

Research Briefing

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Who provides informal care?



Summary

- 1 Total number of informal carers
- 2 Carers' employment, incomes and earnings
- 3 Young carers

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Summary

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has [described an informal/unpaid carer](#) (PDF) as: “...someone who provides unpaid help to a friend or family member needing support, perhaps due to illness, older age, disability, a mental health condition or an addiction”, as long as they are not employed to do so.

How many informal carers are there?

The [Family Resources Survey](#) estimated that in 2022/23 around 8% of the UK population (5.2 million people) were providing informal care. The survey defines informal caring as care that is not a paid job, and can occur for many or only a few hours a week. In each year since 2009/10, women represented around 60% of informal carers.

In terms of young carers, census data from the [2021 census for England and Wales](#), the [2021 census for Northern Ireland](#) and the [2022 census for Scotland](#) provides some information. In Scotland, the census was delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic. Available census data shows the number of carers aged 24 or younger in England and Wales and Scotland, and aged 15 years or under in Northern Ireland. The 2021 and 2022 (where relevant) census found there were:

- 334,300 carers aged 24 or younger in England;
- 22,600 carers aged 24 or younger in Wales; and
- 52,300 carers aged 24 or younger in Scotland; and
- 2,600 carers aged 15 or younger in Northern Ireland.

A [2013 report from the Children’s Society](#) (PDF) found young carers were 1.5 times more likely than their peers to be from Black, Asian or minority ethnic groups.

The total number of people providing unpaid care has fallen between the 2011 census and the 2021 census, by around 2% in England and Wales and around 0.5% in Northern Ireland. Most of this change is explained by fewer people providing 0 to 19 hours of care per week.

[The NHS has acknowledged the “vital contribution” of carers](#), saying it was “critical and underappreciated ... not only to loved ones, neighbours and friends, but to the very sustainability of the NHS in England”.

Carers in employment and poverty

The Family Resources Survey found that in 2022/23, [50% of informal carers aged 16 and above were in employment](#) compared with 60% of everyone aged 16 and above.

The [Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 2024 Poverty Report](#) estimated 28% of carers in the UK were living in relative poverty after housing costs in 2021/22. This is the number of carers living in households with income below 60% of median household income, where income is measured after deducting housing costs.

Further reading

The following briefings by the Commons Library provide more information on unpaid carers and the support available:

- [Informal carers' employment rights and support](#)
- [Local authority support for informal carers](#)
- [Informal carers health and wellbeing](#)
- [Young carers in education](#)

The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) has also published a [POSTnote on unpaid care](#) (19 July 2018).

1

Total number of informal carers

The main source of data on carers across the United Kingdom (UK) is the [Family Resources Survey](#), published by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). It provides survey-based estimates of people providing informal care. Survey respondents are asked if they provide any informal (unpaid) care to people within or outside their household.

Questions on the provision of informal care are also included in the census for England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Data from 2021 is available for England and Wales and Northern Ireland. In Scotland the census was delayed to 2022 in response to the coronavirus pandemic, which was published in the Autumn of 2024.

1.1

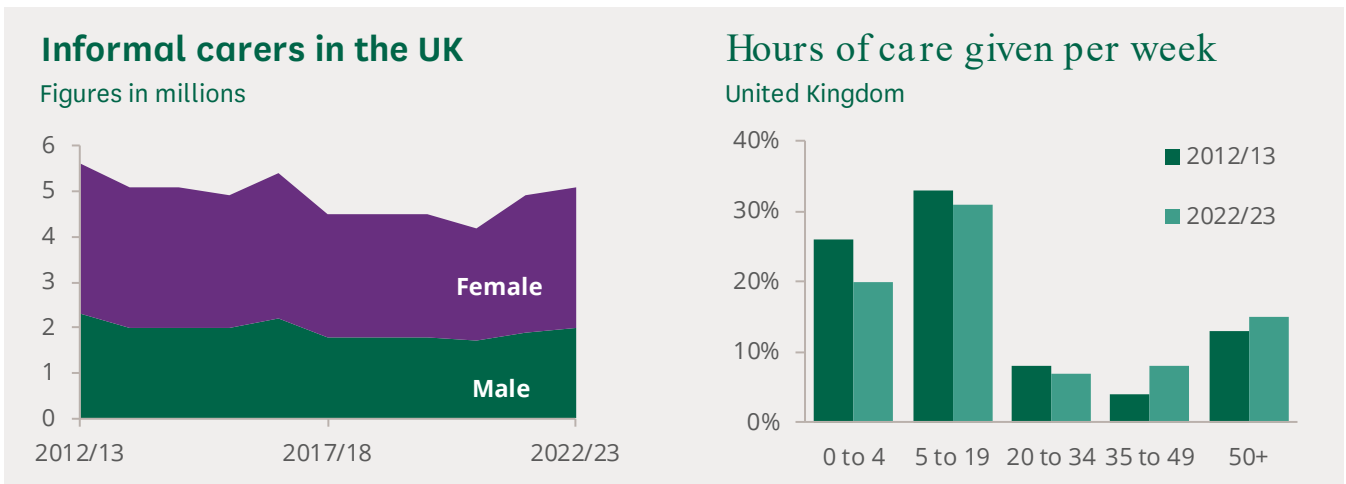
Family Resources Survey data

The latest estimates from the [Family Resources Survey](#) indicate that in 2022/23 around 5.2 million people in the UK were providing informal care. This is around 8% of the UK population.

The survey defines informal caring as care that is not a paid job, and can occur for many, or only a few, hours a week.¹

Figures have fluctuated over the past decade as shown in the chart below. The number of informal carers peaked at 5.6 million in 2012/13 and 5.4 million in 2016/17. The 2020/21 estimate of 4.2 million was the lowest recorded since 2007/08. However, numbers have since increased and the 5.2 million figure for 2022/23 is the third highest over the past decade. In each year shown, around 60% of informal carers were women.

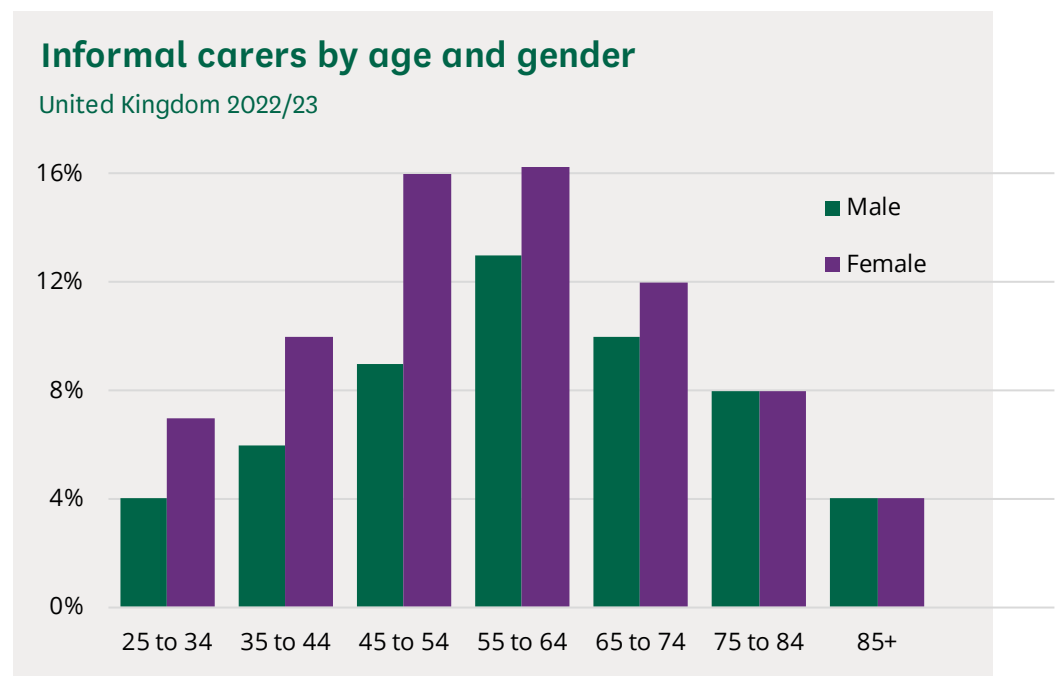
¹ DWP, [Family resources survey, UK, 2019/20, Background note and methodology](#), March 2021, p9



Source: [Family Resources Survey 2022/23, Tables 5.1 and 5.3](#)

The reduction in the number of carers since the peak of 5.6 million in 2012/13 may be because fewer people are providing small amounts of care per week. The proportion of people providing over 35 hours care per week has increased and the proportion providing fewer than 20 hours care per week has decreased.

Adults aged 55 to 64 were most likely to care for others, with younger age groups generally less likely to provide care. In most age groups, women were more likely to provide informal care than men. However, among adults aged over 75 years, men were equally likely to provide informal care.



Source: [Family Resources Survey 2022/23, Table 5.2](#)

1.2

2021 and 2022 census data

Data on informal carers is also available from the 2021 census for England and Wales, the 2021 census for Northern Ireland and the 2022 census for Scotland.

In England and Wales, 5.0 million people aged five years and above reported providing unpaid² care in 2021, around 4.7 million in England and 0.3 million in Wales. In Northern Ireland, 222,200 people aged five years and above reported providing unpaid care in 2021.

The number of people providing unpaid care has fallen since the 2011 census by around 2% in England and Wales and around 0.5% in Northern Ireland. Most of this change is because fewer people are providing 0 to 19 hours of care per week.

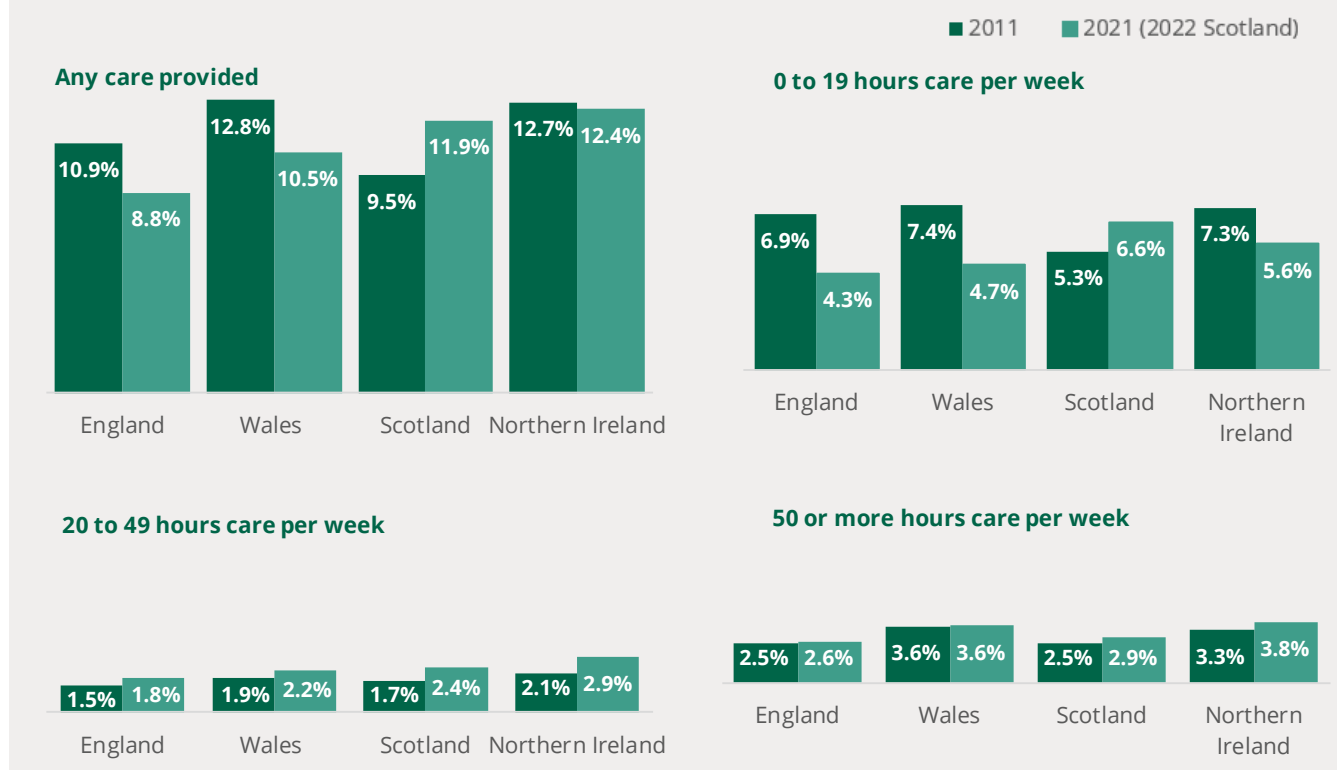
In Scotland, 628,000 people aged three and above reported providing unpaid care in 2022.

Unlike the other UK nations, the number of unpaid carers increased in Scotland by 27.5% since the 2011 census.

² Data published from the census refers to unpaid care, where the Family Resources Survey refers to informal care. However, both terms are used interchangeably. See: DHSC, [How can we improve support for carers?](#) (PDF), GOV.UK, June 2018, p4

Census data shows a reduction in numbers providing unpaid care in all countries except Scotland

Census 2011 and 2021: Percentage of people aged 5 years and over providing care



Source: Census 2021 for England & Wales data via [nomis](#); [Northern Ireland 2021 census data](#); [Scotland 2022 census data](#)

Age of informal carers

The charities [Carers UK and Age UK published a report on caring into later life](#) in April 2015. Using a range of data sources, the report concluded there were 1.2 million people in England aged 65 and over providing unpaid care to a disabled, seriously ill or older relative or friend.³ This represented:

[A]n increase of 35% in just ten years, compared to an 11% rise in the number of all carers, and a 4% rise in the number of carers aged 25-64 in the same time period.

The fastest growing group is carers aged 85 and over, whose numbers have more than doubled, growing by a huge 128% in ten years to over 87,000.

These numbers will continue to grow, with estimates suggesting the number of older carers in England is set to increase to over 1.8 million by 2030. More than 200,000 of these carers will be aged 85 and over.⁴

³ Carers UK, [Caring into later life](#), April 2015

⁴ [As above](#), p6

The report also found that, although carers were more likely to be female than male, this changed as carers get older, with 59% of carers aged 85 and over being male.⁵

The report concluded older carers are a very diverse group and consequently had different needs:

This report looks at some of these differences, highlighting the varying health and support needs of male and female carers at different stages in later life. Solutions must be found to better identify and support these different groups.⁶

Those over 85 were especially in need of support, it argued:

[T]hose carers aged 85 and over identified as a priority in the NHS Five Year Forward View who are more likely than other carers to be caring around the clock, to be suffering anxiety and depression and to be in poor physical health themselves.⁷

A 2013 report from the Children's Society suggested young carers were 1.5 times more likely to be from Black, Asian or minority ethnic groups and twice as likely not to speak English as a first language.⁸

Further information on young carers can be found in section 4.

⁵ [As above](#), p8

⁶ [As above](#), p24

⁷ [As above](#), p24

⁸ Children's Society, [Hidden from view](#) (PDF), 2013, p5

2 Carers' employment, incomes and earnings

2.1 Employment

In 2022/23, 50% of informal carers aged 16 and above were in employment compared with 60% of everyone aged 16 and above. 34% of informal carers were working full time and 17% were working part time.

22% of carers were retired while 25% were economically inactive (not in work and not looking for work) for other reasons.⁹

Carers by employment status 2022/23



Source: DWP, Family Resources Survey 2022/23, [Care data tables](#), Table 5.4

⁹ DWP, Family Resources Survey 2021/22, [Care data tables](#), Table 5.4

2.2

Incomes and poverty

Sources of income

For over half of carers, their main source of income was earnings from employment (54% of carers in 2022/23). State or private pensions were the main source of income for just under a quarter of carers (24%), while around 20% of carers drew most of their income from other benefits or tax credits.¹⁰ Just under half (46%) of adult carers had weekly disposable income (after taxes and benefits) below £300 per week in 2022/23.¹¹

Poverty

The [Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 2024 Poverty Report](#) estimated 28% of carers in the UK were living in relative poverty after housing costs in 2021/22. This is the number of carers living in households with income below 60% of median household income, where income is measured after deducting housing costs.¹²

Carers are also more likely to be in very deep poverty. In 2021/22 11% of carers were in very deep poverty after housing costs, compared to 9% of people who were not informal carers. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation defines very deep poverty as someone who lives in a household with income less than 40% of median household income.

Groups of carers most likely to be in poverty

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that working-age carers were more likely to be in poverty (30% of female working-age carers and 27% of male working-age carers) than pensioners (24% of female pensioner carers and 23% of male pensioner carers).¹³

The Carers UK report on [poverty and financial hardship of unpaid carers in the UK](#) found that in 2021/22, the following groups of informal carers were more likely to be in poverty:

- Carers who spend more hours caring per week,
- Carers who care for more than one person,
- Carers from minority ethnic groups,

¹⁰ DWP, Family Resources Survey 2022/23, [Care data tables](#), Table 5.5

¹¹ DWP, Family Resources Survey 2022/23, [Care data tables](#), Table 5.6

¹² Joseph Rowntree Foundation, [UK Poverty 2023: The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK](#), 26 January 2023

¹³ Working-age adults include people aged between 16 and the state pension age, unless they are dependent children (aged 16 to 19 and live with their parents, are not married and are in full-time education). Pensioners are defined as people above the state pension age.

- Carers aged 25 to 44.¹⁴

Reasons carers are in poverty

The Carers UK report also covered the reasons why carers were in poverty:

- Unpaid carers find it difficult to stay in paid employment because they have less time and are less flexible.
- Caring comes with additional costs like transport, specialist equipment, food and replacement care. Carers and disabled people can also have higher housing costs.
- Carers UK says [Carer's Allowance](#) (the main benefit for carers) can fall short of the income carers need. Carers must provide unpaid care for at least 35 hours each week to be eligible for Carers Allowance and increases in the National Minimum Wage can push carers above the Carer's Allowance earnings limit.

Impact of the rise in the cost of living on carers

As outlined above, carers tend to have additional costs such as equipment, travel and more food and energy.¹⁵ This means increases in the cost of living may have particularly affected carers.

[Carers UK carried out a survey](#) of informal carers in the UK in July to September 2022 and found:

- 19% reported spending more on care services than before, and 8% reported cutting back on care services. 58% said they were worried they would not be able to afford services or practical support in the future,
- 16% were in debt because of their caring role and financial situation,
- 14% couldn't afford to pay bills, compared with 6% in 2021, and
- 25% of unpaid carers reported cutting back on food and heating, compared with 13% in 2021.¹⁶

The Library briefing on the [rise of cost of living in the UK](#) provides information on how the rising cost of living is affecting households in the UK, as well as government support for households.

¹⁴ Carers UK, [Poverty and financial hardship of unpaid carers in the UK](#), 12 September 2024

¹⁵ Carers UK, [Poverty and financial hardship of unpaid carers in the UK](#), 12 September 2024

¹⁶ Carers UK, [Heading for Crisis: caught between caring and rising costs](#), 19 October 2022

3 Young carers

The [NHS describes a young carer as someone under the age of 18](#), who helps to look after a family member or relative with a disability, illness, mental health condition, or drug or alcohol problem.¹⁷

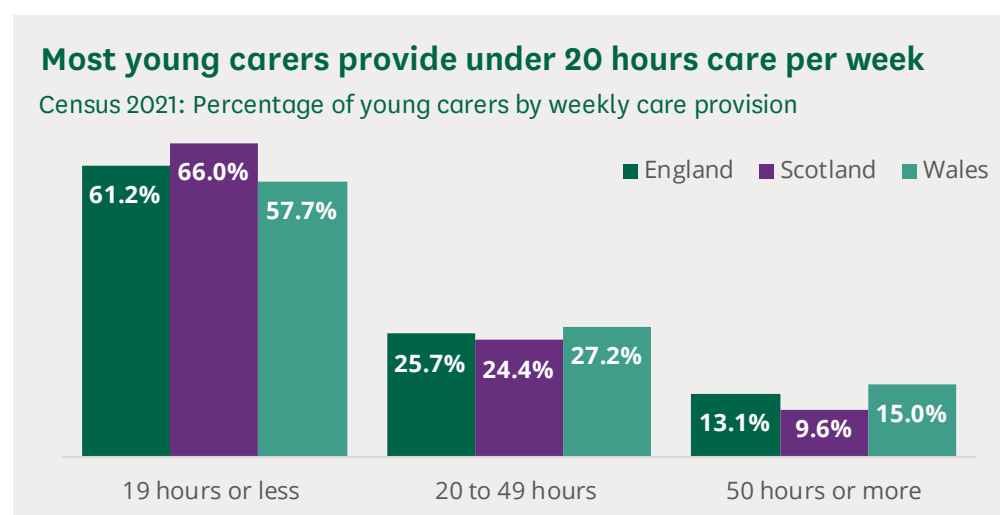
3.1 How many young carers are there?

Carers aged 24 or younger

Census data allows us to identify carers aged 24 or younger in England, Wales and Scotland, but not carers aged 18 or younger. The 2021 census found there were 334,300 carers aged 24 or younger in England, 22,600 in Wales and 52,300 in Scotland.

The rate of young carers per 1,000 population was higher in Wales: 31.2 young carers per 1,000 population aged 5 to 24 in Wales, compared with 25.0 in England.

Most young carers provided 0 to 19 hours of care per week, but over 10% in both England and Wales were caring for someone for at least 50 hours per week, as were 9.6% in Scotland.



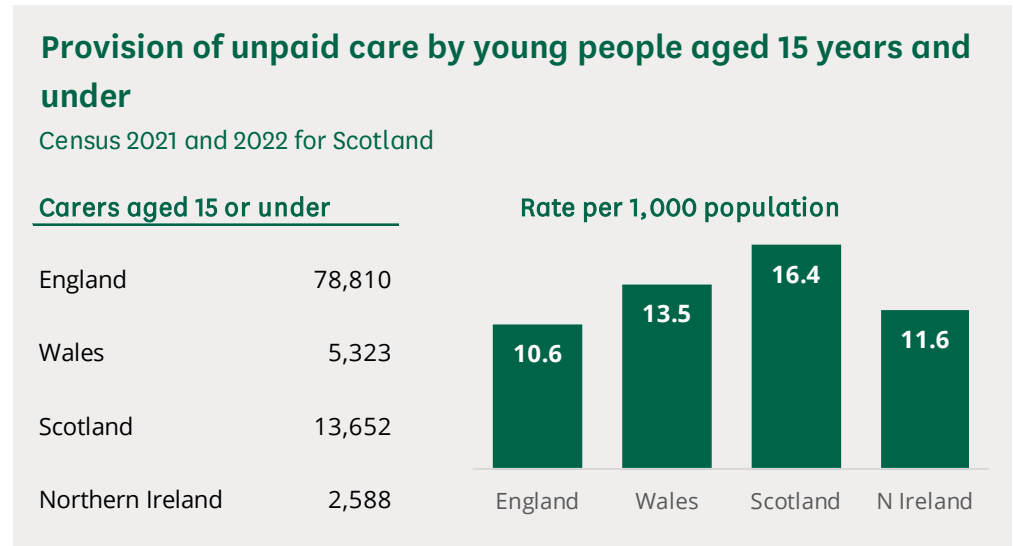
Source: Census 2021 data for England & Wales via [nomis](#)

¹⁷ NHS, [Being a young carer: your rights](#), 22 March 2021

Carers aged 15 or under

Northern Ireland census data does not allow those aged 24 or younger to be identified but numbers for those aged 15 years or under are available.

The chart below provides details of the number of children aged 15 and under providing unpaid care and the rate per 1,000 population. Rates were higher in Scotland (16.4) than in any other nation.



Source: Census 2021 data for England & Wales via [nomis](#) and [Northern Ireland 2021 census data](#)

Most carers aged 15 or under were providing 1 to 19 hours of care per week, but over 10% in each country were providing weekly care of 50 or more hours.

The rate per 1,000 population for carers aged 15 or under providing over 50 hours care per week was higher in Wales (1.7 per 1,000) than other countries: 1.5 per 1,000 in Scotland and 1.3 per 1,000 in both England and Northern Ireland.

3.2

The lives of young carers

Government research into young carers in England

The 2015 Conservative Government commissioned research into the [lives of young carers in England](#). The resulting report was published in February 2016.¹⁸ Key findings are included below.

Caring for someone inside the home

Parents reported most of the young carers aged 5 to 17 were caring for someone inside the home. Of these, over half (55%) were caring for their

¹⁸ DfE, [The lives of young carers in England](#), February 2016

mother and a quarter (25%) were caring for a sibling. Lone parent families were over-represented in the sample.

Diagnoses of physical or mental health illnesses or disabilities

Cared-for parents and siblings all had a single or dual diagnoses of physical or mental health illnesses or disabilities, however these were often also accompanied by other physical and/or mental health issues that had not been formally diagnosed.

Taking on practical tasks

Nearly eight out of ten (78%) young carers were reported by their parents to be undertaking practical tasks as part of their caring responsibilities, such as cooking, cleaning, doing paperwork or helping with household chores.

As might be expected, caring responsibility increased with age. Over one in four (26%) were providing nursing care and parents reported over half of young carers (57%) also provided emotional support.

Time spent caring each day

Although the majority of parents (53%) reported their child was providing up to an hour or so of care a day during the school or college week, around one in seven (14%) reported four or more hours of care each day. Over one in four (26%) reported for or more hours of care at the weekends.

School holiday periods were particularly challenging for most of the young carers because of an increase in their caring responsibilities at home and reduced opportunities to engage in other activities both inside and outside the home compared with term-time.

Caring seen as a rewarding role

Caring was seen to be a very rewarding role by most of the young carers regardless of age or length of time caring, bringing with it a range of positive emotional and psychological benefits. However, caring also had adverse effects: anxiety, stress, tiredness, strain within family relationships, restrictions in social activities and relationships and under-engagement in education.

Formal and informal support

Formal or informal support helped reduce the extent of young carers' responsibilities. However not all parents were comfortable disclosing their condition to health and social care professionals due to a fear of the potential repercussions for their family.

Experience of young carers in 2023

In March 2023, the charity, the Carers Trust published [its survey on the experiences of young carers](#) across the UK.¹⁹ The survey found:

- 56% of young and young adult carers said the time spent caring per week had increased in the past year.
- 51% cared for 20 to 49 hours a week.
- 47% said they are caring for more people than the previous year.
- 56% said increases in the cost of living ‘always’ or ‘usually’ affected them and their family.²⁰

Impact on mental health

The Carers Trust survey also looked at the impact being a young and young adult carer had on mental health and wellbeing. Carers Trust found:

- 44% of young carers or young adult carers “usually” or “always” feel stressed.
 - Proportionally more female young and young adult carers felt stressed (47%) than male young and young adult carers (37%).
- 38% of young and young adult carers “always” or “usually” feel worried by being a carer. This is up from 36% feeling worried in 2022.
- 27% said they felt they “never” or “not often” got enough sleep.²¹

The Carers Trust has recommended the government ensure timely referrals to wellbeing services:

[The Government should] put young carers’ and young adult carers’ mental health and wellbeing at the forefront of planning locally and nationally by ensuring timely referrals to wellbeing services, such as CAMHS, from all statutory services.²²

Specific information on [young carers in education](#) can be found in a separate Library briefing.

¹⁹ The survey was carried out between 21 November 2022 and 15 January 2023. Around 1,100 young carers (aged between 12 and 25 years old) responded to the survey.

²⁰ Carers Trust, [Being a young carer is not a choice: it's just what we do](#), March 2023

²¹ Carers Trust, [Being a young carer is not a choice: it's just what we do](#), March 2023, p19

²² [As above](#), p9

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