

Centre for Policy Research on
Men and Boys

Briefing to Members of Parliament:

Backbench Debate (Thursday 10 July 2025)

Attainment and engagement of boys in education

From: Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys

www.menandboys.org.uk

(A) About the Centre for Policy Research in Men and Boys

The Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys (CPRMB) is a new think tank and policy research institution that conducts non-partisan research on issues that affect the well-being of boys and men across the UK. It has a board of 11 trustees including Professor Sir Michael Marmot, Professor Roger Kirby, Dr Anna Machin, Will Hutton and Baroness Gabby Bertin,

It was launched in May 2025 by Wes Streeting MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care in Westminster. It released a report called Missing Men¹ at the launch focusing on 25 key indicators of men and boys' wellbeing – with educational attainment being a core focus

The CPRMB is focused on seven interlinked areas of focus for men and boys. These are: Economy, Employment and Skills; Education; Health; Fatherhood and Family; Criminal Justice; Male Identity; and Portrayal of Men in Media and Culture.

It will be launching a commission into young men and boys' education and skills in 2026.

(B) Executive Summary

Boys are behind girls at every level of attainment and in comparable socio-economic and ethnic groups – a pattern for over three decades, yet there is:

- Little research on the causes or solutions.
- Only relatively-small national level initiatives – and these are grass roots initiatives such as the Boys Impact Hubs² created by educationalists themselves. There are no national recognised initiatives or policies to address these issues.
- No conclusive information on whether boys' underachievement is referred to in teacher training curricula.

The level of under-attainment and disengagement is impacting on the economy and wider society and will impact on the government's plans for a national employment rate of 80% and its wider Modern Industrial Strategy.

The Centre for Policy Research is putting forward eight outline policy recommendations:

- (1) The government should create a full research programme on the reasons for young men and boys' relative underperformance followed by a full implementation strategy and plan.
- (2) Boys underperformance should be explicitly referenced alongside a strategy in the forthcoming Schools White Paper.
- (3) The Education Select Committee³ inquiry (ceased in 2024 due to the General Election) on boys' engagement and attainment should be restarted.
- (4) The Government and local authorities should work with civic organisations to increase boys' membership.
- (5) There should be a nationwide campaign and strategic project to encourage and increase the number of male mentors available to young men and boys whether through schools (including more male teachers) in community/civil society (Lads Needs Dads⁴ has a model) and relatable leaders (tradespeople, community leaders).
- (6) There should be an increase in investment in further education and careers promotion so that boys see and attain a clear pathway into employment. CPRMB recommends a "This Boy Can" campaign focused on employment including into under-represented careers in health/social care and education (known as HEAL jobs).
- (7) Policymakers including the government at all levels should talk up young men and boys to give them confidence and then should provide better support with their vulnerabilities.

- (8) There should be a Ministerial role with explicit responsibility for improving boys' educational attainment.
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(C) Attainment

Boys are behind girls at every level of attainment and in comparable socio-economic and ethnic groups – a pattern for over three decades.

From 2019 and 2024, there has been a small improvement in overall attainment for boys, but there has been no closure in the attainment gender gap – hence relative underperformance persists.

There is an increasing number of young men leaving education with negative prospects – through being excluded and/or not going into other education, employment or training.

Below are a range of key data sets including those from the **CPRMB's Missing Men** report⁵ and elsewhere. Where there is no additional specific reference, these are therefore included in the CPRMB report.

(1) Early Years: 'School ready' (4 year olds)

According to the Institute for Government⁶, in 2023/24, 60.7% of boys and 75% of girls in England were school-ready (good level of development) in reception year.

The Government's target is 75%. Therefore, to reach overall target, it requires a significant uplift for boys given girls have already reached the target.

(2) SATS (Key Stage 2 – 11 year olds)

The individual SATS results show that boys are slightly ahead of girls in maths in reaching the expected standards (74% boys/ 73% girls), however, boys are behind girls in reading (71% boys / 78% girls) and writing (65% boys / 78% girls).

The current combined SATS scores (57% for boys and 64% for girls) are still behind those in the pre-pandemic period for boys (60%) and girls (70%).

SATS: Percentage reaching the expected standard for reading, writing and maths combined (males, England)	2023/24: 57% 2022/23: 56% 2018/19: 60%
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(3) GCSEs (Key Stage 4 / Level 2 – 16 year olds)

The Grade 5 (a 'good' C) GCSE figures in England (2023/24) have improved and are better than in the pre-pandemic period 2018/19 (40%). The girls' figures for 2023/24 are higher than boys at 48.3% and similarly, there has been an improvement from 2018/19 (46.6%).

The Progress 8 scores for boys show, by being negative, that they are doing worse than expected from when they entered secondary education. Noticeably, the girls' figure is positive (+0.09) which shows the opposite. The fact that boys are not in positive territory should still be of great concern.

GCSEs (Grade 5): 5+ including English and Maths (males, England)	2023/24: 43.6% 2022/23: 43.2% 2018/19: 40.0%
Progress 8 score (males, England)	2023/24: -0.15 2022/23: -0.17 2018/19: -0.27

There is also a clear ethnicity divide as shown by the older Government figures on the percentage of pupils getting a grade 4 or above in GCSE English and maths (2022/23)⁷.

This shows that boys are behind girls in all ethnic groups and with a range of groups being below the English average include White British boys, Black Caribbean boys and Gypsy/Roma boys.

	Boys	Girls
Ethnicity	%	%
Chinese	85.5	91.8
Indian	81.8	85.2
Asian other	74	80.6
Bangladeshi	73.4	76.9
Asian	72.8	76.1
Mixed White and Asian	72	76.1
White Irish	70.1	73.3
Mixed other	66.1	72.3
Black African	65.5	70.4
White other	64.2	69.3
Pakistani	63.9	68.9
Mixed White and Black African	63.8	67.9
Mixed	62.8	67.8
All	62.7	67.6
White	61.4	67
White British	61.2	66.4

Other	60.8	66.1
Black	60.7	66
Unknown	56.2	63.6
Black other	55.1	60.4
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	48.5	57.7
Black Caribbean	46.4	54.2
Irish traveller	32	29.2
Gypsy, Roma	16	16.4

(5) A levels (Key Stage 5 / Level 3 – 18 year olds) and T Levels

A level results are improving for young men in England and as with GSCE results there has been an increase from before the pandemic with 2019 grades being 25.6% (A*-A) and 74.1% (C and above) respectively.

They still remain behind girls who achieved a 28.1% pass rate (A*-A) and 78.9% (A-C).

The percentage pass rates can also mask the differences in volumes actually taking the exam as in 2024, 18-year-old males took 348,425 A levels compared to 406,345 young women.

A levels: Grades A*-A (18-year-old males, England)	2024: 27.6% 2023: 26.5% 2019: 25.6%
A levels: Grade C and above (18-year-old males, England)	2024: 74.4% 2023: 73.7% 2019: 74.1%

(6) T levels (Key Stage 5 / Level 3)

In terms of T levels, boys are receiving lower results there too.

	Overall Pass Rate	Distinction/Distinction Plus
Male	86.4%	11.5%
Females	96.7%	22.7%

(7) Higher Education (Level 6)

There has been no change in the percentage of 18-year-old English domiciled males accepting places in higher education and a similar position exists across the whole of the UK with a 30.4% entry rate.

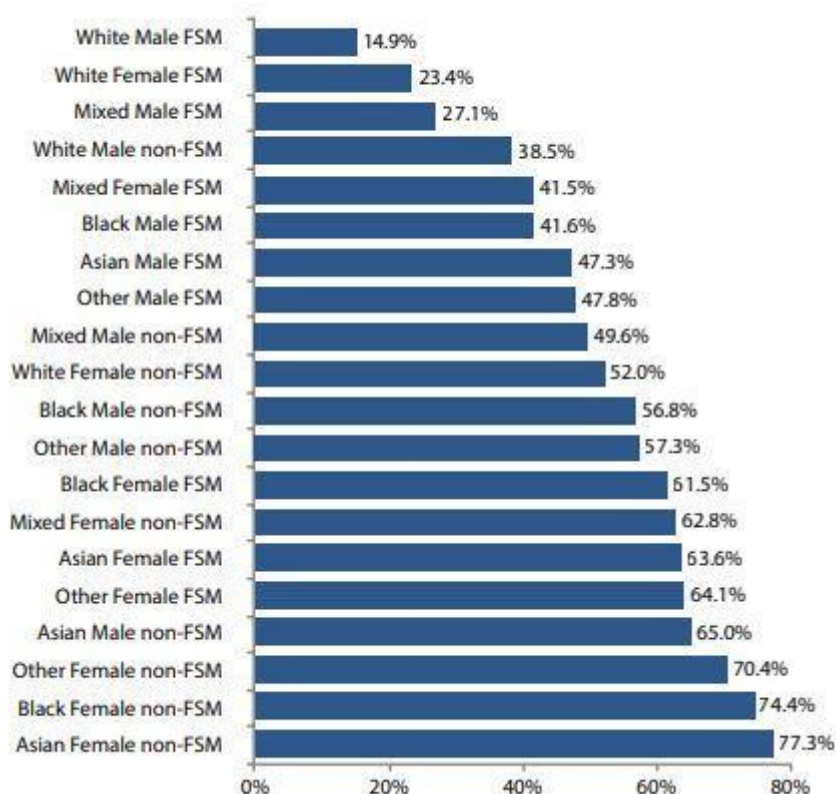
However, the gender gap remains striking. The number of 18-year-old English domiciled females attending higher education in 2024 was 42.0%, a slight increase from 41.9% in the previous year.

The total number of 18-year-old UK-domiciled males attending higher education was 119,730 (at a rate of 30.4%) and the female figure was 154,530 (at a rate of 41.3%). A gap of 34,800 in the UK and the gap in England is 28,385.

Higher Education: Percentage acceptance rate (18-year-old males, English domiciles)	2024: 31.4% 2023: 31.4% 2019: 30.3%
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Similar to GCSEs⁸, there are differences amongst different ethnic groups with respect to higher education entry, including those receiving free school meals:

Progression to higher education, England domiciles, by age 19, FSM eligibility, gender and ethnic group, 2022/23



(8) Apprenticeships

Between 2022/23 and 2023/24, there has been small increase in the number of 19-year-old and under males starting apprenticeships in England, with a similar picture emerging for women too (32,800 in England). However, the male figures are the same in England as they were pre-pandemic.

Apprenticeships: Number of 19-year-old and under starts (males, England)	2023/24: 46,140 2022/23: 45,970 2019/20: 46,270
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(9) Exclusions

Exclusion rates and numbers have increased for young men in England. These are higher than before the pandemic. The same pattern is in place for young women too with an exclusion rate in England of 0.03 in 2019/20 and 0.07 in 2022/23.

These annual figures are now two years behind with early indications that there will be an increase from the 6,481 excluded English males in 2022/23.

Term figures in 2023/24 show it is still increasing. The male exclusion rate in the 2022/23 autumn term in England was 0.05 per 100,000, yet for the same term in 2023/24, the rate is 0.07.

Exclusions: Rate per 100,000 (males, England)	2022/23: 0.15 2021/22: 0.11 2019/20: 0.09
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(10) Not in Education, Employment and Training:

The Office for National Statistics⁹ [has recently released](#) its UK quarterly figures on those 16-24 year olds who are Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET). The latest figures cover Q1 2025.

There were 229,000 young men who were unemployed (201,000 in Q1 2020) and 269,000 who were economically inactive (204,000 in Q1 2020).

The male NEET unemployment rate is 6.1% compared to 3.3% women (125,000). There were 121,000 young women who were unemployed in January – March 2020.

The data also showed:

- The number of economically inactive young men overtook unemployed young men in Jan-Mar 2018 and has continued to be higher ever since.
- The number of unemployed young men is at its highest since Jan-Mar 2016.
- Over the past year, whilst the number of economically inactive young men has fallen by 43,000, the number of unemployed young men has increased by 17,000.

(11) Teaching Workforce

This subject is part of wider discussions on both the importance of male teachers being present and acting as role models for boys in school, and, as a career in itself.

The recent figures show a small increase in male secondary school teachers in England alongside a small fall in those employed in the primary and nursery sectors. In England, they make up 13.9% of primary and nursery teachers, 35.3% of secondary teachers and 24.3% overall.

The number of male teachers entering the profession is falling.

Teachers: Number, secondary school (males, England)	2023/24: 82,231 2022/23: 81,741 2019/20: 78,388
Teachers: Number, primary/nursery school (males, England)	2023/24: 34,001 2022/23: 34,819 2019/20: 35,249
Teachers: Number, new entrants (males, England)	2023/24: 4,272 2022/23: 5,460 2019/20: 5,708

(12) Fatherless Households

CPRMB analysis from the Office for National Statistics' data from their Families and Households¹⁰ research shows that an estimated 1.4-1.5 million boys are growing up in households with no father or 'father figure'.

Research led by the University of Leeds¹¹ found that children do better at primary school if their fathers regularly spend time with them on interactive engagement activities like reading, playing, telling stories, drawing and singing.

Research conducted by the charity, Lads Needs Dads¹² with 615 primary school teachers and 639 secondary school teachers across Essex in 2021 suggested that the lack of fathers does make a difference.

Research from secondary school teachers found:

- 93% said they did believe there was a link between boys having absent fathers or limited access to a positive male role model and disruptive behaviour at school.
- 78% stated it affected for academic achievement
- 66% stated it affected attendance.
- 60% stated these boys were more likely to be sent out from class
- 55% of teachers rated ages 11 to 15 years as the most important for young boys to have a consistent positive male role model

(13) Boys and Civil Society

There is little known UK research on boys' engagement with civil society organisations and their attainment. However, it is important to note that there is a general trend away from organised civic schemes.

- Scouts¹³: The numbers of young males in the Scouts has fallen from 361,564 (2019/20)* to 328,330 (2023/24)*
- Cadets¹⁴: The number of young males in the cadets has increased from 56,290 (2019/2020)** to 56,280 (2024/25) but is lower than 61,200 (2014/15)**.

* End of January each year

** 1st April of each year

(4) Solutions

Over the last 15 years, there has been a small emerging field of research on understanding the challenges and putting forward solutions. These have tended to be from:

- Individual organisations (for example, the Save the Children, National Literacy Trust, Centre for Social Justice, Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys and Higher Education Policy Institute).
- Academics (Ulster University and Arts University Bournemouth).
- Educationalists (Mark Roberts, Trefor Lloyd, Neil Raven, Gary Wilson alongside evidence from six schools who were able to close the gender attainment gap).
- Parliamentary groups such as the APPG on Men and Boys Issues¹⁵ and the Education Select Committee whose inquiry was stopped in 2024 due to the General Election and has not been restarted despite requests)

The primary solutions from two (APPG on Men and Boys, and, Ulster University) are set out in Annex 1. However, what is clear, is that there has been no national political response to resolving the attainment or engagement gap from national education institutions.

Whether that be from the Department of Education itself, national education bodies (such as the Education Endowment Fund and other education 'What Works'

organisations) and other national education institutions and unions. There has also been no response from national level academy chains or similar.

There has been no official explanation for this.

The attainment and engagement gap has been clear for the past 30 years and it means that young men and boys are not reaching their full potential (as shown by the relative underperformance with respect to their female peers).

This has an impact on their ability to gain skills and employment, their critical thinking and wider engagement and understanding of society. This then has a knock-on effect on economic growth and society in general.

This is why the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys recommends that to address boys' attainment and engagement, a range of policy measures should be seriously considered:

- (1) The Government should create a full research programme on the reasons for young men and boys' relative underperformance followed by a full implementation strategy and plan.
- (2) Boys underperformance should be explicitly referenced alongside a strategy in the forthcoming Schools White Paper.
- (3) The Education Select Committee inquiry (ceased in 2024 due to the General Election) on boys' engagement and attainment should be restarted.
- (4) The Government and local authorities should work with civic organisations to increase boys' membership.
- (5) There should be a nationwide campaign and strategic project to encourage and increase the number of male mentors available to young men and boys whether through schools (including more male teachers) in community/civil society (Lad Needs Dads has a model) and relatable leaders (tradespeople, community leaders).
- (6) There should be an increase in investment in further education and careers promotion so that boys see and attain a clear pathway into employment. CPRMB recommends a "This Boy Can" campaign focused on employment including into under-represented careers in health/social care and education (known as HEAL jobs).

- (7) Policymakers including governments at all levels should talk up young men and boys to give them confidence and then should provide better support with the vulnerabilities.
 - (8) There should be a Ministerial role with explicit responsibility for improving boys' educational attainment.
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Annex 1

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Men and Boys

The APPG published an important report in 2023, where it gathered evidence from national and international educationalists. Importantly and uniquely, it also took evidence from actual practising head teachers who had closed the gender attainment gap.

Its conclusions are that some adjustments to school culture and practice would lead to better attainment for boys – no cost. This report recommends this change because it is based on actual practice, on the front line, in actual schools. The four key pillars are below

- **Institutional Will:** Schools/trusts recognise the gap, collect the data and then commit themselves throughout the school to address it continuously – from governors/academy trust boards through to teaching assistants.
- **Creating a Boy-Positive School Environment:** Schools create an inclusive, fair, positive, relational and aspirational learning environment for all students – that boys and their parents recognise includes them. Boys are not seen as a problem – some just need encouragement, understanding, being believed in, given self-esteem and pushing. They need high expectations and to understand the point of what they are being taught.
- **Tactical interventions on better understanding boys, role models and mentors:** These are aimed at boys where needed, especially role models, literacy mentors, early literacy interventions and study skills. These are not needed for all boys, but are needed for some boys. Better understanding of the difference in boys' motivations compared to girls is important as are more male teachers which would help boys understanding learning is for them too.
- **As a society, we need to care about boys:** At a societal, political and educational level, the negative narrative on boys and the indifference that boys face, especially those with problems, has to change. This also includes

dealing with the problems the adult world causes them including family dysfunction, a lack of community aspiration/opportunity and system-level educational indifference.

Ulster University 'Taking Boys Seriously' Framework¹⁶/Boys Impact

Educationalists at the University of Ulster, led by Dr Susan Morgan have developed a framework ('Taking Boys Seriously') based on supporting working class boys in Northern Ireland. It is gaining in prominence.

The core ten principles are:

- i. Recognise the primacy of relationship
- ii. Demonstrate dignity and respect
- iii. Utilise a 'strengths-based approach' to learning
- iv. Challenge and affirm masculine identities
- v. Promote positive mental health
- vi. Identify blocks to boys learning
- vii. Connect boys learning to context
- viii. Engage meaningfully with boys
- ix. Enable creative learning environments
- x. Value the voice of boys

These form the foundation of a new grassroots education initiative and network, created by Dr Alex Blowers (Arts University, Bournemouth), called Boys Impact: <https://www.boysimpact.com/>

¹ Mark Brooks and Nick Isles, Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys, *Missing Men*, 2025: <https://menandboys.org.uk/missing-men2025/>

² Arts University Bournemouth, *Boys Impact Hubs*, 2025: <https://www.boysimpact.com/>

³ Education Select Committee, *Boys Attainment and Engagement*, 2024: <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/8383/boys-attainment-and-engagement-in-education/>

⁴ Lads Need Dads, *Programmes*, 2025: <https://ladsneeddads.org/programmes/>

⁵ Mark Brooks and Nick Isles, Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys, *Missing Men*, 2025: <https://menandboys.org.uk/missing-men2025/>

⁶ Institute of Government, *School Readiness*, 2025: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/policy-making-left-behind-groups-school-readiness>

⁷ Department for Education, *GCSE English and maths results*. 2024, <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/11-to-16-years-old/a-to-c-in-english-and-maths-gcse-attainment-for-children-aged-14-to-16-key-stage-4/latest/#by-ethnicity-and-gender>

⁸ Department for Education, *Widening Participation in Higher Education*, October 2024

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- ⁹ Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys, Male NEETS, 2025: <https://menandboys.org.uk/male-neets-jan-mar25>
- ¹⁰ Office for National Statistics, *Families and Households*, 2024: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/familiesandhouseholds>
- ¹¹ Norman, Helen, and, Davies, Dr. (2023). *Paternal Involvement and its Effects on Children's Education (PIECE)*. Leeds University Business School: <https://tinyurl.com/yr3uz4a6>
- ¹² Lads Need Dads, *Schools Research Project*, 2024: <https://ladsneeddads.org/research/>
- ¹³ The Scouts Associations, Annual Reports, 2019 and 2024: <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/en/about-the-register-of-charities/-/charity-details/306101/accounts-and-annual-returns>
- ¹⁴ UK Government, MoD Sponsored Cadet Forces, 2025: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/mod-sponsored-cadet-forces-statistics-2025/mod-sponsored-cadet-forces-1-april-2025>
- ¹⁵ Mark Brooks and Mike Bell, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Issues Affecting Men and Boys, *Boys' Educational Underachievement*, 2023: <https://equi-law.uk/inquiry-4-boys-edu-underachievement/>
- ¹⁶ Ulster University, *Taking Boys Seriously Principles*, 2021: <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/topic/social-work-and-social-policy/research-themes/taking-boys-seriously>