-nation/ 'Online Nation'.

Boy, aged 11-17, North West

"Social media and cyberbullying, massive impact on people wanting to take their own lives, AI doesn't help, you can make a boyfriend or girlfriend but then they can say horrible things to you and you know they are not real but it still affects your mental health."

Looking deeper, the reasons cited by those aged 8-15 for using such models included "just chatting" (28 per cent), "seeking advice" (18 per cent) and "emotional support / therapy" (6 per cent).²⁴⁶ This is a serious cause for concern as there is already academic evidence that Large Language Models (LLMs) may contain an empathy gap. There is a current risk that LLMs will not "prevent or mitigate the risks of responding inappropriately to children's personal disclosures or accidentally promoting harm."²⁴⁷ International examples of AI abuse are also growing. One sad story came to light of a boy in the US who, after talking to a chatbot online for months, ended up taking his own life, prompted by the chatbot. His mother claimed that the "dangerous AI chatbot app marketed to children abused and preyed on my son, manipulating him into taking his own life."²⁴⁸ It seems that younger generations have a growing propensity to enjoy both the contribution and the companionship of AI.²⁴⁹ Again, while this is not always a bad thing, when unsupervised and unsupported young people access these technologies, they open themselves up to the potential dangers.

Gaming

Men and women are playing video games at practically the same rate in the UK (53 to 51 per cent, respectively). The highest rates of gaming were found between the ages of 16-24 at 83 per cent.²⁵⁰ However, the genders game differently. Boys were much more likely to use a console or handheld game (73 per cent), compared to girls (45 per cent). They were also far more likely to play shooting games (38 per cent to 12 per cent), with girls much more likely to play puzzles or quizzes (40 per cent to 23 per cent).²⁵¹ Other differences and unclear data (one study we found suggested that young men spend over twice the amount of time gaming compared to their female peers)²⁵² results in vastly different outcomes: the aggression effect and the rates of problematic addiction.

There are many studies that articulate the link between aggressive behaviour, aggressive thinking, and aggressive feelings with violent video games.²⁵³ (Alternatively, groups like the Entertainment Software Association vehemently dispute any such negative claims about said entertainment.)²⁵⁴ Whether violent

246 Ibid. p. 37

247 Nomisha Kurian, "'No, Alexa, No!': Designing Child-Safe AI and Protecting Children from the Risks of the 'Empathy Gap' in Large Language Models", *Learning, Media and Technology* 0, no. 0 (July 2024), doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2024.2367052. p.1.

248 Mickey Carroll, 'Mother Says Son Killed Himself Because of Daenerys Targaryen AI Chatbot in New Lawsuit | Science, Climate & Tech News | Sky News', *Sky News*, October 2024, news.sky.com/story/mother-says-son-killed-himself-because-of-hypersexualised-and-frighteningly-realistic-ai-chatbot-in-new-lawsuit-13240210.

249 See, for instance, this polling from the IFS on attitudes to AI use and relationships: Wendy Wang, Michael Toscano, and Chris Bullivant, 'Robots Aren't Just Coming For Your Jobs But For Your Relationships, Too' (IFS, n.d.), ifstudies.org/blog/robots-arent-just-coming-for-your-jobs-but-for-your-relationships-too.

250 'UK Gaming by Age and Gender 2023 | Statista' (Statista, 2023), statista.com/statistics/300513/gaming-by-demographic-group-uk/.

251 'Children and Parents'. p.2.

252 Bradley S. Greenberg et al., '(PDF) Orientations to Video Games Among Gender and Age Groups', *ResearchGate*, 22 October 2024, doi.org/10.1177/1046878108319930.

253 See, for example, Maya B. Mathur and Tyler J. VanderWeele, 'Finding Common Ground in Meta-Analysis "Wars" on Violent Video Games', *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science* 14, no. 4 (July 2019), doi.org/10.1177/1745691619850104.

254 ESA, 'Essential Facts About Video Games and Violence' (ESA, 12 March 2019), theesa.com/essential-facts-about-video-games-and-violence/.

gaming does lead to violence in real life, evidence suggests that it could be linked to online violence.²⁵⁵ With children spending more and more time online, and online abuse and hateful speech increasingly prevalent, this could be a crucial link. Spending any number of hours disengaging from reality and going into potentially violent simulations, encourages young minds to depersonalise and dehumanise faces and names on screens. Many young men and boys would shudder at the thought of being violent or abusive in person, but, behind a screen, such actions could be, in their mind, more impersonal, detached, and therefore permissible.

One blog put it like this:

"Some boys are at greater risk: the boy who is a loner, or socially excluded, is at greater risk of gravitating to violent video games and of becoming more aggressive, according to recent research²⁵⁶ ... Even if the boy who kills enemies online in Grand Theft Auto 5 is not more likely to actually hurt people in real life, he may be more likely to engage in acts of online aggression."²⁵⁷

The National Centre for Gaming Disorder was set up in 2020 and conducted analysis of their service users in 2022. Gamers who used their services were 89.8 per cent male.²⁵⁸ The mean age at referral was 18; two thirds of referrals were in the 13–18 age category (66.4 per cent), and another 21 per cent were in the 19–25 category. Among those referred, there were abnormally high rates of weight gain or loss, victims of bullying and those who showed, or resorted to, aggression when asked to stop gaming. Like much of this report shows, each symptom rarely presents in isolation. This study demonstrates that despite supposedly similar rates of gaming for boys and girls, the problems associated with overuse of, and addiction to, video games were affecting young men nine times out of ten.²⁵⁹

Stacey Riley, Managing Director, M10 Missions:

"It's crazy to see that even parents do not understand the reasons for age ratings on video games (and videos), believing that it's a 'difficulty rating' rather than a 'brain development/ healthy processing rating' meaning that very young children are being exposed to brain-altering content."

255 Yongzhan Li, 'Linking Violent Video Games to Cyberaggression among College Students: A Cross-Sectional Study', *Aggressive Behavior* 48, no. 2 (March 2022), doi.org/10.1002/ab.22002.

256 Alessandro Gabbiadini and Paolo Riva, 'The Lone Gamer: Social Exclusion Predicts Violent Video Game Preferences and Fuels Aggressive Inclinations in Adolescent Players', *Aggressive Behavior* 44, no. 2 (March 2018), doi.org/10.1002/ab.21735.

257 Leonard Sax, 'Is Your Son Addicted to Video Games?' (IFS, September 2022), ifstudies.org/blog/is-your-son-addicted-to-video-games.

258 Steve Sharman et al., 'The National Centre for Gaming Disorders (UK) - Who Is Accessing This Service?', *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 11, no. 2 (5 April 2022): doi.org/10.1556/2006.2022.00010147, p.147.

259 Ibid

Conclusion

Young men and boys in the UK are struggling. In many different areas of life, boys are increasingly on the backfoot. This report stands as the first stage of our research into what life is like for these young men. From family life and education to employment and their lives online, to the criminal justice system and worsening health outcomes, the current situation is stark.

While this report has focussed on what is happening now we will not stop here. The next stage of research for the Lost Boys will begin to look at what we can do to change things for the better. We intend to do a 'deep dive' into each of the six themes, then offer evidence-based policy ideas and reforms to alleviate these challenges and support positive change. In the midst of many of these bleak outcomes, we will seek to offer hope. We will work alongside hundreds of grassroots charities across the UK that are already on this journey to give young men and boys every chance to succeed in the future.

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