

Neurodisability in children linked to increased vulnerability to 'school to prison pipeline'

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Children with special educational needs (SEN) are more likely to be excluded from school, which new studies have found to have a direct

link to early criminal convictions.

A research team from the University of Exeter has investigated the "school to prison pipeline," finding SEN may be a pathway to over-representation in youth justice systems. SEN includes neurodisability, which is an umbrella term for conditions affecting the brain and [nervous system](#), including autism, acquired brain injury, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and dyspraxia.

The study, "School to prison pipelines: Associations between school exclusion, neurodisability and age of first conviction in male prisoners," published in [Forensic Science International: Mind and Law](#), looked at the connection between school exclusions and early involvement with the [criminal justice system](#).

Researchers examined data from 3,000 adults in prison and found prisoners with poorer scores on a neurodisability screener were more likely to have been excluded from school. The more times individuals had been excluded from school, the younger they were when first convicted of an offense.

When [children](#) are permanently excluded from school, they are often educated in a Pupil Referral Unit—an alternative education provision for children who can't attend mainstream school. The research also found any prisoners sent to a Pupil Referral Unit were first convicted six years younger than those never excluded from school.

Lead researcher Dr. Hope Kent from the University of Exeter said, "This finding is significant, because six years is the difference between criminal justice contact at age 12 versus 18—which greatly impacts life chances after that conviction and not getting stuck in the 'revolving door' of crime. SEN is also likely under-diagnosed in this group, who may have just been seen as naughty from a young age."

The rate of fixed-term and permanent school exclusions in the UK has been rising since 2012/13. Previous research has shown that school exclusion is associated with negative psychosocial outcomes, including poorer mental health, unemployment, and homelessness. Children with an identified SEN represent 15% of the school population but make up 47% of all permanent exclusions and 45% of fixed-term exclusions.

Researchers noted that while the study provides valuable insights, future research should focus on [longitudinal studies](#) to establish causal relationships between school exclusions, neurodisability, and criminal justice involvement.

'Double disadvantage'

A [second study](#), "Neurodevelopmental profile and poverty in primary school confer a 'double disadvantage' in risk of criminal justice system contact by the age of 16: A national prospective cohort study," published in *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*, has found children with a neurodevelopmental delay and living in poverty (defined as being eligible for free school meals) at age four or five are more vulnerable to criminal justice system contact by age 15.

The research, which analyzed data from 519,920 children born in 2001/02, found these two risk factors independently increase the likelihood of criminalization, and together create a "double disadvantage."

Dr. Kent continued, "To tackle youth crime, we need more SEN support for children to help them succeed in mainstream school, including improved resources to support teachers. We need to think of more ways to keep children engaged and included in education, rather than punishing and excluding them for not fitting into the system we have designed and labeling them as badly behaved from a young age.

"Our findings underscore the need for a dual approach of targeted educational support for children with neurodevelopmental delays, and policy changes to reduce child poverty. Investing in public health and changing welfare policies should go hand-in-hand with providing individual support for children."

Researchers recommend future studies should explore the relationship between poverty and other factors on routes into the criminal justice system for these children.

More information: Hope Kent et al, School to prison pipelines: Associations between school exclusion, neurodisability and age of first conviction in male prisoners, *Forensic Science International: Mind and Law* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.fsimpl.2023.100123](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fsimpl.2023.100123)

Hope Kent et al, A 'double disadvantage': neurodevelopmental profile and poverty confer synergistic risk of youth justice involvement, *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies* (2025). [DOI: 10.1332/17579597Y2025D000000052](https://doi.org/10.1332/17579597Y2025D000000052)

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