

New research reveals that school attendance in the UK is still well below the pre-pandemic norm. **Andrew Eyles, Esme Lillywhite and Lee Elliot Major** outline the scale of continued absenteeism among pupils across the country and the difficulty of tackling the problem.

The rising tide of school absences in the post-pandemic era

One of the most damaging legacies of Covid-19 may yet prove to be the unprecedented closure of the nation's schools during the pandemic. In March 2020, most schools across the UK closed their gates. Millions of pupils headed home with little idea of how they would continue their studies.

When we produced initial estimates of the large learning losses likely to be suffered by the "Covid generation"

of pupils (Elliot Major et al, 2020), many dismissed these calculations as scaremongering. They argued this would just be a one-off disruption and pupils would soon bounce back.

But our analysis of the pupil absence data for England sadly shows that this is not the case. We now face a national education crisis in the post-pandemic era: a huge slice of the Covid generation has never got back into the habit of attending school regularly.

The rise in absenteeism among pupils has been startling. During the autumn term of 2017/18, 4.4% of lessons were missed across state-maintained schools; during the autumn term of 2021/22, 6.9% of lessons were missed.

Meanwhile, there has been a staggering increase in persistent absence. In 2017/18, 11.7% of pupils missed 10 or more sessions (defined as half a day of school); in 2021/22, 23.5% of pupils missed 10 or more sessions.



A crisis that is affecting children across the country

Our figures also show how widespread absenteeism has become. Primary and secondary school pupils are missing school in all areas of the country.

The rising tide of absences has eradicated a once strong statistical correlation between local deprivation and absence rates. Figure 1 shows the relationship between absence and the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) at the local education authority level. In 2017/18, the rate of persistent absenteeism was 26% greater (12.75% compared with 10.10%) in the most deprived areas compared with the least deprived areas. In the post-pandemic era, we find no evidence of such a difference when we compare the bottom and top deciles of areas by deprivation.

When we look at individual pupils, a similar story emerges, although here we use 2019/20, rather than 2017/18, as a baseline because information on absence by pupil characteristics is only available from 2019/20. This shows that the overall number of pupils classed as persistently absent rose from 921,927 to 1,672,178 between 2019/20 and 2021/22.

Breaking this down by FSM status, the rate of persistent absence doubled for non-FSM pupils across the country, going from 10.5% to 20.0%. In percentage terms, this far outstrips the rise among FSM pupils from 23.8% to 33.6%.

The results are similar for overall absence, which increased from 4.3% to 6.0% for non-FSM pupils (a 40% rise) and 7.6% to 9.7% for FSM-eligible pupils (a 28% rise).

These patterns mirror those we have observed in previous work. For example, we found that educational losses were

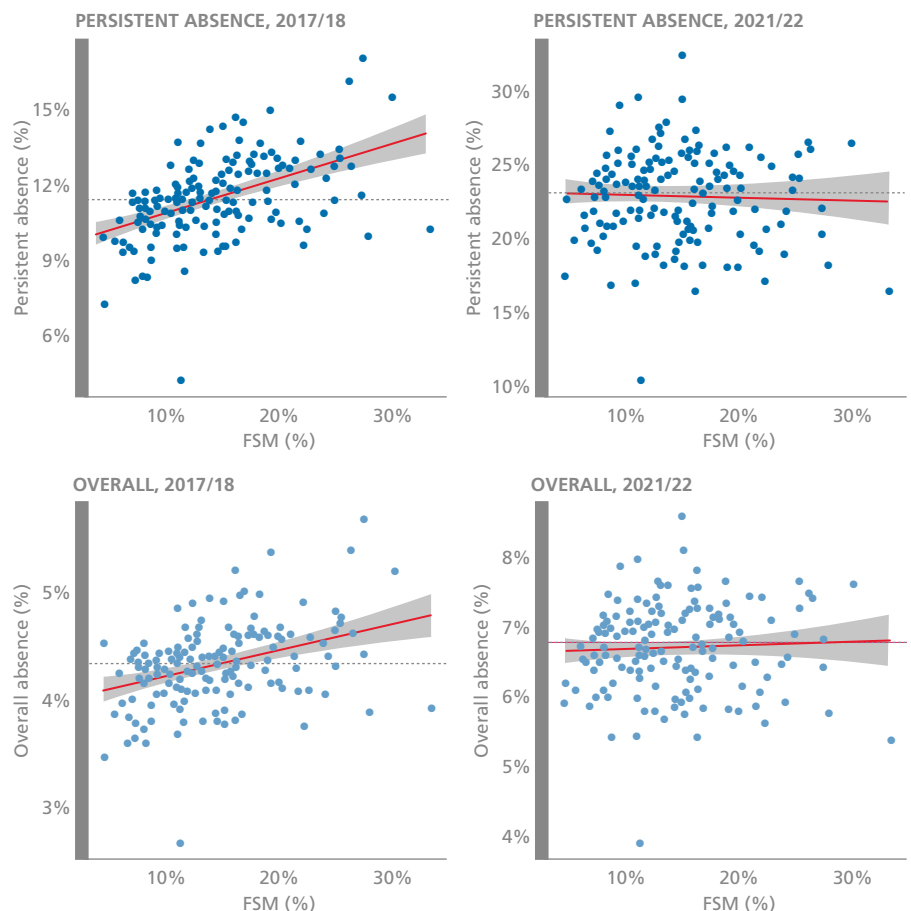
widespread during the pandemic and not confined solely to children with the least resources (Elliot Major et al, 2021).

Other research has shown that children in state comprehensives are twice as likely to say that they have fallen behind in their studies than privately educated pupils: 37% compared with 15% (Montacute et al, 2022). It appears that the most privileged children are being insulated from the damage to the rest of the population, rather than the poorest pupils falling further behind everyone else.

A huge slice of the Covid generation has never got back into the habit of regularly attending school

Figure 1:

The relationship between persistent absences and the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) at local education authority (LEA) level.



Notes: The chart derives from the authors' own calculations based on data published by the Department for Education in the release 'Pupil absence in schools in England: autumn term 2021/22' and FSM variables taken from school performance tables. The red line is a fitted regression line (unweighted) based on the relationship between the fraction of pupils eligible for FSM and the rate of persistent (and overall) absenteeism at the LEA level. The dashed dotted line refers to the national mean. The data are for those in state-maintained schools – both primary and secondary level. The findings hold separately for primary and secondary schools and are not sensitive to the base period – in this case 2017/18 – chosen.



The challenge of finding solutions in uncharted territory

The reasons for the rising absences are still unknown. Increased anxiety, lack of mental health support, budget pressures and long Covid have been cited (Adams and Aguilar Garcia, 2023), as have changes in parental working schedules. We have previously suggested more fundamental factors could be at play: a breakdown in trusting relationships between parents and teachers alongside increasing unhappiness with the narrow academic curricula by which schools are measured.

It's also far from clear what will persuade children to come back to school. On 18 May 2023, the government announced plans to tackle absence rates by expanding Attendance Hubs and Attendance Mentor programmes. These will share effective practice such as automatic texts to parents of chronically absent pupils.

Interventions such as these are not unprecedented, but the nature of the problem is. A recent review by the Education Endowment Foundation highlights that sending personalised letters or texts to parents can help to improve their children's attendance, but it is not obvious that interventions such as these will work at scale if the type of pupils who are absent – and the reasons for that absence – are different to what they have been in the past.

Improving attendance needs to be part of a longer-term education recovery plan

In our view, improving attendance needs to be part of a longer-term education recovery plan, one strand of which should aim to forge deeper school-parent partnerships.

We are still in the earliest days of comprehending the full impact of the pandemic on the Covid generation. Our work supported by the Nuffield Foundation will shed more light on this, assessing how cognitive and socio-emotional skills developed by children at different ages impact on their eventual outcomes, and seeing how these have been affected for the Covid generation.

The aim is to help inform governments to develop the most effective ways of improving prospects for a generation facing multiple challenges including a sclerotic labour market, stagnant productivity growth and rising costs of goods – particularly housing – that are essential for a good standard of living. Getting children back to school would be a good start.

A version of this article first appeared as 'The Rising Tide of School Absences in the Post-Pandemic Era' on *LSE British Politics and Policy* (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-rising-tide-of-school-absences-in-the-post-pandemic-era/>).

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Further reading

Richard Adams and Carmen Aguilar Garcia (2023) 'Rise in School Absences Since Covid Driven by Anxiety and Lack of Support, say English Councils', *The Guardian*.

Education Endowment Foundation (2022) 'Attendance Interventions Rapid Evidence Assessment'.

Lee Elliot Major, Andrew Eyles and Stephen Machin (2020) 'Generation Covid: Emerging Work and Education Inequalities', CEP Covid-19 Analysis No. 11.

Lee Elliot Major, Andrew Eyles and Stephen Machin (2021) 'Unequal Learning and Labour Market Losses in the Crisis: Consequences For Social Mobility', CEP Discussion Paper No. 1748.

Rebecca Montacute, Erica Holt-White, Jake Anders, Carl Cullinane, Alice De Gennaro, Erin Early, Xin Shao and James Yarde (2022) 'Education Recovery and Catch Up', Covid Social Mobility and Opportunities Study Wave 1 Initial Findings – Briefing No. 2.

The most privileged children appear to be insulated from the damage affecting the rest of the population

