



How spouse and partner migration rules affect the mental health and wellbeing of children

Qualitative interviews with children aged 7-16



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## About Coram

This report is published by the **Coram Institute for Children**, the dedicated research and development organisation for children.

Established as the Foundling Hospital in 1739, Coram is today a vibrant charity group of specialist organisations, supporting hundreds of thousands of children, young people and families every year. We champion children's rights and wellbeing, making lives better through legal support, advocacy, adoption and our range of therapeutic, educational and cultural programmes.

Coram's vision for children is a society where every child has the best possible chance in life, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Building on our legacy as the first and longest continuing children's charity, the new **Coram Institute for Children** is instrumental in realising this vision by acting as a catalyst for change and collaboration, seeking evidence-based solutions to the challenges facing children in the 21st century in policy, law and practice.

More information about Coram can be found here: [www.coram.org.uk](http://www.coram.org.uk)

## About Reunite Families

Reunite Families UK (RFUK) envisions an immigration system that is fair, humane, and free from discrimination. We advocate for policies that support the reunification of couples and families in the UK. Our mission includes helping and supporting those affected by spouse visa rules, raising awareness about the challenges these families face, and promoting positive narratives about migrants and bi-national couples and families. RFUK is grounded in values of family, inclusivity, fairness, knowledge, empowerment, and community. These values guide our efforts to create a supportive environment and advocate for systemic change.

We provide a safe, non-judgemental space where individuals can access help and advice on the visa application process. The organisation offers support through personal experience, helping others navigate the complex Home Office requirements. We work closely with migration and legal organisations, such as Fragomen, to offer expert advice and guidance. We also signpost individuals to non-migration organisations that address related social issues. A core part of RFUK's mission is to highlight the realities facing families bound by the spouse visa rules and promote a positive narrative around migrants in the UK. More widely, we actively advocate for a fairer and more humane immigration system.



Too often policy is formulated without considering its impact on children's rights. Following its most recent review of the UK's compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2023, the UN Committee recommended that the UK develop mandatory child rights impact assessment procedures for legislation and policies relevant to children.

Through the work of our legal centre we have sought to impress upon decision-makers that considering children's best interests must be part of developing family migration policy. We hope that such consideration will be evident in the Government's response to the Migration Advisory Committee's recent report on the Minimum Income Requirement for family migration.

Equally, the systems that shape children's lives are too often formulated without hearing their voices; in individual decisions that affect their own lives, too, children are not always heard.

In our work at Coram, we champion the voice of the child – in the care system and family law context and beyond. Through the work of our legal centre, we see that it is the immigration system in particular that is not alert to children's views.

In this report, Coram's Impact & Evaluation team have undertaken the kind of careful research with children for which we seek to be known, providing important and rich commentary. We are proud to be able to play this role in amplifying the voices of children.

It shows us that the family migration rules are creating relationship issues, particularly with regard to language and culture. Children's sense of self and wellbeing and future-building are impacted by awareness of the rules' effect on their family and there are real challenges of reunification, which show parallels to our work with children who have been in care or where a parent has been in prison, for example.

Above all, it evidences the life-determining import of Home Office decisions for children's lives, identities and futures. The result of these state decisions – long-term separation of the child from their parent – has parallels to the decisions made in the family justice arena, where the welfare of the child is paramount. We would proffer that the immigration system has something to learn about how to consider children's family lives from the family justice system.

It is important to see these children's experiences in context. This is not simply about formulating better immigration policy that is lawful and takes real children's lives and futures seriously.

It is also about achieving the Government's other policy objectives of enabling families to reunite so they can earn and relieve children from poverty; meeting the target for children reaching a Good Level of Development; improving children's mental health and wellbeing.

Improving opportunities for children means supporting all children – including those (very often British) children who happen to have a foreign parent.

We would like to thank Reunite Families UK for entrusting us with this research, as well as Paul Hamlyn Foundation for funding this important study. Particular thanks to Caroline, Tamsin and Matteo for the valued collaboration.

Most of all we are grateful to the families and especially the children who took part in the interviews. It is not easy to talk about the effects of the family migration rules. We feel honoured to have been given their trust.

Now it is incumbent on us all to hear them.

Dr Carol Homden, CBE  
Chief Executive, Coram



# Introduction

This research centres the child's voice in family migration policy.

Reunite Families UK (RFUK) commissioned Coram Centre for Impact to interview children about their experience of the spouse and partner migration rules. These rules impose a minimum income that parents need to earn before their partner can live with the family in the UK, known as the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR).

We spoke to nine children between seven and sixteen years old, with half being under eleven. Although each family's situation was unique, there were many shared experiences.

For most of the children we spoke to, the MIR resulted in a period during which one or both of their parents were living in a different country. In some cases, this separation was for most of the child's life. During these periods, one parent had to care for the children alone while also working enough to earn above the MIR and save up for expensive visa application fees. These combined pressures often meant that the children I spoke to had very limited contact with their non-resident parent during the separation.

Some children we spoke to had been reunited with one or both parents, but others remained apart from them. Separation from the father was most common, with the mother typically providing both care and financial support. We also spoke to children who were British citizens but not currently living in the UK, because they were not able to reside here with both parents.

This report uses direct quotes from children wherever possible. Young children do not always speak in full clear sentences, so researchers have added context or slightly changed the word order to make quotes more readable and accessible. We conducted simple thematic analysis on 10 transcripts (including one repeat interview) to develop the key findings.

A short version of this report was submitted as evidence for the review of the spouse/partner minimum income requirement (MIR) by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) in 2024.

# Executive summary

- **Non-resident parent relationship:** Children we spoke to felt that separation due to the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR) had negatively affected the relationship with their non-resident parent/s. Children talked about the difficulties of not knowing when they would be able to next see their parent/s and having phone contact only. Children reported that disrupted family relationships had a negative impact on their wellbeing.
- **Resident parent or extended family relationships:** Some children spoke about the difficulties of living in single parent families or with other family members due to the MIR. Even some of the youngest children we spoke to were aware of the impact of the MIR on family finances, wellbeing, and work-life balance.
- **Mental wellbeing:**
  - The MIR caused children **worry, stress, uncertainty and anxiety**. Children reported worrying about the parent who could not live with them, and the parent/carer who had to look after children without support. Children reported physical symptoms of anxiety, sleep disturbances, selective mutism, and being unable to focus at school.
  - Children also reported feelings of **sadness, guilt and loneliness** due to the stress and separation caused by the MIR. Often, feelings of loneliness came from missing the parent who could not live with them and was exacerbated by the resident parent having to work long hours to meet the MIR.
- Some children found their family situation **very hard to talk about**. Some did not want to share how they were feeling with their parents because they didn't want to cause them stress. Other children wanted to change the subject when talking to researchers. In interviews, we spent time building a rapport with young people before discussing sensitive subjects, which worked well.
- **Financial strain:** Children felt very aware of the extra financial strain on their family. Often this meant parents working long hours, children going without things their peers had, or the family not being able to visit the country their parent/s lived in or where they grew up. Some children reported trying to earn money themselves, to help with visa costs.
- **School and friends:** Children spoke about how having a stressful family situation could affect school and making friends. Often children had to move schools multiple times or had a parent leave or arrive just before an important time at school such as exams. Some children felt disruption had impacted their academic performance.
- **Culture and identity:** Children told us about how growing up in a family affected by spouse and partner visa rules have an effect on their sense of identity, for example, they may grow up not sharing a language with one of their parents, or not be able to visit the country they grew up in (UK or elsewhere).

## Research design

We designed creative, child-led interviews to have with children who were aged seven and/or key stage two and above. The interviews explored children and young people's experiences of living in a family affected by spouse and partner migration rules.

The in-person interviews used life-story mapping, a narrative and creative interview techniques, where the researcher and participant use drawing to document autobiographical histories (Mannay, 2016). Our resource, pictured below, was also influenced by body mapping (Oosterhoff, 2023), where the researcher uses a drawing of a figure to document and symbolise how thoughts, feelings and experiences are embodied. We used this creative resource to prompt the children to think about the things going on around them, but also what is going on 'inside' or how it affects them. We worked with the child to create an image which prompted them to reflect and talk about how their family situation affects their mental health.



We conducted online interviews with some children if they were not based in the UK (due to the MIR). We did not use creative visual methods in online interviews for practical reasons and were instead focused on helping the child to influence or lead topics of discussion wherever possible.

In-depth interview techniques such as prompts, follow-ups, encouragement and requesting more information were applied. Depending on the age and needs of children involved in interviews, aids such as toys, images, or other creative resources complemented questioning. We aimed to make interviews relaxed and spacious so that children and young people would feel able to share, using narrative methods such as storytelling or repeated interviews. This allowed children the opportunity to add new or more detailed information wherever possible.

## Recruitment

Children aged seven to seventeen affected by the spouse and partner migration rules were recruited by RFUK from those who responded to a previous survey and consented to being interviewed. We worked with RFUK on recruitment criteria, to make sure we spoke to a range of families in different situations (including some who are currently separated and some who have been reunited) and children from a range of different age groups.

## Data collection

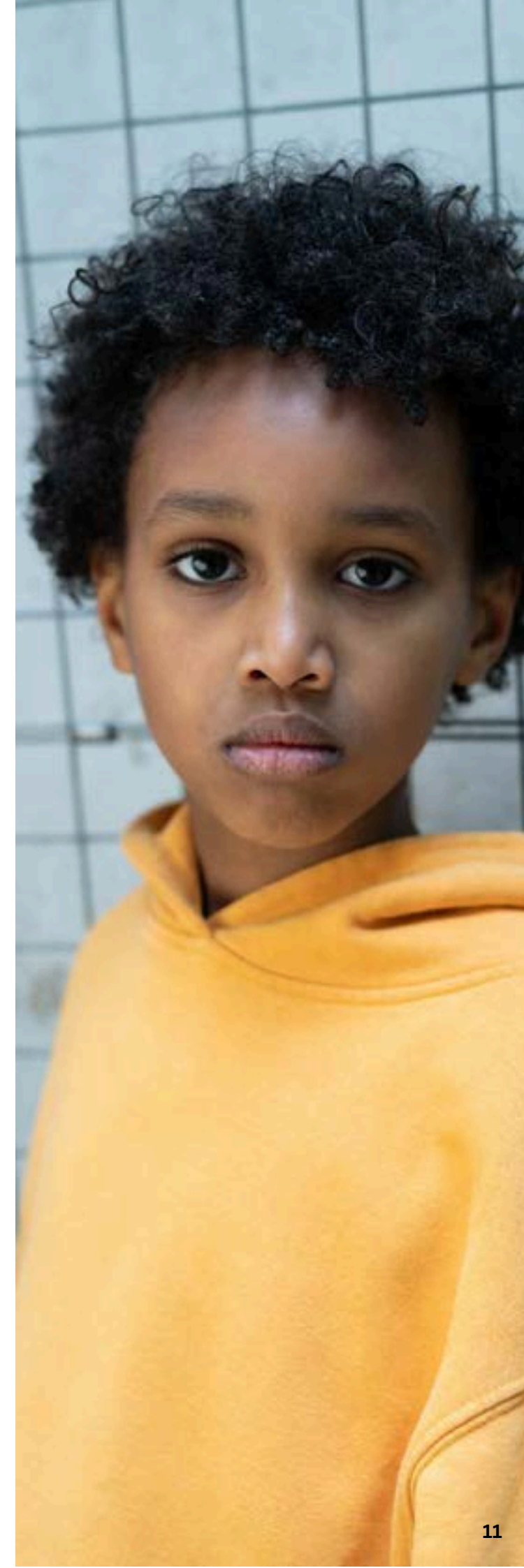
We interviewed nine children between October 2024 and April 2025, with the majority taking place in November 2024. The interviews took place in family homes, at school, or online. Interviews were recorded with consent from the child and parent.

## Data analysis

Two researchers analysed ten interview transcripts (from nine children) using inductive thematic analysis. First, interview transcripts were reviewed to identify initial themes. These themes were then organised in Excel to identify recurring or overarching themes. A second review was conducted to solidify the initial themes, which were then used to code the transcripts. During the coding process, interview transcripts were reviewed, and segments of text were assigned codes. Finally, the coded transcripts were analysed, and the themes were written up to summarise the findings associated with each code.

## Ethics

Coram's Research Ethics Committee, chaired by Professor Jonathan Portes, reviewed and approved this research in October 2024.





## Family separation and the relationship with the non-resident parent

Children living in families affected by spouse and partner migration rules told us about their relationship with the parent that they could not live with, and how it has affected them. **Some children had a close relationship with the non-resident parent, leading them to miss that parent deeply and worry about their safety or loneliness. These children often struggled with feelings of loss and sadness.**

Children talked about the impact of their parents missing key life stages like starting school, birthdays, or Christmas. Children looked forward to visits, which were often limited if they did happen. Children talked about not being able to see their parent for long periods of time because of the financial pressures that the MIR caused on the family, stopping them from affording travel.

"I feel so sad, without seeing my dad... [not having] mother around me. [...] So, so sad."

"I was like happy [when dad was here] but I knew he'd have to go back eventually. So that made me upset quite often, yeah. And then when he did eventually go, it made me really upset."

"... she [mother who now lives in another country due to MIR] has been here [UK] my entire life. Every birthday party. She's never gone away. She's always been the one here [...] so in the recent year, her not being here is a little bit tricky... I can remember her at every single one of my birthday parties from one [year of age] ... this year, she wasn't here to see my [most recent birthday]"

"It often feels a bit like when we're having things like meals and doing family activities it feels a bit more empty because he's not there."

"We were disappointed that [Dad] couldn't come [to the UK] and sad. Because we only had one like adult in the house and we were used to having three and having him like playing around. Yeah, it was a bit sad and nervous [time]."

"...it's [Christmas] gonna be difficult for [...] everyone because we're used to my mum there but what can you do?"

**Children also spoke of how separation and limited contact strained their relationship with the non-resident parent, which led some children to feel frustrated, confused, or upset.**

Some children were not able to grow up in the same country as a parent and spent significant time apart because of the MIR. In some cases, this was most of a child's life, and the children had limited memories of their parents.

Some children faced barriers when talking to their parent/s (for example, if they did not share a language) or did not enjoy phone contact.

"Not that I'd forgotten about him, but like it made me feel sad that ... I had got used to him not being around as much."

"He was just like... he wasn't really talking to me much. He was just there, which is quite annoying cause I haven't seen my dad after like a few years..."

Some children we spoke to told us about how much they valued **phone contact with their parent**, even if they found it difficult.

Other children did not enjoy phone contact, as it highlighted their parent was missing and/or they could not talk easily or comfortably. Phone calls were also difficult because of time differences, working hours or having poor reception. Children were clear that phone calls were no replacement for seeing their parents in person.

"It didn't [being on the phone] feel the same as him actually being there and being able to talk to him. It was just like, really hard for me to cope because he was just there - in front of me, on the phone, - and I felt like I couldn't say the things I could if he was actually in front of me."

"It's not like she's just in another room when you can go and talk to her whenever 'cause you have a certain time schedule because of the two-hour difference"

"I don't really get to talk to her [mum] that much. It's my mom and my dad talking [on the phone], because I don't feel comfortable talking to my mom with my dad and my brother in the room."

"Yeah we video call or we just voice call her [mum]. We say "love you, goodnight." And if there's time, we'll talk to her for a bit."

Some children also spoke about how their relationship with a parent **remained difficult even after they had been reunited** because of challenges related to the disruption. Often, this was because parents had to work long hours to afford visa fees.

Child: "First, he worked [number] days a week and he comes back very late... We didn't see him that much [...] It's probably about two days we can only see him in a week."

Another child cited "It's not good" that their father is now living in the home, explaining that they found it difficult to help their Dad adjust to life in the UK after living away for so long.

## How the MIR affects the child's relationship with the resident parent and other family members

Children reported having good relationships with their resident parent or carer/s but said that living in single parent households or with other relatives was difficult.

Many of the children interviewed recognised how much their caregiver had to juggle due to the demands of meeting the MIR and described how this had impacted their relationship with them. For example, parents often had to work long hours and see their child/ren less to meet the MIR or to save up to visit the parent in another country.

"I wonder like how she is such a good mum when she's single [...] I think she's doing well. Not having like her husband here to help because she needs to work [so], I'm at wraparound [care]..."

"I never saw [mum] throughout the whole day after I came home from school and yeah, she also didn't get paid that much or like not well enough to get to the places... like [country] to see my dad."

"...[parent] wants to spend more time with me, but she can't really spend more time with me because she's working all the time."

Children also talked about how the spouse and visa rules affected their relationship with extended family. Some had grown up with certain family members and now missed seeing them or did not speak to them often because they lived in a different country which they could not afford to visit often.

Others were grateful for the support that extended family provided parents. For example, some extended family members provided financial resources for temporary family reunification such as holidays or visits. Some children struggled living with grandparents as they got older and sick. Some children we spoke to felt responsible and aware of their older relative's health, which was heightened by their parent/s being in another country or working long hours.

Interviewer: "Is there anybody that you talk to about how you feel?"

[draws grandma]

Child: "My grandma. Her heart will stop pumping if I don't hug her because she will feel sad"

"My [non-resident parent] and my two grandparents have always been there for my care and upbringing from an early age... both my grandparents are very old now and their health conditions don't permit them to look after me like before"

"She [grandparent] is really lovely to be around. So I was happy to be living with her, and I miss her a lot."

"I still get to see him [dad] if my Grandma paid for him to be on holiday"

### **Mental wellbeing: the impacts of the MIR caused children worry, stress and anxiety**

The children we spoke to told us about how the visa rules caused them stress, worry and anxiety. For many children, the visa rules had caused instability, leading families to move multiple times.

Interviewer: "So what was that like, when you moved?"

Child: "Uh...it was like... I was nervous, a bit nervous. It's a new country, new people. I've not been there except when I was born."

Children told us that they were very aware of the stress that their parents were under. Children were concerned about how hard their parents were working to meet the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR), the financial strain on the family, the emotional toll of separation on their parents' mental health, and their parents' safety in another country.

"It was worrying to me that like I didn't know how [dad] was doing or how he was feeling or coping with it [separation in another country, living alone]."

"So my dad struggled with his emotions as well...when me and my brother here we are good distractions from [his] emotion, but he's gonna be here alone by himself which is scary for me."

"I got nervous and disappointed and scared that I didn't actually know what was going on there [the country where child's dad resides] until I saw a thing on the newspaper [...] Yeah, I was scared... it was scary."

"... it was very sad when he [dad] left, and I also felt really bad that he was alone because at least I had my mum and my sister. But he was just, you know, living alone and didn't really have any of us. And that made me feel really like, sad and upset."

"I look forward to when he [dad] comes, but sometimes I get a bit worried that he's not gonna be able to come. Maybe because someone in [country] gets hurt, because all my family's there..."  
"He's got like, no family with him, [...] he needs his family with him, and I was nervous at that time. I was scared and sad. Yeah, it was hard."

Children told us about the effect this worry had on them. Children reported sleep disturbances, physical symptoms of anxiety, and being unable to concentrate or focus at school. Often, the stress of the family situation meant that other difficult moments for children, such as school exams or making new friends, became much more difficult.

"So sometimes when I'm at school, I just think about, like, how he's not gonna be there to pick me up or anything. And I'm not gonna be able to see him for a long time."

"Most of the time at night, because there aren't things that distract me [...] At night, when you're trying to sleep, there's not much that tunes that out."

"[When I am nervous about parent] my tummy is like... It hurts sometimes and like bubbles and make me feel scared."

"There was like things going on in school that weren't great and I think at that time the situation with our family made everything else that went wrong in my life feel 10 times worse and so it was stressful, and I think it had quite a big effect on my mental health."

Interviewer: "And what kind of things do you find yourself tending to daydream about [at school]?"

Child: "Not being in class, of course. What I'm going to have to do when I get home. What I can do to make life a little bit easier for my dad..."

Some children had pre-existing diagnoses or symptoms of anxiety, which were made worse by periods of separation, or seeing the family go through a stressful time.

"I've had anxiety for a while, like basically my whole life. And I think the sort of added stress of that [family situation] kind of made my anxiety during that time a lot worse."

"My anxiety was like, it just like came and went sometimes, sometimes all the day it was really bad anxiety and on other days it was fine. But it was something I couldn't control."

Some children said that they avoided showing how they felt about being separated from their parent or talking to their parents about their own worries because they didn't want to cause them any more stress. Other children found it very hard to talk to the interviewer about the absent parent or the period of separation. In a few cases of the children we spoke to, they said that the separation from family members and stress of the situation led to selective mutism, where they were unable to speak in certain situations.

"[While parent was working a lot to meet MIR] When I was on my own, I felt like there was nothing to do and I felt like really mentally drained from it I guess. 'Cause like there's really, no one that I could talk to. And if my mom did talk to me, it was just like a brief in the moment [...] like I couldn't talk to her about my anxiety or anything because I didn't want to go too much in depth without her being carried away with me instead of her work."

"[At school] I don't like to show that I'm feeling nervous. I just feel nervous inside. I don't pretend to be, like me, but I'm actually nervous."

### **Mental wellbeing: the impacts of the MIR caused children sadness, loneliness and guilt**

Young people reported feelings of sadness on behalf of what their parent/family was going through, longing for the parent they were separated from and loneliness due to a resident parent's absence as they worked to meet the financial demands of the minimum income requirement. Some young people told us that they felt bad or guilty about leaving a parent in another country, or without support. Children who were able to have in-person contact with their parent/s were upset as they had to separate again afterwards.



"Every now and then I'll open it [cupboard] cause I'm looking for something and then I see her clothes and I smell her perfume... it's just sad"

"Memories that I have with him [dad] make me happy but like sad. Memories like when we were in [non-resident parent's country of origin] and we had to go back to England here. It was hard because like me, my brother and my mum were like crying a lot. So we were missing him and we were only like 10 meters away, just leaving"

"He [dad] doesn't really like to show his feelings as much. So it was kind of difficult to really know if he was OK, [...] But then the times where I could tell that he wasn't [ok] it really upset me because I know it had to be like quite bad for him to be showing it."

For some young people, the family situation was incredibly difficult and upsetting to talk or even think about. Children reported trying hard to distract themselves or avoid the subject. In interviews, we noticed some children wanted to change subjects whenever a certain issue or period in their life was brought up.

"...but stuff like just talking about my dad can sometimes get me upset"

"[I] try my best to avoid thinking about all the stuff [the family situation] because I get sad and I don't like getting sad in front of people anyway"

"Since my mom left, he's a single parent in [country of residence] [...] Inflation rates going up, it's a little bit difficult to talk to him about leaving [to join family]."

A few of the children we spoke to had developed coping mechanisms to negative feelings. For example, some reached out to a friend when distressed about family matters, or collected items, such as drawings, that they would eventually give to non-resident parent during visits.

"I've got a box with pictures and drawing and something I want to give him [dad]"

## How the MIR affects family finances and income

The children we interviewed demonstrated a great level of awareness of their parents' financial situation. Children reported noticing that their parents were struggling to balance earning and saving enough alongside childcare responsibilities. For some children, this extended to being aware of the cost of the visa and the MIR policy explicitly.

"I feel ... stressed out and worry about [dad] because he works so much to meet up with his financial obligations to me and the rest of the family. However, next year I'm prayerfully hopeful for him to be able to meet up with the minimum financial requirement for my [visa] application"

"I was born in [UK] and then like we moved to [country] for a bit because that's where my family originally was, and I think we moved back. But my dad couldn't come because we couldn't afford the visa at the time."

"I've met [local MP] before [...] she said she was gonna find my mom a job earning up to £38,700, but...only 30 people can like get that much [...] like 30% of the people in the world"

Child: [Writes and reads out] "I hear my brother say the government is stupid"

Other children noticed that they were missing out and not able to afford things that others could, such as new clothes.

Most importantly for the children we spoke to, a lack of money often meant children could not go on holidays to see their parent/s or the country they grew up in.

"We barely go to places outside of England because, like, we can't really like afford to go out like to that extent. Because it's just my mum at the moment. And yeah, so quite hard. Like just having a mum that can just do everything."

"There was, like cracks everywhere in the wall and there's like it's like mold somewhere like the corners of the house."

"Yeah, like sometimes we would try like a lot to save up for holidays to go [country] to see my dad [...] and we couldn't afford them at all"

In some cases, young people felt some responsibility for the financial burden and wanted to help, which could increase worry or stress (covered in more detail in previous section).

"I occasionally sell it [crafts young person makes] to make a little bit more cash on my side so that my dad doesn't have to deal with stuff that I want to get. So I want to get a new pair of shoes or a new shirt or something or I want to buy candy...I make my own money to do it, make it a little bit easier for him because he already has [sibling] to deal with and himself to feed."

## How the MIR affects children's experience of school and making friends

Children told us that moving schools and adjusting to a different education system, language or culture without both/one parent or carer could cause stress and uncertainty. Sometimes this stress affected academic performance or how children made friends at school. Children told us that having to go through important life stages without a parent was upsetting.

"I've moved schools quite a bit and every time I'm... I get really, really anxious about it."

"I was feeling ... scared and nervous with the new people in the school and children that I didn't know."

"I joined [school year], and my dad wasn't with me at the time."

Interviewer: "Do you think there's any other parts of school that having a stressful family situation has affected?"

Child: "... some of the tests, I'll often just like, sit there and cry basically cause I can't do this. It's so overwhelming..."

"My dad left like a week before [school test]. So it was like really stressful. And I wasn't able to achieve as much as I could..."

Some children preferred school in one country or felt that opportunities were limited, and would rather attend school where one parent was, but had to live in a certain country due to their/parents' migration status.

"And at first I was really, really sad to move away from [country] because [...] I'd made like a lot of new friends and I was really excited to like finish school. So moving away at first was kind of, I guess it felt like a bit of a nightmare..."

"Moreover, the education level in this country is limited and I am looking for an opportunity to prepare myself for a better life when I join my dad."

"...especially in secondary school, it was a bit of I guess, a culture shock because I feel like the schools here [country], they're usually smaller. So coming from a school where it was like 100 people to like over 2000 was a bit scary. And there was... I met people who came from, like, very different places and had very different ideas about the world."



"When I join [parent] my future would bright because I will be able to complete my school. I will be able to take care of myself for the future"

Children told us about how a stressful family situation and moving countries without both parents could lead them to struggle with making friends. Children also talked about missing good friends they had made in one country after they moved away, and how hard it was to stay in touch. Financial pressures caused by visa requirements affected what families could afford, leading some children to feel insecure or jealous of their peers.

"[When first coming to UK] I never really made like that many friends. [...]. It was really difficult because, like, I didn't really understand why I was always the one chosen last and it made me like really sad about it."

"Took me a while to make friends. I can't remember when I made friends, but it took a long time."

"It's just like my friends around me had all these things and then I was the only one that didn't have anything. And that was all due to the fact that she was trying to save up to see my dad. [...] They still remained my friends, but I always been like a little bit jealous of them sometimes."

"We [friends from UK] stay in touch, but it is really difficult [...] it makes me miss them a lot [...] just not seeing them and not being able to hang out or do things we used to do is it's really difficult."

### How the MIR impacts cultural identity

There was some reference to identity and cultural heritage in the interviews we had with children and young people separated from their family members or country of origin due to lack of funds to meet the minimum income requirements.

The MIR seems to have an impact on some young people's ability to connect with different parts of their cultural identity, and sense of belonging.

Some children found it hard to adapt to life in different countries, particularly without the support of both parents. Other children found it hard if a parent was struggling to adapt to life in the UK (often exacerbated by not having been able to spend much time in the UK before moving, due to visa costs).

"I would also say Mummy could you please say this to Daddy? Can you please tell Daddy that I've got the picture for him and then she would translate it for me"

"I do miss like going to [country where child grew up]. But like as I said, we can't really like afford it at the moment because there's only one person in the house that can supply that money, it's often like really hard. Because I really want like that nostalgic feeling again, and just like being on the beach, cause I really like the beaches as well."

Mum: "Why is it difficult that [dad] lives with us?"

Child: "Because we have to teach them all the things, yeah. [...] A lot [...] Every day, every day."

"Like growing up, when I was here [another country], England was always in my head was kind of a magical place. [...] And moving there definitely made it feel less magical..."

"Especially in secondary school, it was a bit of I guess, a culture shock"

"I felt uncomfortable and it was quite cold. When we first moved we didn't have that many clothes to wear. Like when I first arrived here, it was like on the... we arrived on a Friday and I was going to school on Monday and it was difficult. Very very hard."

"...coming back after much longer period of time, it felt like nothing was really the same and we weren't in the same house and it was just weird."





Children in families affected by the MIR told us about the challenges they faced as a result which affected their wellbeing. We were struck by the children's awareness of the rules and their implication on family finances.

Often, children were not just dealing with their own emotions but were also worried about how the resident parent was coping and how the separated parent was feeling.

Emotional challenges that the children reported ranged from immense worry about finances to longing for the missing parent. The children talked about a striking amount of stress and anxiety, which had a significant impacts on their day-to-day life.

Children explained how a difficult relationship with one caregiver could go on to impact other parts of a young person's life, such as making friends and attaining at school. Young people spoke about experiencing significant change and disruption, such as having to move away from a parent or having to leave the UK.

Given the formative age of the young people we spoke to, many of the reported impacts on their wellbeing could have additional consequences in the future. It is important to note that most of the children and young people we spoke to were living in families affected by the former MIR rate of £18,600 (House of Commons Library, 2023), which has since been raised. It is likely children living in families affected by the new, higher income requirement would face exacerbated challenges and additional barriers to their mental wellbeing.

## Limitations

A limitation of this research is the small sample size. From speaking to 9 children, we are not able to make broad inferences or generalisations about the experiences of all children who are living in families subject to the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR).

However, the consistency of testimony from these 9 children - who varied in age, lived in different parts of the UK (over 400 miles apart), and had a diverse range of family structures and life experiences - was striking. This research suggests that many children living in families subject to MIR could be experiencing negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing.

More research is needed in this area to confirm these initial findings, and to consider how their experience compares to children who are separated from one parent within the UK or experiencing financial difficulties for reasons other than MIR.

## Reflexivity statement

As part of the reflexive process the researchers working on this project considered their own values, social positions and personal interests. Both are committed to conducting research which supports children and young people facing disadvantage, trauma and marginalisation. This commitment is likely to have created an emotional connection with the subject of this project and participants, which may have influenced data collection and analysis. This emotional connection could lead to a heightened focus on certain viewpoints during our analysis and write-up.

## Research questions:

- 1) What are the impacts of the spouse and partner migration rules on the mental wellbeing of children? Including the impact of children facing different circumstances, such as:
  - Being separated from one parent
  - Experiencing uncertainty regarding the future because of the family's immigration status
  - Having to move country / live between two countries / leave the UK because of the rules and live overseas
  - The impact of uncertainty regarding their family's immigration status and future country of residence
  - The impact of financial stress within the family
- 2) How do children experience being part of a family who are subject to the spouse and partner migration rules? How does it impact on their:
  - Sense of belonging in the UK
  - Friendships
  - Mental health
  - General wellbeing
  - Family relationships
  - Ideas about love / their future (older children)

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