

# Racial and ethnic disparities in children's social care

May 2022



The independent review  
of children's social care

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# Introduction

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From its outset, the review committed to identify, consider and attempt to better understand racial and ethnic disparities that exist in children's social care and consider what could be done to address them.<sup>1</sup> Children's social care reflects and at times magnifies inequalities and disparities that exist in society. For children and families from ethnic minority backgrounds this can mean a marked difference in response to need, the homes children might be placed in and whether they enter care. We have heard from families and care experienced children and adults about the lasting legacy this can leave.

This document draws together the themes we have found through our research and engagement, the implications for children and families, how we believe our recommendations will begin to address them, and where more work is needed.

In reaching these conclusions we have considered:

- evidence submitted via our Call for Ideas, Call for Evidence and Call for Advice
- publicly available research and evidence
- our direct engagement with children, families and care experienced adults
- discussions during our local authority deep dives
- engagement facilitated for the review by *The Black Care Experience* an organisation that works to promote understanding of Black children's experience in care
- roundtable discussions with members of our Experts by Experience Board, Design Group and Evidence Group
- research the review asked the Department for Education (DfE) to undertake analysing their own data to better understand racial and ethnic disparities (Ahmed, James, et al., 2022)

This document considers six themes that we have identified through our work:

1. Supporting families and keeping children safe
2. Children in care
3. Children in the justice system
4. Unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC)
5. Children's social care workforce
6. Improving data and evidence

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<sup>1</sup> In March 2021, the review published its early plans where we said: "Another issue that has been brought to my attention both through the Call for Advice, and by the many signatories of an open letter coordinated by Home for Good, is the question of racial disparities across children's social care. One example of this is that Black children and children from some other ethnic groups are significantly more likely to be in care. My intention is that the review will look to understand this issue in more depth and consider what should be done to address it." See: [https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IRCSC\\_Early-Plans\\_V3.pdf](https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IRCSC_Early-Plans_V3.pdf)



# Theme one: Supporting families and keeping children safe

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## There are ethnic disparities in children's social care intervention in family life that cannot be explained by deprivation alone

Webb et al. (2020) examined ethnic disparities in the intervention rates. The authors highlighted that whilst poverty was found to be strongly associated with intervention rates, it was not sufficient to explain the disparities. Even greater inequalities are apparent when comparing rates at different levels of deprivation - with Black African children in care rates outnumbering White British children by four to one in low deprivation neighbourhoods, but White British children in care rates outnumbering Black African rates by nearly three to one in high deprivation neighbourhoods. This suggests that some ethnic minority groups are underrepresented in poorer neighbourhoods and overrepresented in affluent neighbourhoods. Some children are statistically more likely to receive a social care intervention than other children, after controlling for other differences - particularly if they have a lower family income, live in more deprived areas, are older, and are of Mixed Black or White Caribbean ethnic groups or other Black ethnic group.

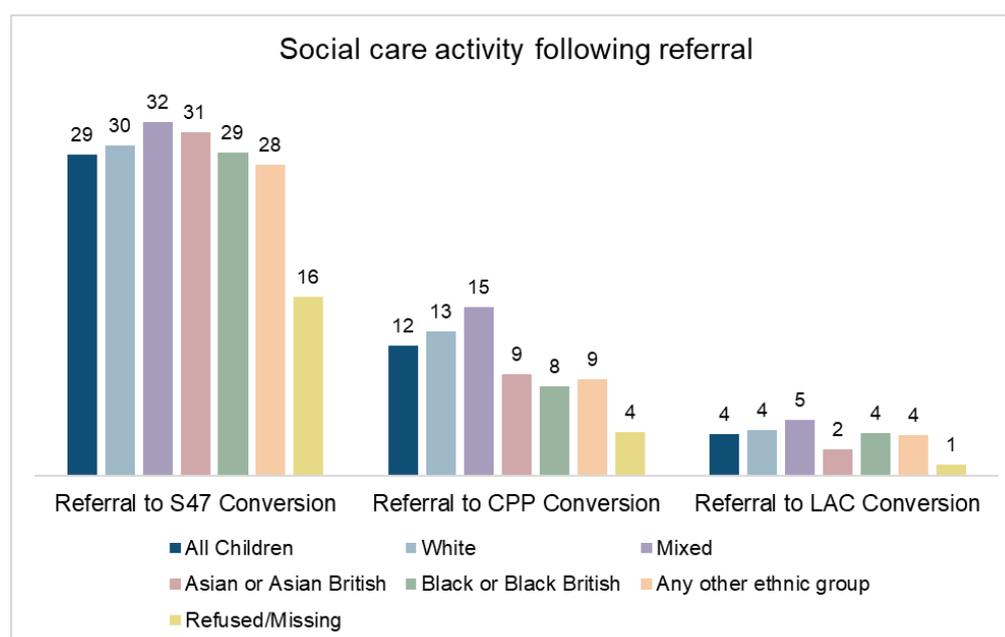
## When families are referred to social care, there is variation in the response they receive depending on their ethnicity

DfE analysis shows differences in how children of different ethnicities enter and move through the children's social care system (Ahmed, James, et al., 2022). The graph below shows the experience of different ethnic minority groups within 12 months of referral. Of all children referred to social care in 2018/19, Mixed and White ethnicity children had the highest rate of conversion to child protection plans, 15% and 13% respectively, while children from Asian, Black and any other ethnic groups had lower rates of conversion to a child protection plan, 9%, 8% and 9% respectively (Ahmed, James, et al., 2022).

Exploratory analysis of teenagers' journeys through the children's social care system revealed that Black and Mixed ethnicity children are overrepresented in the group of children who have long term child in need plans compared to the national average. This group has the worst attainment outcomes and the highest proportion of children with a Special Educational Needs status (The independent review of children's social care, 2022).



**Figure 1: Social care activity following referral**



This disparity is also seen when looking at how many children who are referred to children's social care go on to become children in care, with the rate at which Asian children become looked after around half the rate that Mixed ethnicity children become looked after.

For looked after children, there are significant differences in the interactions prior to children entering care, including the rate of children having had a child protection plan in the eight years prior to becoming looked after. For example, among White and Mixed ethnicity children (65% and 62% respectively) were on a child protection plan before becoming looked after, compared to children from Black, Asian, and any other ethnic groups (39%, 36% and 34% respectively).

There are a number of possible explanations for these disparities in response, which are explored in more detail below - for example differing needs of children and families across different ethnic minority groups of children, or the way social care responds to those needs.

## The needs of the children and families of different ethnicities differ

There are differences in the needs of children identified in assessments. Assessment factors linked to extra familial harms represented 11%, 14% and 12% of all assessment factors for Black African, Black Caribbean and children from any other Black ethnic group, compared to 7% for all children. For children in Black ethnic groups, factors related to association with gangs comprise 34% of assessment factors for children compared to 1% for all children. White Roma and Gypsy children are disproportionately likely to have



child sexual exploitation assessment factors, 3% compared to 1% for all children (Ahmed, James, et al., 2022). More needs to be done to understand what is leading to these differing needs and how social care should respond.

## Children and families from some ethnic groups may be less likely to receive support

Research by the Early Intervention Foundation found that ethnic minority families were seeking help, but at times did not receive this until things had reached “breaking point”, despite repeated attempts to access early help (Waddell et al., 2022 unpublished). Of children in the youth justice system, Black and Mixed ethnicity boys are less likely than their peers to have been referred to early help services when they were younger. It was also found that Black and Mixed ethnicity boys who have been referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) at a young age, have not always received the support they needed prior to them coming into contact with the criminal justice system (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021).

## Understanding of cultural norms shapes the response of services to families

We heard from both families and professionals that understanding of different cultural norms around family shapes the response from children’s social care services (The independent review of children’s social care, 2022a; 2022b). Research by the Early Intervention Foundation found that ethnic minority children and families identified two main areas that can prevent families from getting effective or in some instances any help at all: “Firstly, services were not representative of the communities they worked with, and this was seen to be a problem, and secondly, participants reported interactions with practitioners that lacked cultural sensitivity or an understanding of cultural religious influences on family dynamics” (Waddell, 2022). Throughout the review, we also heard that sometimes suspicion exists within communities and can be a barrier.

### We were told:

*“Social workers do not always understand and respect the cultural differences of families, and this can prevent them from understanding the needs of young people and families and working with them effectively.”*  
**(Parent)**

*“I think social services has been always a “No” for Travellers. Every time the social services have been involved in Travellers something bad happens”*  
**(Parent)**

*“Social care don’t care and treat me worse because I am a traveller.”* **(Young person who was a child in need and remanded to youth detention)**



*“There was little understanding and awareness of different communities’ ethnic minorities cultures and family dynamics which had negative impacts on me” (Young person)*

*“The local authority know families really well - but the vision of family tends to be White and middle class. [This] Doesn’t work with people that have different cultural norms around the idea of family.” (Director of Children’s Services)*

We heard that there were perceptions of bias in social care, with some children and families believing they would be treated differently because of their ethnicity or appearance, while some expressed specific concerns about the skills and ability of the system to work with people from different ethnic backgrounds. Nearly a third of social workers reported witnessing racism directed towards families or service users by colleagues or managers in a recent survey (What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care et al., 2022).

## **More work is needed to understand how to make family support services work better for families of ethnic minorities, however community based organisations may be more effective**

The Early Intervention Foundation, Race Equality Foundation and Action for Children have recently launched a survey, SpeakOut, to hear from young people and parents from ethnic minority families in England to understand more about how help is accessed and if the support available is right.<sup>2</sup> Their findings from the survey will be published soon.

We do, however, know that community based organisations can be more effective at engaging ethnic minority families. The evaluation of the *See, Hear, Respond* project - setup during COVID-19 to bring together national and community based charities to support vulnerable families - identified that smaller voluntary and community organisations tend to be more successful in identifying, engaging and working with those from ethnic communities (Barnardo’s, 2021).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://speakout.family/about/>



## How our recommendations will address these disparities

Our recommendations on Family Help and child protection aim to address these disparities and are supported by changes for the workforce discussed later in this document.

- **A more generous help offer that better meets the needs of local communities:** Our proposed revolution in Family Help aims to offer families who need help a more responsive, respectful, and effective support. Local Family Help offers will need to be highly tailored based on robust population needs assessments, and the co-design of services and engagement with families will ensure services are developed which deeply understand the needs of the local community. This identification of need should specifically consider the needs of ethnic minority groups in the local area and design a response which will meet those needs and address disparities. We are also recommending that local Family Help Teams are embedded into the community and accessible to families and harness the power of the community making use of informal, community and voluntary sector capability.
- **Improve understanding of why disparities exist in decisions about families:** We also recommend that data on court outcomes is regularly published, which will show disparities in decisions across geographical District Family Judge areas but also racial and ethnic groups. This should be linked with wider work to understand the journeys and reasons for racial disparities in decisions about children entering care, discussed later in this document. As set out in Chapter Eight of the main report, we think Ofsted should be clear about how it inspects decision making, building on work that has been undertaken for the review to look at a definition of good quality decision making. Hood suggests that equity is an important factor in good decision making alongside accuracy, consistency, outcomes, practice, and the organisational context (Hood et al., 2022). This work should also be used to conduct validity and reliability assessments of inspector practice across all frameworks.

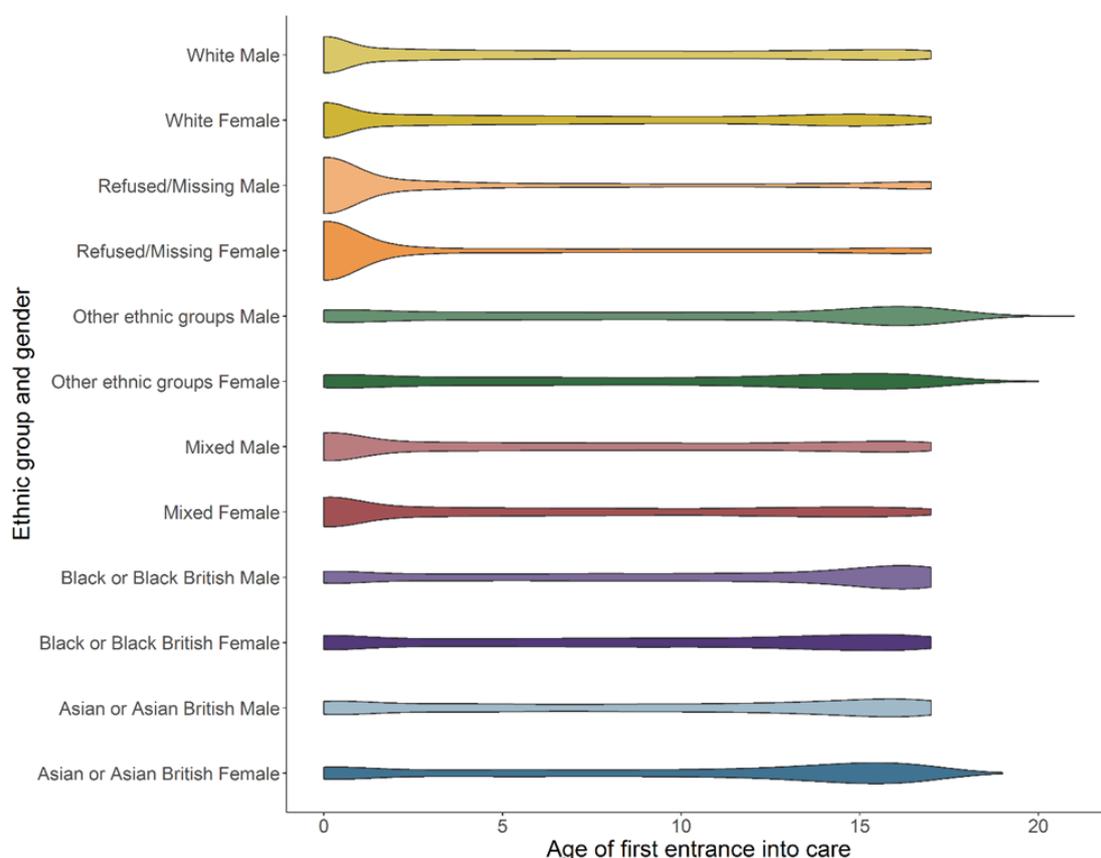


## Theme two: Children in care

### Children from ethnic minority backgrounds tend to enter the care system later and this impacts their experiences of care

Children of ethnic minority backgrounds enter and stay in care at different rates. The experience they have in care and outcomes also vary by ethnic group.

**Figure 2: The age at which a child first enters care for the first time by ethnic group and gender for children who first entered care between 2016 and 2020**



The chart above demonstrates that White and Mixed ethnicity children are more likely to enter care for the first time as a very young child whereas Asian, Black and other ethnic group children are more likely to enter care as teenagers. We also know that children from Asian, Black, and any other ethnic groups tend to have less time between an initial children's social care referral and entering care than White or Mixed ethnicity children (Ahmed, James, et al., 2022). More than half of children from Asian (68%), Black (61%) and any other ethnic group (68%) entered care within two months of being



referred, compared to less than half of White and Mixed ethnicity children (42% and 45% respectively) (Ahmed, James, et al., 2022). As noted above this demonstrates differences in identification and response to concerns about children and families of different ethnicities. However, the consequences for children from Black, Asian and other ethnic groups is that they are frequently coming into care later, they are more likely to be placed in less supportive types of unregulated homes and have less time to build trusting relationships with those that care for them.

Throughout this review we have talked about the importance of maintaining and building relationships both with people and communities. For all children a minority (41%) are placed outside local authority boundaries, however for children from Caribbean, any other Black background, Bangladeshi, Gypsy and Roma and African ethnic groups, and children who refused to give their ethnicity, a majority (52-64%) were placed outside of the local authority boundary (Ahmed, James, et al., 2022).

Individuals who were looked after were least likely to have Key Stage 5, higher education or employment recorded as their main activity at some point in the first eight years post-secondary school, had an earnings gap of around £4,300 in the 8th year, and were most likely to be claiming out of work benefits (Department for Education, 2021a). As some ethnic minority groups of children are overrepresented in care this impacts them disproportionately.

## **There are disparities in children's experiences of relationships in care**

A golden thread running through the review has been the importance of relationships, including the relationships children in care have with professionals and other non-professionals in their lives. It should not be acceptable for any child leaving care to have nobody who loves them, and we are concerned about the disparity that exists between different ethnic groups. The BrightSpots survey (Coram Voice, 2020) found a difference, both by gender and ethnicity, in the percentage of care leavers who felt they had someone who supported them, with only 86% of Black and ethnicity minority young men reporting they felt they had someone who listened to them, dropping to 83% when they were asked if they had someone who "tells them they've done well". This compares to 94% and 88% for White young men. As in the wider population care leaver population, a higher proportion of young women reported having someone who supported them, but the ethnic disparity is replicated again - with 90% of Black and ethnicity minority women reporting having someone who listened to them 90% and 86% having someone who told them that had done well compared to 95% and 90% for White young women.



## Too little work is done to ensure children from ethnic minority backgrounds remain safely within their family networks

Whilst analysis of 2011 Census data has identified a considerable overrepresentation of children from ethnic minority groups (excluding White minorities) living with relatives (Wijedasa, 2015), the recent What Works Centre for Children's Social Care (What Works Centre for Children's Social Care, 2022a) study of formal kinship arrangements found that children of minority ethnic backgrounds were, on average, underrepresented in kinship foster care and in kinship special guardianship compared to their representation among all children in care: half as many Black children live in kinship foster care or on kinship Special Guardianship Orders than we would expect if they were represented equivalently to their care population, 40% and 60% fewer Asian children live in kinship foster care and kinship special guardianship respectively, and 75% fewer children from other ethnic backgrounds live in kinship foster care or kinship special guardianship. This suggests that whilst children from minority ethnic backgrounds are overrepresented in informal kinship care, they are underrepresented in formal arrangements. There are significant implications to this finding: informal arrangements are less likely to benefit from state support, placing kinship children from ethnic minority backgrounds at disproportionate risk of not benefitting from support.

## Carers need more support to meet the needs of children of different ethnic minority groups

In some homes children are not getting the support they need to build a positive sense of identity or to maintain and build the relationships that are important to them.

### Children and young people told us that:

*"When I went into care at 14, I had no idea how to look after and wash my hair. I would use the wrong products, and this would ruin my hair. There wasn't anyone in my placement that could support me with this"*

*"They didn't let me speak to my mum when I was in secure. They wanted me to speak English to her but my mum couldn't speak English. If I spoke a word of Albanian the phone call was cut-off by the staff. There was not concern about my mum, all my social workers worked with my mum. I could only communicate with brother [who was two years younger] and my mum would be able to hear my voice. The calls were only for 5 minutes."*



## How our recommendations will address these disparities

- Our recommendations which introduce new Family Network Plans and support for kinship carers are designed to address any barriers, including financial barriers, to kinship families getting the support they need. Further work and research will be needed to understand and address barriers to kinship families from ethnic minority backgrounds being able to benefit from this support.
- Recommendations around family finding, Staying Close and Staying Put will help to improve the longevity and quality of relationships and will disproportionately positively impact Black boys who currently leave care with fewer supportive adults.
- What we already know about outcomes for care leavers is concerning, but the picture is incomplete. Our recommendation on expanding the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) data collection and launching a longitudinal study will help build a better picture of outcomes for all care leavers and highlight the racial disparities that exist so that relevant government departments can better target interventions.



## Theme three: Children in the justice system

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### There are ethnic disparities in the justice system, with many children having previous social care experience

In 2020/21 43% of children in custody in England and Wales were Black or Mixed heritage (Youth Justice Board & Ministry of Justice, 2022). A recent thematic inspection of nine youth offending services found that where Black or Mixed heritage boys were sentenced to court orders, a third had been subject to a child in need or child protection plan (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2021a). The proportion of Black children in custody is up to 29% of all children in custody from 18% ten years ago, Black children as first time entrants to custody have also increased to 18% from 10% of all children in custody during the last ten years, and use of force in custody was also highest for Black children (Ministry of Justice et al. 2022). A large majority of Black and Mixed heritage boys in youth custody have experienced multiple challenges prior to entering youth custody including multiple adverse childhood experiences, high levels of mental health difficulties and special educational needs, and a third have experienced child criminal exploitation (Ministry of Justice & Youth Justice Board, 2020). Children from a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller background are the most overrepresented ethnic minority in Secure Training Centres (STCs) and Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), representing nearly 10% of the population (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2021b) despite making up only 0.2% (Office for National Statistics, 2011) of the under 18 population in England. Some research has found that ethnic minority parents asked for help from community services, but children were arrested before a problem was acknowledged or support provided (Waddell et al., 2022).

#### Children and families told us:

*"We leave prison to hostels and they are full of addicts and sex offenders. What chances do we have there?"* (Care experienced young person)

*"Well I aren't going back to my old one [home] but don't know where I am going I never do until I get there."* (Care experienced young person)

One care experienced woman told the review that she had left a YOI with very little financial support and no suitable accommodation. This placed her back in the situation that led her to prison. She reoffended and is now serving a sentence in an adult prison. (From visit notes)



## Black children are more likely to be remanded into custody than other children

All children who are remanded to custody become children in care.<sup>3</sup> Black children are more likely to be remanded in custody, rather than the community, than other children. Black children are disproportionately represented amongst children remanded in custody. In the year to March 2021, ethnic minorities (excluding White minorities) made up 60% of the remand population and 34% of those children were of a Black ethnicity (Youth Justice Board & Ministry of Justice, 2022). Research from What Works for Children’s Social Care found that children on remand are often placed in YOIs despite it being recognised that these placements have a negative impact on children” (What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care, 2022). The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) Remand Review highlighted that judges and magistrates believe at times Black boys are not “championed by practitioners” in the way other groups of children are, which leads to higher levels of remand in custody (Ministry of Justice, 2022).

## How our recommendations will address these disparities

- Our recommendation to establish new Regional Care Cooperatives will ensure more homes are available in the areas that children need them. This will disproportionately benefit those children coming out of youth custody who struggle to get an appropriate home that is close to their communities and families currently.
- Our recommendations to increase the number of foster carers recruited who could be available for remand fostering and to increase the number of secure places available within secure children’s homes will particularly impact Black children and avoid the need for them to be remanded into custody.
- Our recommendation to bring youth justice policy into the DfE will help young people in contact with the justice system and social care get a more aligned response and incentivise earlier intervention.

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<sup>3</sup> Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 - <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/10/part/3/chapter/3>



## Theme four: Unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC)

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### The system does not adequately recognise the multiple disadvantages experienced by unaccompanied children who arrive in this country needing help

Unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) represent around 5% of children in care, they tend to be concentrated in local authorities that are points of entry to the country, for example Croydon, where 31% of children looked after were UASC, or Kent where 18% of looked after children were UASC (Department for Education, 2021b).

UASC have often experienced traumatic events prior to, or as part of, their journey to the UK which can significantly impact their mental, emotional and physical health and these needs are not always recognised and met (Draper & Gordon 2016; The Children's Society 2016). Evidence from recent inquests into the deaths of two young people from a friendship group of four Eritrean UASC who all took their own lives, has highlighted the lack of appropriate support some children in this situation can receive (INQUEST, 2019; INQUEST, 2022). This suggests that specific targeted support is needed for these young people.

As well as having a different entry route compared to others in the care system, UASC have a different experience when in care as they are overrepresented in independent living (43%) and semi-independent (36%) living arrangements (Department for Education, 2020). These types of homes specifically do not provide care, while different children need different types of homes to meet their needs, these will never be met by providing no care at all.

#### Care experienced adults told us that:

*“There should be equality in care no matter who you are” (UASC young person)*

*“You need open spaces for refugees or migrants to talk and work through what they've experienced. If there's a particular dress style, allow that to happen. There should be books and videos to watch about different cultures.”*



*“Give them access to as much as possible that's connected to their background or their Culture.”*

## How our recommendations will address these disparities

- New care standards to ensure all homes that children live in provide care and the right level of support. This will particularly benefit UASC who are currently overrepresented in unregulated homes, which young people told us do not always provide the level of support and care they need.
- Strengthening the quality and availability of advocacy will be particularly important for UASC who can have specific immigration and pastoral support needs which an advocate can help them access. Improving immigration support for young people could also have important financial benefits for local authorities. One study has shown local authorities can potentially save more than £130,000 per child (in some scenarios) by submitting a citizenship application at age 13 instead of waiting until the young person reaches the age of 18 (South London Refugee Association & Coram Children’s Legal Centre, 2021).



## Theme five: Social care workforce

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### We need to improve the diversity of the social work workforce, especially within leadership positions

The social care workforce includes but is not limited to social workers, family support workers and residential care staff. Social workers from ethnic minorities are overrepresented in the social work workforce – 23% of social workers are from ethnic minorities, compared to 14.4% of the population (Office for National Statistics 2011). However, this is still lower than the children they work with – 29% of children in need that are recorded as being from ethnic minorities (Department for Education, 2021c).

However, there is a more urgent problem within social care leadership. Only 12% of Principal Child and Family and Adult Social Workers responding to a survey identified as an ethnic minority (excluding White minorities) (Figgett, 2020). The data is even starker amongst senior leaders, as only 6% of Directors of Children Services who shared information with ADCS identified as an ethnic minority (excluding White minorities) (ADCS, 2021).

We also do not hold data for the wider children’s social care workforce, such as family support workers.

There is a need to improve the working environment. A report found that 40% of respondents working in children’s services have experienced or seen others experience racism in their organisation (Gatenby Sanderson, 2021). Another report found 28% of respondents reported experiencing racism from colleagues and managers themselves at least once (What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care, 2022b).

### There needs to be a focus on culturally competent practice

As discussed in the earlier section about support for families, understanding of cultural norms shapes the response of services to families. The National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel has highlighted the importance of culturally competent practice that places children’s wellbeing and protection within their cultural context. They state that “*Absence of cultural competence can lead to inaccurate assessments and decision making. Our evidence from practice reviews suggests that the impact of culture on parenting is not always overtly considered or evidenced.*” (Child Safeguarding Review Practice Panel, 2021).

One of our Experts by Experience Board members, Judith Denton, convened a series of “Black Table Talks” to discuss being Black in the care system.



Through this we heard from Black care experienced people and social workers from a range of ethnic backgrounds about working with Black children and families. White social workers talked about witnessing racism directed at children they were working with at times from other professionals and not being confident about how to address this or support their young people with the impact.

### Families and social workers told us:

*“My mum got my case closed a few times. She would say I can come home, but she wanted me home so she could take me to church to stop me being gay.”*

*“Spiritual and honour-based abuse and other harmful behaviours are not understood. Professionals across the system do not understand that these harmful behaviours occur, and there needs to be more education about the cultural differences in some Black families.”*

*“Professionals have a real lack of understanding about domestic abuse, and trauma responses. Women are perceived as being aggressive and not engaging, and this will lead to formal proceedings.”*

*During the Black Table Talks, one White social worker discussed three Black siblings she is working with who are placed with a White foster carer, the siblings and carer are happy with the match and seem to all be doing well together. The issues appear to be largely external. They are placed in a predominantly White area, and the carer believes they are facing racism in school, this social worker felt she did not have the skills and knowledge she needed to directly support the young people or to support the foster carer in knowing how to help them.*

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## How our recommendations will address these disparities

- The package of recommendations suggested by the review create a



radically new offer for social workers. Professional development will be vastly improved with training and development which provides progression through a five year Early Career Framework. The Early Career Framework will include a focus on cultural competence for social workers.

- Our recommendations to support the development of the wider children’s social care workforce, not just social workers, should build on the expertise that exists in the sector to increase cultural competence and confidence in working with families of different ethnicities. As well as directly improving the experience of children and families, this has the potential to decrease the rate at which children are referred to and escalate within children’s social care.
- Social care leadership should be reflective of the workforce they lead as well as the children and families they serve. We recommend strengthening existing leadership programmes to better align them with the review’s reforms and increase the diversity of leadership will help improve the diversity of the leadership of children’s social care.

## **Theme six: Improving data and evidence**

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The evidence we have drawn together here will not be surprising to many, but it remains stark and in some cases the disparities between the experiences of different ethnic minorities are increasing, such as the representation of Black boys in custody. Alongside our recommendations highlighted here which have the potential to begin to address disparities, there is more work to do to understand these disparities and address them. Chapter Eight of the main report sets out the need to continue to build evidence in children’s social care. In the recommendation annex that discusses the National Children’s Social Care Framework (annex 8.1), we set out a list of areas as a priority for future research. We include understanding racial and ethnic disparities in this list as a priority area for research.

Government must also improve the data available on this topic. The government has committed to publish a strategy on how to improve data regarding ethnic disparities in care (Government Equalities Office, 2022), which is due this year. This should set out a clear timeline, as well as considering what additional data needs to be collected to improve our understanding of the experiences of children and young people. This aligns with, and should link into, our recommendation to overhaul the data collected in children’s social care to drive transparency and learning in the system.



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