

Based Solutions to the Post-Covid Absenteeism Crisis

By Blog editor, on 18 May 2023

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CEPEO recently launched [New Opportunities](#), our evidence-based manifesto for equalising opportunities. In this blog series, we are highlighting one of our policy proposals each week. This post presents evidence-based solutions to address the post-Covid persistent absenteeism, which include effectively engaging parents through automated text messages and addressing underlying factors such as the cost-of-living crisis, increasing mental health problems among young people, and a lack of support for special educational needs.

Schooling can only equalise opportunities if children are present in the classroom. [Preliminary empirical analysis](#) from FFT Education Datalab suggests that absence rates remain significantly higher than before the pandemic, especially in secondary school. Non-Covid-related persistent absence rates were 12 % in primary schools and 21 % in secondary schools during the autumn 2021. [The latest data](#) from Department for Education shows that persistent absence rates were equal to 20 % and 28 % in secondary school during the autumn 2022. By comparison, persistent absence rates were equal to 11 % in primary school and 16 % in secondary school during the autumn 2019. Free school meals pupils are twice as likely to be persistently absent than other pupils.

This issue is not unique to the UK context. [A McKinsey study conducted in December 2021](#) shows that, in the United States, absenteeism has risen, with 2.7 times as many students on a path to be chronically absent from school in 2021 compared with before the pandemic. While absenteeism rates for high-income students are levelling off, rates for low-income students have continued to worsen since the spring 2021, despite the return to in-person school.

[More recent evidence from California](#) further supports this concerning trend. Between 2018-19 and 2021-22, there were substantial spikes in chronic absenteeism for students from ethnic minorities and disadvantaged socio-economic background. Absenteeism rates for Black students rising from 23% to 43%, and rates for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds increasing from 15% to 37%

There is evidence from before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic on the determinants of persistent absences. Evidence from the US ([EPI, 2018](#)) shows that poor health, parents' nonstandard work schedules, low socioeconomic status, changes in adult household composition (e.g., adults moving into or out of the household), residential mobility, and extensive family responsibilities (e.g., children looking after siblings) – along with inadequate supports for student within the educational system (e.g., lack of adequate transportation, unsafe conditions, lack of medical services, harsh disciplinary measures, etc.) are all associated with a greater likelihood of being chronically absent. Evidence from Scotland using the 2007 and 2008 waves of the Scottish Longitudinal Study shows that that parental education, parental class, housing tenure, free school meal registration, and neighbourhood deprivation all increased the risk of being absent from school. Neglecting some of these dimensions would underestimate the full extent of socioeconomic inequalities in school attendance ([Klein and Sosu, 2021](#)), especially in the context of the cost of living crisis.

Post-pandemic evidence on the determinants of persistent absences is still very scarce. A multiple stakeholder qualitative study with parents and professionals conducted in the Spring and Summer 2021 suggests that compounding factors for persistent absences included COVID-related anxiety, difficulties adapting to new school routines, poor home-school communication and collaboration, and concerns about academic catch-up ([McDonald et al., 2022](#)).

An ongoing research project conducted by Asma Benhenda at CEPEO examines the impact of the pandemic on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) pupils' absences. Preliminary evidence reveals that during the pandemic, the absence rate for SEND pupils remained consistently 4 percentage points higher than the average pupil. While absence rates increased for all groups at the end of the pandemic, with an overall absence rate of 5.80%, pupils with SEND still faced a higher risk of absence at a rate of 10%. However, the pandemic did not widen the gap in absence rates between SEND pupils and the average pupil. Disparities in the SEND-all pupils absence rate gap were observed across different regions, with London having the smallest gap of around 2 percentage points, while the Southwest and the East Midlands had the highest gap of around 4 percentage points. Secondary schools exhibited a larger gap of approximately 8 percentage points compared to primary schools, which had a gap of around 3 percentage points. Additionally, a positive and statistically significant correlation was found between the gap in absence risk between SEND pupils and all pupils and local COVID-19 rates, indicating that SEND pupils were more affected by local surges in COVID-19 cases than the average pupil.

While the existing research provides valuable insights, further investigation is needed to fully understand the underlying factors contributing to persistent absence among pupils and inform the development of comprehensive solutions. Work by CEPEO colleagues using the COVID Social Mobility & Opportunities study (COSMO), tracking a cohort of students currently in Year 13, is exploring the links between persistent absences and financial instability, mental health challenges, and students' SEND status. Factors such as food poverty, reliance on food banks, elevated risk of psychological distress, and SEND status are recognised in anecdotal evidence as significant contributors to persistent absence, and analysis of large-scale representative data will shine a light on the importance and implications of these potential contributors to this issue.

[Pre-pandemic evidence from the US](#) shows that leveraging low-cost technology to improve communication with parents can significantly reduce absence rates. In the US, a large-scale one-year experiment that pushed high-frequency information to parents about their child's absences via automated text messages increased class attendance by 12%. The effect of this intervention is the largest for low achieving students, and the total cost was very low: just \$63 in intervention costs for the whole study. A [2022 Evidence review by the Education Endowment Foundation](#) also highlights that sending parents of pupils who are persistently absent personalised letters or texts can help improve attendance. Despite the detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on persistent absenteeism, there exist practical and effective solutions to address this challenge. Evidence suggests that leveraging low-cost technology, such as personalised letters or automated text messages, to communicate with parents can significantly reduce absence rates. Addressing persistent absenteeism will require a multi-dimensional approach, considering various determinants such as the current cost of living crisis, increasing rates of mental health problems among young people, and issues of SEND provision in schools. As the education system recovers from the pandemic, addressing persistent absenteeism must be a priority to ensure that schooling can equalise opportunities.