

ScotGen Insights



Foreword

Paul Bradshaw, Director (Scottish Centre for Social Research)

The forthcoming Scottish Parliamentary election presents an opportunity to both reflect on policy developments over the concluding parliamentary term and consider what challenges lie ahead for the new administration. Our work at the Scottish Centre for Social Research covers many important areas of devolved policy including health, education, social security and crime and justice. In recent years, our projects in these areas have provided robust understanding of the effectiveness and achievements of new policies and the issues which remain. In the pages that follow, we provide some brief insight into these matters, but we would encourage you to seek out the full reports (referenced at the end) for more detailed findings.

We start with health. **The Scottish Health Survey** has been providing a picture of health and wellbeing of the Scottish population since 1995, enabling policy makers to monitor changes to the nation's health over time. As the NHS struggles to recover from the COVID pandemic, recent results show that so does the nation's mental health. The 2024 survey also returned the highest rates of long-term conditions since the turn of the century and the survey continues to demonstrate stark inequalities by sex, age and deprivation on several measures.

Devolution of social security powers has offered the Scottish Parliament the opportunity to address some of these inequalities. For example, the Scottish Child Payment (SCP) provides regular financial support for low-income families and seeks to reduce child poverty. Our research on the **Five Family Payments** shows that SCP and the other benefits are crucial in helping many families meet their daily needs. But we also found (across several projects) that many people continue to face significant financial strain despite the supports in place to help them.

Scotland has led the way in the UK for expansion of state-funded early learning and childcare. From August 2021, the entitlement increased from 600 to 1140 hours per year for all three- and four-year-olds, and eligible two-year-olds. Scotland also continues to provide free university tuition for eligible students. But what difference has the expansion made to children and their families? And does free tuition necessarily remove all student financial worries? Our research for the **Scottish Study of Early Learning and Childcare** and the **Student Finance and Wellbeing Study** explored each of these questions respectively.

Although crime is historically low, it remains a persistent public concern. New data on fraud and computer misuse from the **Scottish Crime and Justice Survey** demonstrate that around one in ten are victims of this crime. Whilst experience of fraud appears not to vary across the population, in other crimes higher rates of victimisation among women and girls are now well documented – as outlined in our report from the **Growing Up in Scotland study**.

Finally data from the **Scottish Social Attitudes Survey** shows that public trust in government is at its lowest level since the Scottish Parliament opened in 1999. This underlines how critical it will be to address these issues to rebuild this trust across Scotland.

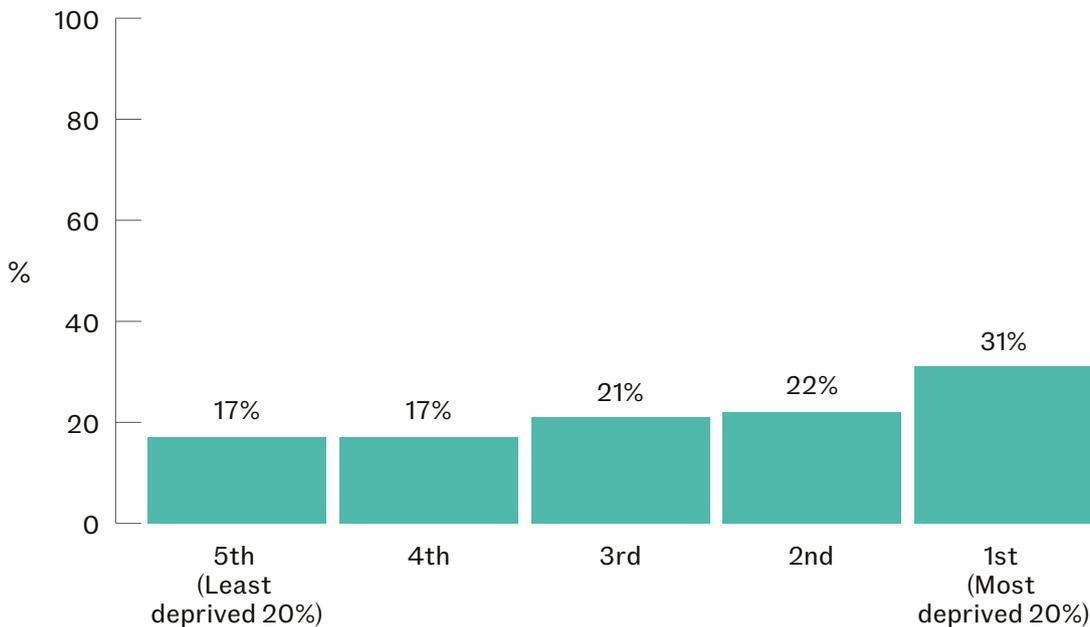
Health

Mental health and wellbeing

While population level mental health and wellbeing in Scotland have generally remained at a similar level since 2008, an increase in mental health difficulties was identified following the COVID-19 pandemic and they have remained above pre-pandemic levels since. The national figures also mask notable differences by sex and deprivation.

For example, the Scottish Health Survey (SHeS) shows that in 2024 rates of possible psychiatric disorders – determined by a score of four or more on the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) – were higher among females than males (25% compared with 18%) and among those living in the most deprived compared with the least deprived areas (31% compared with 17%, Figure 1). Poorer mental health for women was also reflected in lower mental wellbeing scores than for men whilst rates of anxiety, depression and self-harm were all greater among people living in the most deprived areas than the least deprived areas.

Figure 1: Percentage of adults reporting a GHQ-12 score of 4 or more, by area deprivation quintiles (SHeS, 2024)



General health

In SHeS 2024, 70% of the population reported their general health to be ‘good’ or ‘very good’. This figure was at the lowest end of a range of between 70-77% recorded since 2008. There were differences reported by age and deprivation with ‘good’ or ‘very good’ health lowest among those living in the most deprived areas and older age groups. The trend towards poorer health in the population is also reflected in the highest levels of long-term conditions

(reported by 50% of all adults), of doctor-diagnosed asthma (18%) and diabetes (8%) reported since 2003. With such conditions being more common in older people, a large proportion of this change reflects Scotland's ageing population. However, prevalence of long-term conditions was also higher among those living in the most deprived areas in Scotland.

Smoking, vaping and nicotine products

There has been relative success in tackling smoking over the last two decades. For example, the proportion of smokers has halved, from 28% to 14%. Nevertheless, smoking remains much more common among adults living in the most deprived areas in Scotland (23%) than among those living in the least deprived areas (7%).

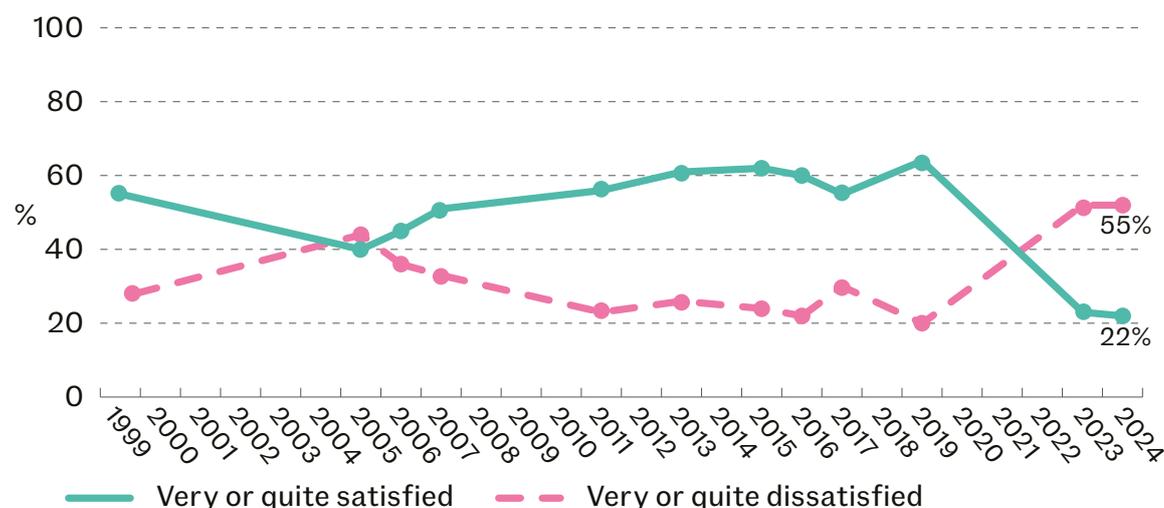
But as cigarette smoking has declined, use of other nicotine products - such as vapes and pouches - has grown, particularly among 16-24 year olds. Overall, use¹ of e-cigarettes or vaping devices has increased only slightly, from between 5% to 7% over 2014 to 2021, to 10% to 12% since 2022 (10% in 2024). However, among 16-24 year olds it has increased from 4% to 18%.

Young people in Scotland are also commonly experimenting with nicotine pouches and reporting adverse effects from doing so such as sickness and fainting. Our qualitative research among S3 and S4 pupils found pouches were routinely being used 'under the radar' in schools with staff having little knowledge of their use.

Satisfaction with the NHS

The challenge of tackling these persistent health inequalities falls at a time when satisfaction with the NHS has reached an all-time low. Tracking satisfaction from 1999 in Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey data, levels were highest in 2019 when 64% of the public said they were very or quite satisfied. But this dropped significantly to 22% in 2023 (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Satisfaction with the NHS (1999-2023) (SSA, 2023)



1. Current use at the time of interview.

Poverty and welfare

Supporting families

The passing of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 gave the Scottish Government powers to deliver social security benefits and resulted in the creation of a series of new benefits. Amongst these were the Five Family Payments (FFP): Scottish Child Payment (SCP); three Best Start Grants - Pregnancy and Baby, Early Learning, and School Age; and Best Start Foods (BSF). FFP provide support to families living on low incomes and play an important role in the government's child-poverty reduction ambitions. ScotCen has been involved in evaluating the impact of these payments.

Both individually and collectively, the FFP are helping to improve the overall financial circumstances of low-income families, albeit to varying degrees. For many families, FFP have helped cover the costs of essential child and household expenditure (and deal with unexpected cost more easily), which helped reduce money-related stress. In fact for some - especially larger families (with three or more children) and households with a disabled family member - receiving FFP was crucial in being able to meet these essential needs and has reduced the need to use food banks and/or borrow money for some families. Around three-fifths of respondents who received SCP (64%) and BSF (59%) 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that, as a result of the payments, they did not need to use food banks or food parcels.

For some families, the impact of FFP went beyond reducing household financial pressures. For example, many parents and carers reported that FFP had a positive impact on their child's mental and physical health. As well as supporting healthier diets, FFP enabled children to take part in social and educational activities which improved their skills and development, built their confidence and self-esteem, and helped them develop friendships. FFP helped some families provide opportunities for their children that they otherwise could not afford.

"Because of SCP, my daughter attends gymnastics, is learning to play basketball and attends art class which has improved her social, mental and physical health. Her teacher told me she's doing great at parents evening, and I know it's because of the joy she gets from extra-curricular activities."

(Parent)

Whilst the impact of FFP was mainly positive, parents raised concerns about what would happen if the Scottish Child Payment was ended. Parents were also concerned about the continued costs of supporting older children who live at home and are no longer entitled to the payments. Without FFP, some parents and carers said they would be living in poverty, relying on food aid and facing increasing debt.

Food insecurity

Whilst FFP is having a positive impact on family finances, widespread poverty and cost of living issues remain. In 2024, the Scottish Social Attitudes survey found that around one quarter (24%) of adults in Scotland were really struggling or struggling on their present income, a notable increase from 2010 (16%). Nevertheless, there is some indication that food insecurity has reduced following the high levels seen after the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis. In 2024, the Scottish Health Survey found that 8% of adults had been worried about running out of food due to a lack of money or other resources in the last 12 months, a decrease from 14% in 2023.

Despite this positive trend, the overall figures again disguise some alarming inequalities such as among single parent households where just over one in three adults had worried that they would run out of food in the last 12 months. Disabled people also face a greater risk of food insecurity. Our qualitative study for the Trussell Trust (2023) found the key drivers of this to be:

- Economic exclusion: A lack of accessible employment or inflexible employment structures excluded many participants from employment.
- Extra costs associated with impairments and health conditions: Disabled people faced a range of extra costs, above and beyond higher day-to-day living costs, in the treatment and management of their impairments and health conditions.
- Inadequacy of disability benefits: Disability benefit payment levels were often too low to meet the extra everyday costs related to disability leading to regular borrowing and debt.

Disabled people suggested a range of ways that their financial security, and lives more generally, could be improved, including:

- Improvements to the disability benefits system, for example, through: better promotion of the eligibility criteria; an improved application process; increasing the value to better reflect costs; and improved training for staff supporting disabled people to navigate the system.
- Increased public education on impairments and health conditions to help reduce stigma associated with being disabled and claiming disability benefits.
- Increased understanding of disability among employers.
- Additional financial support for disabled people including grants for adaptations and costs not covered by the NHS, and increased support with transport, utilities and food costs.
- Greater promotion of support and opportunities available, and for public environments to be made more accessible to enable disabled people to take part fully in society.

Education

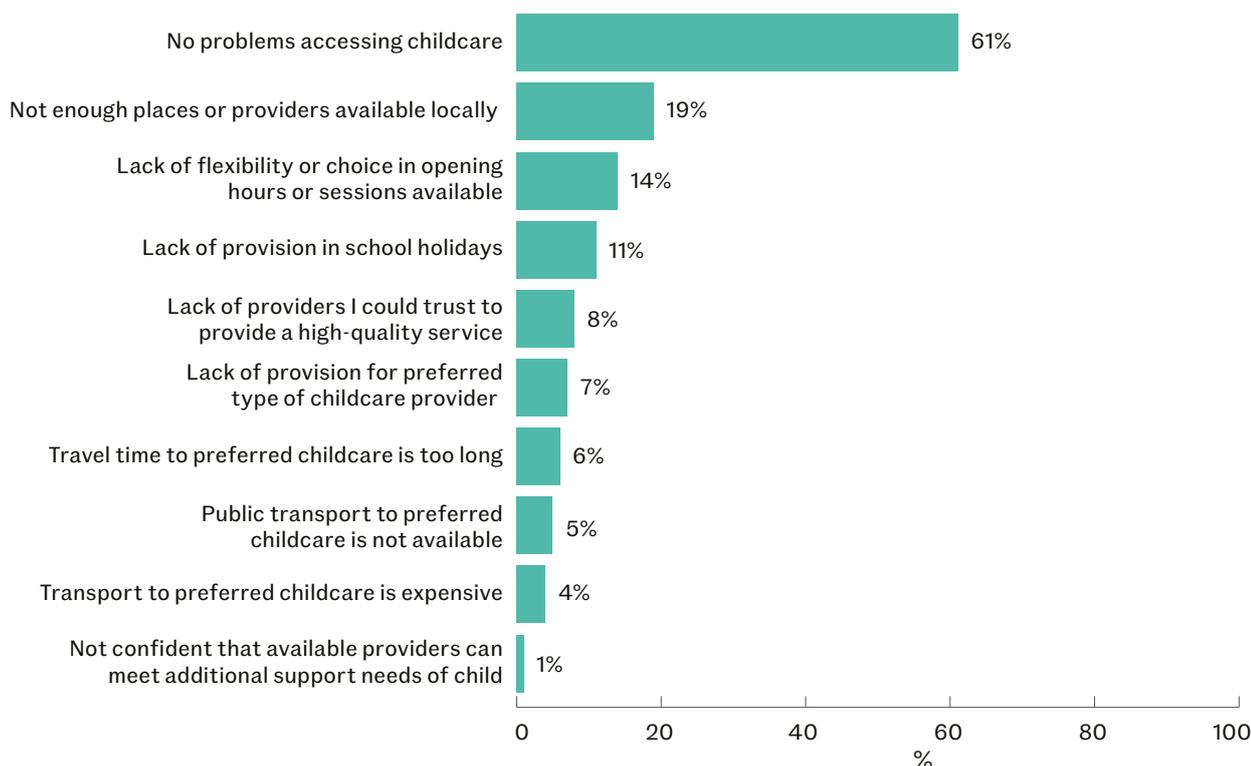
Early learning and childcare

The expansion of government funded early learning and childcare (ELC) has been central to Scottish Government policy and investment over the last decade. The expansion saw statutory hours for all three- and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds increase from 600 to 1140 hours per year in 2021. The [Scottish Study of Early Learning and Childcare \(2019-2025\)](#) was conducted as part of the evaluation of the expansion, and was supplemented by [further research with parents of pre-school children \(2025\)](#).

The latest official statistics³ show that almost all 3 and 4 year olds take up their funded ELC place whilst a little over half (55%) of eligible 2 year olds do so. However, [our research](#) showed that most but not all of the parents used their full entitlement. This was primarily due to personal choice, but also due to limited flexibility from ELC settings in terms of the days or hours on offer or simply a lack of local capacity (Figure 3).

As such, many parents supplemented their funded hours with paid-for or informal childcare. A quarter (25%) used regular informal childcare and around half (47%) used paid-for childcare. Thus, childcare remains a significant cost for many parents; on average, those who paid for childcare spent £726 per month in 2025. This figure was considerably higher for parents with children aged under three.

Figure 3: Percentage of parents reporting issues with the childcare available in their local area (ELC, 2025)



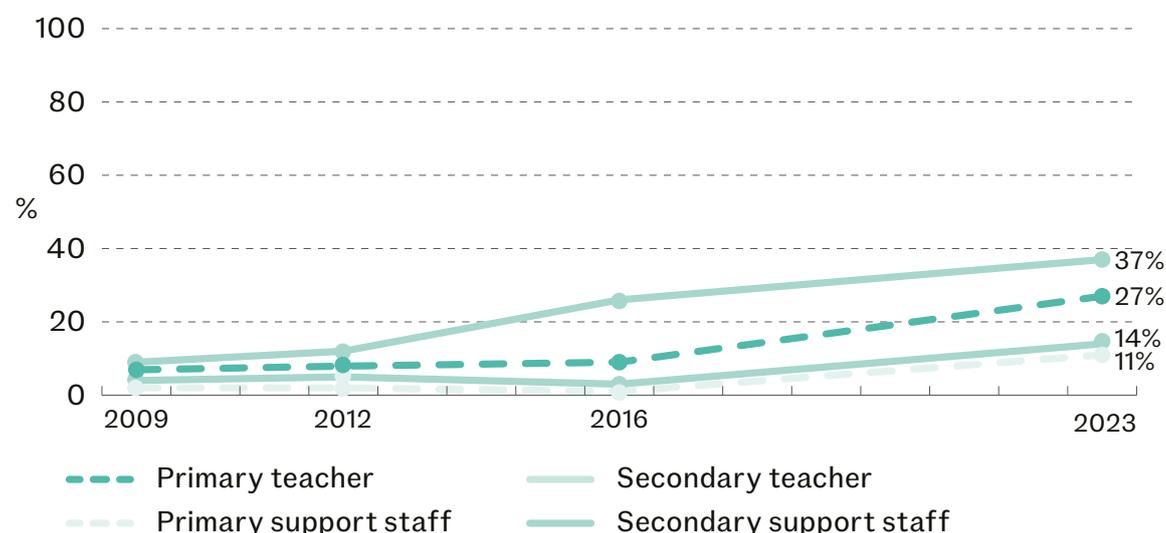
3. [Funded Early Learning and Childcare Statistics 2025 - gov.scot](#).

The expansion was intended to have three high-level benefits: improved child development, with a parallel narrowing of the poverty-related outcomes gap; improved family wellbeing and increased opportunities for parents to take up or sustain work, study or training. Overall, our research found little evidence for progress on the child development outcomes. The considerable effect of COVID-19 and the associated protective public health measures on young children and their families appear to have limited any potential impact from expanding ELC. There were also few changes in family wellbeing. However, there is clear evidence that mothers increased their participation in work, training or study over the period covered, which may be attributed to ELC expansion. This change was seen across mothers in different circumstances - those from the lowest income families saw a large increase in employment whilst those in higher income households saw an increase in the proportion taking on full-time roles.

School education

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, pupil discipline in schools has been a regular topic in the media and a prominent concern for teaching unions. In the Behaviour in Scottish Schools study (2023), both primary and secondary school staff reported generally good behaviour among most or all pupils in the classroom (65%) and around the school (85%). However, the proportion of staff reporting both low level and more serious disruptive and negative behaviours - including physical violence - had increased from the previous study in 2016 (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentage of staff reporting experiences of physical violence in the last 12 months (2009-2023) (BISS, 2023)



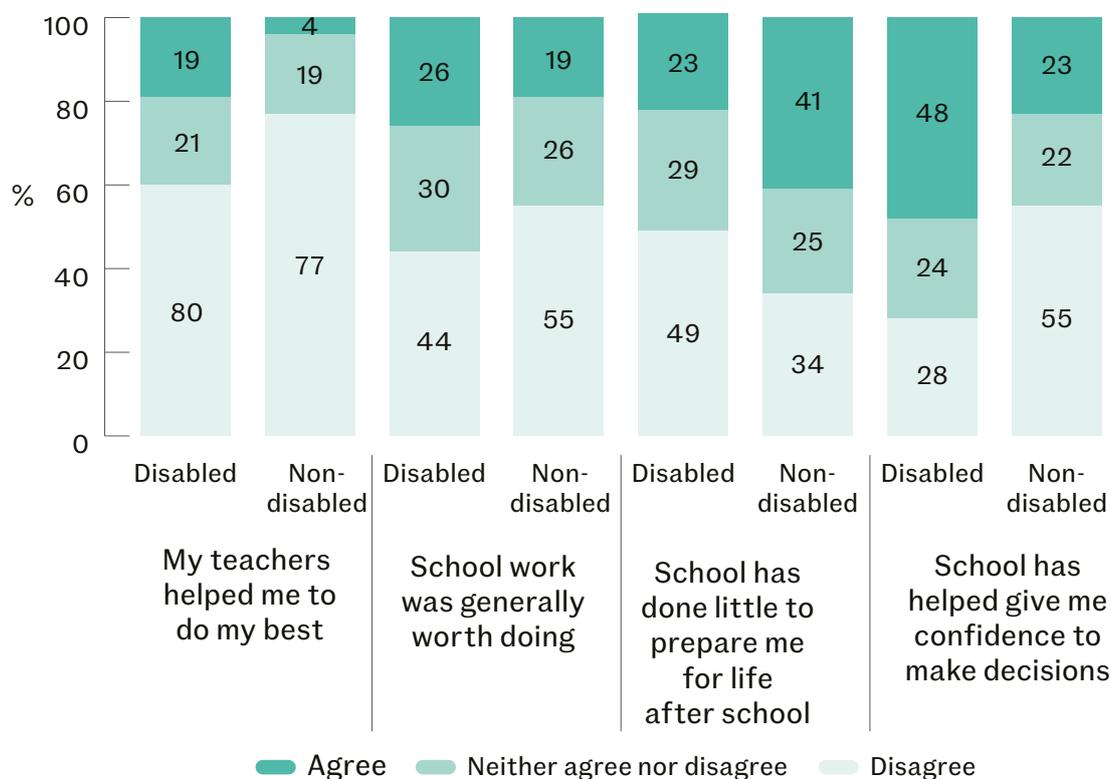
Low-level disruptive behaviours were perceived to have a greater overall negative impact than occasional more serious incidents. In secondary schools, for example, the most commonly cited form of disruptive behaviour was pupils looking at or using mobile phones or tablets when they shouldn't be. This particular behaviour showed a notable increase since the

previous study in 2016. The qualitative research with teaching and support staff identified new and emerging patterns of disruptive behaviour including vaping and in-school truancy, a rise in misogynistic views expressed by male pupils, and problematic use of mobile phones and social media.

School staff and LA representatives gave many potential explanations for these changes in behaviour, including a perceived lack of consequences for pupils, a lack of support for pupils with additional support needs, pupil disengagement from school and learning and wider societal changes such as a general lack of respect, the ubiquity of social media and changing approaches to parenting.

In the Growing Up in Scotland study, pupils themselves noted a range of perspectives on school, suggesting that, for some, their particular needs were not always being met. For example, at age 17, disabled⁴ young people reported a less positive experience of school than non-disabled young people. Half (49%) of disabled 17 year olds said that school did little to prepare them for life after school, compared with a third (34%) of non-disabled 17 year olds. Disabled young people were also less likely to say that school had helped give them the confidence to make decisions (28% compared with 55% of non-disabled young people, Figure 5).

Figure 5: Young people’s views on their experiences at school, by disability (GUS Sweep 11, 2025)



4. In this report, a young person is considered to be disabled if it was reported in the survey that they had 'physical or mental health conditions or illnesses which lasted or were expected to last 12 months or more' and affected their 'ability to do activities normal for someone their age' either 'a lot' or 'a little'.

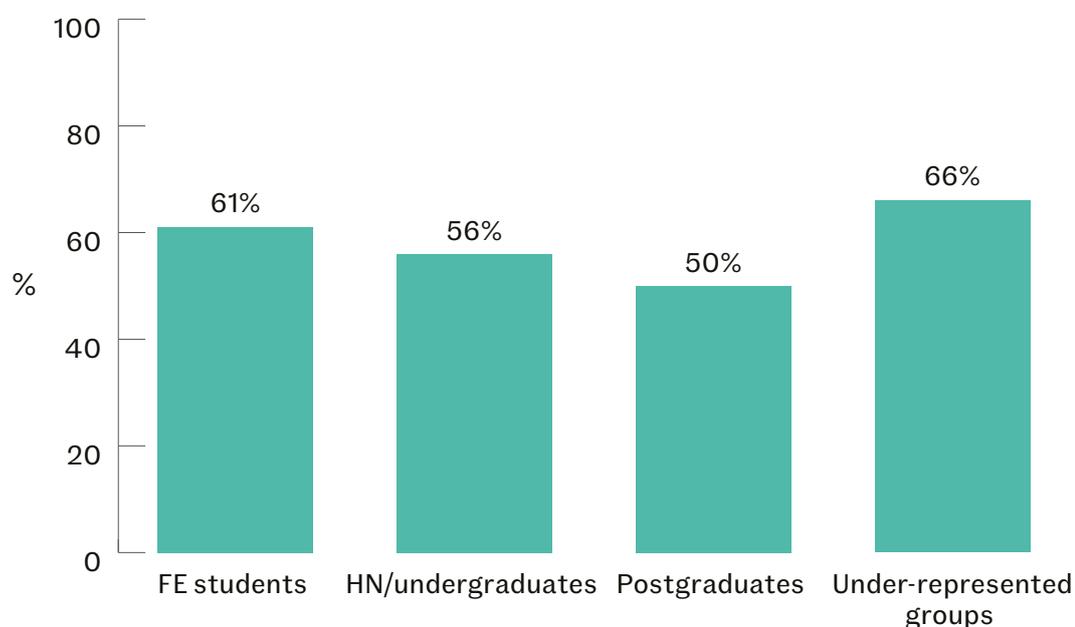
Further and Higher education

Whilst most further and higher education tuition fees are covered for Scottish students, studying at college or university attracts a range of additional costs and expenses. The strain of balancing finances can result in students dropping out before receiving any qualifications. The Student Finance and Wellbeing Study Scotland (2023-2024) explored these issues in detail.

Across all student groups, education-related income on its own was not enough to cover student expenses. Between half and two-thirds of students reported experiencing financial difficulty during the academic year 2023-2024, with further education students and students from under-represented groups - such as student parents, carers, estranged, care-experienced and disabled students - more likely to say this (Figure 6). Students from under-represented groups were also more likely than average to say financial difficulties affected their mental health and wellbeing 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount'. Overall, between half and two-thirds of all student groups reported that financial difficulties had affected their studies 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount'.

Paid work was viewed as being essential to fund living costs. As such, most students were in some form of employment and typically worked more than the 10 to 15 hours per week recommended by Student Information Scotland⁵. Some groups, such as student parents, disabled students and student carers, noted the challenges of combining work with their studies.

Figure 6: Percentage of further and higher education students who reported experiencing financial difficulty (SFWS, 2024)



5. <https://www.studentinformation.gov.scot/students/student-life/studying-and-working>

Crime and victimisation

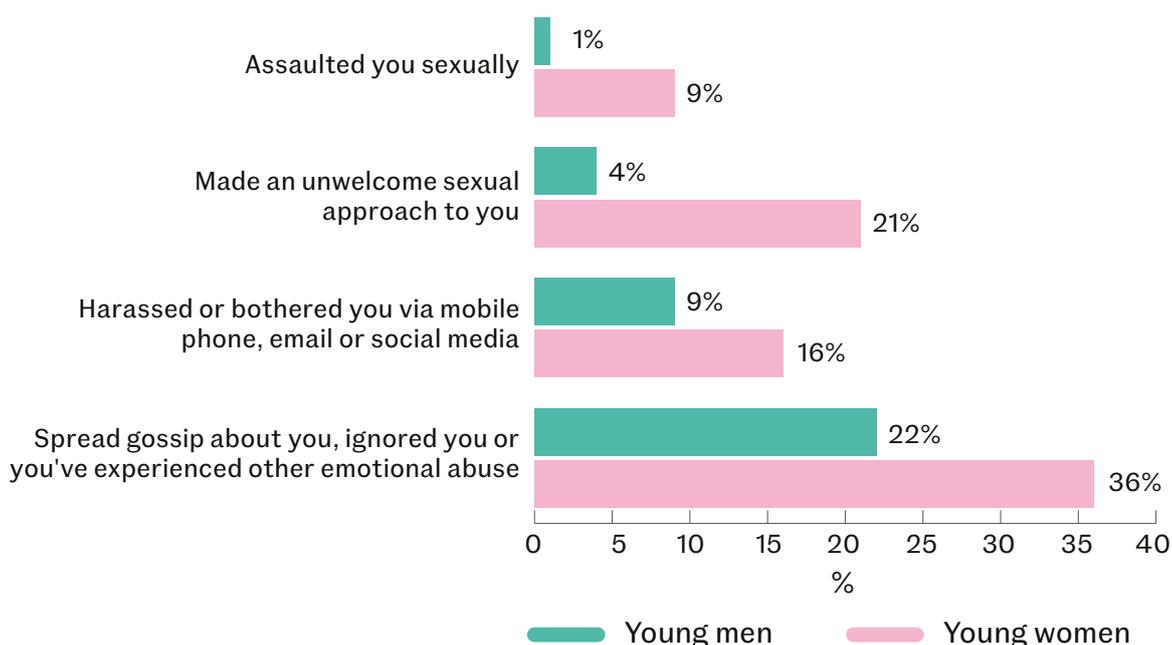
Levels of crime in Scotland are historically low, having been on a downward trend from the 1990s. The most recent data from the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey (SCJS) show that an estimated 1,199,000 crimes occurred in the 12 months from April 2024 to March 2025 and one in five adults (21%) were a victim of at least one crime. The most common crimes were fraud and computer misuse (49% of all crimes) or property related crime (34%). Fewer than a fifth (17%) of crime reported was violent crime.

Experience of crime varied across the population. For example, younger adults were more likely than older adults, and disabled people were more likely than non-disabled people, to be a victim of a crime.

Fewer than a fifth (17%) of all SCJS crimes were estimated to have been reported to the police. The main reasons victims gave for not reporting the crime to the police were that the incident was too trivial, or that the police could not do anything about it.

Gender-based violence has been a key policy and parliamentary focus in recent years. The Growing Up in Scotland study gives some insight into the different victimisation experiences of young women to young men. It found that at age 17, young women were more likely, in the last 12 months, than young men to have experienced emotional abuse (36% compared with 21%), unwelcome sexual advances (21% compared with 4%), harassment via mobile phone, email or social media (16% compared with 9%), and sexual assault (9% compared with 1%, Figure 7).

Figure 7: Percentage of young people who had experienced victimisation in the last 12 months, by sex (GUS Sweep 11, 2025)

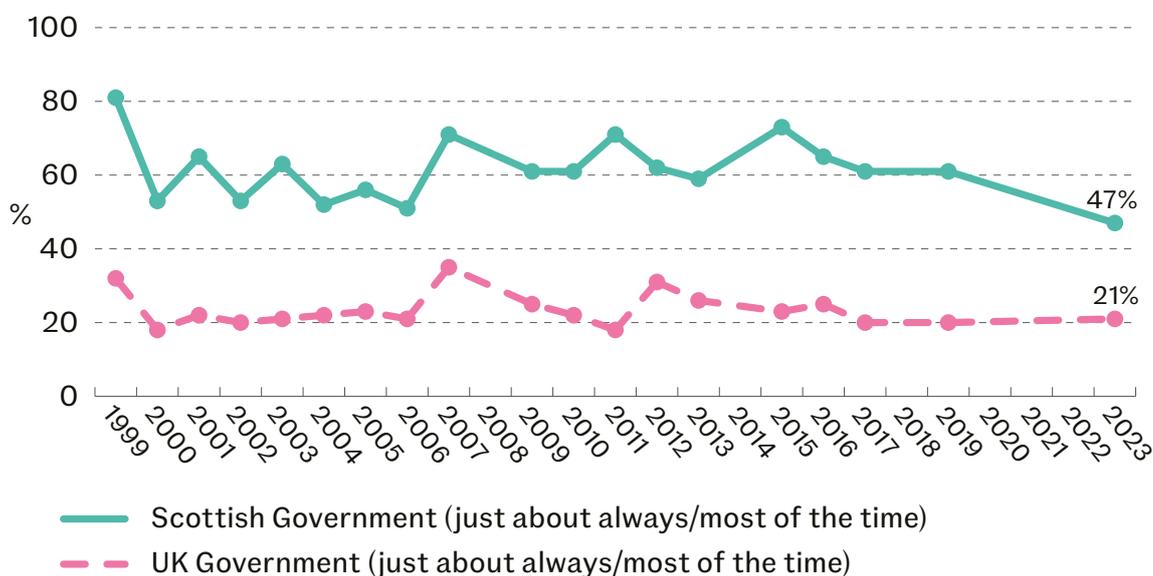


Attitudes to government

Mirroring uniquely low levels of satisfaction with the NHS, data from the Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey in recent years also show that public trust and confidence in government is at an historic low.

In 2023, the proportion of the public who trusted the Scottish Government to work in Scotland's best interests just about always or most of the time reached its lowest level since 1999 at 47%. This was nevertheless double the proportion who trusted the UK Government (21%, Figure 8).

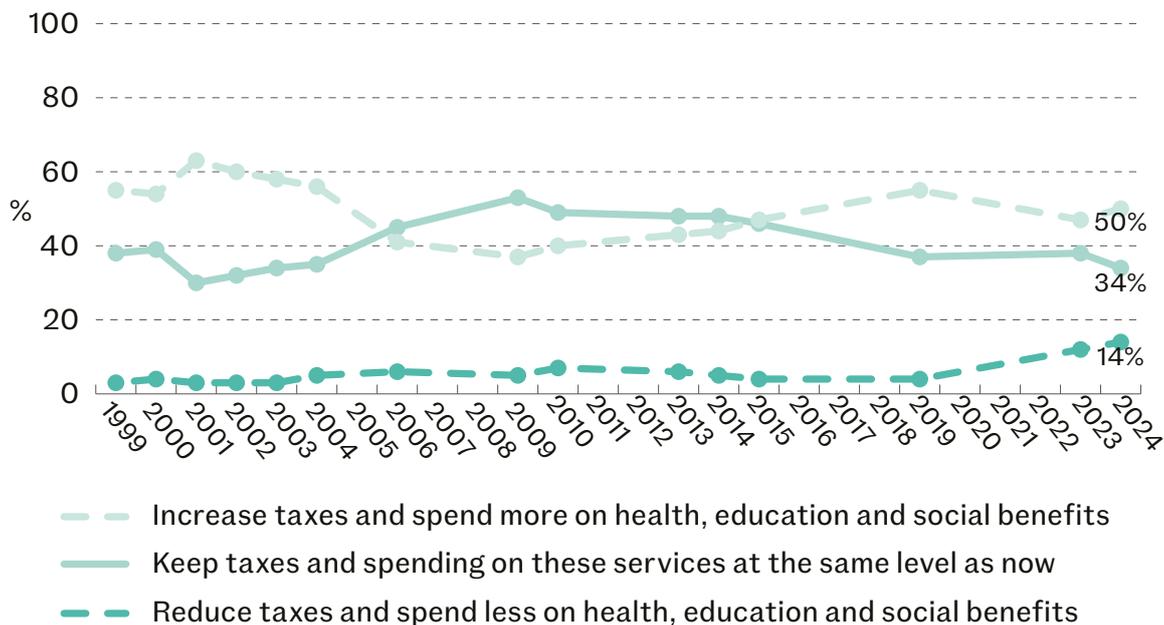
Figure 8: Percentage of people who trusted the Scottish Government and the UK Government to work in Scotland's best interests (SSA, 2023)



Relatedly, there was concern about how well the Scottish Government listen to the views of the public. In 2023, just 36% of people thought the Scottish Government were very good or quite good at listening to people's views before taking decisions gradually dropping from 59% in 2015.

There was broad support for increasing taxes and spending on health, education and social benefits in Scotland. In 2024, 50% of people were behind this (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Public views on tax and spending (SSA, 2024)



References

- [Scottish Health Survey \(SHeS\) \(2024\)](#) is the only annual national source of information on the health and factors relating to the health of the population of Scotland.
- [Vapes in Schools \(2024-26\)](#) is part of the wider NIPS study: Exploring The Retail Availability, Display, And Marketing Of New Nicotine Products In Scotland: A Mixed-Method Study Of Retailers And Secondary School-Aged Adolescents, funded by CSO Scotland. ScotCen is part of the research consortium, led by the University of Stirling. ScotCen has conducted fieldwork with pupils and teachers in four secondary schools in Scotland.
- [Scottish Social Attitudes Survey \(SSA\) \(2023\)](#) asks a representative sample of the population what it's like to live in Scotland and what they think about how Scotland is run. Since 1999 we've been measuring and tracking changes in people's social, political and moral attitudes.
- [Evaluation of the Five Family Payments \(FFP\) \(2025\)](#) is a mixed method study providing insight into the experience and impact of FFP on families and children receiving one or more of the payments.
- [Disability and financial hardship: How disability benefits contribute to the need for food banks in the UK \(2023\)](#) is a qualitative study which provides insight into the drivers of food insecurity among disabled people, the reasons for the overrepresentation of disabled people accessing food banks, and the underclaiming of disability benefits among people in disabled households.
- [Scottish Study of Early Learning and Childcare \(2018-2025\)](#) is a study of children receiving funded Early Learning and Childcare, both before the expansion of funded ELC, in 2018-19, and after the expansion, in 2023-24. Data were collected from parents, from keyworkers about the children, and from ELC setting heads.
- [Early Learning and Childcare \(ELC\) – parents' views and use \(2025\)](#) is a mixed method study providing insight into parents' views and experiences of funded early learning and childcare (ELC) in Scotland.
- [Behaviour in Scottish Schools \(2023\)](#) is the fifth wave of the Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research (BISSR), first undertaken in 2006. BISSR is a mixed method study exploring the headteachers', teachers' and support staff members' views of relationships and behaviour in publicly-funded mainstream schools, as well as the views of key local authority representatives across Scotland.
- [Growing Up in Scotland \(GUS\) \(2005 - present\)](#) is a longitudinal research study, tracking the lives of thousands of young people and their families from birth through to the teenage years and beyond. GUS is a multidisciplinary study which collects a wide range of information about children, young people and their families.
- [Student Finance and Wellbeing Study \(SFWS\) Scotland 2023-2024 \(2024\)](#) is a mixed method study providing insight into students' financial experiences whilst studying at college and university in Scotland in the academic year 2023-2024.
- [Scottish Crime and Justice Survey \(SCJS\) \(2024/25\)](#) is a large-scale social survey which asks people about their experiences and perceptions of crime in Scotland, including crimes that haven't been reported to, or recorded by the police, as well as public opinions of policing and the justice system.
- [Scottish Social Attitudes: 25 years of devolution in Scotland \(2025\)](#) is an overview of public attitudes and reactions to governance and public services over the last 25 years.

Other related reports

- [Evaluation of perinatal and infant mental health care in Scotland \(2025\)](#) is a mixed method study which explores the views of women and health professionals in relation to new Perinatal and Infant Mental Health (PIMH) Services in Scotland.
- [DBI under 18s \(2025\)](#) is a mixed method study which explored whether Distress Brief Intervention (DBI) can be an effective intervention for young people aged under 18.

