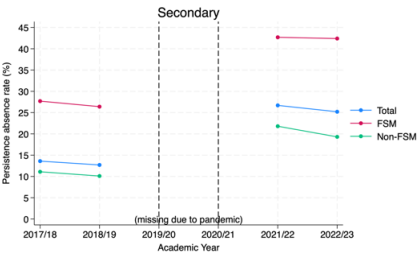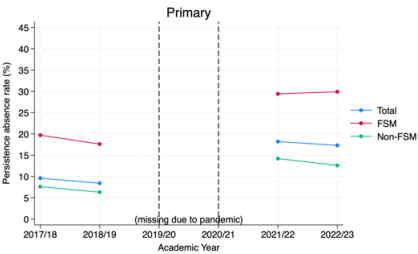# Understanding the drivers of pupil absences
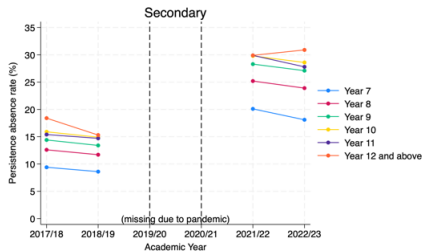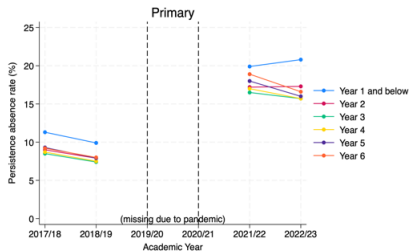
Professor Lindsey Macmillan

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

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
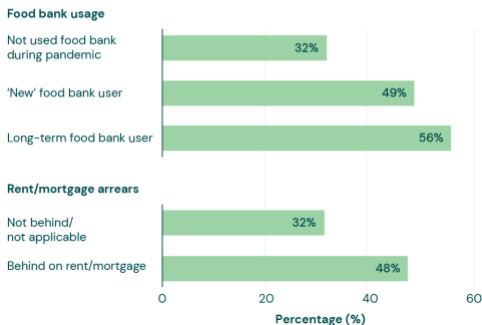
Mental health crisis

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

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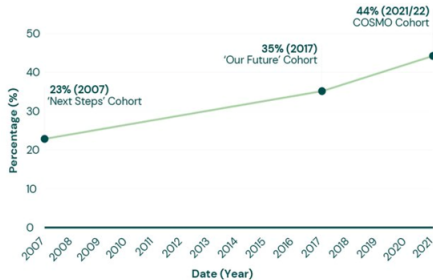
A large-scale study found that 44% of young people were above the threshold for "probable mental ill health" (Gareth Fuller/PA)

These are interrelated

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

How household managing financially

	Young person	Parent
Living comfortably	40%	19%
Doing alright	40%	29%
Just about getting by	43%	47%
Finding it quite difficult	52%	68%
Finding it very difficult	53%	82%

All = 42% All = 35%

Percentage (%)

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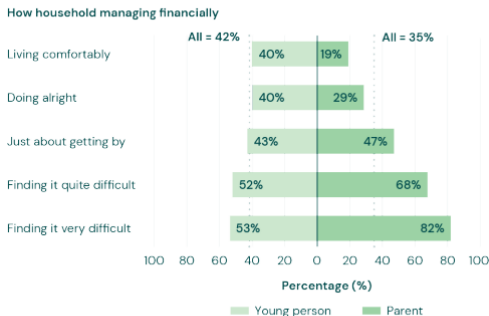
Notes: N = 7,543. The analysis is weighted for survey design and young person and main parent non-response. Only households where we have GHQ data for both the young person and a parent are included.

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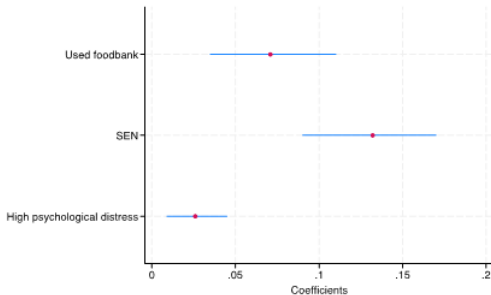
Notes. N = 4,387. Reporting change in probability (marginal effects) while also adjusting for gender, ethnicity, parental education, parental occupational status, and Key Stage 2 prior attainment; SEN = Special Educational Needs.

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