

Policy Brief

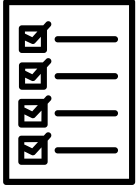
Young carers post-16 academic attainment in England

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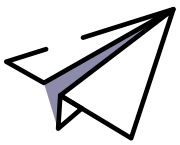
Key Findings – Summary

Lower attainment



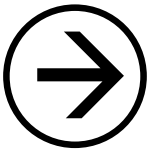
- Young carers obtained **fewer qualifications**. On average, young carers obtained **19% fewer A-Level passes** than non-carers.

Key attainment benchmarks missed



- Young carers are 60% less likely to attain the key benchmark of achieving **three or more A-levels** or equivalent qualifications.

Higher likelihood of vocational route



- Young carers were **64% more likely** to follow a **vocational** qualification pathway, even though they don't show better outcomes in vocational attainment.

Persistent gaps beyond socioeconomic status



- Socioeconomic differences **do not explain** these academic difference between young carers and non-carers.

What education stage did we analyse?

This study focuses on **Key Stage 5** — the final phase of secondary education in **England**. It includes students in Year 13, **aged 16–18**, studying for **A-Levels** and equivalent qualifications

Background

Young carers remain a critical yet often under-recognised group of carers in the UK.

Although some research has explored how caring affects their academic outcomes, much of it relies on self-reported **attainment data**, which may not fully capture the extent of the

challenges young carers encounter. Many continue to go unnoticed in educational environments, limiting their access to the support they need. Developing a clearer understanding of attainment patterns could support earlier identification and help educational institutions provide more targeted interventions.

This is the first academic study to examine the **association between young caring and educational attainment at Key stage 5**, the final phase of secondary education in England, usually **covering students aged 16 to 18** and including **A-levels and equivalent** qualifications, typically taken in sixth form or further education colleges.

What do we mean by 'Young carers'?

A young carer is someone aged under 18 who cares for a friend or family member, due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction.

Objective

We aimed to understand the effect of becoming a young carer on educational attainment at Key Stage 5.

Methods

This study analysed **linked** data from Understanding Society (UK Household Longitudinal Study) with the National Pupil Database (NPD). This data linkage combines **self-reported information on young caring** with **official administrative records on educational attainment**.¹

Sample

3,306 students aged 16–18 in Key Stage 5 in England.

Educational attainment at Key Stage 5 (KS5)

We used data from 2009 to 2018.

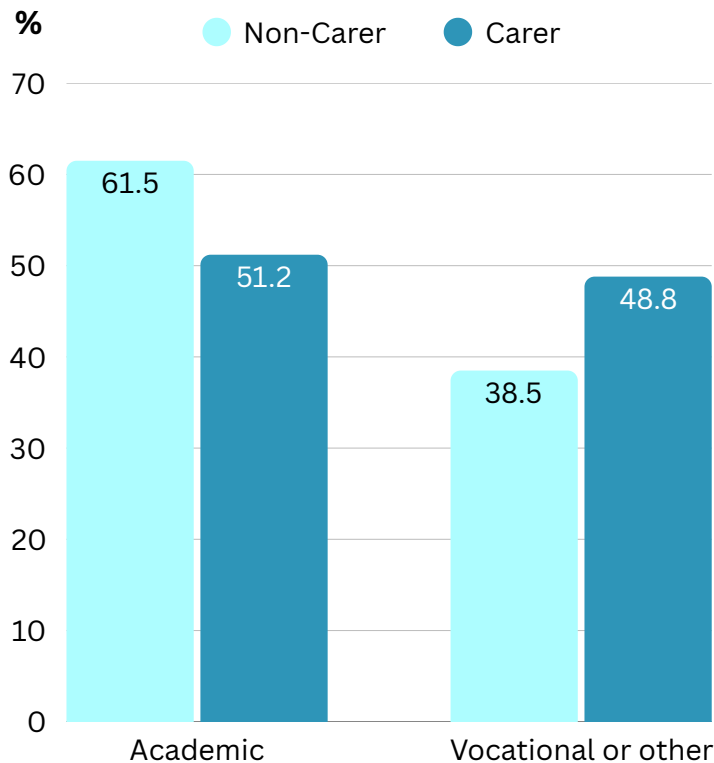
KS5 attainment was assessed using a range of indicators. These included:

- The qualification route taken by the student:
 - Academic or Vocational
- The number of passes at:
 - A-Level and equivalencies
 - GCE A-Level*
 - VCE A-Level*
 - VCE-AS-Level
 - VCE/GCE Applied AS-Level
- Key benchmarks:
 - Achieved equivalent of three A-Levels in A-Level qualifications
 - Achieved three A-levels in academic qualifications
 - Achieved three A-Levels in vocational qualifications

*GCE and VCE A-Levels were both UK pathways to higher education between 2009 and 2018, but differed in focus: VCE A-Levels were vocational, emphasising practical and industry-related skills, while GCE A-Levels were academically oriented.

Findings

Qualification route



8%

of **16 to 18** year olds reported having care responsibilities.

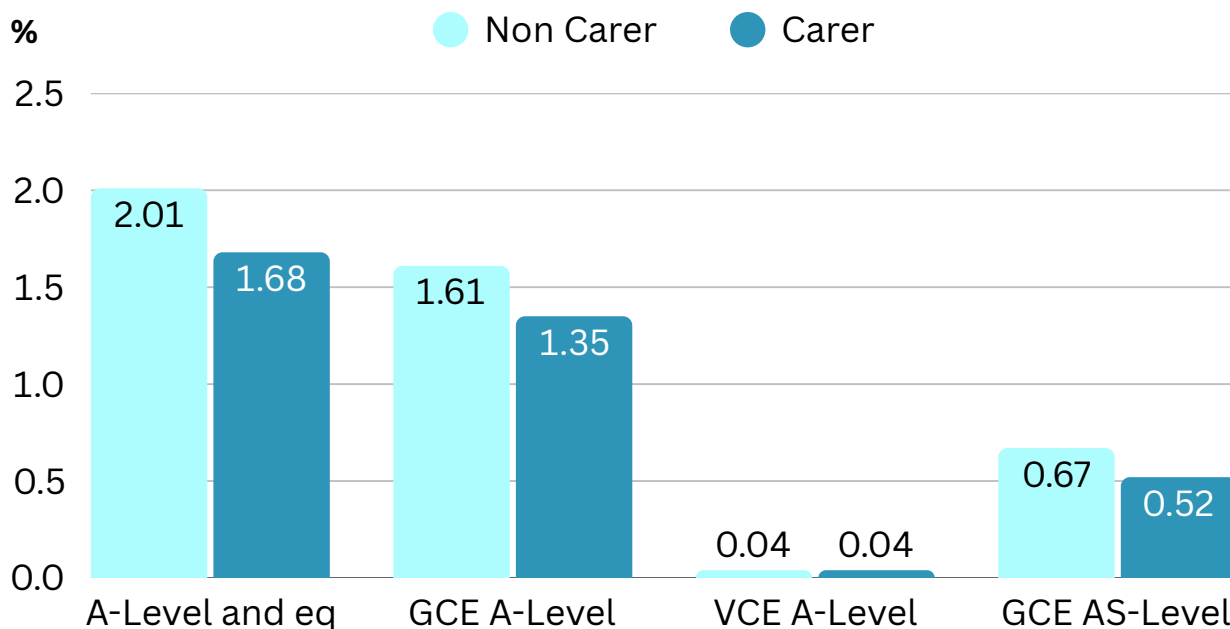
This equates to approximately 1 in 13 students at KS5

Young carers are

64%

more likely to follow a vocational qualification route than non-carers

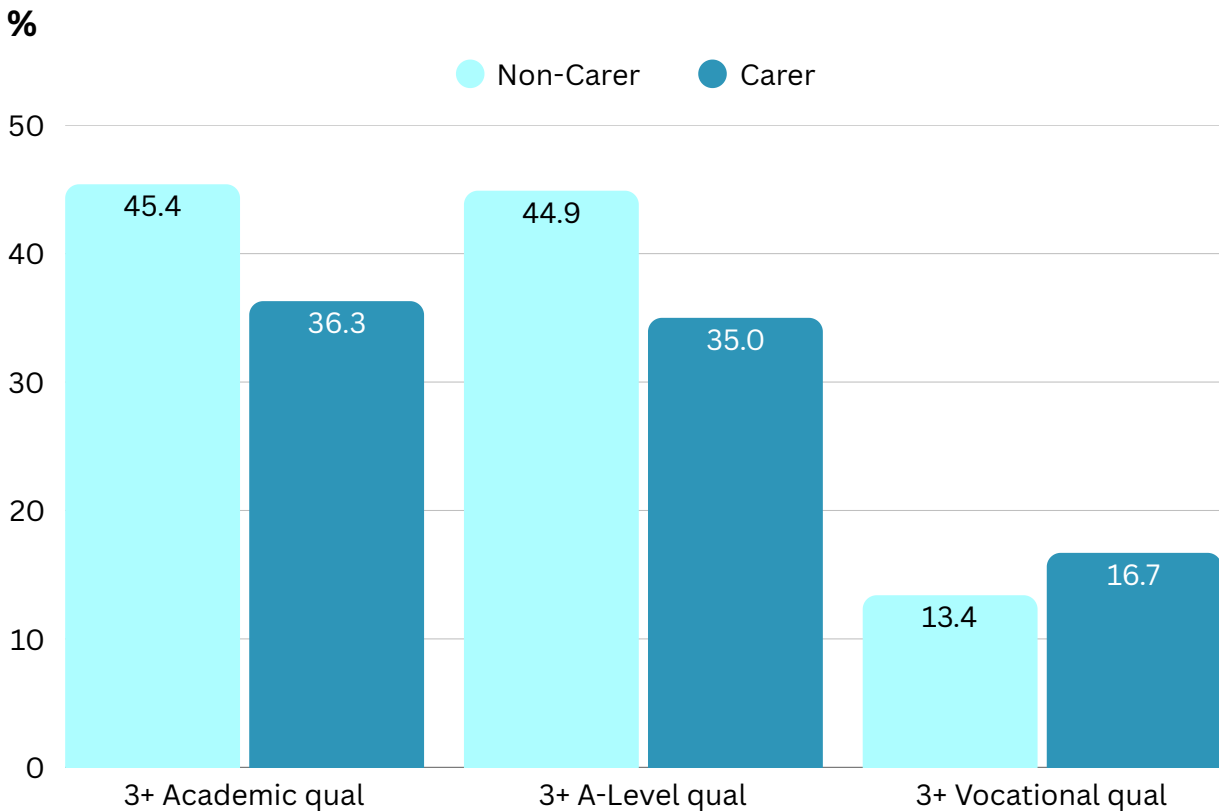
Number of passes (Mean)



Young carers achieve **fewer qualifications** than non-carers:

- 19% fewer GCE A-Level passes
- 17% fewer GCE AS-Level passes
- 43% fewer GCE/VCE Applied AS-Level passes
- No significant differences in VCE A-Level passes

Key attainment benchmarks



Young carers are **less likely** than non-carers to reach key attainment benchmarks:

- 62% less likely to achieve the equivalent of three A-Levels in all **A-Level** qualifications
- 64% less like to achieve the equivalent of three A-Levels in **academic** qualifications
- No significant differences were found regarding vocational benchmarks

These **links stayed strong** even after looking for differences in socioeconomic position and income.

Social inequalities

Young carers are more likely than non-carers to be from **Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi** ethnic background, to live in lower income households with unemployed parents, and to reside in more deprived areas. These differences mean that there are more young carers whose KS5 attainment is potentially **affected in these groups**.

Implications for policy

Improve identification and early intervention

The **UK Government** should:

- Provide **funding** to enhance the identification of, and support for, young carers in education.

The **Department for Education** should:

- Require all education providers to **appoint a young carer or student carer lead**. These leads should be responsible for raising awareness and ensuring appropriate support for young carers across the setting.
- Launch an **awareness campaign** to help education professionals better understand the challenges faced by young carers.
- Collaborate with **data** providers, professional bodies, and carer organisations to ensure information about young carers is accurately reported in school records, census returns, and Department for Education data releases.

Education providers should:

- Implement a **young carers policy** to formally recognise young carers within the education system, ensuring they are entitled to specific rights and support mechanisms.

Tailored educational support

Education providers should:

- Offer flexible, targeted academic interventions for young carers, including support with workload, deadlines, and revision planning.

The **UK Government** should:

- Expand **access to financial assistance**, such as bursaries, transport subsidies, and additional learning resources, to help reduce socioeconomic barriers.
- Embed the needs of young carers into **national education strategies**, ensuring sustained policy commitment to addressing their educational disadvantage.



Conclusion

Young carers face serious and long-lasting barriers in education. They are more likely to come from **disadvantaged backgrounds** and are often in vulnerable situations compared to their peers who don't have caring responsibilities.

This study adds robust, **population-level evidence** that by the **end of secondary education**, young carers are at a clear disadvantage. At Key Stage 5, they earn **fewer qualifications**, and are **less likely to achieve key attainment benchmarks**. These gaps are **not explained by socioeconomic position**. The data robustly show that young carers lacked support to balance caring and learning over many years.

But this data should not be seen in isolation. When it comes to higher education, the numbers are stark: in 2023, only 3.8% of UCAS² applicants identified as young adult carers, despite estimates suggesting that around 12% of young people have caring responsibilities.³ Together, this evidence makes one thing clear: **young carers are being left behind**. The impact on their future opportunities—like getting into university—show why they must be treated as a priority group by every education provider and national governments.

References

1. Department for Education, University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2022). Understanding Society: Linked Education administrative Datasets (National Pupil Database), England, 1995-2018: Secure Access. [data collection]. 3rd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 7642, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7642-3>
2. Letelier, A., McMunn, A., McGowan, A., Neale, B., & Lacey, R. (2024). Understanding young caring in the UK pre-and post-COVID-19: Prevalence, correlates, and insights from three UK longitudinal surveys. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 166, 108009.
3. UCAS. (2024). Next steps: What is the experience of young adult carers in education? UCAS.

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