

Local area disparity in SEND diagnoses

LSE Research Briefing

Summary

- Children in affluent areas have a higher chance than those in poorer areas of being diagnosed with certain special needs conditions, according to research published by Dr Tammy Campbell at LSE's Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE).
- The research, which uses census data from the National Pupil Database for children in state-funded primary schools in England, analyses the relationship between family low income – according to eligibility for free school meals (FSM) – area deprivation level, and the level and type of provision for special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).
- This is set against a backdrop of recent Education Select Committee sessions which identified substantial “[high needs deficits](#)” in local authorities, indicating **the clear unmet need for support and provision, alongside long-known funding challenges**.
- Lord Addington, President of the British Dyslexia Association, cited this research in a recent House of Lords [debate](#) to argue for greater emphasis on diagnosing SEND within schools so that children do not have to rely solely on their parents for help with receiving a diagnosis and support.

Key Findings

- Dr Tammy Campbell, Visiting Senior Fellow at LSE, analysed 4.5 million children in state primary schools. She found that **16.2%** of primary school children are recorded to have SEND: **12.9%** at “support”-level, and **3.3%** with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).
- Free school meal-eligible children are less likely to receive EHCP support in more deprived areas. This suggests that there is **significant unmet need** in these poorer locations. Some **4.75%** of such children have an EHCP in the most deprived areas, compared to **5.75%** in the most affluent areas.
- Among all children with any SEND, about **17.5%** have an EHCP in the most deprived areas, compared to **22%** in the most affluent areas. This pattern holds for all children and FSM-eligible children.
- Children with SEND living in more deprived areas are also more likely to be recorded as having **less well-defined, more commonly documented SEND conditions**, such as “Speech, Language and Communication Needs”; “Moderate Learning Difficulties”; and “Social, Emotional and Mental Health Difficulties”.
- Around **32%** of children with SEND are recorded with “Speech, Language and Communication Needs” in the most deprived areas, compared to **25%** in the most affluent areas.

- Some **10.3%** of children with SEND are recorded with “Autistic Spectrum” conditions in the most deprived areas, compared to **11.9%** in the most affluent areas.
- For “Specific Learning Difficulties” (SPLD), which includes conditions such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, and ADHD – which, like autism, **require diagnosis by professionals outside of the immediate school environment** – the gradient is particularly clear. Around **15%** of children with SEND living in the most affluent decile are recorded with SPLD, compared to about **6%** in the most deprived.

Implications for Policy

- Because both diagnoses with specific conditions and the provision of EHCPs are present at lower rates in more deprived areas, this suggests that a “[massive rationing process](#)” is taking place, as described by Ian Mearns MP to the Education Select Committee in 2023. This indicates that there are **insufficient resources to provide for children with disabilities in areas of higher need**.
- This lack of resources is coupled with the fact that parents and carers are often forced to undergo **resource-heavy and adversarial processes** to access appropriate support for their child – or, put simply, are having to “fight” for provision.
- Among parents who apply for but are not awarded an EHCP for their child, those in less deprived areas are more likely to appeal and have a hearing at a SEND tribunal. This indicates **under-appeals – and, as a result, unmet need – in more deprived areas**. The vast majority – 96% – of SEND appeals are successful.¹
- Although the “high needs block” of funding to serve children with SEND is tailored by local authority to take account of factors including the number of FSM-eligible children, this research suggests that **the adjustment does not adequately address the higher prevalence of SEND in more deprived areas**.
- Therefore, **a revision of the funding formula** to better serve areas of high need could help to improve inequalities in provision. However, it is not about adjusting the funding formula to move money away from more affluent areas – instead, **more resources must be added into the system**.
- Dr Campbell states that the findings suggest that **the Government’s plans to reduce spending on specialist provision “are a move in the wrong direction”**, and that cuts to EHCPs “are likely only to worsen unmet need”.

The full report “*Inequalities in provision for primary children with special educational needs and / or disabilities (SEND) by local area deprivation*” can be accessed [here](#) on the LSE website.

¹ <https://ajc-justice.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/AJC-SEND-Report-FINAL.pdf>