

# Girls at risk of exclusion

Girls Speak briefing  
September 2021



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## About this briefing

This briefing paper is about girls at risk of exclusion from mainstream education. It has been produced as part of Agenda's Girls Speak campaign which shines a light on the experiences of some of the most marginalised girls and young women aged 14–24 in England and Wales. The project is kindly supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

The development of this briefing has been informed by desk-based research, interviews with 14 girls and young women with lived experience of the issues, and a roundtable discussion involving 10 experts in the field hosted by Agenda in June 2021. In all but one case, pseudonyms are used. Where data relating to school exclusions broken down by sex and ethnicity is discussed, this has been obtained by Agenda through a Freedom of Information request, as this information is not routinely published by the Department for Education.

## Introduction

Girls who are excluded from education often face considerable disadvantage. Many are struggling with poor mental health, violence, abuse and

exploitation, poverty and discrimination<sup>1</sup> – challenges which overlap and reinforce each other, and are compounded by inequalities such as gender-inequality and racism.

Rising rates of exclusion amongst girls tell us that girls are being let down. Where they should receive protection and support to stop problems escalating, a failure to identify and address their adverse experiences means that they are excluded from the very environments where they could be supported to thrive and reach their potential. Once excluded from mainstream education, girls can go on to face further disadvantage, including gender-specific risks of sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation in male-dominated alternative provision, such as pupil referral units (PRUs). Being excluded should be a warning sign that things are going wrong in a girl's life and, if specialist support is not in place, the challenges girls face risk becoming more complex and entrenched. But, time and again, policies, reviews, strategies and funding streams fail to recognise the needs and experiences of girls and young women as distinct from those of boys and young men who are excluded.

The fact that girls who are excluded are in a minority should not make them

less of a priority. Instead, it should make us think carefully about what that might mean for their experiences of education, and how to intervene to prevent a spiral of disadvantage for the most marginalised girls at a critical time in their lives.

Alternative provision is education outside school, arranged by local authorities or schools, for pupils who do not attend mainstream school for reasons including school exclusion, behaviour issues, or illness. This includes local authority maintained settings such as pupil referral units (PRUs), as well as increasing numbers of alternative provision academies and free schools.

## Girls excluded from education: the data

Girls excluded from education are a significant and growing minority.

- In 2018/19, 1,885 girls were permanently excluded from school, compared to 6,009 boys.<sup>2</sup> Whilst boys continue to face higher rates of exclusion overall, the rate at which girls are excluded is increasing. The rates<sup>3</sup> of permanent exclusions of girls rose by 66% in the five years prior to the coronavirus pandemic, compared to a rise of 27% for boys.<sup>4</sup>

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
<b>Boys</b>						
<b>Permanent exclusions (number)</b>	4,549	5,223	6,033	6,118	6,009	3,871
<b>Permanent exclusions (rate)</b>	0.11	0.13	0.15	0.15	0.14	0.09
<b>Girls</b>						
<b>Permanent exclusions (number)</b>	1,246	1,461	1,686	1,787	1,885	1,182
<b>Permanent exclusions (rate)</b>	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.03

Table showing permanent exclusions for boys and girls between 2014/15 and 2019/20. Department for Education (2021) Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England: 2019 to 2020.

- In 2020/21, national figures for England showed that girls now make up 27% of pupil referral unit (PRUs) pupil rolls<sup>5</sup> although enrolment does not necessarily mean presence. Day-to-day, girls remain a minority in these environments – speaking with Agenda, they describe feeling unsafe and uncomfortable and, as a result, may simply not attend.

*“I think I’m the only girl in today. I’ve actually complained about this before... They did move more girls into my form, but they’re never in... And you just get boys everywhere and it ain’t nice.”*

– Gemma, 15

- Whilst the latest statistics show that rates of permanent exclusion dropped significantly during 2019/20, this year's data includes the start of the coronavirus pandemic when, from 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, school sites were closed for all pupils other than children of key workers and vulnerable children, remaining partially closed until the end of the school year. Permanent exclusions were possible throughout the full academic year but, with children out of school, it is reasonable to

expect that rates of exclusion would be much lower and comparisons with previous years should be treated with caution.

- During the Autumn term prior to the pandemic, there was a 7.8% increase in the number of permanent exclusions for girls compared to a 4.2% increase in the numbers of permanent exclusion for boys. Rates of exclusion remained consistent with rates seen in the Autumn term 2018/19 for both genders, indicating that had schools remained open it is likely that rates of exclusion for 2019/20 would have remained in line with the previous year.<sup>6</sup>

In the five years prior to the pandemic, rates of permanent exclusion for girls rose more rapidly than for boys. Official statistics suggest that, in the first term of 2019/20,



the rate at which girls were being permanently excluded appeared to stabilise. However, our research shows that this is not the case for all groups of girls, with this trend masking concerning disparities in the rates of exclusion facing some groups of Black and minoritised girls when compared with their peers.

- A Freedom of Information (FOI) request submitted by Agenda in August 2021 found that in the academic year 2019/20, Black Caribbean girls were permanently excluded from school at a rate double that of White British girls, with this tripling for Mixed White and Black Caribbean girls. Girls whose ethnicity was recorded as Gypsy Roma faced rates of permanent exclusion which were more than four times higher than

those of White British girls.<sup>7</sup>

- Despite an overall drop in rates of exclusion in 2019/20, Agenda’s research shows the rate of permanent exclusions for Black girls and mixed-race girls actually increased in the Autumn term 2019/20 from the previous year, rising from a rate of 0.01 in 2018/19 to 0.02 in 2019/20 for Black girls, and from 0.02 to 0.03 for mixed-race girls. This increase was particularly marked for girls whose ethnicity was recorded as Black Other (rising from a rate of 0.01 in 0.03) and girls whose ethnicity was recorded as Mixed White and Black Caribbean (rising from 0.04 to 0.06).<sup>8</sup>

Despite this concerning and persistent over-representation of Black and

	Autumn term 2018/19		Autumn term 2019/20	
	Permanent exclusion of girls(number)	Permanent exclusion of girls (rate)	Permanent exclusion of girls (number)	Permanent exclusion of girls (rate)
<b>Asian</b>	16	0.00	23	0.00
<b>Black</b>	33	0.01	38	0.02
<b>Mixed</b>	52	0.02	75	0.03
<b>White</b>	579	0.02	591	0.02

Table showing number and rate of permanent exclusions for girls in the Autumn term 2018/19 and the Autumn term 2019/20, broken down by ethnicity. Department for Education (2021) FOI request – FOI2021\_0037012.

minoritised girls amongst children excluded from school, the Department for Education does not routinely publish data relating to school exclusions broken down by sex and ethnicity, with **these findings only made available through our FOI**. This risks obscuring important trends and information about the experiences of girls most at risk of exclusion which is vital if we are to ensure their needs are addressed and further disproportionality is reduced.

Girls may be at greater risk of informal exclusion than boys, but this can also be 'invisible' in official data.

- Evidence has long-suggested that girls are more vulnerable to types of exclusion which are absent from official statistics and which lack the accountability mechanisms built into the formal exclusion process.<sup>9</sup> This can include girls who 'self-exclude' through non-attendance at school, as well as unlawful exclusions which are not formally recorded (e.g. sending a pupil home to 'cool off') or the illegal practice of off-rolling.<sup>10</sup>
- In 2020, research conducted in one local area found that girls are

more likely than boys to experience functional exclusion from school as a result of persistent absence (where pupils miss more than 10% of school days), school change<sup>11</sup> or 'early exit'<sup>12</sup> (including as a result of off-rolling.)<sup>13</sup>

With girls often 'lost' in narratives around exclusion due to their smaller numbers and less visible in the data, their distinct needs and experiences are too often overlooked. As the proportion of girls being excluded increases, it is important to ensure that alternative provision is a safe, supportive environment for girls, able to meet their needs. Now more than ever, the full range of ways in which girls experience exclusion must be accounted for in policy and research.



## Girls' experiences of exclusion: in girls' and young women's words

*"In school, if a girl is acting up, they don't really question it enough... They just kind of pass it off as nothing, or them just misbehaving... I think schools have got to realise that girls are dealing with a lot, and they aren't going to reach out and be like, "Look, this is what's happened to us, that's why I'm acting out that way." It's not something girls like to talk about... They think that it was their fault..."*

– Leah, 17

Official data shows that persistent disruptive behaviour is the most commonly recorded reason for formal exclusion of all pupils.<sup>14</sup> However, Agenda's research indicates that this may mask the complex reasons behind girls' behaviours and their high levels of need.

Children exposed to multiple risks such as social disadvantage and family adversity are more likely to develop behavioural problems than their peers.<sup>15</sup> Girls facing five or more risk factors are nineteen times more likely to develop what are described as conduct disorders<sup>16</sup> under the age of

ten than girls with no risk factors. Boys facing five or more risk factors were almost eleven times more likely to develop a disorder than those with no risk factors.<sup>17</sup>

Girls who are excluded from education often face considerable disadvantage. Many are struggling with poor mental health, violence, abuse and exploitation, poverty and discrimination<sup>18</sup> – challenges which overlap and reinforce each other, and are compounded by discrimination and inequalities, such as gender-inequality and racism. Although they are at the forefront of dealing with severe and complex problems, schools are not always equipped to identify and respond to the challenges facing girls who are responding to harmful and challenging circumstances.

This can create a harmful narrative where girls are blamed for the challenges they face and are labelled as 'risky' or 'hard to reach'. Girls internalise these labels and feel further stigmatised and socially excluded.

*"In alternative provision settings... As a young person in that environment, you feel like the bottom of the barrel sometimes. There were times when I'd go missing for months and months and nobody made a phone call... That creates a real sense of*

*unimportant-ness. To know that you're supposed to be somewhere by law, but no one actually cares if you're there or not..."*

– Laila, 19

Whilst more commonly associated with behavioural problems and preventing disruption in the classroom, the **girls and young women Agenda has spoken to often attribute their exclusion from education to poor mental health**<sup>19</sup> stemming from experiences of violence, abuse and trauma which were not addressed in mainstream education.<sup>20</sup> There is clear evidence about the extent and prevalence of poor mental health amongst girls and young women.

- Girls and young women between the ages of 16 and 24 are three times more likely to have a common mental health problem – like anxiety or depression – than their male counterparts.<sup>21</sup>



Self-harm rates have tripled amongst girls and young women since 2000<sup>22</sup> and suicides of girls and young women were the highest on record in 2019, increasing by 72% over the last ten years, compared to a 28% increase amongst boys.<sup>23</sup>

Children who experience multiple forms of abuse are at greatest risk of developing mental health problems, with research suggesting that girls experience high rates of victimisation and suffer more serious mental health outcomes as a result of this when compared to boys.<sup>24</sup>

*“We have seen a big increase in suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts and self-harm recently. Some girls are on the waiting list for specialist mental health support for up to 18 months. Schools are not equipped to deal with this.”*

– Head teacher, Alternative provision

This increase in poor mental health for girls and young women is an important part of understanding the growing numbers of girls who are permanently excluded, yet this is overlooked in policy, which focuses on discipline and behaviour – ignoring the underlying challenges girls are facing.

Importantly, this includes the connections between girls' poor mental health and their experiences of abuse and discrimination. This means that girls are at risk of being punished, when really they need help and support. Inside and outside of school, poor responses to girls' experiences of sexual harassment, violence and other forms of abuse can lead to girls being excluded from or dropping out of mainstream education.<sup>25</sup>

### Katy's story

Katy is 19. When she was younger, she struggled with depression, suicidal thoughts and self-harm which was heightened by experiences of sexual harassment and abuse by her peers. Without access to support and protection, she felt her only option was to 'self-exclude', leaving her feeling isolated and falling behind.

*"When I was 13, I started to stop going as much as I could get away with... I think they just thought it was because I didn't want to go and I was lazy, or I was doing it to be rebellious. But I wasn't... I was suffering with a lot when I was going to school.*

*There was one boy who used to sort of target me and try and touch me and things like that, and it would make me not want to go into school...*

*And there was a few times teachers would see it and totally ignore it, or basically insinuate that it was my fault. One time it happened, I don't think I went in for like a week afterwards... "*

## Black and minoritised girls' experiences of exclusion

On the ground, practitioners speaking with Agenda suggest that girls who act out may be treated more harshly than boys as they are perceived to have not only been disruptive, but to have transgressed gender norm. Girls expressing their sadness and anger overtly through 'bad behaviour' may experience inappropriate responses from professionals who misinterpret them as manipulative or delinquent. For girls facing multiple forms of inequality and discrimination, including racism, this can be exacerbated.

*"When girls are rude... It escalates... We label this girl as 'problematic' and talk about how she needs to be careful and is putting herself at risk... With girls... They don't seem to get as many chances..."*

- Member of staff, Alternative provision

For Black girls at risk of or experiencing abuse, for example, research identifies a process of ‘adultification’ whereby they are viewed as older than their age and more ‘adult-like’, with professionals assuming that they have greater levels of maturity and less ‘innocence’ than their white peers.<sup>26</sup> As well as informing more punitive responses, this may also result in Black girls receiving less support in relation to their emotional wellbeing as they are treated as posing a risk to others first and foremost, rather than as vulnerable children in their own right.

*“The word ‘tough’ used to get thrown around all the time. ‘You’re tough, you’re alright, you’ll get through it.’ I definitely think race plays a part... Just in terms of the amount of care. I feel like you get given less care in my opinion, and your voice isn’t as heard either.”*

– Laila, 19



### Marie's story

Marie is 23. After a sexual image was shared without her consent when she was at secondary school, she was excluded on the basis of her consequent behaviour.

*“That was just like the start of the hell... From there, I got excluded a few times, just for little things, like setting off the alarm and bunking and stuff like that. I just felt like I gained a stereotype... Like “loud, Black girl”, and that really is not tolerated. Instead of being asked, “What’s going on... Are you okay?”... They asked me about school counselling once... It was a while after... I didn’t engage with it...”*

Stigmatised for her experience of abuse and stereotyped on the basis of her ethnicity, she was not offered mental health support until her problems had escalated, and she began to use alcohol as a coping mechanism.

In other sectors too, research highlights the use of more punitive rather than welfare-based responses to Black and minoritised children who are seen to be ‘acting out’. This includes the disproportionate use of restraint on Black and minoritised young people – a practice also used in education but inconsistently recorded.<sup>27</sup>

Racist stereotyping can also limit agencies' understanding, and thus accurate identification of other forms of vulnerability when this is faced by Black and minoritised young women. This includes Black young women's experiences of sexual abuse in childhood being more likely to be overlooked<sup>28</sup> and the under-identification of Asian girls experiencing child sexual exploitation.<sup>29</sup>

Where Black and minoritised girls identify these inequalities, the way in which they respond to this kind of injustice can be perceived negatively by teachers and other professionals – seen as an example of rude or disruptive behaviour, rather than understood in its wider context in which girls are reacting to another form of trauma.<sup>30</sup> Where teachers fail to connect girls' 'bad behaviour' with the oppression they face, this may further heighten their risk of exclusion. Where girls do 'act out', this should be taken seriously, but must also be recognised as a reaction to harm they have themselves experienced, with support being offered, rather than further punitive action being taken.

### Laila's story

Laila is 19. She experienced sexual abuse early in her childhood and went on to be groomed and criminally exploited as a young teenager. She was permanently excluded from school at the age of 14. Speaking with Agenda, she described her experiences of abuse and discrimination being overlooked, and the way that this impacted her.

*"I don't know if I realised that bad things were happening, or that things were particularly wrong. When certain things were being flagged up... I feel like, because I was Black and possibly because I had older siblings involved in gangs and in and out of prison, agencies overlooked it. Other people were telling me that it was wrong but, when social care or the council or teachers aren't picking it up, I just thought, "Well, it's minor then, isn't it?"*

*I experienced a lot of racism both at school and out of school. I was never afraid to call it out – if that was from teachers or other students. I was excluded for throwing flour on someone else who was racist to me. So, flour on their clothes, on their uniform, is more important than them telling me that I deserve something horrible because I'm Black?"*

Whilst it is never acceptable to harm another student and schools must take steps to ensure all children are safe, a more proactive response to issues such as racism and abuse may prevent situations escalating in this way.

## The impact of exclusion on girls

Once outside of mainstream education, girls face further disadvantage, including increased risk of abuse and exploitation, poor mental health and coming into contact with the criminal justice system.

Once excluded, girls may face a series of escalating risks and negative outcomes. In alternative provision, they may face further harassment and abuse in a male-dominated environment. It is also clear that there are lasting mental health impacts associated with exclusion, as well as clear links to child criminal and sexual exploitation. For many girls, exclusion becomes part of a spiral, which can see them criminalised and further marginalised.

- Experience of exclusion has been linked to **long-term psychological distress**.<sup>31</sup> The mental health impacts of exclusion are particularly significant for girls, with the mental health of girls excluded after the age of 16 described as on a 'deteriorating trajectory' following exclusion, compared with the mental health of boys excluded at the same age which remains comparatively stable.<sup>32</sup>
- In male-dominated settings like PRUs, girls face gender-specific risks of **sexual harassment and abuse**, and have described feeling unsafe and uncomfortable in these environments to Agenda.

*"Some girls don't want to attend because they are scared of what the school will be like and what the boys will be like with them..."*

– Head teacher, Alternative provision

*"They're expecting me to go into a classroom full of boys... It's just so uncomfortable, you just feel like a hundred pairs of eyes staring at you..."*

– Gemma, 15

Despite this Agenda's research has uncovered limited guidance on and huge geographical variation in reporting of sexual harassment and violence in these settings. Only a handful of local authorities have specific policies on sexual harassment and violence in education, and only a handful have specialist support available for girls who have been excluded.<sup>33</sup> Where girls respond negatively to harassment, professionals working in alternative provision have raised that it can be girls' responses which are problematised, rather than boys' behaviour.

*"That young girl, quite rightly... She gets mad. And then some times what we see is a display of negative behaviour... It's tough that we don't have more resources to do work with girls around this, as well as what's covered in PSHE. I wish I could do more work with girls on dealing with these challenges and girls' empowerment... "*

– Staff member, Alternative provision

- Permanent and temporary school exclusion – as well as truancy or being reported missing from school – is associated with

heightened risk of **child sexual exploitation**, with girls who feel out of step with the social mainstream more likely to be targeted by exploitative adults or peers.<sup>34</sup>

*"I would never be at school – I would walk around the area until school finished. One time, I bumped into a couple of people that were a bit older. Like grown men. I started spending time with them...."*

*To be honest, I had nowhere else to go. They had a house – there was shelter, food... That's all anyone wants really. They wanted me to do stuff for them, like sell drugs, and other stuff like that..."*

– Amelia, 18

Girls who are excluded are also at increased risk of coming into **contact with the criminal justice system**.<sup>35</sup>

74% of girls in youth custody have previously been permanently excluded compared to 63% of boys<sup>36</sup> and a growing body of research describes the 'school-to-prison' or 'PRU-to-prison pipeline' – a process where behaviour policies and disciplinary practices in schools increase the likelihood of children coming into contact with criminal justice agencies.<sup>37</sup> This includes the

direct placement of police officers in schools, increasing the likelihood of minor behavioural issues being tackled through punitive interventions which criminalise young people, rather than offering support.

The role of school-based police officers can range from being a point of contact for teachers to leading on more intensive interventions such as stop and search and surveillance of children thought to be 'gang members'. Research shows that officers are more likely to be placed in schools in areas with higher proportions of disadvantaged pupils<sup>38</sup> and concerns have been raised about the particularly negative impact of police presence in schools on working class and Black and minoritised pupils.<sup>39</sup>



Emerging evidence also suggests that, for girls, the presence of police in schools can also bring with it further experiences of harassment and sexualisation. Research by [Kids of Colour](#) has highlighted reports from girls of the use of victim-blaming language and derogatory language by school-based police officers to describe female students experiencing harassment and abuse from peers, including calling students 'sluts' and 'slags, particularly when referring to Black and minoritised girls.<sup>40</sup>

Since 2002, the Safer Schools Partnership Programme has seen the placement of police in schools with the aim of improving the safety of pupils and staff in and out of school, improving standards of behaviour and attendance, early identification and support for pupils at risk of offending and creating more positive relations between young people and the police. The number of police in schools is not monitored nationally.

Concerns have been raised about the impact of these local partnerships between schools and the police on a range of marginalised groups, including girls.

*“They [school-based police officers] would use excessive language in meetings towards students even calling them 'sluts' and 'slags!'”*

- Young person featured in [Decriminalise the Classroom](#) report (2020) by Kids of Colour

In addition to being re-traumatising for those who already face gender-based abuse and racism both inside and outside of school, this can create a climate of fear, hostility and mistrust, exacerbating girls' poor mental health<sup>41</sup> and potentially reducing the likelihood of girls seeking support in relation to this and other vulnerabilities which drive their experience of formal and informal exclusions. Once outside of mainstream education, girls excluded from education are also more vulnerable to being drawn into the criminal justice system in other ways, including through **child criminal exploitation**<sup>42</sup> – a form of exploitation which, although more commonly associated with boys, appears to have increased for girls and young women during the coronavirus crisis.<sup>43</sup>

### Lauren's story

Lauren is 17. After she was excluded, she started to get arrested, her substance use escalated and she had periods of going missing, following which she was taken into care. This took a significant toll on her mental health.

*“I've been in hospital twice for suicide... The first time was at the beginning of Year 9 which made me not want to go back into school... Eventually, I got kicked out of secondary school... I got arrested a few times there, got into a lot of drugs and violence... Then I got kicked out of the college... And then, because nowhere would take me, that's when things went downhill...”*

## A trauma-informed response to girls at risk of exclusion

Girls are often excluded because mainstream schools aren't able to respond effectively to their needs or the level of complexity in their lives.

For some girls, alternative provision can, if delivered in the right way, be a more supportive environment – better able to respond to girls’ specific needs and experiences, and offering more focused education and support. Speaking with Agenda, services have highlighted examples of good practice locally, but emphasise that not all forms of alternative provision are resourced in this way.

*“I had a couple of overdoses and I was self-harming... I couldn’t go to school because I was too nervous so I went to a day unit. They were more aware of individuals and how they were feeling, and making sure you were alright.”*

– Lily, 22

At a roundtable discussion hosted by Agenda in June 2021, a Head Teacher at one academy trust working with girls who have been excluded spoke about the gender-specific provision they have developed to meet the needs of girls. Girls now make up about a quarter of all pupils attending this setting.

*“We’ve really thought about the curriculum needs of girls. Some of the main issues they face are to do with physical and sexual safety. We’ve set up personal development groups*

*which children are referred into – some of these are just for girls and explore high-level safeguarding concerns, like grooming. We also run outdoor, girl-only activities to promote solidarity and support and good relationships between them.*

*We’ve been trying to upskill the wider staff team, but we’re very fortunate to have a qualified counsellor on staff who specialises in domestic and sexual violence, and we also have a CAMHS nurse who works closely with us. This isn’t the case in most PRUs – we’re very lucky with the set-up we have here.”*

Unfortunately, for many girls, this is not their experience of exclusion. Where there are local or national policy responses to children at risk, these are designed around the needs of boys by default, with limited gender-specific consideration of girls’ needs. With models of youth provision regularly built around boys’ and young men’s lives and all key youth funding announcements since 2018 ‘gender-neutral’, services for children at risk in education and other settings tend to be limited in their direction and ability to deliver gender-responsive support.<sup>44</sup>

Specialist women and girls' services can play a critical role in engaging girls most at risk and improving their mental health and wellbeing.<sup>45</sup>

Delivered by the women and girls' voluntary sector, these services provide access to dedicated girl-only spaces and offer 'wraparound' support which addresses girls' multiple, interlinked needs using an approach grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma.

Provision is patchy and specialist services for girls and young women report difficulties securing funding and establishing relationships with education and social care partners needed to grow this area of work, but there exists great potential for these organisations to work together, developing expertise to support girls at risk of exclusion and improve local systems and service responses to them.

*"We tend to refer straight to local authorities – early help, or social care – but we're really keen to start finding out about those places we can refer on to that are specific for our female*

*cohort – I think that's something that's really important for us to start doing."*

– Staff member, Alternative provision.

In Gateshead, the [Young Women's Outreach Project](#), is one example of this kind of specialist youth work provision for girls and young women. Highlighted nationally as an example of good practice, the project delivers both early intervention work and advocacy support for girls in crisis situations.<sup>46</sup> This includes working with girls who have disengaged with or been excluded from school in a girl-only environment. Initially seen on a one-to-one basis, girls also attend group work where programmes are guided and shaped by girls themselves, but may include a focus on topics such as self-esteem and confidence-building, healthy relationships, independent living skills and parenting skills.

An evaluation of the Young Women's Outreach Project's work between June 2016 and June 2021 found that over 90% of girls attending the project with a school place in a mainstream school, specialist school or PRU either returned to school full time or overall attendance improved.<sup>47</sup>

## Leah's story

Leah is now 17. When she was younger, she experienced abuse in a relationship with an older partner and was dealing with conflict at home. At school, she began to find the classroom environment overwhelming but did not feel like teachers understood what she was experiencing and began walking out of lessons. Eventually, she was referred to the Young Women's Outreach Project which she attended several times a week as an alternative to school attendance.

*"I was dropping out of school during Year 10. I just wouldn't go in whatsoever... I felt like I had the world on my shoulders... Then, someone from the council suggested this place, because it could be classed as school attendance. At first, I wasn't sure about coming because of my anxiety and not knowing anyone so, before I started coming to groups, I met my support worker – just me and her. I love coming here now. There's quite a lot of girls that have been through the same stuff as me so they understand – you can get whatever you want off your chest. You don't have to stress about home, you don't have to stress about school, you don't have to stress about friends... It takes your mind off stuff. I think if I'd known about here sooner, I would have actually stuck with school."*

## The policy context

Already more likely than their peers to leave school without qualifications and be out of education, employment or training<sup>48</sup> girls at the sharpest end of inequality have been amongst the most negatively impacted by the pandemic.

As we enter the recovery phase of the pandemic, the Government has set out a new agenda focusing on behaviour in schools, including the roll-out of a three-year behaviour hubs programme and a planned update to guidance on exclusions.<sup>49</sup> This emphasis on punitive approaches to managing behaviour and discipline as children return to school<sup>50</sup> is concerning. This approach may drive further experiences of exclusion and disadvantage for girls already struggling with the impact of trauma.

Plans for improving mental health and wellbeing as part of education recovery lack provision for girls as a distinct and particularly vulnerable group.<sup>51</sup> Without gender-specific interventions, additional support for the most disadvantaged pupils such as the Recovery Premium<sup>52</sup> is unlikely to reach the most marginalised girls who already find support from mainstream services inaccessible.

Girls at risk of or who have experienced exclusion are absent in other key policy areas too, even where it is understood that they face poorer outcomes or additional vulnerabilities compared to other groups. These include in mental health settings, in the criminal justice system and when facing violence and abuse.<sup>53</sup> Whilst plans for preventative work with young people in schools and colleges in the new Violence Against Women and Girls strategy are welcome,<sup>54</sup> there is little recognition in the strategy that girls are disproportionately impacted by sexual harassment and violence in schools,<sup>55</sup> or of the lack of girl-friendly services available in the community for teachers to work alongside or refer on to when working with pupils most at risk. Likewise, whilst it is apparent that sexual abuse is a serious problem in mainstream schools, a recent Ofsted review did not address the heightened vulnerabilities of girls who have been excluded.<sup>56</sup> The lack of sustained attention to this, including in new guidance on sexual violence and sexual harassment between children in schools and colleges,<sup>57</sup> is alarming when considering the risks – both inside and outside education – facing some of the girls in alternative provision.

A well-established evidence-base makes clear that poor mental health and violence and abuse are an important part of the story of girls' exclusions.

Negative stereotypes attached to vulnerable and marginalised girls – particularly those from Black and minoritised groups – also play a critical role, despite disparities in the rates of permanent exclusion experienced by Black and mixed-race girls going unacknowledged in official data. In policy and in practice, a lack of knowledge and interest in what drives the 'bad behaviour' that can lead to girls' exclusion leaves their experiences largely ignored or misunderstood. The challenges which girls go on to face following exclusion and which, too often, they are left to navigate alone, reflect a system-wide failure to pay attention to the needs of girls at risk, as well as gaps in support on the ground. Without better investment in age-, gender- and trauma-informed support for girls at risk of exclusion, girls will continue to pay the price, facing a punitive response to their vulnerabilities, rather than the care and support they need and deserve at a critical time in their lives.

# Recommendations

1. The Department for Education to put in place measures to support the most disadvantaged girls as part of its plan for education recovery. This should include investing in gender-specific provision for girls at risk developed in partnership with the women and girls' voluntary sector as part of the Recovery Premium. The impact of other education recovery measures on the most disadvantaged girls should be monitored and reported on.
2. The Department for Education to fully fund and implement the Timpson Review recommendation to invest in building multi-disciplinary teams around schools. For girls at risk, these teams must include specialist services for girls and young women and services led by and for Black and minoritised women.
3. The Department for Education to take a gendered approach to the forthcoming update of guidance on school suspensions and permanent exclusions. This must recognise differences between the drivers and impacts of exclusion for girls and boys. Existing guidance on mental health and behaviour in schools should also be updated to recognise girls' gender-specific experiences, including the way in which racial inequalities contribute to this for Black and minoritised girls.
4. The Department for Education to carry out and publish an evaluation of the behaviour hubs programme. This must include assessment of the impact of new approaches to addressing poor behaviour on the most disadvantaged girls' and Black and minoritised pupils.
5. Training for teachers, senior mental health leads and safeguarding leads to ensure that professionals working with girls at risk understand the impact of trauma and are equipped to offer a specialist response, including through working in partnership with the women and girls' voluntary sector.
6. Local Authorities to lead on developing local partnerships between schools, alternative provision, youth services and the women and girls' voluntary sector. This should support the development of a whole-system response to girls at risk of exclusion, where all services in contact with girls work collaboratively, sharing knowledge and skills to provide age- gender - and trauma-informed support.

7. The Department for Education to collect and publish data on the numbers, types and drivers of school exclusions for girls and the characteristics of girls experiencing formal and informal exclusion. This data must be disaggregated across all protected characteristics, in particular sex and ethnicity.

## About Agenda

Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, is working to build a society where women and girls are able to live their lives free from inequality, poverty and violence.

Through our Girls Speak campaign, Agenda shines a light on the experiences of some of the most marginalised girls and young women (aged 14 to 24) in England and Wales – those who face multiple disadvantage. We work with girls and young women to create a fuller picture of the challenges they face, to identify what works, and to raise the profile of girls and young women to ensure their needs are recognised in policy and practice, nationally and locally.

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# References

1. In 2015/16, 1 in 50 children in the general population was recognised as having a social, emotional and mental health need – this rose to 1 in 2 amongst children who were excluded from mainstream education ([Institute for Public Policy Research, 2017](#)). Research has identified that excluded children frequently discuss challenges in their home lives, often including reference to experience of violence and abuse ([Department for Education, 2019](#)) and children who are ‘children in need’ (children whose home lives have prompted interactions with social care) are permanently excluded from education at almost three times the rate of their peers ([Department for Education, 2020](#)) In 2020, 47% of children in pupil referral units were eligible for free school meals (the standard measure for poverty in schools) compared to 15% of the secondary school population at large. ([Department for Education, 2020](#))
2. Department for Education (2021) [Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England: 2019 to 2020](#).
3. The rate of permanent exclusions describes the number of permanent exclusions as a proportion of the overall school population in the relevant academic year. An exclusion rate of 0.01 is the equivalent of 1 in every 10,000 pupils.
4. Department for Education (2021) [Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England: 2019 to 2020](#).
5. Department for Education (2021) [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: England 2021](#).
6. Department for Education (2021) FOI request – FOI2021\_0037012.
7. The number of permanent exclusions for girls whose ethnicity was recorded as Black other increased from 4 permanent exclusions in the Autumn term 2018/19 to 9 permanent exclusions in the Autumn term 2019/20. The number of permanent exclusions for girls whose ethnicity was recorded as Mixed White and Black Caribbean increased from 23 to 39 in the same period. Department for Education (2021) FOI request – FOI2021\_0037012.
8. Department for Education (2021) FOI request – FOI2021\_0037012.
9. Osler, A. et al. (2002) [Not a Problem? Girls and exclusion from school](#).
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11. School change or a school move occurs when a pupil is moved between one mainstream schools to another, between school censuses. Research shows a significant overlap between pupils who ‘self-exclude’ through persistent absence, and pupils who experience a school move or fixed-term exclusions. Social Finance (2020) [Who’s at risk of exclusion? An analysis in Cheshire West and Chester](#).
12. An early exit occurs when a pupil leaves a mainstream secondary school prior to the final census return in Year 11 and does not move to a special school or pupil referral unit. This could occur for several reasons, including attending an educational setting out of area, being home educated, or off-rolling. Social Finance (2020) [Who’s at risk of exclusion? An analysis in Cheshire West and Chester](#).
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14. Department for Education (2020) [Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: 2018 to 2019](#).
15. Brown, E. et al (2012) [A Chance to Change: Delivering effective parenting programmes to transform lives](#), Centre for Mental Health.

16. All children misbehave from time to time but, in some cases, behavioural problems can become persistent and severe. About 5% of children aged 5–10 display problems which are sufficiently severe to justify diagnosis as a mental health condition (conduct disorder), while a further 15–20% have difficulties which fall short of this threshold but still carry an increased risk of poorer outcomes in later life. Centre for Mental Health (2014) Childhood behavioural problems: a briefing for schools

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18. In 2015/16, 1 in 50 children in the general population was recognised as having a social, emotional and mental health need – this rose to 1 in 2 amongst children who were excluded from mainstream education (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2017). Research has identified that excluded children frequently discuss challenges in their home lives, often including reference to experience of violence and abuse (Department for Education, 2019) and children who are 'children in need' (children whose home lives have prompted interactions with social care) are permanently excluded from education at almost three times the rate of their peers (Department for Education, 2020) In 2020, 47% of children in pupil referral units were eligible for free school meals (the standard measure for poverty in schools) compared to 15% of the secondary school population at large. (Department for Education, 2020)

19. An independent study from NatCen on adolescent mental health and educational attainment observed a strong association between mental health difficulties between the ages of 11 and 14 and later educational attainment at age 16. The study found that children experiencing poor mental health are three times less likely than their peers to pass five GCSEs. Smith et al (2021) 'Adolescent mental health difficulties and educational attainment: findings from the UK household longitudinal study', *BMJ Open*, 11 (7).

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25. Women and Equalities Select Committee (2016) 'Widespread' sexual harassment and violence in schools must be tackled'.

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