

**Representation of people  
of colour among children's  
book creators in the UK**

Mid-term report

**November 2020**



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# Foreword

## Acknowledgments

We'd like to thank all the individuals and organisations that have supported and enabled this project. In particular, thanks to Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, the lead author on this research, and her colleagues at UCL.

Thank you to Arts Council England for funding this research and all of the other projects that strive to increase representation in the cultural and creative industries.

Finally, we are also grateful to the metadata team at the British Library for their support in providing the database for this research.

At BookTrust, we know that reading is a powerful force for change. The books children read shape their view of themselves and of the world. Yet, although over 30% of school children in England are from ethnic minority backgrounds, the voices and the world portrayed in children's books published in the UK have been largely white.<sup>1</sup>

Our BookTrust Represents research published in 2019 looked at the trends in authorship over 11 years, between 2007 and 2017. The research showed that in 2017 less than 6% of published creators of children's books were people of colour, and it pointed to a number of key contributing factors.

BookTrust is by nature a 'doing' organisation; we act. So we set ourselves and the industry the challenge of increasing this number to over 10% by 2022. Diversity has always been one of the key criteria for the books we buy and recommend, but what more could we do to drive change? In 2019, supported by Arts Council England, we began a focused programme of promoting creators of colour. We introduced children to authors and illustrators through sponsored school visits, book gifting, events in bookshops and festivals, social media and book recommendations. We set up a free programme to empower and train emerging creators to understand the book industry and manage their careers.

The pandemic has moved our activities online, but we continue with virtual school visits. We are also delivering recommendations and online events, such as the recent #PassThePen campaign, as well as online training and advice clinics for aspiring and emerging creators of colour. We host and support an online community of over 150 authors and illustrators of colour, providing news and opportunities and, most importantly, a forum where creators support each other in developing their careers.

We could not have done any of this without the help of the authors and illustrators of colour who so generously gave us their time and advice, and have helped to support emerging writers. And we have had help and inspiration from other organisations committed to change, such as Knights Of, Speaking Volumes, the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, Spread the Word, UCL, Pop Up, First Story, Faber & Faber and the FAB Prize, Megaphone, Story Makers Company and Storymix.

This update to our BookTrust Represents research shows a small but significant increase in the percentage of creators of colour published. The increase was from 5.6% in 2017 to 8.7% in 2019, but it is important to note that much of this is as a result of self-publishing and that we still have a very long way to go. The Black Lives Matter movement has brought the urgent need for change to pervasive racial inequalities into sharp focus for the publishing industry and all those involved in the wider context of getting children

reading, including charities, education settings and the early years sector.

We are hopeful of a more significant shift in the next two years – this year we have seen more creators of colour win key literary prizes: Shaun Tan was the first illustrator of colour to win the Kate Greenaway medal with *Tales of the Inner City*; Nathan Bryon and Dapo Adeola won the Waterstones Children’s Book Prize 2020 with *Look Up!*; and Jasbinder Bilan was the winner of the Costa Children’s Book Award 2019 with her book *Asha and the Spirit Bird*. Additionally this year we have seen Onjali Q. Raúf in the top 10 children’s book bestseller charts.

In the light of these green shoots, we have increased our target and now challenge ourselves and the industry to raise the percentage of creators of colour to reach 13% by 2022. At BookTrust, we will increase our efforts to support published and emerging writers of colour. In 2021 we will launch a major new partnership to help BookTrust Represents reach more children and to effect long-term sustainable change. We owe this to the children who are at the heart of everything we do.



**Diana Gerald**  
CEO BookTrust

# Introduction

People of colour have long been under-represented in UK children's books and publishing.<sup>2</sup> Creators, advocates and activists, including Verna Wilkins, Petronella Breinburg, A. Sivanandan and Aidan Chambers, have been vocal about this for decades.<sup>3</sup> However, it has only been in the last few years that longitudinal statistical evidence has shown the extent of this under-representation.

Since 2017 BookTrust has conducted research into the representation of creators of colour in the UK. At the same time, the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education has studied the representation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic 'BAME' characters in UK children's books.

In 2019 BookTrust published its **first report** on the representation of creators of colour based on data from 2007 to 2017. It found that during this period, fewer than 6% of children's book creators were people of colour and that creators of colour had fewer than 5% of unique titles published in the UK. In 2017, the last year of the previous study, 5.6% of children's book creators were people of colour.

This mid-term report presents updated data on the representation of creators of colour for the 2018 to 2019 period. It reveals a small but positive increase in the percentage of creators of colour being published. BookTrust will continue to monitor this data and share learnings in its next report in 2021.

There have been some positive developments in UK children's publishing since our last report. At BookTrust, we launched the **BookTrust Represents** programme, which supports creators of colour to promote their work and to reach more readers through events in bookshops, festivals and schools.<sup>4</sup> Through the programme, we offer training and mentoring for less experienced authors and illustrators. Publishers Knights Of also established a **permanent inclusive children's bookshop**, Roundtable Books, in Brixton after raising nearly £50,000 with a crowdfunding campaign.<sup>5</sup> Further research into representation has been conducted, with the **Reflecting Realities reports** by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education highlighting the lack of 'BAME' characters in UK children's books. These reports found that in 2017 just 1% of main characters in children's books were from 'BAME' groups, with the figure rising to 4% in 2018.<sup>6</sup> **These reports** introduced a new lexicon to help us identify some of the problematic depictions of these characters (or lack thereof).

<sup>2</sup> This report draws from a very large dataset that includes a large number of creators from a large number of ethnicities across the world. As it is not possible to include and refer to all these ethnicities in our report we use the term 'of colour' to refer to all individuals from racially minoritised groups. The term 'of colour' is used in the political sense to emphasise the common experiences of systemic racism experienced by minoritised groups. Please note that this term does not include people from a white minority ethnic background.

<sup>3</sup> Others include: Beryl Gilroy, Jessica Huntley and Errol Lloyd

<sup>4</sup> BookTrust (2020)

<sup>5</sup> Prynne (2019)

<sup>6</sup> CLPE (2018, 2019)

We have also seen more organisations working together to address the inequalities of representation. For example, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Knights Of and Jacaranda partnered with Spread the Word in a **crowdfunding campaign** to support independent, inclusive publishers.<sup>7</sup>

These are all positive steps, and the results of this report show some upturn in representation. However, we still have a lot of work to do to tackle the systemic issues that cause under-representation. We need only look at **discussions that compare advance payments** to creators by ethnicity to see that creators of colour, especially Black creators, are undervalued in cultural production.<sup>8</sup> BookTrust, partner organisations and the author of this report will continue to work with creators, publishers and the wider book community to help dismantle the negative cycle that contributes to the under-representation of people of colour among UK children's book creators. We will explore these issues in more depth in our next report.

**Our first report, which provides a benchmark and a timeline to show how representation changed between 2007 and 2017, is available here: [Representation of people of colour among children's book authors and illustrators \(2019\)](#).**

## Methodology

As in our previous study (2007-2017), data presented in this report is based on the development and analysis of a corpus of relevant titles. These were identified and collected through the British Library's British National Bibliography database.

The database did not include information such as creator demographics or the type of publisher. This additional information was identified through digital and printed paratextual (mostly epitextual) information (e.g. publisher and creator websites, creator interviews, book covers, etc.) where available.

Creators were segmented by their (self-identified) sex/gender identity, ethnicity (based on Office for National Statistics terminology) and nationality.<sup>9</sup> The data was then coded and analysed. This approach provided statistical information about what percentages of children's books were created by different demographic groups.

The database analysis focused on three main areas: all of the titles published (including the various editions of a unique title); unique titles published (removing all of the different editions); and individual creators (removing the different titles). We also analysed publishing patterns in relation to how the work of creators of colour is published in the UK.

<sup>7</sup> Comerford (2020)

<sup>8</sup> Flood (2020)

<sup>9</sup> For this report, nationality was allocated through self-identification and used British citizenship as the framework.

# Key findings:

## representation of people

## of colour among children's

## book creators in the UK

Our analysis of a dataset of children's books published in the UK between 2018 and 2019 reveals that, while still under-represented, there has been a small increase in the percentage of creators of colour being published in the UK.

### In 2017...

 **5.58%**

of children's book creators (109 people) were people of colour and they created

 **4.02%**

of unique titles

 **1.98%**

of children's book creators (39 people) were British people of colour and they created

 **1.58%**

of unique titles

Number of British debut creators of colour:

**12**

### In 2018...

 **7.17%**

of children's book creators (137 people) were people of colour and they created

 **5.26%**

of unique titles

 **2.1%**

of children's book creators (40 people) were British people of colour and they created

 **1.51%**

of unique titles

Number of British debut creators of colour:

**17**

### In 2019...

 **8.68%**

of children's book creators (174 people) were people of colour and they created

 **7.19%**

of unique titles

 **2.86%**

of children's book creators (57 people) were British people of colour and they created

 **2.53%**

of unique titles

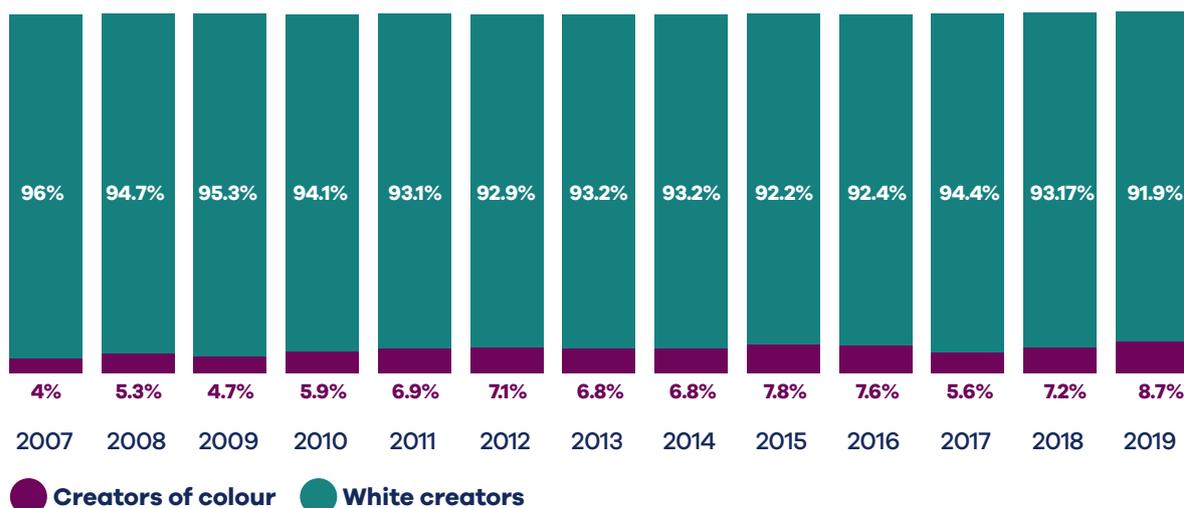
Number of British debut creators of colour:

**24**

# Trends in context

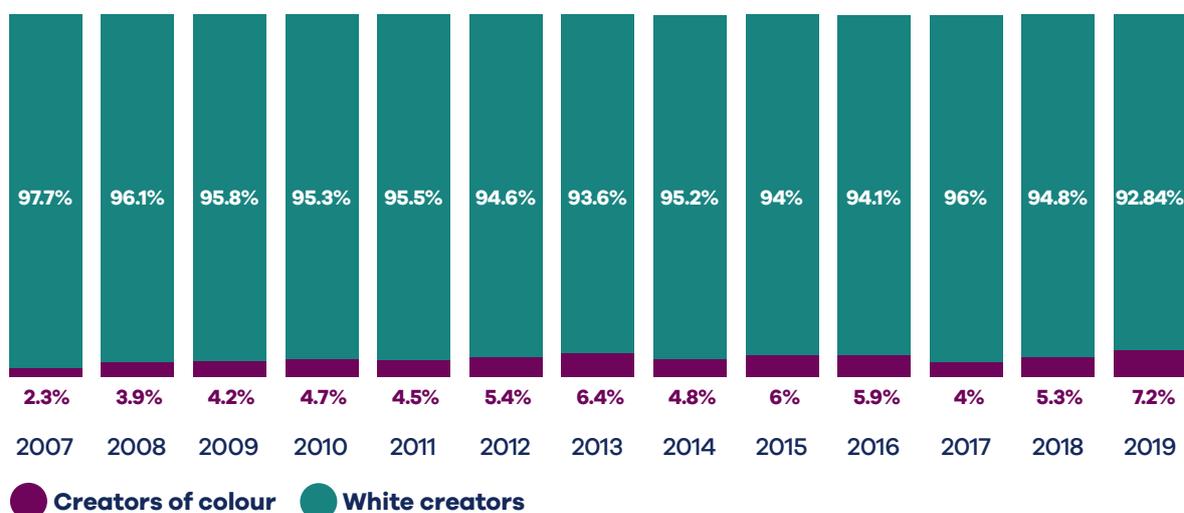
## 1. Creators of colour published in children's books in the UK since 2007

**Figure 1:** Percentage of creators of colour and white creators per year<sup>10</sup>



In 2019, 8.7% of children's book creators were people of colour. This represents a 3.1 percentage point rise since 2017 (5.6%) and a 4.7 percentage point rise since 2007 (4%).

**Figure 2:** Percentage of unique titles by creators of colour and white creators per year

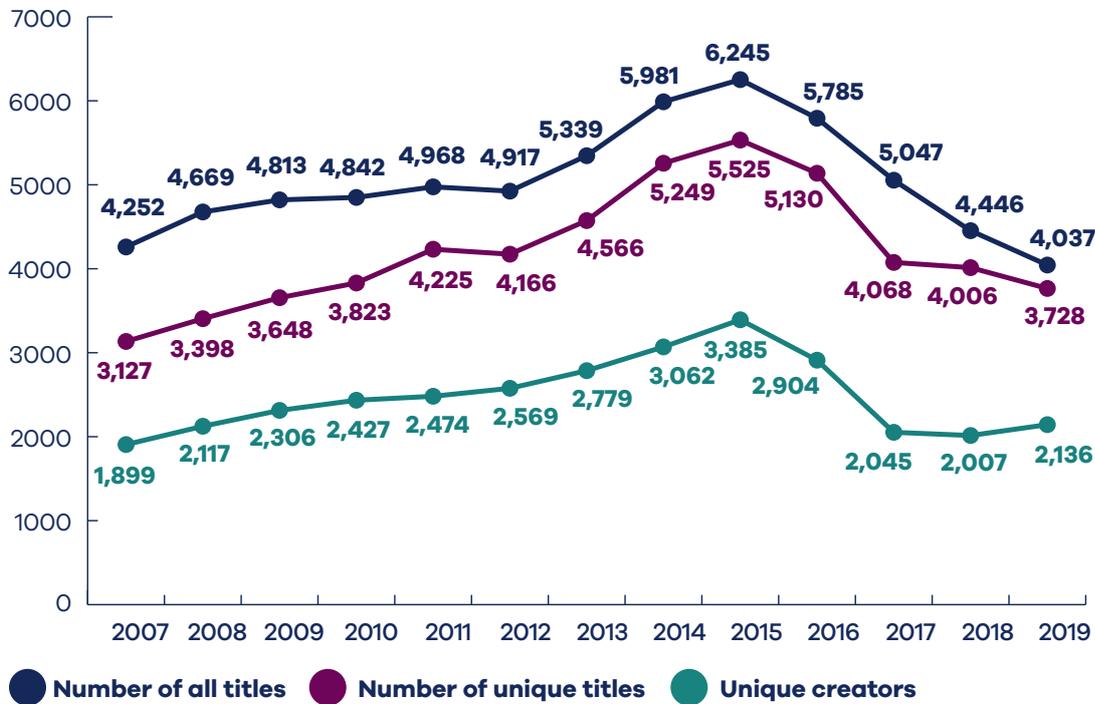


In 2019, 7.2% of unique titles were created by people of colour. This represents a rise of 3.2 percentage points since 2017 (4%) and of 4.9 percentage points since 2007 (2.3%).

<sup>10</sup> All charts are based on creators where demographic information was available, unless otherwise noted.

It is important to consider these changes in the context of wider trends in UK children's publishing.

**Figure 3:** Total number of titles, unique titles and creators of children's books between 2007 and 2019<sup>11</sup>



Overall, there has been a steady decrease in the number of all titles, unique titles and number of creators since 2015. This decline in the number of titles and creators being published continued in 2018 and 2019. Although there was a slight rise in the numbers of creators published in 2019, this was still lower than in the peak period of 2013-16.

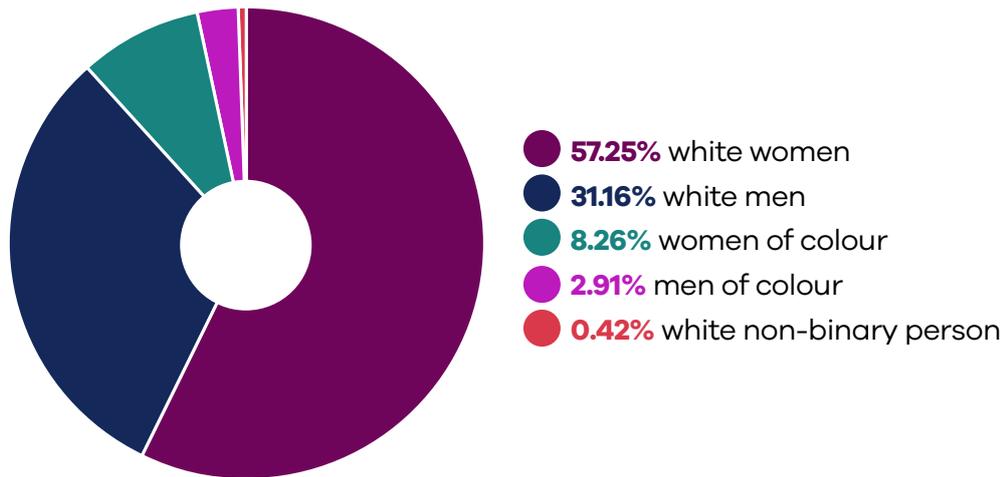
<sup>11</sup> The graph on this page includes all the titles, unique titles and creators of children's books published between 2007 and 2019, irrespective of whether demographic information was available.

## 2. Ethnicity and gender identity

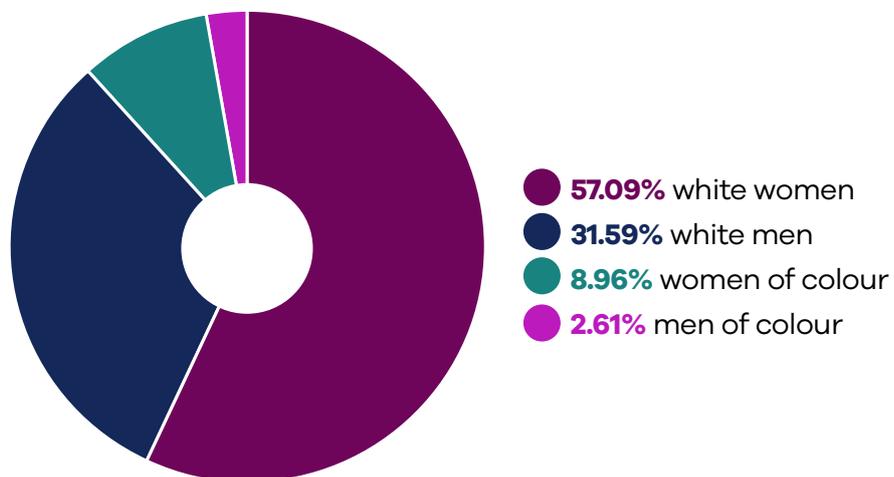
In 2018 and 2019, the majority of children's books were created by white women, mirroring the 2007-17 findings.

In 2019, there was a very slight increase in the percentage of women of colour being published and a slight decrease in men of colour.

**Figure 4:** 2018



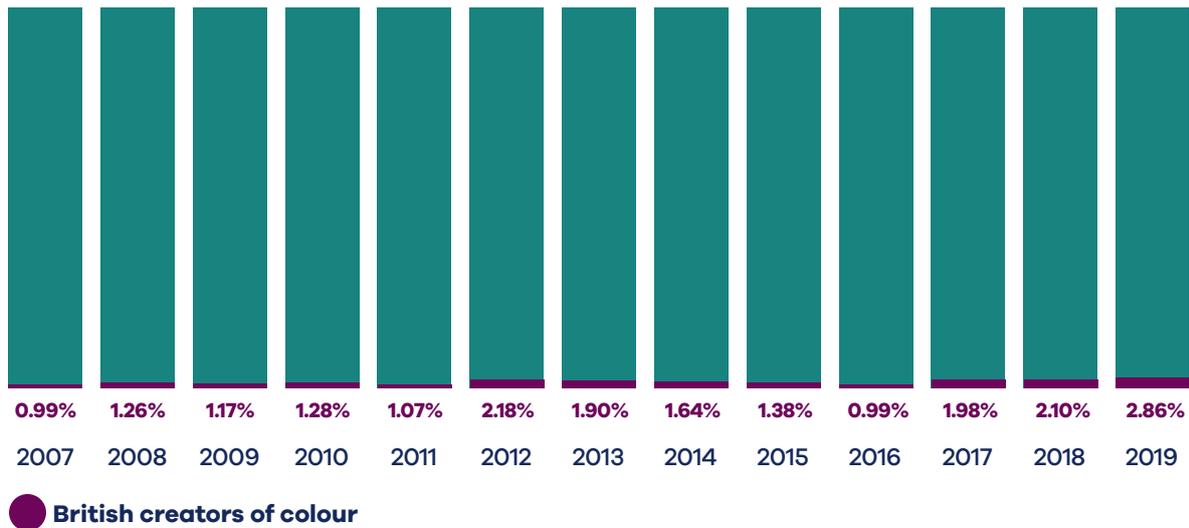
**Figure 5:** 2019



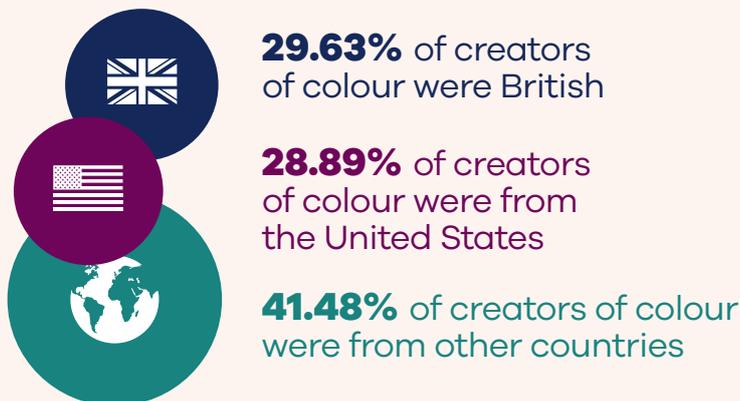
### 3. Ethnicity and nationality

There has been a small increase in the percentage of British people of colour published and the unique titles they created in UK children’s publishing. In 2019, **2.86%** of children’s book creators were British people of colour (57 creators), which represents an increase of 0.88 percentage points since 2017 (39 creators). In 2019, British people of colour created **2.53%** of unique titles, representing an increase of 0.95 percentage points since 2017.

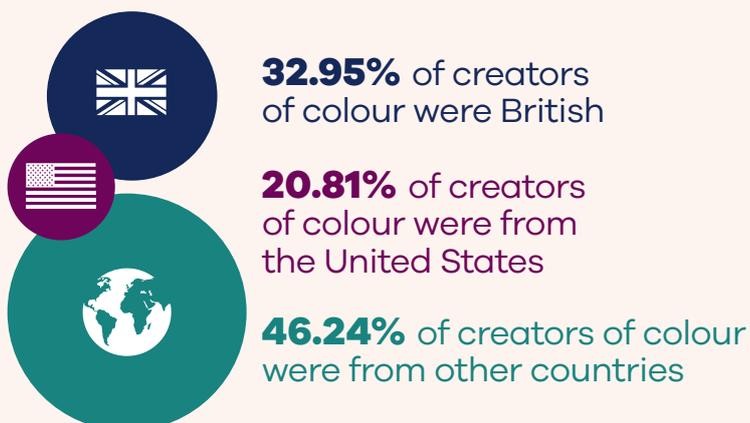
**Figure 6:** Percentage of British creators of colour in children’s publishing in the UK, per year (2007-19)



#### Nationality of all creators of colour in UK children’s publishing (2018)



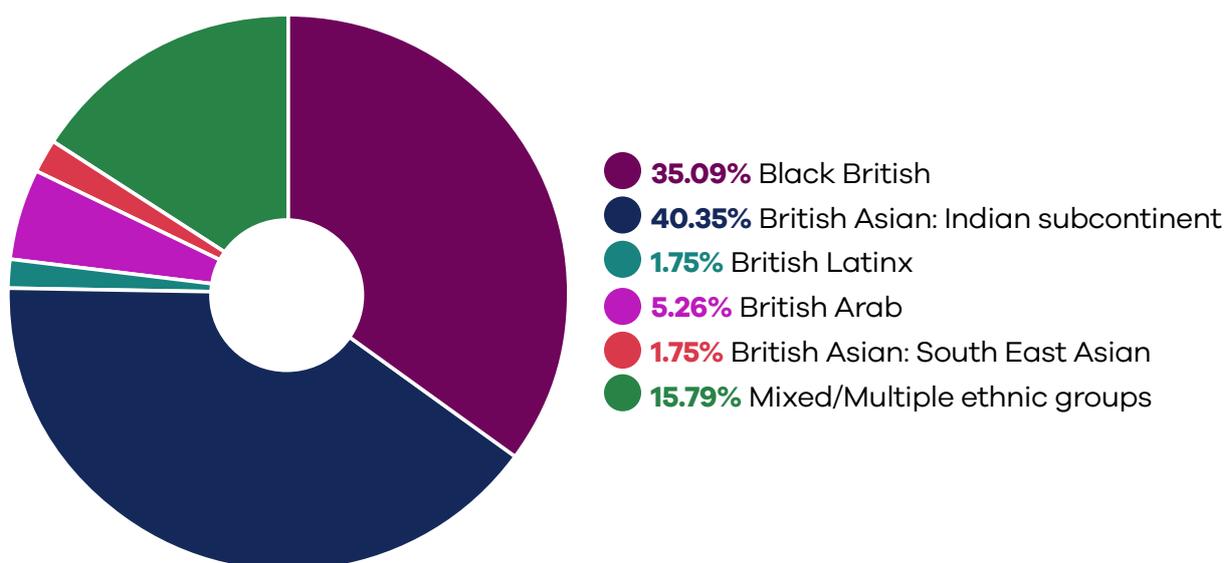
#### Nationality of all creators of colour in UK children’s publishing (2019)



## 4. British creators of colour: ethnicity breakdown

Creators of colour are not a homogenous group, and creators within this group face different challenges. We will explore this further in the next report when we will interview creators from different ethnic groups. In 2019, out of 57 British creators of colour, 35.09% were Black British and 40.35% were British Asian (from the Indian subcontinent).

**Figure 7: Ethnicity breakdown: British creators of colour in children's publishing in the UK - 2019**



## 5. Publishing the work of creators of colour

Our analysis also seeks to identify patterns in children's publishing and the experiences of creators of colour in the sector. Our previous report highlighted a disparity between the publishing output of children's book creators of colour and their white counterparts (i.e. how many unique titles they published). Data from 2018-19 shows that children's book creators of colour continued to have fewer books published on average than white book creators. These creators were also more likely to self-publish. In 2018-19:

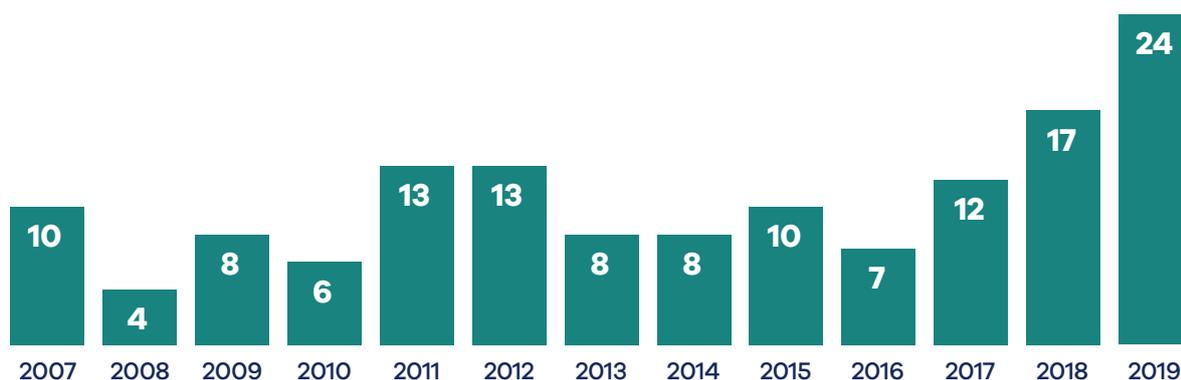
- White children's book creators each had around twice as many books published as children's book creators of colour, publishing on average approximately **4 books** in comparison to approximately **2 books**.
- Children's book creators of colour were almost **twice as likely** than white creators to **self-publish** their work.
- **British creators of colour** were nearly **four times more likely** to **self-publish** than their white counterparts. **20.29%** of unique titles by British creators of colour were self-published in comparison to **5.51%** of titles by white creators.
- **Over a quarter** (26.09%) of British children's creators of colour were **self-published** or **published by a hybrid publisher**.<sup>12</sup> In comparison, 13.64% of unique titles by white creators were self-published or published by a hybrid publisher.

<sup>12</sup> Hybrid publishers combine different features of both traditional publishing and self-publishing, often for an upfront fee.

## 6. Emerging creators: debuts and their publishers

Our previous report and other studies indicated that publishers have typically published a small selection of prominent creators of colour with less focus on commissioning new talent. One of the main objectives of our previous report, and the subsequent launch of BookTrust Represents, was to support aspiring and emerging creators of colour. We now monitor the number of British debut creators of colour being published and how they are published. We will continue to track this data over the next few years.

**Figure 8: Number of debut British creators of colour in children's publishing in the UK – by year**



● Number of British debut creators

**There has been a clear increase in the number of debut British creators of colour published since 2007. The number more than doubled from 10 debut creators of colour in 2007 to 24 in 2019.**

It is important to note that a large proportion of these debut creators continued to be self-published/published by a hybrid publisher:

- **In 2018**, 41.17% of debut British creators of colour were self-published/published by a hybrid publisher, and 35.29% were published by an independent publisher.
- **In 2019**, 45.84% of debut British creators of colour were self-published/published by a hybrid publisher, and 29.17% were published by an independent publisher.

# Conclusion and

## next steps

There have been small improvements in the number and percentage of children's creators of colour published in the UK, particularly in 2019. However, it is important to emphasise that these numbers remain low. BookTrust recognises that structural and cultural change take time, but we must acknowledge that this conversation has been taking place for decades.

As part of BookTrust's commitment to increasing representation and creating a more equitable writing/illustrating and publishing landscape, we will continue to track the numbers of creators of colour. Our next report will be published in 2022. It will explore changes in the number and experiences of children's creators of colour being published in the UK, and examine the factors contributing to this.

At the launch of our first report, our aim was for the number of children's creators of colour to have risen from 5.6% in 2017 to 10% by 2022. We are pleased that this has risen to 8.68% in 2019, and in response we have now revised our aim for the number of creators of colour to reach 13% by 2022. This increase reflects the proportion of

people from Black, Asian, Mixed or other ethnic groups in the UK, which was 13% in the 2011 census. We will, of course, review data from the upcoming 2021 census and consider our next steps accordingly.

BookTrust will continue its **BookTrust Represents** programme of support for creators of colour. This programme includes workshops and training events for aspiring authors and illustrators, in addition to further building and supporting an online community of authors and illustrators of colour. As our first report emphasised the importance of school visits, BookTrust will also carry forward its programme of schools visits with creators, while working with schools to shine a spotlight on authors/illustrators of colour to improve representation. Finally, BookTrust will continue to work with partners across the book industry to support and promote creators of colour, particularly home-grown talent.

We have been encouraged by the response to our first report and the commitment and support shown by our stakeholders. However, we emphasise that there must be a continual, collaborative and sustained effort for creators of colour to feel truly seen and heard in the British children's publishing industry.

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