

Technical Report

Homeless 16- and 17-year-olds in need of care

November 2023



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Methodology

Quantitative data collected from local authorities

Using the Children's Commissioner's statutory data collection power under section 2F of the Children Act 2004, the office asked the 152 local authorities (those authorities with responsibility for children's social care) of England for data on the treatment of children aged 16 and 17 at the point of presenting as homeless or threatened with homelessness. The request asked for child-level data covering the 12-month period from 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023.

Unaccompanied children seeking asylum were included in the request, but 16- and 17-year-olds who presented as homeless with their families were excluded.

To better understand the experience of these children and how we can best support them, the office asked for the following information:

- Child ID, an ID assigned to the child and used within local authority systems, and Unique Pupil Number, an ID assigned by schools and used in Department for Education data.
- Demographic characteristics: date of birth, gender, ethnicity, care and disability status.
- Whether the child was an unaccompanied child seeking asylum (UCSA).
- The date the child presented to the local authority as homeless or threatened with homelessness, and how many times they had done so before.
- The child's living arrangement prior to presenting as homeless and their last known living arrangement post-presentation.
- The child's reason for presenting as homeless such as family breakdown, domestic abuse, eviction from supported housing, end of rented tenancy and others no longer willing or able to accommodate.
- How the child was referred to the local authority, including self-referral and other agencies such as social services, hospitals, schools and the police. (Some local authorities also volunteered

housing team or housing association. We report these separately but as these categories were not suggested by the template, the numbers should be considered minimums.)

- What decision was made (and when) by the local authority regarding the child's accommodation and whether this decision was accepted by the child.
 - If accommodated, the legislation they were housed under. This includes sections 17 and 20 of the Children Act, as well as housing legislation. From data cleaning it became clear that returns did not always differentiate between children accommodated under housing legislation and *also* supported under section 17 as a Child in Need, and those accommodated through section 17.
 - If not accommodated, the reasons for refusal. Examples include the child being supported to remain at home, not judged to have a local connection, and not judged to be homeless.
- The type of accommodation the child was housed in, including independent and semi-independent housing, foster care, children's homes and residential schools.
- Whether a child housed in semi-independent or supported accommodation had a named support officer on site.
- Whether the child was offered an advocate and whether the offer was accepted.
- Whether any enquiries had been made under s47 of the Children Act since their date of presentation and/or whether a Serious Incident Notification had been made between the date of presentation and March 31st, 2023.

In total, all 152 local authorities responded to the request. Of these, 75 responded by the initial collection deadline of 17 May 2023, and a further 61 responded by 17 July, in time to be included in the analysis. The remaining 16 local authorities responded to the collection too late and have not been included in the main analysis, however, Annex A1 presents simple statistics covering all 152 local authorities.

As a result, the analysis in the report covers the 136 local authorities who responded by the cut-off date.ⁱ Of these, 4 stated they had no homeless 16- and 17-year-olds to report: the Isles of Scilly; the Isle of Wight; and two local authorities in London, Waltham Forest and the City of London. The final sample consisted of 5,968 children from these 136 local authorities. Excluding those with nil returns, the number of homeless 16- and 17-year-olds in each local authority ranged from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 313.

Four local authorities (Dorset, Hounslow, Kent and Southwark) explained that they did not provide any data on unaccompanied children seeking asylum as their processes for accommodating this group were not compatible with the data fields requested. A further 70 returns did not contain any UCSA in their data but did not specify whether they had been intentionally excluded. This is a limitation of the dataset, meaning that the UCSA data should be interpreted with caution.

Excluded from the final sample of 5,968 children, but included in the data submitted by some local authorities, were children whose living arrangement prior to presenting as homeless was in a children's home, foster care, or other care placements. These cases have been deemed as not comparable with other homelessness cases, as they should be treated as cases of a care placement breakdown, and therefore dealt with through care planning procedures, rather than considered a homelessness presentation.

Looking at the raw data return, the office found that it seemed there was wide variation in how local authorities collected children's homelessness data. Some were able to provide data exactly as the office's data template requested, but many were unable. Instead, many local authorities either provided blank returns for the questions they could not answer or provided answers in a format that did not fit with the template.

Assumptions and decisions made during the data cleaning process included:

- Children where an invalid date of birth had been returned by their local authority (for example, 01/01/3000) were assumed to have been aged 16 and 17 and so have been included in the analysis.

ⁱ In April 2023, during the data collection, Cumbria split into two new local authorities: Cumberland; and Westmorland and Furness. They opted to respond as two separate local authorities. Conversely, in April 2021, the local authority of Northamptonshire split into the local authorities of North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire, but they jointly responded to the collection as Northamptonshire.

Although local authorities did return some records for individuals aged under 16 or over 17, there was only a small number of these records, and so the office has assumed that local authorities abided by the collection guidance in the majority of cases where date of birth information is invalid.

- Children whose local authority did not specify whether the child was UCSA have been assumed not to be UCSA. This was because non-UCSA children were the majority, and that some local authorities later clarified that they intended a blank response to mean 'no'.
- In all other cases where local authorities responded with confusing or blank information, that data has been treated as missing in analysis and reporting.
- New response categories were created in some cases following manual review of free-text responses. For example, 'housing association' was not a category prompted in the office's data collection template, but was added as a category during data cleaning.

Qualitative data collected from interviews with children and professionals

The office wanted to hear directly from children who had experience of presenting as homeless to their local authority to understand their experiences and the barriers they faced to getting the right help, and to gain more understanding of the decision-making process. The office spoke to a total of 15 children and young people aged 16 to 21, with experience of presenting as homeless at age 16 or 17. Of these, 4 were UCSA and 11 were not, 8 participants were female and 7 were male. The interviews took place in London, Cambridgeshire, Bristol, and virtually. The young people may or may not have been among the children about whom local authorities provided administrative data.

The team also carried out 6 interviews with 10 adults who support children when they experience homelessness. These were: a specialist advocate for 16- and 17-year-olds, a service manager for a supported lodgings organisation, a supported lodging host, a social worker, charity support workers, and lawyers specialising in supporting 16- and 17-year-olds to get access to appropriate accommodation. The team also spoke to a range of charity and other stakeholders that work to support 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.

The views of the office's Help at Hand team, and the experiences of the children they support, have also informed this report.

The office also conducted a series of visits to understand what provision looks like in practice.

New Horizons Youth Centre, London

The Children's Commissioner and her team visited a day centre for homeless young people in the London Borough of Camden, which provides a range of support and services to children and young adults. The team spoke to an outreach worker, two key workers, and two managers.

UCL Integrated Legal Advice Clinic, London

The Children's Commissioner's office interviewed two young people in a University College London office. In one of the interviews, the young person was accompanied by their legal advisor.

St. Basils, Birmingham

The Children's Commissioner's office spoke to St Basil's Youth Advisory Board in June 2023, then visited the centre in Birmingham to tour facilities and speak with professionals from the charity as well as from the local authority housing and children's services.

Concrete Rose, Cambridgeshire

The Children's Commissioner's office interviewed two young people who had been accommodated in supported lodgings through Concrete Rose, a community interest company. The team also interviewed a service manager and a supported lodging host.

Qualitative review of Joint Protocols

The Children's Commissioner's Office used qualitative content analysis to sample and analyse Joint Protocols using the following three-stage approach:

Data collection

Each local authority was asked to return a copy of their Joint Protocols for assessment and accommodation of 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.

Each local authority is required to set out how housing and children's services work together to support homeless 16- and 17-year-olds as statutory guidance states that it is 'essential that services for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are underpinned by written joint protocols'.¹

The office received 98 documents.

Iterative codebook development on random sample of 10 protocols

The following key themes were identified in the majority of protocols that were reviewed:

- Support to remain in home
- Assessment process
- Timescales
- Emergency accommodation
- Responsible team within local authority
- Provision of information
- Advocacy
- Suitable accommodation
- Section 20 and section 17
- Intentional homelessness
- Release from custody and contact with secure estate.

Other elements of interest that were found in less than half of the sampled protocols:

- Education
 - Young parents and pregnancy
 - Involvement of parents
 - Care leaver support
 - Example scenarios
 - UCSAs
 - Child-friendly info
 - Emotional impact
 - Exploitation risk
-

Subsequent systematic application of code to a purposive sample from the remaining joint protocol documents

16 local authorities of interest were identified through findings from the quantitative analysis of local authority data and issues raised in interviews. Of these, 4 had not supplied copies of protocols.

A total of 22 protocol documents were included in this analysis, and quotes and findings are presented in relevant sections throughout this report.

Annexes

A1. Total number of homeless 16- and 17-year-olds in England

Of the 152 local authorities who responded to the office's collection, only the data for the 136 local authorities who responded before 17 July 2023, the cut-off date for inclusion in the analysis, has been presented in the main report.

As a result, the data submitted by the 16 local authorities who responded after the cut-off date have not been through the same data cleaning process as the other local authorities (for example, removing children not aged 16 or 17, removing children who presented as homeless after a care placement breakdown, and removing any duplicate records from the submitted data). Nonetheless, the 501 records in this data provides a high estimate for the number of homeless children in these local authorities.

This gives a total estimate of 6,469 homeless children, including UCSA, across all 152 local authorities who responded to the collection. Further, because 70 local authorities did not specify whether or not they had intentionally excluded UCSA from their data return (see Methodology), this number may still be an underestimate.

A2. Regional breakdown

The table below shows the percentage breakdown of decisions taken by local authorities by region.ⁱⁱ

Region	Number of children	Proportion of children	Accommodated: section 20	Accommodated: section 17 or other	Not accommodated	Outcome unknown
East Midlands	408	0.37%	19%	22%	43%	16%
East of England	438	0.34%	16%	24%	24%	36%
London	537	0.31%	32%	20%	24%	24%
North East	242	0.45%	15%	27%	47%	12%
North West	811	0.51%	14%	27%	42%	17%
South East	542	0.28%	21%	20%	55%	5%
South West	474	0.46%	14%	26%	34%	27%
West Midlands	601	0.43%	9%	22%	48%	21%
Yorkshire and The Humber	826	0.65%	7%	30%	45%	18%
National	4,879	0.41%	16%	25%	41%	19%

ⁱⁱ Table excludes UCSA. The denominator for the 'Proportion of children' column is number of 16- and 17-year-olds in the ONS' mid-2021 population estimate. Local authorities who did not respond to the collection before the analytical cut-off (see Methodology) have been excluded from this denominator.

A3. Regression analysis

Throughout this report, results show how children with different characteristics receive different decisions from their local authority. These include whether the child was accommodated at all, the legislation under which they were housed, and the type of accommodation the child was placed in.

To check the statistical significance of the results, two regressions isolated the effects of each characteristic from the effects of all other observed characteristics. The first regression examined the effects of a child's characteristics on the chances that they were accommodated. The second regression looked only at those who were accommodated, and examined the effect of child characteristics on the chances that they were accommodated under section 20, or under section 17 or other housing legislation.

As the dependent variables were binary – a child was accommodated or they were not, and they were accommodated under section 20 or not – the analysis used a logistic regression.

The characteristics used in both logistic regressions were:

- Age at presentation (16 or 17)
- Gender (female, male or other)
- High-level ethnic group (Asian, black, mixed, other or white)
- Unaccompanied child seeking asylum status (UCSA or not UCSA)
- Disability status (disabled or not disabled)
- Home local authority
- Prior living arrangement before presenting as homeless (living with family, living with friends, other temporary accommodation, rough sleeping, semi-independent accommodation, or other)
- Reason for presenting as homeless (family breakdown, domestic abuse, eviction from supported housing, family or friends no longer willing or able to accommodate, or other)
- Route of referral to local authority as homeless (self-referred, LA's homeless team or housing association, school or college, social services, or other)
- Number of previous homeless presentations (0, 1, 2, or 3+)

Key assumptions made include:

- Children where UCSA data was missing have been assumed to not be UCSA.
-

- Children where data was missing for any other variable included in the regressions (including the dependent variables) have been excluded from the regressions.ⁱⁱⁱ

Regression 1: whether a child was accommodated

Tests were used to assess the quality of the model. When used to predict whether or not a child was accommodated in a test data set,^{iv} the model had an accuracy of 75.6%. The response operating characteristic (ROC) curve for the model had an area under the curve (AUC) of 0.83.^v The McFadden pseudo R-squared was 0.40, giving a relationship of 40% between predictors and prediction. These results suggest the model was sufficient to explain some of the variation in whether a child was accommodated, but also highlight that a wide array of factors not captured here may play into a local authority's decision.

Seven of the ten characteristics examined individually were shown to have a statistically significant effect on whether a child was accommodated^{vi}: gender, ethnic group, UCSA status, home local authority, prior living arrangement, reason for referral and referral source. The other three characteristics – age at presentation, number of previous presentations and disability status – did not have a statistically significant effect. The CCo additionally analysed the predicted probability of being accommodated when all other characteristics are held equal. Those results, for selected characteristics, are presented in figure 13 below, and the full regression results are presented in table 1 below.

In line with the descriptive statistics presented in the main body of this report, the biggest effect came from being UCSA. No other characteristic came close to making such a large difference to the likelihood of being accommodated.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some local authorities had no children with complete data for all of the characteristics used in the regression, so consequently these local authorities have been excluded from the regression.

^{iv} 70% of the data was used to create the logistic regression model, while 30% of the data was put aside to be used as a test data set to assess the model's ability to predict known results. A theoretical perfect model would have an accuracy of 100%.

^v A theoretical perfect model would have an area under the curve of 1, while a model with no predictive power would have an area of 0.5.

^{vi} Statistically significant is defined here as where the p-value is less than 0.05.

The regression results also show that girls and children from the white ethnic group were less likely to be accommodated than boys and those of other ethnic backgrounds. Rough sleeping was the living arrangement prior to presenting as homeless which was most likely to be accommodated, with an odds ratio more than four times higher than those who had been living with family.^{vii} Family or friends no longer being willing or able to accommodate was the reason for homelessness which was most likely to be accommodated, with an odds ratio almost twice that of children who were homeless because of family breakdown. And referrals via social services were the referrals most likely to be accommodated, with an odds ratio 1.6 times higher than those who self-referred.^{viii}

While age was not found to make a statistically significant difference on the likelihood that a child was accommodated, the second regression, reported below, showed that it did make a significant difference as to whether the children was accommodated under section 20, or accommodated under section 17 or other housing legislation.

^{vii} Logistic regressions give their outputs in terms of odds ratios. An odds ratio is the probability that an event will occur divided by the probability that it will not occur. For example, an event with a 50% chance of occurring has an odds ratio of $50\%/50\% = 1$, while an event with a 75% chance of occurring has an odds ratio of $75\%/25\% = 3$.

^{viii} The choice of comparison in each case is the reference value used in the regression. Reference values were chosen as the most common value within each variable. For example, as per the main body of this report, the majority of children self-referred as homeless. Age on day of presentation is an exception to this as, as a continuous variable, a reference variable is not necessary.

Figure 13: The predicted probability of being accommodated, for selected characteristics, when all other characteristics are held equal.

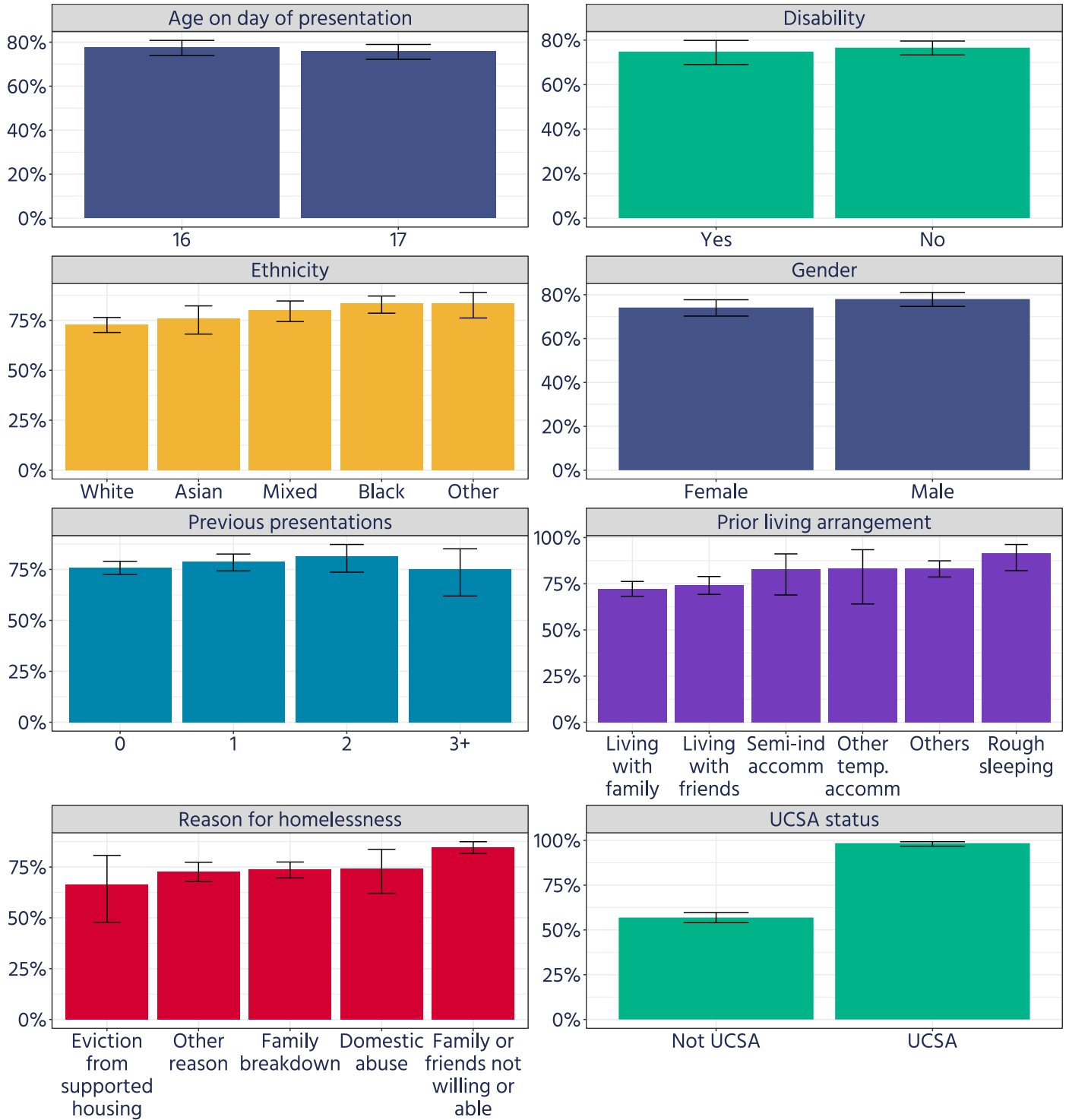


Table 1: Full regression results on whether a child was accommodated or not.

Independent variable	Value	Proportional change in odds ratio from reference value
Gender (reference = Female)	Male	1.237***
	Other	1.956
Ethnicity (reference = White)	Asian	1.173
	Black	1.861***
	Mixed	1.495***
	Other	1.892***
Disability (reference = No)	Yes	0.908
UCSA (reference = No)	Yes	47.379***
Previous presentations (reference = 0)	1	1.171
	2	1.387
	3+	0.968
Prior living arrangement (reference = Living with family)	Living with friends	1.105
	Other	1.926***
	Other temporary accommodation	1.917
	Rough sleeping	4.129***
	Semi-independent accommodation	1.822
Reason for homelessness (reference = Family breakdown)	Domestic abuse	1.033
	Eviction from supported housing	0.698
	Family or friends not willing or able	1.984***
	Other	0.958
Route of referral (reference = Self-referred)	Homeless team or housing association	0.643***
	Other	1.058
	School or college	0.836
	Social services	1.651***
Age on day of presentation (reference = 16)	17	0.905
Constant		3.046

Observations: 3,770.

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Regression 2: whether accommodated children were accommodated under section 20

A second logistic regression covered only children who were accommodated, and used the legislation used to provide that accommodation as the dependent variable. This showed that, unlike the first regression where age did not have a statistically significant effect on the chances that a child was accommodated by their local authority, among those accommodated, age *was* significant in the likelihood that the child was accommodated under section 20. The odds ratio of a 17-year-old being accommodated under section 20 were half that of a 16-year-old.

Similarly, while the number of previous presentations was not statistically significant to whether they were accommodated, it was to the legislation they were accommodated under. The odds ratio of a child who had presented three or more times previously was almost three times higher than those who had presented for the first time to be accommodated under section 20.

The same tests of model quality were used as for the first regression. The second regression had an accuracy of 85.6% when used to predict on a test data set. The ROC curve had an AUC of 0.93. And the McFadden pseudo R-squared was 0.62. These are similar results as the first regression, and again suggest that the model is capable of explaining some of the variation in whether a child is accommodated under section 20.

Figure 14: The predicted probability of being accommodated under section 20, for selected characteristics, when all other characteristics are held equal (*excludes children who were not accommodated*).

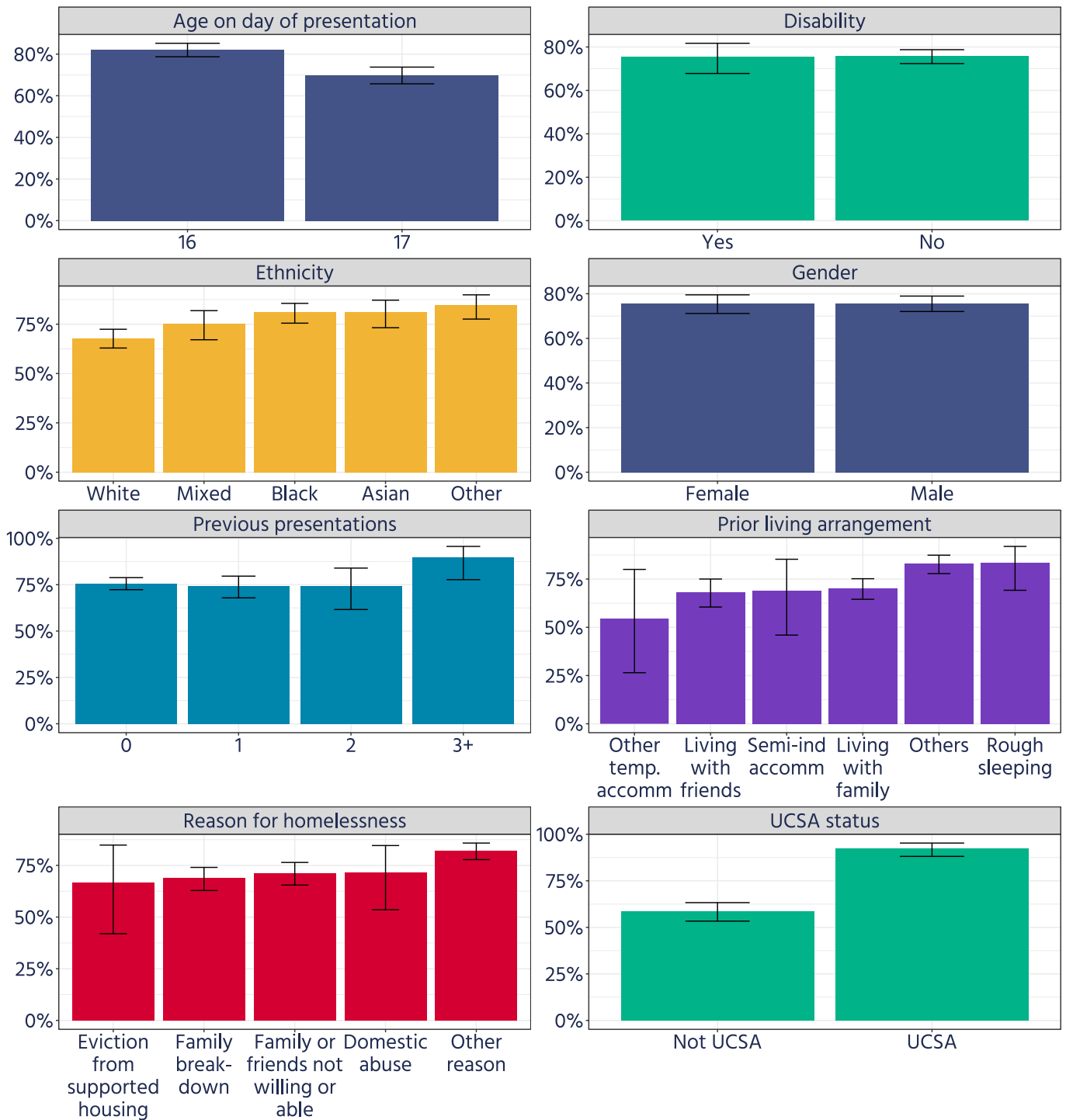


Table 2: Full regression results on whether accommodated children were under section 20.

Independent variable	Value	Proportional change in odds ratio from reference value
Gender (reference = Female)	Male	1.005
	Other	1.454
Ethnicity (reference = White)	Asian	2.041***
	Black	2.026***
	Mixed	1.437*
	Other	2.627***
Disability (reference = No)	Yes	0.985
UCSA (reference = No)	Yes	8.728***
Previous presentations (reference = 0)	1	0.923
	2	0.930
	3+	2.817**
Prior living arrangement (reference = Living with family)	Living with friends	0.914
	Other	2.101***
	Other temporary accommodation	0.511
	Rough sleeping	2.157*
	Semi-independent accommodation	0.945
Reason for homelessness (reference = Family breakdown)	Domestic abuse	1.146
	Eviction from supported housing	0.915
	Family or friends not willing or able	1.129
	Other	2.096***
Route of referral (reference = Self-referred)	Homeless team or housing association	0.847
	Other	1.610***
	School or college	1.491
	Social services	0.894
Age on day of presentation (reference = 16)	17	0.503***
Constant		40,076.720***

Observations: 2,374.

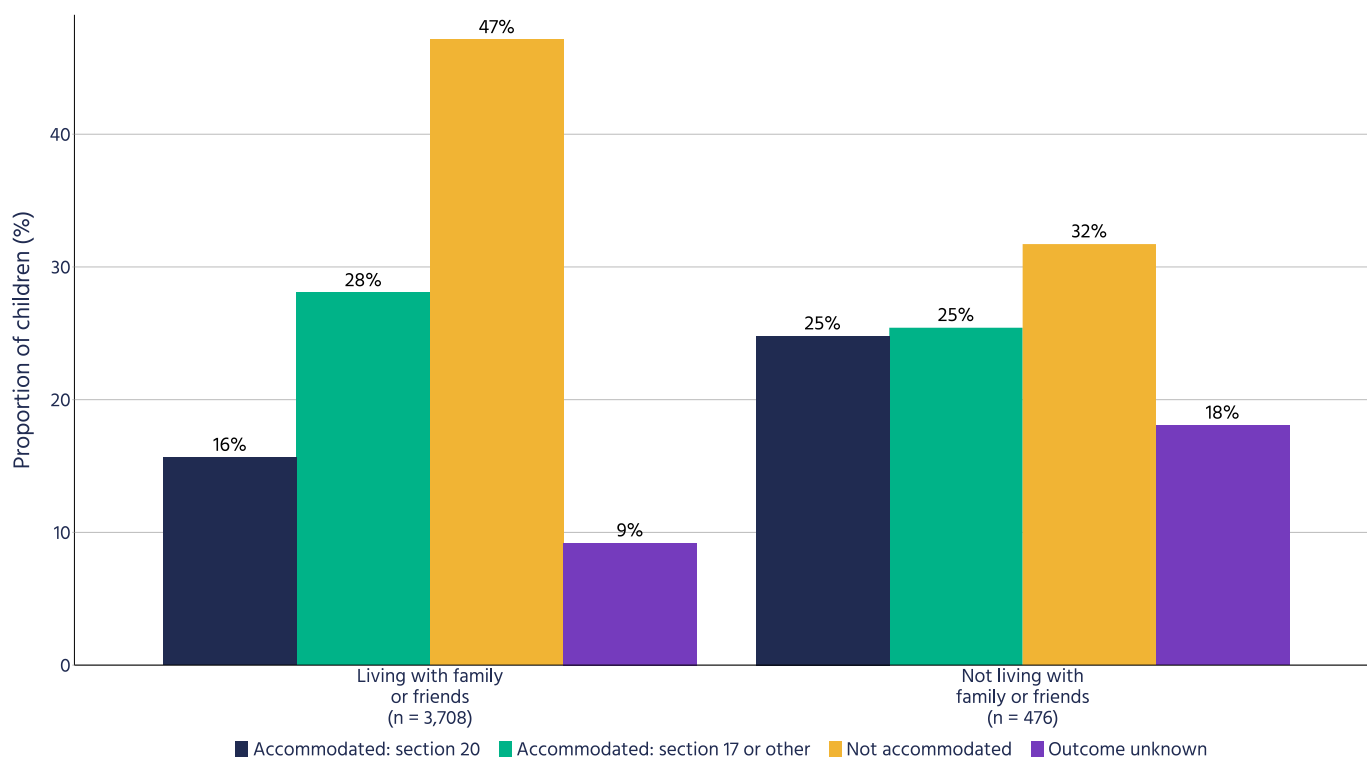
Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

A4. Additional analysis

Prior living arrangement

Most children presenting as homeless (76%) were living with family or friends. These children were more likely to not be accommodated than children living in other arrangements such as those rough sleeping, in semi-independent accommodation or renting in the private or social sectors (figure 15 below). They were also less likely to be housed under section 20 – only 16% of those presenting as homeless, compared to 25% of children who were not living with family or friends.

Figure 15: Legislation used to accommodate a child by their prior living arrangement



Reason for presenting as homeless

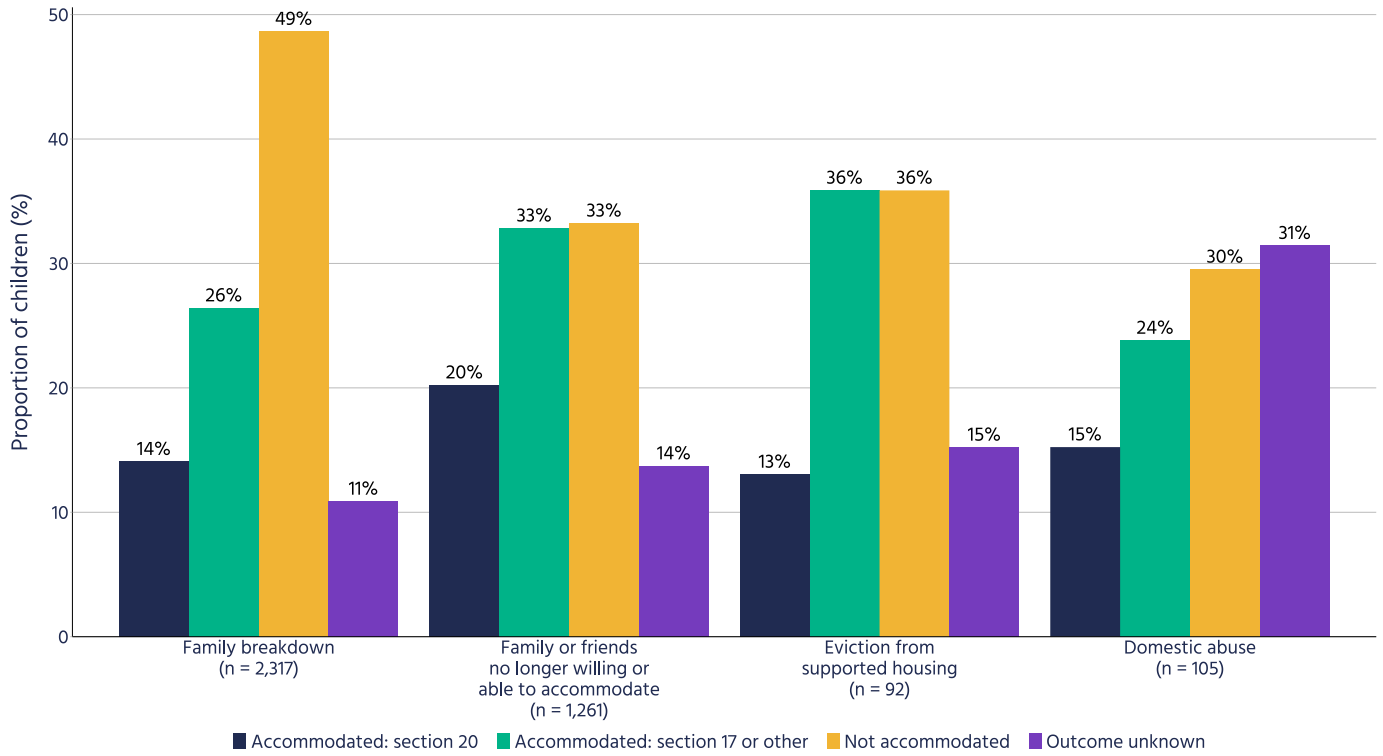
The majority of children presented as homeless either because of a family breakdown (47%) or because their family or friends were no longer willing to accommodate them (26%). Of the remaining children, in the majority of cases local authorities either did not know the reason why they were homeless (10%) or described it as 'other' (9%). The next most common categories were 'domestic abuse' (105 children, 2%) and 'eviction from supported housing' (92 children, 2%).

Among these most common reasons, besides 'unknown' and 'other', children were most likely to be housed if their family or friends were no longer willing or able to accommodate (53% were accommodated). Conversely, the children least likely to be accommodated were those homeless due to domestic abuse (39%) (figure 16).

Children whose families or friends were no longer willing or able to accommodate them were the group most likely to be housed under section 20 (20%). This compares to 15% for those who experienced domestic abuse, 14% for those who experienced family breakdown, and 13% for those evicted from supported housing.

Those evicted from supported housing were also the group most likely to have been accommodated through section 17 or other housing legislation (36%).

Figure 16: Child’s reason for presenting as homeless by the legislation used to accommodate the child



Safeguarding children at the point of presentation as homeless

The office asked local authorities whether section 47 enquiries had been made for each child that presented as homeless, as well as whether a serious incident notification to the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel had been made. Under the Children Act, section 47 enquiries are carried out if there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. A serious incident notification should be triggered if there has been a child death or serious injury to a child.

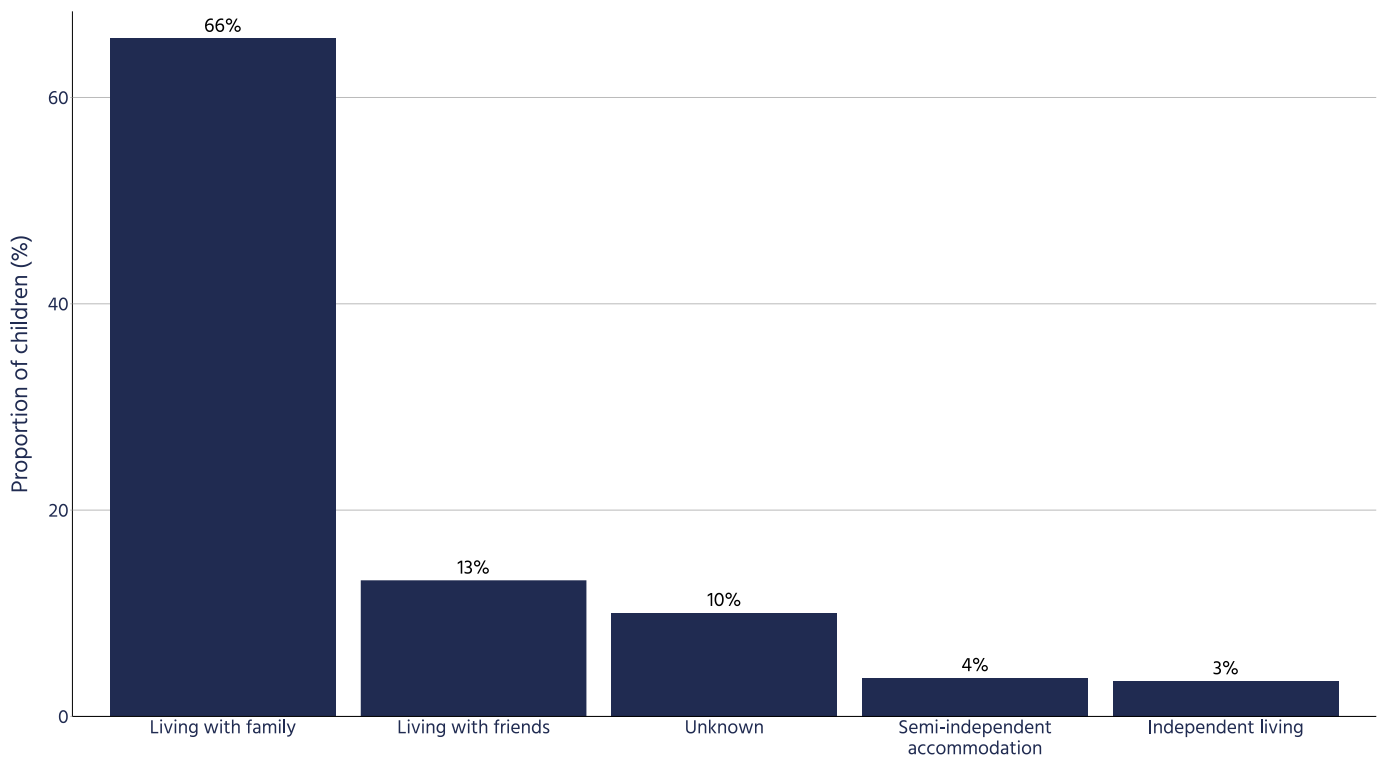
In the data the office received from local authorities, there were 360 section 47 enquires made by local authorities for children who presented as homeless. 209 enquiries were made for children who had been offered accommodation after presenting as homeless. Among those 209, 62 (30%) were in semi-independent accommodation and 54 (26%) were in independent accommodation. 54% of these children had been housed under section 20 of the Children Act. It is concerning that the remaining 46% of children for whom a section 47 enquiry was carried out were not given section 20 support as a child in care. These are children who are at risk of suffering significant harm, and who are living alone, but are not being brought into care.

There were 28 serious incident notifications made by local authorities for children who presented as homeless. Of these, 21 of the notifications were made for children who had been offered accommodation after presenting as homeless. Among these 21, the vast majority (18, 86%) were housed in semi-independent or independent accommodation, which is concerning given the vulnerability of these children.

Last known accommodation after presenting as homeless

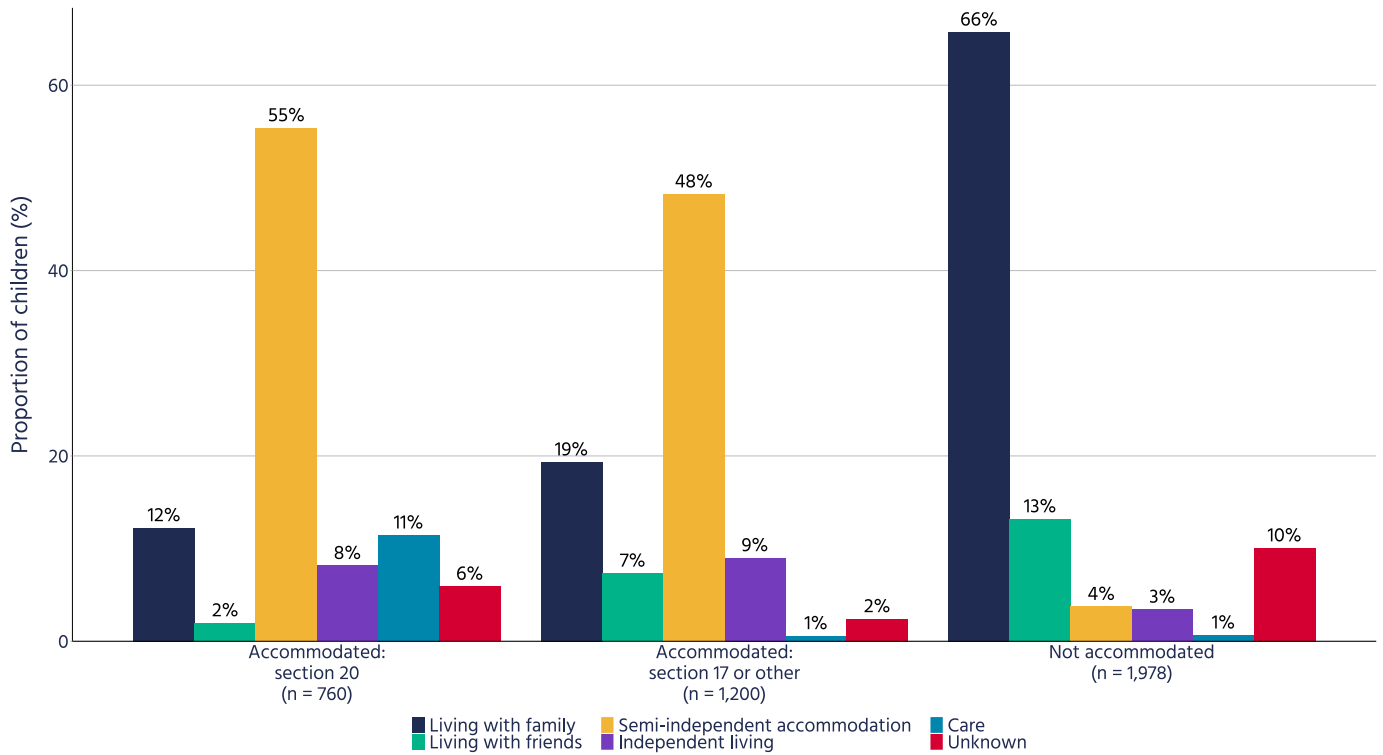
Among children who were not accommodated at the point of presentation, 66% were since last known to be living with family, 13% were living with friends, 10% were unknown, 4% were in semi-independent accommodation and 3% were in independent living.

Figure 17: Last known accommodation of children who were not accommodated by their local authority



Higher proportions of children who were accommodated under section 17 or housing legislation were last known to be living with family (19%) than those accommodated under section 20 (12%) (figure 18).

Figure 18: The last known accommodation type of children, by legislation that a child was housed under



Other characteristics of children

How these and other characteristics influenced the probability that a child was accommodated were examined through a regression analysis, the results of which can be found in annex A3.

Gender

Overall, boys were more likely than girls to be accommodated (43% for boys compared to 39% for girls). Boys were also more likely to be accommodated under section 20 (17% for boys vs 14% for girls). Girls were instead more likely than boys to not be accommodated and instead supported to remain at home and/or with family (19% for girls vs 18% for boys).

Ethnicity

Children with an ethnicity of other were the most likely to be accommodated (53%), followed by children who were Black or Asian (48% and 46% respectively). Children with an ethnicity of other, Asian or Black were also those most likely to be given care under section 20 (36%, 25% and 25% respectively), compared to 14% for children who were White. Conversely, children who were White were most likely to be supported to stay at home and/or with family (20%, compared to 16% for children who were Asian and 15% for children who were Black).

Disability

Children with a disability were more likely to be accommodated (44%, compared to 40% for children without a recorded disability), and more likely to be accommodated under section 20 (18%, compared to 16%).

References

¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government and Department for Education, *Prevention of homelessness and provision of accommodation for 16 and 17 year old young people who may be homeless and/or require accommodation*, 2018. [Link](#).



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