- 1 Do adolescents with impaired vision have different intentions and
- 2 ambitions for their education, career and social outcomes
- **3 compared to their peers? Findings from the Millennium Cohort**
- 4 Study.

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18 Word count: 3046

SYNOPSIS

In this contemporary national birth cohort, adolescents with impaired vision had similar intentions and ambitions regarding their future education, careers and social outcomes as their normally sighted peers.

ABSTRACT

- Background/aims To investigate if impaired vision adversely impacts the intentions/ambitions of adolescents concerning their future education, careers and social outcomes.
- Methods Population-based birth cohort study in the United Kingdom comprising 9273 participants
 from the Millennium Cohort Study who were followed-up to age 17 years. Children were classified as
 having normal vision or unilateral or bilateral impaired vision caused by significant eye conditions
 based on detailed parental-structured questionnaire data on sight problems and treatment coded by
 clinicians. Ten domains covering education, career, and social outcomes by age 30 were
 investigated.
 - **Results** Adjusted regression models showed few differences by vision status. Bilateral impaired vision was associated with increased odds of intending to remain in full-time education after statutory school age (adjusted OR, 2.00; 95%CI: 1.08, 3.68) and of home ownership at age 30 (1.83; 1.01, 3.32). Impaired vision was not associated with intending to attend university. A significantly higher proportion of parents of children with bilateral or unilateral impaired vision thought that their child would not get the exam grades required to go to university than parents of those with normal vision (29 or 26% versus 16%; p=0.026).
 - **Conclusion** Adolescents with impaired vision have broadly the same intentions/ambitions regarding future education, careers and social outcomes as their peers with normal vision. The known significant gaps in attainment in these domains amongst young adults with vision impairment is therefore likely to be due to barriers that they face in achieving their ambitions. Improved implementation of existing interventions is necessary to ensure equality of opportunities.

KEY MESSAGES

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What is already known on this topic

- 48 Despite a legislative framework to protect and support those living with disabilities, there remain
- 49 reduced opportunities for adults with impaired vision manifest in their lower educational and
- 50 employment attainments.

What this study adds

- 52 Using a national population-based study in the UK we found that adolescents with impaired vision did
- 53 not differ from this with normal vision in their intentions for future education, careers and social
- 54 outcomes, and there were no differences in the reasons for intending or not intending to go to
- 55 university.

How this study might affect research, practice or policy

- Our findings demonstrate that significant gaps in attainment in key domains by comparison with
- 58 normally sighted peers do not originate in differences in aspirations of adolescents, and suggest that
- 59 instead the barrier is lack of specific support and provision required to help them realise their
- 60 potential.

Introduction

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In the UK, the rights of individuals living with disabilities to promote equal opportunities are 62 enshrined in legislation.^{1,2} Educational provision and rehabilitation services exist to ensure 63 everyone can achieve their ambitions.³ Nevertheless, adults with disabilities today are more 64 likely to have lower educational attainment, be in lower-skilled jobs, not own a house, live in 65 social housing, have poorer well-being, and feel lonely.4 66 67 Prior research has shown that whilst future educational and occupational 68 intentions/ambitions are similar among adolescents with and without disability, there is an 69 attainment gap in these domains as those living with disability have worse outcomes.⁵ 70 71 Qualitative research with adolescents living with visual impairment (VI) has shown that most 72 have well-defined professional and personal ambitions for their lives as adults but also that they fear discrimination in the workplace and have concerns about independent living and 73 family life. 6 There has been no systematic investigation to quantify any associations between 74 their impaired vision and their plans/ambitions for future education, careers and social 75 76 outcomes. 77 78 We hypothesised that, despite having concerns about barriers they might face, adolescents 79 living with VI would have the same intentions/ambitions as their peers with normal vision. We 80 report here our quantitative investigation of this question analysing data from the Millennium 81 Cohort Study (MCS), which has collected data longitudinal on health, well-being, education

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Methods

Study design

- The MCS is a birth cohort study of 18,827 children born in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2000-
- 87 01.7 Households from socioeconomically disadvantaged and ethnic minority backgrounds

and social outcomes of children as they transition to adulthood.

were intentionally oversampled to ensure sufficient numbers for analysis of these typically hard-to-reach groups. ⁷ This makes the cohort particularly suited for research on VI as the risk of childhood VI is considerably higher among lower socioeconomic and ethnic minority households. ⁸ Data on development and family socioeconomic circumstances were collected every 2-3 years.

Our previous work^{9,10} identified MCS's members with vision problems at ages 3-7 years, the age at which VI would have manifested in most children.⁸ This was used to dichotomise individuals as having impaired vision or not, and future intentions were assessed up to the age of 17 years. Adolescents with neurological or neurodevelopmental conditions (such as Down syndrome) were excluded as these conditions could themselves impact both vision and intentions.^{9,11}

The MCS received overarching ethics approval from the Multi-Centre Research Ethics Committee (MREC/03/2/022).¹² This study drew on existing anonymised data, therefore additional ethics approval was not needed for our analysis.

Vision data

In the absence of a formal biomedical assessment of MCS, our ophthalmic team developed and piloted a structured questionnaire that was administered by trained expert interviewers to elicit any vision and eye conditions, which eye(s) affected, age when first suspected, any treatment undertaken and formal certification for sight impairment at ages 3, 5, and 7 years. The questionnaire comprised both open-ended answers where the expert interview recorded parents' response verbatim, including taking information from medical correspondence provided by the parents, as well pre-defined/precoded lists of the most common eye conditions for the age group. At ages 5 and 7 years, previously recorded data were also rechecked. Three clinical members of our team classified responses independently using a conservative and hierarchical strategy that required diagnosis, forms of therapy, and age at treatment to match consistently. Coding was based on the International Classifications of

Diseases (ICD) and the extended taxonomy used in our previous national epidemiological study of blindness in children,⁸ which has been successfully validated.^{9,10} We dichotomised participants at age 7 years into either a) those with significant eye conditions causing any level of impaired vision and/or those certified as sight impaired (full list in eTable 1) or b) those without any eye condition causing impaired vision. We also distinguished between unilateral and bilateral impaired vision (using the coded data on laterality and treatment) as an indicator of severity based on knowledge of a 'gradient' of functional impact on socioeconomic outcomes.¹³⁻¹⁵

Intentions regarding education, career and social outcomes

These outcomes comprised self-report at ages 14 to 17 years on various dimensions of education, career, and social outcomes (see eTable 2 for questions and coding used in our study; entire surveys are available at https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/cls-studies/millennium-cohort-study/).

Education – Members reported as 14-years-olds how likely they were to remain in full-time

education – Members reported as 14-years-olds now likely they were to remain in full-time education beyond statutory schooling age (16 years) and the main reason they might *not* stay in full-time education. As 17-year-olds, they reported how likely they were to go to university and the main reason for their view. Parents also reported on their view of the likelihood that their child would go to university and from this, the agreement between child-parent pairs was derived.

Career – At age 17 years, participants reported what job they expected to be doing when aged 30 years which were categorised using the Social Occupation Grouping SOC2000 Major Groups by the MCS team¹⁶ and then grouped into three groups by us (ordinal categories 1: managers, senior officials, professional occupations; 2: associate professional and technical; and 3: administrative, secretarial and skilled trades occupations, personal

service, sales, customer service, process plant and machine operatives, and elementary occupations).

Social outcomes – At age 17 years, members reported on what they expected to have achieved by age 30 including home ownership, having a good car, earning money, having a worthwhile job, having children, being married, being famous, or other personal achievements.

Confounders/covariates

Due to the sociodemographic patterning in impaired vision and intentions,^{8,11,17,18} important confounders were ethnicity, maternal education, and household income along with the cohort member's sex, any special education needs (SEN i.e. not specific to vision as primary and secondary reasons for SEN were not available nor information on contact with a Qualified Teacher of Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (QTVI) but should be inclusive of SEN), and parent's university expectations for their child,^{11,18,19} measured at ages 7, 11, 14 and/or 17 years. See eTable 1 for detailed coding of covariates.

Statistical analyses

Analyses were performed in R version 4.1.0.²⁰ With most outcomes measured at age 17 years, the final study sample included all who participated at that age. To account for the MCS survey design and attrition over time, sample weights were applied.²¹ There was between 2 and 65% missing data, with the largest number of missing observations in outcomes reported at age 17 (eTable 3). Logistic regression models adjusted by confounders showed that missingness was positively associated with impaired vision, lower socio-demographic characteristics as with 'lower' intentions/ambitions (eTable 4), therefore, imputation would not be appropriate.²² Missing values were grouped as 'not present' for

binary outcomes and classified as 'do not know' for ordinal outcomes (turning them into nominal).

Chi-squared tests assessed differences by impaired vision in sociodemographic characteristics, intentions, and the reasons for educational intentions. Regression models of intentions were fitted to assess associations with impaired vision adjusted for confounders; logistic models for *remaining in full-time education, going to university,* and *social outcomes,* and multinomial models for *university agreement by child-parent* and *occupation.* Next, interactions between impaired vision and sociodemographic characteristics (i.e. sex, maternal education, and household income) were added to test for synergistic effects associated with intentions and kept in the models if significant at α =0.05. Interactions between impaired vision and ethnicity could not be estimated due to the low frequency of some combinations. All models' assumptions were satisfied.

Results

Study population

The study sample comprised 9273 singletons who participated at least at age 17 years and had no neurological or neurodevelopmental conditions (82 excluded) (Figure S1). The overall proportion of adolescents with eye conditions that caused unilateral impaired vision was 47 per 1000 (95% CI, 44-50), and mostly due to amblyopia and/or strabismus, whilst the frequency of bilateral impaired vision was 5 per 1000 (4-6) and mainly accounted for by children certified as sight impaired severely sight impaired and/or with conditions affecting retina, optic nerve of visual pathways. The impaired vision groups had a higher proportion of adolescents with lower maternal educational attainment, and general SEN history (Table 1).

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the study population by vision status.

Characteristic	Category	Normal vision (weighted* %)	Unilateral impaired vision (weighted* %)	Bilateral Impaired vision (weighted* %)	χ^2 (weighted*) p -value†
Sex	Boys	4367 (50)	222 (51)	20 (41)	0.360
	Girls	4425 (50)	210 (49)	29 (59)	
Ethnicity	Black/ African/ Caribbean	276 (3)	10 (2)	‡	NA
	South Asian	958 (11)	32 (7)	‡	
	White	7281 (83)	378 (88)	‡	
	Other	277 (3)	12 (3)	‡	
Maternal education	A-levels or higher	3622 (41)	154 (36)	16 (33)	0.032
	O-levels	2864 (33)	138 (32)	20 (41)	
	None	2306 (26)	140 (32)	13 (27)	
Household income quintile	1 Richest	1952 (22)	82 (19)	6 (12)	0.601
	2	1884 (21)	95 (22)	12 (24)	
	3	1731 (20)	83 (19)	10 (20)	
	4	1654 (19)	84 (19)	11 (22)	
	5 Poorest	1571 (18)	88 (20)	10 (20)	
History of special education needs	No	7761 (88)	355 (82)	37 (76)	<0.001
	Yes	1031 (12)	77 (18)	12 (24)	

^{*}Weighted for survey design; †Associations with p<0.05 in **bold**; ‡Not provided to avoid potential statistical disclosure at n<5.

Future intentions

The distribution of the future education, career, and social outcomes intentions of adolescents by level of vision can be seen in eTable 5. The adjusted regression models are reported in Table 2. There were no significant interactions between vision status and sex, maternal education, and household income, therefore only the main effects are reported.

Table 2: Adjusted associations between vision status and future intentions

Intention*	Category	Unilateral	Bilateral	
		impaired	impaired	
		aOR (95%CI)†	aOR (95%CI)†	
Education				
Remain in education beyond 16 years		1.21 (0.97-1.51)	2.00 (1.08-3.68)	
Likely to go to university	1	0.85 (0.65-1.09)	1.67 (0.96-2.91)	

University likelihood	Participant and parent	1.00	1.00	
agreement by	agree – unlikely to attend	1.00	1.00	
participant-parent pair	Participant and parent	0.72 (0.54-0.95)	1.61 (0.85-3.08)	
	agree – likely to attend	0.72 (0.34-0.93)	1.01 (0.03-3.00)	
	Participant and parent	0.87 (0.68-1.11)	0.72 (0.33-1.58)	
	disagree	0.67 (0.06-1.11)	0.72 (0.33-1.36)	
	Career at age 3	0		
Career	High skilled occupation	1.00	1.00	
	Medium skilled	1.26 (0.84-1.89)	1 70 (0 65 4 02)	
	occupation	1.20 (0.04-1.09)	1.79 (0.65-4.92)	
	Low skilled occupation	1.48 (0.96-2.30)	0.90 (0.22-3.61)	
	Do not know	1.26 (0.95-1.66)	1.03 (0.47-2.28)	
	Social outcome at a	ge 30		
Home ownership		0.87 (0.71-1.06)	1.83 (1.01-3.32)	
Having a good car		1.05 (0.86-1.29)	1.05 (0.59-1.86)	
Earning a lot of money		1.01 (0.81-1.26)	1.48 (0.83-2.66)	
Having a worthwhile job		0.92 (0.75-1.13)	1.25 (0.69-2.24)	
Having children		0.90 (0.72-1.12)	1.06 (0.56-1.98)	
Being married		0.85 (0.69-1.04)	1.04 (0.56-1.92)	
Being famous or other personal achievement		1.25 (0.97-1.60)	0.97 (0.46-2.05)	
*Independent outcomes w	ith their own regression mode	1		

^{*}Independent outcomes with their own regression model.

Education – Compared to adolescents with normal vision, those with bilateral impaired vision had twice the odds of intending to remain in full-time education from the age of 16 years (aOR, 2.00; 95%CI, 1.08-3.68). There were no differences by vision status in intention to go to university.

It was relatively rare for participants to intend to go to university whilst their parents disagreed, therefore the discordant pairs were combined to express both directions.

Unilateral impaired vision was associated with reduced odds of participants and parents agreeing on it being likely that the participant would go to university (0.72, 0.54-0.95).

Participants' reasons for intending or not intending to remain in full-time schooling or going to university did not vary by vision status (Table 3). The majority (73%) reported they were likely to go to university to improve their job prospects or pursue their career of interest. However, significantly more parents of 17-year-olds with bilateral or unilateral impaired vision thought that their child would not get the educational qualifications required to go to

[†]Odds ratio (aOR) weighted for survey design and adjusted for sex, ethnicity, maternal education, household income, special education needs, and parents university expectation; associations with p<0.05 in **bold**.

university compared to parents of those with normal vision (29 or 26% versus 16%; p=0.026).

Career at age 30 – There were no differences in terms of intended occupation (grouped in three groups) by vision status.

Social outcomes at age 30 – Compared to adolescents with normal vision, those with bilateral impaired vision had higher odds of thinking they would achieve home ownership (1.83; 1.01-3.32). No other differences in intended social outcomes by vision status were observed.

Table 3: Child- and parent-reported reasons for full-time education and university intentions by vision status.

Reasons	Normal vision (weighted* %)	Unilateral impaired vision (weighted* %)	Bilateral impaired vision (weighted* %)	χ^2 (weighted*) p-value†		
Child-report unlikely to remain in full-time education at age 16‡						
Too early to decide	36%	33%	39%	0.114		
Prefer to work	36%	34%	29%			
Not helpful for career	6%	6%	7%			
Child-report unlikely to go to university‡						
Not the grades	33%	35%	34%	0.926		
Prefer to work	23%	25%	25%			
Too early to decide	13%	13%	12%			
Child-report likely to go to university‡						
Better job prospect	73%	75%	77%	0.938		
Learn more	9%	8%	6%			
Experience new things	5%	7%	3%			
Parent-report unlikely to go to university‡						
Child prefers to work	61%	56%	43%	0.394		
Child does not want to go	35%	37%	14%	0.488		
Child will not get the grades	16%	26%	29%	0.026		

*Weighted for survey design; †Associations with p<0.05 in **bold**; ‡Child reported one reason whilst parents reported multiple reasons, top three shown.

Discussion

Using a population-based birth cohort study, we found no meaningful adverse association between impaired vision and the intentions and ambitions of affected adolescents in terms of their future education, careers and key social outcomes when compared with their normally sighted peers. Interestingly, those with bilateral impaired vision were more likely to intend to remain in full-time education beyond 16 years and to expect to own a home by the age of 30 years. Reasons for being likely or unlikely to remain in full-time education or going to university did not differ by vision status. Adolescents with unilateral impaired vision and their parents were less likely to agree that they were going to university and these parents more often reported they thought their child would not get the qualifications required to get into university compared to child-parent pairs of those with normal vision.

Strengths of this study include the sample size of adolescents with unilateral or bilateral impaired vision embedded in a representative birth cohort and thus provides an appropriate comparison group with normal vision. A wealth of data has been collected longitudinally which allowed an investigation of intentions/ambitions in both professional and personal domains as well as some insights into the perspectives of both adolescents and their parents. Data were collected at ages during the transition from statutory to further and higher education and about outcomes into early adult life. As all outcomes were not rare (>10%), the study had enough power to detect significant differences if present between the normal vision group and impaired vision groups, including the much smaller bilateral impaired vision group with the exception of the intention for occupation. The reason for not combining the unilateral and bilateral impaired vision groups to increase statistical power is because they are distinct clinical groups with different functional impacts on socioeconomic outcomes 13-15 and combining them would dilute any differences present in the more severe bilateral impaired vision group. A potential limitation includes the possibility for misclassification of vision status through the use of parental reports of eye conditions and thereby may result in biased associations. This approach has been verified previously^{9,10} and indirect validation is

provided by similarity in frequency of childhood impaired vision and causative conditions observed in this study and those reported in similar UK population studies that involved biomedical assessment.¹⁷ Attrition and missing data are common problems in cohort studies. Here, attrition was addressed by using sampling weights²¹ and missing observations of intentions were extensively examined and appropriately dealt with, limiting the potential bias of the results.²² Although regression models were adjusted for the major confounders identified in previous research,^{11,17-19} residual confounding cannot be ruled out, as in any observational study. The MCS did not collect data on teachers' expectations for their students to go to university, whether adolescents received support other than at school, and whether adolescents and their parents were satisfied with support services received. These factors would be important to investigate in future research. Finally, as in all observational research, associations do not imply causality, however reverse causality is not the case as childhood vision status precedes the later outcomes.

There has been no similar research, to our knowledge, with which we can directly compare our findings. However previous qualitative research has shown that most adolescents living with impaired vision have well-considered education and career ambitions⁶ but also have concerns about discrimination at work, independent living, driving in particular for boys, intimate relationships and the implications of hereditary eye conditions.⁶ Our study now quantified that the ambitions of adolescents living with impaired vision correspond closely to those of their peers with normal vision. The fact that impaired vision was not associated with lower ambitions or expectations in several domains - having a worthwhile job, earning a lot of money, having a good car, being married, or having children - is striking, given the present realities of adults living with VI in the UK. For example, 15% have a university degree compared with 38% of adults without a disability,²³ furthermore a higher proportion have no educational qualifications (11% vs 6%, respectively)²³ and much lower proportion are in paid employment (57% vs 81%, respectively).⁴ Our findings suggest that the 'attainment gap' in

adult life is at least partly attributable to the ambitions and intentions of adolescents living with impaired vision not being fully realised. A combination of factors is likely to account for this, including a lack of adequate and appropriate support in the transition from compulsory schooling into further and higher education, and opportunities to enter into and remain in employment.

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There is now extensive literature identifying the specific needs of children and young people (CYP) with VI in terms of support for development and in educational settings^{24,25} recognising that most childhood VI in the UK and other industrialised countries is present at birth or from early infancy.²⁶ A formal assessment of educational needs, to develop and agree the child's education and health care plan (EHCP)^{25,27} is the key catalyst for ensuring adequate provision in the UK and is likely to be a key factor in educational attainment in adult life³, yet around 80% of CYP with VI do not have such a plan²⁸ as was in our study. There are also significant variations in habitation support in the UK, which for CYP living with VI is aimed at maximising independence at different developmental stages all the way to adult life; worryingly given the findings of our study, adolescents aged 16 years and older are the age group the least likely to receive this support.²⁷ This is in turn also likely to be a key factor in obtaining and retaining employment.²⁷ The 2014 legal reforms related to special educational needs provision in the UK have not been effective due to implementation problems with considerable gaps in support provision, with suggested improvements not yet widely implemented.²⁹ Without accessible high-quality support services to help CYP with VI through schooling and further and higher education, many will not achieve their potential. Importantly, educational attainment is a stronger predictor of employment in adults with impaired vision than it is for those without disabilities.³⁰ Thus, educational provision is the foundation for much that follows in adult life for CYP with VI.

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Given the striking associations between disadvantage and risk of VI in childhood^{8,9,17,26} and the influence of socioeconomic status on educational aspirations, ^{11,18} it is notable that we

found no synergistic interactions between impaired vision and the sociodemographic factors associated with adolescents' intentions.

Our findings that there is little to distinguish between the intentions/ambitions of adolescents with unilateral impaired vision (the majority of whom had amblyopia) and those with normal vision is consistent with our prior research by us^{10,21} and others³¹ that has shown that amblyopia is not associated with adverse educational, occupational, or social outcomes into adult life. Furthermore, children with amblyopia perform similarly well to their peers in early cognition tasks and school tests.^{10,31} Together these findings should reassure families, teachers and clinicians that amblyopia need not be considered a barrier to professional or personal ambitions.

We examined concordance between adolescents and their parents about the intention or expectation of going to university. Interestingly we found that unilateral –but not bilateral—impaired vision was associated with reduced odds of adolescents and their parents agreeing that they were likely to go to university. Since unilateral impaired vision was not similarly associated with adolescents reporting directly that were likely to university, it seems that parental concerns about their child's likelihood of obtaining the necessary school qualifications to go to university explain the discordance. These concerns may reflect both a lack of awareness (due to suboptimal communication between families and professionals)²⁹ or a lack of availability of support^{32,33} to ensure children with impaired vision achieve their full educational potential. This is important to address as parents' support is a strong predictor of employment in young adults with VI.³⁴

Conclusion

Adolescence is a key development stage and those living with VI face additional challenges.

In the general population, career aspirations in adolescence predict career attainment in

early adult life, even after controlling for family social background and general cognitive ability. 11 Despite a legislative framework to protect and support those living with disabilities, there remain reduced opportunities for adults with impaired vision manifest in their lower educational and employment attainments. Our study demonstrates the origin of these disparities is not in the aspirations of affected individuals in their childhood or adolescence but rather suggests is in the specific support and provision they receive to nurture their abilities so that they can achieve full potential.

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 Acknowledgements We are grateful to the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS), UCL Social Research Institute, for the use of these data and to the UK Data Service for making them available. However, neither CLS nor the UK Data Service bears any responsibility for the analysis or interpretation of these data.

Contributors All authors met the ICMJE criteria for authorship. LAHG contributed to the design of the study and was accountable for data analysis and interpretation, preparation of the manuscript and final manuscript approval. MCB contributed to the data analysis and interpretation, and critical revision of the manuscript. JSR was accountable for the design of the study, data interpretation, and critical revision of the manuscript. JSR is the guarantor.

Funding LAH-G is supported by the Ulverscroft Vision Research Group (no award number). JSR is an NIHR Senior Investigator and is supported by the NIHR Biomedical Research Centre at Moorfields Eye Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and UCL Institute of Ophthalmology (no award numbers). All research at Great Ormond Street Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health is made possible by the NIHR Great Ormond Street Hospital Biomedical Research Centre.

Disclaimer The sponsors had no role in the design or conduct of this research. The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health.

Competing interests None declared.

Data availability statement Data are freely available from the UK Data Service, https://beta.ukdataservice.ac.uk/datacatalogue/series/series?id=2000031#!/access-data. For this study, we utilised surveys at ages 3, 5, 7, 11, 14 and 17 years (MCS2-7 SN:5350, 5795, 6411, 7464, 8156 and 8682). We had special access privileges as co-investigators on the CLOSER grant to the original parental report on eye conditions (variable EYEX in MCS2-4). Access is otherwise obtained via https://www.closer.ac.uk/study/millennium-cohort-study/. Information on eye conditions was included in the coding of longstanding illness (variable CLSI in MCS2-4) that is present in the freely available survey data from the UK Data Archive. The longstanding illness is based on the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th version (ICD-10).

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