

Young carers' experiences of poverty in Northern Ireland

Policy briefing from the Carer Poverty Commission NI

September 2023



In partnership with:



Contents

Introduction: What do we know about young carers in Northern Ireland?	5
Young carers' experiences of poverty and financial hardship	7
Young carers in poverty miss out on the opportunities and experiences enjoyed by their peers	8
Young carers may provide the same levels of care as adult carers, but receive no financial compensation	10
There is a lack of understanding about the financial and other pressures young carers face	11
Caring impacts on young peoples' education.....	11
Policy recommendations	13
References.....	14

About the Carer Poverty Commission NI

The Carer Poverty Commission was established to better understand the causes of poverty among Northern Ireland's unpaid carer population and to deliver the fresh thinking needed to address it. The Commission is led by Carers NI and works to:

- Examine the scale and drivers of poverty among unpaid carers in NI; and
- Design new policy recommendations for the Stormont Assembly and Executive to help tackle that poverty wherever it exists.

The Carer Poverty Commission is funded by the Carers Support Fund, delivered by the Community Foundation NI and supported by the Department of Health. For more information visit: www.carersuk.org/CarerPovertyNI

Acknowledgements

The Carer Poverty Commission NI is indebted to the young carers, parents and guardians from across Northern Ireland who shared their experiences with us for this research; and to Action for Children for conducting interviews with them.

About Carers NI

Carers NI is Northern Ireland's membership body for unpaid carers. We're here to listen, to give carers expert information and tailored advice. We champion the rights of Northern Ireland's 220,000 carers and support them in finding new ways to manage at home, at work, or in their community.

About Action for Children

Action for Children are a UK-wide organisation with a wide-range of services based in Northern Ireland, working to protect and support vulnerable children and young people. We do this by providing practical and emotional care and support, and ensuring their voices are heard by campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.

About WPI Economics

WPI Economics makes an impact through economics that people understand, policy consulting and data insight. We work with a range of organisations to help them influence and deliver better outcomes through improved policy design and delivery.

Our focus is on important social, environmental and economic policy debates, such as tackling poverty and inequality, the future of the green economy, productivity and growth, levelling up and mental health. We are driven by a desire to make a difference, both through the work we do and by taking our responsibilities as a business seriously.

Introduction: What do we know about young carers in Northern Ireland?

There are over 17,500 unpaid carers aged under 25 in Northern Ireland, representing roughly 8% of Northern Ireland's carer population. Shockingly, this includes more than 2,500 carers aged under 15, and 550 carers under the age of 10 years old. ^[1]

Like their adult counterparts, young carers are a diverse group. They support family members and loved ones with a range of illnesses and disabilities, and the help they provide covers the whole caring spectrum – including emotional support, practical tasks around the home such as cooking, housework and shopping, physical care, like helping someone out of bed, and personal care, such as supporting someone to dress. ^[2] This care may be provided before and after school, at weekends, and during other times of the day.

While the majority (60%) of young carers in Northern Ireland spend up to 19 hours per week providing care, close to one-third (29%) are caring for 20-49 hours per week, and more than 1 in 10 are caring for 50+ hours each week (see table below). That means over 4,600 young people are caring for the equivalent hours of a full-time job at the same time as trying to juggle education and/or employment. With such severe demands on their time, it is little wonder so many young carers are unable to enjoy the social lives and opportunities that should be part of every child's formative years.



The pressure facing our young carers inevitably has consequences for their health and wellbeing. In a UK-wide survey from the Carers Trust, child and young adult (CYA) carers reported high levels of stress, worry and inadequate sleep. [3] Caring at a young age is linked to long-term health conditions, physical disorders, mental ill-health – including depression – and isolation, [4] and may also impact on young peoples' educational attainment [5] and career progress. [6]

Child and young adult (CYA) carers in Northern Ireland [1]

Age group	Number of carers	Proportion of CYA carer population
5-9	554	3%
10-14	2,043	12%
15-19	5,746	33%
20-24	9,186	52%
Hours spent caring per week		
1-19	10,516	60%
20-34	2,318	13%
35-49	2,745	16%
50+	1,950	11%
Total	17,529	

However, much less is known about CYA carers' experiences of poverty and financial hardship – particularly in Northern Ireland. This briefing seeks to begin addressing that evidence gap, giving a platform for young carers and their families to tell their stories, in their own words.

It is based primarily on interviews with 11 young carers, the parents and guardians of young carers in Northern Ireland, carried out during July and August 2023 by Action for Children as part of the work of the Carer Poverty Commission NI. Where appropriate, this is supplemented by wider evidence, data and research.

The authors fully acknowledge the limitations of our findings. There are unique challenges to engaging with young carers on any research topic, and this is compounded by the stigma and sensitivity associated with poverty. Our sample was limited both in size and diversity, as all the young carers we spoke to were female.

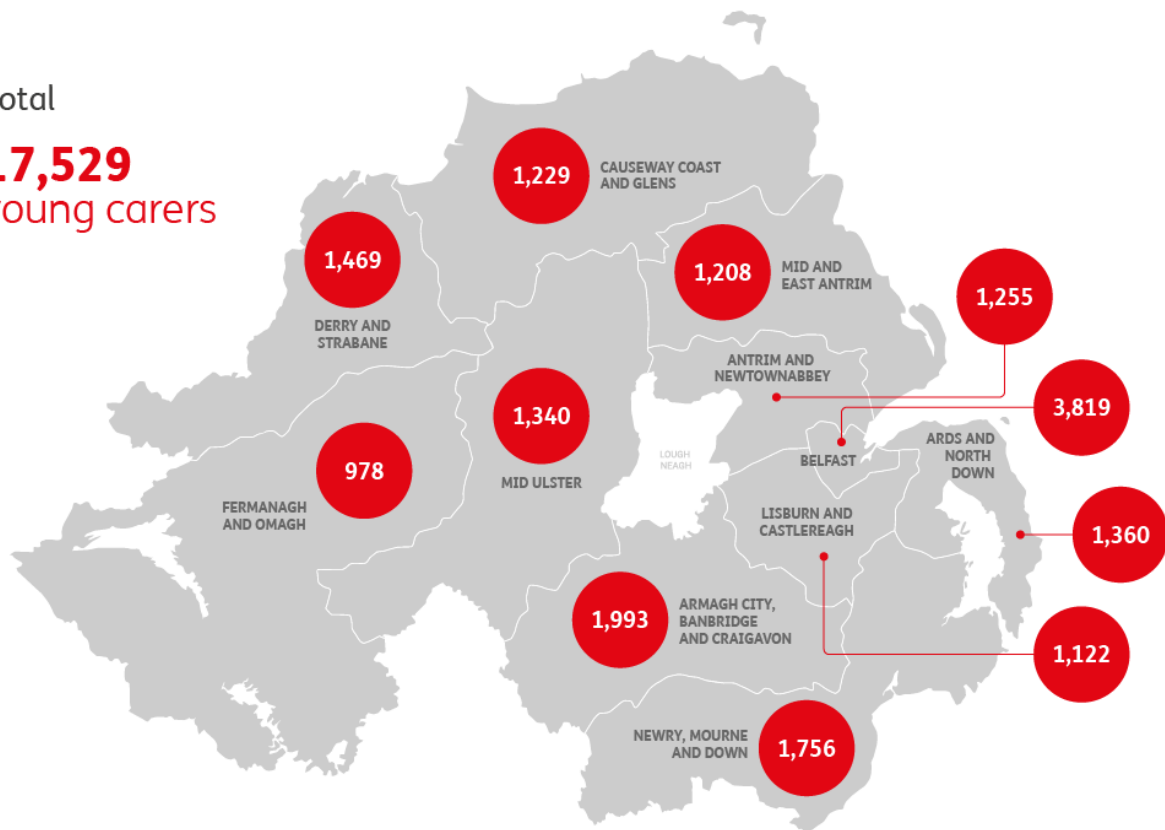
Despite these limitations, this briefing still makes a meaningful contribution to the evidence base and policy debate on poverty in NI – which too often ignores the unique experiences of young carers. We hope our findings can be a catalyst for further research and, ultimately, lead to meaningful changes to policy and practice.

In an ideal world, Northern Ireland's Health and Social Care system would have the capacity, staff and resources to ensure no young person ever had to take on an unpaid caring role. But that is not the reality that currently exists, and until it is, policy change must deliver the financial security young carers need to lead full, happy lives and enjoy all the opportunities available to their peers.

Young carers by council area

Total

17,529
young carers



Source: NI Statistics and Research Agency (2023). Census 2021: Unpaid caring.

Young carers' experiences of poverty and financial hardship

Insufficient sample sizes within available datasets meant the Carer Poverty Commission NI cannot make a robust estimate of the poverty rate among child and young adult carers in Northern Ireland. However, UK-wide research shows young carers are more likely to experience material deprivation than other children, with over 30% experiencing relative low income in one study. ^[7] Our research does not provide any evidence to suggest that levels of CYA poverty in Northern Ireland would be less than in the rest of the UK, because the drivers of that poverty – particularly the high extra costs of disability and ill-health (eg higher energy bills to run medical equipment, the cost of specialists diets, frequent travel to health appointments etc), low social security support and the disproportionate impact of the cost of living crisis ^[8] – are just as pertinent here.

The pages that follow provide an insight into how this poverty shapes the experiences and lives of young carers from across Northern Ireland, based on interviews with them and their parents/guardians. Their experiences are reported anonymously to protect their privacy.

Young carers in poverty miss out on the opportunities and experiences enjoyed by their peers

The families we spoke to recounted numerous examples of CYA carers missing out on the opportunities and experiences enjoyed by their peers because of the combined pressures of caring and poverty. Whether this relates to holidays and trips out, to more mundane social activities that most young people take for granted, we heard that many young carers living in situations of financial strain find it challenging to take part in the fun experiences that are a regular part of the lives of their peers. As one parent of a young carer said:

“She has had to deal with a lot. Never gets out. No holidays... The financial burden just adds more pressure to a boiling pot.”

While households impacted by disability and ill-health have always been at a heightened risk of poverty, ^[9] the cost of living crisis has only compounded the strain facing many families. Speaking in this context, one parent of a young carer said:

“What I’ve had to say to her [the young carer] recently is, ‘There’s a small pot’. Because me and my husband don’t work [due to disability], there is a very small pot. She knows herself that she can’t consistently ask me, ‘Mummy can I have this today. Mummy can I have that tomorrow’. Because I’ll say, ‘Well, what’s it coming out of?’... You feel bad saying to your child, ‘I can’t get you that’... But there are just a lot of times when I have to say, ‘No’.”

In another case, rising living costs meant a family weren’t able to afford to do as many activities during the summer months. This led to more intense pressure on the young carer to help her parents look after and entertain her siblings at home.

Another parent of a young carer said that the pressure associated with their loved one’s disability meant “*life was small*” already and had only shrunk further due to poverty. Extra caring costs and the spiralling price of essentials had massively reduced opportunities for family activities, and while she and the young carer had previously enjoyed going out together for trips to the cinema or to enjoy a sweet treat, financial constraints meant there was “*less room*” for that.

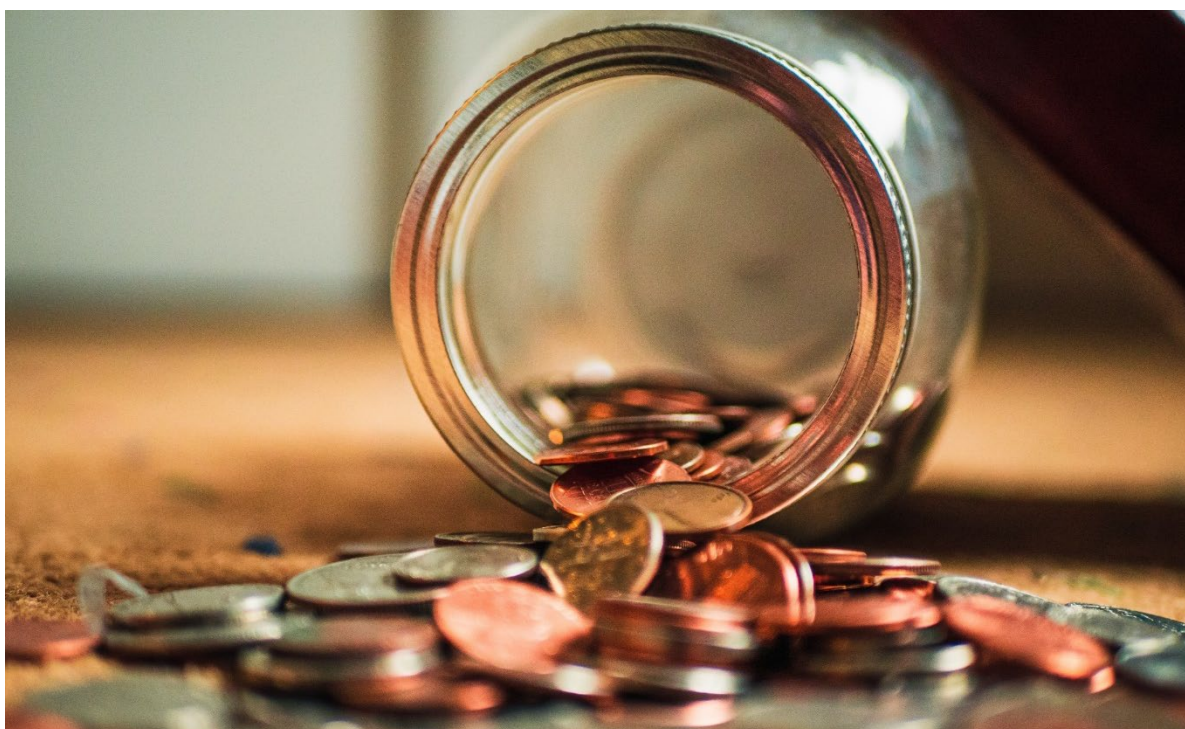


More generally, CYA carers being unable to spend time with friends, where there was a cost involved, was another concern raised. One parent of a young carer said that financial pressures meant that breaks and holidays weren't possible, and with the combined impact of poverty and caring:

“My biggest worry is that she isn't getting to socialise.”

Many families were full of praise for the services and activities provided for young carers by charitable organisations, while recognising that they weren't always accessible. For example, one parent noted that the young carer in her house couldn't take part in some of the fun activities organised for young carers by a local charity because they had no means of transporting them there and back again; and the free travel that was previously available pre-Covid hadn't been reinstated. It was acknowledged that these charities are operating in squeezed financial environments and could only provide more with greater funding.

Within education, school trips were highlighted as a large expense, with schools providing little support for CYA carers whose families struggled to afford the high cost. In one case, where the young carer attended a grammar school, there was a feeling that the school assumed all its pupils came from wealthy backgrounds, and therefore didn't put anything in place to help students attend trips when their family was struggling financially.



We heard about the lower expectations that young carers may have in this context due to their family's financial situation, with one young carer saying:

“School trips are really expensive, so sometimes you can't do that sort of stuff. But it's ok.”

This was part of a notable wider trend, where many of the young carers we spoke to seemed to expect less from life because of the financial pressures facing their family and the caring responsibilities on their shoulders. Many young carers were very aware of the financial strain facing their families, which was both a worry for them and a source of guilt for their parents or guardians, as one explained:

“She [the young carer] wouldn't be long in saying, ‘We can't do that this week, we're broke’... The guilt that brings as a parent, hearing that.”

Another parent of a young carer reinforced this trend:

“We always say, ‘Something has to give’... We never want to say no to her [the young carer], but we're mindful that we have to sometimes. And she is really good. She doesn't ask for a lot.”

Young carers may provide the same levels of care as adult carers, but receive no financial compensation

There was a deep sense of unfairness among the families we spoke to that CYA carers receive no financial compensation or recognition for their caring roles. These young people are providing tens of thousands of hours of unpaid care across Northern Ireland every week but can't access Carer's Allowance if they're under 16 or still in full-time education, which *“limits her [the young carer's] opportunities to do fun stuff”*, according to one parent.

Another parent expressed considerable anger at policymakers for failing to recognise young carers financially:

“Government needs to sit up and see the jobs our young carers are doing. It is disgusting because our young carers are saving them a fortune. And yet they're still struggling... These children deserve what every other child has... They deserve to be recognised. They deserve days out. The government needs to look at the funding needed to ensure these children have some sort of normality.”

The injustice of excluding young carers from Carer's Allowance or other forms of financial recognition was also expressed by adult carers in wider research from the Carer Poverty Commission NI. ^[8]

The families we spoke to were supportive of introducing a Young Carer Payment, or something akin to Scotland's Young Carer Grant, as an important recognition of the contribution young carers make and to help them financially. One parent of a young carer said:

"I think young carers, even if is once a year, should be able to apply for a grant. To be able to do something for themselves... What they do is unrecognised. It is an adult role for a child... Financially, there should be something for young carers... There should be more financial support for them. There is a lot of a burden put on them and the government doesn't do enough to support them."

Another agreed:

"Why shouldn't they get that [the equivalent of Scotland's Young Carer Grant], as a recognition of what they've done?"

It was telling that, when the prospect of a grant was mentioned to some young carers, their reaction was one of shock. They seemed to be conditioned to treat their caring role as something they should just get on with, with no expectation that it would be recognised financially. As one young carer responded:

"What, money for me?! Yeah, that would be nice!"

There is a lack of understanding about the financial and other pressures young carers face

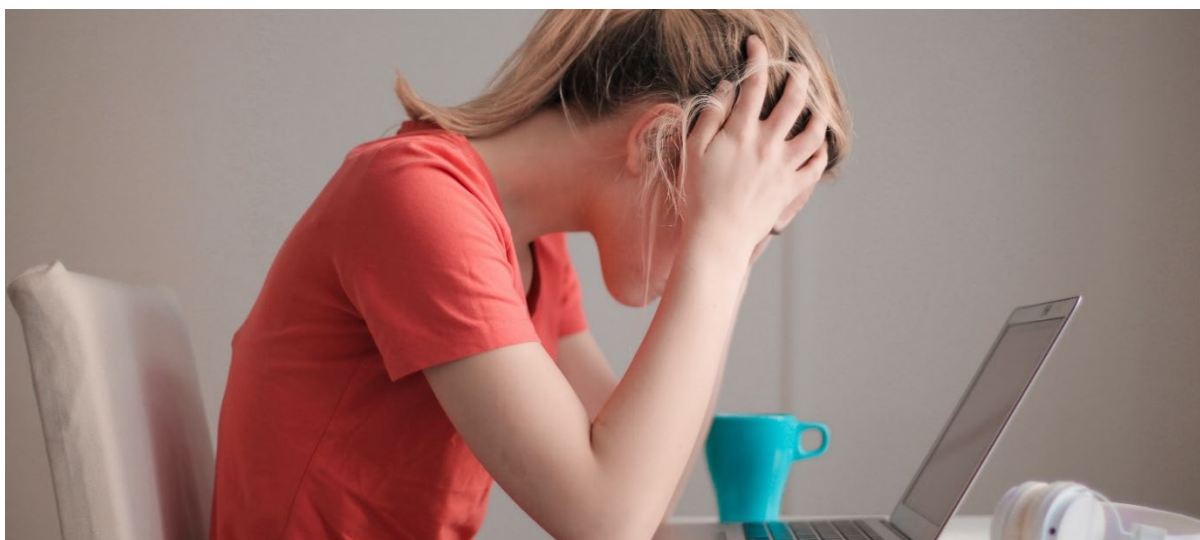
Some of the families we spoke to expressed frustration at the lack of understanding from wider society about the financial pressures young carers are facing. The young people felt ignored, forgotten and even judged by some of the people around them, who failed to understand how the cost of living crisis has only compounded the pre-existing poverty facing many young carers and their families.

One young carer described the disproportionate impact of the cost of living crisis on her family, and the way that this limits their opportunities in ways that aren't experienced by others without disabilities or caring roles, saying:

"[It is] really annoying... Other people don't have to deal with it."

Caring impacts on young peoples' education

The families we spoke to were clear that caring responsibilities impact on young people's education. Completing homework on time was challenging for some, as they began their caring roles as soon as they got home from school and these duties sometimes didn't end until later in the evening.



A wider theme was a sense that schools don't always give young carers the special consideration and support they need to juggle their caring role with schooling. In one example, a young carer was still required to sit an exam despite being under severe stress due to one of her parents undergoing an operation that morning.

The experiences shared with us reinforces wider research, which shows that caring at a young age can adversely impact on educational attainment ^[5] and many schools are unaware of the caring responsibilities of the students in their classrooms. ^[10] Less success at school can affect earning potential and career prospects in later life, increasing the likelihood of living in poverty, as the Carer Poverty Commission's wider work has evidenced. ^[8]

Policy recommendations

Among the young carers and parents/guardians we spoke to, there was a strong consensus that unpaid carers are being let down by Northern Ireland's government and other public services. Young carers do not receive any direct financial recognition for what they do, and the household units that they are a part of are too often missing out on the support required to meet the extra costs of disability or ill-health.

To begin addressing this situation, the Carer Poverty Commission NI is calling for:

- **Young Carer Payment**

Delivered twice-yearly, this payment would give young carers extra financial resources for the social and leisure activities they so often miss out on. The payment would also represent a much-deserved recognition of the caring roles they perform.

- **Carer Educational Activities Grant**

The grant would provide (confidential and discreet) support for families who may be struggling to afford the likes of school trips or extra-curricular activities for students with caring roles.

- **Carer Essentials Payment**

This payment would make it easier for households to meet the high and inescapable extra costs associated with caring for someone with a disability or ill-health. For example, the payment could contribute toward energy, food, clothing and fuel costs linked to a caring role.

- **Greater recognition and support for young carers in school**

As reinforced in wider research by Action for Children, ^[10] there is a lack of a systematic approach to support and identify young carers in schools, often placing many of them at an educational disadvantage compared to their peers. There needs to be continued progress among educational stakeholders to help identify and support young carers in their caring role and its potential impact on their social and academic outcomes.

- **Increased funding for social and emotional wellbeing activities provided by the voluntary and community sector for young carers**

Many of the families we spoke to praised the services and activities provided by charities for CYA carers, but also highlighted that they aren't always accessible due to financial and other constraints. Government should deliver greater funding to charitable organisations to help them expand their offering for young people with caring roles across Northern Ireland.

References

1. NI Statistics and Research Agency (2023). Census 2021: Provision of unpaid care by broad age bands.
2. Action for Children (2023). More than 8 out of 10 young carers feel lonely during summer holidays. See: <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media-centre/more-than-eight-out-of-ten-young-carers-feel-lonely-during-summer-holidays/>.
3. Carers Trust (2023). The voices and experiences of young carers and young adult carers from across the UK.
4. Scottish Government (2017). Young carers: Review of research and data.
5. Campbell, A (2020). The educational impact of being a young carer aged 16 – 24 in Northern Ireland.
6. Children's Society. Young carers wellbeing. See: <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/young-carers-wellbeing.pdf>.
7. Vizard, P et al (2019). Child poverty among young carers in the UK: Prevalence and trends in the wake of the financial crisis, economic downturn and onset of austerity. *Child Indicators Research*, 12.
8. Carer Poverty Commission Northern Ireland (2023). Experiences of poverty among unpaid carers in Northern Ireland.
9. Social Metrics Commission (2021). Measuring poverty before the Covid-19 pandemic.
10. Action for Children (2023). Young carers' education research. See: https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/Young_Carers_in_Education_Report_2023.pdf.

For more information about the Carer Poverty Commission Northern Ireland, contact Carers NI or visit the website:

W: carersuk.org/CarerPovertyNI

T: 07553 180202

E: povertycommission@carersni.org



© Carers NI, September 2023. Publication code: NI4122_0923

Carers UK is a charity registered in England and Wales (246329) and in Scotland (SC039307) and a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (864097). Registered office 20 Great Dover Street, London, SE1 4LX.