

[Press release: New data shows illegal schools are a huge nationwide problem](#)

The data, which has never been published before, shows that Ofsted has investigated 521 settings, and inspected 259 since January 2016.

Ofsted estimates that as many as 6,000 children are being educated in the unregistered settings it has inspected to date. These children are potentially at risk because there is no formal external oversight of safeguarding, health and safety or the quality of education provided.

Almost a quarter (23%) of the settings investigated are in London, with the rest spread fairly evenly across the country. Alternative provision is the most common type of setting (28%). Around a quarter (26%) of the settings are general education providers, and a fifth (21%) are places of religious instruction.

In total, 71 settings have been issued with a warning notice by inspectors. Today's data shows that 15 of those settings have since closed, while 39 have changed the way they operate in order to comply with the law, and 9 have registered as independent schools.

An unregistered school is defined as a setting that is operating as an independent school, without registration. It is a criminal offence to operate an unregistered independent school in England.

Ofsted's Deputy Director in charge of the unregistered schools taskforce, Victor Shafiee, said:

We continue to have serious concerns about unregistered schools. As today's data shows, this is not simply an issue with faith settings, nor is it limited to certain areas of the country. Unregistered schools come in many shapes and sizes, and not all of them are run with malicious intent. But, all children deserve the best. These settings deny children a proper education and can leave them at risk of harm.

The problem here is first and foremost about safeguarding. Many of these places are unsafe – with poor facilities and hygiene, badly trained or untrained staff, who may not have had any employment checks made on them, and little care for children's health and well-being.

We need to make sure children are safe and receiving a good education that prepares them for life in modern Britain. Ofsted will continue to do everything we can to investigate and inspect unregistered schools, and where necessary we will seek to prosecute those running them.

To be required to register as a school, a setting must be providing full-time education to at least 5 children of compulsory school age, or one child who is looked after by the local authority or has an education, health and care plan. The setting must operate from a building, and must offer a curriculum that includes maths and English.

There is currently no legal definition of 'full-time education'. The Department for Education (DfE) has issued guidance to say that 18 hours or more a week is likely to constitute full-time education. However, some providers circumvent the requirement to register by operating for 17 hours and 50 minutes per week. By doing this, they are able to operate on the cusp of the law and avoid scrutiny.

Settings that offer only religious instruction are also able to evade registration, even though they operate full time and their pupils do not receive an education anywhere else.

The DfE's proposal for a register of children not in school is a welcome first step to help identify and tackle unregistered schools. However, Ofsted will continue to call for the legislation to be strengthened, and for additional powers that would allow inspectors to collect evidence they find in unregistered schools.

Ofsted's unregistered school's taskforce was established in January 2016 to investigate and inspect suspected illegal schools. The team receives £1 million of annual funding from the Department for Education.