

# What we learned from The Big Ask about attendance

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### Introduction

In April 2021, the Children's Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, launched The Big Ask: a national consultation exercise with children in England to ask them about their lives and their priorities, their aspirations and worries for the future. The purpose was not only to provide a large-scale 'state of the nation' assessment of the views of children on these issues, but also to help inform the Commissioner's priorities and longer-term strategy for her term in office, and to help ensure that children's needs and interests could be placed at the forefront of policy measures to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

The Big Ask ran for approximately 6 weeks and gathered more than 550,000 responses, making it the largest ever survey of children anywhere in the world, to our knowledge. This means it is possible to understand the experiences of specific groups of children who might have additional needs because we received a large enough response rate from these groups. This paper explores the characteristics of children in The Big Ask aged from 9 to 17 who said they were in home education or not in education at all. The Big Ask survey does contain demographic information, self-reported happiness with various aspects of life, indicators of vulnerability, and a free-text question on barriers to success, and this enables us to explore the experiences of particular groups of children in more detail.<sup>1</sup> However, there are many factors that could influence whether a child is in home education or missing from education and many of these are not measured in The Big Ask.

Among children in The Big Ask, we find there are several factors associated with a higher probability of missing education, including receiving mental health support, being unhappy with educational progress, being unhappy with friendships, having a social worker, and being supported by a youth offending team. Children's responses indicated that some were missing school because their special educational needs were not being met, they were not able to access mental health support, or they had experienced bullying in school. For some children, there was a combination of these factors.

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<sup>1</sup> The Big Ask survey for children aged 9-17 included one free-text question: 'What do you think stops children/young people in England achieving the things they want to achieve when they grow up?'

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## Descriptive Analysis

In The Big Ask, children were asked about what school or college they go to or to specify whether they are home educated or not in education. Approximately 6,500 children, 1.7% of respondents, were not in school, comprised of 4,600 children in home education (1.1% of respondents)<sup>2</sup> and 1,900 children out of education entirely (0.6% of respondents).

The proportion of respondents in home education may not be representative of the proportion of pupils in home education in England overall. Since the survey was taken while some students were learning remotely, children who are enrolled in school but learning remotely may have said they're home educated, which could lead to an over-estimate of home education. On the other hand, since The Big Ask was often completed in the classroom, it is likely that home educated children and children missing from education are underrepresented in this sample as the primary distribution method of the survey was through schools. This is something that we are addressing through our wider Attendance Audit work.

The prevalence of children missing from education and the prevalence of home educated children varies by groups. Across all ages, the share of children not in school is higher for boys than it is for girls. Some groups of children are significantly more likely to be out of education than the average of 0.6%:

- Ten percent of Gypsy or Irish Traveller children were out of education.
- Eight percent of children receiving support from a young offenders team were out of education.

Some groups of children are more likely to report being home educated than the average of 1.1%:

- Six percent of Gypsy or Irish Traveller children were home educated.
- Six percent of children with a young offenders team were home educated.
- Three percent of children with a social worker were home educated.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that while the question asked about the school attended by the child, children selecting home education could include children who were registered in a school but were learning online and responded they were being home educated.

- Two percent of children receiving mental health support were home educated.

### **Exploring the predictors of school absence**

Children can belong to more than one of the groups mentioned above (for example, children with a social worker and receiving mental health support). We use a statistical technique called regression analysis, to isolate the relationship between a particular factor and the probability of not being in school, holding all other factors constant. Our analysis can identify factors that are associated with being out of school, such as unhappiness with a certain aspect of life, but it is not possible to say whether this unhappiness has caused school absence, because the opposite could be true – i.e. that being out of school has caused higher levels of unhappiness. It is also possible that there are other unmeasured or unobservable factors that could affect both the probability of a child being in school and their overall happiness.

In this analysis, we consider whether the child is out of education entirely and whether the child is home educated. We control for several child-specific factors that could affect these outcomes<sup>3</sup>, with the full regression results in Table 1 in the Annex.

- Demographic factors (age, gender and ethnicity)
- Indicators of vulnerability (whether the child has a social worker, whether the child is a young carer, whether they're in kinship care, whether they're receiving any mental health support, and whether the child is receiving support from a young offending team)
- Indicators of unhappiness (whether the child is unhappy with the progress of their education, their mental health, their friendships, their physical health, their choice of things to do in their local area, their experience online, their personal safety, their access to somewhere outside to go have fun, their family health, their family life and family's ability to buy the things they need)<sup>4</sup>

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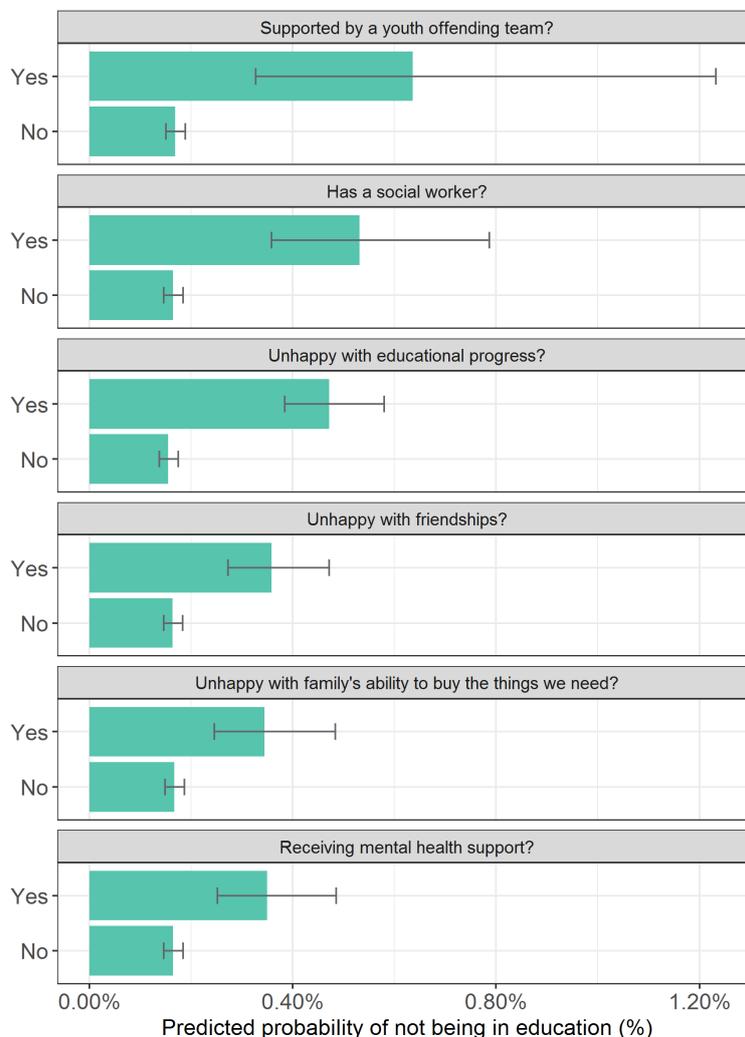
<sup>3</sup> For children who told us the name of their school or local authority, we also have information on aspects of their local area but we don't include in the regression analysis because local factors for children not in school are missing for 70% of children.

<sup>4</sup> We don't include an indicator on whether children are unhappy at school because the interpretation of this question could be interpreted differently for children not in school and we don't include indicator on whether children are unhappy with their mental health because we instead include an indicator on whether the child receives any mental health support. We don't include an indicator on whether the child receives SEND support because this mostly refers to in-school support.

## Children not in education

Our analysis suggests that certain vulnerable groups have a higher predicted probability of not being in education. The predicted probability of not being in education was 0.6% for children supported by a youth offending team, 0.5% for children with a social worker, and 0.4% for children receiving mental health support, compared to 0.2% for children not in these groups. The predicted probability of not being in education was also higher for children unhappy with their educational progress (0.5%), friendships (0.4%) and their family's ability to buy the things they need (0.3%), compared to children happy with these areas of their life (0.2%).

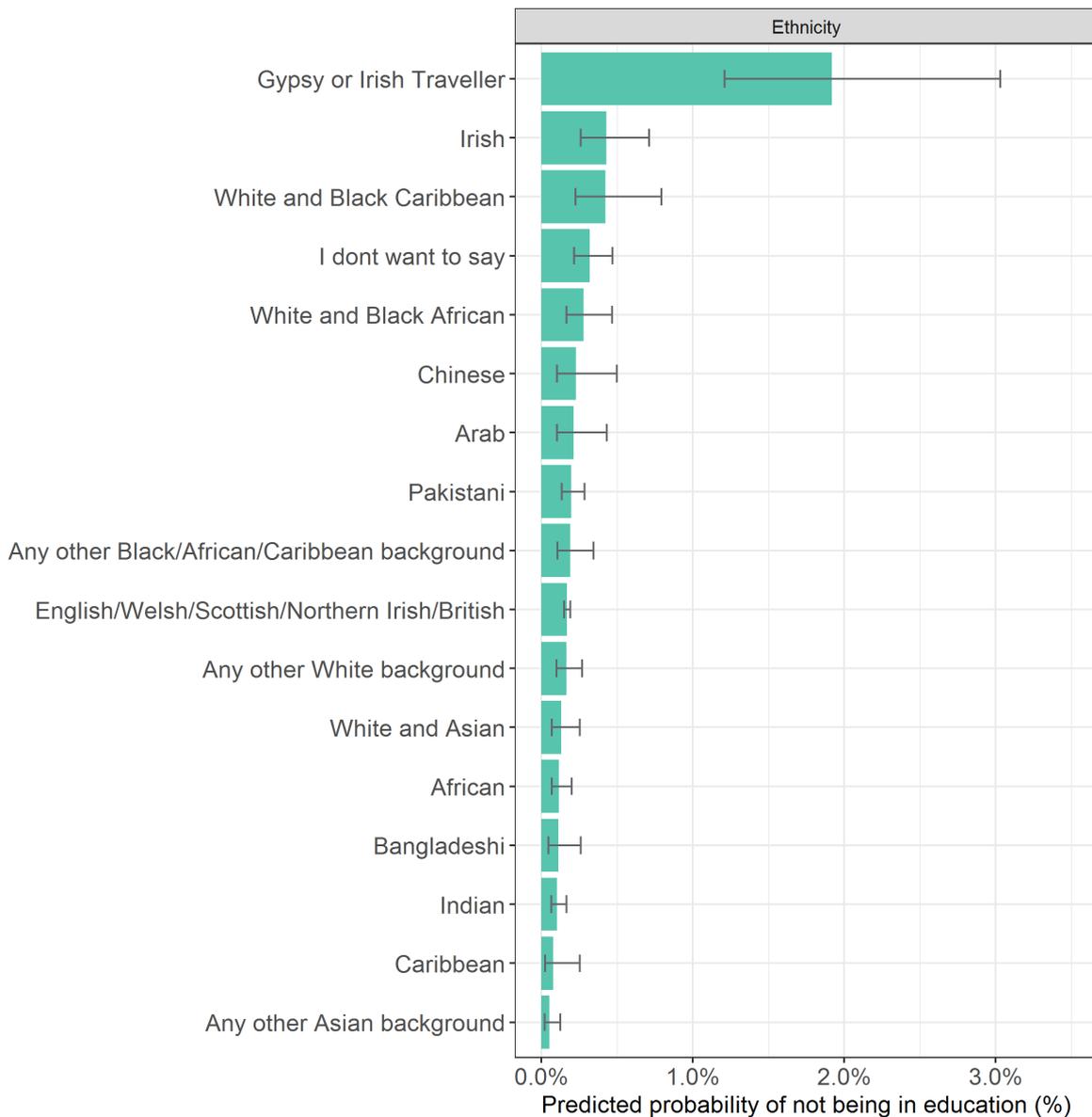
**Figure 3: Predicted probability of not being in education by characteristic**



Note: Predicted probabilities indicate the likelihood of an outcome, averaged over the levels of factors. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.

Boys had a higher predicted probability of not being in education (0.2%) than girls (0.1%). In terms of ethnicity, we find that Gypsy or Irish Traveller children have a higher predicted chance of not being in education (2%) than White British children (less than 1%).

**Figure 4: Predicted probability of not being in education by child ethnicity**

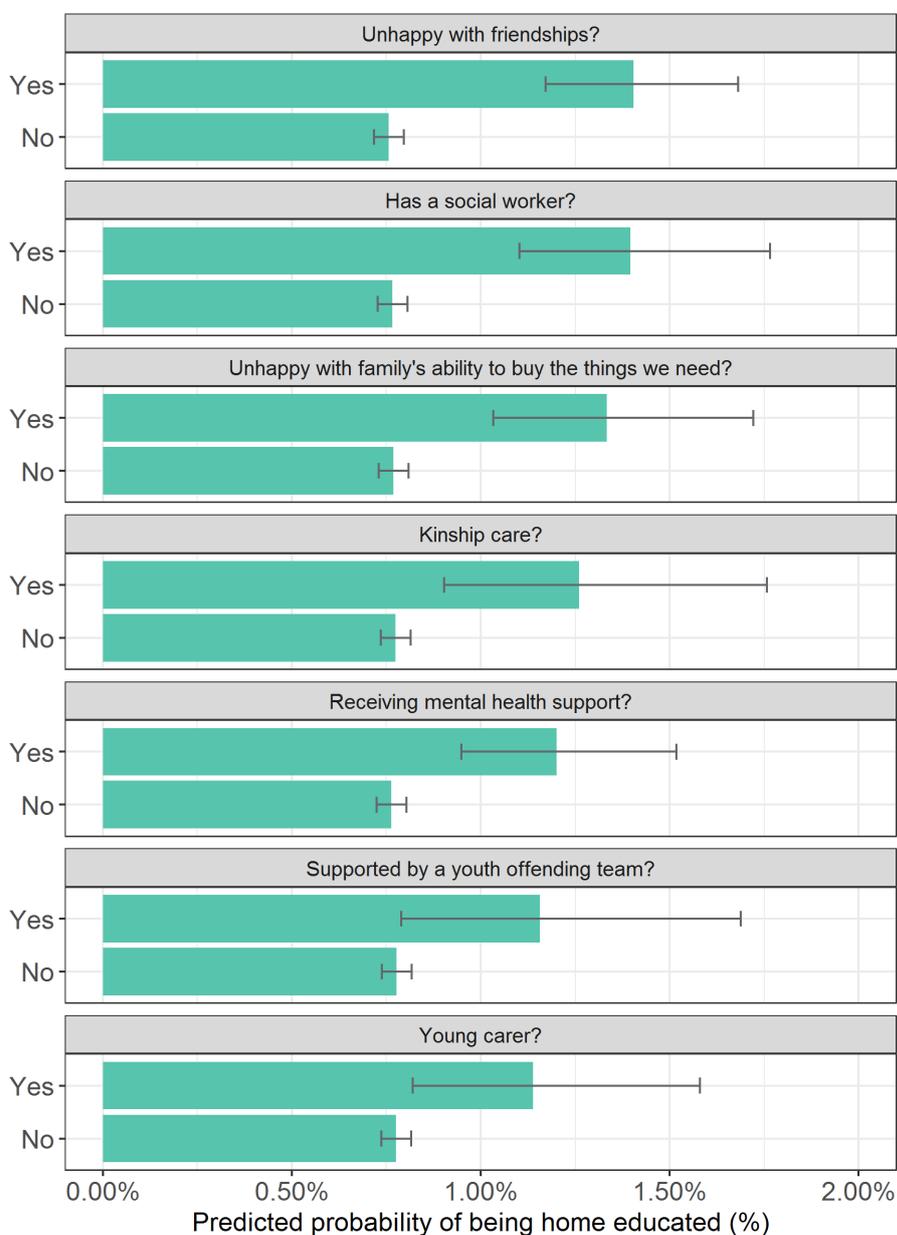


Note: Predicted probabilities indicate the likelihood of an outcome, averaged over the levels of factors. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Note that ethnic groups are in line with the 2011 Census ethnic groups (Asian or Asian British: Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Any other Asian background, Black, African, Caribbean or Black British: African, Caribbean, Any other Black, African or Caribbean background, Mixed or multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Asian, Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background, White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller, Any other White background, Other ethnic group: Arab, Any other ethnic group), available at <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups>.

### Children who are home educated

Our analysis suggests that the predicted probability of being in home education is 1.4% for children unhappy with their friendships, 1.4% for children with a social worker, 1.3% for children in kinship care, 1.3% for children who are unhappy with their family's ability to buy the things they need, 1.2% for children receiving mental health support, 1.1% for children receiving support from a youth offending team, and 1.1% for young carers, compared to 0.8% for children without these characteristics.

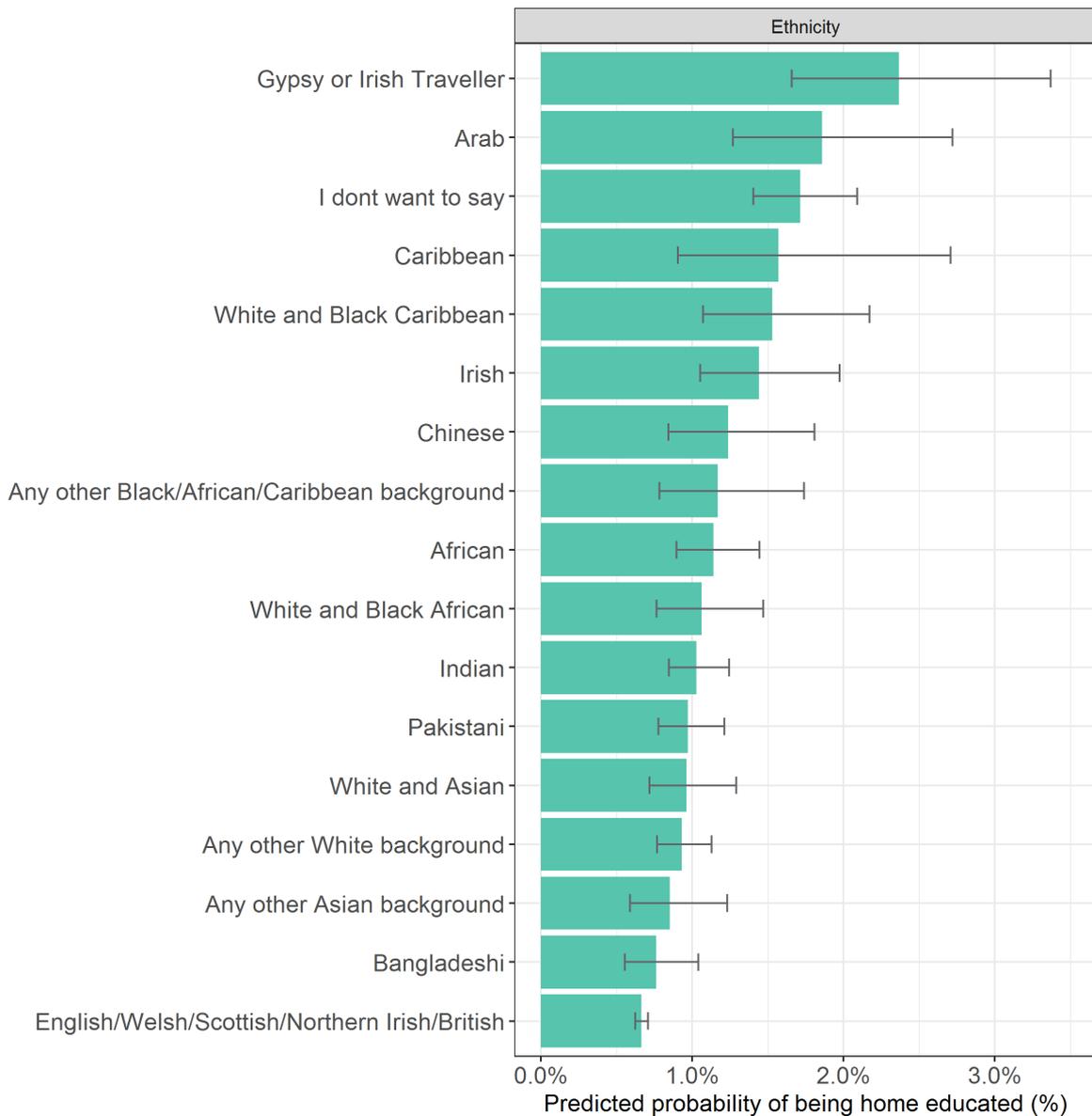
**Figure 5: Predicted probability of being home educated by characteristic**



Note: Predicted probabilities indicate the likelihood of an outcome, averaged over the levels of factors. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.

The analysis also suggests that demographic factors are associated with a higher chance of being home educated. Boys have a higher predicted probability of being home educated (1%) than girls (0.6%) and Gypsy or Irish Traveller children were more likely to be home educated (2%) than White British children (1%), holding constant all other factors.

**Figure 6: Predicted probability of being home educated by child ethnicity**



Note: Predicted probabilities indicate the likelihood of an outcome, averaged over the levels of factors. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Note that ethnic groups are in line with the 2011 Census ethnic groups (Asian or Asian British: Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, Any other Asian background, Black, African, Caribbean or Black British: African, Caribbean, Any other Black, African or Caribbean background Mixed or multiple ethnic groups: White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Asian, Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background, White: English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller, Any other White background, Other ethnic group: Arab, Any other ethnic groups).

### **What children not in school told us in The Big Ask about the barriers to success**

Children who said that they were either home educated or not in education at all raised issues around lack of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and mental health support, bullying, physical health barriers and pressure in school. Note that the following includes mention of suicide.

#### *SEND*

Among the children who responded to the free-text question on barriers to success, children out of school were much more likely than their peers to say they have a special educational need. About 1.4% of children who were not in education and 0.9% of children who were home educated wrote about how they personally had SEND, compared to 0.1% of children in school.

Children wrote that they were unable to participate in mainstream education because of the lack of support for their special educational needs, including lack of access to timely diagnoses, lack of support from the school and teachers and the absence of suitable adjustments or provisions to meet their needs. The vast majority of children who shared these experiences were boys.

- 'I think some young people like me who are autistic who are unable to attend school for many reasons, such as sensory difficulties and anxiety have less opportunities [...] The education system does not cater for children like me who finds the school environment too difficult to access, there is not the right schools for people like me.' - Boy, 15, not in education
- 'A good education for young people who have needs, like me I was not helped at my schools they used to just leave me, and I could not learn my work as I could not do it, I am trying hard to achieve things, but my maths is bad, and I struggle and did not get supported at school.' – Boy, 17, not in education
- 'There aren't enough school places for young people with SEN. Mainstream school is really hard to cope with. I have been out of school for a very long time, and I don't see friends, it can be really lonely. I don't think people always understand autism and it's hard to fit in. I need an education so I can get a good job, but I am stuck because there is no school where I fit in' – Girl, 16, not in education
- 'I am 15 and for years have had a diagnosis of Tourette's syndrome, there is nobody

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to help somebody like me manage my condition and it is very painful and frustrating that nobody will help' – Boy, 15, home educated

One 11-year-old boy with severe dyslexia shared his experience in school:

- 'schools dont help kids wiht issews and want help wiht bad dislexic i elft scool 8 cos i cudnt read nyfing now lerning im home ed now and learn lots but worry we cant get exam place so cant go colige so wont get job my mum carres so helps me lern sum kids stay scool cos dont now dont hav to to lern and get help' [sic].

In addition to his response in his own words, his mother translated some of what he had shared and provided additional information:

- 'Schools don't help children with issues such as severe dyslexia. He left school at 8.5 unable to read or write at all and was not being supported with his learning [...] He is electively home educated now and is learning lots but is worried about the lack of exam access for home educated children. [...] He is studying for his GCSEs but is worried if he doesn't find an exam centre the college will not accept him and he will not get a place on the environmental management course he wants to do.'

Children with SEND talked about the support their parents needed to provide to help get them support in schools. As one 10-year-old girl with ADHD and autism said: 'mummy has tried really hard to get me more help for when I go to big school.' However, when parents aren't able to provide that support, that can create additional challenges for children with SEND:

- 'I have never had the help I need my education has been non-existent and I now live I care because my family didn't get help to care for me. I have Tourette's syndrome and I am isolated with no friends. I spend my whole time with adults.' – Girl, 17, not in education

### *Bullying*

Some children talked about how bullying led to them feeling they could no longer attend school:

- 'I am homeschooled due to being bullied at my secondary school so took the decision to be homeschooled.' – Boy, 13, home educated

Children also talked about the interaction between SEND and bullying, and how this could compound the negative experience in school:

- 'For me, I have been put through lots of mainstream schools, but I needed to be in a special school, to be in a place where I am understood and not punished for things I got wrong. I was bullied many times and kept running away because of the anxiety. I am now out of school and get therapies to help me with my self-esteem and confidence and communications. [...] I am putting on weight and am bored. I miss not having friends.' – Boy, 15, not in education

### *Mental health*

Similar to the issues of provision for children with SEND, children also talked about how not receiving support for their mental health led to them not being able to take part in education:

- 'Not getting help when its needed. I am on 3 CAMHS [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] waiting list for nearly three years now' – Boy, 15, not in education
- 'Lack of quick available help for mental health. It took a year to be prescribed the medication that my GP wanted to give me there and then but was unable to as I had to wait for CAMHS. I missed my last year of school and GCSEs as I was so unwell. If I was 2 years older I would have had some of the help I needed straight away, and may have not got into such a downward spiral.' – Boy, 16, not in education
- 'My youngest daughter has attempted suicide twice in the last 9 months - she is 12 and the fight we had to engage in to access services was unbelievable [...] my daughter does not see a future for herself, which I completely understand when she is waiting for 3 months for a response from our CAMHS team.' – Parent of 12 year old girl, not in education

There were also examples of the interaction between SEND and mental health:

- 'With me my ADHD and the lack of support I have received over the years has made my mental health decline seriously. I am at risk and am worrying my family a lot'. – Boy, 17, not in education

### *Physical health*

For some children, their physical health meant that they were unable to attend school

regularly. For some, there was also an issue with getting access to the right support with their illness to help them stay in school.

- 'I think the children that are ill with the conditions pans/pandas, like me, struggle to get their education because they are not receiving the medical care that would help them get better so they can also attend school most of the time.' – Girl, 14, home educated
- 'Physical health as well, I am unable to attend school because of poor health and my parents have to pay a lot of money for me to get an education from home.' – Girl, 17, home educated
- 'Not enough help from doctors when they need it. like doctors wouldn't believe that I was ill and my mum had to see a private doctor and it has taken years and now I'm not at school. I have pandas and the NHS doesn't help people with this very well.' – Boy, 10, not in education

### *Pressure in school*

The pressure that children can experience in school was mentioned frequently as a potential barrier to attending. Some children who are home educated or out of education felt they 'couldn't cope' with the pressure of school, or that they couldn't keep up. Others felt that school was a challenging environment because of other pupils' behaviour. This was most often given as a reason by younger children.

- 'In school the teachers never could get enough control over the kids, so everyone was talking for most of the lesson and now I'm homeschooled as it was such a bad atmosphere I just felt so unwanted and unhappy and now I'm not doing enough work so sorry I went into some detail about my own life I've just had a really tough time and nobody helps.' – Girl, 13, home educated
- 'Because I am not even in school anymore because I could not cope and it's been almost a year and no one cares' – Girl, 10, home educated
- 'When I was at school I felt sad a lot of the time. I felt stupid because everyone else could do the work. [...] Now I learn at home I don't have to stay sitting down all the time and I learn fun and interesting stuff.' – Boy, 10, home educated

## **Conclusion**

The Big Ask indicates that there are various factors in children's lives that are linked with them being more likely to be out of school. These include demographic factors (like the fact that boys are much more likely to be out of school than girls) and a wider set of wellbeing indicators, where children with different additional needs are more likely to be missing from education settings. Children's free-text responses suggest the barriers to being in school are having SEND without having the right support in school, mental health problems, bullying, the pressure of the school environment and physical illness. Further research is needed to understand the most important drivers of children missing education, and to identify which factors are causing children to fall out of the school system. Nevertheless, this analysis provides evidence on the risks for children falling through the gaps in education and suggests that further reforms to the SEND system and mental health support are needed to help children to stay in school and to thrive.

## Annex

**Table 1: Logit regression results**

*Odds Ratios with standard errors in brackets*

Notes: The odds ratio is a measure of how likely an outcome given a particular characteristic, relative to a baseline characteristic. A value greater than one indicates that people in that group are more likely to be not in school than those in the relevant baseline category.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	<b>Not in Education Home Educated</b>	
Male (reference group: female)	1.849*** (0.171)	1.719*** (0.083)
Age 10 (reference group: 9)	0.800* (0.101)	0.648*** (0.041)
Age 11 (reference group: 9)	0.577*** (0.076)	0.431*** (0.029)
Age 12 (reference group: 9)	0.331*** (0.052)	0.378*** (0.033)
Age 13 (reference group: 9)	0.386*** (0.058)	0.333*** (0.027)
Age 14 (reference group: 9)	0.280*** (0.050)	0.284*** (0.028)
Age 15 (reference group: 9)	0.356*** (0.069)	0.348*** (0.035)
Age 16 (reference group: 9)	0.422*** (0.082)	0.333*** (0.043)
Age 17 (reference group: 9)	0.775 (0.144)	0.250*** (0.041)
Irish (reference group: White British)	2.543*** (0.657)	2.189*** (0.362)
Gypsy or Irish Traveller (reference group: White British)	11.540*** (2.830)	3.628*** (0.678)
Other White background (ref group: White British)	0.972 (0.250)	1.406*** (0.145)
White and Black Caribbean (ref group: White British)	2.506*** (0.818)	2.322*** (0.429)

White and Black African (reference group: White British)	1.650*	1.605***
	(0.438)	(0.273)
White and Asian (reference group: White British)	0.782	1.453**
	(0.258)	(0.226)
Indian (reference group: White British)	0.616**	1.552***
	(0.144)	(0.162)
Pakistani (reference group: White British)	1.157	1.467***
	(0.226)	(0.175)
Bangladeshi (reference group: White British)	0.656	1.146
	(0.285)	(0.188)
Chinese (reference group: White British)	1.348	1.874***
	(0.534)	(0.374)
Any other Asian background (reference group: White British)	0.305***	1.287
	(0.138)	(0.247)
African (reference group: White British)	0.685	1.724***
	(0.190)	(0.219)
Caribbean (reference group: White British)	0.454	2.385***
	(0.277)	(0.682)
Other Black/African/Caribbean background (ref group: White British)	1.137	1.767***
	(0.338)	(0.370)
Arab (reference group: White British)	1.255	2.834***
	(0.454)	(0.580)
I don't want to say (reference group: White British)	1.882***	2.834***
	(0.377)	(0.580)
<b>Unhappiness Indicators</b> (reference group: Happy or neutral)	3.052***	1.313***
Unhappy with educational progress		
	(0.352)	(0.127)
Unhappy with friendships	2.193***	1.869***
	(0.295)	(0.184)
Unhappy with physical health	1.170	1.043
	(0.157)	(0.106)
Unhappy with online experiences	1.487**	1.256*
	(0.233)	(0.159)

Unhappy with personal safety	1.778*** (0.263)	1.363** (0.172)
Unhappy with somewhere to have fun	1.090 (0.165)	1.135 (0.107)
Unhappy with choice of things to do	1.263** (0.148)	0.902 (0.071)
Unhappy with family's health	1.151 (0.174)	1.168 (0.148)
Unhappy with family life	0.832 (0.124)	0.927 (0.140)
Unhappy with family's ability to buy the things they need	2.067*** (0.357)	1.746*** (0.238)
<b>Vulnerability indicators</b>		
Has a social worker	3.239*** (0.684)	1.833*** (0.228)
Young carer	0.603 (0.234)	1.474** (0.247)
Receives support from a youth offending team	3.785*** (1.277)	1.494** (0.291)
Receives mental health support	2.134*** (0.369)	1.581*** (0.198)
Kinship care	1.481 (0.409)	1.637*** (0.282)
Constant	0.002*** (0.0002)	0.011*** (0.001)
Observations	297,751	297,751
Log Likelihood	-5,889.525	-16,532.940
Akaike Inf. Crit.	11,861.050	33,147.890
<i>Note:</i>	*p**p***p<0.01	



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