



Improve school attendance: New collation of routinely collected data shows where early support is needed

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Persistent school absence has nearly doubled from pre-pandemic levels to affect around one in four children¹. Absence is associated with poor academic outcomes, long-term physical and mental illness, later financial difficulties, and crime. Drawing on routinely collected data from public services in Bradford, we found that absence rates vary widely across neighbourhoods, and that it was possible to identify children at risk of absenteeism at an early age. We recommend taking an early, place-based and system-wide approach to reduce school absences.

School absence is currently a huge priority for Government. Indeed, driving this push towards getting more pupils in school regularly is the launch of “attendance hubs” by the Department for Education (DfE), the launch of the attendance communications toolkit for schools, and new Government guidance and legislation (e.g., National Framework for penalty notices and “attendance contracts”). However, these policies may not be equally effective across all children.

Absenteeism is a multifaceted problem. The different reasons for being absent (e.g. truancy, sickness) uniquely influence academic attainment², and the type and timing of absence influences the attainment gap³. In addition, various demographic factors interact and intersect to differentially impact who is more likely to be

absent and why. For example, analyses demonstrate regional disparities, with overall absence rates greater in the North East (7.9%) and Yorkshire and The Humber (7.7%), compared to the rest of England (7.5%)⁴. Therefore, blanket approaches across the whole country, or even a whole district, may not be the most suitable.

Using geospatial analyses, we demonstrate how place-based approaches may be appropriate for deciding where need is greatest to target support (e.g., the establishment of new attendance hubs). With new statutory requirements for schools to share their daily registers, we also demonstrate how we can use these data to drive improved outcomes and obtain a deeper understanding of why some pupils are more likely to be absent from school and how this impacts later life.



Using administrative data to explore school absences

Our research used routinely collected datasets from across healthcare, social care, and education, for the entire Bradford District⁵. The anonymised data was linked across services to give a much fuller picture of people's lives and related circumstances.

We share findings from three key analyses on school absences.

Absences are geographically concentrated

- Unauthorised absence is highly variable even within the same district⁶.
- Increased rates of absence were particularly prevalent around the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods.
- The neighbourhood in Bradford with the highest rate of unauthorised absence (5.1%) was 22 times higher than the area with the lowest rate (0.23%).
- Absences are not evenly distributed, with 80% of absences attributable to about 12% of pupils. When the absence rate is higher or in a more disadvantaged neighbourhood, absences are distributed across a larger proportion of pupils.
- Different approaches to reduce absences may be more effective in some areas than others, even in the same district.

Early education data can be used to identify increased risk of absenteeism

We used linked education datasets to identify pupils at elevated risk of becoming a “persistent absentee”, a term for children with less than 90% attendance.

- Children who failed to be “school ready” by Reception (age 4-5 years) were 2.4 times more likely to be a persistent absentee, compared to pupils who were considered “school ready” by teachers as part of their Early Years Foundation Stage Profile⁷.

Absenteeism is associated with demographic factors

We linked attendance records with information from the school census. From this we found:

- Children who were eligible for free school meals (a common proxy for socioeconomic status) were more likely to be a persistent absentee, as were children with Special Educational Needs or Disability (SEND), females, and children with English as an Additional Language⁷.
- Compared to White British pupils, Pakistani pupils were *less likely* to be a persistent absentee, while those categorised as “Other” ethnic groups were *more likely*.

Although developmental and demographic factors don't cause school absences, using such information to identify the children at greatest risk of future absenteeism would allow support to be put in place early on and prevent children disengaging with education.

Policy implications

Our findings suggest administrative data may be useful to tackle the attendance crisis currently thwarting our education system. From our evidence, we suggest the following considerations for policy:

- **Implement specific place-based approaches.** A blanket approach to reducing school absences is unlikely to be successful. Patterns of absence are highly variable even within a district, and it is likely that the most effective solutions vary between areas. Place-based approaches, that account for these differences, are the mostly likely to realise change.
- **Use public service administrative data to identify children most at risk of school absence early on.** The risk factors for school absence are in place early in life, such as lack of school readiness or low socioeconomic background. Linking administrative datasets across our different services, that often operate in isolation, would allow earlier identification of increased risk across several negative outcomes.
- **Take a system-wide approach to reduce school absences.** Schools alone cannot effectively reduce school absences. The overlap between the areas most deprived and with the highest rates of absence suggests absence is related to wider determinants. System-wide approaches involving the community, education, healthcare, and other services are needed.

Further information

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Recommended reading: Mon-Williams M., Wood, M. et al. (2023). healthequitynorth.co.uk/app/uploads/APPG-REPORT-SEPT-23.pdf

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