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Childhood homelessness and education and employment outcomes:

Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study

November 2026

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Acknowledgements

The Millennium Cohort Study is supported by the Economic and Social Research Council and a consortium of government departments. These findings would not be possible without the invaluable contributions of the Millennium Cohort Study members and their families over many years. We are very grateful for their ongoing commitment to the study.

Shelter is grateful for the support of Trust for London, who provided financial support for this project.

How to cite this briefing paper

Hunter J, Kelly D P, Pennington J and Henderson M (2026) Childhood homelessness and education and employment outcomes: findings from the Millennium Cohort Study. London: Shelter

Key findings

This analysis provides new insights into child homelessness in the UK.

Findings draw on data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS). The MCS follows young people born across the UK between 2000 and 2002 and asks them and their parents/caregivers if they have experienced homelessness. Responses from every interview were combined to identify a cohort of young adults who had reported experiencing homelessness during childhood (age under 18) and who took part in the survey at age 23.

We find:

- Approximately **one in twenty** (5.4%) young adults born at the start of the 2000s who took part in the survey at age 23 have been **homeless during childhood** (age 0-17)**.**
- The prevalence of childhood homelessness among Black cohort members (10.7%) is **more than twice** that among White cohort members (5.1%).

This analysis also explores the relationship between child homelessness and outcomes in later life. We find that, by age 23, the majority of young people who experienced homelessness as a child have achieved good academic qualifications and are in employment, education or training. However, compared to young adults who were not homeless as a child:

- The proportion of young adults who are not qualified to GCSE level (or equivalent) by age 23 **was almost twice as high** among those who were homeless as a child (21.5% compared with 11.6%).
- The proportion of young adults who are not qualified to A level standard (or equivalent) by age 23 **was approximately 50% higher** among those who were homeless as a child (57.6% compared with 38.0%).
- Rates of being NEET (not in education, employment or training) at age 23 were **twice as high** among young adults who were homeless as a child (26.4% compared with 13.1%).

Introduction

Broadly, a person is legally defined as homeless if they have no accommodation they can legally occupy, they can't access their accommodation, or it is not reasonable for them to live there.[1]

Government statutory homelessness statistics show that, as of March 2026, 177,530 children under 18 were homeless with their families in temporary accommodation in England. This is the highest number since records began in 2004, when 121,590 children were homeless. The number reached a low of 68,770 in 2011 and has risen more or less steadily since then.[2]

Previous Shelter research has explored some of the immediate impacts that being statutorily homeless in temporary accommodation can have on children's physical and mental health, as well as their education. For example:

- A 2022 survey of parents living in temporary accommodation in England found that one in four (26%) reported their children are often unhappy or depressed as a result of homelessness.[3]
- A survey of teachers in England who work with children that they believed are homeless found that three-quarters (76%) said that being homeless was associated with poor performance in assessments or exams. They also reported that children who are homeless are often tired and/or distracted in the classroom.[4]

Children who experience homelessness often demonstrate incredible resilience in the face of substantial adversity. But, for some, the experience of homelessness may continue to affect their lives, even once they've moved into a settled home. For example, long periods of disruption to their schooling could affect children's education and development. In addition,

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[1] For more information, see: https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/legal/homelessness_applications/homelessness_and_threatened_homelessness/legal_definition_of_homelessness_and_threatened_homelessness

[2] Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (2026) Statutory homelessness England level time series "live tables, table TA1 "https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness. Data are for the end of March 2026.

[3] Shelter (2023) Still Living in Limbo: Why the use of temporary accommodation must end - Shelter England

[4] Shelter (2025) Homelessness in the Classroom - Shelter England

the mental and psychological effects of homelessness could, for some children, result in a loss of confidence, which may influence learning and attainment.

This study explored the associations between childhood homelessness[5] and education and employment outcomes in early adulthood. To achieve this, we analysed data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)[6], which follows young people born across the UK between 2000 and 2002.

The latest MCS data collected in 2023-2024 allow us to compare outcomes at approximately age 23 between those who experienced childhood homelessness and those who did not. Specifically, we are interested in the following:

- What proportion of young adults had a reported experience of homelessness during childhood?
- What are the characteristics of the cohort who were homeless during childhood and are there any notable differences between this group and the rest of the MCS cohort?
- What associations exist between child homelessness and a) educational attainment and b) employment outcomes at age 23, specifically rates of being not in education, employment or training (NEET)?

Homelessness in the Millennium Cohort Study

The Millennium Cohort Study has collected data on homelessness since 2000. Prior to age 17, the household lead (usually a parent) was asked about homelessness as part of the study's questions on residential history. Parents were asked about homelessness only if their address indicated that they had moved since the last interview or, in the case of the first interview, since the birth of the cohort member. Where the question was not asked because information suggested that the family had not moved address, this was treated as 'no homelessness' reported for that period. At age 17, the cohort members themselves were asked if they had *ever* been homeless.

[5] For the purposes of this analysis, we use the legal definition of a child i.e. anyone under the age of 18.
[6] For further detail, see https://closer.ac.uk/study/millennium-cohort-study/

For this analysis, responses from each interview were combined to identify young adults who participated in the survey at age 23 and had homelessness reported for them at least once during childhood (age 0-17).

Data on homelessness in the MCS differs from official homelessness statistics. Government statistics on homelessness use data from local authorities on the numbers of households with children who have been assessed to be homeless and are placed in temporary accommodation, or who are eligible for support but making their own arrangements. By contrast, MCS homelessness data are self-reported by participating household members. As well as people who have been found to be statutorily homeless, the MCS measure may include those who did not apply for support from their council or were found ineligible.

Findings

Our analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study data offers new insights into the prevalence of homelessness among young people born in the UK across childhood.

We find that approximately **one in twenty cohort members (5.4%)** across the UK who participated in the survey at age 23 reported experiencing homelessness at some point from birth to age 17.[7]

As might be expected, most children experience homelessness with their families. Among cohort members with reported childhood homelessness in the MCS, the vast majority (96.5%) experienced homelessness alongside their parents or caregivers. Only a small proportion (3.5%) were homeless on their own, or with their friends only.

Accommodation while homeless

The data also provides insight into households who reported homelessness while staying with family or friends, in addition to those in hostels, hotels, refuges or other forms of temporary or emergency accommodation. This includes people who are experiencing homelessness who the local council may not be supporting, or even know about and, to this extent, constitutes a form of 'hidden homelessness'[8]. Data on the extent and nature of this form of homelessness are, by definition, very difficult to obtain, and, as such, it is not currently possible to estimate the true scale of homelessness in the UK[9].

Among the 363 cohort members who reported childhood homelessness and provided data on accommodation while homeless, approximately half (54.1%) stayed with friends or family while looking for a permanent place to

[7] Our final results have been modified using population weights to improve the national representativeness of the estimates. Further details on the data and methods are available on page 10. Estimates are treated as notably different if their 95% confidence intervals are not overlapping. This is generally a more conservative approach than using significance testing for the same purpose.
[8] The Office for National Statistics [ONS] defines "hidden" homelessness in a recent evidence review. Their definition includes "people who are experiencing homelessness or housing difficulties, regardless of legal definitions or entitlement, but who are not supported by their local authorities or counted in official statistics". ONS (2023) "Hidden" homelessness in the UK: evidence review
[9] Office for National Statistics (2023) Hidden Homelessness in the UK: an Evidence Review https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/articles/hiddenhomelessnessintheukevidencereview/2023-03-29

live[10]. The rest (45.9%) reported staying in a hostel, hotel, refuge or temporary housing.

Inequalities by ethnicity and sex at birth

Previous evidence suggests that members of some ethnic groups, notably Black households, are more likely to experience homelessness than others[11].

Analysis of the MCS data finds similar disparities. The rate of reported childhood homelessness among Black cohort members (10.7%) is almost double that for the overall cohort (5.4%). Almost one in nine Black cohort members had been homeless during childhood, along with approximately one in thirteen (7.8%) Mixed ethnicity cohort members. By contrast, a smaller proportion of White (5.1%) and Asian (4.1%) cohort members had been homeless as a child.

We also analysed the data by sex at birth. As expected, there was no meaningful difference in reported childhood homelessness between male and female cohort members.

Education and employment outcomes

Figure 1 shows that although the majority of those who were homeless had achieved a NVQ Level 2 qualification (equivalent to five GCSEs at grades 4-9[12]) by age 23, more than one in five (21.5%) had not. This is almost double the rate for those without experience of homelessness (11.6%).

Similarly, over half of those who were homeless during childhood (57.6%) had not achieved a NVQ Level 3 qualification (equivalent to at least two A levels or a Level 3 qualification) by this age, compared with 38.0% of those who had not experienced childhood homelessness.

[10] Note that 'Friends and/or family' excludes instances where respondents indicate that they also stayed in other homeless accommodation (such as hostel or B&B). Data on accommodation while homeless is not publicly available for wave 3 of the MCS.
[11] Shelter (2025) Shelter Charts show inequalities in temporary accommodation https://england.shelter.org.uk/what_we_do/updates_insights_and_impact/inequalities_temporary_accommodation
[12] This level of attainment is equivalent to NVQ Level 2, which is often a baseline expectation for many entry-level skilled jobs. A full list of relevant qualifications is here: https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels
GCSEs at grades 4-9 are equivalent to A* - C in the previous GCSE system

Finally, the proportion of 23-year-olds not in employment, education or training (NEET) was twice as high among those who were homeless in childhood as among those who were not. Over a quarter of those who were homeless were NEET at age 23 (26.4%), compared with 13.1% for the rest of the cohort.

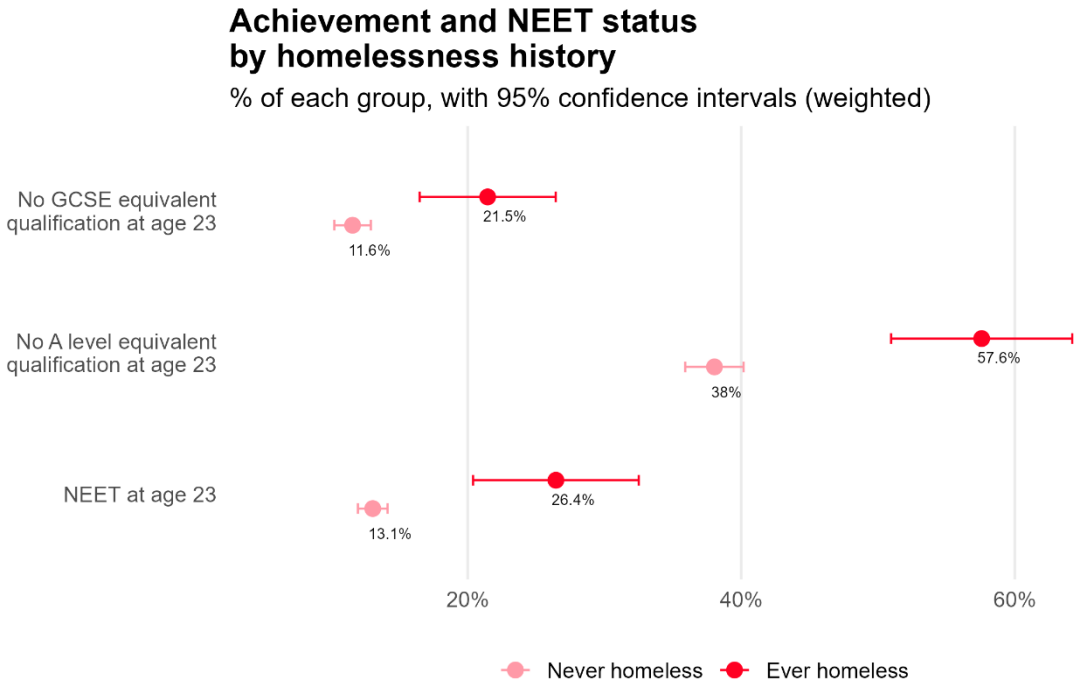


Figure 1 – Education and employment outcomes differ between cohort members who reported childhood homelessness and those who did not.

Summary

This analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study, and the self-reported data it collects, provides new and important insights into the potential scale of child homelessness in the UK. We find that approximately one in twenty young adults born 2000-02 who took part in the MCS at age 23 experienced homelessness as a child. Of those who provided information regarding where they stayed while homeless, over half stayed with friends and/or family and can be considered as 'hidden homeless'. Childhood homelessness also varied by ethnicity, with the highest rate among Black cohort members.

This analysis also shows substantial differences in several important outcomes in early adulthood between those cohort members who experienced homelessness as children and those who did not, both in terms of their achievement at school and their NEET status at age 23. As this is an observational study, we cannot establish causal links.

Experiencing homelessness in childhood does not inevitably lead to poorer outcomes in adulthood. The data show that a majority of young people who experienced homelessness had achieved good qualifications and were in employment, education or training by age 23, demonstrating remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. Nevertheless, the findings highlight substantial inequalities in outcomes between those who experience being without a home during childhood and those who do not.

For more information on Shelter's fight for home, see shelter.org.uk

ABOUT THE DATA

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is a UK longitudinal birth cohort study. It has been following the lives of young adults born across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2000-02. This report makes use of data from MCS cohort members who participated in the study at age 23, and who provided data about their academic qualifications (n = 9,542) or their current employment or education activity (n = 9,609). This analytical sample represents just under half of the entire MCS cohort (19,426 cohort members): at age 23, 9,675 study members took part in a 60-75 minute survey, either online or with an interviewer. This decrease in the number of active study members (called 'attrition') is common in longitudinal population studies. Data are available to download from the UK Data Service.

Measures

Homelessness *was reported by a parent or carer before age 17, and by the cohort member themselves at age 17. At each survey sweep, and* ***if their address history indicated that they had moved since the last interview****, the household lead (usually a parent) was asked:*

> *"Since [name of cohort member] was born/since date of the last interview, has there been a time when you were homeless, by that I mean you had to move out of a place and had nowhere permanent to live?"*

At age 17, the cohort member themselves was asked:

> *"Has there ever been a time when you were homeless, by that I mean you had to move out of a place and had nowhere permanent to live?"*

Where the homelessness question was not asked because there was no indication that the cohort member had moved address, we assumed that they had not been homeless since the previous interview. Responses across surveys were combined: cohort members with homelessness reported at least once between birth and age 17 were coded as having experienced homelessness. For the very small proportion of cohort members with no response to the homelessness question at age 17, and no indication of homelessness or moving residence for any wave of the survey (~1%), the cohort member were assumed to be 'not homeless' for these analyses. Those

classified as having experienced homelessness include cohort members who reported that they stayed with friends or family, as well as those in institutional arrangements, including temporary accommodation provided by a local council.

Calculations for ***accommodation while homeless*** *use a base of 363 cohort members who reported homelessness during childhood and provided data on their accommodation.*

For the data on ***ethnicity,*** *"Black" includes "Black Caribbean", "Black African" and "Other Black" ethnicities. "Asian" includes "Indian", "Pakistani", "Bangladeshi", "Chinese" and "Other Asian" ethnicities.*

Data on ***academic achievement*** *is taken from the latest data collection when the cohort members are approximately 23 years old and refers to the highest level of qualification that they have achieved to date. A cohort member is counted as being qualified to NVQ Level 2 if they have achieved at least five GCSEs at grades 4-9 (formerly A* - C), two AS levels, or any equivalent or higher qualification in the Qualifications and Credit Framework. A cohort member is counted as being qualified to NVQ Level 3 if they have at least two A levels, or an equivalent vocational qualification.*

Data on being ***NEET*** *is taken from the latest data collection when the cohort members are approximately 23 years old, where they indicated that they are either a) Unemployed, b) In unpaid/voluntary work, c) Sick or disabled, d) Looking after home or family, e) Taking a year out / career break or f) Looking for employment.*

We exist to defend the right to a safe home and fight the devastating impact the housing emergency has on people and society.

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