

Who Is Missing-out On School? Exploring Socioeconomic Inequalities In School Absenteeism

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Background

The strong relationship between family background and school performance among secondary pupils is a well-established finding in the cross-national comparative literature (Van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2010) and for Scotland (Sosu and Ellis 2014). “Closing the attainment gap” between children from lower and higher socioeconomic backgrounds is the main priority of the Scottish government’s education policy (Scottish Government 2016). A potential mechanism that may help to account for the association between family background and school performance is school absenteeism. Being absent from school may result from legitimate (e.g. sickness) or illegitimate reasons (e.g. truancy), as well as exclusion from school. In the school year 2014/2015, the total rate of absence for secondary schools in Scotland was 8.1% with significant differences between low (12%) and high-income (5.5%) neighbourhoods (Scottish Government, 2015). Several studies have found that school absenteeism is linked to lower educational achievement (Aucejo and Romano 2016; Buscha and Conte 2014; Gottfried 2011; London, Sanchez and Castrechini 2016; Steward et al. 2008). This is because absent students miss out on teacher-led lessons, peer interactions or activities that may stimulate their learning and ultimately their performance in exams. In addition, they might feel less integrated into their class and struggle to participate in classroom activities and interactions with peers and teachers which, in turn, is detrimental to their learning. Importantly, school absenteeism may be particularly harmful for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds as their parents have neither the time nor resources to compensate for school absence by supporting their children in engaging with the content of the missed school lessons.

The relationship between family background and school absenteeism may operate through health-related behaviour (e.g. Moonie et al. 2006), environmental hazards (e.g. Currie et al. 2009), residential and school mobility (Nolan et al. 2013), family structure and environment (Evans 2004), and parental employment characteristics (Han 2005). Although a few studies show that students from the lower socio-economic background are more often absent from school (Attwood and Croll 2006; Nolan et al. 2013; Theriot, Craun and Dupper 2010), they do not address if and to what extent parental resources are associated with absenteeism. Additionally, it is not clear if students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or specific family structures are more likely to experience particular forms of absenteeism- such as exclusion- possibly due to the tendency for teacher bias towards students from low-income households (Campbell, 2015). Finally, it is not clear if boys and girls from different socioeconomic backgrounds experience absenteeism in the same way.

This study attempts to fill the existing knowledge gaps in trying to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do different socioeconomic factors (parental education, parental class or neighbourhood deprivation) and family structures (Eg. single parent, number of siblings) determine school absenteeism?

2. Do students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or specific family structures differ in their experience of particular forms of school absenteeism (legitimate absence, truancy and exclusion)?
3. Drawing on the theory of intersectionality, does the relationship between socioeconomic backgrounds and school absenteeism differ between boys and girls?

Method

We analyse secondary data from the Scottish Longitudinal Study (SLS) by linking census, school administrative and achievement, and administrative health data. The SLS is a large-scale, anonymised linkage study designed to capture 5.5% of the Scottish population based on 20 semi-random birthdates. These large-scale administrative data are unique in providing detailed and accurate information on family background, school attendance and school attainment among secondary pupils in Scotland. Our sample (N=5,157) comprised SLS members who were followed through the secondary school. The unique SLS data provided us with a rich set of sociodemographic variables in estimating the relationship between socioeconomic background and school absenteeism using regression-based approaches.

Expected Outcomes

Expected Results We completed the data linkage and cleaning. The analysis of the data is currently ongoing at a safe setting place due to the confidential nature of the data. We will discuss policy and practice implications of the findings as part of our presentation. **Conclusion** A social gap in school attendance is crucial since missing out school has detrimental consequences for at-risk behaviour, educational attainment and occupational destinations. Programmes aimed at bridging the attendance gap may thus contribute to closing the inequality gap in educational attainment.

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