

The Independent

According to the last census, there are 166,000 young carers in England, but recent research suggests that the actual figure may be as many as 800,000 – that's six young carers in every secondary school classroom. Despite being so prolific, carers are often hidden from view – attempting to juggle their caring role with school but too terrified to seek support. Carers Week 2021 runs from 7-13 June and aims to raise awareness of the everyday challenges facing young carers.

Like many [young carers](#), I can't tell you the exact moment my mum got sick. Nor can I pinpoint the moment I started helping her and my family get through day-to-day life. But there was a moment, 10 years ago, when my mother went from healthy to bed bound. She spent weeks unable to move, struggling to even sip water or to stomach a slice of toast. That was when everything changed.

We now know that my mum has [myalgic encephalomyelitis](#) (ME), a chronic disease that impacts the body's nervous and immune systems. Previously known as chronic fatigue syndrome, it is [at least as disabling as multiple sclerosis and congestive heart failure](#) – but there is currently no cure and reaching diagnosis is a battle. My mum can't walk further than half a mile without crashing for days afterwards. On her best days, she is mostly housebound; even going for a walk is a distant dream. She spends her worst in bed, unable to stand any noise or light. ME can also impact her cognitive capabilities: her words can often become mixed up and slurred.

In the years after she got sick, I helped my mum with everyday tasks that kept my family going. This could mean making sure that she had eaten and taken her pain killers; it could involve undertaking basic household chores or it could mean dropping my plans to become available at a moment's notice to pick my sister up from school or to look after her at weekends. It also meant that from the age of 14, I had to be strong for the rest of my family, even when I didn't feel strong myself.

The last census placed the number of young carers (those under 18) in England at nearly [166,000](#), but recent research suggests that the actual figure may be as many as [800,000](#) – that's six young carers in

every [secondary school](#) classroom. Despite being so prolific, carers are often hidden from view – attempting to juggle their caring role with school work but too terrified to speak up and seek support, suffering mental health complications as a result

Childline defines a young carer simply as “someone who looks after another person.” This could be because the person is sick, has [mental health](#) issues or physical [disabilities](#), or as a result of [substance abuse](#), that has left them unable to care for themselves. Caring can range from the practical – cooking, cleaning, and admin – to helping someone with physical tasks, like walking or communicating.

Although I didn’t recognise it at the time, being a young carer shaped me. But with thousands of hidden young carers across the country and with a predicted [£3.1 billion](#) funding gap for [children’s services](#) by 2025, having the provision in place to identify young carers is more important than ever, so they can seek the help they need.

Young carers doing over 50 hours of care a week are [five times more likely](#) to report that their own health is “not good” when compared to their peers, while the 2017 GP Patient Survey found that a [third more](#) young adult carers (aged 18-25) report anxiety or depression than other young adults.

In a survey by Carers Trust, [39 per cent](#) of young carers admitted that nobody at school was aware of their caring role. Even if they do know how to reach out, some young carers worry about seeming incapable of looking after their family member, or are scared that they will be separated from the people they care for.

Better communication between people working in health, education and social care is needed to identify more young carers. Those who care often have no choice but to leave education to fulfil their caring responsibilities – recent research shows that [29 per cent](#) of young adult carers aged 16-25 had dropped out of college or university because of their caring role.

Carer’s allowance can only be accessed if a young person isn’t in full-time education and is caring for someone for over 35 hours a week. This leaves some young carers in a position of choosing between financial support and education, with young adult carers aged between 16 and 18 being [twice as likely](#) to be not in education, employment, or training.

With 961 responses from across the UK, our survey provides a base of evidence. It shows how worries relating to Coronavirus and increased isolation caused by the lockdown have affected the mental health and wellbeing of the UK's young people with caring responsibilities.

Even before the outbreak of Coronavirus, young carers and young adult carers were all too often spending significant amounts of time caring for a relative in addition to the time they needed to spend on education, work and time for themselves.

Coronavirus has significantly increased those pressures.

- 40% of young carers and 59% of young adult carers say their mental health is worse since Coronavirus.
- 67% of young carers and 78% of young adult carers are more worried about the future since Coronavirus.
- 66% of young carers and 74% of young adult carers are feeling more stressed since Coronavirus.
- 69% of both young carers and young adult carers are feeling less connected to others since Coronavirus.
- 11% of young carers and 19.7% of young adult carers report an increase of 30 hours or more in the amount of time they spend caring per week.
- 58% of young carers who are caring for longer since Coronavirus are spending on average ten hours a week more on their caring responsibilities. Among young adult carers the proportion is even higher at 63.6%.
- 7.74% of young carers and 14.94% of young adult carers who responded to the survey, said that they are now spending over 90 hours a week caring for a family member or friend.