

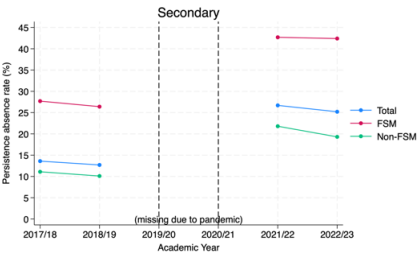
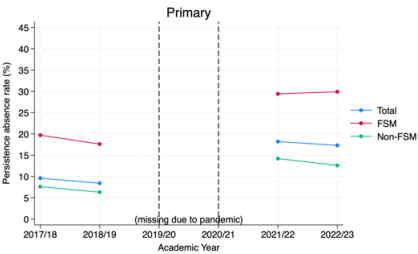
Understanding the drivers of pupil absences

Professor Lindsey Macmillan

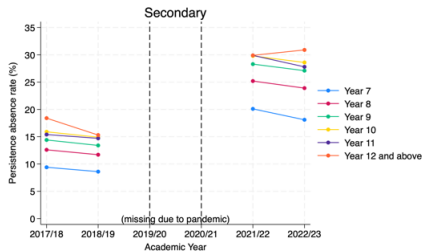
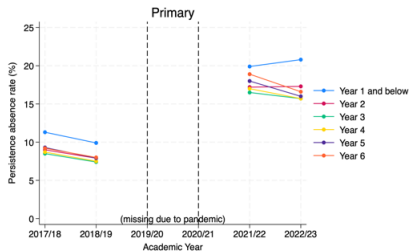
UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities

Pupil absence: Questions for policy, for research and in practice,
Monday 22nd January, 2024

Rates of persistent absenteeism have increased dramatically since 2019




But the increased rates have been broadly stable across groups




This will have a lasting impact on educational attainment *and* inequalities

CENTRE FOR EDUCATION POLICY
& EQUALISING OPPORTUNITIES



Briefing note School absences and pupil achievement

Prepared by Sam Sims



Key points

Pupils who do not attend school when school is open see a small decline in their academic achievement:

- Each day of individual pupil absence results in around 0.3-0.4% of a standard deviation reduction in achievement.
- Equivalently, eight days of absence (the annual average in England) would move a pupil one place down a ranking of 100 pupils (e.g. from 50th to 51st).
- Pupils from low-income households see a larger negative effect from each day of absence.

Pupil achievement can also be harmed by term-time coordinated school closures:

- It is not clear whether coordinated closures are more or less damaging than uncoordinated closures. In any case, the magnitude of this effect will likely depend on what kind of educational activities pupils engage in during the closure.
- Again, pupils from low-income households experience a larger negative effect from coordinated absences.
- Coordinated absences lasting for several weeks can have small long-run negative effects on pupil achievement.

Recommendations

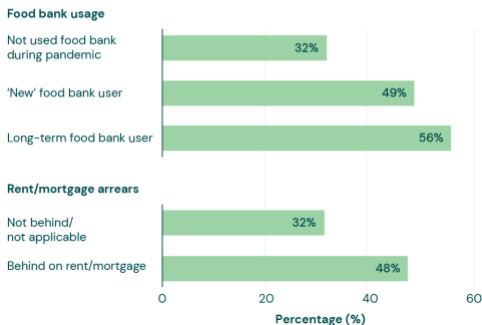
- Improving communication with parents via text or email has been shown to be an effective way of reducing such absences.
- If feasible, and where pupils will be studying related material in the subsequent terms, delaying tests gives pupils a chance to catch up.

Potential drivers?

- 1 Cost-of-living crisis and disadvantage
- 2 Mental health crisis
- 3 Special Educational Needs provision
- 4 Attitudes of parents and young people

Cost-of-living crisis and disadvantage

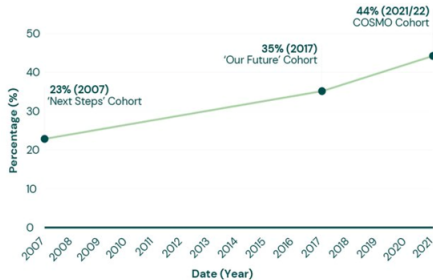
Figure 10: Whether participants thought they had fallen behind their classmates, by food bank usage and rent/mortgage arrears



Mental health crisis

Levels of high psychological distress amongst young people in England over time

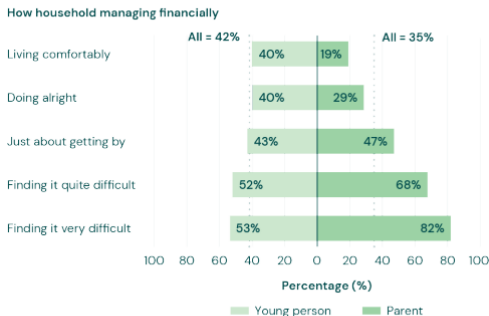
COSMO



A large-scale study found that 44% of young people were above the threshold for "probable mental ill health" (Gareth Fuller/PA)

These are interrelated

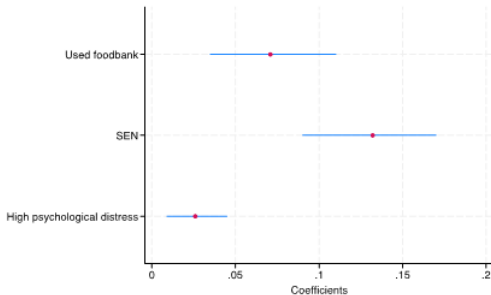
Figure 13: Percentage of young people and parents reporting high psychological distress, by how well parents feel they are managing financially



Notes: N = 7,543. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person and main parent non-response. Only households where we have GHQ data for both the young person and a parent are included.

Special Educational Needs

Figure 3: Change in probability of pupils living in households that used a food bank, pupils with SEN status and pupils with high psychological distress being persistently absent from school, relative to their otherwise similar peers



Notes: N = 4,387. Reporting change in probability (marginal effects) while also adjusting for gender, ethnicity, parental education, parental occupational status, and Key Stage 2 prior attainment; SEN = Special Educational Needs.

Parent and young people's attitudes

In undertaking this research, we sought to give voice to parents across the socioeconomic spectrum. Their voices paint a bleak picture of the reality of the attendance crisis and shed light on the driving forces behind it. Although some of the parents we spoke to expressed disappointment at responses to attendance issues, the frustrations were not about individual schools and this report should not be read as such. Many specifically highlighted it was not about particular schools or teachers. For others, it was clear that their frustration with school was – at least in part – due to their inability to access any other support. It is clear from speaking to them that the social contract between schools and parents is profoundly broken and that it will take a colossal, multi-agency effort to rebuild it.

Solutions?

- 1 System re-set?
- 2 Improving data collection and communication with parents



- 3 Funding the wider system (including SEND and CAMHS)
- 4 Tackling underlying disadvantage