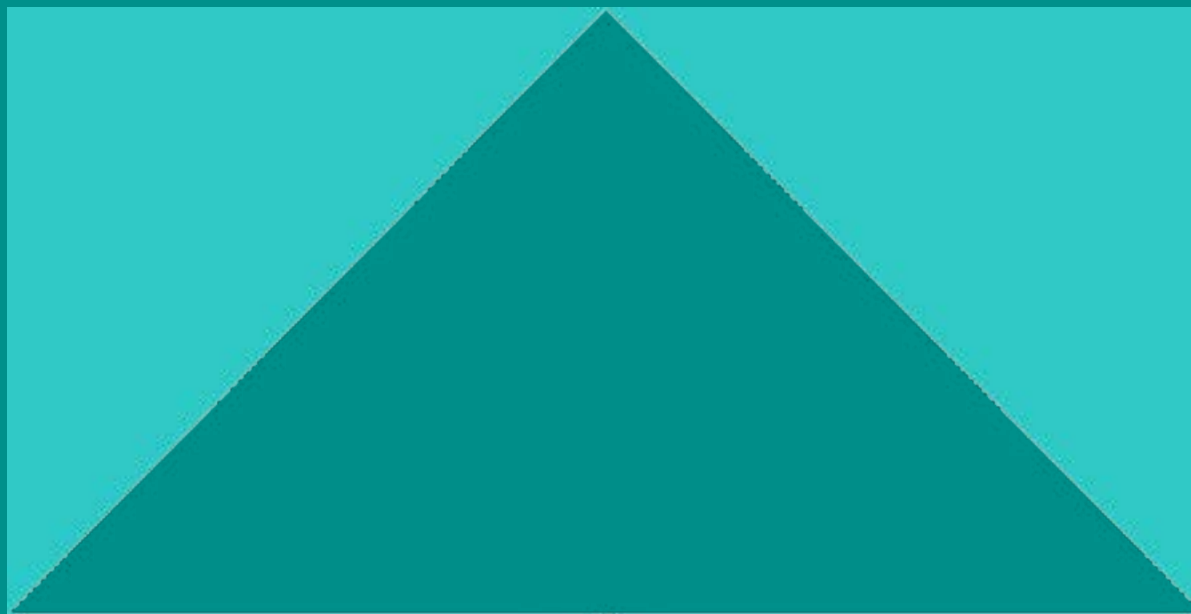


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Crossing Paths

How gender, ethnicity and place
shape opportunity





About the Sutton Trust

The Sutton Trust is the UK's leading social mobility charity. Our programmes empower young people to access life-changing opportunities, and our research influences national change to deliver a fairer future.

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Foreword

Regional as well as racial inequality have received increasing amounts of attention in recent years. The regional question has seen a broad consensus: the UK is too skewed towards London and its hinterland, while vast areas of the country fall further behind. Yet little progress has been made fixing this.

Ethnic and racial disparities on the other hand have been fiercely contested and politicised. The movement to address racism and improve diversity and inclusion across a range of institutions has been met with increasingly loud calls to focus on the “white working class”. While this has been highly polarised, ultimately both arguments have some truth to them. There is a long history of racial discrimination, both overt and institutional, in this country, with many institutions rightly facing a reckoning. However it is also clear that the white working class, however defined, are a group in need of attention.

But ultimately the reasons for this are more about socio-economic background. It is really the multi-generational poverty that is impacting them, not their skin colour. It is instructive that the Black Caribbean working class, most likely to have been in Britain the longest among ethnic minority groups, have outcomes similar and sometimes worse than the white working class.

Different groups face different challenges, but we should not be pitting these groups against each other. We should care about white working-class boys struggling in school, but we should also care about Bangladeshi girls whose talent is not being recognised in the labour market, or Black students struggling to fit in at university.

The data in this report allows us to be clearer about which groups are facing which kinds of challenges. We should not be shy about this. But we should also be clear that socio-economic background has some of the widest gaps in outcomes, and is accentuating inequities amongst other characteristics. It is vital therefore, for everybody’s benefit, that social class plays a much more prominent role in the diversity and inclusion conversation.

Addressing social mobility and opportunity will mean different things in different parts of the country, for different ethnic groups, and for men and women. Solutions will not be easy. But the data in this report could not be clearer on the importance and urgency of tackling these difficult questions.

Carl Cullinane, Director of Research and Policy, Sutton Trust

“Different groups face different challenges, but we should not be pitting these groups against each other.

We should care about white working-class boys struggling in school, but we should also care about Bangladeshi girls whose talent is not being recognised in the labour market.”

Key findings

- **There are wide disparities in attainment and earnings across socio-economic background, ethnicity, gender and region, which don't always follow straightforward intersectional patterns.** A Bangladeshi girl on Free School Meals in the North West has GCSE attainment almost 2 times higher on average than a White British FSM boy from the South East, but earns almost £5.5k less at age 28.
- **Many regional gaps in attainment are driven by the uneven spread of ethnic groups across England.** Ethnic gaps in attainment are relatively consistent across regions. However, just 5% of all White British pupils in England live in London, whereas over 50% of Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean pupils live in the capital.
- **Much of the 'London effect' for attainment is driven by higher ethnic diversity in the capital.** Despite large differences in overall attainment levels, White British FSM pupils in actually perform slightly better in the North East than in London.
- **Black Caribbean pupils have the lowest overall attainment among major ethnic groups. However, looking at those eligible for FSM only, White British boys and girls consistently achieve the lowest across regions, with Black Caribbean slightly above.** Indian and Bangladeshi pupils eligible for FSM perform the highest across regions.
- **Ethnic groups with pupils more likely to be first or second generation immigrants have the highest educational performance.** This high performance of recent immigrants is a success story for integration and diversity. In fact recent studies have shown that the UK is one of only two countries in Europe where second generation immigrants score higher than their peers.
- There are large differences in private tutoring rates by ethnicity. **Black African, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean, Pakistani, and Indian FSM pupils are all 4 to 5 times more likely to receive private tutoring than FSM White British pupils.** This could reflect parental attitudes to education, as well as greater availability of tutoring in places like London.
- **Despite widespread focus on 'white working-class boys', White British FSM girls' attainment is further behind other ethnic groups than their male equivalents.** Their attainment is also getting worse over time: the gap to the average female FSM pupil has almost doubled since 2016.

- **Earnings gaps for White British FSM girls are even more acute.** Formerly FSM eligible White British boys earn 17% less than FSM eligible Indian boys, but White British girls earn 35% less than Indian girls. FSM eligible White British young people also have the largest gender pay gap.
- **These ethnic gaps in earnings are partly driven by geography.** While White British FSM overall earn the lowest amongst ethnic groups, unlike with school attainment, this is not consistent across regions. In some regions they are closer to the middle of the pack. This means that their low position is partly driven by their location in lower earning areas.
- **Indian (19%) and Other Asian (20%) pupils from FSM backgrounds are most likely to move into the top 20% of earners by age 28.** Just 8% of White British and Black Caribbean FSM eligible pupils are income mobile.
- **Not all ethnic groups are equally rewarded by the labour market.** FSM pupils from Bangladeshi backgrounds show the biggest disparity. Their GCSE attainment is 5% better than the average pupil, yet their earnings are 12% lower than average. In contrast, White British FSM pupils attain 35% below the average student, but earn 26% below.
- These disparities are even more significant when you look at gender. **For FSM eligible girls of all ethnicities, their relative achievement in the labour market compared to average is lower than their school attainment.** Bangladeshi girls attain 11% higher than the average student, but earn 20% less. **White British FSM boys are better rewarded in the labour market than girls.** They attain 40% below the average student, but earn just 15% less. White British girls attain 30% below the average and earn 41% below.
- **Opportunities for white working-class pupils vary greatly based on where they grow up.** A “white working-class” version of the Opportunity Index for constituencies is revealing. Someone growing up in Kensington and Bayswater has over 75% higher attainment and earns over 50% more a year at 28 than someone who grew up in Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West.
- **City areas tend to have lower opportunity ranking for white working-class pupils.** Cities with areas of low opportunity include Leicester, Nottingham, Newcastle, Bristol, Birmingham, Leeds, and Sheffield, among others. London, instead of dominating the highest ranking areas, now has a mix of both the highest and the lowest ranking.

Policy recommendations

- **The government's target to halve the disadvantage gap should acknowledge this is not a homogenous group and ensure it focuses on groups and geographical areas facing the most disadvantage.** Given the spread of white working-class pupils across the country, tackling regions with low attainment is likely to improve the attainment of this group. As part of this, government should:
 - **Reform the National Funding Formula** to rebalance funding back towards schools serving the most disadvantaged communities and areas, including reflecting persistent disadvantage.
 - **Reverse the real terms erosion of Pupil Premium funding over the last decade, and extend to students in post-16 study.** Efforts to keep disadvantaged young people engaged in education and training after GCSEs are key to tackle the NEET crisis.
 - **Tackle persistent pupil absence through evidence-based interventions**, including parental engagement, with a particular focus on getting the most disadvantaged students back into the classroom.
 - **Reduce social segregation in the school system by making admissions policies fairer**, through removing barriers to schools using Pupil Premium priority, or reforming the admissions code to require oversubscribed schools to do so. Schools seeking to review their admissions can access resources at the Trust's [Fair Admissions Hub](#).
- **Place-based missions should reflect specific local challenges and conditions - for example 16-19 education in the North East - as well as building on learnings from previous place-based initiatives.** In particular, they should seek balance between national focus and investment, with local buy-in and ownership. Regionally and locally, policymakers should use data to target where support is needed most, for which groups and what stages of education. Our [interactive data resource](#) can help understand the different patterns seen across the country.
- **Universities across the country should use their position as civic institutions to increase regional and local collaboration with schools, colleges, employers and local government** to identify coldspots, address barriers, and improve access to higher education for under-represented groups in their local communities, as well as taking into account local skills needs.
- **Maintenance support for university students, as well as those in level 4 and 5 courses, should be increased to reflect students' real costs, as well as an expansion of access to maintenance grants to more families who need support.**
- **Apprenticeship and further education routes for the half of people who don't attend university should be strengthened.** More quality apprenticeship opportunities should be focused on young people, and employers should be financially incentivised to create more opportunities across the country.

- **Social class should be seen as an essential element of diversity and inclusion work across schools, universities and employers**, particularly as it magnifies other disparities. The government should review making social class a protected characteristic.
- **Gaps by socio-economic background and ethnicity open early. There should be equal access to funded early education hours**, with a priority for three- and four-year-olds, followed by two-year-olds.
- **Evidence-based parental engagement programmes in the early years to support the home learning environment should be scaled up and rolled out** through Family Hubs, childcare settings and school-based nurseries, with a focus on left-behind areas. The target of 75% of children achieving a good level of development should encompass improvements among the hardest to reach groups, and not just those just below the threshold.
- **Improving educational outcomes alone is not enough. Economic policy should focus on spreading opportunity across the country.** Opportunities for social mobility will only be available nationwide if there is a more even spread of economic opportunity across the government. There should be a sustained cross-governmental focus on this, potentially including greater devolution of powers, reforms to local government funding, as well as investment, for example in transport and infrastructure.

Introduction

Geographical inequality is often seen as the most serious form of inequality in Britain.¹ Our [Opportunity Index](#) provided the most detailed ever look at the geography of opportunity and social mobility in England, revealing great disparities between different areas, with young people in low-income households growing up in one place having vastly different outcomes compared to those who grew up in another. However, we also know that average outcomes can hide important differences. One of the key factors behind differences in outcomes between areas in the original index was the ethnic mix, with more diverse areas having much better outcomes for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

On average disadvantaged students have substantially lower school attainment than their non-disadvantaged peers, but even within the disadvantaged group, previous Sutton Trust research has shown sizeable differences in attainment and higher education access across ethnic groups.² “White working-class” pupils, which that report showed to be among the lowest achievers in education, have received significant media and political attention in recent years, with the government identifying them as a key group of concern in the recent schools white paper.³

Enabled by greater access to granular data on education and earnings in the workplace, research has also increasingly highlighted the stark and entrenched geographical disparities in opportunities for young people.⁴ Work for the IFS Deaton Review found that, for pupils from ethnic minority groups eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), earnings outcomes at age 28 did not reflect their higher school attainment, while low attaining White British FSM pupils on

“Research increasingly highlights the stark and entrenched geographical disparities in opportunities for young people.”

¹ Stuart Adam et al., *Public Policy and Inequalities: Lessons for Policymakers from the IFS Deaton Review* (The IFS, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.1920/re.ifs.2026.0028>.

² Philip Kirby and Carl Cullinane, *Class Differences: Ethnicity and Disadvantage* (The Sutton Trust, 2016), https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Class-differences-report_References-available-online.pdf.

³ *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* (Department for Education, 2026), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/every-child-achieving-and-thriving-html-version>.

⁴ *The Long Shadow of Deprivation: Differences in Opportunities across England* (The Social Mobility Commission, 2020), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-long-shadow-of-deprivation-differences-in-opportunities>.

average benefit from relatively higher earnings.⁵ However, as the Opportunity Index has shown, geography and ethnicity are closely intertwined.

Despite the often politicised nature of the discussion on these issues, it is important to be clear-eyed as to what opportunities look like for young people across England today in order to address the underlying problems. Also announced in the schools white paper, the government's Mission Coastal and Mission North East highlight low educational outcomes based on geography, while the [inquiry into educational outcomes](#) for white working-class pupils puts a spotlight on the exceptionally low outcomes for those pupils. The rise in numbers of young people not in work, education or training (NEET) highlighted by the recent Milburn Review⁶ also demonstrates the extent to which talented young people are falling between the cracks.

However, it's also important to understand whether the national picture is telling the full story. In this report, we look deeper at how opportunities for disadvantaged young people interact with gender and ethnicity and how this varies regionally across England. It looks beyond educational outcomes, exploring school attainment, earnings in the labour market and the transition between them. The first section of this report provides a brief evidence review and examines the current context of regional and intersectional disparities and how they interact with disadvantage. The second section provides analysis of attainment outcomes, earnings outcomes and the link between attainment and earnings at the regional level. The third section provides a deep dive of outcomes for white working-class pupils at a more granular geographical level across education, employment and earnings, providing a ranking of constituencies for opportunity, and comparing to our original Opportunity Index. It concludes with a discussion of the findings and policy implications.

These findings are important for several reasons. First, although it has long been recognised that national level data do not accurately reflect the realities of all groups in all parts of the country, policy decisions are still often based on the national picture. Taking place seriously means properly understanding the nuances of local realities. Second, the diversity of the intersections between ethnicity, gender and socio-economic disadvantage adds another layer to local complexity such that one-size-fits-all solutions are likely to fall short of the mark. There is significant variety in the challenges faced by those from

“Taking such a more nuanced approach should help to better support and nurture all young people wherever they are...and to better focus the targeting of limited resources.”

⁵ Laura van der Erve et al., *Intergenerational Mobility in the UK*, The IFS Deaton Review (IFS, 2023), <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-03/Intergenerational-mobility-in-the-UK.pdf>.

⁶ Alan Milburn, *Young People and Work: Interim Report* (Department for Work & Pensions, 2026), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report>.

disadvantaged backgrounds depending on their gender, ethnic background and where they grew up. These findings can help those developing place-based solutions to tailor them to their local conditions. Taking such a more nuanced approach should help to better support and nurture all young people wherever they are, to feed talent wherever it is to be found and to better focus the targeting of limited government resources.

Background

National patterns

In the UK, your socio-economic background can impact your educational opportunities, employment prospects, and ultimately your life chances. But socio-economic background is not the only factor. Economic disadvantage can also interact with other characteristics that influence outcomes. However, particularly in this country, the intersection of these characteristics doesn't always produce the sort of patterns that the classic intersectional model would suggest. It is not always the case that gender disadvantage adds to ethnic disadvantage adds to socio-economic disadvantage in a neat way.

Gender

In general, girls outperform boys throughout school and tend to have higher progression into higher education.⁷ However, they also tend to have lower average earnings than men, historically and today,⁸ although it has been reported that in 2022 for the first time, young women in the UK on average had a higher income than young men. This partly reflects the higher proportion of female graduates. However, once they start families, the inequalities tend to rise again.⁹

“Girls outperform boys throughout school and tend to have higher progression into higher education. However, they also tend to have lower average earnings than men.”

The reasons behind gender disparities in education are not clear cut, and evidence shows that boys are already significantly behind by the time they start school. Work by HEPI has identified some potential reasons for the

⁷ *The Education Policy Institute (EPI) Annual Report 2025* (Education Policy Institute (EPI), 2025), <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2025/>.

⁸ *Gender Pay Gap in the UK: 2025* (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2025), <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2025>.

⁹ John Burn-Murdoch, 'Young Women Are Starting to Leave Men Behind', *Financial Times*, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/17606f25-1d03-4f37-b7f4-f39989af9bde?syn-25a6b1a6=1>.

underachievement of boys, including motivational barriers such as lower educational aspirations, a shortage of role models and bias among teachers.¹¹ Work by Alex Blower focused on working-class young men in particular has also identified social expectations of masculinity, peer pressure and relationships, among important factors affecting young men's aspirations. These can take effect through preconceptions of educators as well as messages transmitted to young men societally through the media and peer group interactions. Mental health and poverty also play important roles especially for those from a working-class background.¹²

In relation to the labour market, women can be particularly affected by family, social and childcare responsibilities meaning that they tend to opt for part-time or more flexible jobs and take more time out of work.¹³ At the same time, female dominated careers tend to be lower paid.¹⁴

There is also evidence that gender and disadvantage intersect in nuanced ways. For example, FSM eligible boys see some of the highest rates of suspension and exclusion in the education system.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the Social Mobility Foundation reported that women from working-class backgrounds are hit with a double disadvantage, with a class pay gap of £6,855 in addition to the gender pay gap overall.¹⁶

On the other hand, there is not clear-cut evidence that men or women have higher social mobility.¹⁷ The question is complicated due to measurement issues, but also due to the higher disparities in women's earnings – women tend to have lower earning jobs no matter their socio-economic background.

¹¹ Nick Hillman and Mark Brooks, *Boys Will Be Boys: The Educational Underachievement of Boys and Young Men* (Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), 2025), <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/boys-will-be-boys/>.

¹² Alex Blower and Laura Moore, 'Changing the Conversation about Boys and Young Working-Class Men in Education', *The Sutton Trust*, 2025, <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/changing-the-conversation-about-boys-and-young-working-class-men-in-education/>.

¹³ Alison Andrew et al., *Women and Men at Work* (The IFS, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1920/re.ifs.2021.0205>.

¹⁴ 'How Do the Jobs Men and Women Do Affect the Gender Pay Gap?', *Office for National Statistics*, 2017, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/howdothejobsmenandwomendoaffectthegenderpaygap/2017-10-06>.

¹⁵ Natasha Plaister and Dave Thomson, 'The Educational Outcomes of Disadvantaged White Pupils', *FFT Education Datalab*, 2025, <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2025/07/the-educational-outcomes-of-disadvantaged-white-pupils/>.

¹⁶ 'The Class Pay Gap', *The Social Mobility Foundation*, n.d., <https://www.socialmobility.org.uk/campaign/the-class-pay-gap>.

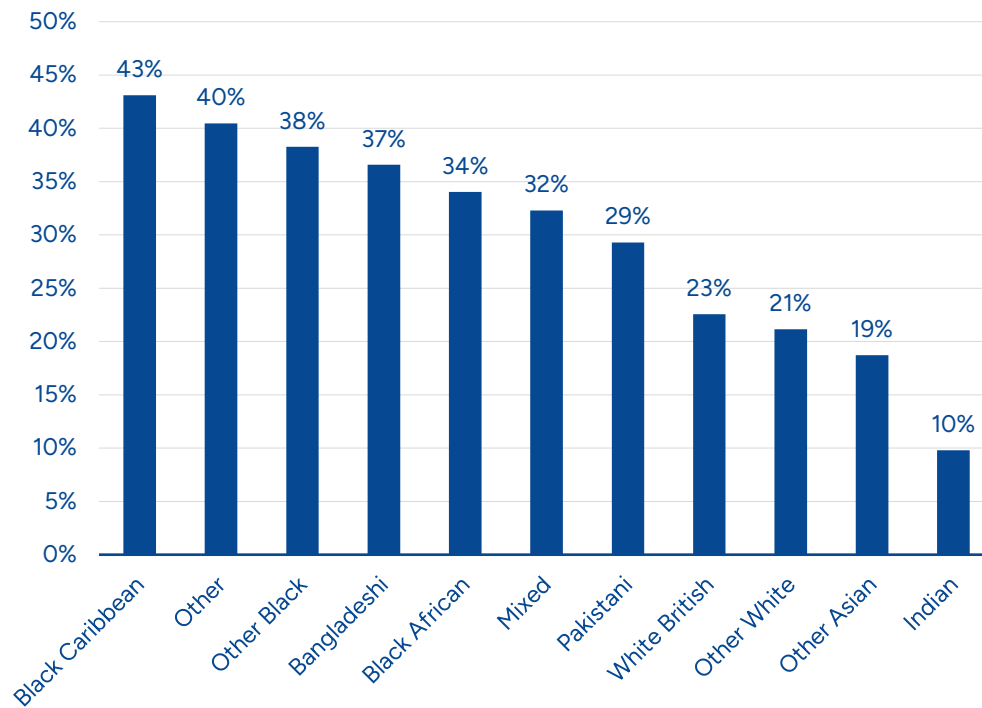
¹⁷ Jo Blanden et al., 'Intergenerational Mobility of Women (and Men) across Working Ages: The Role of Partnership and Participation', 2023, <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/Intergenerational-mobility-o-%20women-and-men-across-working-ages-Jo-Blanden.pdf>.

Findings from the Deaton Review suggested that women may be less mobile in terms of earned income at age 28 than men but caveated this with how sensitive the results are to disadvantaged women being more likely to work part-time.¹⁸

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is another important part of the picture, which intersects heavily with socio-economic disadvantage and gender.²⁰ There are significant differences in the socio-economic profile of ethnic groups in England. While around one quarter of White British pupils are FSM eligible, almost half of Black Caribbean pupils are (see Figure 1).²¹

Figure 1: FSM eligibility by ethnicity, 2023/24 GCSE cohort



Among FSM pupils though, some ethnic groups perform exceptionally well. For example, Indian and Bangladeshi FSM students attain higher than the average

“Bangladeshi and Pakistani FSM students attain higher than the average for all pupils. However, this is not translated to earnings.”

¹⁸ van der Erve et al., *Intergenerational Mobility in the UK*.

²⁰ Steve Strand, ‘Ethnicity, Gender, Social Class and Achievement Gaps at Age 16: Intersectionality and “Getting It” for the White Working Class’, *Research Papers in Education* 29, no. 2 (2014): 131–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2013.767370>; Kirby and Cullinane, *Class Differences: Ethnicity and Disadvantage*; Bart Shaw et al., *Ethnicity, Gender and Social Mobility* (Social Mobility Commission, 2016), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ethnicity-gender-and-social-mobility>.

²¹ *Schools, Pupils and Their Characteristics* (Department for Education, 2025), <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25#section-free-school-meals-eligibility>.

for all pupils. However, this is not translated to earnings, particularly for women.²³ On the other hand, White British FSM pupils have exceptionally low attainment, especially boys. Other outcomes across schools such as absence rates, exclusions and progression to higher education are also low for White British FSM pupils.²⁴ Polling published by the [Inquiry into White Working Class Educational Outcomes](#) cites parental educational experiences and attitudes, lack of belonging, school transitions and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) as among the factors impacting outcomes for this group.²⁵

Conversely, work by Zuccotti and Platt suggests two mechanisms as to why certain ethnic minority groups have higher attainment.²⁶ Firstly, 'immigrant advantage', where the positive choice to migrate explains differences in expectations, aspirations and investment between children with migrant backgrounds and those without. Secondly, social class misallocation, where immigrants are more likely to be in occupations for which they are overqualified, and so in turn have higher social and cultural capital compared to those without a migration background. However, it should be acknowledged that the UK is an outlier in terms of the educational performance of recent immigrants, as one of just two countries in Europe where second generation immigrant students outperformed non-immigrants in the PISA study.²⁷

The Deaton Review also discusses hypotheses as to why ethnic minority groups tend to have lower earnings returns to educational attainment. While overall, more evidence is needed, the authors highlight several possible explanations: differences in higher education and vocational education choices by ethnicity, the higher concentration of certain ethnic groups in specific occupations, and differences in capital (such as social and cultural) that is important for educational success but less so for the labour market. These forms of capital may also be undervalued as a result of discrimination. Some evidence also suggests that concentration of groups in certain professions may

²³ van der Erve et al., *Intergenerational Mobility in the UK*.

²⁴ Plaister and Thomson, 'The Educational Outcomes of Disadvantaged White Pupils'.

²⁵ *The Inquiry into White Working Class Educational Outcomes* (2026), <https://educationaloutcomes.org.uk/wp-content/WWCI%20Findings%20Website%20January%202026.pdf>.

²⁶ Carolina Zuccotti and Lucinda Platt, *Social Origins and Social Mobility: The Educational and Labour Market Outcomes of the Children of Immigrants in the UK*, Working Paper no. 13/21 (CREAM Discussion Paper Series, 2021), <https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/295646>.

²⁷ Sam Freedman, 'The Truth About Integration', *Comment Is Freed*, 2024, <https://samf.substack.com/p/the-truth-about-integration>.

be a response to opportunities and constraints, as career aspirations in childhood do not vary greatly over gender and ethnicity.²⁹

However, they note a lack of evidence into how geographical disparities may play into this, for example whether ethnic minority advantage is driven by geographical variation in quality of education, for example, the London effect, where attainment, particularly that of disadvantaged pupils, is higher compared to other regions.³⁰

This report contributes evidence on opportunity and social mobility across ethnicity by investigating to what extent these gaps are explained by regional differences. We provide regional analysis, using detailed ethnic groups meaning we can distinguish between groups such as Black African and Black Caribbean pupils and Bangladeshi and Pakistani pupils, all who have been shown to have important variation. Smaller groups, such as Gypsy Roma, Irish Traveller and Chinese are incorporated into larger categories however.

Through these analyses we can see the wide variation in experiences of education, earnings and social mobility across different ethnic groups and in different parts of the country. Understanding this is fundamental to being able to better target investment, resources and interventions.

Geographical inequality

Recent polling has revealed that geographical inequality was considered the most important type of inequality among the general public.³² This may be because geographical inequalities tend to be entrenched historically and amalgamate across generations, a mix of multiple dimensions of inequality: health, income, education, job opportunities, quality of life, housing and crime.

Regional inequality in the UK is high compared to other countries, with research concluding that the UK is one of the most regionally unbalanced countries in the industrialised world.³³ The British economy is highly concentrated in London and the South East. This means that income mobility often relies on geographic

²⁹ Sam Parsons and Lucinda Platt, 'Do Occupational Aspirations of Children Help to Explain Ethnic Differences in Labour Market Outcomes?', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31 January 2026, 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2026.2616224>.

³⁰ van der Erve et al., *Intergenerational Mobility in the UK*.

³² Adam et al., *Public Policy and Inequalities*.

³³ Philip McCann, 'Perceptions of Regional Inequality and the Geography of Discontent: Insights from the UK', *Regional Studies* 54, no. 2 (2020): 256–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2019.1619928>.

mobility, the costs of which can be prohibitive for those from poorer backgrounds and with negative implications for the British economy.³⁴ Previous Sutton Trust research has highlighted how London is difficult to access for people from working-class backgrounds outside the capital, with those from an already privileged background more likely to move to the capital for work.³⁵

There are stark economic inequalities between regions. More nuanced than simply a North/South divide, geographical challenges also include rural and coastal communities, with education cold spots too. Even among disadvantaged students there are stark differences within and between regions. Our [Opportunity Index](#) revealed striking variation across education and employment outcomes for FSM pupils in different areas, for example with FSM pupils from Ruislip Northwood and Pinner in London over six times more likely to become higher earners than those in Leeds East. Increasingly, geography has become part of the discussion on opportunity and social mobility, with the latest Social Mobility Commission State of the Nation highlighting areas of entrenched inequality in post-industrial areas.³⁶

While London is often known as having the highest educational outcomes, especially for disadvantaged pupils (the so-called 'London effect')³⁷ it also suffers from England's highest levels of child poverty and most extreme concentrations of hardship according to the latest data.³⁸ While higher incomes in London push up rent and living costs, those at the bottom of the income distribution are pushed more deeply into poverty. A recent EPI report also found this pattern, arguing that a key part of London's success comes down to breaking the link between poverty and low attainment among ethnic minority

³⁴ McCann, 'Perceptions of Regional Inequality and the Geography of Discontent'.

³⁵ Katharina Hecht et al., *Elites in the UK: Pulling Away?* (2020), <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/uk-elites-pulling-away/>.

³⁶ The Social Mobility Commission, *State of the Nation: Research on Social Mobility in the UK* (2025), <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/state-of-the-nation>; Christina Beatty and Steve Fothergill, 'Recovery or Stagnation?: Britain's Older Industrial Towns since the Recession', *Regional Studies* 54, no. 9 (2020): 1238–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2019.1699651>; Christina Beatty and Steve Fothergill, *Beyond the Pandemic: Older Industrial Britain in the Wake of the Crisis* (Sheffield Hallam University, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.7190/cresr.2021.1054106944>; Melanie Gower, *Regeneration of Former Industrial Areas in the UK*, 29 February 2024, <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/regeneration-of-former-industrial-areas-in-the-uk/>.

³⁷ Andy Ross et al., *Examining the London Advantage in Attainment: Evidence from LSYPE* (Department for Education, 2020), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/examining-the-london-advantage-in-attainment-evidence-from-lsype>.

³⁸ *Households Below Average Income: An Analysis of the UK Income Distribution: FYE 1995 to FYE 2025* (Department for Work & Pensions, 2026), <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-for-financial-years-ending-1995-to-2025/households-below-average-income-an-analysis-of-the-uk-income-distribution-fye-1995-to-fye-2025#main-stories>.

groups. This may be driven by different norms surrounding aspirations and ambitions for ethnic minority groups.³⁹ But to what extent do FSM pupils in London achieve higher attainment than their peers in other regions, once accounting for ethnicity?

Policy context

Recent years have seen significant interest and coverage of the outcomes of those from white working-class backgrounds, with a particular focus on boys. An inquiry into white working-class educational outcomes led by Sir Hamid Patel and Estelle Morris is expected to report in the Summer of 2026. Previous inquiries have also investigated the issue, however there has been little sign of improvements for this group.⁴⁰

Geographical inequalities have increasingly been recognised in national policy. Efforts to address educational disadvantage are also starting to be targeted regionally in a variety of initiatives from 'Opportunity Areas' to 'Education Investment Areas'. In the recent government schools white paper,⁴¹ two place-based missions were also announced: 'Mission North East' and 'Mission Coastal' aimed at transforming outcomes for children in local areas, but with expected implications also for national policy in the future.⁴²

Other place-based policies aimed at tackling geographical inequality in opportunity include the government's Pride in Place Programme, which provides funding across different areas to make long-term improvements. The programmes target 'doubly disadvantaged' neighbourhoods with high levels of socio-economic deprivation and weaker social infrastructure.

Place-based policies with a greater focus on education and the labour market include the government's *Youth Matters: national youth strategy*, published in December 2025 alongside the SMC's State of the Nation report.⁴⁵ The strategy includes an overarching place-based approach to funding for youth offers and

³⁹ *The Education Policy Institute (EPI) Annual Report 2025*.

⁴⁰ *The Forgotten: How White Working-Class Pupils Have Been Let down, and How to Change It* (Education Committee - House of Commons, 2021), <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmeduc/85/8502.htm>.

⁴¹ *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*.

⁴² 'New Missions to Transform Childhoods of Most Disadvantaged', *Department for Education*, 2026, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-missions-to-transform-childhoods-of-most-disadvantaged>.

⁴⁵ 'Youth Matters: National Youth Strategy', GOV.UK, 20 May 2026, <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/youth-matters-national-youth-strategy>.

includes actions that focus on strengthening the workforce and providing good work among other things. Another element is the Youth Guarantee, which guarantees paid work for every eligible young person on Universal Credit, responding to the crisis of young people who are NEET. In May 2026, Alan Milburn published a damning report into the NEET crisis stressing the importance of investing more to support young people into work.⁴⁶ The government also published its [industrial strategy](#) in November 2025, which includes identifying and investing in key areas for industry.

Consequently, there is clear recognition in government of the problems of social, educational and economic inequalities, of unequal access to job opportunities and some of the regional character of these challenges. However, the next fundamental challenge is turning this recognition into effective action and interventions. For that, more than lip-service needs to be paid to 'place-based' solutions. Those tasked with finding these solutions need to be empowered with the resources to fully understand the complexity of their challenges and how they may overlap or differ from those in other places. This report, and accompanying [interactive data resource](#) is intended to contribute to such empowerment.

“The next fundamental challenge is turning this recognition into effective action and interventions.”

School attainment

Nationally, the differences in attainment between disadvantaged pupils (eligible for free school meals FSM) and their peers are well known. In 2024/25, the gap between the proportion of FSM and non-FSM pupils achieving grade 5 or above in English and maths at GCSE was 27.3 percentage points, up from 25.2 percentage points in 2018/19 and the Attainment 8 gap has increased over the same period from 13.6 points to 15.5 points.⁴⁷ Similarly, there are well-known differences in attainment by gender (girls outperforming boys) and ethnicity (Indian and Chinese pupils generally outperforming other groups).⁴⁸

In this section we delve more deeply into these attainment gaps to ask what differences we see in the intersections between socio-economic disadvantage,

⁴⁶ Milburn, *Young People and Work*.

⁴⁷ Department for Education, 'Key Stage 4 Performance', London, 23 April 2026, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance/2024-25>.

⁴⁸ *The Education Policy Institute (EPI) Annual Report 2025*.

gender, ethnicity and across regions. So, for example, do FSM attainment gaps vary by ethnicity and by gender? And how do these vary by region?

This analysis uses data from the National Pupil Database, covering educational data for all pupils in state schools in England. It covers pupils in Year 11 in 2023/24. Data corresponds to the region in which a pupil grew up and attended secondary school. Eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) aged 16 is used here as the primary indicator of socio-economic disadvantage. Indicators used for attainment include Attainment 8 score (based on best GCSE results across 8 subjects) and Progress 8 score (based on how much progress pupils make between the end of primary school and their GCSEs).

An understanding of the diversity of KS4 attainment across genders, ethnicities and regions provides the backdrop for understanding subsequent social mobility journeys. This is essential if we are to truly understand what is driving social mobility gaps, where they are and for whom they have the greatest impact.

As the Opportunity Index showed, regionally, London has the highest attainment for FSM students at 41 points on the Attainment 8 measure, with the second highest scoring region the West Midlands at 34 points. The lowest scoring region is the South East, with 31 points. This high achievement of FSM students in London is often known as the 'London effect'.⁴⁹ Accordingly, the FSM gap is also narrowest in London at 12 points, compared to 19 points in the South East.

This is somewhat mirrored in FSM Progress 8 scores which measure pupil progress between the end of primary school and GCSEs, with London the highest at -0.13 and the North East lowest at -0.81, with the South East close behind at -0.76.

National attainment by ethnicity

Overall attainment gaps between the highest achieving and lowest achieving ethnicities across the country are stark. Nationally, the gap between the highest (Indian) and lowest performing (Black Caribbean) pupils measured by Attainment 8 scores is 20 points (39 vs 59). This is approximately equivalent to 2 GCSE grades difference in each subject. However, these are figures for all

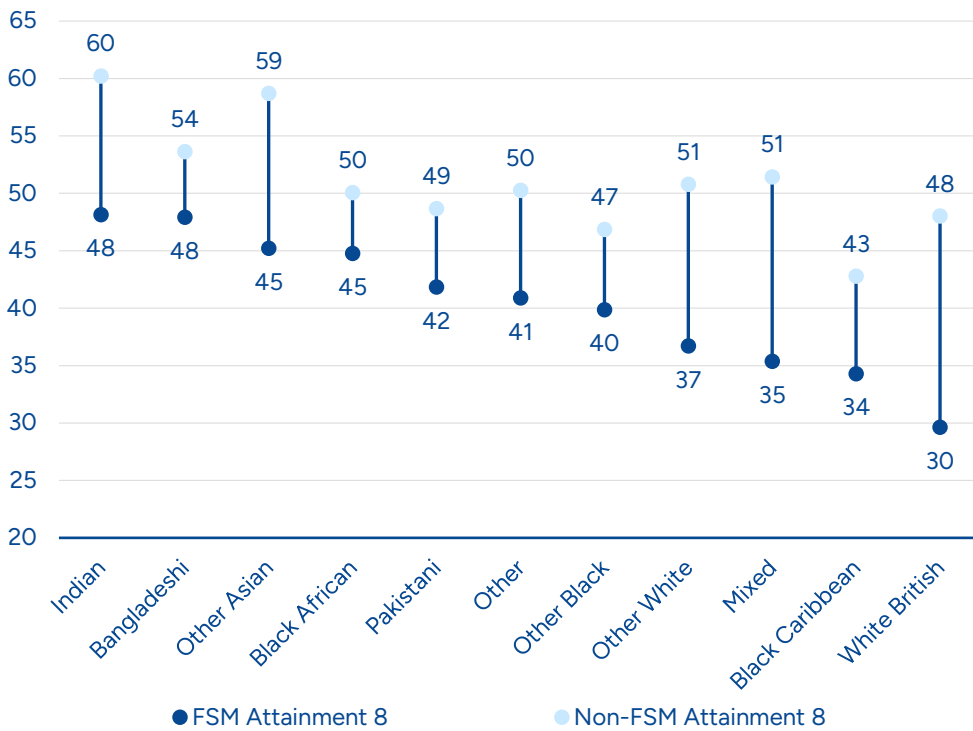
⁴⁹ Ross et al., *Examining the London Advantage in Attainment: Evidence from LSYPE*.

students. Here, and in the subsequent sections, we are particularly interested in how divergent this picture is when looking at disadvantaged pupils.

Attainment of FSM eligible pupils specifically shows similar patterns with some differences. Indian pupils again attain highest but in this case White British pupils attain lowest (see Figure 2). There is more than a 18 point difference between the average attainment of FSM Indian pupils and White British FSM pupils.

Nationally the FSM gap – that is the difference between average attainment for FSM and non-FSM eligible pupils – is 15 points. Comparing by ethnic groups however, this ranges from just 5 for Black African pupils to 18 for White British pupils (see Figure 2). This shows how socio-economic disadvantage affects different ethnic groups to different extents. In general, ethnic groups with higher rates of FSM have smaller attainment gaps, with the White British gap signalling high levels of inequality within the group. Nonetheless, Indian pupils have the lowest levels of FSM, but also a small attainment gap. The reasons for these patterns encompass a complex range of factors including parental background and forms of out of school support, discussed in more detail in the penultimate section below.

Figure 2: Attainment 8 scores by ethnicity and Free School Meal eligibility



Regional attainment by ethnicity

Ethnic groups are spread unevenly across England. Just 5% of White British pupils across the country live in London, compared to 59% of Black Caribbean pupils, 51% of Bangladeshi, and 43% of Black African pupils. Overall, White British pupils make up 65% of the Year 11 population, ranging from 87% in the North East, 83% in the South West, to just 23% in London (see Appendix Table 1A). The demographics of London are unique compared to other regions, which is important to bear in mind.

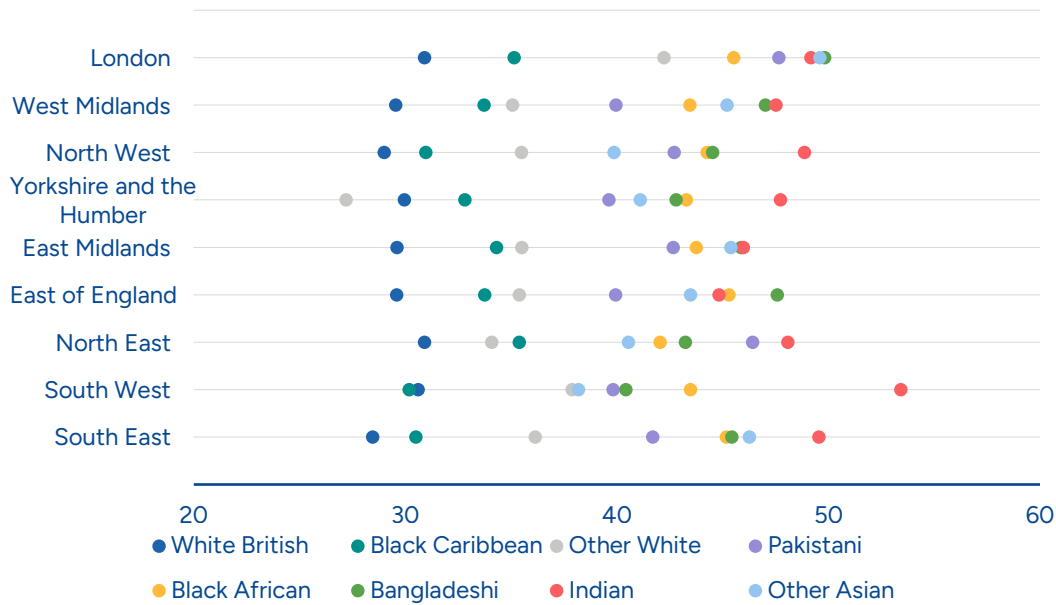
In general, for all pupils, Indian pupils are the highest performing in all regions bar one (East Midlands) and Black Caribbean pupils are the lowest performing by some distance.⁵⁰ The gap between the highest and lowest attaining ethnic groups varies by region from 17 points in the West Midlands to 24 points in the North West and South East.

Looking at the attainment of FSM pupils in particular there is a fairly consistent spread of FSM attainment across different regions (see Figure 3). White British FSM pupils have the lowest attainment both nationally and across all regions, except the South West where the small number of Black Caribbean FSM pupils perform slightly lower and in Yorkshire and the Humber where the lowest performing are Other White pupils. Attainment for White British FSM pupils is lowest in the South East and North West. Black Caribbean FSM pupils are also consistently among the lowest attaining groups across all regions.

“Nationally White British FSM pupils have the lowest attainment and are also the lowest performing across all regions, except the South West.”

⁵⁰ Due to low numbers, no data is available for Black Caribbean pupils in the South West or North East and for Indian pupils in the North East.

Figure 3: Attainment 8 scores by ethnicity and region, FSM pupils



Note: Selected ethnicities only.

As we saw earlier, Indian FSM pupils are the highest performing nationally and also across all regions except for London and the East of England (where Bangladeshi pupils do slightly better). While one would expect some regional variation, the relative consistency of these patterns shows the strong impact of ethnicity on attainment regardless of location.

It is informative to compare these Attainment 8 rankings with Progress 8,⁵¹ which reflects pupil progress in secondary school compared to the average pupil. Here we find White British FSM pupils also have exceptionally low scores, nationally at -0.9, compared to Black Caribbean and mixed ethnicity pupils, the next lowest, at -0.5. This is consistent across every region, and reflects existing evidence of FSM White British pupils falling further behind through the school years.⁵²

The gap between White British and Black Caribbean FSM pupils is notably larger than in terms of absolute attainment, indicating that FSM eligible Black

⁵¹ Whereas Attainment 8 is a measure of absolute attainment in terms of grades, Progress 8 is an indication of how well a school or a pupil improves in attainment between the end of primary school and the end of Key Stage 4. There are some striking contrasts between achievement measured on Attainment 8 versus Progress 8. The national average progress 8 score is -0.08. However, that is 0.09 for non-FSM and -0.66 for FSM; 0.04 for girls and -0.19 for boys and ranging from -0.24 for Black Caribbean pupils to 0.65 for Indian pupils.

⁵² *The Education Policy Institute (EPI) Annual Report 2024.*

Caribbean pupils achieve relatively strongly between the end of primary school and GCSEs.

Insights like these are essential starting points for addressing educational disadvantage. The drivers of consistently low attainment and progress scores such as those of White British FSM pupils are likely to be different to those of groups, like Black Caribbean FSM pupils, who, as we have seen, experience greater intersection of ethnic and socio-economic disadvantage but also show a greater propensity for progression. The former may be to a large degree a matter of alienation, disengagement and low educational aspirations whereas the latter might point to the effects of teacher labelling or systemic discrimination.

“The drivers of consistently low attainment and progress scores such as those of White British FSM pupils are likely to be different to those of groups.”

The gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils varies considerably across ethnicities and regions, pointing to the strength of the influence of ethnicity for some groups regardless of socio-economic disadvantage.

For White British pupils the FSM gap is among the largest in each region (ranging from 17 in the West Midlands to 23 points in London) as well as nationally (18 points). This means that White British FSM pupils attain 38% lower nationally than their non-FSM peers, with the biggest gap in London. For Black African pupils the FSM gap is among the smallest nationally (5 points) and across regions – just 10% lower nationally and across regions ranging from 9% to 17%.

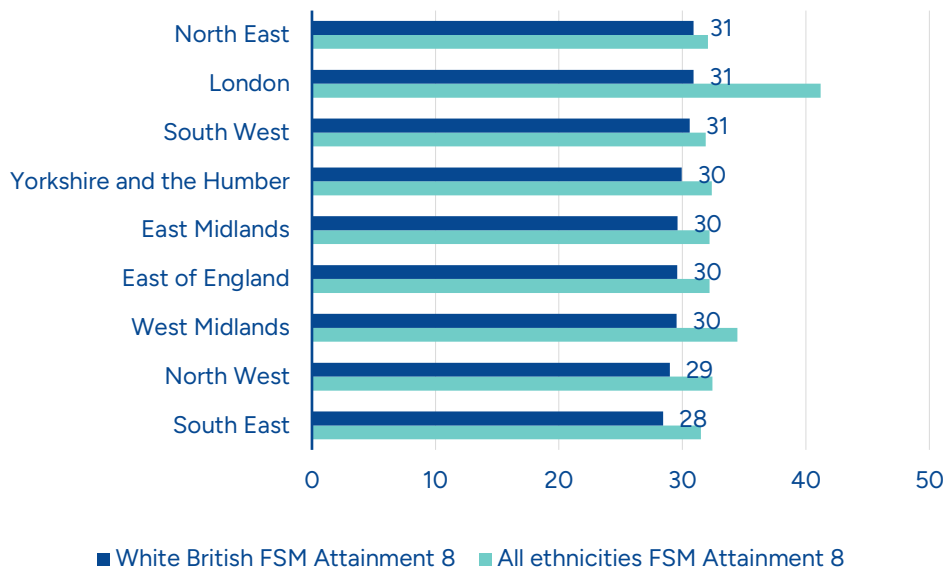
‘London effect’ largely driven by ethnicity

In general, we know that there is a London effect on attainment, where FSM-eligible pupils’ attainment in the capital pulls ahead of the national average, with less variation across other regions (see Figure 4). Pupils in London had 7 points higher attainment on average than the next highest attaining region. It has been suggested that the London effect disproportionately benefits ethnic minority pupils rather than White British pupils.⁵⁴ However, our findings suggest that rather than ethnic minorities benefitting more, the London effect is to a very high degree driven by overall ethnic minority attainment. If we look at only White FSM outcomes, we see there is very little difference in attainment in London compared to other regions. In fact, average attainment is highest in the North East at 31 points, at a similar level to London and the South West.

“The London effect is to a very high degree driven by overall ethnic minority attainment.”

⁵⁴ Heidi Safia Mirza and Ross Warwick, *Race and Ethnicity*, 2022; Laura Van der Erve et al., *Intergenerational Mobility in the UK*, IFS Deaton Review (Institute for Fiscal Studies and Nuffield Foundation, 2023), <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-03/Intergenerational-mobility-in-the-UK.pdf>.

Figure 4: Attainment for White British FSM pupils and all FSM pupils by region



We do see some London effect for White British pupils not eligible for FSM however, where those in London on average score five points higher than the next highest attaining region (South East), suggesting that White British FSM students are particularly immune to the London effect. It may also be a story of greater levels of inequality in London. In general disadvantage gaps tend to be lowest in London, but this data suggests that the ethnic mix is masking underlying gaps. In fact the disadvantage gap amongst White British pupils is higher in London than anywhere else in the country.

Impact of gender

In general, girls have higher attainment than boys. This is widely true across ethnicity, region and FSM, although there are some outliers, and there are also some notable regional differences in the size of the gender gap.

Girls eligible for FSM nationally have an Attainment 8 score of 36.6 and boys 31.6, compared to 51.8 and 47.2 respectively for non-FSM pupils. On Progress 8 FSM girls average -0.5 nationally and boys -0.7 compared to 0.2 and 0.0 for non-FSM pupils. Disadvantage gaps within both genders are roughly equivalent, particularly in terms of progress, though on Attainment 8 non-FSM boys attain 33% higher than FSM, while non-FSM girls attain 29% higher. However, there is a larger gender attainment gap among FSM pupils (girls achieve 14% higher) than non-FSM (girls achieve 9% higher).

Looking regionally, both FSM boys' and FSM girls' attainment is highest in London. In the capital, Attainment 8 scores for FSM girls average at 44 and for

boys at 39. With the exception of the West Midlands (37), FSM girls consistently have scores of 34 to 35 across all other regions. For FSM boys in all other regions, scores are consistently between 29 and 32, with most around 30. Gender gaps between FSM pupils are consistent across all regions.

The attainment gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils varies across regions, with the highest gap in the South East where non-FSM boys perform 40% better than FSM boys and for girls this is 35% better. The lowest FSM gaps are in London where non-FSM boys perform 25% better than FSM boys, and 21% for girls. Excluding London, the lowest gap is found in the West Midlands (boys 30%, girls 26%).

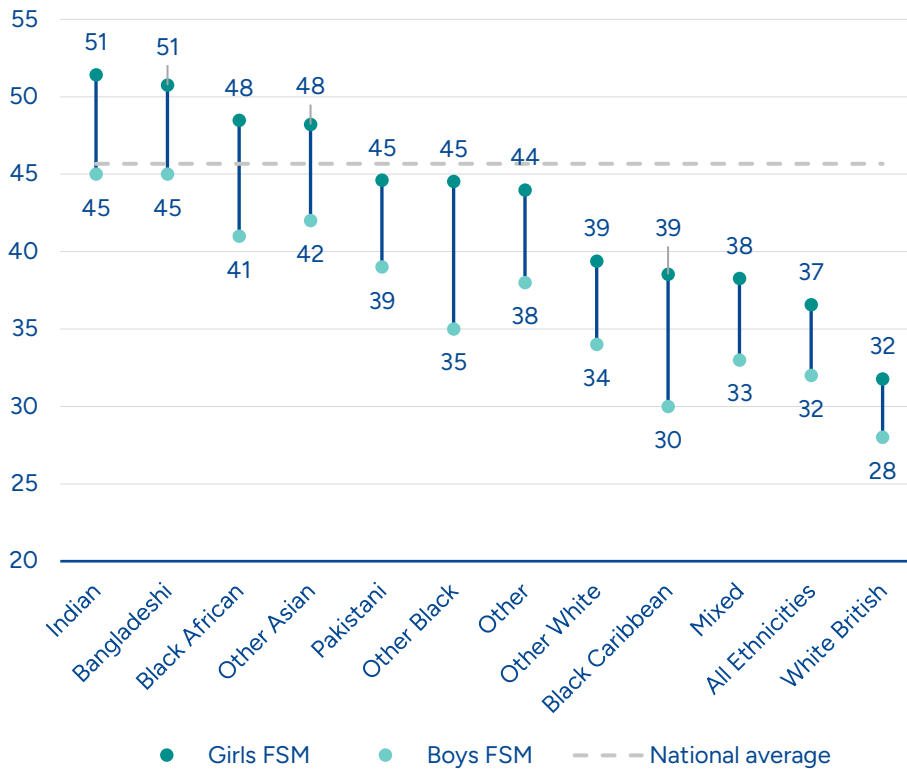
These figures suggest there is considerable regional consistency in gendered FSM attainment gaps. It is perhaps notable that the highest FSM gaps for both genders are in the South East, one of the most affluent parts of the country, but as the Opportunity Index demonstrated, one of the most unequal. Smaller gaps in the West Midlands might similarly be driven by high ethnic minority achievement. This is the region with the second highest proportion of ethnic minorities outside London and the highest proportion of Indians and Bangladeshis.

“The highest FSM gaps for both genders are in the South East, one of the most affluent parts of the country.”

Intersection between ethnicity and gender nationally

White British FSM girls and boys are the lowest attaining groups nationally (girls 32, boys 28). Indian and Bangladeshi FSM boys and girls are the highest attaining groups nationally (girls 51, boys 45 for both – see Figure 5). Bangladeshi (51), Indian (51) and Other Asian (48) FSM girls are actually performing higher than the national average for all girls (48).

Figure 5: National FSM boys' and girls' attainment by ethnicity

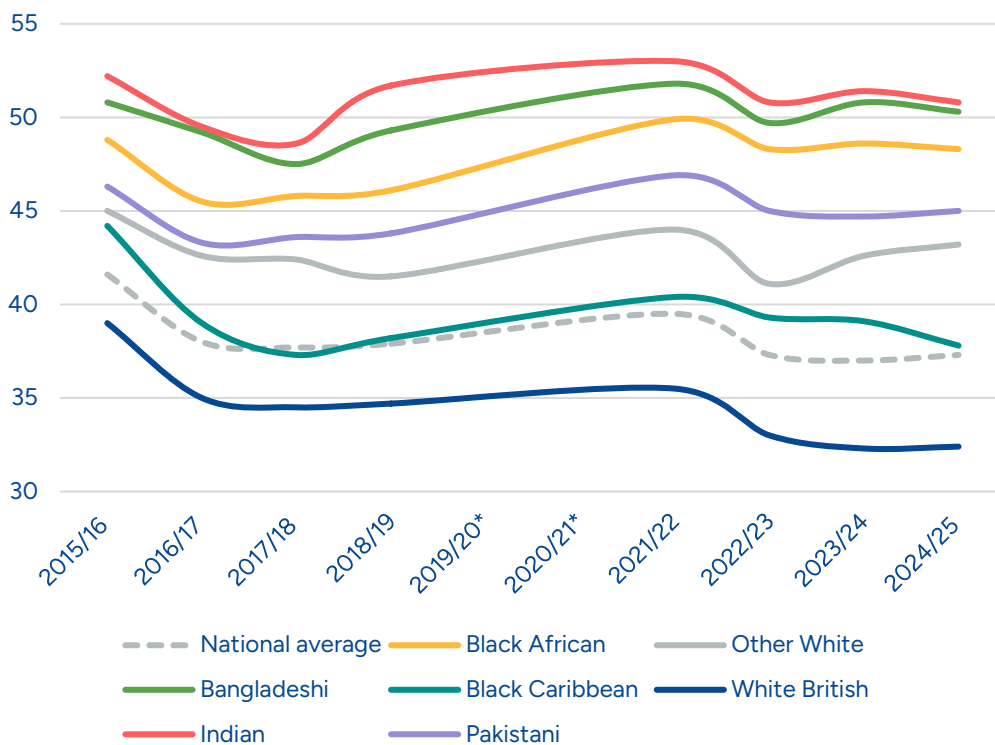


As for FSM-eligible boys, White British (28) and Black Caribbean (30) have the lowest Attainment 8 score, below the national boys FSM average (32). FSM boys from all other ethnic groups have higher than average scores, the highest being Bangladeshi boys (45), slightly above Indian boys.

As Figure 5 shows, White British FSM girls are further behind other ethnic groups than boys are. While they are both similarly far from the top attaining ethnic group, boys are 8% behind the second lowest group, while girls are 17% behind.

White British FSM girls' attainment is also getting worse over time relative to other groups (see Figure 6). The gap to FSM eligible Indian girls (the highest performing group) has increased by around 40% since 2016. The gap to the average female FSM student has almost doubled.

Figure 6: FSM girls Attainment 8 scores by ethnicity, 2016-2025



Source: Department for Education.⁵⁵ *Teacher assessed grades in 2019/20 and 2020/21 not included.

Intersection between ethnicity and gender regionally

Similar to the national situation, White British FSM girls are the lowest performers with very limited variation (all between 31 and 33) across all regions except for Yorkshire and the Humber. There was slightly more variation among top performing Indian FSM girls, whose scores averaged between 56 in the South West and 48 in the East Midlands. As they are a smaller group you might expect more regional variation.

It is also striking that White British FSM girls are by some distance the worst performing FSM ethnic group across all regions also on Progress 8 (see Figure

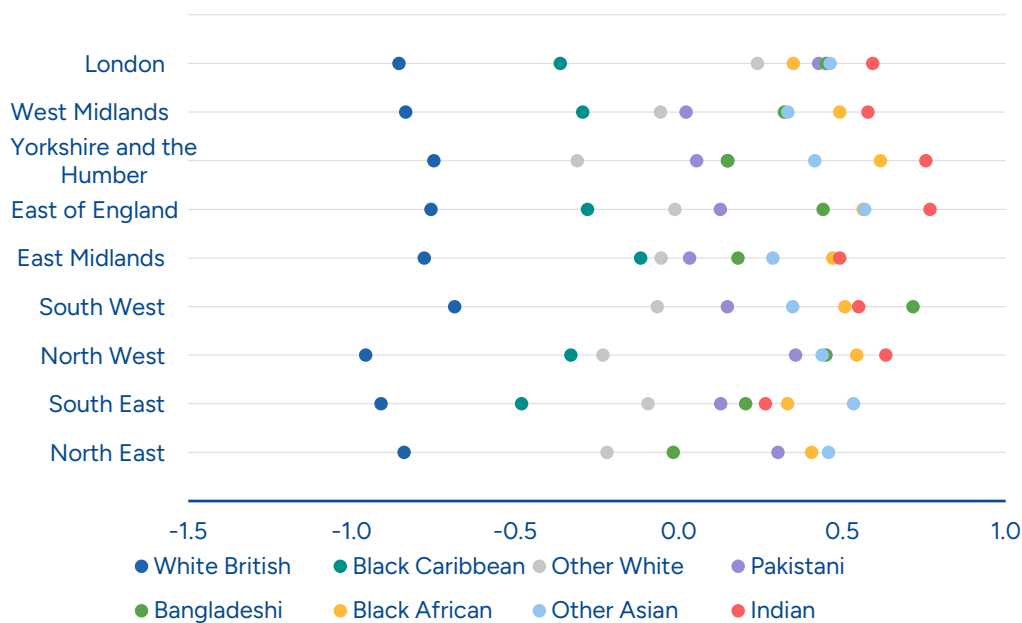
“White British FSM girls are by some distance the worst performing FSM ethnic group across all regions on Progress 8.”

⁵⁵ ‘Revised GCSE and Equivalent Results in England: 2016 to 2017’, GOV.UK, 11 March 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/revised-gcse-and-equivalent-results-in-england-2016-to-2017>; ‘Revised GCSE and Equivalent Results in England: 2015 to 2016’, GOV.UK, 14 July 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/revised-gcse-and-equivalent-results-in-england-2015-to-2016>; ‘All State-Funded Pupil Characteristics and Geography Data’ from ‘Key Stage 4 Performance’, Permanent Data Table’, accessed 4 June 2026, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/3f802384-4d1e-4b5d-bc3a-08deb7efc055>; ‘Key Stage 4 and Multi-Academy Trust Performance 2018 (Revised)’, GOV.UK, 10 September 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-stage-4-and-multi-academy-trust-performance-2018-revised>.

7). This shows that White British FSM girls consistently show the least progress between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 compared to all other ethnicities and across all regions, falling almost one full grade per subject behind the average classmate.

With much recent attention to white working-class boys, this is an important finding to register. While White British FSM girls do indeed outperform their male counterparts, this shouldn't hide the issues they face compared to other ethnicities.

Figure 7: FSM girls Progress 8 scores by region and ethnicity



Note: Selected ethnicities

A slightly more complex picture emerges for boys. While White British FSM boys are amongst the lowest achieving nationally and regionally, in some regions there are even lower outcomes for Black Caribbean (North West and East Midlands) and White Other (Yorkshire and the Humber) FSM boys.

There is relatively little regional variation in Attainment 8 for White British FSM boys and girls, again showing a lack of a London effect. However, there are some gender differences across regions and ethnicities as well as contrasts within ethnic groups by gender that can be explored through our [interactive data resource](#). These could reflect differences in the local context ranging from job opportunities, the strengths of particular schools or the influence of local social and cultural factors, as well as the size of and mix between ethnic groups.

Earnings

This section uses data from the Longitudinal Education Outcomes dataset, linking educational data for all pupils in state schools in England to earnings and benefits records in adulthood from HMRC and DWP. Earnings are measured at age 28 for cohorts of those who took their GCSEs between 2002 and 2007.⁵⁶ One limitation of the data is that it doesn't take into account hours worked, and so the figures comprise total earned income.

Nationally, pupils who were FSM eligible at age 16 go on to earn on average 25% (£5.9K) less a year than their non-FSM peers at age 28. However, as with school attainment, this varies substantially by ethnicity, gender and geography. Understanding the variation in labour market earnings constitutes the next step in building up pictures of quite different opportunity and social mobility trajectories across groups and regions.

Regional earnings gaps

While absolute gaps differ across the country, in proportional terms the gaps are relatively consistent, with two outliers at the top and bottom in London and the South East. The largest gaps were amongst FSM pupils who earned 29% (£7.2K) less in the South East, 28% (£5.9K) less in Yorkshire and the Humber, and 27% less (£6.8K) in the East of England (see Figure 8). The smallest gap was in London where, unlike the other higher-income southern regions in England, we found the lowest proportional FSM earnings gap of approximately 22% (£5.8K).

“The largest gaps were amongst FSM pupils, who earned 29% less in the South East, 28% less in Yorkshire and the Humber, and 27% less in the East of England. The smallest gap was in London.”

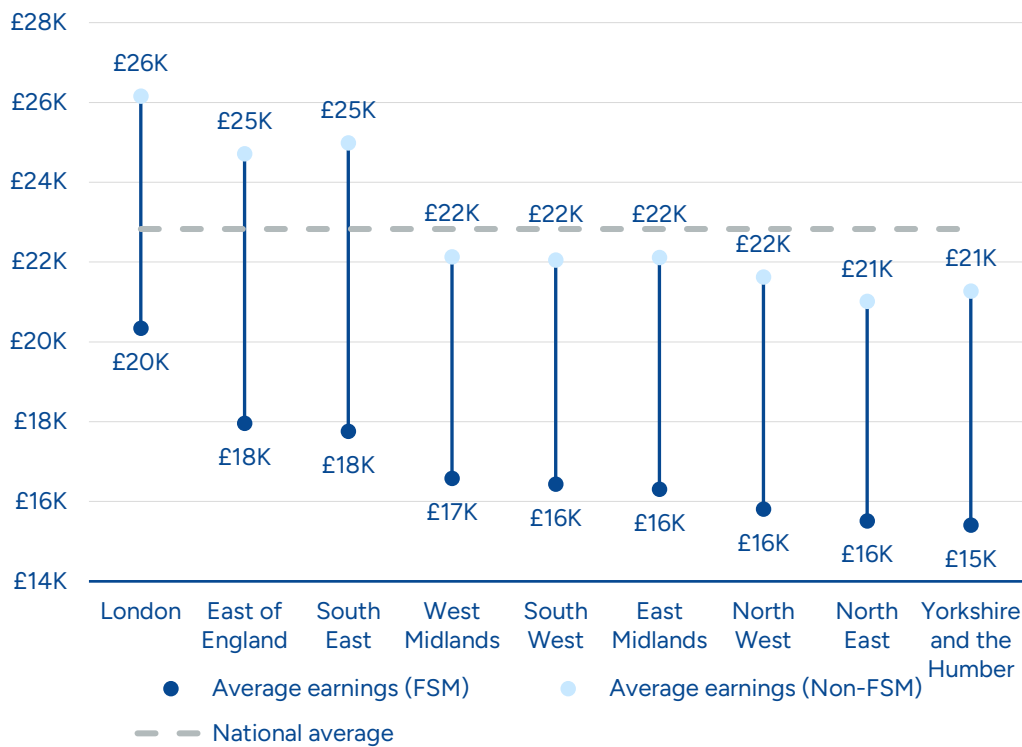
There are several factors that could contribute to this, including the fact that educational gaps in general are less wide in London. In addition to this, while the national minimum wage stands at £12.71 per hour for those 21 and over,⁵⁷ employers in London are incentivised to implement a voluntary London living wage of £14.80 an hour⁵⁹ to reflect the high cost of living in the region, which could have an impact for those on low wages.

⁵⁶ The earnings data comes from tax and benefits records and is an average of all earnings above 0, including that of both part-time and full-time workers. Non-earners are not counted.

⁵⁷ 'National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage Rates', GOV.UK, <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>.

⁵⁹ 'For the Real Cost of Living | Living Wage Foundation', accessed 15 June 2026, <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/>.

Figure 8: Average earnings at 28 and earnings gaps by region



Earnings by ethnicity

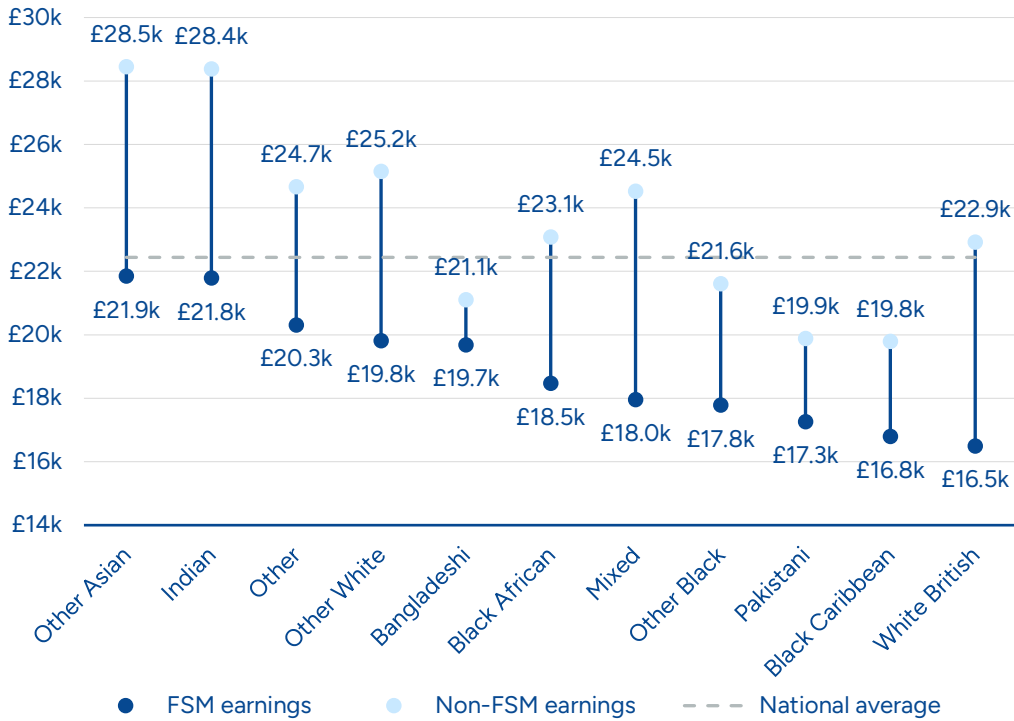
While regional variation in earnings is similar to that for attainment, variation by ethnicity in terms of earnings is substantially less. The gap between the earnings of the highest and lowest ethnic group is around half that seen for attainment/GCSE scores.

Nationally, the highest earning formerly FSM pupils at age 28 were other Asians (including Chinese), closely followed by Indians with earnings of £21.9K and £21.8K respectively. Unlike GCSE scores, even the highest earning FSM groups still earn below the national average (£22.4K). The lowest earning FSM pupils by ethnicity were White British at £16.5K and Black Caribbean at £16.8K. This contrasts with non-FSM earnings where White British pupils rank in the middle. Black Caribbean and Pakistani groups are the lowest earning non-FSM pupils at £19.8K and £19.9K respectively (see Figure 9).

White British FSM pupils earn 28% (£6.4K) less than their non-FSM peers at age 28, the highest gap in earnings within ethnic groups. By contrast, at 15% (£3K), the FSM gap was half of that for Black Caribbean FSM pupils, whose non-FSM peers had the lowest average earnings. This, and similarly low gaps among Pakistani and Bangladeshis, suggests that for White British young people, socio-economic background is playing bigger role in earnings than their

ethnicity, but for other groups their ethnicity can be a disadvantage regardless of their socio-economic background.

Figure 9: FSM/non-FSM earnings by ethnicity

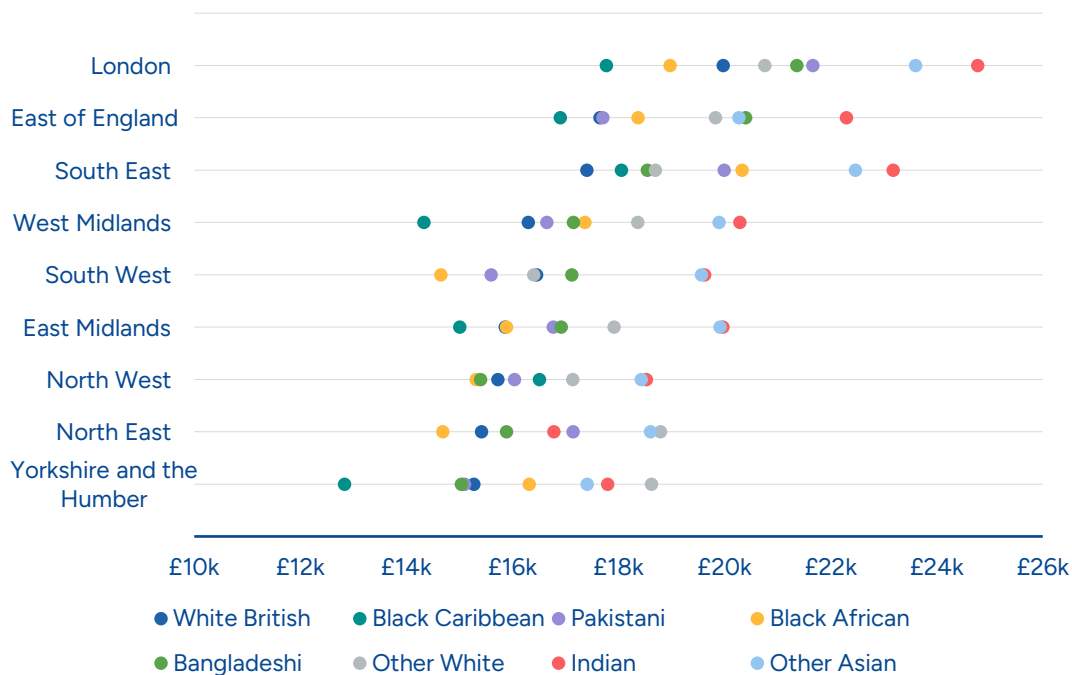


Regional earnings by ethnicity

The highest FSM earners at 28 are mainly in London for all ethnicities apart from all categories of Black (see Figure 10) and ‘other’. The South East and East of England are generally the next highest earning regions for FSM pupils across ethnicities. However, for all Black ethnicities London is only the second highest earning region with the South East (Black African and Black Caribbean) and the East Midlands (Other Black) the highest. Figure 10 also shows that, unlike with attainment, there are substantial regional disparities within all ethnic groups.

While White British FSM are the lowest earning group nationally, in contrast with GCSE scores, this is not consistent across regions. In some areas, particularly the South West, the North West and London, they are around the middle of the pack. Only in the South East are they actually the lowest earning group. This suggests that their low earnings overall are to an extent driven by their disproportionate location in lower earning areas of the country. In most regions, Black Caribbeans have the lowest earnings.

Figure 10: FSM Earnings by region and ethnicity



Note: Selected ethnicities

These variations in earnings highlight the need to delve into the local detail of disadvantage. This means that there are different questions to be asked for different contexts and groups. In Yorkshire, for example, for Black Caribbean young people the question is why FSM pupils are doing so badly both compared to other ethnicities, but also non-FSM Black Caribbean peers. For Bangladeshi and Pakistani young people, the question is more about why non-FSM pupils are earning less than almost all other ethnicities in all other regions across the country.

Income mobility by ethnicity

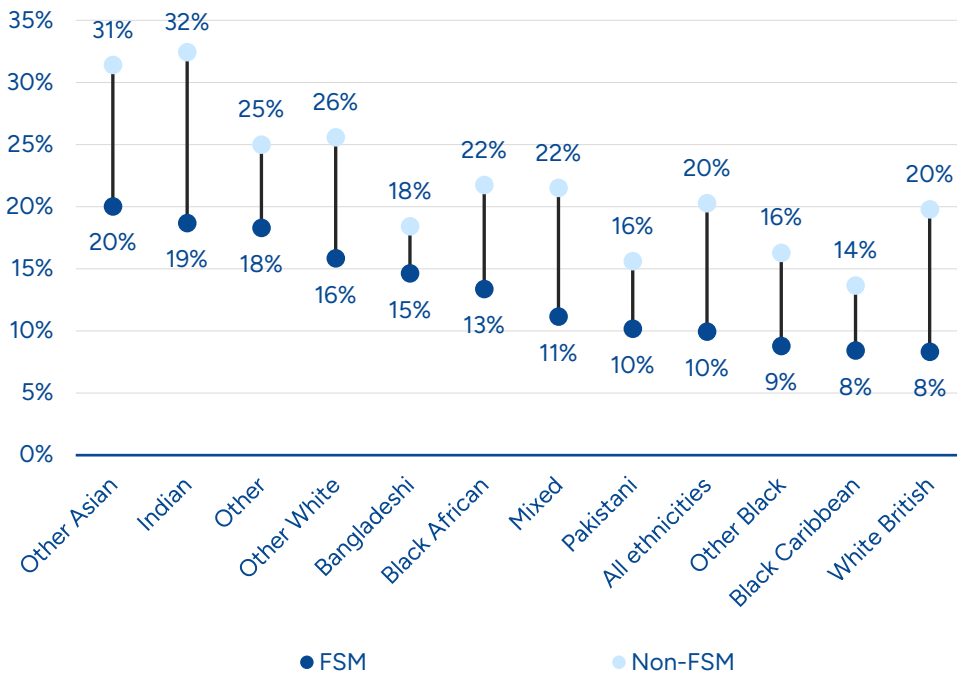
Turning to social mobility specifically, looking at who enters the top 20% of earners at age 28, just 8% of the White British FSM group are income mobile, compared to 20% of other Asian and 19% of Indian FSM pupils. Other Asian, Indian, and Other ethnicity are all at least twice as likely to be socially mobile as White British (Figure 11).

FSM eligible Black Caribbean pupils are similarly unlikely to be top earners as White British at 8%. Reflecting the same pattern with earnings, the biggest gap is within the White British group, with 20% of non-FSM 28-year-olds becoming a top earner, which is closer to the middle of the pack. The groups most likely

to become top earners are Indian and Other Asian young people not eligible for FSM, at 32% and 31% respectively.

While this reflects the highest earners, similar patterns are seen if you look just at those earning above the median wage (i.e. the top 50%), with FSM eligible White British lowest at 31%, compared to FSM Other Asian and Indian, both at 48%.

Figure 11: Percentage entering the top 20% of earners at age 28 by ethnicity and FSM status



Impact of gender

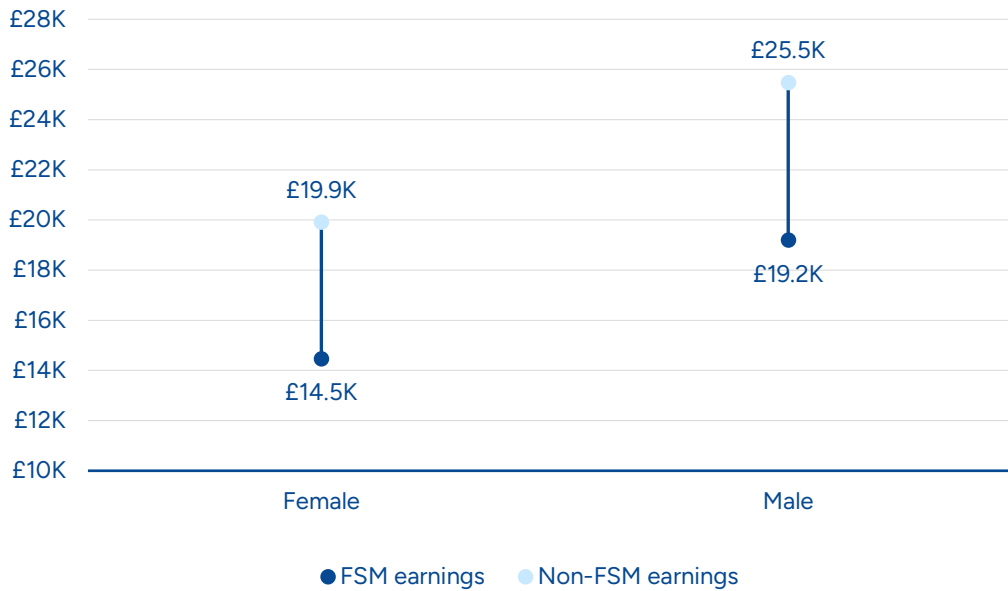
As is well established in the UK and internationally, the female advantage in education flips to a male advantage in the labour market. At age 23 the gender pay gap is 14%, at 26, this is 19%, and 28 it is 22%, with the gap in pound terms more than doubling from £2.4k to £5.4k. One key limitation of the LEO dataset, particularly when it comes to gender comparisons, is that it doesn't account for hours worked, so these figures refer to income over a year rather than hourly wages.

When looking at the combination with socio-economic background, women who received FSM earned 27% less (£5.4K), and men earned 25% (£6.3K) less at age 28 than their non-FSM peers (see Figure 12).

Furthermore, gender gaps are also larger among those previously eligible for FSM. FSM women (£14.5K) earned 25% less than FSM men (£19.2K), compared to a 22% gap for those not previously eligible for FSM.

“Gender gaps are larger among those previously eligible for Free School Meals.”

Figure 12: Earnings by gender and previous eligibility for FSM



Regional differences by gender

FSM-eligible women earn less than FSM-eligible men in all regions. However, there are some notable regional differences. In particular, in London FSM women went on to earn the highest average women’s FSM income, at £18.5K, 23% less than their non-FSM peers and 16% less than FSM men in the capital. For FSM women there is a clear London effect. This seems to be much less driven by ethnicity than the London effect for attainment (see below). The next highest average earnings for FSM women is in the East of England at £14.8K, 31% less than their non-FSM peers and some 28% less than FSM men in the region. The lowest earnings for FSM women was the North East at £12.3K. For men it was £17.6K in Yorkshire and the Humber. The range of regional earnings is much narrower for FSM men than women, with the difference between the highest and lowest regions £6.2K for women and £4.4K for men. The biggest gender gaps among those from FSM backgrounds are in the East Midlands (31%) and the North East (33%), double that of London.

“Although FSM women outperform men in attainment at school, they routinely earn considerably less than even their male peers, and for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the gaps are bigger.”

Here we see an important gender dimension to disadvantage and earnings. Although FSM women outperform men in attainment at school, they routinely earn considerably less than even their male peers, and for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the gaps are bigger.

Intersection between ethnicity and gender

In our earlier findings, we see that the inequalities in earnings between FSM and non-FSM pupils vary by region, ethnicity, and gender. Looking at these factors together is important because they provide more context on what is driving disparities in social mobility. Regional differences in earnings may be due to differences in job opportunities, access to higher education as well as the wider economic context.

Nationally, FSM men of every ethnic group earn more on average than FSM women, although the size of that gap varies by ethnicity. Among FSM men, Indian and other Asian FSM men earn the most at age 28, while Black Caribbean and Pakistani FSM men earn the least. For FSM women, other Asian and Indian women are also amongst the top earners. White British women, in contrast to White British FSM men, are the lowest earners, at £13.3K, almost £2K less than the next lowest earning group (Other Black FSM women). This shows that the low earnings of the White British FSM group overall are driven more by women's low earnings than men. Ethnic gaps in earnings for women are double those of men. Formerly FSM White British men earn 17% less than formerly FSM Indian men. But FSM White British women earn 35% less than their Indian peers.

The particular challenge faced by white working-class women is also illustrated by the fact that the largest proportional FSM gap is 33% (£6.4K) for White British women.

Regional intersection between ethnicity and gender

At the regional level, average earnings and earnings gaps can vary considerably, for a variety of different reasons.⁶¹ Overall, White British FSM men earn more than Pakistani and Black Caribbean men, and in many regions earn at or above the regional average for those formerly eligible for FSM. In Yorkshire, the South West, West Midlands and London they are in the top half of ethnic groups. In contrast, White British FSM women earn the lowest overall, and in almost every region are the lowest or second lowest earners, alongside Other Black and Black Caribbean women. This suggests that regional inequalities have a particular impact on formerly FSM boys in the White British group.

Earnings gaps by disadvantage vary widely across gender, ethnicity and region, from £11.5K for Indian women in the North East, 47% less than their non-FSM

⁶¹ In some cases this is likely due to low numbers and the disproportionate influence of outliers (e.g. a few very high earning individuals in a relatively small ethnic community). For this reason, caution is required about overinterpreting such results.

peers, to even a negative gap, in the same region, where Bangladeshi FSM women are outearning their non-FSM peers by £1K. Similarly, the earnings gap between FSM and non-FSM men varies widely across region and ethnicity, from 53% (£15K) for Black Caribbean men in Yorkshire and the Humber to a negative gap of 9% (£18K) for Black (other) men in the East Midlands. Some of these stark contrasts may be due to small numbers and influential outliers – indeed these groups have relatively small numbers. However, this highlights the need to understand the diversity of intersections at the local level. The [interactive data dashboard](#) released alongside this report allows exploration of these local patterns.

Earnings compared to attainment

As the previous section has indicated, high average attainment does not always translate to high earnings, indicating inequalities in labour market returns to education. In this section, we compare average attainment relative to average earnings to understand how that link varies by FSM status, ethnicity and gender, and whether there are regional variations in these patterns.

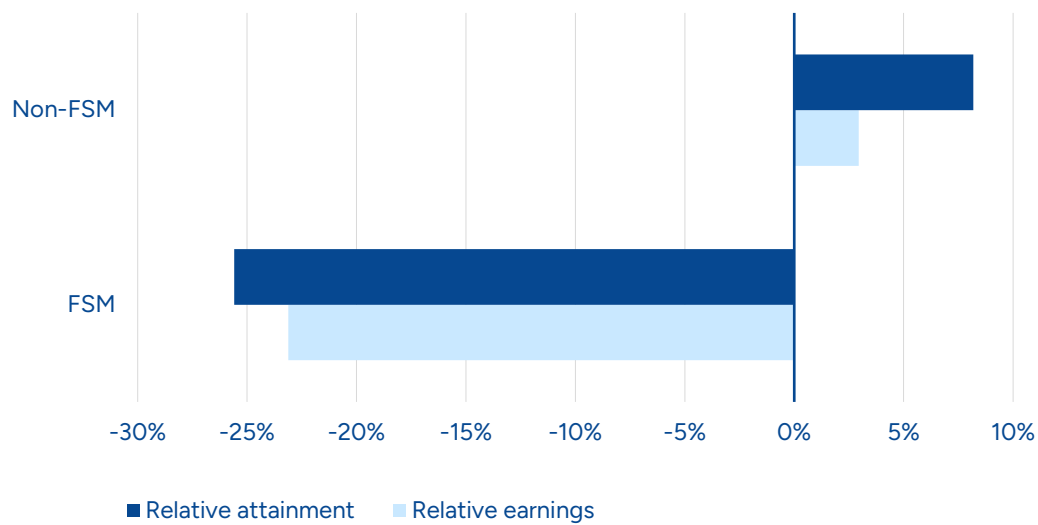
To do this we standardised measures of attainment and earnings by comparing them to the overall average for all pupils. It is important to note that this does not reflect returns to education per se, rather the earnings position relative to attainment position. This offers an indication of whether a particular group is earning more or less relative to what might be expected given their attainment.

Attainment to earnings by FSM

Overall, we found that FSM eligible pupils had a higher earnings position relative to their attainment compared to their non-FSM eligible peers (see Figure 13). It shows that FSM pupils attain 26% less at GCSE than the average student but earn 23% less at age 28. Other research suggests that non-FSM pupils have higher returns to attainment,⁶² however our results suggest that FSM pupils have slightly higher earnings relative to their attainment, although both attainment and earnings fall far below the national average.

⁶² Louis Lodge et al., *GCSE Attainment and Lifetime Earnings* (Department for Education, 2021), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60c36f0cd3bf7f4bd11a2326/GCSE_Attainment_and_Lifetime_Earnings_PDF3A.pdf.

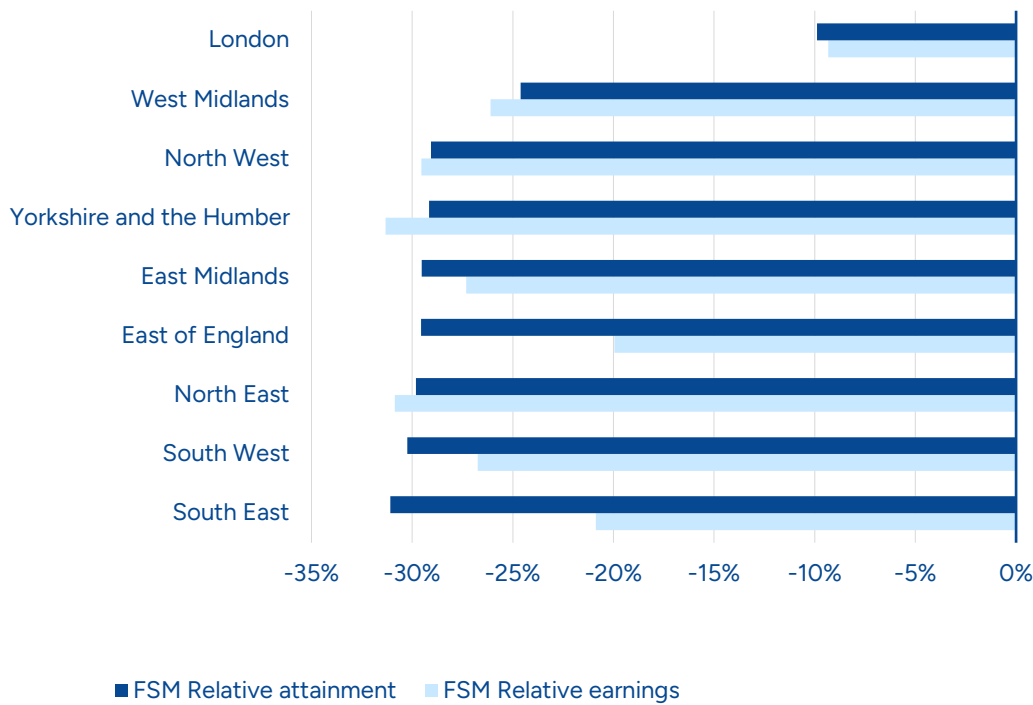
Figure 13: Earnings and attainment relative to the average, by FSM status



Looking regionally, FSM pupils have earnings and attainment consistently between 20% and 30% below the average across regions, with London a notable exception on both. Notably however, the East of England and South East, two of the wealthier regions, FSM pupils are relatively worse off in terms of attainment than they are in terms of earnings (Figure 14). In the South East they have 31% lower attainment than the national average, the biggest gap, but earnings 21% below, one of the smallest.

This suggests that while attainment is the main driver of inequality in the South East and East of England, in much of the North employment or earning opportunities are equally if not an even larger part of the problem.

Figure 14: FSM earnings and attainment relative to the average, by region



Attainment to earnings by ethnicity

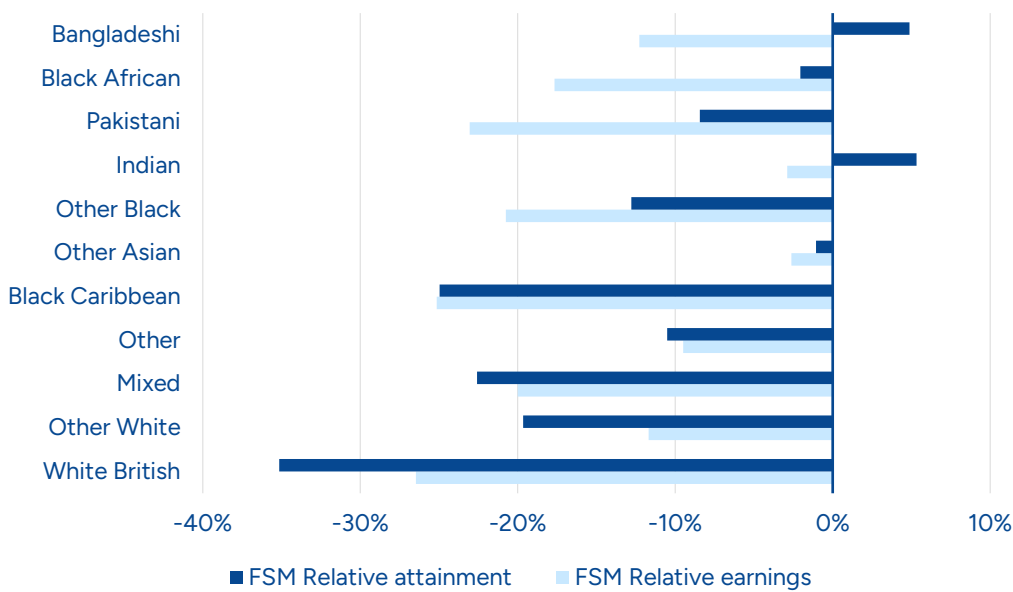
The biggest discrepancies between earnings and attainment are related to ethnicity. Lower returns to education are documented for many ethnic minority groups.⁶⁴ Our analysis found that among FSM pupils, White British and White Other pupils stand out for having notably higher earnings relative to attainment. Though this may partially reflect their exceptionally low attainment position.

While every other ethnic group has higher relative attainment compared to White British FSM pupils, they have lower earnings positions relative to the average. This mismatch is greatest for Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani students, who have earnings which don't reflect their high relative attainment position (see Figure 15). Bangladeshis attain 5% higher than the average pupil yet earn 12% lower.

“While every other ethnic group has higher relative attainment compared to White British FSM pupils, they have lower earnings positions relative to their attainment.”

⁶⁴ Van der Erve et al., *Intergenerational Mobility in the UK*; Shaw et al., *Ethnicity, Gender and Social Mobility*.

Figure 15: FSM earnings and attainment relative to average, by ethnicity



This national pattern also differs regionally. While White British FSM pupils have higher relative earnings to attainment across all regions, the disparity, while very large in London, the South East and East of England, narrows to almost nothing in the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber. In each region, as well as nationally, we also see that Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black African FSM pupils have lower earnings compared to attainment.

Impact of gender

Gender is another area where there are significant discrepancies. Women’s higher attainment doesn’t translate to earnings. FSM women attain 20% below the average but earn 35% below, while men attain 31% below but earn 13% below. This is true for women across ethnic groups, with larger gaps for Bangladeshi, Black African, Other Black and Pakistani groups, and smaller gaps for White Other, Other Asian and White British. Some of this is likely explained by differences in hours worked, as fewer women work full-time compared to men.

FSM eligible Bangladeshi women attain 11% higher than the average student but earn 20% less. But this effect is not restricted to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Non-FSM eligible Bangladeshi women attain 23% higher than the average student but earn 14% less.

White British FSM improvement in the labour market compared to school is mostly driven by men, who attain 40% below the average student, but earn just

15% less. White British women attain 30% below the average but earn 41% below. White British FSM men have the biggest positive improvement in earnings relative to attainment of any group.

London is the region where this is most prominent, where they attain 35% below the average student but this deficit is wiped out in the labour market and they earn almost exactly average. The South East shows a similar pattern.

While in general, women have higher relative attainment to earnings across ethnicities and regions, this is not true for White British FSM women in London where there is a marked London effect on earnings.⁶⁵

Summary

White British and White Other FSM pupils have a higher earnings position relative to their attainment position, with all non-White ethnicities except mixed and other having a lower earnings position relative to their attainment position. This may suggest structural disadvantage in the job market for non-White ethnic groups. The ethnic groups that tend to have the largest 'mismatches' include high attaining groups such as Black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils, suggesting the job market is often not recognising their abilities.

These discrepancies, however, complicate the question of how best to intervene to address these inequalities. As indicated by the Deaton Review, while raising educational attainment for all groups is a worthy goal, it may have knock on effects for inequality at the earnings level if inequalities in the transition to employment are not also addressed.⁶⁶ This is why improving the lot of the white working class should not be seen in isolation, as there are other groups that face different challenges.

While there are regional variations, the biggest discrepancies between school attainment and earnings are by gender and ethnicity. The attainment to earnings transition is very dependent on things such as university progression, subject choice and career choice. While occupational concentration among certain ethnic groups partially explains some of these inequalities, evidence

⁶⁵ All other groups were groups of under 100 women, including women of 'other' ethnicity in the East, South East and South West, Black Caribbean women in the South East as well as Other White women in Yorkshire and the Humber.

⁶⁶ Van der Erve et al., *Intergenerational Mobility in the UK*.

suggests this is not driven by difference in aspirations.⁶⁷ It can also be affected by discrimination in the workplace. A variety of experiments have found evidence of racial discrimination in the hiring process in the UK.⁶⁸ A report by researchers at UCL also found that job applicants from lower socio-economic backgrounds and ethnic minority groups disproportionately did not receive job offers, even compared to similar applicants.⁶⁹ Overall, there needs to be scrutiny on the relative lower earnings outcomes for women, and for Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani students.

⁶⁷ Parsons and Platt, 'Do Occupational Aspirations of Children Help to Explain Ethnic Differences in Labour Market Outcomes?'

⁶⁸ Anthony F. Heath and Valentina Di Stasio, 'Racial Discrimination in Britain, 1969–2017: A Meta-analysis of Field Experiments on Racial Discrimination in the British Labour Market', *The British Journal of Sociology* 70, no. 5 (2019): 1774–98, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12676>.

⁶⁹ C. Dilnot et al., *Inequalities in Access to Professional Occupations*, CEPEO Working Paper No. 25-01 (UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, 2025), <https://repec-cepeo.ucl.ac.uk/cepeow/cepeowp25-01.pdf>.

White Working Class Opportunity Index

Our findings so far have pointed to regional patterns of inequality of opportunity. However, these can obscure a lot of the detail on geographical inequalities. The regional level misses information on the types of areas that are doing better or worse – for example the rural or urban areas, cities, towns and coastal communities.

While we cannot drill down to the same level of detail by ethnicity and gender at the constituency level due to small numbers, we can look at our largest ethnic group, White British FSM pupils. This group is particularly relevant given their consistently low achievement across a range of measures, as well as recent political and policy attention. How much of the gaps we see are driven by local factors?

Our [Opportunity Index](#) revealed huge disparities in opportunity for FSM eligible young people across England. One of the strongest predictors of opportunity was the ethnic mix in the area. But what if you restrict to just the White working class? Here, we recreate the index looking only at outcomes for White British FSM-eligible pupils. It also allows us to look beyond Attainment 8 and earnings to understand how geographical inequalities manifest from GCSEs to A-levels, to higher education and employment. This analysis gives us a much fuller picture of white working-class (WWC) opportunity across the country.

White British FSM pupils are highly unevenly spread. They make up 49% of all pupils in Knowsley, 41% in Houghton and Sunderland South and 40% in Blackpool South. Almost all of the constituencies with the highest rates are in the north of England. In contrast, they make up just 1% of the entire cohort in Ealing Southall, Harrow East, Brent West and East Ham, some of the highest ranking constituencies in the original Index. Almost all of the lowest 25 are in London.

London effect is fractured

There is a marked reshuffling of rankings when looking at this group only compared to the overall Opportunity Index. Looking at the top-ranking constituencies, we see that London still dominates, though not to the same extent. See Table 1, and our accompanying map for more information. It should

be noted that among some top-ranked London constituencies, the numbers of White British FSM in their cohorts is very low.

Table 1: Top 20 and bottom 20 ranking constituencies

Top 20

Rank (*)	Constituency	Region	Rank	Constituency	Region
1 (↑ 2)	Brent West	London	11 (↑ 44)	Hertford and Stortford	East of England
2 (↑ 4)	Cities of London and Westminster	London	12 (↑ 50)	Hitchin	East of England
3 (↑ 17)	Kensington and Bayswater	London	13 (↑ 54)	Putney	London
4 (↑ 38)	Harpenden and Berkhamsted	East of England	14 (↑ 1)	Streatham and Croydon North	London
5 (↑ 19)	Chelsea and Fulham	London	15 (↑ 6)	Chipping Barnet	London
6 (↑ 75)	South Norfolk	East of England	16 (↑ 2)	Wimbledon	London
7 (↑ 33)	Chingford and Woodford Green	London	17 (↑ 65)	Honiton and Sidmouth	South West
8 (↑ 72)	South Devon	South West	18 (↑ 51)	Colne Valley	Yorkshire and The Humber
9 (↑ 28)	South West Hertfordshire	East of England	19 (↑ 99)	Fylde	North West
10 (↑ 58)	Bicester and Woodstock	South East	20 (↑ 70)	Skipton and Ripon	Yorkshire and The Humber

*Change in rank compared to original Opportunity Index

Bottom 20

Rank (*)	Constituency	Region	Rank	Constituency	Region
524 (↑ 16)	Sevenoaks	South East	534 (↓ 139)	Bolton West	North West
525 (↑ 13)	Bristol South	South West	535 (↑ 2)	Sheffield Heeley	Yorkshire and The Humber
526 (↓ 296)	Leeds Central and Headingley	Yorkshire and The Humber	536 (↓ 7)	Nottingham South	East Midlands
527 (↓ 422)	Leicester South	East Midlands	537 (↓ 458)	Peckham	London
528 (↓ 22)	Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough	Yorkshire and The Humber	538 (↓ 35)	Manchester Central	North West
529 (↓ 210)	Walsall and Bloxwich	West Midlands	539 (↓ 102)	Preston	North West
530 (↓ 22)	Bradford South	Yorkshire and The Humber	540 (↓ 367)	Clapham and Brixton Hill	London
531 (↑ 2)	Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend	North East	541 (↓ 122)	West Bromwich	West Midlands
532 (↓ 66)	Oxford East	South East	542 (↓ 63)	Nottingham East	East Midlands
533 (↑ 8)	Mid Leicestershire	East Midlands	543 (-)	Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West	North East

*Change in rank compared to original Opportunity Index

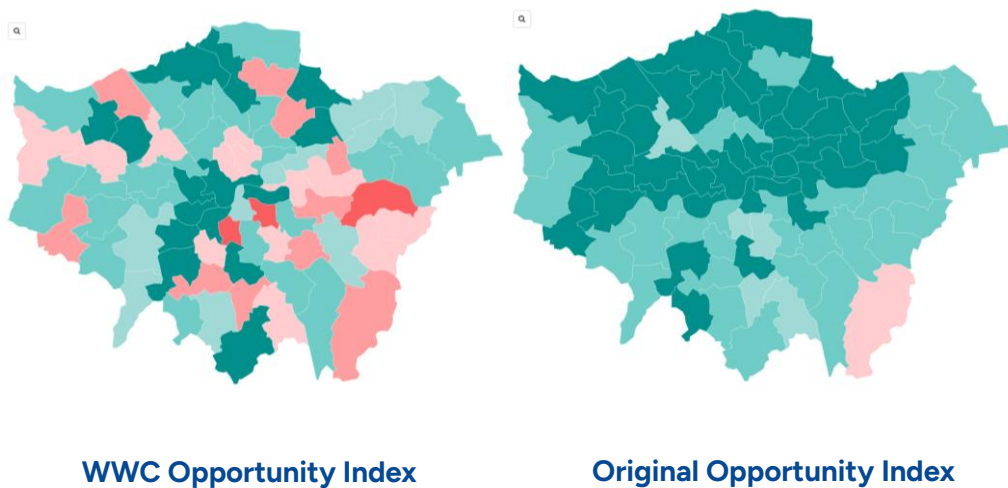
While in our overall Opportunity Index, every top 20 constituency was in London, and all bar eight of the top 50 were, now only nine of the top 20 constituencies are in London, with five in the East of England and the rest in the North West, South East, South West and Yorkshire and the Humber. As for the top 50 (see Table 2), London and the East of England clearly still dominate the top rankings again, but with some spread across other areas.

Table 2: Constituencies in top and bottom 50 by region

Region	Number of constituencies in Top 50	Number of constituencies in bottom 50	Number of constituencies	Change in average rank
London	16	3	75	↓ 132
East of England	10	1	61	↑ 43
South West	6	4	58	↑ 65
South East	4	7	91	↑ 11
West Midlands	4	5	57	↓ 24
Yorkshire and the Humber	6	9	54	↑ 17
North West	3	8	73	↑ 2
East Midlands	1	8	47	↑ 19
North East	0	5	27	↑ 70

In fact, we now see a fracture form in the London effect (see Figure 16). While in the overall Opportunity Index, no London constituencies featured in the bottom 20 or even the bottom 50, we now see that two feature in the bottom 20 for white working-class prospects. In fact, London constituencies Clapham and Brixton and Hill and Peckham dropped over 300 ranks each to feature in the bottom 20. When considering White British FSM outcomes, London contains not only some of the best, but also some of the worst places for opportunity. This is more in line with other regions, which feature more equally in the bottom ranking constituencies, with some regions overrepresented such as Yorkshire and the Humber, North East and East Midlands.

Figure 16: London constituencies - WWC ranking compared to overall



Overall, the London effect for opportunity is weakened, underlining that it is partly driven by higher levels of outcomes for ethnic minority students, and higher concentrations of ethnic minority students in London. There are also patterns within London, with a cluster of very high ranking areas such as Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea, and some very low ranking areas in the south east, including Peckham.

How much does the White Working Class Opportunity Index differ?

There is some overlap between the overall Opportunity Index and the White Working Class Opportunity Index, shown in Table 3. While 55% of the top-ranking constituencies in the WWC index are top ranking constituencies in the original Opportunity Index, a handful (9%) of top-ranking constituencies have fallen to the bottom quintile for white working-class opportunities. Despite these differences, the two indices are strongly correlated.

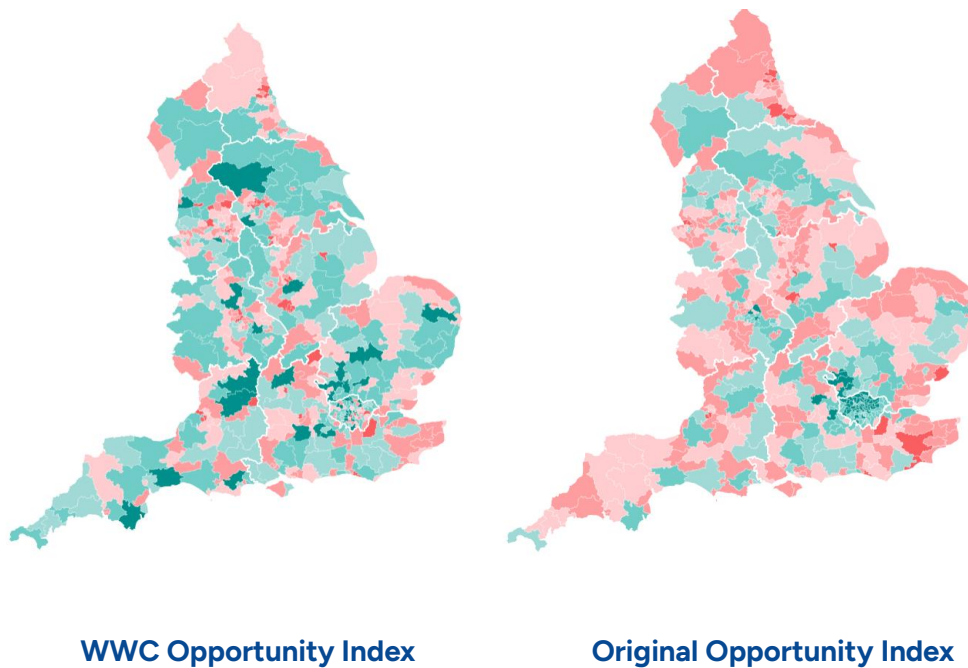
Table 3: WWC Opportunity Index ranking, by original Opportunity Index ranking

Original Opportunity Index rank (quintiles)	Average rank (WWC)	Change in rank	% Top quintile (WWC)	% Bottom quintile (WWC)
1 - Highest ranking	159	↓104	55%	9%
2	178	↓14	42%	8%
3	246	↑26	3%	8%
4	333	↑48	0%	17%
5 - Lowest ranking	446	↑43	0%	57%

This shows how overall averages are concealing low outcomes for White British FSM pupils. Areas in Birmingham, Leicester and London were high ranking overall, but in the bottom 50 for WWC Opportunity Index for instance. The constituencies with some of the biggest drop in opportunity ranking for White British FSM pupils included Birmingham Perry Barr, Peckham, Harrow East, Leicester East and Birmingham Ladywood, all characterised by higher rates of ethnic minority pupils. On the other hand, the constituencies with the greatest increases in opportunity ranking tended to have lower rates of ethnic minority pupils.

Visually comparing the two maps, we also see that the WWC Opportunity Index appears covered in more green areas than the overall Opportunity Index (see Figure 17). This is partly because there are more constituencies in the above average and high categories, but also because larger, less densely populated towns and villages tend to have higher ranking in the WWC index, while smaller, more densely populated city constituencies tended to have lower rankings (see Table 4).

Figure 17: Comparison of the Opportunity Index maps



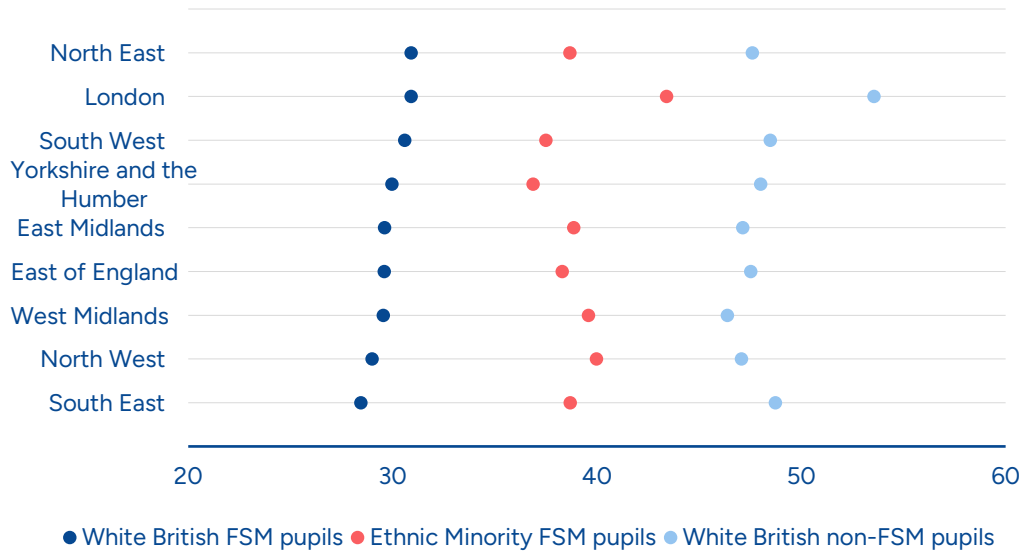
Large gaps persist

School attainment

Attainment 8

As covered above, White British FSM-eligible pupils score 30 points at GSCE: 4 points lower than the overall FSM average, and 18 points below their White British non-FSM peers. This did not vary significantly by region (see Figure 18), unlike in the overall Opportunity Index, again demonstrating that the London effect on attainment mostly comes down to ethnic diversity. In fact, London has the biggest disadvantage gap among White British pupils.

Figure 18: White British FSM Attainment 8 scores, by region



Interestingly, white FSM students in the North East in fact have the highest average Attainment 8 score (albeit only very small differences to London and the South West). This is important to note, considering Mission North East specifically targets white FSM students in the North East for low attainment.

14 of the top 20 constituencies for attainment are in London, led by Brent West with an average score of 47, just above the national average score for all pupils. The bottom 20 constituencies are more geographically spread, with six out of 20 in London and four in the South East. The lowest score is for a constituency also in London, where White British FSM pupils in Croydon West score on average 16 points at GCSE – a gap of 31 points compared to those in Brent West.

Notably, the constituency that was ranked first in our overall Opportunity Index, East Ham, was in the bottom 20 of constituencies for white FSM attainment. While white FSM-eligible pupils scored on average 21.5, ethnic minority FSM students scored on average 48.9, a gap of 27 points. In fact, if you look at the highest and lowest constituencies on the original index (East Ham and Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West), White British FSM students in Newcastle - the lowest ranked - actually have slightly higher scores than East Ham. However, it is important to note small numbers with these samples.

16-18 study

Destination after Key Stage 4

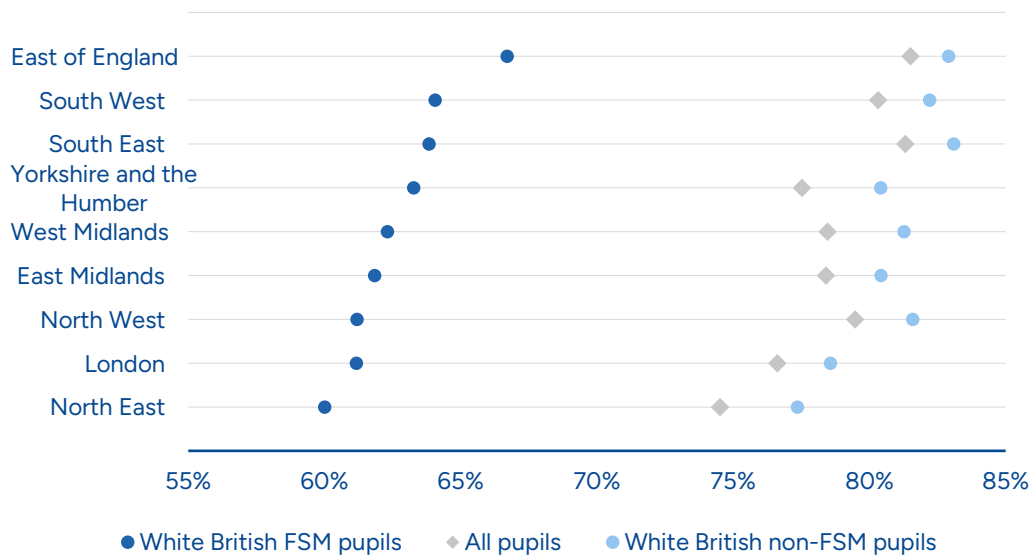
The percentage of pupils in sustained education, apprenticeship or employment after taking GCSEs is a salient issue given the rise of young

people who are NEET. Our findings reveal disparities in chances of being NEET for white working-class pupils across different areas of England.

Across the country, 79% of pupils were in sustained education, apprenticeship or employment following KS4, compared to 65% of FSM pupils.

There is some regional variation for this outcome, with 67% of white FSM pupils in a sustained destination post KS4 in the East of England compared to 60% in the North East, and 61% in London (see Figure 19).

Figure 19: Percentage of white FSM pupils in sustained employment, apprenticeship or education post KS4, by region



These regional averages conceal large differences at the constituency level. The top ranking area for the proportion of white FSM pupils in a sustained destination post KS4 was in Kenilworth and Southam (West Midlands) – 81%, just above the national average for all pupils. The top 20 constituencies for this outcome are spread geographically, with six in the East of England and five in the South East. Only one of the top 20 were in London, which shows lower levels of education and employment participation than most other regions.

The lowest ranking constituency is Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West at 35%, a huge 47 percentage points lower than the top performing constituency, showing how much opportunity can differ based on where you grow up. Six of the bottom 20 constituencies were in London, three in the North East and the rest spread across the country.

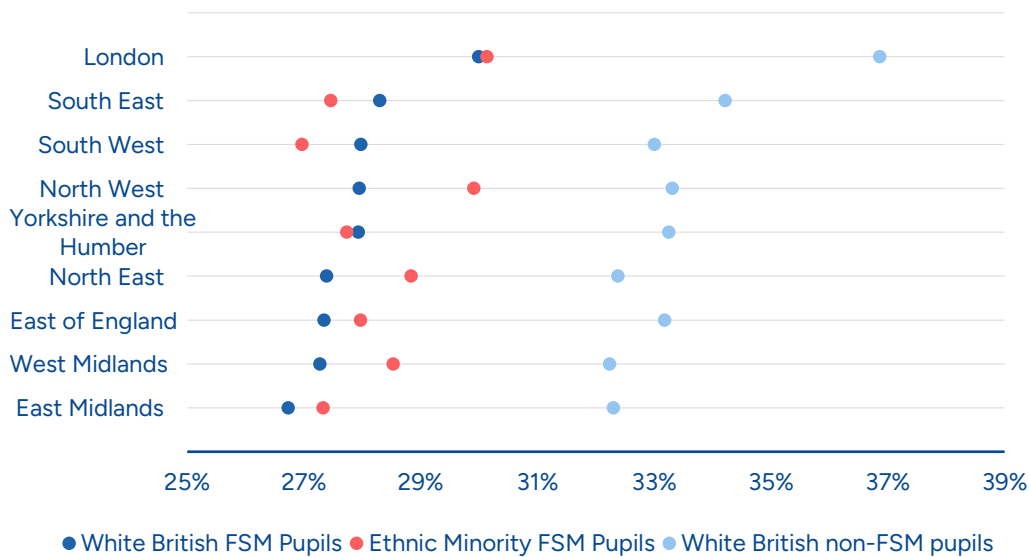
A Level Attainment

A Level average attainment is self-selecting to an extent, as it only includes those who go on to study A levels, so less variation is expected. There was also a lot of missing data for constituency-level analysis due to small numbers.⁷⁰

However, it is in A Level participation where the biggest gaps are seen. While overall 41% of pupils took at least one A level, this is 20% for FSM pupils, and in the region with the lowest level of participation, the North East, it is 13% for FSM pupils. In contrast, the figure for London is 34%. For White British pupils, it ranged from 31% in the North East to 48% in London.

Of those who entered A levels there is less variation by region or ethnicity. On average, white FSM pupils in London had the highest A Level point score (APS) average at 30 points, compared to 27 in the East Midlands, West Midlands, East of England and the North East (see Figure 20).

Figure 20: APS points white FSM pupils, by region



Post-18

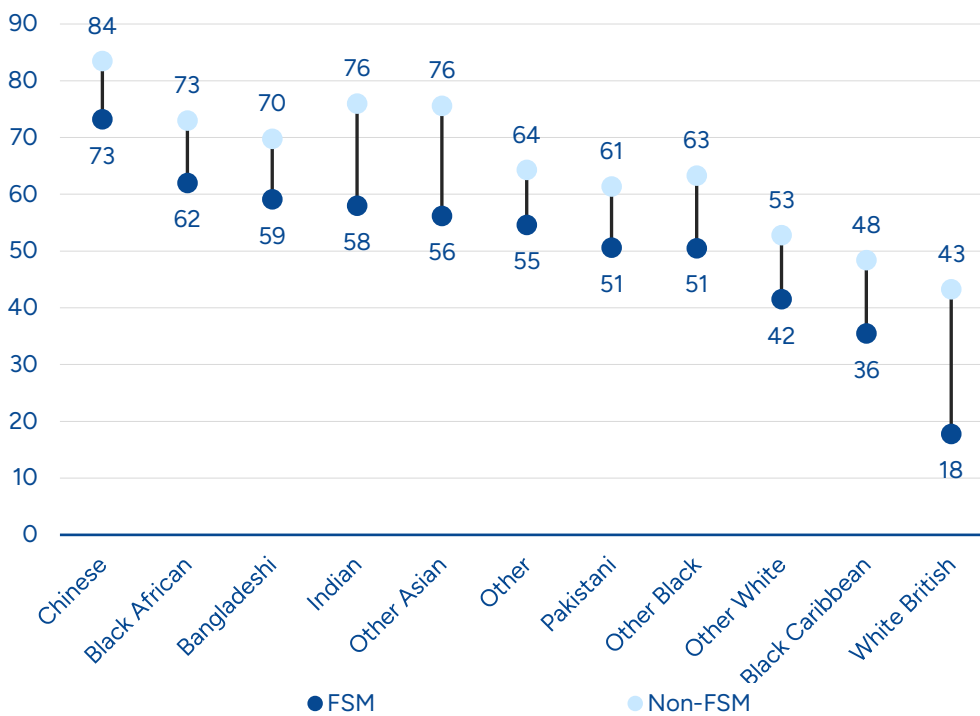
Higher education

Progression to higher education shows some of the largest ethnic and regional gaps. Just 18% of White British FSM pupils progress to university after school, compared to 62% of Black African, 59% of Indian and 58% of Indian FSM pupils (see Figure 21). Even the second lowest progression rate – Black Caribbean – has double the rate (18% compared to 36%). Again, while this is the case for

⁷⁰ We used mean imputation to deal with missingness when calculating the overall index.

both boys and girls, it is girls who, despite having higher rates than boys, are further behind other girls, with a 22 percentage point gap to Black Caribbean FSM girls.

Figure 21: Higher education progression by age 19, by ethnicity and FSM eligibility



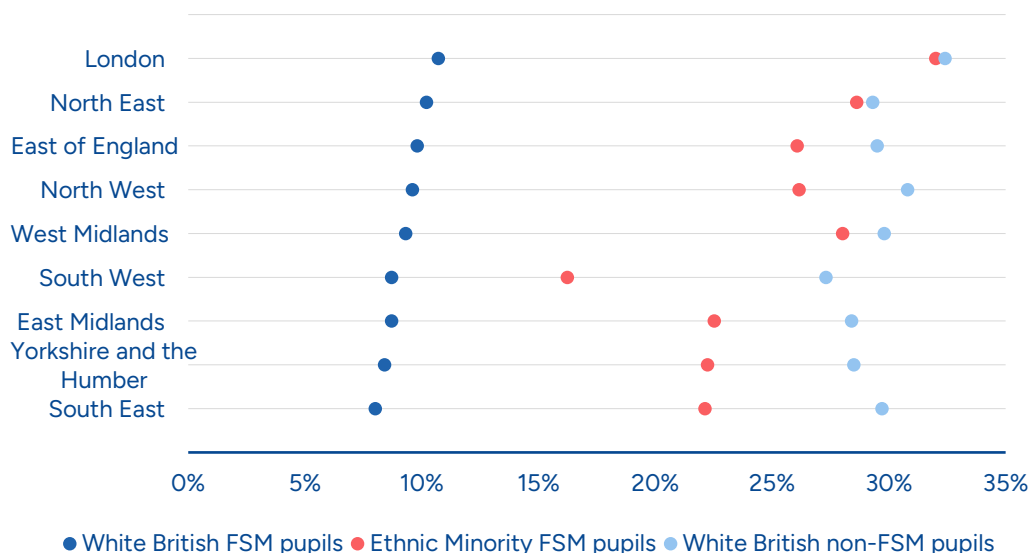
Source: [Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England](#), House of Commons Library

On average, 29% of pupils achieved an undergraduate degree by age 22. This is just 16% for FSM pupils, and 9% for white FSM pupils, less than a third of the national average.

11% of white FSM pupils in London achieve a degree by age 22 compared to 8% in the South East (see Figure 22). Compared to the overall Opportunity Index, as with other educational outcomes, we see that London no longer pulls far ahead, showing that there is not a particularly strong effect of living in London on higher education progression for White British FSM students. It has also been suggested that the South West is somewhat of a cold spot for higher

education for disadvantaged pupils,⁷¹ however our analysis suggests that it is in line with other regions for white FSM pupils. Along with the North East, it is one of the regions with the highest proportion of white pupils, so the overall figures are shaped by their ethnic make-up.

Figure 22: Percentage of White British FSM pupils who achieve an undergraduate degree age 22, by region



These regional averages hide significant local variation. 37% of white FSM pupils achieved an undergraduate degree by age 22 in Kensington and Bayswater (London), 15 times higher than those in Bristol North West (South West) at 2%.

Employment

Sustained employment

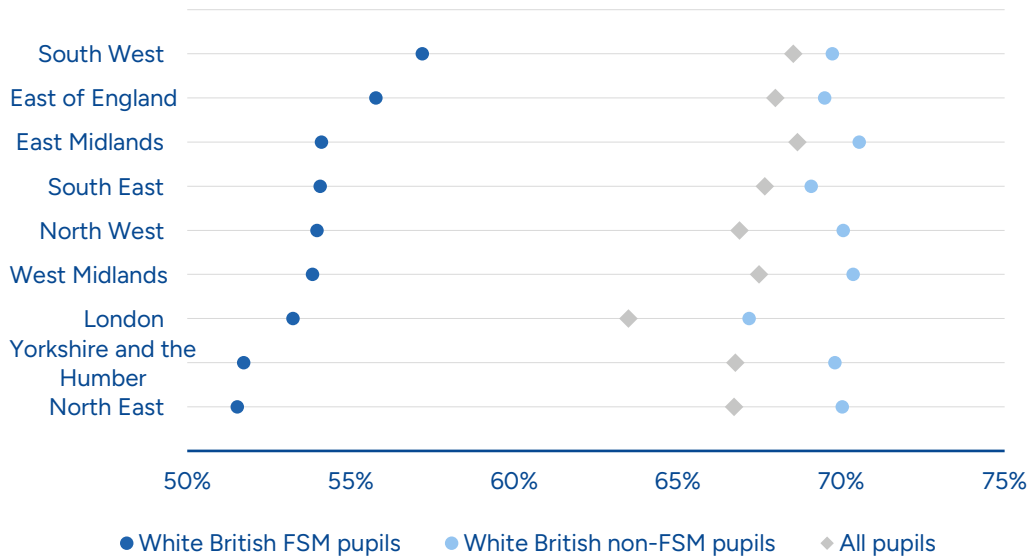
Nationally, 67% of pupils were in sustained employment age 28. This dropped to 55% for FSM-eligible pupils and 54% for white FSM-eligible pupils, showing less of a disparity for white working-class pupils nationwide on this measure.

There was some variation across regions (see Figure 23) for this outcome, with 52% of White British FSM-eligible pupils in sustained employment at age 28 in the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber compared to 57% in the South

⁷¹ Christopher James Playford et al., 'Coast and City, It Matters Where You Live: How Geography Shapes Progression to Higher Education in England', *Social Sciences* 12, no. 11 (2023): 610, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12110610>.

West. These are relatively comparable to the overall opportunity index, as employment doesn't tend to vary as strongly by ethnicity.

Figure 23: Sustained employment for white FSM pupils, by region

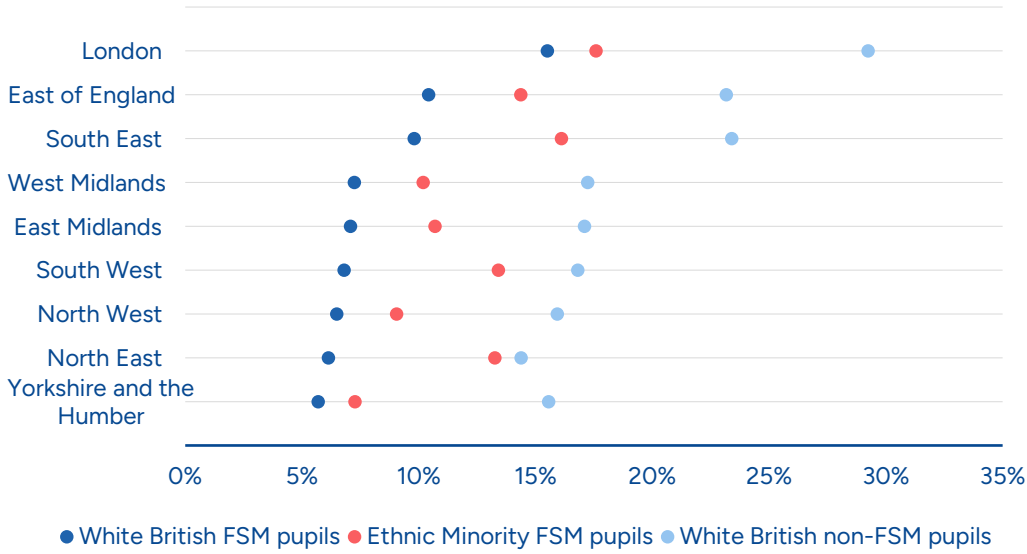


At the constituency level, there is wider variation. For example, 69% of White British FSM pupils in Bicester and Woodstock (South East) were in sustained employment compared to only 27% in Clapham and Brixton Hill (London), with the former being 2.5 times more likely to be in employment than the latter. Although this may be an outlier with exceptionally low numbers, as the next lowest is 38% in West Bromwich (West Midlands), it still represents a significant difference in opportunity.

Income mobility

Nationally, only 10% of FSM eligible pupils become a top 20% earner, while only 8% of White British FSM pupils do. There was a wide variation across regions, with 16% in London compared to just 6% in the North West, the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber (see Figure 24). The extent of these regional disparities is such that an FSM pupil in London is more likely to become a top earner than a non-FSM eligible pupil in the North East.

Figure 24: Top 20% earners for White British FSM, by region

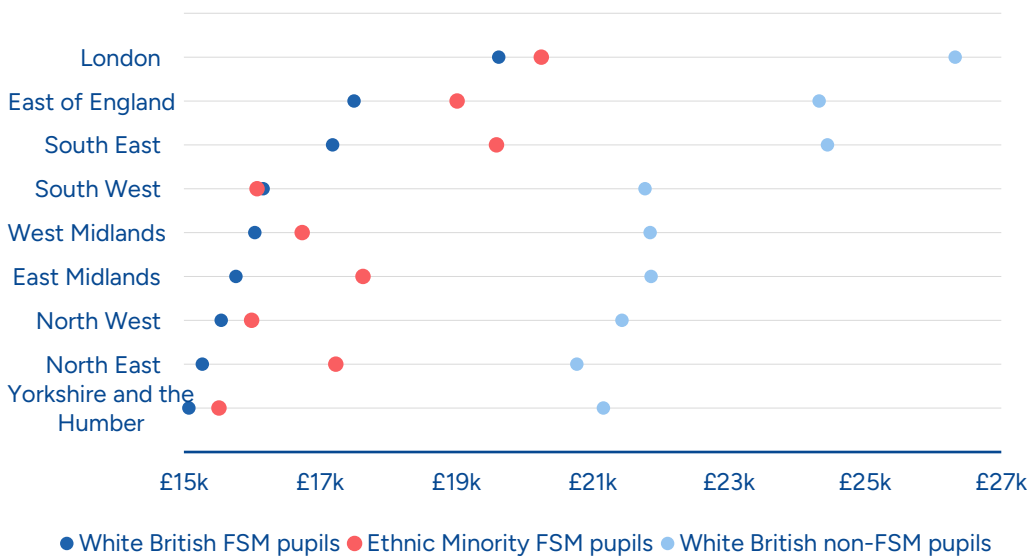


Income mobility isn't just about who those who go from the 'bottom to the top'. Even when looking at who goes on to earn above average, there are wide disparities for FSM eligible students. In London, 43% of White British FSM eligible pupils went on to become an above average earner. This drops to just 26% for pupils in Yorkshire and the Humber and the North East.

Mean earnings

The analysis above went into detail on mean earnings by FSM, gender and ethnicity by region. Here, we look at variation at the constituency level in mean earnings for White British FSM eligible pupils.

Figure 25: White British FSM pupils mean earnings, by region



At the constituency level the top area was South Devon (South West), where White British FSM pupils earned £23,970 on average. That is over 80% (£10,856) more than pupils in Sheffield Heeley (Yorkshire and the Humber) at just £13,114.

Nationally, average earnings age 28 are £22,176. This drops to £17,030 for FSM eligible pupils and further to £16,308 for White British FSM pupils.

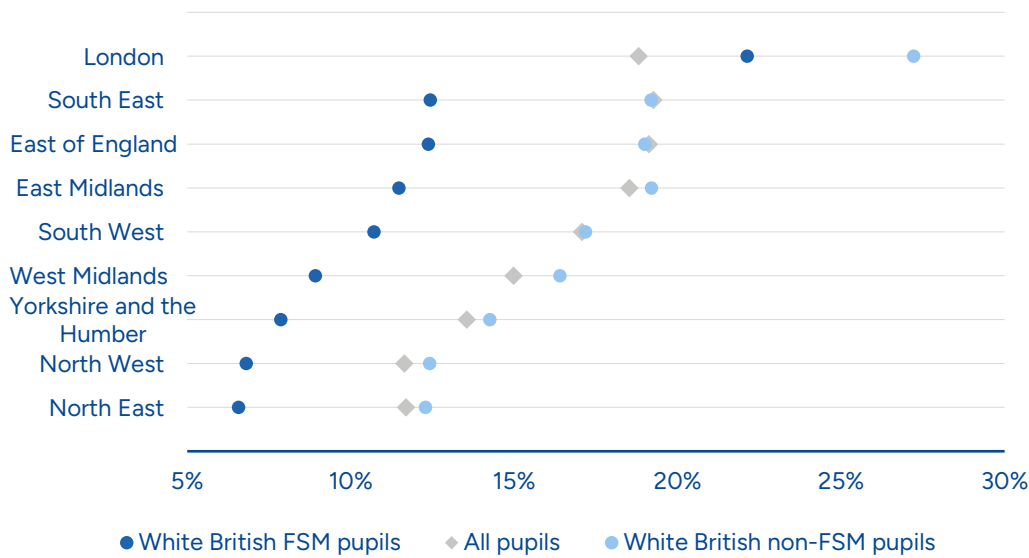
Geographic mobility

People often move region for opportunity – for education, or employment. However, national averages hides a lot of variation in who is geographically mobile and who isn't. While nationally, 16% of pupils changed region by age 28, only 10% of FSM pupils did, and the same proportion of White British FSM pupils.

22% of White British FSM pupils leave London by age 28, by far the most of any region. This compares to just 13% of overall FSM pupils in London, meaning that White British pupils are more likely to leave London than non-white FSM peers. Otherwise, geographic mobility levels of White British FSM pupils vary less from 12% in the South East and East of England compared to 7% in the North West and North East. This broadly mirrors patterns in the overall Opportunity Index.

While we do not have an FSM breakdown of ethnic minority pupils, we also found large regional and ethnic variation in geographic mobility. Overall, white and non-white pupils nationally have similar rates of geographic mobility (around 15%). However, while White British pupils were over twice as likely to move away from London compared to their non-white peers, in the North East, South East, East of England and South West ethnic minority pupils were much more likely to move region than their white peers.

Figure 26: White British FSM pupils who changed region by age 28, by region



This also varied substantially by constituency, with 41% of White British FSM pupils in Harrow East leaving London by age 28, compared to just 4% of White British FSM pupils in Liverpool Walton leaving the North West.⁷²

Differences by area characteristics

Next, we analysed certain area characteristics and how they correlated with our opportunity index ranking.

Geography

Already noted in the analysis above, we found that when focusing on White British FSM outcomes, London becomes a less strong driver of top ranked constituencies, with 21% of London constituencies in the top fifty for White British FSM pupils compared to 56% for overall FSM pupils.

Other cities outside London also saw big falls compared to the original index. Villages were more likely to be a top constituency and less likely to be a bottom constituency, with 13% in the top fifty here, compared to 4% in the overall index, and 2% in the bottom fifty compared to 15% in the overall index (see Table 4).

⁷² Missing >2% on constituencies.

Overall, London and rural areas with villages had the highest ranks, with non-London cities having the lowest ranked constituencies.

Table 4: White British FSM Opportunity Index ranking by town and city classification

Town and city group	Average rank (WWC) out of 543	Change in rank	% in top fifty	% in bottom fifty
Core City (London)	193	↓ 132	21%	4%
Core City (outside London)	399	↓ 77	5%	45%
Other City	381	↓ 54	0%	22%
Large Town	305	↑ 13	5%	6%
Medium Town	242	↑ 46	11%	4%
Small Town	270	↑ 46	6%	4%
Village or smaller	201	↑ 81	13%	2%

Additionally, the schools white paper announced a focus on Coastal communities. We have looked at rankings of constituencies with coastal

towns.⁷³ Four of the 89 constituencies classified as coastal were in the bottom fifty, but equally, four were in the top fifty too, suggesting that the classification of coastal communities needs to be considered carefully to best target the areas with the lowest opportunity. Hastings and Rye (#502) and Scarborough and Whitby (#385) are two constituencies identified in Mission Coastal as low opportunity areas, both with low rankings.⁷⁴ In general, coastal communities had higher proportions of White British pupils and White British FSM-eligible pupils than non-coastal communities.

Ethnic diversity

In our original Opportunity Index, constituencies with greater ethnic diversity tended to rank higher. While this was to some extent driven by London, there was still a weak correlation when excluding London. However, there was no such association when we looked just at White British FSM pupils.

In fact, the constituencies with the highest ethnic diversity are the most likely to be in both the top and bottom fifty (see Table 5). The top ones tended to be in London, whereas the bottom ones were spread across different regions. Note that ethnic diversity also tends to overlap with other characteristics such as type of area (urban/rural) and deprivation levels as explored below.

Of the top fifty constituencies that also have higher ethnic diversity, almost all are London constituencies, where White British FSM pupils also have good levels of opportunity. Of the bottom fifty with higher ethnic diversity, constituencies were spread more equally across the Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber.

⁷³ Ben Cooper, *Breaching the Sea Wall: Polling Labour's Support in Coastal Towns* (Fabian Society, 2022), <https://fabians.org.uk/publication/breaching-the-sea-wall>.

⁷⁴ 'New Missions to Transform Childhoods of Most Disadvantaged'.

Table 5: White British FSM Opportunity Index ranking, by ethnic diversity

Ethnic diversity (quintiles)	Average rank (WWC)	Change in rank	% in Top fifty	% in Bottom fifty
1 – Constituencies with the highest ethnic diversity	275	↓ 161	16%	17%
2	304	↓ 42	6%	15%
3	288	↑ 37	10%	8%
4	241	↑ 76	6%	3%
5 – Constituencies with the lowest ethnic diversity	253	↑ 92	8%	3%

Deprivation and child poverty

Higher levels of deprivation in the overall Opportunity Index were associated with lower levels of opportunity. This was so to an even greater extent for the WWC index. For example, looking at child poverty measured by the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), areas with the highest levels ranked on average 382, compared to areas with the lowest deprivation ranking at 159 on average (see Table 6). Rankings in the WWC Index were more strongly correlated with area deprivation than those in the overall Opportunity Index. Some of this is driven by the fact that areas in London with high levels of deprivation tended also to have higher opportunity scores.

Table 6: White British FSM Opportunity Index ranking by IDACI

Child poverty (quintiles)	Average rank (WWC)	Change in rank	% top fifty	% bottom fifty
1 – Constituencies with the highest child deprivation rates	382	↓ 76	3%	28%
2	332	↓ 24	2%	7%
3	271	↑ 19	8%	7%
4	216	↑ 37	8%	2%
5 – Constituencies with the lowest child deprivation rates	159	↑ 45	25%	1%

Overall, these findings suggest that white working-class pupils’ opportunity is more sensitive to deprivation. It’s been suggested that ethnic minority groups tend to be able to break the link between poverty and achievement more commonly, which these findings too back up.

What drives white working class gaps?

While there is much focus on the white working class as a group, this report highlights that there are other groups that face significant challenges, in particular Black Caribbean. But what are the origins of these patterns?

The data in this report has shown that geography plays some role, particularly in terms of labour market opportunities, with White British FSM pupils less concentrated in London, and more spread across England. In contrast, most

ethnic minority groups are more likely to be located in urban areas. However it goes much deeper than this, particularly in terms of school attainment.

While this report has focused on the age of 16 onwards, these dynamics are already visible when children start school. White FSM girls and boys are least likely to achieve a good level of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage; 12% and 17% respectively below FSM eligible Asian children. This is despite the fact that white non-FSM eligible pupils have the highest results. So both socio-economic and ethnic gaps emerge early, and grow wider, particularly in secondary school.

As mentioned above, one common hypothesis for these gaps is the 'immigrant advantage', whereby those who emigrate selects for those who are aspirational, driven and often optimistic, values which they pass on to their children, but which can fade as the generations go on. Another is the 'misallocation' issue, where their position in the social hierarchy in the country they reside doesn't reflect their background.⁷⁵ Looking at the COSMO Study of a recent cohort of 16-year-olds, there is evidence of both.⁷⁶

Ethnic minority groups with higher levels of first and second generation immigrants among school pupils (including Black African, Bangladeshi and Pakistani) tended to perform higher. FSM eligible Black Caribbean pupils had the lowest levels of recent immigration among ethnic minority groups, and have education experiences that are closer to poorer White British families.

This is reflected in parental attitudes and approaches to education even among those with similar levels of income. Low-income White British and Black Caribbean parents were least likely to say that how well a child does in education will affect how they do in life. They were also less likely to agree that if you work hard then you will usually succeed.

But the biggest differences were seen in terms of previous school experiences. White British parents of FSM pupils were over three times more likely to say they had played truant in school compared to Black African or Pakistani parents of FSM children, and twice as likely as Black Caribbean. They were half as likely to say they enjoyed school as Pakistani, Black African or Bangladeshi parents, and were also least likely to say that they had tried hard in school. In some cases there can be multiple generations of poverty and alienation from the

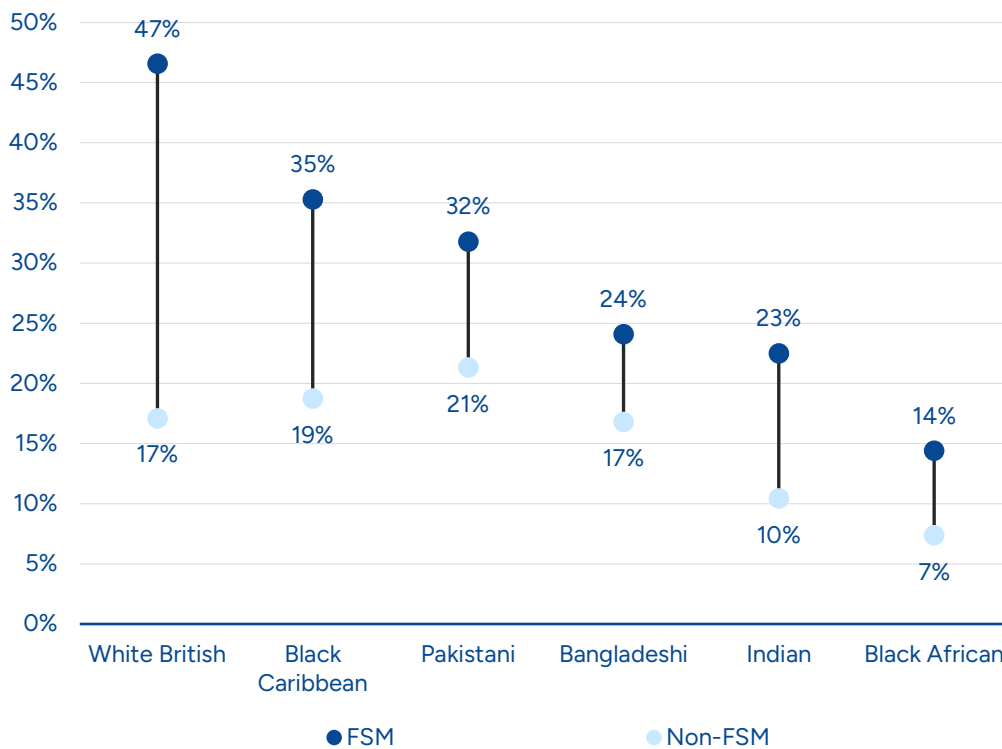
⁷⁵ Zuccotti and Platt, *Social Origins and Social Mobility*.

⁷⁶ 'After the Pandemic: A Generation-Defining Challenge', COSMO, accessed 29 May 2026, <https://cosmostudy.uk>.

education system. These experiences and attitudes shape their children's experiences of school.

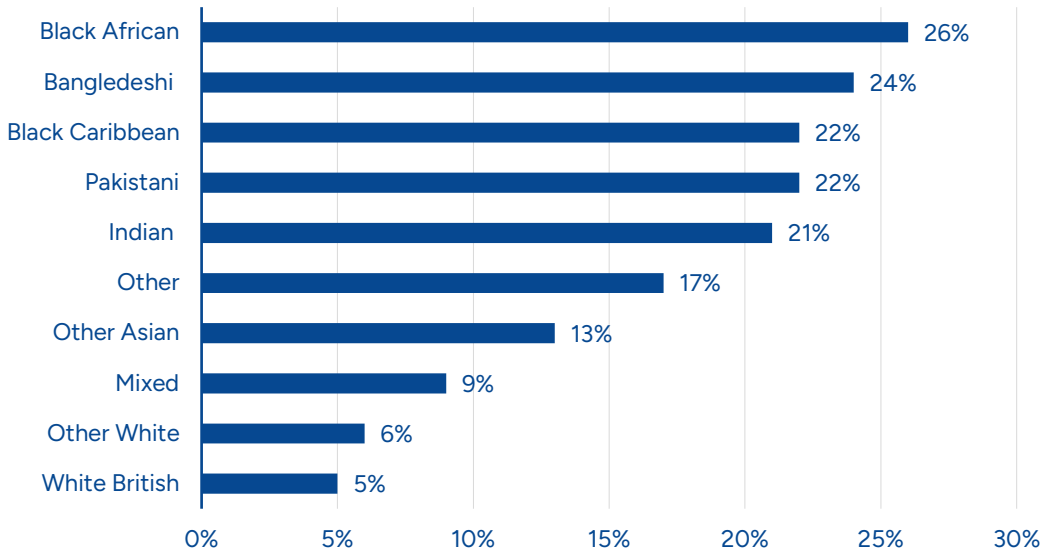
This alienation can particularly manifest in terms of absence from school, a rising issue across the school system this decade. 47% of White British FSM pupils in secondary school were persistently absent in the 2024/25 school year (missing over 10% of classes), and 10% severely absent (missing more than half of their classes), compared to a national average of 23% and 4% respectively. As with many other areas, the biggest disadvantage gap is within the White British group, with 17% of non-FSM eligible White British persistently absent, which is not out of line with other ethnic groups.

Figure 27: Rates of persistent absence in secondary school by FSM eligibility and ethnicity, 2024/25



Particularly notable also are patterns of private tutoring (see Figure 28). While 26% of Black African and 24% of Bangladeshi pupils received tutoring, this dropped down to just 5% for white British pupils. This likely reflects parental attitudes to education, as well as potentially the greater availability of tutoring in places like London.

Figure 28: Rates of private tutoring in COSMO cohort of Year 11s in 2021 (FSM eligible only)



In terms of class misallocation, the COSMO data suggests a mixed picture. For instance, much higher proportions of parents of Black African pupils had a university education, pointing to higher educational capital. 59% of FSM eligible Black African pupils had a parent with a university degree, compared to just 33% for White British pupils. However for Pakistani pupils, who still perform significantly higher than White British, this is just 25%. Indian pupils were most likely to have parents in higher professional occupations (51%), but White British were second at 41%.

Discussion

This research has shown the extent of differences in the experiences of low-income young people depending on their ethnicity, gender and region. Our Opportunity Index report in 2025 revealed large disparities in educational and earnings opportunities for FSM pupils across parliamentary constituencies in England. This research has looked in greater depth at how some of those disparities intersect with gender and ethnicity.

The strength of this analysis is in the detail, as well as the scale of the data now available. This allows us to see the complexity of the range of social mobility stories across gender and ethnicity around the country. At the national level, many of these stories are familiar – FSM boys and girls have lower attainment than their better off peers all over the country and regardless of ethnicity, for instance. However, this hides regional and local stories that could also be

“At the national level, many of these stories are familiar ... However, this hides regional and local stories that could also be guiding attempts to find policy solutions to problems of inequality of opportunity.”

guiding attempts to find policy solutions to problems of inequality of opportunity.

To take just one example, in the East Midlands, Black Caribbean FSM girls' attainment is only one point below that of their non-FSM Black Caribbean peers and 8 points higher than non-FSM Black Caribbean boys. Meanwhile their male classmates are the lowest performing of all ethnicities in the region and second lowest nationally for Black Caribbean FSM boys. This suggests there may be lessons to be learnt from the FSM girls' success and that there are specific gender and ethnicity intersections for these groups that may need further scrutiny.

We also see nuance in the story of the London effect – where FSM students in London have better educational outcomes than FSM peers across the country. This research shows this is largely driven by ethnic diversity, and many groups, most prominently White British FSM students, do not have particularly higher educational outcomes in London compared to other regions. Nonetheless, there is a clear London effect when it comes to earnings across gender and ethnicity, suggesting that the right question to ask around London is not necessarily what London schools are doing right, but rather, how to emulate its labour market opportunity for disadvantaged students.

To address inequalities in intergenerational mobility we need to look carefully at the drivers behind them. While white working-class educational achievement clearly needs addressing, Black Caribbeans face many of the same issues, and barriers to earnings in the labour market for other ethnic minority groups also need to be addressed.

Regional patterns also obscure more local patterns with attainment and earnings only part of the picture. Our [White Working Class Opportunity Index](#) shows that opportunities for White British FSM pupils do not map neatly onto those for the general population. In particular, we see that the lowest ranking constituencies for white working-class communities are often urban post-industrial areas and cities such as Leeds, Sheffield, Leicestershire, Nottingham, Bolton, Preston, Newcastle, Manchester, Blackburn, Burnley and Bradford.

We know that people from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to be geographically mobile.⁷⁷ People should not have to leave their communities in order to access opportunities. Consequently, opportunities should be more

“While white working-class educational achievement clearly needs addressing, Black Caribbeans face many of the same issues”

“People should not have to leave their communities in order to access opportunities.”

⁷⁷ Kevin Latham and Esme Lillywhite, *The Good Life?* (The Sutton Trust, 2026), <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/the-good-life/>.

geographically spread. This could also help break the place-based cycle of disadvantage whereby disadvantage is rooted and entrenched for each generation unless young people are able to move away. The UK Modern Industrial Strategy, published by the government in 2025, shows awareness of the need to find place-based solutions to issues like these.

For example, the strategy includes targeting of funds particularly in the North and Midlands. There is a strong emphasis on empowering local authorities and businesses, of encouraging economic investment in areas with the greatest need and developing skills appropriate to the needs in different areas and regions. The National Youth Strategy, also published last year, similarly emphasises the need to support, listen to and empower young people through investment in local authorities. These are all positive strategies, but their impact is yet to be tested.

The government has also recently announced two geographically focused missions to give 'the most disadvantaged children the mentoring, careers support, and enrichment opportunities they need to achieve and thrive.'⁷⁸ These are to be focused on the North East and coastal areas.⁷⁹ There is logic to this. There have been loud calls to address coastal disadvantage and deprivation in recent years and the North East has repeatedly reported the lowest GCSE and A level results.⁸⁰ However, from this report we see how these missions also need careful focus. Our analysis reveals that in fact, young White British FSM pupils in the North East are doing relatively well in school, in fact they have higher attainment on average compared to many other regions in terms of percentage who achieve a 5 or above in English and maths, and higher progression to university.

While the White British FSM pupils in the North East have low average earnings at 28, the issue here is not clearly one of low attainment. A better aimed mission might not be focused on what schools in the North East are doing

⁷⁸ 'New Missions to Transform Childhoods of Most Disadvantaged', GOV.UK, accessed 10 May 2026, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-missions-to-transform-childhoods-of-most-disadvantaged>.

⁷⁹ See for example Andy Powell et al., *Coastal Communities*, 10 May 2026, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2025-0059/>; Kasper de Graaf, 'On the Waterfront – Report on Coastal Communities', *Key Cities*, 10 March 2025, <https://keycities.uk/2025/03/10/on-the-waterfront-report-on-coastal-communities/>; Stefania Fiorentino et al., 'Coastal Towns as "Left-behind Places": Economy, Environment and Planning', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 17, no. 1 (2024): 103–16, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsad045>.

⁸⁰ Sutton Trust, 'Sutton Trust Response to GCSE Results Day 2025', *The Sutton Trust*, 21 August 2025, <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/sutton-trust-response-to-gcse-results-day-2025/>; Sutton Trust, 'Sutton Trust Response to Level 3 Results Day 2025', *The Sutton Trust*, 14 August 2025, <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/sutton-trust-response-to-level-3-results-day-2025/>.

wrong, but what they are doing right for White British FSM pupils. White British FSM pupils in the South East actually perform worse than those in the North East. Similarly, some coastal communities (for example in the South West) which ranked poorly on the original Opportunity Index, were ranked above average in the White Working Class Opportunity Index in this report.

It is clear that targeting is not only about regions, it is also about particular communities and how to reach people in the appropriate ways. Disadvantaged girls and women need support, training and employment opportunities across the country, but certain ethnic groups require additional support in particular places. For these strategies to work and to address the mobility gaps identified in this report, careful attention needs to be given to structural inequalities related to poverty, ethnicity/race and gender, and importantly the intersection between them.

“Targeting is not only about regions, it is also about particular communities and how to reach people in the appropriate ways.”

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Appendix Table A1: Ethnic composition, by region

Region	White British	Other White	Black African	Pakistani	Mixed	Indian	Other Asian	Other	Bangladeshi	Black Caribbean	Other Black
North East	86.6	2.6	1.6	1.5	2.9	0.8	1.6	1.3	0.8	0.1	0.3
South West	82.5	6.0	1.5	0.5	4.5	1.5	1.6	0.9	0.3	0.3	0.4
North West	72.6	4.1	3.0	6.8	4.8	2.2	2.2	1.9	1.2	0.3	0.8
East Midlands	71.3	7.0	3.2	2.4	5.6	5.3	2.1	1.1	0.7	0.6	0.7
Yorkshire and the Humber	71.2	5.5	2.8	9.4	4.8	1.5	1.7	1.4	0.8	0.3	0.4
South East	70.3	7.6	3.4	2.6	6.9	3.3	3.1	1.4	0.6	0.4	0.4
East of England	70.2	8.7	3.6	2.8	6.5	2.2	2.2	1.2	1.4	0.6	0.6
West Midlands	58.8	5.3	4.8	9.3	7.0	5.4	2.7	2.3	2.0	1.6	0.8
London	23.3	14.4	14.0	4.9	10.9	6.5	5.9	7.0	6.2	4.5	2.3
National average	64.5	7.3	4.8	4.7	6.4	3.4	2.8	2.3	1.8	1.1	0.8



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