

Policy Brief

Young carers - the forgotten young people in the NEET conversation

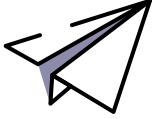
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Summary of key findings

Risk of being Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)



Young carers were **2.2 times (119%) more likely** to be persistently in the NEET category for two or more years.

Further Education (FE) success



Young carers were **40% less likely** to complete FE.

Higher Education (HE) entry and success



Young carers were **31% less likely** to attend HE, **40% less likely** to complete HE and **37% less likely** to achieve a degree-level qualification.

HE attendance was less likely for those caring for >10 hours/week.

Additional inequalities



Young carers who had parents with no qualifications were **around 80% less likely** to achieve a FE or HE qualification, compared to non-carers with parents with no qualifications.

Young carers who had parents with a degree level qualification were **40% less likely** to attend HE, **46% less likely** to achieve a HE qualification and **36% less likely** to obtain a HE degree, compared to non-carers with parents with a degree.

Young carers with a limiting, longstanding illness were **78% less likely** to attend HE than non-carers with such an illness.

This study adds **robust, population-level evidence** that young carers are at a **clear disadvantage** beyond school. They are much more likely to be in the NEET category and less likely to enter and succeed in FE and HE. **These gaps are not explained by socioeconomic position.** This shows that **young carers are being left behind.** The impact on their future opportunities show why they must be treated as a priority group by every education provider, local council, strategic authority, and national government seeking to reduce the number of young people in the NEET category.

Background

Young carers remain an important yet often under-recognised group of young people in the UK. Although previous research has started to explore how caring affects their educational attainment outcomes at school. However, far less research has shown how being a young carer impacts their entry and success in Further (FE) and Higher Education (HE) and their risk of being in the Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET) category. Developing a clearer understanding of young carers' destinations beyond compulsory schooling could support earlier identification and help FE and HE institutions provide more targeted interventions.

What do we mean by 'Young carers'?

A young carer is someone aged under 25 who cares for a friend or family member, due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction.

This is the first UK study to examine **associations between young caring and post-16 destinations**, namely entry and success in Further (FE) and Higher Education (HE) and risk of being in the Not in Employment, Education and Training (NEET) category.

This briefing comes at a crucial time in the discourse around youth unemployment and participation in education and training. With the recently published interim Milburn Review and the government's commitment to every young person earning or learning, it provides brand new insights into the link between being a young carer and being in the NEET category.

Objective

We aimed to understand associations between being a young carer on FE and HE entry and success, and risk of being in the NEET category in the UK.

Methods

This study analysed data from Understanding Society (the UK Household Longitudinal Study), using data from 2009-2024.¹



This data combines annual self-reported information on young caring with information on young people's destinations after school (including entry and success in FE and HE) as well as likelihood of being in the NEET category between ages 16-25.

Sample

2,452 young people who were aged 16 in 2009-2015 with information on post-school destinations between ages 16-25 in 2015-2024.

The outcomes examined included:

- Entry into FE and HE
- Achievement of a FE- or HE-level qualification
- Achievement of a HE degree-level qualification
- Being in the NEET category at any point between ages 16-25
- Being persistently in the NEET category for 2+ consecutive years

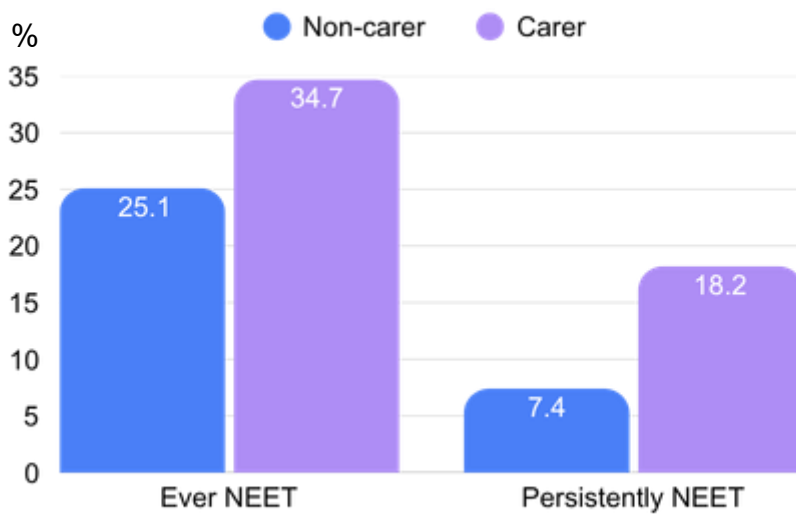
We additionally sought to explore whether associations between young caring and young people's destinations varied by: sex, ethnicity, parental composition, highest parental qualification, household income, parental social class and whether the young person had a limiting, longstanding illness.

All of our analyses control for factors that can influence the chances of being a young carer, educational success and risk of being in the NEET category, e.g. socioeconomic circumstances.

¹ University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research (2026) *Understanding Society: Waves 1-15, 2009-2024* [data collection]. 21st edition. UK Data Service. SN: 6614. <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-22>

Findings

NEET status



17%

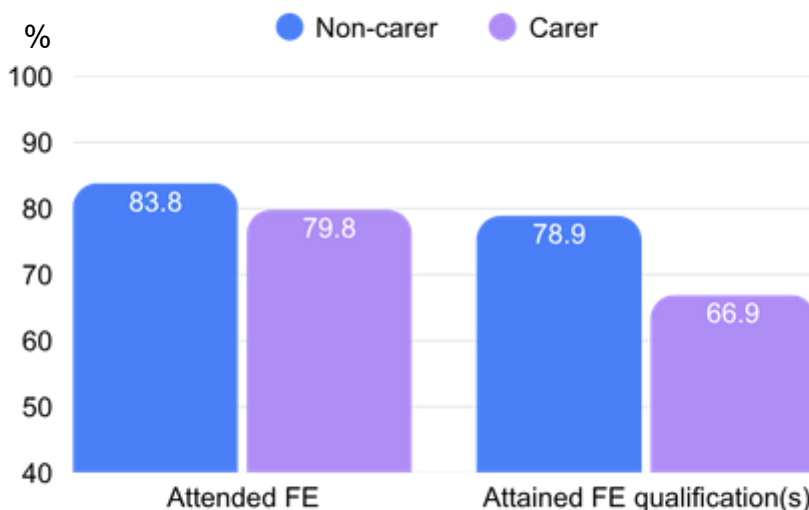
of **16-year-olds** in our study reported having caring responsibilities

Young carers were **2.2 times more likely** to be persistently NEET (in the NEET category for 2+ years)

Young carers (compared to non-carers) were:

- No more likely to ever be in the NEET category
- **2.2 times (119%) more likely** to be persistently in the NEET category

Further education entry & success



Young carers were

40%

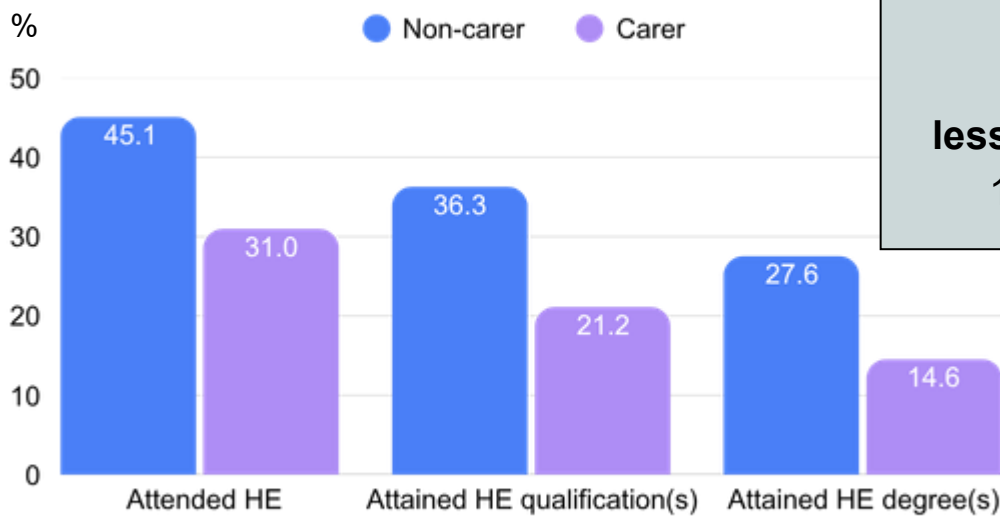
less likely to complete a FE qualification

Young carers (compared to non-carers) were:

- No less likely to enter FE
- **40% less likely** to complete a FE qualification

Young carers who were caring for <10 hrs per week were **38% more likely** to complete FE.

Higher education entry & success



Young carers were
31%
 less likely to attend HE
 and
64%
 less likely if caring for
 10+ hours/week

Young carers (compared to non-carers) were:

- **31% less likely** to attend HE
- **40% less likely** to complete HE
- **37% less likely** to obtain a degree level qualification

Young carers who were caring for 10+ hrs per week were **64% less likely** to attend HE

Young carers' life chances are not equal

Young carers with parents who had no qualifications (compared to non-carers with parents with no qualifications) were:

- **81% less likely** to obtain an FE qualification
- **80% less likely** to obtain an HE qualification
- **76% less likely** to obtain a HE degree

Young carers with parents holding a degree-level qualification (compared to non-carers of parents with a degree) were:

- **40% less likely** to attend HE
- **46% less likely** to obtain a HE qualification

Young caring therefore appears to compound additional disadvantages or 'derail' young people from their expected trajectories.

Young carers with a limiting, longstanding illness were **78% less likely** to attend HE than non-carers with such an illness

Implications for policy

Improve identification and early intervention

The **UK Government** should:

- Ensure that young carers are a **priority group** in their Jobs and Youth Guarantee offer and in policy discussions and solutions for young people at risk of being in the NEET category. **Local councils and strategic authorities** should be encouraged to ensure that young carers are a priority group within local and regional initiatives to reduce rates of NEET.
- 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.
- **Collaborate with the Department of Work and Pensions** to improve the inclusion of carers within administrative datasets relating to youth unemployment and participation in further/higher education/training (e.g. the Individualised Learner Record and local authority NEET returns).

Education providers should:

- Implement a **young carers policy** to set out the range of academic and pastoral support available to young carers across the setting.

Tailored educational support

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.

Education providers should:

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



Conclusion

Young carers face serious and long-lasting barriers in education and beyond. They are more likely to come from **disadvantaged backgrounds** and often miss out on opportunities that their peers without caring responsibilities take for granted.

This study adds robust, **population-level evidence** that young carers are at a **clear disadvantage** beyond school. They are much more likely to be in the NEET category and less likely to enter and succeed in FE and HE. These gaps are **not explained by socioeconomic position**. When taken together with our previous findings about young caring and educational attainment from Key Stages 2-5,^{1,2} we robustly show that young carers lack support to balance caring and learning over many years. Our findings show that young carers are not leaving school and entering work on a level playing field with their peers.

But this data should not be seen in isolation. When it comes to HE, the numbers are stark: in 2023, only 3.9% of UCAS applicants identified as being carers,³ despite estimates suggesting that around 12% of young people have caring responsibilities.⁴ Together, this evidence makes one thing clear: **young carers are being left behind**. The impact on their future opportunities show why **they must be treated as a priority group** by every education provider, local council, strategic authority, and national government seeking to reduce the number of young people in the NEET category.

1. Letelier, McMunn, McGowan, Cartlidge, Lacey (2026) Young carers and inequalities in educational attainment and school engagement: evidence from the UK household longitudinal study linked to the national pupil database. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 137, 102928
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2025.102928>
2. Lacey, McMunn, Letelier, McGowan, Cartlidge (2025) Young carers post-16 academic attainment in England [policy brief]. <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/KS5-Young-Carers-Education-Policy-Brief.pdf>
3. UCAS. (2024). Next steps: What is the experience of young adult carers in education? UCAS.
4. Letelier, McMunn, McGowan, Neale, Lacey (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 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2024.108009>

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Project website:

<https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/long-term-effects-of-being-a-young-carer>



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