

WHERE HAVE ALL THE CHILDREN GONE?

The school absence crisis sweeping Scottish schools



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About the Centre for Social Justice

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the UK who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five "pathways to poverty", first identified in our groundbreaking 2007 report *Breakthrough Britain*. These are: educational failure; family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report *It Happens Here* shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policymakers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises, and other grassroots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2024 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

About the CSJ Foundation

The CSJ Foundation exists to support and magnify the fantastic work done by grassroots charities across the UK. Sitting in a unique position between frontline charities, philanthropists, and policymakers, the CSJ Foundation aims to revolutionise the way local grassroots charities are seen and funded.

We oversee an Alliance of 700+ grassroots charities and social enterprises spread across the UK. These charities have been vetted by our team and represent the very best small, community-based charities.

The insights we gain from these charities feed directly into the CSJ's policy work, providing vital intelligence about the nature of poverty in the UK – and providing some of the best solutions to deep rooted social problems.

We have a growing network of regional offices that are embedded in their local community. Working in a specific region, dedicated CSJ Foundation staff build strong relationships with the most effective poverty fighting charities and organisations.

Through these offices, we make sure frontline voices are heard loud and clear in national discussions about poverty. We make the case for forgotten regions, showcasing their innovations and successes, not just highlighting their problems. And we direct much-needed funding to frontline charities.

Our deep understanding of small, grassroots charities and the communities that rely on them, means we are able to provide practical and informed guidance to philanthropists seeking high impact giving. In our first two years, we have helped to direct over £8 million to frontline charities – through advising private donors and administering trusts and foundations. Each charity within the CSJ Alliance is reviewed and assessed by us to ensure their work is making a significant impact in tackling poverty. This means that a modest philanthropic investment will have a transformational impact on the lives of the poorest people in our society.

The CSJ Foundation was established by the Centre for Social Justice, an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the UK who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

Foreword

More than four years since schools first closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the legacy of lockdown continues to blight our children's lives. Yet despite four years having passed, the Scottish Government response has been inadequate.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the school absence crisis.

As schools re-opened, the expectation was that all children would return, ready to learn and be re-united with their friends. The reality has been very different. Very limited data released by the Scottish Government shows that nearly one in three children are regularly missing school. Worrying new analysis uncovered by the Centre for Social Justice in this report estimates that the number of children who are missing fifty per cent or more of their school time has increased by 72 per cent from pre-pandemic levels. These are the children who are absent from school more than they are present.

What is most shocking is that, due to the lack of systemic and regular data collection, the Scottish Government does not know the full extent of this crisis. This report has extracted data from local authorities via FOIs, as there is no centralised up-to-date absence data. While the response to the absence crisis across the whole UK is lacking, Scotland is still far behind England, where although they haven't been able to turn the tide on absence, at least expansive data is published on a termly basis.

These are children and families who are in urgent need of support. Many are facing huge barriers to attendance that go far beyond the school gates. But we cannot offer support if we do not know where they are.

While the Scottish Government fails to act, this lost generation is growing up and passing through the education system. Children who were in S1 at the start of the pandemic recently got their Highers results and babies born in the first months of lockdown have just started school.

The First Minister oversaw the education system during the pandemic and has acknowledged failings during that period. Now the Scottish Government lacks the vision and ambition to undo the damage done. The education recovery plan after the pandemic was no different from the education recovery plan before the pandemic. The Scottish Government has fallen asleep at the wheel and is veering towards a crisis of epic proportions that could affect our children's lives for years to come.

I welcome this report by the Centre for Social Justice which clearly lays out how the Scottish Government must act. The first step is to urgently improve data collection and reporting on school absence. This must be quickly followed by a comprehensive action plan to get these children back into school. Any further delay is failing our children.

It is time to get these children back into view and back into school.



Willie Rennie MSP

Member of the Scottish Parliament for North East Fife & Member of the Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee. Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Education, Economy and Communities.

Executive Summary

When schools reopened in Scotland after subsequent lockdowns, the expectation was that every child would come back to school, ready to re-engage with their education in person. The reality has been very different. New data uncovered by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) has found that, more than three years on since schools re-opened, the number of children absent from school more than they are present appears to be at crisis level. Most concerning, however, is that due to a vast lack of data, we do not know just how many children are missing huge amounts of their education. These children are out of sight and at risk of catastrophic lifelong consequences if urgent action is not taken.

Scottish Government data released in December 2023 showed that 32.5 per cent of children were persistently absent in the 2022/23 academic year – missing 10 per cent or more of their school time. In comparison, in England – where persistent absence is also at crisis level – this figure stood at 21.2 per cent.

Shockingly, Freedom of Information (FOI) data collated and analysed by the CSJ has revealed an estimated 72 per cent increase in the number of children severely absent across Scottish schools between the 2018/19 and 2022/23 academic years. Severely absent children are those who miss 50 per cent or more of their school time – they are absent more than they are present.

Despite these worrying indicators that school absences are proliferating across Scotland, we can only make very limited conclusions about how many vulnerable children are currently being impacted. This is due to a sizeable gap in the data collected by the Scottish Government. It is not acceptable that Education Scotland does not know how many vulnerable children are regularly missing large parts of their education.

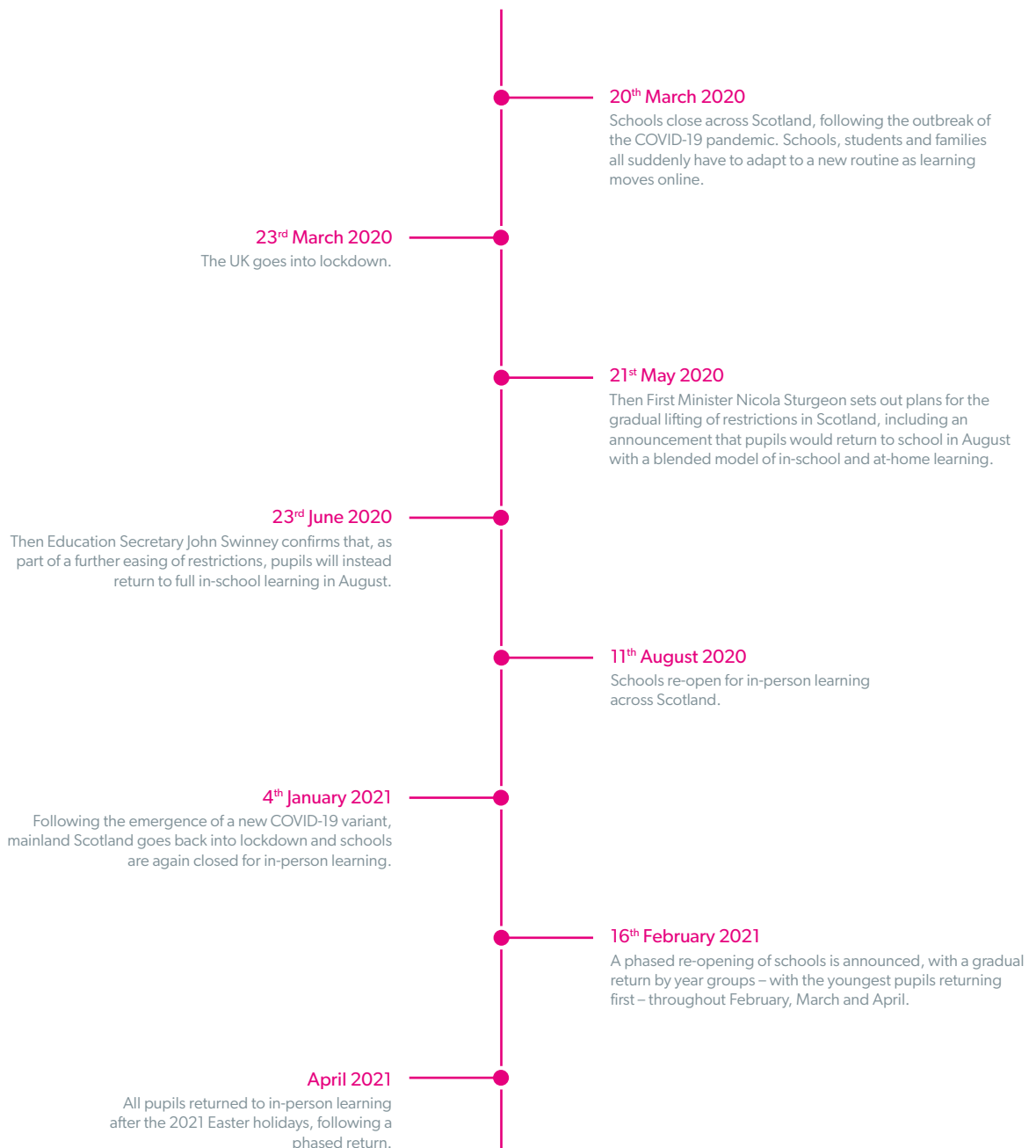
Currently, attendance data is only published every two years and 2022/23 marked the first release of persistent absence data. Even though the inclusion of persistent absence in this release was welcome, there is no available Scottish Government data on persistent absence for previous years, which does not allow for yearly comparisons or for patterns to be tracked. Nor did the data include any breakdowns of persistent absence by pupil characteristics, which would help identify which pupils are most affected.

Furthermore, the Scottish Government has not collected any data on which pupils are severely absent, which means this particularly vulnerable cohort of so-called ‘ghost children’ are not only out of school, but also out of the Scottish Government’s sight.

This contrasts to England, where expansive data on the school absence crisis is collated and published termly – including persistent and severe absence and breakdowns by pupil characteristics. Furthermore, official statistics tracking school attendance are published fortnightly, to give indicative figures for absence rates over the course of the year and allow for immediate monitoring of estimated figures and patterns. Despite increasing the quantity and regularity of data collected, the response to the absence crisis in England has not been ambitious enough to tackle the scale of the problem. Similarly, there has been a distinct lack of action taken by the Scottish Government to try and get to grips with this crisis, in addition to the inadequate data collection.

Failure to get these children back to school will have enduring consequences for them, for wider society and for the economy. For as long as we are not able to track detailed patterns of school absence and understand more about the characteristics of pupils affected, we cannot even begin to address this unfolding crisis. That is why, at the core of our plan for change in this report is a call for more regular and comprehensive data to be collated and published by the Scottish Government. This should be alongside a package of support designed to understand and remove underlying barriers to attendance and rebuild the relationship between school and families. It is time to bring these children back into view and back into school.

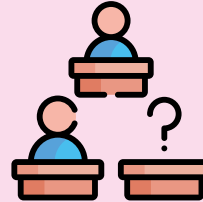
Scotland COVID-19 pandemic timeline



Key headlines



Almost three in ten parents (28 per cent) agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown it is not essential for children to attend school every day.



There are sizeable gaps in the absence data collected by the Scottish Government. These children are not just missing school, they are missing from view.



In 2022/23 an estimated 2.7 per cent of pupils were severely absent.



The number of children who were severely absent in 2022/23 is an estimated 72 per cent higher than pre-pandemic (2018/19).



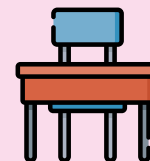
A child with additional support needs (ASN) is estimated to be nearly four times more likely to be severely absent from school than their peers.



Nearly one in three children were persistently absent in 2022/23.



In 2022/23, 9.7 per cent of sessions were marked as absent.



The number of children who were persistently absent in 2022/23 is an estimated 62 per cent higher than pre-pandemic (2018/19).

Absence data review

Since school shutdowns, attendance issues have become endemic across our school system. Persistent absence is prolific throughout Scotland and thousands of schools are struggling to re-engage this lost generation.

This report uncovers data collected by the CSJ in an FOI request to all local authorities, as well as collating existing data on school attendance.

In addition to the concerning levels of persistent absence outlined in national data collections and previous research, this report also uncovers crisis levels of severe absence (where a pupil misses 50 per cent or more of their school time). Severe absence is not currently included in official school attendance statistics in Scotland, despite being a key measure of understanding the current school absence crisis and how it affects a particularly vulnerable cohort of children.

Absence Overview

According to official Scottish Government data, in 2022/23, 9.7 per cent of sessions were marked as absent. 6.1 per cent of sessions were marked as authorised absences and 3.7 per cent were marked as unauthorised absences. In comparison, in 2018/19 (the last full academic year before the COVID-19 pandemic), 7.0 per cent of sessions were marked as absent, with 4.4 per cent marked as authorised absences and 2.6 per cent as unauthorised absences.¹

Authorised illness absences make up the majority of overall absences and have done consistently throughout the period for which data has been collected. Notably, the percentage of sessions marked as ‘sickness without education provision’ was 1.4 percentage points higher in 2022/23 than in 2018/19 (5.0 per cent of sessions, compared to 3.6 per cent).²

‘Unauthorised absence – unexplained absence’ rates have grown considerably since the COVID-19 pandemic. These rates indicate where children are off school without permission and without explanation. In 2022/23, 2.3 per cent of all sessions were marked as this category, in 2018/19 it stood at 1.7.³

In 2022/23, 0.9 per cent of sessions were marked absent for unauthorised holidays, compared to 0.7 per cent in 2018/19. The rate of authorised holidays in both 2022/23 and 2018/19 was 0.1 per cent.⁴

1 Scottish Government, 2024. “School attendance and absence statistics, Attendance and Absence 2022-23” [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-attendance-and-absence-statistics>]

2 Scottish Government, 2024. “School attendance and absence statistics, Attendance and Absence 2022-23” [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-attendance-and-absence-statistics>]

3 Scottish Government, 2024. “School attendance and absence statistics, Attendance and Absence 2022-23” [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-attendance-and-absence-statistics>]

4 Scottish Government, 2024. “School attendance and absence statistics, Attendance and Absence 2022-23” [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-attendance-and-absence-statistics>]

Persistent Absence

Children who are persistently absent miss 10 per cent or more of possible sessions. This is the equivalent to missing half a day per week, or one day per fortnight.

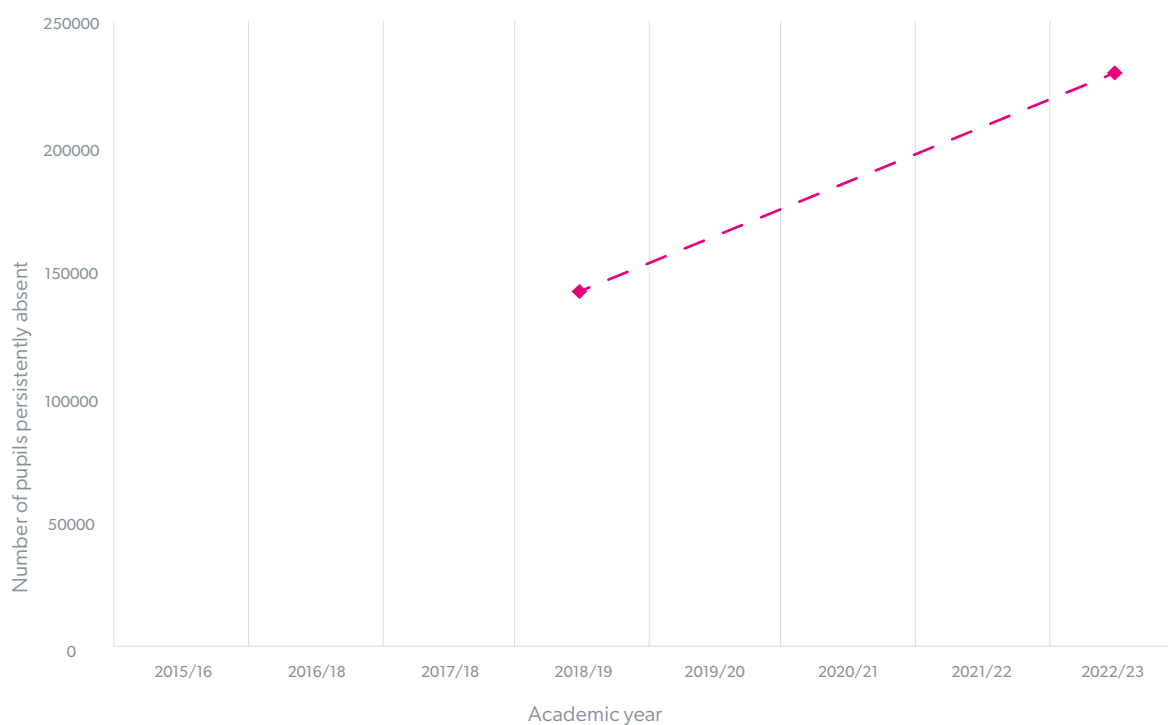
In the most recent national data release for the 2022/23 academic year, the Scottish Government confirmed that 32.5 per cent of children were persistently absent.⁵

This means that nearly one in three children were persistently absent in the 2022/23 academic year. In comparison, the latest data in England, where persistent absence is also at crisis levels, shows that in the same academic year, 21.2 per cent of children were persistently absent, over ten percentage points lower than in Scotland.⁶

CSJ analysis comparing the Scottish Government absence data to the Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland 2022 estimates there were 229,409 children persistently absent in 2022/23⁷.

While there is no Scottish Government data on persistent absence rates in previous years, research by the Commission on School Reform identified that in 2018/19, 21 per cent of children were persistently absent, a total of 141,502.⁸ This would suggest an 11-percentage point increase in the rate of children persistently absent, compared with pre-pandemic, and a 62 per cent increase in the number of children persistently absent.

Figure 1: Persistent absence in Scotland



5 Scottish Government, 2024. "School attendance and absence statistics, Attendance and Absence 2022-23" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-attendance-and-absence-statistics>]

6 Department for Education, 2024. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Academic Year 2022/23" [Accessed via: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2022-23>]

7 Scottish Government, 2022. "Schools in Scotland 2022: summary statistics" [Accessed via <https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-for-schools-in-scotland-2022>]

8 Commission on School Reform, 2023. "Absent Minds: attendance and absence in Scotland's schools" [Accessed via <https://www.reformscotland.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Absent-Minds.pdf>]

Severe Absence

Children who are severely absent miss 50 per cent or more of possible sessions. This is equivalent to missing every morning at school. They are a subgroup of persistently absent children and are absent more often than they are present.

Shockingly, severe absence is currently not monitored in any official Scottish Government statistics. This contrasts with England, where crisis levels of severe absence are tracked termly, including a breakdown of the data by pupil characteristics to help better understand which pupils are most affected.

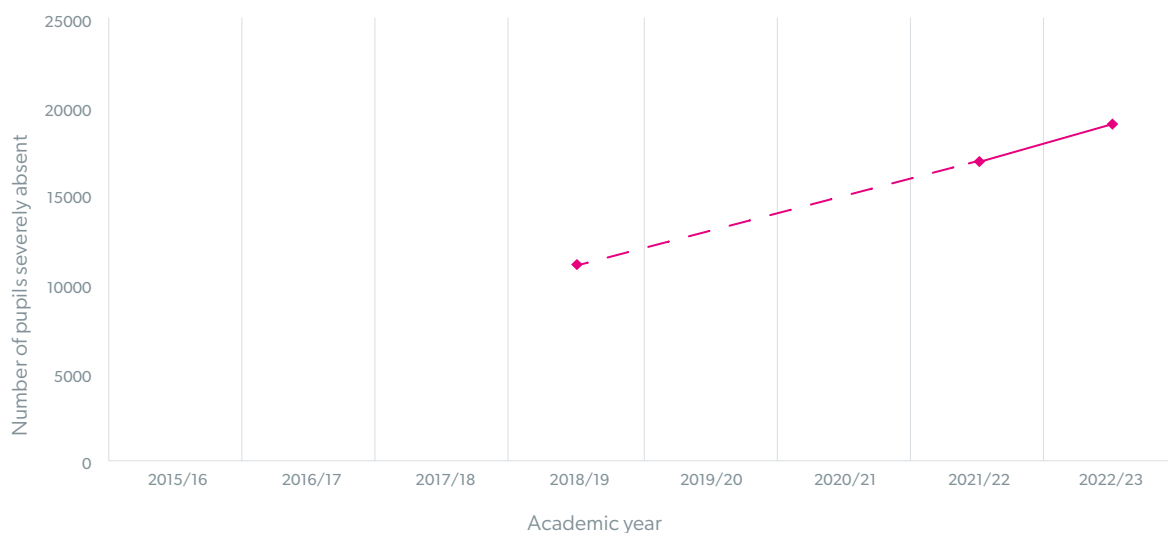
A CSJ FOI asked all Scottish Councils to identify how many children had been severely absent in the 2018/19, 2021/22 and 2022/23 academic years. For information about response rates to this FOI, please see the Methodology section at the end of this report.

Analysis of the FOI estimates that 2.7 per cent of pupils in primary, secondary and special schools were severely absent in the 2022/23 academic year. This is an increase from 1.6 per cent in 2018/19 (the last full academic year, pre-pandemic). This is also a slight increase from 2.4 per cent in 2021/22. By comparison, in England, where severe absence is also at crisis levels, the rate of severe absence during the 2022/23 academic year was 2.0 per cent.⁹ This highlights just how prolific severe absence appears to be across Scotland.

The FOI responses received indicate that there was a 0.8-percentage point increase in the rate of severe absence between 2018/19 and 2022/23.

CSJ analysis comparing the above estimated percentage of children severely absent to the Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland 2022 estimates there were 19,059 children severely absent in 2022/23,¹⁰ compared to an estimated 11,092 in 2018/19.¹¹ This equates to a 72 per cent increase in the estimated number of children severely absent.

Figure 2: Severe absence in Scotland



9 Department for Education, 2024. "Pupil absence in schools in England: Academic Year 2022/23" [Accessed via: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2022-23>]

10 Scottish Government, 2022. "Schools in Scotland 2022: summary statistics" [Accessed via <https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-for-schools-in-scotland-2022>]

11 Scottish Government, 2018. "Pupils Census 2018 Supplementary Tables" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics/2019/07/pupil-census-supplementary-tables/documents/pupil-census-2018-supplementary-tables/govscot%3Adocument/pupil-census-supplementary-2018.xlsx>]

Absence by school type

Scottish Government data shows that the 2022/23 persistent absence rate in Scotland was highest in secondary schools, with 41.0 per cent of children persistently absent, followed by special schools (38.6 per cent). Primary schools had the lowest rate of persistent absence, with 25.6 per cent children persistently absent.¹²

The FOI data analysed by the CSJ indicates that pupils in special school are most likely to be severely absent, followed by pupils in secondary school, with pupils in primary school the least likely. Analysis of the data estimates that 0.8 per cent of primary school pupils were severely absent in 2022/23, compared to 4.8 per cent of secondary school pupils and 5.7 per cent of special school pupils.

However, it is important to note that while primary schools have the lowest rates of severe absence, the FOI data would indicate that primary schools have seen the biggest increases in the rate of severe absence since pre-pandemic. According to the FOI data collated, there has been a 111 per cent increase in the rate of severe absence in primary schools between 2018/19 and 2022/23, compared to a 52 per cent increase in secondary schools and a 32 per cent increase in special schools.

Absence by pupil characteristics

FOI data analysed by the CSJ also uncovered how vulnerable children are particularly affected. In 2022/23, 5.1 per cent of children with additional support needs (ASN) were severely absent, compared to 1.3 per cent of children with no identified ASN. This means a child with ASN is nearly four times more likely to be severely absent from school than their peers.

The FOI revealed a mixed picture in terms of severe absence rates for children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and those not eligible. In 2018/19 and 2021/22, children eligible for FSM were slightly more likely to be severely absent than their peers. In 2018/19, the rate of severe absence for children eligible for FSM was 1.6 per cent, compared to 1.5 per cent for those not eligible.

However, in 2022/23 this notably flipped, with children not eligible for FSM more likely to be severely absent than their peers. In 2022/23, the rate of severe absence for children eligible for FSM was 2.2 per cent, compared to 3.5 per cent for those not eligible. It is worth considering that, during this time, the Scottish Government continued to rollout universal FSM to additional primary school years, which may have impacted these figures.

¹² Scottish Government, 2024. "School attendance and absence statistics, Attendance and Absence 2022-23" [Accessed via: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-attendance-and-absence-statistics>]

UK-wide absence polling

There is an urgent need for research to better understand the reasons behind high rates of absence across Scotland, as well as the rest of the UK. To uncover the reasons behind these figures, the CSJ commissioned a UK-wide poll of 1,206 parents of children aged between 5-16 and enrolled in primary or secondary school. Fieldwork took place between 15-19th December 2023. The overall sample was weighted to be nationally representative of the target UK population and filtered down to the target audience.

Higher levels of parental engagement are associated with better outcomes for children – including school attendance – and disadvantaged children are likely to benefit the most.¹³ For some parents, however, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have broken the contract of trust between schools and families. It will be very hard to encourage children back to school unless parents are fully bought into their education.

Our polling uncovered:

School is still seen as important, but lockdown has impacted the perceived 'necessity' of school attendance:

- The majority of parents (88 per cent) agree that every single day of school matters and it is vital children attend school as much as possible.
- However, it is clear that lockdown has had some impact on parents' attitudes towards school attendance. Almost three in ten parents (28 per cent) agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has shown it is not essential for children to attend school every day.

Most parents feel they have the foundations of a good relationship with school, but a large minority, particularly in secondary schools, do not:

- The majority of parents feel that their relationship with their children's school has remained the same (56 per cent) or got better (27 per cent) since the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 16 per cent, however, felt that the relationship had worsened.
- Only 26 per cent say the school communicates with them 'very well' about their child's educational progress. However, a significant minority (38 per cent) say the school does not communicate with them well enough.
- The majority of parents (77 per cent), say they trust their children's school to provide a quality education. However, this drops to 70 per cent among low-income households and in relation to secondary schools specifically.

Some parents feel that they need more support from schools:

- Over a third of parents (35 per cent) said that they are worried about their child's performance and would like more support from their child's school. A further 18 per cent said they were worried about their child's attendance and would like more support.
- Seven in ten parents (70 per cent) are confident that their child's school is meeting their child's needs, however almost one in five (18 per cent) do not feel confident their child's needs are being met. Amongst parents with a child in secondary school, confidence drops to 61 per cent.

¹³ Education Endowment Foundation, 2019. Parental Engagement: Evidence from Research and Practice

A plan for change

The number of persistently and severely absent children is at crisis levels across Scotland. The Scottish Government must urgently detail a comprehensive response to get this cohort of children back into the classroom. At the core of this plan must be the urgent rollout of more comprehensive and regular data collection. We cannot find these children if we do not know who they are. This responsibility lays squarely with the Scottish Government – and they must act now.

The CSJ has outlined a plan for reform which would help to re-engage persistently and severely absent children. This plan has been designed to tackle the underlying drivers of absence cost-effectively, focusing on providing support to the whole family.

1. Improve school attendance data.

RECOMMENDATION:

Education Scotland should publish termly data on school attendance. This termly data should include data on how many pupils were persistently and severely absent. The termly data should also include detailed breakdowns by pupil characteristics: including school-type, additional support needs status, free school meals eligibility, gender, ethnicity and Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). Where possible, the Scottish Government should collate and publish this data for previous years, backdating to at least 2015/16 to allow for pre-pandemic comparisons and for long-term patterns to be tracked.

This would bring Scotland in line with England on data collection and would provide a baseline for understanding rates of absence across the UK.

“Our most disadvantaged young people often have to overcome huge obstacles before they even get to a class. Having accurate and real time records are so important, not for judgements or penalties but to provide additional support to help the young people to navigate and mitigate the impacts of instabilities at home. Absence now, is both from school and, even when marked in school, absence can be from classes.”

Dr Iain MacRitchie, Founder, MCR Pathways

2. Roll out attendance mentors – a proven intervention to boost attendance.

RECOMMENDATION:

Education Scotland should roll out a nationwide programme of 200 attendance mentors. These mentors would work with families to understand and remove the underlying barriers to school attendance. A nationwide programme would cost an estimated £8 million per year.

"We have seen that disengagement and non-attendance are increasing issues; issues for which there is no easy 'fix'. The reasons some of the young people we have worked with have given for not attending school include anxiety, poor mental health, poor physical health/long term health conditions, and even not feeling challenged enough academically by school."

Kirsty De Placido, Service Manager, People Know How, Edinburgh.

3. Rebuild the relationship between parents and schools.

RECOMMENDATION:

Education Scotland should create a National Parental Participation Strategy, which should create a new duty for schools to focus on parental participation and publish parental participation plans. Schools should design these plans in consultation with parents and guardians to reflect the needs of local families. As part of a broader Parental Participation Strategy, Education Scotland should release guidance on the best practice for engaging parents of children who are severely absent.

"It's great to see schools invite outside agencies like Teen Challenge to help with mentoring and bridge the gap between parents and schools. I also recognize the importance of giving young people in school more opportunities in life. It's essential to continue supporting parent/school relationships to do the best for our young people to attend school regularly as they progress into young adulthood."

Craig Houston, Schools/Youth Worker, Teen Challenge

"Parental engagement and support particularly around wellbeing is key and we are continuing to see positive steps forward. However, the cost-of-living crisis continues to have an impact on family relationships and dynamics and this is likely to continue to be an ongoing challenge that needs addressing alongside relationship breakdowns, trauma and inequality issues.

Together in partnerships with schools, we are striving to get children back into school settings and making this a positive experience for all by focussing on positive family relationships between schools and community partnerships."

Michaela Collins, Chief Executive Officer, PEEK

Methodology

As outlined above, the data currently available on absence in Scotland is severely limited. Therefore, the analysis by the CSJ of the FOI detailed in this report should be treated as estimates only, until more comprehensive and centralised data is published.

The CSJ conducted an FOI to all Scottish local authorities in April 2024. As part of each FOI, local authorities were asked to submit the number of overall enrolments and the number of children who had attendance figures of 50 per cent or less for the 2018/19, 2021/22, and 2022/23 academic years. This included breakdowns by primary school, secondary school, Free School Meal eligibility and whether the child had any recorded additional support needs (ASN).

Below details the response rates of the local authorities to the FOI, broken down by each dataset. Please note, that a very small number of the below local authorities did not return full enrolment and absence data for the 2018/19 school year.

- 24 out of 32 local authorities (75 per cent) returned information regarding the severe absence rate of pupils in primary schools in their local authority area.
- 26 out of 32 local authorities (81 per cent) returned information regarding the severe absence rate of pupils in secondary schools in their local authority area.
- 13 out of 32 local authorities (41 per cent) returned information regarding the severe absence rate of pupils in special schools in their local authority area.
- 24 out of 32 local authorities (75 per cent) returned information regarding the severe absence rate broken down by FSM eligibility in their local authority area.
- 25 out of 32 local authorities (78 per cent) returned information regarding the severe absence rate broken down by ASN in their local authority area.

Where calculations were made to extrapolate the percentage of children absent to a total number of children absent, the official Scotland School Summary Statistics were used to identify how many children were enrolled in primary, secondary and special schools in Scotland for the respective academic year. As with the above data, these analysed figures are to be treated as estimates only.



Kenneth Ferguson, Head of Scotland

 Kenneth.Ferguson@centreforsocialjustice.org.uk

 www.csjfoundation.org.uk

 [@CSJFoundation](https://twitter.com/CSJFoundation)