research in practice

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S BUREAU
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Conceptualising Vulnerability for Ofsted

Rapid Evidence Review

Research in Practice,
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Executive Summary

Background to the Project

Vulnerability is a complex and contested term. In the invitation to tender for this project, Ofsted note a tendency within current inspection approaches to 'focus on narrow definitions of disadvantage and vulnerability', acknowledging that, 'The current ways used to identify vulnerable children and learners...do not capture other vulnerabilities and characteristics that might put them at a disadvantage'. The objective of this scoping review is to provide a rapid synthesis of the theoretical conceptualisations and research evidence relevant to the question of vulnerability of children and learners across the education (between early years and tertiary level) and the children's social care system.

Whilst there are welcome policy measures intended to counter disadvantage within early education, schools and in FE and social care, there are challenges with the current model of measurement and mitigation of vulnerability in a broader sense. Children do not move through benignly neutral spaces, with only their own personal characteristics to predict their outcomes – instead they interact with family, peers, neighbourhoods, institutions and systems who can be both sources of challenge and of support. It is important to recognise the rising pressures facing parents and carers, many of which are not captured in current constructs of vulnerability and may not be known to providers – but which have a detrimental effect on the home learning environment. Pressures also exist on the institutions and systems that children and young people interact with, and importantly the impact of those pressures on outcomes are mediated by the capacity of the workforce.

The myriad ways in which children and learners may be vulnerable are not consistently understood or measured. Not all vulnerabilities are obvious or disclosed. These 'hidden vulnerabilities' might include (but are certainly not limited to) children of parents in prison, children of parents with learning difficulties, families and adult learners with precarious immigration status, children and learners with gender-related distress, children who are carers or care experienced, and many others. It is evident that many of these factors overlap with socioeconomic disadvantage, underscoring the importance in understanding how such intersection occurs so that intervention and support can be effectively targeted. It is also the case that individuals who have special educational needs and /or disabilities (SEND) similarly exist within a wider ecosystem and may intersect with experiences such as bullying or systemic racism in the way that those needs or difficulties might be labelled in the first instance. While the scope of this review was to consider the evidence for a broader conceptualisation of vulnerability, going beyond a relatively narrow definition of socioeconomic deprivation and/or SEND, it nevertheless acknowledges the significance of both factors and recommends that they are considered in tandem with wider influences on a child or setting.

This rapid scoping review is the first deliverable of this larger project to understand and make recommendations about the conceptualisation of vulnerability. Further deliverables include a range of stakeholder engagements' activities, a discussion paper and a final report. It is in these that we will consider applicability of conceptualisations within Ofsted's inspection activity.

Method

This rapid scoping review took a narrative approach to considering conceptualisations of vulnerability across a wide range of literature. There were two planned rounds to the review. The first round looked broadly at definitions and conceptualisations largely across theoretical work and policy documents. The findings from this round fed into a second round, where some of the most significant causes and indicators of vulnerability were considered in more detail, with greater emphasis on empirical research than round one. The approach allowed for some dynamisms, which facilitated the breadth of scope desirable in this review.

Findings

- There has been little consistency in the definition of vulnerability, with some papers conflating the concept with notions of risk and adverse life events.
- While theoretical papers favour a systems-focused view of vulnerability, research and policy documents refer more to an individualised notion of vulnerability, often driven by individuated data points and feeding into specified outcomes or outcome-based accountability. This is perhaps not surprising – operationalising terms in research is important but may inadvertently promote a categorical and narrow approach to understanding vulnerability.
- The tension between a broad conceptualisation that allows for individual circumstances and their interactions, and something more categorical is not straightforward to reconcile.
- The term 'vulnerability' is sometimes seen as stigmatising and disempowering, particularly reported by those who have been labelled as such and is therefore not used across all policy frameworks.
- There are areas that are consistently referred to as being significant drivers of vulnerability. These factors alter and interact across ages and developmental stages and are likely to have a multiplicative impact on outcomes. Outside of socioeconomic disadvantage and SEND, these include, but should not be considered limited to:
  - Minoritisation according to race, ethnicity, faith or gender identity
  - Bullying and victimisation
  - Experience of the care system, and being a carer
  - Child and parent mental health
  - Maltreatment
  - Homelessness and insecure/low quality housing

- It is important to warn away from simply creating a longer 'list' of vulnerabilities. Such lists are limited by the relative importance placed on particular factors and will never include all of the causes or indicators of vulnerability across education and social care systems. Such lists are also likely to lead to an idea that those are 'enough', and that consideration of how those factors might interact is not warranted – leading to labelling and intervention that misses a bigger picture.

- The examples considered in this review clearly demonstrate that causes and indicators of vulnerability interact, including with poverty and SEND, and that noticing and articulating these intersections are likely to be helpful for developing effective intervention and support initiatives. Services and settings should be able to look to consider the context of their own service and population to inform their practice.

- Further work is needed to think about how a single conceptualisation might work across age ranges and services.

This review is the first piece of work in a package to investigate conceptualisation of vulnerability, and will contribute directly to stakeholder discussions and consultations, as well as the planned internal discussion paper for Ofsted. The **final project report** was published in June 2025

Keywords: Vulnerability, Education, Early Years, Social Care, Care, Early Help, Further Education.

Introduction

This rapid scoping review aims to explore conceptualisations of vulnerability in the theoretical and empirical literature, and in policy and related frameworks, with a view towards understanding key drivers of vulnerability across education and social care services, including early years and further education.

The review is concerned with conceptualisation of vulnerability as relevant to children and young people in relation to education and social care. We are considering a definition of vulnerability that speaks to an individual's susceptibility to deleterious developmental outcomes as a result of circumstances of adversity and risk.[1] In this way, vulnerability is seen as the outcome of multiple systems acting on an individual in such a way that they are materially or otherwise disadvantaged.

Vulnerability is often used interchangeably with terms like adversity and risk. Adversity is best considered to be the experience of circumstances and life events that may provide a threat to an individual's development and access to resource and capital. Risk, however, is the *chance* that an outcome will occur. Originally, risk was a neutral term, regarding the probability that a gain or loss will occur. However, more modern understandings and usage of the term place risk within the field of threat – where adversity will result in deleterious outcomes. For example, a child may experience the adverse life event of a parental divorce.[2] The risk for that adverse life event translating into a negative outcome may depend on a number of factors, including parents' capacity for positive mediation, stability of family finances and living arrangements, etc.

While all families and individuals experience times of stress and difficulty, not all children and young people will necessarily be considered 'vulnerable'. It is also sometimes easy to accept a narrative of disadvantage that can be pathologising, deficit-focused, and/or can result in unconscious or otherwise discriminative or biased views. As Kuldas and Foody[3] describe it:

> This is a tendency to attribute the adaptive or maladaptive functioning of a child to his or her nature rather than context.[4,5].

1 M.A. Zimmerman and R Arunkumar, 'Resiliency Research: Implications for Schools and Policy', Social Policy Review 8, 4 (1994): 1–17; Brigid Daniel, 'Concepts of Adversity, Risk, Vulnerability and Resilience: A Discussion in the Context of the "Child Protection System"', Social Policy and Society 9, 2 (2010): 231–41, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746409990364.

2 B Daniel, 'Concepts of Adversity, Risk, Vulnerability and Resilience'.

3 Seffetullah Kuldas and Mairéad Foody, 'Neither Resiliency-Trait nor Resilience-State: Transactional Resiliency/e', *Youth & Society* 54, no. 8 (November 2022): 1352–76, https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X211029309.

4 Arnold J J. Sameroff, 'It's More Complicated', *Annual Review of Developmental Psychology* 2 (15 December 2020): 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-devpsych-061520-120738.

5 Froma Walsh, *Strengthening Family Resilience*, Third edition (New York London: The Guilford Press, 2016).

It is important to think about the interplay between the influences on a child's life to both amplify and mitigate those protective and risk factors. Vulnerability is not an inherent characteristic that stays with someone across the life-course – anyone can experience a state of vulnerability. Another important term to include here is resilience. Understanding resilience has been a growing trend in child development and is defined by the understanding that even in situations of multiple risks to development, an individual may be able to access positive resources, within individual, familial and community spaces, and thrive in spite of adversity and risk.[6] However, resilience is not a character trait, nor an inherent part of a person's identity.[7] A useful definition of resilience can be found in Pooley and Cohen's work,[8] where they propose that resilience can be seen as 'the potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using available internal and external resources in response to different contextual and developmental challenges'. Adversity, risk and the protective/harmful structures around a person might interact to create outcomes of vulnerability and/or resilience that are notably different between individuals.

Understanding drivers of vulnerability in education and social care is important to the healthy development of children, young people and learners. Wherever possible in this review, we will refer to infants, children, young people and learners in line with the work under consideration. We are aware that using the term 'learners' in the FE context is likely to cover age ranges between 16-25, and older. Considering vulnerability as part of a systems model allows us to consider conceptualisations that are not only material, but also relational – considering the context of social norms, as well as absolutes. We aim to summarise the conceptualisations of vulnerability that exist within the research, theory and policy literature, looking for commonalities in definitions. Our secondary aim is to provide a more in-depth examination of some of the key drivers of vulnerability across early years, education and social care in order to illustrate examples of significance and how these might interact. The review does not aim to cover Special Educational Needs and Disabilities or socioeconomic disadvantage in detail but rather refers to the intersections between these and other conceptualisations of interest as appropriate.

The literature review is intended to provide some grounding for the second deliverable in this project, an internal discussion paper for Ofsted. It is there that we will explore and expand upon themes, and highlight opportunities and/or dilemmas regarding the application of emerging conceptualisations within inspection practice. Project findings are contained in the **Final Report**, published in June 2025

6 Ann S. Masten et al., 'Resilience in Development and Psychopathology: Multisystem Perspectives', *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 17, no. 1 (7 May 2021): 521–49, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-081219-120307.

7 Michael Rutter, 'Resilience as a Dynamic Concept', *Development and Psychopathology* 24, no. 2 (May 2012): 335–44, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579412000028.

8 Julie Ann Pooley and Lynne Cohen, 'Resilience: A Definition in Context', *The Australian Community Psychologist* 22, no. 1 (2010): 30–37.

Definitions

One of the most striking observations has been the lack of consistency in definitions and conceptualisations that have been applied in the research literature and policy. Vulnerability was referred to by some as being unsatisfactory and/or difficult to define,[9] while others argued for categories which reflect existing data and with the explicit purpose of linking conceptual groups to measurement.[10] As one paper notes: 'the concept of vulnerable individuals or vulnerable social groups is often easier to talk about than to define.'[11] These conceptualisations are underpinned by a wide variety of assumptions, and result in a similarly broad range of theoretical and empirical assessments of risk and drivers of vulnerability.[12]

Many of the conceptualisations of vulnerability seen in policy and research are rooted in concepts of victimhood, dependency, or pathology. However, many of the theoretical papers discuss vulnerability within the context of social justice, where vulnerability is not just a synonym for disadvantage or discrimination at an individual level, but rather concerned with the systems around an individual.[13] Understanding the role that societal institutions play in maintaining and extending inequality is a central tenet of vulnerability theory. The theory does not seek to deny the importance of individual factors (for example, disability or bereavement), but rather centralises the importance of the interaction between an individual and the economic and social institutions around them. Interrogating that example of disability; social and ecological models of disability[14] posit that this is better understood not as an individual factor but as a societal factor. Through this lens, vulnerability is the consequence of disenabling and/or marginalising structures and systems, not the individual's status as a disabled person.

9 Kate Brown, Kathryn Ecclestone, and Nick Emmel, 'The Many Faces of Vulnerability', *Social Policy and Society* 16, no. 3 (July 2017): 497–510, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746416000610; Daniel, 'Concepts of Adversity, Risk, Vulnerability and Resilience'.

10 Children's Commissioner, 'Constructing a Definition of Vulnerability – Attempts to Define and Measure', Technical Paper 1, Children's Commissioner Project on Vulnerable Children, 2017, https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2018/07/Vulnerability-Technical-Paper-1-2017-Constructing-a-Definition-of-Vulnerability.pdf.

11 Terry Potter, 'What Do We Mean When We Talk about "Vulnerability"?', in *Working with Vulnerable Children, Young People and Families*, ed. Graham Brotherton (Routledge, 2020), 1–15.

12 David Finkelhor, *Childhood Victimization* (Oxford University Press, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195342857.001.0001.

13 Martha Albertson Fineman, 'The Vulnerable Subject and the Responsive State', *Emory Law Journal* 60, no. 2 (2010).

14 Robert Chapman, 'Neurodiversity and the Social Ecology of Mental Functions', *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 16, no. 6 (November 2021): 1360–72, https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620959833; Michael Oliver, *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1996), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-24269-6.

It is clear from the majority of landmark papers and reviews in this area that vulnerability is most usefully considered in relation to the structures and systems around an individual, and the interactions of these with the individual. Child development is shaped by social and cultural context.[15] This context determines the people with whom children and young people will interact, the places they are situated in, as well as the resources available to them. These coalesce to create expectations about the behaviour and values that children and young people might develop.[16] Taking this social-constructivist approach to vulnerability orients us away from the more intra-individual risk factors that have been a common theme in psychological work, and towards understanding the interplay between legal regulation and policies, social institutions and child-parent/family relations and interactions. This starts to surface a central tension, as to how vulnerability is conceptualised will likely drive approaches to interventions and policy.

Key Models and Frameworks

Considering conceptualisations of vulnerability from existing frameworks allows us to consider how recent and current frameworks work with potentially vulnerable children and young people across education and social care. Here, we have made a distinction between those that are theoretical and derived from the research literature, and those designed for the purposes of policy. It is important to acknowledge overlap between these groupings.

Theoretical Models from the research literature

Given the clear importance of the interaction between systems in driving vulnerability (and resilience), it is useful to consider a framework by which these can be explored. Bioecological systems theory is based on the premise that there are several levels of interaction relevant to understanding drivers of vulnerability.[17] This theory is contextualist in nature, emphasising that environment, developing individuals, and developmental processes are interconnected, and that neither environment nor individual characteristics can adequately account for developmental outcomes in isolation.[18] The processes that occur between an individual and their environment can be considered at multiple levels, including an individual's personal characteristics, their personal resources and the existence of expectations and biases that may be relevant to some interactions with the wider systems around them. It is also sensible to think about processes that occur between the individual and their context, from proximal (e.g. family, school) to more distal (e.g. legal systems, cultural norms). The influences of these on a child or young person's development can be both direct and indirect in nature and occur over a period of time.

15 Sabine Andresen, 'Childhood Vulnerability: Systematic, Structural, and Individual Dimensions', *Child Indicators Research* 7, no. 4 (December 2014): 699–713, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-014-9248-4; Finkelhor, *Childhood Victimization*; J Garbarino, *Children and the Dark Side of Human Experience* (New York, NY: Springer New York, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-75626-4; Yochay Nadan and Jill Korbin, 'Cultural Context, Intersectionality, and Child Vulnerability', *Childhood Vulnerability Journal* 1, no. 1–3 (2019): 5–14, https://doi.org/10.1007/s41255-019-00003-7.

16 Nadan and Korbin, 'Cultural Context, Intersectionality, and Child Vulnerability'.

17 Urie Bronfenbrenner and Pamela A. Morris, 'The Bioecological Model of Human Development', in *Handbook of Child Psychology*, ed. William Damon and Richard M. Lerner, 1st ed. (Wiley, 2007), https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470147658.chpsy0114.

18 Iram Siraj and Aziza Mayo, *Social Class and Educational Inequality: The Impact of Parents and Schools*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139086387.

It is also relevant here to consider the contribution of work by Maslow and others on needs. The oft-cited Hierarchy of Needs[19] is one of the most easily recognisable concepts in psychology of motivation and well-being. It is important to understand this not as a hierarchy in the progressive sense that one cannot reach the next level without meeting the needs of the first, rather that the levels interact something more akin to a matrix formation.[20] Research suggests that the key underpinning of the success of such growth is safety. This is posited as a continuous and structural need. Unmet safety needs across development may result in different outcomes over time. While the hierarchy of needs remains relevant in its illustration of the interaction of vulnerabilities, it is perhaps less useful as a tool to conceptualise vulnerability overall – except to observe that the key outcome is positive psychosocial development.

Placing these frameworks within a changing developmental context is important. A person's core needs change over time, as do the expectations that we might hold about an individual's situation, and so the drivers that might make us experience greater vulnerability or resilience will also evolve over time.

Policy Frameworks

Policy frameworks generally either provide an overview of the quality or level of service expected or make recommendations about best practice. As such they refer to vulnerability but rarely with underpinning conceptualisations or consistency. Some frameworks make recommendations about identifying and measuring support needs and outcomes related to service provision without providing a clear definition.[21,22,23] The focus is largely on individualised notions of 'vulnerable children'[24,25,26], rather than the conditions, circumstances and structural factors that can drive vulnerabilities.

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19 A. H. Maslow, 'A Theory of Human Motivation.', *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (July 1943): 370–96, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346.

20 Bob Bowen, 'The Matrix of Needs: Reframing Maslow's Hierarchy', *Health* 13, no. 05 (2021): 538–63, https://doi.org/10.4236/health.2021.135041.

21 HM Government, 'Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023: A Guide to Multi-Agency Working to Help, Protect and Promote the Welfare of Children', 2023, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/669e7501ab418ab055592a7b/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_2023.pdf.

22 DfE, 'Children's Social Care National Framework Statutory Guidance on the Purpose, Principles for Practice and Expected Outcomes of Children's Social Care' (Department for Education, 2023), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/657c538495bf650010719097/Children_s_Social_Care_National_Framework__December_2023.pdf.

23 Department for Education and Skills (DfES), *Every Child Matters Green Paper* (London: Stationery Office, 2003), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c95a4e5274a0bb7cb806d/5860.pdf.

24 DfE, 'The Children's Safeguarding Performance Information Framework' (Department for Education, 2015), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7e2f42e5274a2e8ab4662f/_2015-01-12__The_Childrens_Safeguarding_Performance_Information_Framework.pdf.

25 DfE, 'Children's Social Care Dashboard and Indicators Update' (Department for Education, 2023), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/657c3774095987000d95e1b4/CSC_Dashboard_and_Indicators_Update.pdf.

26 Children's Commissioner, 'Defining Child Vulnerability: Definitions, Frameworks and Groups', Technical Paper 2, Children's Commissioner Project on Vulnerable Children, 2017, https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2017/07/CCO-TP2-Defining-Vulnerability-Cordis-Bright-2.pdf.

Not all statutory frameworks concerned with safeguarding use the term. Adult Social Care for example does not use the term 'vulnerable'.[27] The Law Commission reported 'Many consultees criticised the term vulnerable adult as stigmatising, dated, negative and disempowering' (p. 114)[28]. The Children Act 1989[29] does not explicitly mention children with vulnerabilities, instead distinguishing between children who require protection and those who need support in order 'to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development'.

A useful perspective that operationalises an ecological systems approach can be found in the Assessment Framework, developed to improve outcomes for Children in Need (CiN)[30]. This framework represents three inter-related domains: a child's developmental needs; parent or caregivers' capacity to respond to those needs; and wider family and environmental factors, with an aim to create a map of what is relevant to and how they affect the child. There is tension between more in-depth assessments and high caseloads and prescribed timelines.[31] Nevertheless, there is merit in an approach that considers both difficulties and strengths existing for a child and takes account of the people and systems they interact with.[32] This approach allows for a holistic view of an individual or group, articulating points at which significant factors might interact, and allowing for intervention or support strategies to be targeted in such a way that might also flag unintended harms or consequences in advance.

Whilst examining exclusion from education in its broadest terms, the European Agency of Special Education and Inclusive Education sought to consider legal and policy definitions of vulnerability across its members.[33] Their working definition included those who were 'impacted upon by a number of pressures, forces, levers, discriminations and disadvantages' (p.6). England was not considered to have a legal definition of learners vulnerable to exclusion, but in line with those countries that provided a definition or adequate description in their strategy or programmes, listed Special Educational Needs/Disabilities and socioeconomic disadvantage as being major drivers of vulnerability. The categorical approach to vulnerability across the countries was still common, but it appears that there is a marked shift away from a purely medical model of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, and towards a more contextual view of vulnerability.

27 DoH, 'Care Act' (Department of Health, 2014).

28 The Law Commission, 'Adult Social Care', 2011, https://lawcom.gov.uk/project/adult-social-care

29 'Children Act', § c. 41 (1989), https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41.

30 DoH, DLHC, and Home Office, 'Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families' (London: Stationey Office, 2000).

31 Mary Baginsky, Jill Manthorpe, and Jo Moriarty, 'The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families and Signs of Safety: Competing or Complementary Frameworks?', *The British Journal of Social Work* 51, no. 7 (2021): 2571–89, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa058.

32 Hedy Cleaver, Steven Walker, and Pamela Meadows, *Assessing Children's Needs and Circumstances: The Impact of the Assessment Framework* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2004).

33 European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 'Multi-Annual Work Programme 2021–2027 Parameters', n.d.; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 'Legislative Definitions around Learners' Needs: A Snapshot of European Country Approaches.', 2022, https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/Legislative_Definitions_around_Learners%27_Needs.pdf.

Considering vulnerability 'in practice'

This section aims to summarise how vulnerability is described and understood, and its pertinence, in relation to the professional areas in scope for this project. Whilst early years, school-age education, and Further Education are distinct areas in which an 'ages and stages' approach could be used to organise the literature, this is not true for social care. A child may be aged under 5 and the subject of a child protection plan; a young person may be attending college, and their parents and siblings may be receiving support via early help services; a child of any age may be in care and accessing education. This makes universal constructs of vulnerability hard to identify or apply. The interfaces, overlaps, concurrence and contradictions between different aspects of the education and social care systems will be considered in the discussion paper and subsequent stakeholder engagement activity.

For this reason, this section does not try to neatly group the literature according to the four professional areas above. Instead, we aim to pay particular attention to the youngest children, the oldest young people, and those most in need of protection.

Infants and young children

Given their younger age, smaller stature and relative lack of agency, early childhood is tended to be perceived as a period of particular vulnerability. The dependency of infants and very young children on adults, both for food and shelter and also for optimal developmental relationships means that the vulnerabilities of these youngest children are bound up with those of the adults on whom they rely.

This realistic acknowledgment of younger children's dependency intersects with a social construction of early childhood that is arguably deficit in its nature. Take for example, reports on childhood that take self-reports from children as their basis (e.g. The Good Childhood Report, World Happiness Report), but do not include voices of children younger than eight. The youngest children are considered to lack necessary reasoning and communication skills and are unreliable narrators of their own experience. However, the Scottish Mental Health, Happiness and Wellbeing report[34] stands in contrast to this, including data collected from 3–5-year-olds. This is pertinent because if vulnerability is, in part, understood as being unable to self-advocate, then research which embodies this presumption of incapacity in how it engages (or excludes) younger children can reinforce that vulnerability.

There is considerable overlap between conceptualisations of drivers of vulnerability and risk amongst early years, and those described for other age groups. Reported risk factors relate to socioeconomic disadvantage and health and disability, but also insecure or overcrowded housing, immigration status, experience of racism and bullying and neighbourhood safety and crime.[35] Further signification factors include importance of familial social support and unmet social need, linguistic diversity, and pre-school attendance.

34 Early Years Scotland, 'Mental Health, Happiness and Wellbeing Report' (Early Years Scotland, 2022).

35 S Gray et al., 'Measuring Vulnerability and Disadvantage in Early Childhood Data Collections' (Melbourne, Australia: Centre for Community Child Health, 2023).

The home learning environment is of particular importance during the early years,[36] and research indicates that predictors of poor outcome across early development include being bilingual with English as an additional language, lower levels of maternal education, non-attendance at pre-school and not having stories read at home.[37] It is important to be clear that these are indicators derived from the measures that were able to be used across a large sample, but work is still required to understand that factors that might contribute to variability in that behaviour (for example, parents with reading difficulties, parents who are not able to spend time reading with a child due to illness or work).

Work has also sought to examine the impact of adverse experiences in childhood.[38,39] Adverse childhood experiences, covering various forms of maltreatment and 'household dysfunction', were associated with poor academic skills and increased behavioural difficulties during the pre-school period, where children who had experienced greater adversity were reported to be at greater risk of poor outcome.[40] There is also an important suggestion that commonly considered adverse experiences might be best being extended in the early childhood population to include experiences of neighbourhood violence, separation from a parent who provides safety and care, or experience of prejudice.[41]

Children in need of protection

As noted above, the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families[42] defined 'vulnerable children' as 'those disadvantaged children who would benefit from extra help from public agencies in order to make the best of their life chances' and goes beyond health and development to include some wider social factors in conceptualisations of vulnerability.

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36 Allen Joseph et al., 'Drivers of the Socio-economic Disadvantage Gap in England: Sequential Pathways That Include the Home Learning Environment and Self-regulation as Mediators', *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, August 2023, e12629, https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12629; Kathy Sylva et al., *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010).

37 Margaret Curtin et al., 'Determinants of Vulnerability in Early Childhood Development in Ireland: A Cross-Sectional Study', *BMJ Open* 3, no. 5 (14 May 2013): e002387, https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2012-002387.

38 Sarah E. Cprek et al., 'Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Risk of Childhood Delays in Children Ages 1–5', *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 37, no. 1 (February 2020): 15–24, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-019-00622-x; Manuel E. Jimenez et al., 'Adverse Experiences in Early Childhood and Kindergarten Outcomes', *Pediatrics* 137, no. 2 (February 2016): e20151839, https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-1839; Kiley W. Liming and Whitney A. Grube, 'Wellbeing Outcomes for Children Exposed to Multiple Adverse Experiences in Early Childhood: A Systematic Review', *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 35, no. 4 (August 2018): 317–35, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-018-0532-x; Shannon T. Lipscomb et al., 'Adverse Childhood Experiences and Children's Development in Early Care and Education Programs', *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 72 (January 2021): 101218, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2020.101218; Lorraine M. McKelvey, James P. Selig, and Leanne Whiteside-Mansell, 'Foundations for Screening Adverse Childhood Experiences: Exploring Patterns of Exposure through Infancy and Toddlerhood', *Child Abuse & Neglect* 70 (August 2017): 112–21, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.06.002.

39 Kirsten Asmussen et al., 'Adverse Childhood Experiences: What We Know, What We Don't Know, and What Should Happen Next', Early Intervention Foundation, 2020, https://www.eif.org.uk/report/adverse-childhood-experiences-what-we-know-what-we-dont-know-and-what-should-happen-next.

40 Jimenez et al., 'Adverse Experiences in Early Childhood and Kindergarten Outcomes'.

41 Lipscomb et al., 'Adverse Childhood Experiences and Children's Development in Early Care and Education Programs'.

42 DoH, DLHC, and Home Office, 'Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families'.

Legislation and guidance most pertinent to children in need of protection points to a conceptualisation of vulnerability that is broadly understood as the susceptibility to harm whether physical, emotional, or social, and the recognition that some children will require additional support to address unmet needs or disabilities. A key challenge for social care systems is identifying vulnerability early and consistently providing support to build resilience in the systems surrounding children. This requires understanding that vulnerability varies depending on individual circumstances, and that it is not a static condition, but can evolve over time. Infants and very young children are found to be over-represented in data relating to abuse and neglect, and many of the vulnerabilities children face are linked to their dependence on adults for protection, guidance, and advocacy.[43]

Social care services ostensibly aim to mitigate vulnerabilities by providing appropriate support and intervention. However, arguably children's social care systems, which are designed to focus on individuated children, are not equipped to provide support in relation to the structural causes of vulnerability, such as poor housing and deprivation.[44] Access to support, and the effectiveness of that support, is influenced by systemic challenges such as thresholds, resource constraints, a lack of clarity around criteria for Section 17 support, and inequality in the provision of care.[45] Indeed, the way local authorities identify vulnerable children has been criticised for being service driven rather than being led by need, with children and families often reaching crisis point before they can access help.[46]

The concern regarding 'invisible' children experiencing vulnerabilities who are 'under the radar' has also been raised by the previous Children's Commissioner who estimated that 'there are over 2 million children in England living in families with substantial complex needs, and that of these 1.6 million children have no established, recognised form of additional support' (p. 2).[47]

When thresholds are met and the vulnerabilities experienced by children are recognised by children's services, the systemic challenges outlined above can hinder the timely and effective provision of services, making it difficult to meet the diverse needs of children experiencing vulnerability effectively (Children's Commissioner, 2024).

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43 E Munro, 'The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, a Child-Centred System' (The Stationary Office, 2011).

44 Brid Featherstone et al., 'Let's Stop Feeding the Risk Monster: Towards a Social Model of "Child Protection"', 1 March 2018, https://doi.org/10.1332/204674316X14552878034622.

45 J MacAlister, 'The Independent Review of Children's Social Care – Final Report' (Department for Education, 2022), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/640a17f28fa8f5560820da4b/Independent_review_of_children_s_social_care_-_Final_report.pdf; Munro, 'The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, a Child-Centred System'; All Party Parliament Group (APPG)for Children, 'Storing up Trouble: A Postcode Lottery of Children's Social Care' (London: National Children's Bureau, 2018), https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/NCB%20Storing%20Up%20Trouble%20%5BAugust%20Update%5D.pdf; Children's Commissioner, 'Children on Child in Need Plans.' (Children's Commissioner, 2024), https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/huge-regional-variation-in-support-from-childrens-social-services-for-some-of-englands-most-vulnerable-children-new-report-shows/; Paul Bywaters and Child Welfare Inequalities Project Team, 'The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report', 2020, https://research.hud.ac.uk/media/assets/document/research/cacyfr/CWIP-Overview-Final-V4.pdf#:~:text=The%20Child%20Welfare%20Inequalities%20Project%20(CWIP),%202014-19,.

46 All Party Parliament Group (APPG)for Children, 'Storing up Trouble: A Postcode Lottery of Children's Social Care'.

47 Children's Commissioner, 'Vulnerability Report 2018: Overview' (Children's Commissioner, 2018), https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/childrens-commissioner-vulnerability-report-2018.

Where support is not timely or effective the vulnerabilities and risk of harm facing children and young people is likely to increase, leading to damage which can be difficult to undo.[48] Conversely, social care may also at times intervene in ways which increase – or create new – vulnerabilities children and young people face. Examples include separating children from parents with whom there is a strong emotional bond (as can sometimes be necessary); responses to domestic abuse that feel punitive and deplete the capacity of the non-violent parent; multiple and/or unsuitable placements for children in care; children being moved to locations that are unfamiliar to them.[49]

Some children and young people in care, despite being exposed to high levels of adversity, demonstrate an ability to adapt and thrive. As noted earlier, rather than considering resilience as an inherent individual trait it is important to recognise the socio-environmental conditions – the strong relationships with supportive and consistent carers, stable placements, access to responsive systems of support and interventions where needed – that make resilience possible.

Older children and young people

All of the ideas explored above, apart from those specifically about infants and very young children, apply to older children and young people (including young adults). However, the experiences of young people entering adulthood, finding society and services view them in a wholly different light, raise important issues for an overarching conceptualisation of vulnerability. This section of the rapid scoping review aims to consider the issues most pertinent to Further Education (FE).

The law requires all young people in England to continue in education or training until at least their 18th birthday.[50] The FE student body is diverse and their lives can be complicated with many drivers of vulnerability to be alert to. It fills gaps and can act as a safety net in educational provision, providing some of the greatest benefit to those learners living with vulnerabilities.[51]

The FE landscape means that institutions themselves are under pressure to perform and meet targets related to retention and attainment. Some have noted this can drive a culture in some FE provision of 'performativity' which may lead to providers competing for the most 'valuable' students, creating an environment of potential risk and exclusion for those who are perceived to be more 'risky'[52] – who may be living in more vulnerable circumstances. The tensions between vulnerability as risk to the student, and risk to the institution, will be important to include in stakeholder engagement activity focused on conceptualisations of vulnerability in FE.

48 Munro, 'The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, a Child-Centred System'.

49 Maddy Coy, '"Moved around like Bags of Rubbish Nobody Wants": How Multiple Placement Moves Can Make Young Women Vulnerable to Sexual Exploitation', *Child Abuse Review* 18, no. 4 (July 2009): 254–66, https://doi.org/10.1002/car.1064; Carlene Firmin, 'Relocation, Relocation, Relocation: Home and School-Moves for Children Affected Extra-Familial Risks during Adolescence', *Children's Geographies* 20, no. 5 (2022): 523–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1598545; Simon Haworth et al., 'Parental Partnership, Advocacy and Engagement: The Way Forward', *Social Sciences* 11, no. 8 (8 August 2022): 353, https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11080353.

50 DfE, 'Keeping Children Safe in Education 2024' (Department for Education, 2024).

51 G Moodie et al., 'Case Study of Further Education in England' (Education International, 2018).

52 Liz Atkins, 'The Odyssey: School to Work Transitions, Serendipity and Position in the Field', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38, no. 5 (4 July 2017): 641–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1131146.

Exploring key contributory factors to vulnerability

It is clear that there are multiple contributory factors to vulnerability facing children and young people (including young adult learners), and that these are likely to interact to have a multiplicative impact on outcomes. After considering the research literature and frameworks that have sought to understand and come to a conceptualisation and definition of vulnerability, we observed areas that are consistently referred to as being significant characteristics and circumstances associated with vulnerability. The model in Figure 1 aims to map the commonly cited factors (or categories) against hypothesised 'levels' of a person's ecosystem. This illustrates the potential both proximal and distal influences and crucially how these interact in multi-directional ways.

In this section, the most consistently reported influences are considered in more depth, in relation to both education and social care to demonstrate the importance of understanding how these potential 'categories' of vulnerability can interact across the systems that surround children and young people, impacting outcomes. We reiterate that 'categories' can be problematic. Producing ever-longer lists or categories of which children and young people are vulnerable has not enabled a clear definition of vulnerability that is useful across sectors.

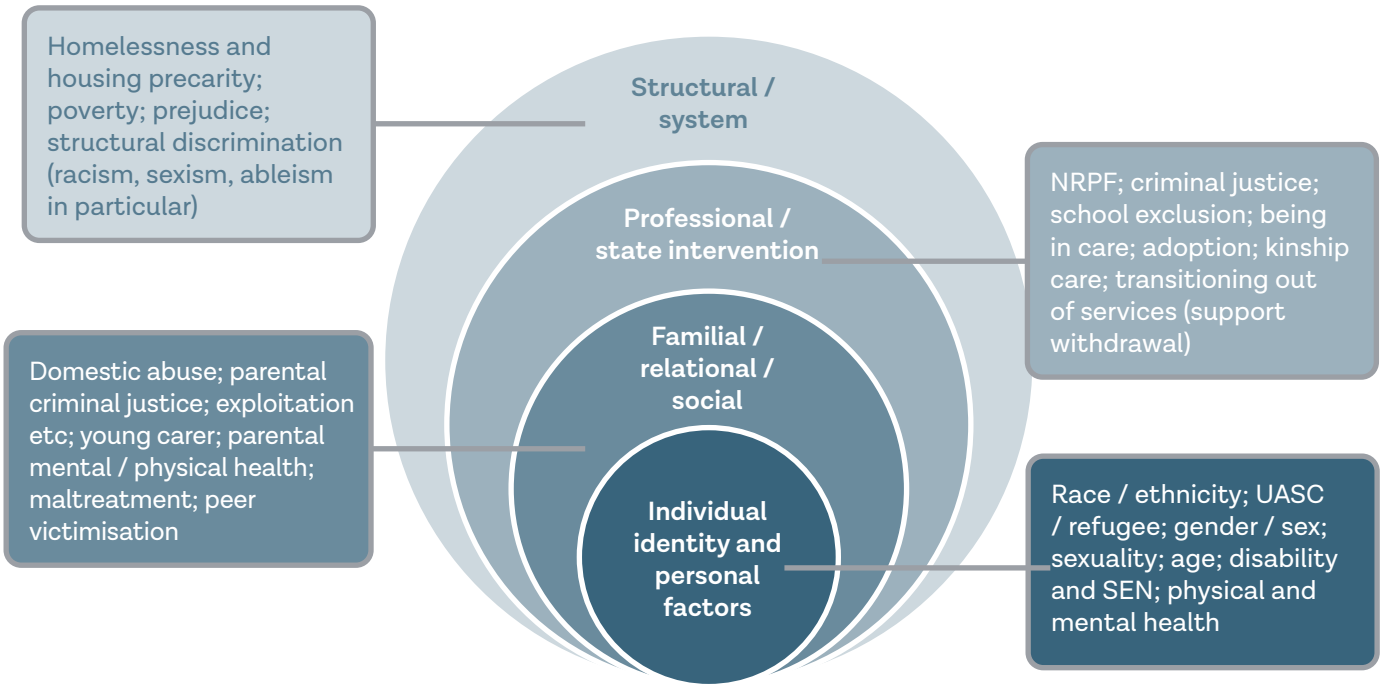

Figure 1: Illustration of how second round topics for review interact within the wider system around a child or young person.

Children, young people and learners who are minoritised

There is a wealth of research that reports on the experiences and outcomes of students from all stages of education who are, for one or more reasons, perceived as being part of a minority group. Minoritised students whose experiences, beliefs or dispositions do not obviously align with those of the dominant group often report feelings of victimisation, alienation and experience poorer academic and well-being outcomes.[53] These experiences can be born of perceptions of not being understood, 'othering' and discrimination from both peers and school staff. Students can experience minoritisation in multiple ways according to the majority context. This can include (but is not limited to) ethnicity and race, religion, immigrant status, sexuality and gender identity.

Minoritisation by Race or Ethnicity

There has been long-standing concern about educational outcomes for children who are minoritised by race or ethnicity, and/or are of immigrant background, compared with majority peers.[54] It is also well-documented that Black Caribbean children and those from Gypsy and Traveller backgrounds are more likely to excluded from school than their peers.[55] Ethnicity in and of itself is not a driver of vulnerability – it is the interaction between an individual's identity and the discriminatory influences and systems around them that are the source of potential vulnerability and resilience. Systemic and more proximal experiences of racism are important elements of the experience of school for many non-white students.[56] These experiences can impact a student's education experience and outcomes in a myriad of ways, including diminishing a sense of belonging, through bullying and discrimination, and perceptions of staff attitudes and expectations.[57]

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53 Charles B. Hutchison, ed., *What Happens When Students Are in the Minority: Experiences That Impact Human Performance* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2009); Maykel Verkuyten, Jochem Thijs, and Nadya Gharaei, 'Discrimination and Academic (Dis)Engagement of Ethnic-Racial Minority Students: A Social Identity Threat Perspective', *Social Psychology of Education* 22, no. 2 (April 2019): 267–90, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-018-09476-0.

54 DfE, 'Suspensions and Permanent Exclusions in England, Academic Year 2022/23', 2023, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2022-23?subjectId=569f763b-69d5-4070-2e8a-08dca26ec4d8; DfE, *Post-16 Education Outcomes by Ethnicity in England: Topic Note.*, [Research Report] RR1244 ([United Kingdom]: Department for Education, 2022).

55 C Alexander and W Shankley, 'Ethnic Inequalities in the State Education System in England', in *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation*, 2020; Feyisa Demie, 'The Experience of Black Caribbean Pupils in School Exclusion in England', *Educational Review* 73, no. 1 (2 January 2021): 55–70, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2019.1590316; DfE, 'Suspensions and Permanent Exclusions in England, Academic Year 2022/23'.

56 Alexander and Shankley, 'Ethnic Inequalities in the State Education System in England'; YMCA, 'Young and Black' (YMCA, 2020), www.ymcaeurope.com/young-and-black-report

57 Kalwant Bhopal, '"This Is a School, It's Not a Site": Teachers' Attitudes towards Gypsy and Traveller Pupils in Schools in England, UK', *British Educational Research Journal* 37, no. 3 (June 2011): 465–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/01411921003786561; Sauro Civitillo, Anna-Maria Mayer, and Philipp Jugert, 'A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Associations between Perceived Teacher-Based Racial–Ethnic Discrimination and Student Well-Being and Academic Outcomes.', *Journal of Educational Psychology* 116, no. 5 (July 2024): 719–41, https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000818; Sandra Graham, Kara Kogachi, and Jessica Morales-Chicas, 'Do I Fit In: Race/Ethnicity and Feelings of Belonging in School', *Educational Psychology Review* 34, no. 4 (December 2022): 2015–42, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-022-09709-x; Maria Sapouna, Leyla de Amicis, and Loris Vezzali, 'Bullying Victimization Due to Racial, Ethnic, Citizenship and/or Religious Status: A Systematic Review', *Adolescent Research Review* 8, no. 3 (1 September 2023): 261–96, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-022-00197-2.

Education can act as a driver for directing wider societal inclusion, where culturally responsive learning environments can promote shared understanding.[58] This kind of socially inclusive practice is one of the central tenets of the United Nation's Sustainable Development goals on quality education.[59] Schools that are perceived by their students as being socially inclusive are characterised by lower rates of victimisation, discrimination and loneliness, and higher rates of student belonging and perceptions of student safety.[60] Early childhood education might be one of the first spaces that children meet with differences between their home environment, culture and language and those of the societal majority.[61] Although there is a paucity of literature, successful intervention work focusing on supporting inclusion for children of minority ethnic and immigrant backgrounds can be summarised as comprising involvement of family and wider community, highlighting strengths and creating an environment that promotes meaningful intergroup contact.[62]

Significant inequalities related to race are also evident in children's social care. Children from Black and some mixed ethnic groups in the UK are overrepresented in the child welfare system, while children from Asian ethnic groups are underrepresented.[63] They are also more likely to have a secure accommodation or deprivation of liberty order than white and mixed or multiple ethnicity children.[64] Children from white and mixed ethnic groups have the highest rates of being placed on child protection plans and entering care within a year of referral.[65] Black and Asian children were less likely than white or mixed ethnicity children to have been on a child in need plan or a child protection plan in the month before entering care, or at any time in the previous eight years.[66]

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58 Carmel Cefai et al., 'Social Inclusion and Social Justice: A Resilience Curriculum for Early Years and Elementary Schools in Europe', ed. Professor Glenn Hardaker ,Prof. Carol Evans, *Journal for Multicultural Education* 9, no. 3 (10 August 2015): 122–39, https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-01-2015-0002.

59 United Nations, 'Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', 2015, http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org.

60 Adrienne Nishina et al., 'Ethnic Diversity and Inclusive School Environments', *Educational Psychologist* 54, no. 4 (2 October 2019): 306–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1633923.

61 R Aghallaj et al., 'Exploring the Partnership between Language Minority Parents and Professionals in Early Childhood Education and Care: A Systematic Review', in *Multilingual Approaches for Teaching and Learning* (Routledge, 2020); Alberto Ortega and Tyler Ludwig, 'Immigrant English Proficiency, Children's Educational Performance, and Parental Involvement', *Review of Economics of the Household* 21, no. 2 (June 2023): 693–719, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-022-09628-4; Joseph Tobin and Fikriye Kurban, 'Preschool Practitioners' and Immigrant Parents' Beliefs about Academics and Play in the Early Childhood Educational Curriculum in Five Countries', *ORBIS SCHOLAE* 4, no. 2 (22 February 2018): 75–87, https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2018.127.

62 Serap Keles, Elaine Munthe, and Erik Ruud, 'A Systematic Review of Interventions Promoting Social Inclusion of Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Preschool Children', *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 28, no. 6 (11 May 2024): 924–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1979670.

63 Claudia Bernard and Perlita Harris, 'Serious Case Reviews: The Lived Experience of Black Children', *Child & Family Social Work* 24, no. 2 (May 2019): 256–63, https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12610; Bywaters and Child Welfare Inequalities Project Team, 'The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report'; Calum Webb et al., 'Cuts Both Ways: Ethnicity, Poverty, and the Social Gradient in Child Welfare Interventions', *Children and Youth Services Review* 117 (October 2020): 105299, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105299.

64 Dr Charlotte Edney, Dr Bachar Alrouh, and Dr Mariam Abouelenin, 'Ethnicity of Children in Care and Supervision Proceedings in England' (Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, 2023).

65 Noor Ahmed et al., 'Ethnicity and Children's Social Care' (Department for Education, 2022).

66 Ahmed et al.

Poverty has been found to be a key factor in understanding differences in intervention rates across ethnic groups, however it does not account for all differences.[67] Inequalities in children's social care involvement should be understood through a combined consideration of race, ethnicity and socioeconomic class, applying an intersectional lens.[68,69] Socioeconomic class offers protection for some groups but correlates with higher levels of discrimination and intervention for others. This is particularly significant as global majority families often experience greater structural inequality and disadvantage, which in turn can drive the circumstances that can mean families come to the attention of child welfare services.[70]

It is also clear that children and families from minoritised ethnic groups can face other forms of racism from the professionals they encounter, with recent research showing that almost one in three social workers have witnessed colleagues or managers direct racism towards families and individuals on at least one occasion.[71]

Minoritisation by status as asylum seeker, refugee or unaccompanied minor

Almost 15 years ago, attention was drawn to the fact that there were large numbers of children who were refugees and asylum seekers, but that there was no education policy that set out to address their needs.[72] The situation has not moved far. Children who are asylum-seeking or refugees have been described as 'one of the most socially and economically deprived and discriminated-against' in society.[73] The obstacles to successful outcomes for refugee and asylum-seeking students are multiple, including language barriers, poverty, precarious housing and uncertainty about long-term living arrangements. Câmera[74] reports on teachers' lack of knowledge about the previous life experiences and current out-of-school challenges for families, as well as the fact that teachers do not always know that a child in their class has refugee or asylum-seeker status. The same may be the case for children living in families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), however research in this area related to schools is still scarce.

Families who have NRPF face challenges such as limited income, unstable housing, uncertain immigration status and barriers to support from professionals, often needing to rely on charitable and community support, which can be difficult to access. These factors contribute to hunger, homelessness and lack of support, directly harming children's welfare.[75]

67 Webb et al., 'Cuts Both Ways'.

68 Bywaters and Child Welfare Inequalities Project Team, 'The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report'.

69 Bywaters and Child Welfare Inequalities Project Team; Webb et al., 'Cuts Both Ways'.

70 Bywaters and Child Welfare Inequalities Project Team, 'The Child Welfare Inequalities Project: Final Report'.

71 O Gurau and A Bacchoo, 'Anti-Racism Report. What Works for Children's Social Care' (What works for Children's Social Care, 2022), https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/research-report/anti-racism-survey-report/#:~:text=Work%20to%20strengthen%20anti-racism%20in%20organisations%20needs%20to#:~:text=Work%20to%20strengthen%20anti-racism%20in%20organisations%20needs%20to.

72 Halleli Pinson, Madeleine Arnot, and Mano Candappa, *Education, Asylum and the 'Non-Citizen' Child* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230276505.

73 Pinson, Arnot, and Candappa.

74 Florian Scharpf et al., 'A Systematic Review of Socio-Ecological Factors Contributing to Risk and Protection of the Mental Health of Refugee Children and Adolescents', *Clinical Psychology Review* 83 (February 2021): 101930, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2020.101930.

75 Andy Jolly, Jasber Singh, and Sunila Lobo, 'No Recourse to Public Funds: A Qualitative Evidence Synthesis', *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care* 18, no. 1 (10 March 2022): 107–23, https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMHSC-11-2021-0107; Andrew Jolly and Anna Gupta, 'Children and Families with No Recourse to Public Funds: Learning from Case Reviews', *Children & Society* 38, no. 1 (2024): 16–31, https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12646.

The NRPF rule creates a significant barrier for vulnerable women, making it harder for them to leave abusive relationships, heal from trauma, and rebuild their lives. This, in turn, increases the risks to their children.[76]

Minoritisation by gender or sexuality

Children, young people and learners who identify as LGBTQ+ might be considered invisible in terms of their minority status, with teachers and school administration potentially unaware of their status and the victimisation that students may be experiencing.[77] However, the same may not be true amongst peers, and LGBTQ+ students are widely reported to experience challenging school environments, where their identity confers a moderate risk for bullying and victimisation on the basis of their sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression.[78] The consequence of this is poorer educational attainment, and poorer physical and harmful mental health outcomes than their peers which is contributed to by isolation and experience and internalisation of stigma.[79,80,81] There is some evidence that these risks can be mitigated by a positive and inclusive school climate[82] where students may find it easier to protect and express their identity.[83]

Contact with Criminal Justice System

Children whose parents are imprisoned may experience grief and loss, but with the added stigma of a parent with a criminal conviction. It is common for children with a parent in prison to experience significant difficulties in school, although these are suggested to be less to do with learning needs, and far more to do with the significant disruptions to the family environment.[84,85]

76 Sundari Anitha, 'No Recourse, No Support: State Policy and Practice towards South Asian Women Facing Domestic Violence in the UK1', *The British Journal of Social Work* 40, no. 2 (1 March 2010): 462–79, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcn160.

77 Richard Harris, Ann E. Wilson-Daily, and Georgina Fuller, 'Exploring the Secondary School Experience of LGBT+ Youth: An Examination of School Culture and School Climate as Understood by Teachers and Experienced by LGBT+ Students', *Intercultural Education* 32, no. 4 (4 July 2021): 368–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2021.1889987.

78 Susie Bower-Brown, Sophie Zadeh, and Vasanti Jadva, 'Binary-Trans, Non-Binary and Gender-Questioning Adolescents' Experiences in UK Schools', *Journal of LGBT Youth* 20, no. 1 (2 January 2023): 74–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2021.1873215; Harris, Wilson-Daily, and Fuller, 'Exploring the Secondary School Experience of LGBT+ Youth'; Wesley Myers et al., 'The Victimization of LGBTQ Students at School: A Meta-Analysis', *Journal of School Violence* 19, no. 4 (October 2020): 421–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2020.1725530.

79 Jonathan Glazzard and Mark Vicars, 'Editorial: LGBT Inclusion in Schools', *Frontiers in Sociology* 7 (26 April 2022): 904357, https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2022.904357; V Jadva et al., 'Predictors of Self-Harm and Suicide in LGBT Youth: The Role of Gender, Socio-Economic Status, Bullying and School Experience', *Journal of Public Health* 45, no. 1 (14 March 2023): 102–8, https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdab383.

80 Bower-Brown, Zadeh, and Jadva, 'Binary-Trans, Non-Binary and Gender-Questioning Adolescents' Experiences in UK Schools'.

81 Glazzard and Vicars, 'Editorial'.

82 April J. Ancheta, Jean-Marie Bruzzese, and Tonda L. Hughes, 'The Impact of Positive School Climate on Suicidality and Mental Health Among LGBTQ Adolescents: A Systematic Review', *The Journal of School Nursing* 37, no. 2 (2021): 75–86, https://doi.org/10.1177/1059840520970847.

83 Bower-Brown, Zadeh, and Jadva, 'Binary-Trans, Non-Binary and Gender-Questioning Adolescents' Experiences in UK Schools'.

84 Lorna Brookes and Jo Frankham, 'The Hidden Voices of Children and Young People with a Parent in Prison: What Schools Need to Know about Supporting These Vulnerable Pupils', *International Journal of Educational Development* 81 (March 2021): 102323, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2020.102323.

85 Julia Morgan and Caroline Leeson, 'School Experiences of Children of Prisoners: Strengthening Support in Schools in England and Wales', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison and the Family*, ed. Marie Hutton and Dominique Moran (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 503–18, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-12744-2_24.

Children in early childhood are reported to show increased challenging behaviour and regressions in behaviour, attachment and communication.[86,87] Older children report not wanting people to know about their situation because of stigma.[88] There are clear intersections between the experience of an incarcerated parent and other significant contributing factors to vulnerability, including experiencing kinship or local authority care, maltreatment, socioeconomic disadvantage and stigma and victimisation.[89,90,91]

The experience of domestic violence

The most common factor identified during assessments of children in need (CiN) in England at the time of writing is domestic abuse.[92] Children exposed to domestic violence and abuse face numerous vulnerabilities, including emotional, behavioural and academic challenges, often exacerbated by short-term living environments such as shelters.[93] Emotional and behavioural issues are common, and long-term effects include mental health issues, substance misuse and revictimisation.[94] Research also shows exposure to domestic violence has a negative impact on academic outcomes for children.[95] Maternal mental health has been shown to play a protective role.[96] However, many parents have their own history of abuse and trauma. Therefore, addressing the trauma experienced by parents is likely to be important for breaking intergenerational patterns of abuse.[97]

86 Amanda Geller et al., 'Beyond Absenteeism: Father Incarceration and Child Development', *Demography* 49, no. 1 (February 2012): 49–76, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-011-0081-9; Shona Minson, 'Direct Harms and Social Consequences: An Analysis of the Impact of Maternal Imprisonment on Dependent Children in England and Wales', *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 19, no. 5 (November 2019): 519–36, https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895818794790.

87 Cynthia Burnson and Lindsay Weymouth, 'Infants and Young Children with Incarcerated Parents', in *Handbook on Children with Incarcerated Parents*, ed. J. Mark Eddy and Julie Poehlmann-Tynan (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 85–99, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16707-3_7.

88 Brookes and Frankham, 'The Hidden Voices of Children and Young People with a Parent in Prison'.

89 Tyson Whitten et al., 'Parental Offending and Child Physical Health, Mental Health, and Drug Use Outcomes: A Systematic Literature Review', *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 28, no. 5 (1 May 2019): 1155–68, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01388-7.

90 Hedy Cleaver, Ira Unell, and Jane Aldgate, *Children's Needs - Parenting Capacity: Child Abuse: Parental Mental Illness, Learning Disability, Substance Misuse and Domestic Violence*, 2. ed (London: TSO, The Stationery Office, 2011).

91 Kristin Turney and Rebecca Goodsell, 'Parental Incarceration and Children's Wellbeing', *The Future of Children* 28, no. 1 (2018): 147–64.relatively few US children experienced the incarceration of a parent. In the decades since, incarceration rates rose rapidly (before leveling off more recently

92 DfE, 'Children's Social Care Dashboard and Indicators Update'.

93 Sara Thunberg, Martina Vikander, and Linda Arnell, 'Children's Rights and Their Life Situation in Domestic Violence Shelters—An Integrative Review', *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 41, no. 4 (1 August 2024): 499–514, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-022-00900-1.

94 Laura Campo-Tena et al., 'Longitudinal Associations Between Adolescent Dating Violence Victimization and Adverse Outcomes: A Systematic Review', *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 25, no. 2 (1 April 2024): 1265–77, https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231174504; Jill R. McTavish et al., 'Children's Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence: An Overview', *International Review of Psychiatry* 28, no. 5 (2 September 2016): 504–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2016.1205001.

95 Jamie Cage et al., 'The Effect of Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence on Children's Academic Functioning: A Systematic Review of the Literature', *Journal of Family Violence* 37, no. 8 (1 November 2022): 1337–52, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-021-00314-0.

96 Kathryn J. Spearman, Emily Hoppe, and Emma Jagasia, 'A Systematic Literature Review of Protective Factors Mitigating Intimate Partner Violence Exposure on Early Childhood Health Outcomes', *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 79, no. 5 (2023): 1664–77, https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.15638; Alison Fogarty et al., 'Factors Promoting Emotiona-behavioural Resilience and Adjustment in Children Exposed to Intimate Partner Violence: A Systematic Review', *Australian Journal of Psychology* 71, no. 4 (1 December 2019): 375–89, https://doi.org/10.1111/ajpy.12242.

97 M. K. M. Lünnemann et al., 'The Intergenerational Impact of Trauma and Family Violence on Parents and Their Children', *Child Abuse & Neglect* 96 (1 October 2019): 104134, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104134

Experience of exploitation, involvement with criminal groups and trafficking

Children can be involved in criminal activity in complex ways. The involvement in children and young people in criminal activity is not new, but the systematic targeting of children and young people experiencing multiple vulnerabilities is a relatively newer feature of County Lines activity.[98] Home and neighbourhood environment, as well as learning difficulties and disabilities, mental health issues, exposure to violence during childhood, substance use and family breakdown and trauma are all known risk factors for involvement in exploitation.[99,100]

98 James Windle, Leah Moyle, and Ross Coomber, '"Vulnerable" Kids Going Country: Children and Young People's Involvement in County Lines Drug Dealing', *Youth Justice* 20, no. 1–2 (April 2020): 64–78, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473225420902840.

99 James Alexander, *Dealing, Music and Youth Violence: Neighbourhood Relational Change, Isolation and Youth Criminality* (Bristol University Press, 2023), https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529216530.

100 Emma Alleyne and Jane L. Wood, 'Gang Involvement: Social and Environmental Factors', *Crime & Delinquency* 60, no. 4 (June 2014): 547–68, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128711398029; Sarah Frisby-Osman and Jane L. Wood, 'Rethinking How We View Gang Members: An Examination into Affective, Behavioral, and Mental Health Predictors of UK Gang-Involved Youth', *Youth Justice* 20, no. 1–2 (April 2020): 93–112, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473225419893779; Andrew O'Hagan and Charles James Edmundson, 'County Lines: The Exploitation of Vulnerable Members of Society', *Forensic Research & Criminology International Journal* 9, no. 2 (19 August 2021): 47–57, https://doi.org/10.15406/frcij.2021.09.00340; Windle, Moyle, and Coomber, '"Vulnerable" Kids Going Country'.

Experience of Caring and Care

Young carers

The 2021 census pointed to there being approximately 120,000 children aged between 5-18 years of age in England who are young carers – those who care for someone at home with physical or mental health needs, often at the level that would be expected of an adult. However, the 2023/24 Schools Census reports on almost 54,000 young people who are known to be young carers.[101] This discrepancy points to a large number of children and young people not disclosing their status to their schools. Young carers may experience increased rates of bullying and victimisation, and greater difficulties making friends. They are also more likely to miss school.[102]

Research indicates that young carers experience poorer mental and physical health compared to their non-caregiving peers, particularly those with intense caregiving roles.[103] This might be because of social isolation and inadequate support, but also of chronic stress and neglect of own health and needs.[104] However, there are also benefits associated with caring – and while caring for a family member is certainly a challenge, it is also for many a source of pride.[105]

Children in care

Children in care face significant vulnerabilities that affect various areas of their lives and overall wellbeing. They often experience instability because of frequent placement changes contributing to lower academic performance, a higher likelihood of unemployment and increased rates of homelessness compared to their peers.[106] Children in care, particularly older children, are at greater risk for poorer wellbeing and mental health issues.[107,108]

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101 DfE, 'Schools, Pupils and Their Characteristics', 2024, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/9636dfb1-4b8e-4e14-3e1f-08dc65d12a8f; ONS, 'Unpaid Care by Age, Sex and Deprivation, England and Wales: Census 2021', 2023, https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/socialcare/articles/unpaidcarebyagesexanddeprivationenglandandwales/census2021.

102 Sarah Cheesbrough et al., *The Lives of Young Carers in England: Omnibus Survey Report : Research Report*, Research Report (Great Britain. Department for Education) 636 ([London]: Department for Education, 2017).

103 Rebecca E Lacey, Baowen Xue, and Anne McMunn, 'The Mental and Physical Health of Young Carers: A Systematic Review', *The Lancet Public Health* 7, no. 9 (1 September 2022): e787–96, https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(22)00161-X; Ludmila Fleitas Alfonzo et al., 'Mental Health of Young Informal Carers: A Systematic Review', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 57, no. 12 (1 December 2022): 2345–58, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-022-02333-8.

104 Maren Roling et al., 'Early Caregiving Experiences and the Impact on Transition into Adulthood and Further Life: A Literature Review', *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences* 34, no. 3 (2020): 539–51, https://doi.org/10.1111/scs.12757.

105 Helena D. Rose and Keren Cohen, 'The Experiences of Young Carers: A Meta-Synthesis of Qualitative Findings', *Journal of Youth Studies* 13, no. 4 (August 2010): 473–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261003801739.

106 Laura Gypen et al., 'Outcomes of Children Who Grew up in Foster Care: Systematic-Review', *Children and Youth Services Review* 76 (1 May 2017): 74–83, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.02.035.

107 Claire Baker, L Briheim-Crookall, and J Selwyn, 'The Wellbeing of Children in Care and Care Leavers - Learning from the Bright Spots Programme' (Dartington: Coram, Research in Practice and Rees Centre, University of Oxford, 2022), https://www.coram.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/learning_from_the_bright_spots_programme_sb_web.pdf; Aimee Cummings and Katherine Shelton, 'The Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders amongst Care-Experienced Young People in the UK: A Systematic Review', *Children and Youth Services Review* 156 (January 2024): 107367, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107367; Karine Dubois-Comtois et al., 'Are Children and Adolescents in Foster Care at Greater Risk of Mental Health Problems than Their Counterparts? A Meta-Analysis', *Children and Youth Services Review* 127 (1 August 2021): 106100, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106100; Amy D. Engler et al., 'A Systematic Review of Mental Health Disorders of Children in Foster Care', *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 23, no. 1 (1 January 2022): 255–64, https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838020941197; Rhiannon Evans et al., 'Comparison of Suicidal Ideation, Suicide Attempt and Suicide in Children and Young People in Care and Non-Care Populations: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Prevalence', *Children and Youth Services Review* 82 (1 November 2017): 122–29, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.09.020; Colette McAuley and Teresa Davis, 'Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health of Looked after Children in England', *Child & Family Social Work* 14, no. 2 (May 2009): 147–55, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2009.00619.x.

108 National Institute for Health and Care Excellence(NICE), 'Looked-after Children and Young People: NICE Guideline' (Public Health England, 2021), https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng205/resources/lookedafter-children-and-young-people-pdf-66143716414405.

Factors such as trauma, behavioural difficulties, and special educational needs, as well as pre-care experiences, including maltreatment and socio-economic context play a significant role in shaping educational outcomes.[109] Supportive relationships with caregivers and teachers help to mitigate the adversities faced by these children by supporting emotional stability, fostering resilience and improving educational performance.[110] Research suggests being in care may support academic outcomes, with those in care for at least two years tending to perform better academically than those who enter care more recently and those receiving social care at home.[111]

Adopted children

Research indicates that adoptees face unique challenges in their peer relationships and overall well-being. While adopted children generally perform better academically than those in care, they still show lower school performance and IQ compared to the general population, alongside higher rates of emotional and behavioural problems.[112]

Care leavers and transition to adulthood

The transition to adulthood for care leavers is influenced by various interrelated factors that significantly impact their mental and physical health and overall well-being. Research shows that care leavers often experience negative health outcomes, exacerbated by adverse childhood experiences both before and during their time in care.[113] Social networks, type of care placement and stability, socio-economic background, housing, employment, and education are all factors which may influence health. Evidence suggests that social support, emotional regulation skills and stability in the years leading up to aging out of care are vital for mental health outcomes post-transition.[114]

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109 Aoife O'Higgins, Judy Sebba, and Frances Gardner, 'What Are the Factors Associated with Educational Achievement for Children in Kinship or Foster Care: A Systematic Review', *Children and Youth Services Review* 79 (1 August 2017): 198–220, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.06.004; Nikki Luke and Aoife O'Higgins, 'Is the Care System to Blame for the Poor Educational Outcomes of Children Looked After? Evidence from a Systematic Review and National Database Analysis', *Children Australia* 43, no. 2 (1 June 2018): 135–51, https://doi.org/10.61605/cha_2121; Stephan Lund and Cathy Stokes, 'The Educational Outcomes of Children in Care – a Scoping Review', 9 November 2020, https://doi.org/10.61605/cha_2248.

110 Brianne H. Kothari, Jennifer Blakeslee, and Rebecca Miller, 'Individual and Interpersonal Factors Associated with Psychosocial Functioning among Adolescents in Foster Care: A Scoping Review', *Children and Youth Services Review* 118 (1 November 2020): 105454, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105454; Lund and Stokes, 'The Educational Outcomes of Children in Care – a Scoping Review'; O'Higgins, Sebba, and Gardner, 'What Are the Factors Associated with Educational Achievement for Children in Kinship or Foster Care'.

111 Luke and O'Higgins, 'Is the Care System to Blame for the Poor Educational Outcomes of Children Looked After?'

112 Brown, Ecclestone, and Emmel, 'The Many Faces of Vulnerability'.

113 Luke Power and Mark Hardy, 'Predictors of Care Leavers' Health Outcomes: A Scoping Review', *Children and Youth Services Review* 157 (1 February 2024): 107416, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107416.

114 Alice R. Phillips et al., 'A Scoping Review of Factors Associated With the Mental Health of Young People Who Have "Aged Out" of the Child Welfare System', *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 25, no. 3 (1 July 2024): 1780–98, https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231196107.

Young people experiencing clear vulnerabilities – such as exploitation – face a 'cliff edge' of support at 18 years of age when they are no longer recognised as 'victims' in need of safeguarding response but instead are viewed as adults making choices which may lead to a criminal justice response. However, the harms and vulnerabilities they faced at 17 do not change overnight, neither do the environmental and structural factors – such as poverty and inequality – that very often underpin these vulnerabilities.[115] Many have argued that this binary system – 'in which people are viewed as either vulnerable or culpable, depending on their age' – creates an approach to safeguarding which fails to respond effectively to a young person's changing needs leading to worsening outcomes for individuals as they transition into adulthood.[116]

115 D Holmes and L Smith, 'Transitional Safeguarding' (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2022).

116 Christine Cocker et al., 'Transitional Safeguarding: Presenting the Case for Developing Making Safeguarding Personal for Young People in England', *The Journal of Adult Protection* 23, no. 3 (23 June 2021): 144–57, https://doi.org/10.1108/JAP-09-2020-0043; Holmes and Smith, 'Transitional Safeguarding'.

Mental Health

Children and young people

In England, around one-in-five children and young people live with a mental health condition.[117] Despite this, mental health services for children are difficult to access with high thresholds and long waiting lists, leaving some children and young people more vulnerable to further escalation in their mental health needs, compounding other vulnerabilities where those intersect.[118] It is important to acknowledge a complex overlap between mental health and SEND, impacting academic attendance, exclusion and overall attainment. The personal, social and economic costs of mental health difficulties are high, and there is emerging evidence that the prevalence of mental health conditions in young people have been increasing.[119,120]

Mental health conditions are even more prevalent among care leavers and children in care,[121,122] yet research shows that children and young people who have social work involvement and those living in poverty are even more likely to be refused mental health support following referral, leaving them at heightened risk of harm and/or poor outcomes.[123]

Parental mental health

Parental mental health can have an important impact on children[124] and may contribute towards vulnerability in children in a myriad of ways. These might include an impact on early bonding and attachment with an infant, relationship difficulties between adults in the family, and social difficulties with friends caused by bullying, stigma or low self-esteem.[125] There are also important intersections with financial hardship, which have an additive impact on child mental health.[126]

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117 NHS England, 'Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - Wave 4 Follow up to the 2017 Survey', 2023, https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up/copyright.

118 Children's Commissioner, 'Children's Mental Health Services 2022-23' (Children's Commissioner, 2024).

119 K Lyons-Ruth et al., 'The Worldwide Burden of Infant Mental and Emotional Disorder: Report of the Taskforce of the World Association for Infant Mental Health', *Infant Mental Health Journal* 38, no. 6 (November 2017): 695–705, https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.21674.

120 NHS England, 'Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - Wave 4 Follow up to the 2017 Survey'.

121 Baker, Briheim-Crookall, and Selwyn, 'The Wellbeing of Children in Care and Care Leavers - Learning from the Bright Spots Programme'; McAuley and Davis, 'Emotional Well-being and Mental Health of Looked after Children in England'; National Institute for Health and Care Excellence(NICE), 'Looked-after Children and Young People: NICE Guideline'.

122 Baker, Briheim-Crookall, and Selwyn, 'The Wellbeing of Children in Care and Care Leavers - Learning from the Bright Spots Programme';
Jo Dixon, 'Young People Leaving Care: Health, Well-being and Outcomes', *Child & Family Social Work* 13, no. 2 (May 2008): 207–17, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2007.00538.x.

123 J Mannes et al., 'A Call for Change Tackling Inequalities in Access to Mental Health Support for Children with Social Work Involvement and Those Living in Poverty' (National Children's Bureau, 2024), https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/240813%20A%20call%20for%20change%20-%20COACHES%20report.pdf.2024

124 C Kamis, 'The Long-Term Impact of Parental Mental Health on Children's Distress Trajectories in Adulthood', *Society and Mental Health* 11, no. 1 (2021): 54–68, https://doi.org/10.1177/2156869320912520.

125 CMH Hosman, KTM Van Doesum, and F Van Santvoort, 'Prevention of Emotional Problems and Psychiatric Risks in Children of Parents with a Mental Illness in the Netherlands: I. The Scientific Basis to a Comprehensive Approach', *Australian E-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health* 8, no. 3 (2009): 250–63, https://doi.org/10.5172/jamh.8.3.250; R Shetgiri, H Lin, and G Flores, 'Suboptimal Maternal and Paternal Mental Health Are Associated with Child Bullying Perpetration', *Child Psychiatry & Human Development* 46, no. 3 (2015): 455–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-014-0485-z.

126 E Fitzsimons et al., 'Poverty Dynamics and Parental Mental Health: Determinants of Childhood Mental Health in the UK', *Social Science & Medicine* 175 (February 2017): 43–51, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.12.040; S Wickham et al., 'The Effect of a Transition into Poverty on Child and Maternal Mental Health: A Longitudinal Analysis of the UK Millennium Cohort Study', *The Lancet Public Health* 2, no. 3 (March 2017): e141–48, https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(17)30011-7.

Maltreatment

Child maltreatment is associated with a wide range of long enduring negative physical, mental and psychosocial health outcomes for those infants, children and young people who are exposed. Maltreatment can also lead to insecure attachments, risky behaviours, academic difficulties and suicidal tendencies, with more severe outcomes seen in those who experience prolonged abuse.[127] Maltreatment, in all its forms, is strongly associated with social disadvantage and poverty, with greater deprivation increasing the likelihood and severity of child abuse and neglect.[128]

Neglect is the most prevalent form of maltreatment and can happen at any age, with impacts often being both severe and long-lasting.[129] Despite this, research suggests that neglect has become normalised as it is so widespread, professionals expressing reticence in reporting it, deeming it not of sufficient concern.[130] This might be particularly pertinent to adolescents, where neglect might be under-identified and inadequately addressed.[131]

Parental substance use

Children exposed to parental substance use face a range of vulnerabilities, with prenatal substance exposure strongly linked to increased risks of child maltreatment and involvement with child protection services.[132] Children of substance-using parents often endure chaotic and unpredictable environments, marked by poverty and insecurity, which can lead to emotional distress, isolation and feelings of stigma.[133]

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127 L Radford et al., 'Child Abuse and Neglect in the UK Today' (NSPCC, 2011); Alan Carr, Hollie Duff, and Fiona Craddock, 'A Systematic Review of Reviews of the Outcome of Noninstitutional Child Maltreatment', *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 21, no. 4 (1 October 2020): 828–43, https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018801334.

128 Bywaters, P; L Bunting; G Davidson, *The Relationship between Poverty, Child Abuse and Neglect: And Evidence Review* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016).

129 M Brandon et al., 'Missed Opportunities: Indicators of Neglect – What Is Ignored, Why, and What Can Be Done?', 2014; Steve Flood and Dez Holmes, 'Child Neglect and Its Relationship to Other Forms of Harm - Responding Effectively to Children's Needs: Evidence Scopes', Research in Practice, 2016, https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2016/november/child-neglect-and-its-relationship-to-other-forms-of-harm-responding-effectively-to-children-s-needs-evidence-scopes/; N. Hindley, PG Ramchandani, and DPH Jones, 'Risk Factors for Recurrence of Maltreatment: A Systematic Review', *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 91, no. 9 (1 September 2006): 744–52, https://doi.org/10.1136/adc.2005.085639; NSPCC, 'Child Protection Plan Statistics: England 2019-2023' (NSPCC, 2023), https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/3neb415q/child-protection-plan-register-statistics-england-2019-2023.pdf; M O'Hara et al., 'Children Neglected: Where Cumulative Risk Theory Fails', *Child Abuse & Neglect* 45 (July 2015): 1–8, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.03.007.

130 L Bullock et al., 'Identifying and Responding to Child Neglect: Exploring the Professional Experiences of Primary School Teachers and Family Support Workers', *Child Abuse Review* 28, no. 3 (May 2019): 209–24, https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2558; NSPCC, 'Too Little, Too Late: The Multi-Agency Response to Identifying and Tackling Neglect' (NSPCC, 2024), https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/cfanzypa/too-little-late-multi-agency-response-neglect.pdf.

131 Ofsted, 'Growing up Neglected: A Multi-Agency Response to Older Children', 2018; Gwyther Rees et al., 'Safeguarding Young People: Responding to Young People Aged 11 to 17 Who Are Maltreated' (The Children's Society, 2010), https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/pubs/pdf/safeguarding.pdf.

132 AE Austin et al., 'Prenatal Substance Exposure and Child Maltreatment: A Systematic Review', *Child Maltreatment* 27, no. 2 (1 May 2022): 290–315, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559521990116; Madeleine Powell et al., 'The Burden of Prenatal and Early Life Maternal Substance Use among Children at Risk of Maltreatment: A Systematic Review', *Drug and Alcohol Review* 43, no. 4 (2024): 823–47, https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.13835.

133 C Muir et al., 'A Systematic Review of Qualitative Studies Exploring Lived Experiences, Perceived Impact, and Coping Strategies of Children and Young People Whose Parents Use Substances', *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 24, no. 5 (1 December 2023): 3629–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380221134297.

Homelessness

Children and young people who experience homelessness are exposed to a wide range of vulnerabilities that increase their risk of poor physical, mental and behavioural health outcomes. Homeless children often have a history of trauma, mental health issues, involvement in criminality, substance use and academic struggles, all of which contribute to their precarious situations.[134] Frequent relocations and living in temporary housing or shelters leads to feelings of isolation, shame and distress and create disruptions in education, which exacerbates academic challenges.[135] Research suggests that housing stress, including homelessness, also increase the likelihood of child maltreatment.[136] Protective factors identified by research include strong family connections, supportive school environments and effective parenting.[137]

Older children and young people who present as homeless have often been overlooked in terms of identification and support, yet the scale of homelessness is substantial with over 58,000 16-24 years olds reported as homeless in 2024. It is worth noting that these figures do not account for a likely cohort of 'hidden homeless' children and young people who are not reflected in official statistics because of short-term, often precarious and unsafe, solutions, such as sofa-surfing.

Peer bullying and victimisation

In the UK, bullying affects about 27.33% of children.[138] It is clear that there are strong intersections between bullying and other indicators and causes of vulnerability. Maltreated children are particularly at risk, as both child abuse and neglect strongly predict bullying victimisation, while experiences such as exposure to domestic violence and parental mental health issues are associated with both bullying others and being victimised.[139] Racial, ethnic, and minority status are also key risk factors, with minority, immigrant, and LGBTQ+ youth disproportionately targeted due to stereotypes and discrimination.[140]

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134 RE Grattan et al., 'Risk and Resilience Factors for Youth Homelessness in Western Countries: A Systematic Review', *Psychiatric Services* 73, no. 4 (April 2022): 425–38, https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.202000133; Dominika A. Winiarski et al., 'Addressing Intersecting Social and Mental Health Needs Among Transition-Age Homeless Youths: A Review of the Literature', *Psychiatric Services* 72, no. 3 (March 2021): 317–24, https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201900498.

135 S Murran and E Brady, 'How Does Family Homelessness Impact on Children's Development? A Critical Review of the Literature', *Child & Family Social Work* 28, no. 2 (2023): 360–71, https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12968.

136 CE Chandler, AE Austin, and ME Shanahan, 'Association of Housing Stress With Child Maltreatment: A Systematic Review', *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 23, no. 2 (1 April 2022): 639–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838020939136.

137 S D'Sa et al., 'The Psychological Impact of Childhood Homelessness—a Literature Review', *Irish Journal of Medical Science (1971 -)* 190, no. 1 (2021): 411–17, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11845-020-02256-w; Yuri Flach and Timothy S. Razza, 'Suicidality in Homeless Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Review', *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 64 (1 May 2022): 101575, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2021.101575.

138 A Nation et al., 'Prevalence of Violence against Children in the United Kingdom: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis', *Child Abuse & Neglect* 146 (1 December 2023): 106518, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106518.

139 H Lee et al., 'The Effect of Childhood Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Exposure on Bullying: A Systematic Review', *Journal of Family Violence* 37, no. 8 (November 2022): 1283–1300, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-021-00299-w; A Nocentini et al., 'Parents, Family Characteristics and Bullying Behavior: A Systematic Review', *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, Bullying and cyberbullying: Protective factors and effective interventions, 45 (1 March 2019): 41–50, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2018.07.010; GJ Merrin et al., 'Adverse Childhood Experiences and Bullying During Adolescence: A Systematic Literature Review of Two Decades', *Adolescent Research Review* 9, no. 3 (1 September 2024): 513–41, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-023-00229-5.

140 Sapouna, de Amicis, and Vezzali, 'Bullying Victimization Due to Racial, Ethnic, Citizenship and/or Religious Status'; Mariah Xu et al., 'Racial and Ethnic Differences in Bullying: Review and Implications for Intervention', *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 50 (1 January 2020): 101340, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2019.101340.

Additionally, children with disabilities and children in residential care settings and in foster care, especially those with histories of maltreatment, are at greater risk of being victimised, leading to behavioural and emotional challenges such as hyperactivity, aggression and poor social-emotional adjustment.[141]

Protective factors, however, can mitigate some of the negative impacts of bullying. Supportive parenting practices and positive peer and school relationships can reduce the likelihood of victimisation and mental health difficulties[142] highlighting the importance of strong social support systems in preventing and addressing the detrimental effects of bullying on children's well-being.

Young parents

Teenage pregnancy is not often referred to by name in policy documents considered. However, we considered it to be another important example of where an indicator of disadvantage intersects with other factors in a broad sense. Being the child of a young parent does not make them vulnerable per se, but the associations with lower educational attainment, unemployment and limited social support increase the likelihood of poor health and mental health outcomes for both the mother and child.[143] These challenges are compounded by the fact that teenage mothers often experience higher levels of deprivation both before and after pregnancy, and are less likely to complete their education or training. This means that they have limited employment opportunities, increasing the risk of long-term economic hardship and reinforcing a cycle of poverty.[144] Children born to teen parents in these situations are vulnerable not only because of their parents' young age but due to the wider socio-economic and mental health challenges that increase the risk of poor health and well-being for both parents and their children.[145]

141 H Brett et al., 'Bullying for Children in Social Care: The Role of Interpersonal Relationships', *International Journal of Developmental Science*, 2025; Angela Mazzone, Annalaura Nocentini, and Ersilia Menesini, 'Bullying and Peer Violence among Children and Adolescents in Residential Care Settings: A Review of the Literature', *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 38 (1 January 2018): 101–12, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2017.12.004.

142 G Serafini et al., 'The Relationship Between Bullying Victimization and Perpetration and Non-Suicidal Self-Injury: A Systematic Review', *Child Psychiatry & Human Development* 54, no. 1 (1 February 2023): 154–75, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-021-01231-5.

143 C Xavier, A Benoit, and HK Brown, 'Teenage Pregnancy and Mental Health beyond the Postpartum Period: A Systematic Review', *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 72, no. 6 (1 June 2018): 451–57, https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2017-209923; S. Paranjothy et al., 'Teenage Pregnancy: Who Suffers?', *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 94, no. 3 (1 March 2009): 239–45, https://doi.org/10.1136/adc.2007.115915.

144 Paranjothy et al., 'Teenage Pregnancy'.

145 Action for Children, 'The next Chapter: Young People and Parenthood' (Action for Children, 2017), https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/the-next-chapter.pdf.

Conclusion

This literature review aimed to consider the theoretical, research and policy literature relating to the conceptualisation of vulnerability in children, young people and learners. We acknowledge that this is not an exhaustive review, rather a rapid scoping review of a broad area that has taken a narrative approach to the research and policy landscape. We also acknowledge that there are likely to be gaps in the second round of in-depth reviews that were based on common and frequently used conceptualisation in research and policy literature. This is not to say that any area that is not covered by this review is less important – rather that the areas of in-depth study should be taken as illustrative examples of the importance of understanding how an individual interacts with the systems around them, how indicators and causes of vulnerabilities might interact and how that is likely to vary according to the age and developmental stage of the child or young person.

There is no single and straightforward definition of vulnerability ready for universal application, and indeed, it is argued by some not to be a useful term at all. However, it is clear that any conceptualisation needs to take account of both the individual and the systems that exist around them, at multiple levels – proximal and more distal. A child or young person does not move through a neutral landscape with only their 'own' vulnerabilities impacting their outcomes – this sort of conceptualisation risks entrenching stigma and blame attributed to children and families. This approach can risk making space for a helplessness amongst professionals. Theoretical models that consider an individual and their ecology are helpful in that they consider the interactions between children and their families, schools, health and social care services, and their respective regulatory bodies; allowing for greater interrogation of where services might be improved to better meet the needs of those children and families that they serve. It does not suggest that individual services should be responsible for solving all of the challenges a child might face, rather an ecological model allows these challenges to be noticed and articulated, facilitating action to address them relevant to the aims of the service. This review has observed that this sort of conceptualisation is becoming increasingly part of the policy landscape.

It is also useful to use an ecosystems model to understand how drivers interact in order to know where best to focus intervention efforts. For example, although poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage were not the focus of this review, many of the conceptualisations and examples considered in this review demonstrate an intersection with poverty. However, it should not be imagined that socioeconomic disadvantage is the most significant driver of poor outcomes; prejudice and bias, stigma and physical and emotional harm are potential causes and consequences of socioeconomic disadvantage but also have their own pathways to deleterious outcomes that should be accounted for.

This rapid evidence review informed the two rounds of consultation with professionals and an internal discussion paper for Ofsted, exploring the tensions noted across the literature on how vulnerability might be conceptualised. The **final report**, published in June 2025, summarises the learning from the project.

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