



University of  
**Strathclyde**  
Glasgow



# Executive Summary

## Understanding School Attendance, Educational Attainment, and Labour Market Outcomes

Pupil absenteeism is a long-standing issue in the UK, particularly among disadvantaged children. It is one of the biggest challenges facing education and the problem has worsened significantly since the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, the overall absence rate in England increased from 4.3% in 2018 to 7.2% in 2024. Similar trends have been observed across Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Socioeconomic disparities in absenteeism also widened post-pandemic, making it a critical focus for the UK's education policy agenda.

Understanding how pupil absences affect educational and labour market outcomes is crucial. Frequent absences can negatively impact national exam performance due to missed teacher-led lessons and peer interactions. While the negative consequences of absenteeism on attainment are well-documented in the US, fewer studies have explored this in the UK. Additionally, most studies on absenteeism have typically used limited measures of absences at specific school stages despite the dynamic nature of pupil absences throughout a child's education.

Absenteeism will likely have long-term effects on educational attainment and labour market outcomes, as early-life skills and dispositions influence long-term outcomes. In other words, school absence is a key vulnerability that can trap young people in a cycle of poorer educational and labour market outcomes. Few studies have examined this possible long-term relationship between absenteeism and outcomes such as post-school qualifications or labour market participation.

The mechanisms by which absences affect attainment are likely multifaceted. Absenteeism can impact psychosocial factors such as risky behaviour and educational motivation, with consequences for academic achievement. The relationship between absenteeism and outcomes may also differ by sociodemographic group (e.g. gender, socioeconomic background). Still, the role of psychosocial factors or variations of absence effects across sociodemographic groups have yet to be thoroughly studied.

### Objectives and Significance

This study contributes to understanding the role of absenteeism in shaping educational attainment and labour market outcomes in the UK. It addresses knowledge gaps by examining short- and long-term effects, the impact of absences at different school

stages, typical absence trajectories, reasons for absences, and the role of psychosocial factors. It also investigates variations by sociodemographic characteristics.

The study is timely in the post-COVID-19 context, providing evidence to help policymakers and practitioners make informed decisions about tackling absenteeism and its consequences. Understanding the extent, timing, reasons, and affected groups provides crucial information for effective interventions.

### Methodology

The research design involves a secondary data analysis using linked birth cohort and school administrative data. These longitudinal datasets are suitable due to their large representative samples and comprehensive variables, which allow for a robust analysis.

The study uses the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) to examine long-term effects of school absences. The BCS70 tracks over 17,000 individuals born in England, Wales, and Scotland in 1970, with data collected at multiple life stages.

For more recent data, the study uses the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) and school administrative data from England, Wales, and Scotland. The MCS follows approximately 19,000 individuals born in the UK between 2000 and 2002, with seven sweeps to date.

In England, MCS data is linked with the National Pupil Database (NPD), resulting in an analytical sample of 8,139 pupils. In Wales, MCS data is linked with the Secure Anonymized Information Linkage (SAIL) databank, resulting in a sample of 1,730 pupils. In Scotland, MCS data is limited to the end of key stage 1 (age 7) and linked administrative data, with an analytical sample of 1,407 pupils.



## Key Findings

**Short- and Long-term Impact:** School absences significantly harm both short-term school attainment and long-term educational and labour market outcomes. The negative impact of absences on educational attainment is consistent across UK nations.

**Stage-specific impact:** Absences during all stages of schooling negatively affect educational attainment, but absences during the transition from primary to secondary school and early to middle stages of secondary school are especially harmful due to multiple transitions (e.g., changes in school, friends and teachers) faced by pupils.

**Absence Trajectories:** Patterns of increasing absence trajectories are rooted in early primary schooling and emerge during the transition from primary to secondary school. Increasing absence trajectories across children's schooling are most detrimental to attainment. However, consistently moderate levels of absences also have significant negative consequences.

**Authorised vs. Unauthorised Absences:** Both types of absences harm educational attainment equally in each year of schooling. However, cumulative unauthorised absences are the most detrimental with Strongly Increasing Unauthorised absence trajectories having the most negative impact on educational attainment.

**Psychosocial Factors:** Decreased educational motivation and increased problem and risky behaviours partly explain the negative association between absences and attainment. By contrast, prosocial behaviour and self-esteem did not mediate the association between absences and achievement in our study.

**Sociodemographic Consistency:** The negative impact of absenteeism is consistent across sociodemographic groups. However, disadvantaged sociodemographic groups are more likely to be absent, necessitating targeted interventions to improve overall attendance.

## Policy and Practice Recommendations

**Targeted interventions:** Develop targeted interventions addressing the root causes of absenteeism, particularly for vulnerable groups, to break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage.

**Support for lost learning:** Implement policies to help pupils recover lost learning, such as additional tuition and catch-up homework.

**Home/School Engagement:** Foster strong partnerships between schools and families by developing programs that actively engage parents and caregivers in the educational process. Building trust and collaboration between home and school can help identify and address barriers to attendance early, ensuring that students receive the necessary support from both their families and educators.

**Lifelong learning opportunities:** Provide more opportunities for lifelong learning, such as adult education classes, to help chronically absent pupils acquire essential skills for future success.

**Health screening and interventions:** Incorporate health interventions, such as mental health screening or chronic disease management, for pupils who are frequently absent to address underlying health issues affecting their education and future employment.

**Early identification:** Use school administrative data to identify pupils with emerging absence patterns and provide early support to prevent escalation. This will require professional development and support for schools in analysing school absences data.

**Address all levels of absenteeism:** Focus not only on persistent absenteeism but also on moderate absences, as they accumulate over time and significantly impact achievement.

**Early support systems:** Target attendance issues early in primary school to address absences before they escalate.

**Critical transition support:** Implement interventions such as academic bridging programs or peer mentorship programs to prevent absences during the critical transition period from primary to secondary school.

**Equal emphasis on all types of absences:** Address both authorised and unauthorised absences with equal importance to reduce overall absenteeism.

**Enhance educational motivation:** Develop interventions that help absent pupils master concepts and experience educational success to build their motivation.

**Reduce problem and risky behaviours:** Implement strategies to address problem and risky behaviours. This is because risky behaviours increase the likelihood of pupils being absent from school and are exacerbated by school absences.

**Universal focus on attendance:** Address absenteeism for all pupils with a national approach, reducing stigma and encouraging comprehensive school attendance initiatives.

## Conclusion

This study provides crucial evidence on the detrimental effects of school absences on educational and labour market outcomes in the UK. Addressing pupil absenteeism is essential to improve educational and labour market outcomes and break the cycle of disadvantage, particularly in the post-COVID-19 context. The study highlights the need for targeted, stage-specific interventions that address both authorised and unauthorised absences. The findings suggest that a comprehensive approach involving health screening, early identification, and support, as well as addressing psychosocial factors, is essential for mitigating the negative impacts of absenteeism.

## Research Output

Three academic articles and one policy brief have been produced so far within this project, providing further details to the results in this report. The references are as follows:

### Academic articles:

Dräger, J., Klein, M. & Sosu, E. (2024). The long-term consequences of early school absences for educational attainment and labour market outcomes. *British Educational Research Journal*, 00, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3992>

Dräger, J., Klein, M., & Sosu, E. M. (2024). Trajectories of school absences across compulsory schooling and their impact on children's academic achievement: An analysis based on linked longitudinal survey and school administrative data. *PloS one*, 19(8), e0306716. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0306716>

Dräger, J., Klein, M., & Sosu, E. (2024, March 13). Does the impact of pupil absences on achievement depend on their timing? <https://doi.org/10.35542/osf.io/nwzqh>

### Policy brief:

Dräger, J., Klein, M., & Sosu, E. (2023). Trajectories of school absences and pupils' academic performance. University of Strathclyde. <https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.00086856>