



National Audit Office




REPORT

Support for vulnerable adolescents

Cross-government

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Cross-government

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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Gareth Davies
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

8 November 2022

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The National Audit Office study team consisted of:


Leo Abraham, Rosie Buckley, Sophie McCammond, Marco Spataro and Philip Taylor under the direction of Ashley McDougall.

For further information about the National Audit Office please contact:

National Audit Office
Press Office
157-197 Buckingham Palace Road
Victoria
London
SW1W 9SP

 020 7798 7400

 www.nao.org.uk

 @NAOorguk

Key facts

£2bn

spending on various additional programmes which support families, vulnerable adolescents and children, announced at the 2021 Spending Review

£23bn

estimate of the annual social cost of adverse outcomes for children who have ever needed a social care worker

7.3m

adolescents aged 9- to 19-years-old in England mid-year 2020

26%

increase in the number of 9- to 17-year-olds in care between 31 March 2014 and 31 March 2021, which is higher than the increase in the total number of children in care (18%)

82%

reduction in the number of children cautioned or sentenced between 2010-11 and 2020-21

142%

increase in referrals of children to secondary mental health services between 2016-17 and 2021-22

72%

of children sentenced in 2019-20 were assessed as having mental health concerns and 71% had communication concerns

81%

of children cautioned or sentenced for an offence had ever been persistently absent from school according to government research published in 2022

6.3%

of 16- to 19-year-olds were not in employment, education or training (NEET) in 2021, an improvement from the 9.2% NEET in 2000

Summary

- 1** There are approximately 7.3 million 9- to 19-year-olds in England. There is no single definition of adolescence; it covers more than one educational phase as well as growing maturity and independence. We include, for the purpose of this report, this wide age group as it captures the period when children start to be exposed to risks from outside the home through to their leaving education and entering the adult world.
- 2** Some adolescents are vulnerable to seriously adverse, avoidable outcomes such as physical or mental harm (including exploitation), leading to entry to the care system; contact with the criminal justice system; periods of not being in education, employment or training (NEET); or severe mental health difficulties. If these adolescents do not receive effective support, from whatever source, at the right time, their problems may become entrenched and require intense and expensive support to reverse or mitigate any harm.
- 3** When vulnerable adolescents are not identified and provided with effective and timely support the costs to society can be significant. The government does not know the full costs of these adverse outcomes. In 2021 the Independent Review of Children's Social Care estimated the lifetime social cost of adverse outcomes for all children who have ever needed a social worker at £23 billion a year. This estimate covers all children who have ever needed a social worker, includes the cost of children's services and makes an estimate of the consequences, but it does not include costs for those children who have never had a social worker. It nevertheless provides an indication of the scale of the cost of adverse outcomes for society.
- 4** Universal services, such as attendance at school, are the first line of public support for all young people. However, for some this will not be enough and specific programmes will be needed to provide additional support or interventions to promote their welfare, help them achieve better life outcomes and avoid costly intervention and support later. Support is largely delivered through local bodies, which work in partnership to identify, protect and safeguard children. Each local authority area has a statutory multi-agency safeguarding partnership, which comprises the local authority, NHS integrated care board and chief officer of police. The three partners work with other local bodies, including schools, colleges, GPs, probation services and providers of childcare, to protect the welfare of children in their area.

5 Several government departments have lead policy responsibilities that address the challenges facing vulnerable adolescents and those around them, for which they fund specific programmes to be delivered by local bodies. Because of the complexity and variety of the challenges involved, departments do not treat vulnerable adolescents as one group with a single, specific cross-government policy programme. The relevant responsibilities are:

- the Department for Education (DfE) is responsible for policy for children's services and education. It has a cross-cutting priority outcome objective to "support the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people through high-quality education and local services so that no one is left behind". There are six other departments which support this outcome and have policies and programmes designed to support vulnerable children, including adolescents;
- the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) provides the majority of funding for children's social care as part of the wider local government finance settlement, and councils decide how this is spent on children's services. The Department leads the Supporting Families programme, alongside DfE;
- the Department of Health & Social Care (DHSC) sets guidance and policy for health bodies including children and young people's mental health services (CYPMHS);
- the Home Office (HO) is responsible for protecting vulnerable communities, by preventing and reducing crime;
- the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) is responsible for family courts, support for children who have offended and sponsors the Youth Justice Board;
- the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) leads work on improving employment outcomes for benefit claimants and the Reducing Parental Conflict programme; and
- the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) sets policy on the voluntary sector, responding to online harms and provides central government funding to support the provision of youth services.

Scope of the report

6 Because of the potential costs to adolescents and society arising from serious adverse outcomes, we examined the information government uses to understand these issues and how well government bodies are working together to plan and deliver support to vulnerable adolescents who are at serious risk of avoidable adverse outcomes. Our report sets out evidence on the complexity of challenges facing vulnerable adolescents, the cumulative impact of adverse outcomes for adolescents and society, and the challenges for government to provide effective support and deliver value for money.

7 This differs from our more usual approach in which we would examine the value for money of a specific government programme or intervention. Our report does not consider the quality of locally delivered services, such as children’s social care or policing.

8 This summary provides our key findings, our conclusion and our recommendations, which build on research and improvement work already under way in government. Our audit approach is set out in Appendix One.

Key findings

Understanding the adverse outcomes faced by vulnerable adolescents

9 For the adverse outcomes we examined, government’s data show that:

- adolescents make up the largest number and are the fastest growing cohort of children in care. At 31 March 2021, there were 53,790 adolescents in care between the ages of 9 to 17, making up 67% of the total care population;
- 49,511 children aged 10–17 were arrested in 2020-21 for notifiable offences, down from 201,718 in 2010-11;
- referrals to secondary mental health services for 0–18-year-olds have increased from 482,640 in 2016-17 to 1,169,515 in 2021-22, with 17.4% of 6- to 16-year-olds having a probable mental health disorder in 2021; and
- 6.3% of 16- to 19-year-olds were not in employment, education or training (NEET) in 2021, an improvement from the 9.2% NEET in 2000.

(paragraphs 1.10, 1.22, 1.26 and Figure 3).

10 Adverse outcomes are often overlapping rather than self-contained.

Data available to government show, for example, that:

- 21.3% of 16- to 24-year-old NEETs had a mental health condition in 2021;
- 72% of children sentenced in 2019-20 were assessed as having mental health concerns and 71% as having communication concerns; and
- research published in 2022 found that 81% of children cautioned or sentenced for an offence had ever been persistently absent from school.

(paragraphs 1.30 and 1.32, Figure 9).

11 Adverse outcomes for adolescents vary across the country and by ethnicity.

For example, hospital admissions for under-18s with mental health conditions varied between local authorities from 21 to 251 per 100,000 in 2020-21. The proportion of children in youth custody who are white has reduced, while the proportion from minority ethnic backgrounds increased dramatically between 2010-11 and 2020-21. When asked about the causes of variation, national and local bodies told us that provision can be inconsistent, different localities have different challenges and the solutions that work in one place may not be applicable in another, leading to different outcomes (paragraphs 1.19 and 1.28, Figure 8).

12 The government does not fully understand the reasons for the dramatic fall in adolescents' formal contact with the criminal justice system in the past decade.

Between 2010-11 and 2020-21, the number of children cautioned or sentenced reduced from 85,300 to 15,751 (82%) and the number of first-time entrants to the youth criminal justice system reduced from 46,012 to 8,848 (81%). This means fewer children are receiving a criminal record with the adverse effects on their life chances, such as job opportunities in later life. While the government has carried out work to understand these falls, it does not have the information to fully understand what is driving this change. The MoJ considers changes to police activity and the efforts, including diversionary activity by youth justice services, to reduce the numbers of children who have offended entering the criminal justice system, contributed to the falls. By contrast, the latest demand analysis forecasts a long-term increase in the number of children in custody with the number of 15- to 17-year-olds in Young Offender Institutions now projected to double by 2025, compared with 2021. This projected increase is driven by court recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and government's plans to recruit around 23,000 additional police officers (paragraphs 1.17 to 1.19 and Figure 3).

13 Central government has a limited knowledge of whether the same adolescents are known to or receiving support from different local services but has started to try to join up data.

Different departments will record individual data for different purposes and data sets are not consistently joined up. For example, the HO told us that most of its data are focused on the offence rather than the person, making it hard to understand the person and circumstances that lead to the offending. This in turn makes it harder to understand how risks escalate and how support can be better targeted. Current initiatives to address the fragmentation of data sources include:

- the DfE and MoJ combined data in 2020, which improved their understanding of the link between offending and social care and educational background; and
- the MoJ-led Better Outcomes through Linked Data (BOLD) programme aims to show how linking and improving government data can improve the support provided for those with complex needs. BOLD will run until March 2024 and its findings will be used to deliver changes to how government supports those in need (paragraphs 2.17 to 2.21).

Government's approach to supporting vulnerable adolescents

14 We have calculated that the 2021 Spending Review announced £2 billion of additional spending, on various additional programmes which support families, vulnerable adolescents and children. The funding announced at the Spending Review was provided to seven departments over a number of years for specific initiatives proposed by departments. This is in addition to the ongoing funding for universal services, such as schools, and the £10.2 billion spent on children's services by local authorities in 2020-21. In addition, outside the 2021 Spending Review announcement there are other existing programmes which provide additional prevention and support services to vulnerable adolescents such as Violence Reduction Units (£170 million over four years 2019-2020 to 2022-23), the Youth Endowment Fund (£200 million since 2019 over 10 years) and SAFE (Support, Attend, Fulfil, Exceed) taskforces (£60 million over three years). Departments told us that it is not possible to provide a precise figure for total spending on vulnerable adolescents as government does not report expenditure by recipient age group (paragraphs 2.8 and 2.10 and Figure 12).

15 Two recent independent reviews of new multi-agency safeguarding arrangements found that while there has been some progress, arrangements are disjointed, fragmented and not yet fit for purpose. Individual services, such as children's social care, police services and schools can be effective in their own domains but need to be coordinated to address the full range of adverse outcomes identified in this report. New multi-agency safeguarding partnerships started in 2019, aimed at joining up the work of local bodies. Issues identified in two recent reviews included poor coordination between services, a lack of appropriate and timely information-sharing around cases, and services that are difficult to navigate for professionals, let alone adolescents and their families. Both reviews have been clear that there is much to do to build on existing good practice and implement effective multi-agency working (paragraphs 2.2 and 2.11 to 2.13).

16 Local bodies implementing policies led by different departments are navigating complex requirements which can lead to confusion at the local level. Central government told us it expects local partners to join up and it aims to incentivise this through programme design. However, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care found there is complexity and duplication in central government's governance and funding response to harms from outside the home, particularly at a local level, and that this creates confusion among local bodies about who is accountable. The multiple programmes from government often impact the same local authority teams, who themselves are then in some cases working with the same young people. Local bodies and other stakeholders told us the short-term nature of funding makes it difficult to sustain projects and allow for long-term planning. Our previous reports have shown that financial uncertainty, both short-term and long-term, creates risks for value for money as it encourages short-term decision-making and undermines strategic planning (paragraphs 2.13 to 2.15 and 2.26, Figure 13).

17 While departments work together on programmes and initiatives there is no overall strategic assessment of whether vulnerable adolescents' needs are being addressed. Departments use mechanisms such as 16 multi-departmental boards to manage projects which cut across different department responsibilities, such as the Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme Board, co-led by DfE and DHSC. However, there is no joined-up assessment of the extent to which cumulative government interventions have succeeded in improving outcomes for vulnerable adolescents. Vulnerable adolescents may need support from more than one organisation or government programme, which underlines the need for a coordinated and collaborative approach between policy teams and delivery bodies. There has been no overall analysis of the policies and programmes that support vulnerable adolescents to identify gaps and overlaps in support and inform policy development. Without a strategic approach to planning there is a risk of gaps and overlaps in support (paragraphs 2.28 to 2.30 and 2.37, Figure 14).

18 There are gaps in the evidence of what works to support vulnerable adolescents. There is a body of evidence of what works to prevent offending behaviour by children. For example, the Youth Endowment Fund has produced a toolkit showing a range of initiatives that are effective at preventing serious violence. However, there is less evidence on interventions that prevent other adverse outcomes, such as how best to support adolescents at risk of being taken into care. Stakeholders also told us that less is known about how to scale projects up, sustain them over longer periods of time and incentivise adoption of well-evidenced good practice. There are examples of government providing funding to local bodies on the condition they draw on evidence of what works, but this is not universal. In addition, it is not clear how or where all the evaluation will be brought together to provide coherent advice and support to local places (paragraphs 2.34 to 2.37).

Conclusion on value for money

19 Identifying and supporting vulnerable adolescents to reduce the risk of adverse outcomes is complex. But if it is done successfully, the potential savings in damage to lives and costs to other public services are very great. We have calculated that the government has announced the spending of approximately £2 billion through seven different departments on various additional programmes which support families, vulnerable adolescents and children. Our examination suggests that there are gaps in government's understanding of the relationship between risk factors and adverse outcomes for vulnerable adolescents and what works to support them. Government departments work together on certain programmes and interventions, such as Supporting Families, or targeted spending such as the Violence Reduction Units, but there is no overall strategic approach, so government does not know whether there are gaps or overlaps in the support for vulnerable adolescents. Local services are putting in place arrangements to join up their efforts but there are signs that this is not yet effective. These gaps in knowledge and lack of a strategic approach mean it is not possible for government to know whether it is currently providing value for money and addressing the needs of adolescents as effectively as it could.

Recommendations

20 Central government needs to know whether the programmes it funds and the extra £2 billion it has committed are well targeted to reducing the long-term damage to vulnerable adolescents and costs to the country. To do this it will need a shared strategic, data-led view of the complex set of problems it is trying to address, and a strong evidence base to determine the most efficient and effective ways of addressing them, which may involve challenging the existing programmatic approach across government.

21 We recommend that those central government departments involved should, through formal governance, work together to:

- a** **build on recent data-sharing exercises to understand better the relationship between risk factors and adverse outcomes for vulnerable adolescents;**
- b** **address the gaps in the evidence base of what interventions work to support vulnerable adolescents;**
- c** **agree some cross-government objectives and outcome measures for supporting those vulnerable adolescents most in need of support**, along with data sources and methods of tracking progress, by June 2023; and
- d** **set out how they will support local bodies to improve local safeguarding arrangements and respond to the two recent reviews which found they were not yet adequately joined-up or effective.**