

Absence rates will stay high until the Covid generation leaves school

Pupil absence in secondary schools is likely to remain above pre-pandemic levels, at least until those who began secondary school during the pandemic have left school.

Stephen Gibbons, Sandra McNally and Piero Montebruno explain how a shift in attitudes has driven this persistent high absence rate.

School absences increased massively during the Covid-19 pandemic and remain at higher levels. Our [new research](#) (funded by the Nuffield Foundation) shows that the high level of pupil absence in England can be attributed to a shift in attitudes towards school attendance during the Covid-19 pandemic, and that this change in attitudes was due in part to restrictions on social and economic activity at the time. The research looks at how these restrictions influenced pupil absence during 2020 and how this affected [post-pandemic](#) attendance and academic achievement.

Policies during autumn 2020 appear to have had long lasting effects for pupils.

Absence rates doubled from the periods before to after the pandemic. In the autumn terms before the pandemic, around 3.6 per cent of half-day sessions were missed. In the autumn of 2020, overall absence rates had risen to 13.5 per cent of sessions missed – the majority of these (8.7 per cent) were “forced” absences, due to children not being allowed to come to school after coming into contact with someone who had tested positive for Covid. But “unforced” absences for reasons unconnected to Covid also rose – to a rate of 5.6 per cent of remaining sessions missed. By the autumn of 2021, “forced” absences had dropped to 1.7 per cent but the rate of “unforced” absence remained high at 7.7 per cent.

Policies during autumn 2020 appear to have had long lasting effects for pupils. Our analysis focusses on the effects of periods during the pandemic when schools in England were not in national lockdown, but there were various local restrictions on social and business activity – the Tier Regulations of autumn 2020 – or differing local guidance

on school opening (after the first national lockdown). These policies generated changes in absence rates in different schools at different times, allowing us to compare the subsequent outcomes for children exposed to these policies.

Chronic absenteeism – defined as missing at least 10 percent of sessions, equivalent to one day every fortnight – has risen dramatically.

We find that:

- Pupils in higher tiers were more likely to be absent than those in the lowest, and pupils from lower socio-economic groups were much more strongly affected. Tighter restrictions (not directly affecting schools) led to a half-day absence on average for a pupil in the least deprived area but 2.25-day absence for a pupil in the most deprived area.
- The changes in absenteeism caused by local policies during 2020 were persistent, particularly for secondary school students. This pattern is illustrated in the figure below, which shows the rate at which pupil absence will have declined from year to year since the initial increase in 2020. While the impacts on absenteeism for those who were in primary school will now have returned to near pre-pandemic levels, higher absence rates for those already in secondary school that autumn are likely to remain higher until they leave school.
- Chronic absenteeism – defined as missing at least 10 percent of sessions, equivalent to one day every fortnight – has risen dramatically. The numbers missing one day a fortnight quadrupled between 2019 and 2021 (from 8 percent to 34 percent) and the proportion missing two days a week (40 percent of sessions) was more than 10 times higher, (from 0.2 percent to 2.3 percent).

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