



# NO MORE EXCLUSIONS

A new radical grassroots  
coalition movement in education

# SCHOOL EXCLUSIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC:

# WHY WE NEED A MORATORIUM



## INTRODUCTION

This report was created by No More Exclusions (NME), a UK grassroots coalition of over 140 teachers, teaching assistants, trade unionists, social workers, lawyers, youth workers, faith leaders, local councillors, journalists, academics, education researchers, SEND specialists, mental health practitioners, parent advocates, parents and young people. NME focuses on race equality and inclusion in education – our work is about addressing institutional racism, unconscious bias, negative stereotyping and low teacher expectations, as well as the wider structures and practices that create the context within which school exclusions exist.

### Our research

In the Autumn of 2020, the NME Volunteer Research Team issued Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to schools and academies across England, with the goal of uncovering why, how often and against whom exclusions were and are being issued in the context of the global pandemic. The aim of this research was to gain a better understanding of what is happening nationally, and to gather evidence in support of NME's demand for a moratorium on school exclusions in

the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Several members of the group conducted the original research that forms the basis of this co-authored report, which currently stands alone amid a dearth of evidence on the current state of school exclusions. Indeed, given the UK government only publishes statistics collated from Local Authorities (LAs) the following summer, there is a significant lack of robust, real-time exclusions data; figures from September to December 2020 will only be published in Summer 2022, for example. This lag in available data means that, along with parents, carers, young people and other members of the public, the government has minimal understanding of what is happening in schools at any given moment, let alone insight into how the pandemic has and is continuing to impact pupils most at risk of exclusion.

### COVID-19

Exclusions are detrimental to children's education, wellbeing and socioemotional development, and it is cause for concern that exclusions are being used at all, let alone amidst a global pandemic. Considering pupils' anxiety, loss, bereavement, poverty and digital inequality are only being exacerbated as the pandemic continues, our findings are particularly worrying and indicate that exclusions are being used to address or at least manage these additional pressures.

## FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUESTS (2020)



In late October and early November 2020, the NME volunteer research team issued 290 FOI requests to primary and secondary schools and academies across London, the South West, the Midlands and the North of England, using the open-source platform *What Do They Know*. We requested information from schools about exclusions during three time periods:

- 1) 1 Sept 2019 through 31 March 2020;
- 2) 1 April through 31 July 2020;
- 3) 1 Sept 2020 to the Present (with data returns being made up to 4 December).

The information obtained related to internal, fixed-term and permanent exclusions; unless otherwise specified, 'exclusion' here refers to all three.

### The response

The response rate from schools was notably poor. By law, FOI requests should be responded to within 20 days, yet only just over a quarter (27.5%) of schools responded in time, and even less (25.2%) provided responses with usable data. Of the primary schools we approached, 39 schools provided usable information; of secondary schools, just 34 provided usable responses. Although we recognise that the pandemic is likely to have impacted schools' response rates,

this difficulty in obtaining data from schools means that we have limited information regarding how, why, when and where school exclusions are occurring at present.

### The sample

The sample used is not – and was not intended to be – representative. Rather, it provides a glimpse into what took place within particular localities before, during and immediately after the UK's first national lockdown. Although not statistically representative nationwide, important observations can thus nonetheless be drawn. It is also important to note that exclusions data necessarily underestimates the number of children being removed from classrooms and/or schools: not only are schools *not* legally obliged to record internal exclusions or the characteristics of pupils placed in 'isolation', but schools' data does not include illegal exclusions (or the 'off-rolling' of certain pupils) or children who have experienced a "managed move" to another school or a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU).

Our data thus offers a snapshot of a wider, deeper, national problem, shedding light on the punitive measures that are consistently taken to manage children's behaviour in lieu of appropriate forms of pastoral and socioeconomic support.



## KEY FINDINGS

Our research found that exclusions occurred extensively prior to lockdown, and continued to occur as soon as pupils returned to school in September 2020. Overall, an astounding 13,268 exclusions were issued between September 2019 and November 2020; this is even more concerning when one considers that this was across just 34 secondary schools and 39 primary schools.

### ● September 2019 – March 2020

During this time period, exclusions were staggeringly high within secondary schools overall. A total of 9,493 exclusions were reported across just 34 schools, including 141 permanent exclusions and 2,088 fixed-term.

For primary schools, the numbers were lower overall, but more concentrated. While 21 of the 39 schools reported no exclusions at all, the remaining 18 schools reported a total of 103 exclusions, the vast majority of which were fixed-term.

### ● April 2020 – September 2020

These numbers dropped significantly during the first national lockdown – bearing in mind this was not only a period of remote learning for most pupils, but a shorter time period than the others we investigated. However, they did *not* drop to zero. Indeed, the 34 secondary schools from our sample that responded in time issued at least 11 exclusions during this time, including one permanent exclusion and one exclusion during online/remote learning.

Across our sample of primary schools, the number of exclusions did drop to zero among the schools that responded in full.

### ● September 2020 – Present

Despite a drop in the number of exclusions within a both primary and secondary schools during the Spring term, our research indicated that these numbers were quick to rise again as soon as pupils returned to school in September.

Within primary schools, a different 21 schools to those cited

above reported zero exclusions, but the remaining 18 schools issued 26 exclusions within the first two months of returning to school; at least one of these was permanent.

For secondary schools, the numbers were significantly higher. Two schools reported zero exclusions but the remaining 32 had already issued 3,628 exclusions between September and mid-November 2020. This included at least 4 permanent exclusions and 728 fixed-term.

To note, new reasons for exclusion have arisen since pupils' return to school, with at least 10 fixed-term exclusions given out in secondary schools for 'Failure to follow COVID rules'.

### High levels of exclusion

Some schools had particularly high rates of exclusion prior to national lockdown, with one secondary school issuing over 300 fixed-term exclusions within a school roll of just over 800 pupils. Only one school of our sample reported zero exclusions overall.

High numbers of exclusion remained an issue within the later time period. One secondary school issued over 150 fixed-term exclusions within a school roll of just over 800, while a different school issued at least 1,000 internal exclusions within a school roll of just over 1,000; between September 2019 and March 2020, this same school issued just 950 internal exclusions. This school therefore



issued more internal exclusions in two and a half months *after* pupils returned in September than in seven months before the first national lockdown.

### Who is excluded: supporting what we already know

Our research findings supported existing evidence that children from marginalised backgrounds are more likely to be excluded: among others, frequently excluded are Black and brown children; children eligible for free school meals; and children on the SEN register.\*

**Free School Meals (FSM):** Of our sample, and of the pupils for whom characteristics data was recorded, 46% of excluded secondary school pupils and 45% of excluded primary school pupils were eligible for FSM.

**Special Educational Needs (SEN):** Of our secondary school sample, and of the pupils for whom characteristics data was recorded, 44% of excluded pupils were on the SEN register – at least 30% of which without an EHC Plan (see below).

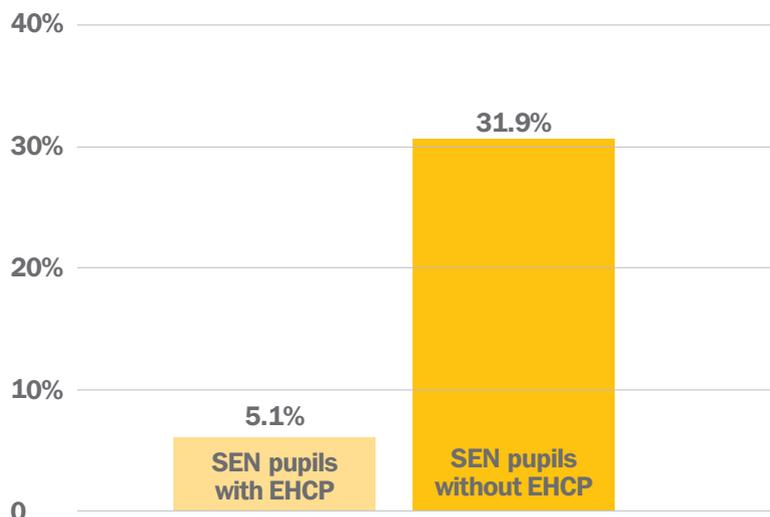
\*See: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england>



On SEN Register	% of Excluded Secondary Pupils
With an EHC Plan	5.1
Without an EHC Plan	31.9
Unspecified	7.34
Total on register	44.24



### SEN exclusions in our sample



**Ethnicity:** Significant disparities continue to exist when it comes to the ethnicity of excluded pupils. This is even more striking when the *rate of exclusion* is considered alongside or against the proportion of the national population these pupils comprise (see table opposite). With these statistics in mind, our results indicate that exclusions continue to “other” those who are often already othered – note, for instance, the disproportionate exclusion of Mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils.

These disparities in exclusion along lines of race and ethnicity are not new; on the contrary, this knowledge has been widely available to governments and schools for decades, underlining the generally disingenuous way in which the UK government operates at all levels. This point was made explicitly by NME in their submission to the October 2020 Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: ‘Ethnic Disparities and Inequalities in the UK: Call for evidence’.

### Ethnicity data from our sample

Ethnicity*	% of Excluded Secondary Pupils	% of Secondary Pupil Population**
White British	52.82	65.9
Pakistani	6.65	4.5
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	6.56	1.50
Black Other	4.81	0.80
Other Ethnic Group	4.79	2.00
Black African	4.73	4.10
Black Caribbean	3.45	1.20
Other Mixed	2.73	2.10
Mixed White and Black African	1.07	0.80
Gypsy/Roma/Traveller	0.76	0.20

\*<https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups>

● Note that the ethnicities listed here are labelled the same as the Gov.uk list of ethnicities, though not all of the schools in our dataset used these labels or the same ethnic categories.

\*\*<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>

### Problems with reporting

Across our sample, there were significant inconsistencies in how schools reported the ethnicity of excluded pupils. Notably, a number of schools included nationality alongside or instead of ethnicity – this was most common with pupils of African descent, variously described as Black Nigerian, Somali,

Ghanaian, etc. Some schools also differentiated between ‘White English’ and ‘White British’ (though no schools listed White Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish), and some listed ‘White Western/Eastern European’ separately.

In each case, the level of detail used by schools to describe ethnicity could easily help to conceal or massage the figures – for example, listing the nationalities of Black African students clearly detracts from the number of Black African pupils excluded overall, while categories such as ‘White European’ or ‘White Other’ might be used to conceal the number and nature of exclusions issued to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) children.

Crucially, segmenting up pupils into so many different ethnic categories works to hide the disproportionate rate at which Black pupils are excluded at all stages of education.



### Hidden data

There are multiple other ways in which we fear exclusions data is, or could be, hidden by and even from schools – including, but not limited to, the following:

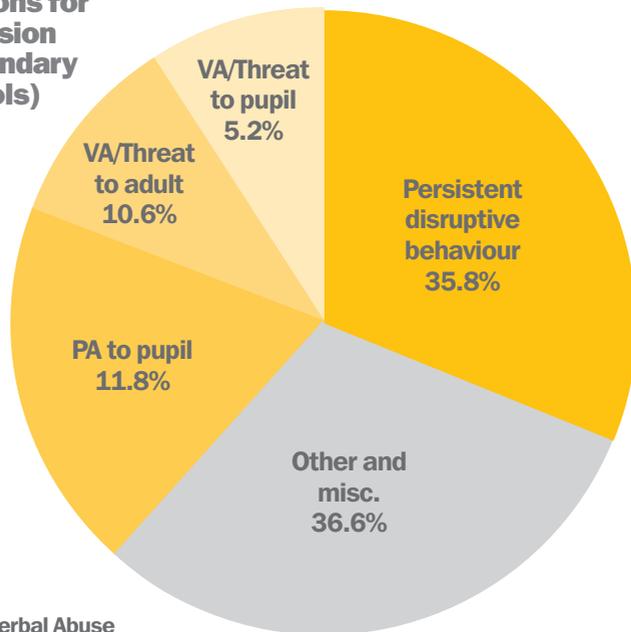
#### Reasons for exclusion:

In our sample of secondary schools, the main reasons for exclusion overall were ‘Persistent Disruptive Behaviour’ (36%) and ‘Other’ (22%):

- ‘Other’ was the reason for 16% of permanent exclusions, and 15% of fixed-term;
- ‘PDB’ was the reason for 12% of permanent exclusions, and 37% of fixed-term.

Both of these ‘reasons’ are notably vague, rendering schools virtually unaccountable for their actions or these life-altering decisions.

### Reasons for exclusion (secondary schools)



\*VA = Verbal Abuse



It is particularly alarming that the reason given for 16% of permanent exclusions in this sample was simply ‘Other’. *Why* are these children being permanently removed from secondary school? The lack of transparency here is deeply concerning.

#### Internal exclusions:

##### Tip of the iceberg

Internal exclusions (IE) and pupil characteristics for IEs do not have to be recorded by law. Added to this, on-site inclusion, seclusion or Behaviour Support Units may not even be classified as internal exclusion by schools, meaning many IEs could be missing from our data (not to mention the national statistics). We know via testimony that this is the case for at least one secondary school in our sample.

Many schools in our sample also stated that they had not collected data for internal exclusions, or simply did not respond to that part of our request, suggesting that this form of exclusion is frequently going under the radar. And yet, even with this lack of reporting, internal exclusions remain the most common form of exclusion, accounting for at least 8,996 exclusions from our sample of schools across all three time periods.

#### Poor response rate from schools:

As noted above, the response rate from schools was poor. We understand the difficulties facing schools at this time, but most unreturned FOI responses remain as such months later. It is imperative that schools be adequately supported to be able to provide this data – regardless or even in light of the current challenges – given the seriousness and long-lasting consequences of exclusion.



## Conclusion

Our preliminary findings suggest that, as feared, exclusions are being used to manage the additional pressures, turbulence and trauma of the pandemic and its impact on children and young people in ways that are truly worrying. These findings are perhaps unsurprising, but nonetheless alarming, suggesting that exclusions are continuing during a time when one would expect more leniency and understanding with children in their difficult return to school. This highlights a failure of government and associated lack of policy or provision to adequately support schools during this time.

Our data makes government rhetoric concerning vulnerable children ring decidedly hollow: vulnerable children have been and continue to be excluded, regardless of the trauma of COVID-19 and the current situation facing schools.

Moreover, there have been calls to reopen schools owing to concerns over lost learning, but our data raises the question of who will be allowed back and who will be permitted to stay in class? Who has been excluded during this time already, and prior to the pandemic? Which pupils were given the opportunity to learn and be taught five days a week in the first place?

Much discussion has focussed on the GCSE years, raising understandable concerns about how pupils will manage their examinations and/or other qualifications this summer. Yet schools continue to exclude GCSE-age pupils: from September to mid-November 2020, there were at least 57 fixed-term exclusions within Year 10, and 40 fixed-term exclusions from Year 11, across just eight secondary schools in our sample.

Concerns about learning loss appear similarly insincere. If we are concerned about children not being in school, why do we



allow children to be excluded? And why does the government continue to allow our most vulnerable and marginalised children to be excluded disproportionately, let alone amid such unprecedented upheaval? Indeed, concern over learning loss should already exist, given the number of exclusions that occur on a regular basis, regardless of personal or national circumstance.

This data supports what we already know regarding who is excluded and why. Yet there are numerous ways in which exclusion practices and their consequences can and do go unnoticed. As mentioned, data could be hidden by the poor response rates from schools; in the granularising of ethnicity data; through the use of ‘other’ as a reason for exclusion; and in the large number of internal

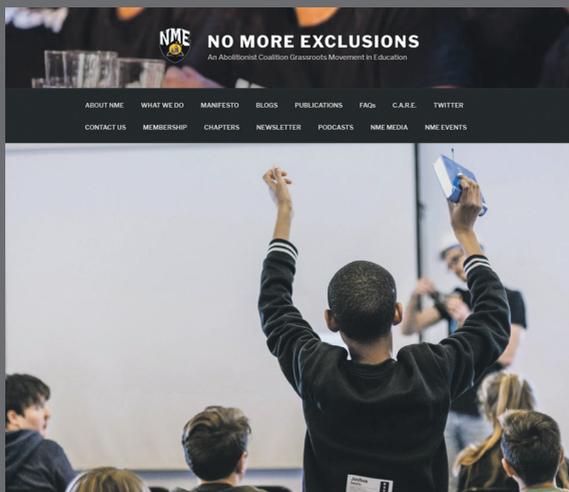
cases that are not recorded formally. These concerns are all-the-more pressing in light of the school closures and ongoing COVID-19-related restrictions, the impact of which we are yet to see in full.

## A moratorium

Exclusions ruin lives, and young people who are excluded during the pandemic are already likely to be facing extremely difficult circumstances. This is why NME are urging the government to recognise and embrace the need for a different approach to behaviour management and education policy during and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In short, we demand that the government issues a *moratorium on school exclusions*, halting all forms of exclusion and exclusionary practice in schools urgently and with immediate effect.

**Support NME’s moratorium on school exclusions here:**

<https://nomoreexclusions.com/moratorium-on-school-exclusions/>



## NME, first edition March 2021

- This report has been produced by the NME Volunteer Research Team.
- All resources produced by No More Exclusions are free, written by a collective of volunteers and available to everyone who needs them.
- Use freely but please cite as necessary
- No more exclusions also means no more erasure of our voices, experience and labour.

### Further Reading:

NME Report (June 2020): *Impact of COVID-19 on Education & Children's Services*

NME Response to the Women & Equalities Select Committee (April 2020)

NME Home Education Inquiry Report for the Education Select Committee (November 2020)

NME Submission to the Commission on Race & Ethnic Disparities (November 2020)

RSA Report (March 2020): *Pinball Kids: Preventing School Exclusions*

Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (March 2020): *It was Hard to Escape: Safeguarding Children at Risk from Criminal Exploitation*

Prescod, Colin (CCJS, March 2020): 'Race, class and the scandal of school exclusions'

University of Oxford (June 2020): 'Risks of school

exclusions in England may be higher after COVID-19'

Excluded Lives Report (Uni of Oxford, June 2020): *School Exclusion Risks after COVID-19*  
Joseph-Salisbury, Remi. (Runnymede, June 2020): *Race and Racism in English Secondary Schools*

Just for Kids Law Report (August 2020): *Excluded, Exploited, Forgotten: Childhood Criminal Exploitation and School Exclusions*

Institute of Race Relations (September 2020): *How Black working-class youth are criminalised and excluded in the English school system: A London case study*

TES (October 2020): 'Ban exclusions during the pandemic, MPs told'

### Sources of help and information:

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-exclusion](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-exclusion)

[www.equalityadvisoryservice.com](http://www.equalityadvisoryservice.com)

[www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

<https://justforkidslaw.org/school-exclusions-hub>

[www.nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk](http://www.nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk)

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

<https://takingpositivesteps.org.uk>

<https://counsellingfoundation.org>

[www.justeducationmatters.org](http://www.justeducationmatters.org)



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