

Policy Brief

Who are young carers in the UK?

Understanding the prevalence and characteristics of adolescent young carers in the UK before and after COVID-19

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Background

A **young carer** is defined as "Someone aged 25 and under who cares for a friend or family member who, due to illness, disability, a mental health problem or an addiction, cannot cope without their support".

The 2021 Census for England and Wales identified at least 120,000 young carers in UK, aged 5 to 17. However, this figure likely underrepresents the true prevalence of young caring in the UK. This is because Census returns are most often completed by adults rather than by young people themselves. Also, many young carers and their families may not realise that a young person is a young carer, or prefer not to identify themselves as such.

With the increase in health problems following COVID-19 (e.g. Long COVID and increases in mental health problems), there has likely been a rise in the need for unpaid carers, including young carers. This situation underscores the urgent need for up-to-date data on young carers to ensure they receive the necessary support.

Questions

In this research we sought to answer the following questions:

1. How many young carers aged 16-18 are there in the UK?
2. Has the prevalence of young caring increased since the Covid-19 pandemic?
3. What are the characteristics of young carers regarding the care they are providing and their social and demographic attributes?

Data

We used data from **pre- and post-COVID-19**, from three UK-representative longitudinal surveys:

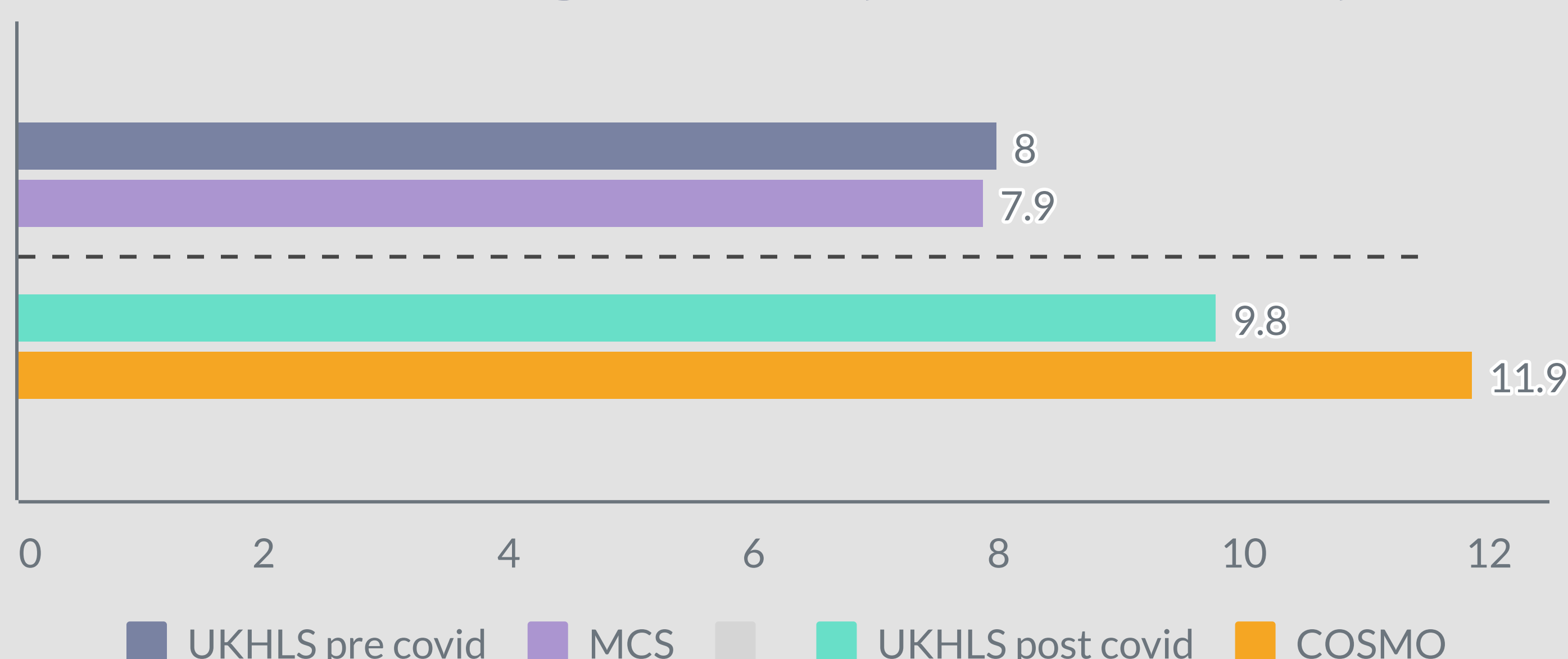
- the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS)
- the COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities Study (COSMO)
- the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)

Unlike the Census, these surveys **ask young people themselves** whether they have caring responsibilities or not. They also ask young people about the caring they provide, such as the number of hours per week and who they are caring for.

Sample

The study focused on adolescents aged **16 to 18 living in the UK** and examined data from two periods: pre-Covid (UKHLS and MCS) and post-Covid (UKHLS and COSMO).*

Young Carers prevalence - pre and post Covid



Young carers' prevalence **rose** from 8.0% pre-COVID to **9.8-11.9% post-COVID**.

This equates to at least 247,000 young carers aged 16-18 in the UK post-COVID (or 3 young carers in every class).

* To be able to compare across surveys, we focused on 16 to 18-year-old individuals because the MCS and COSMO data only covered this age group.

Key Findings

Social inequalities

The increase in young carers occurred across all social, demographic, and socioeconomic groups, but it was particularly pronounced in more social and socioeconomically disadvantaged households and areas.

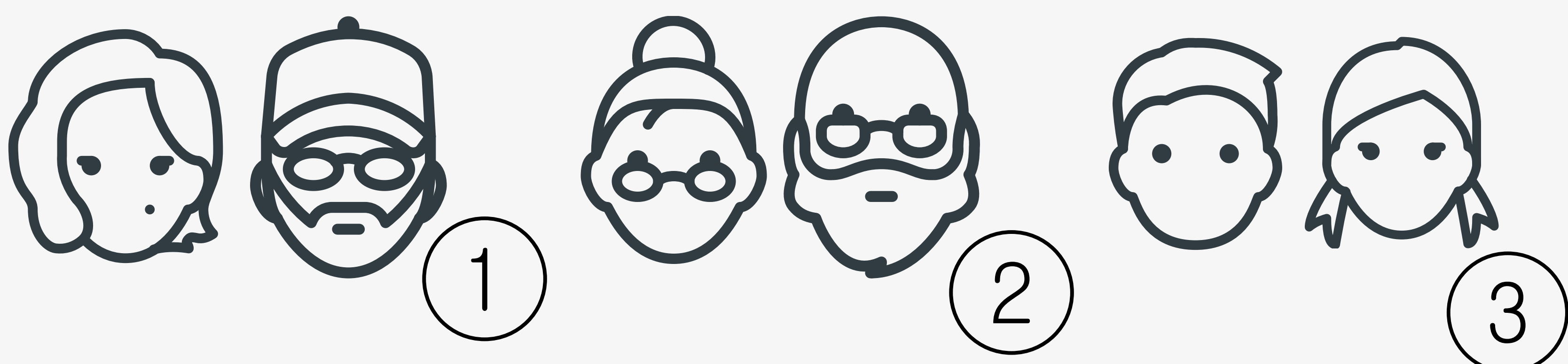
- The number of young carers increased from before to after the COVID-19 pandemic in both single-parent and two-parent households, with more young carers in single-parent households.
- The prevalence of young carers has a graded trend: it is highest in households with parents who are not working, followed by those with parents in routine jobs, and lowest in families where parents have managerial or professional occupations.
- There are more young carers in households with parents holding lower educational qualifications.
- Living in a more deprived area is associated with higher chances of being a young carer.

How much care are young carers providing?

The pandemic has led to a significant shift towards high-intensity care (>10 hours/week), especially among female carers.

Who are young carers caring for?

Young carers are mainly caring for parents (40.8%), followed by grandparents (39.2%) and siblings in third place (14.5%).



Young people in single-parent households are

2 times

more likely to be young carers than those in two-parent homes



Young people from homes with parents who are not working are

4 times

more likely to be young carers than those with parents in managerial positions



Young people living in the most deprived areas are

2 times

more likely to be young carers than those living in least deprived areas*

* Measured by Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)



Post-Covid, **25%** of young carers reported **over 10** hours of caring weekly, compared to 16% pre-Covid



60.5% of young carers providing over 10 hours of care per week are female

Implications for Policy

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the number of young carers in the UK and the extent of their caring responsibilities. Given the impact that young caring can have on young peoples' lives and opportunities there is an urgent need for policy and practice interventions tailored to identifying and supporting young carers.

- **Awareness and Identification:** Develop strategies to better identify young carers, especially in more socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. It is crucial to involve various services and agencies that work with young people and people with long-term conditions to effectively identify young carers. The Government should introduce a requirement for health professionals supporting an adult to ask if there are children in the household who may be young carers.
- **Supportive Engagement:** Collaboration between social services, schools and colleges to provide targeted support and interventions for young carers, with a focus on mitigating the additional pressures brought on by the pandemic. The Government should require that all schools and colleges identify a young carer lead and have a young carer policy.
- **Training:** Implement training sessions for professionals working with young people and their families, focused on the identification and support of young carers. This might include schools, colleges, young peoples' health services (e.g. CAMHS), general practitioners, adult social care and adult mental health and drug and alcohol services.
- **Community Policies:** Strengthen efforts to engage with vulnerable families and young carers, ensuring they have access to necessary services and support. This includes maintaining and improving support services in deprived areas.
- **Adopt a Gender Focus:** Local and national governments, and health commissioners, should implement gender-sensitive policies and support systems specifically tailored to address the unique challenges faced by young female carers.

Conclusion

The rise in young carers, particularly those with more caring responsibilities, necessitates a proactive and supportive policy approach, emphasising the need for community engagement and inter-agency collaboration. Improved recognition and support for young carers could minimise the inequalities in opportunities that they experience.

