Key facts about vision impairment in children and young people

A number of sight loss sector organisations have assessed and agreed a series of key facts for everyone to use. The way they are worded should not be altered in any way: doing so may make them wrong.

Please contact info@vision2020uk.org.uk if you have any questions about the statistics used here.
Key facts

1. Two in every 1,000 (0.2%) children and young people up to the age of 25 in the UK have vision impairment. This is based on the WHO international classification of childhood vision impairment (Appendix A). This estimate does not include children with 'mild' vision impairment whose level of vision is better than the acuity threshold in the WHO definition, although some of these children may have other types of difficulties with their vision that – particularly when combined with other disabilities/SEN – can have implications for the child's learning and development. For example, eye movement problems, or problems with the way that the brain interprets visual information.

2. An estimated 0.05% (5 in every 10,000) of children up to the age of 16 are severely sight impaired/blind. This group of children is included within the overall 0.2% estimate (Ref: 17).

3. Those at higher risk of vision impairment are very premature and very low birth weight babies (Refs: 6,15,19), children from the most economically deprived social backgrounds (Refs: 6, 17,18, 20) children and young people from some South Asian ethnic groups (Refs: 6,17, 20), and those with learning difficulties (Ref: 5).

4. An estimated 0.031% (31 in every 100,000) children and young people up to the age of 19 in the UK have co-occurring vision and hearing impairments (Ref 21). The WHO does not have a definition of Deafblindness, and as Deafblindness represents a combination of two sensory impairments it is not possible to specify levels of loss of visual acuity or decibel loss as the impairment is the interaction of both forms of impairment. However, this statistic applies to CYP who are more severely impaired.

5. Approximately 5.6% of children with learning difficulties are estimated to have vision impairment (Ref: 5). A definition of ‘learning difficulties’ may be found in the SEND Code of Practice:
“Support for learning difficulties may be required when children and young people learn at a slower pace than their peers, even with appropriate differentiation. Learning difficulties cover a wide range of needs, including moderate learning difficulties (MLD), severe learning difficulties (SLD), where children are likely to need support in all areas of the curriculum and associated difficulties with mobility and communication, through to profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), where children are likely to have severe and complex learning difficulties as well as a physical disability or sensory impairment.” (Ref: 4, p86)

6. The estimated numbers of children and young people with vision impairment in the UK and England (calculated from the ONS mid-2013 population estimates, Ref: 16) are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>England</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ages 0-16:</td>
<td>25,660</td>
<td>Ages 0-16: 21,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 0-18:</td>
<td>28,760</td>
<td>Ages 0-18: 24,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 0-25:</td>
<td>40,770</td>
<td>Ages 0-25: 34,360</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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For further information about population estimates see the RNIB Sight Loss Data Tool Ref: 19).

7. In England, there are more than 25,000 children and young people supported by local authority Visual Impairment (VI) specialist education services (Ref: 12,13). Included in this figure are 9,535 aged 0-17 registered as blind or partially sighted (Ref: 11). The registration figures under-represent the true number as not all children and young people who are eligible are registered, and some local authorities do not hold a register for children.

8. Around 20 per cent of young people with vision impairment have additional special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and a further 30 per cent have complex needs (Ref: 12).

9. It has been proposed that the population of children with vision impairment can be thought of as two distinct sub-populations: those with and those without additional SEND (although there is wide variation/considerable diversity within each of these two sub-groups)(Ref: 18).
Experiences of health, education and social care are different for children with vision impairment as their sole disability, compared to those with vision impairment and additional SEND. Children with vision impairment and additional SEND are also at increased risk of poorer outcomes on a range of wellbeing and educational outcome measures (Ref: 7).

10. Two thirds of childhood vision impairment was present from birth or diagnosed in the first year of life (Ref: 17). The causes of vision impairment in childhood are very different from the causes in adults. Many children and young people have more than one sight disorder causing their vision impairment. The most common causes are: Cerebral vision impairment (CVI), disorders of the optic nerve (particularly optic atrophy), and disorders of the retina. The single most common cause is CVI, which is where there has been damage to the visual pathways in the brain, affecting the way that visual information is processed. CVI accounts for up to 48% of blindness and between 32% and 45% of all vision impairment in children (Ref: 14,15).

11. Children and young people with vision impairment are more likely than children without vision impairment to live in families that experience social and economic disadvantage (Ref: 7).

12. Approximately 7 in 10 children and young people with vision impairment are educated in mainstream schools and around one in 3 in generic special schools. Very few are in schools designated for pupils with vision impairment; most children in these schools have additional complex needs (Ref: 12).

13. The educational attainment of pupils with vision impairment up to the age of 16 (as a group) is higher than any other SEND group, but not as good as pupils with no SEND. However, the gap is far smaller for pupils with vision impairment as their only SEND (Refs: 1, 2). Pupils with vision impairment feature highly (relative to the size of the population) among the group of pupils identified as gifted and talented (Ref: 3).

14. Around one in 4 young people aged 16 to 25 with vision impairment aged are students. This is the same proportion of the general population of 16 to 25-year olds and includes young people in further and in higher education (Ref: 9).
15. Around 4,600 students aged 16 to 18 in colleges of further education have vision impairment. This is 5 in every 1,000 students (Ref: 9).

16. Just over 1,000 first year higher education/university students in the UK have vision impairment. This is 15 in every 10,000 students (0.15%) (Ref: 8).

17. 44% of young people aged 16 to 25 who are long term disabled with a seeing difficulty appear not to be in employment, education or training (NEET). They are twice as likely to be NEET as the general population of 16 to 25 year olds (Ref: 10).

References


5. Emerson E and Robertson J (2011) The estimated prevalence of visual impairment among people with learning disabilities in the UK. CeDR, Lancaster University/Learning Disabilities Observatory report for RNIB and SeeAbility


Appendix A

World Health Organisation (WHO) definition of blindness and visual impairment

Blindness is defined as a presenting visual acuity of less than 3/60, or a corresponding visual field loss to less than 10° in the better eye with the available correction.

Severe visual impairment is defined as a presenting visual acuity of between less than 6/60 and 3/60

Moderate visual impairment is defined as a presenting visual acuity of less than 6/18 to 6/60. In this document “visual impairment” includes both severe and moderate visual impairment.

For further information see: http://www.who.int/blindness/en/