



# Socioeconomic Inequalities in School Attendance in Scotland

- Research Brief

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## Background

School absenteeism is a pervasive problem in education worldwide and Scotland. Persistent absenteeism has a significant impact at both a societal and individual level. Frequently missing school is associated with poorer academic performance, a higher likelihood of going on to further or higher education. At a societal level, we can see a knock-on effect of associations between absenteeism and lower rates of employment; higher likelihood of delinquency; and increased contact with the criminal justice system, and imprisonment.

It is well documented that there is a strong association between socioeconomic background and school absenteeism (e.g., Gottfried and Gee, 2017; Gubbels et al., 2018). Young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are consistently more likely to absent from school than those from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.

However, we do not know how different dimensions of socioeconomic status (e.g., eligibility for free school meals, parental education etc.) are associated with school absenteeism, and particularly how these associations between socioeconomic factors and absenteeism relate to a Scottish or UK context. Specifically, it is unclear if one dimension (e.g., parental education) may have more of an impact on school attendance than others (e.g., registered for free school meals) to make sure that we do not underestimate the full scope of the relationship between socioeconomic factors and school attendance.

It is also rare that research addresses the extent to which socioeconomic factors are associated with different forms of absenteeism, such as truancy, and sickness-related absence,

or school holidays. In other words, it is unknown if the impact of socioeconomic factors may be greater or lesser depending on the type of absenteeism considered.

## Aims

Our research aimed to investigate how different dimensions of socioeconomic background (i.e., social class, parental education, free school meal registration, housing status and neighbourhood deprivation [SIMD]) may impact differently on absenteeism from school.

Furthermore, we aimed to examine how these different dimensions of socioeconomic background are each implicated in different forms of absenteeism (truancy, sickness-related absence, family holidays and temporary exclusion). Finally, we do not know whether the association between socioeconomic background and school absenteeism is the same for boys and girls, or children in urban and rural schools.

## Data

We used data from the Scottish Longitudinal Study (SLS) that links various administrative and statistical data in Scotland. The SLS is a large scale, anonymised record linkage study, which covers 5.3% of the Scottish population, selected through the use of 20 semi-random birthdates. In our study, we used data that linked Census data from 2001 to administrative school records. Census data allowed us to use socioeconomic background measures with school attendance measures from school

administrative data. We looked at data relating to two cohorts of SLS members who were in their final year of compulsory schooling (S4) in 2007 and 2008, respectively.

## Key findings

As shown in Figure 1, we found that all dimensions of socioeconomic background were uniquely linked to overall absenteeism. Figure 1 demonstrates that pupils from more deprived areas, living in socially rented housing, coming from households with lower levels of parental education and social class, and those registered for free school meals were more frequently absent from school than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. Pupils from socially rented households, and households with no qualifications are the most likely to be absent from school.

When looking at specific forms of absenteeism, our analyses revealed that there were socioeconomic inequalities related to truancy, sickness and temporary exclusion but not in relation to absences due to family holidays. We found that living in socially rented housing, and parental education had the most pervasive effect on all forms of absenteeism. Our analysis also showed that girls were more frequently absent than boys, and that those in urban areas had higher levels of overall absenteeism than those living in rural areas. However, we did not find that socioeconomic differences in school absenteeism were more or less pronounced between girls and boys or people living in urban or rural areas.

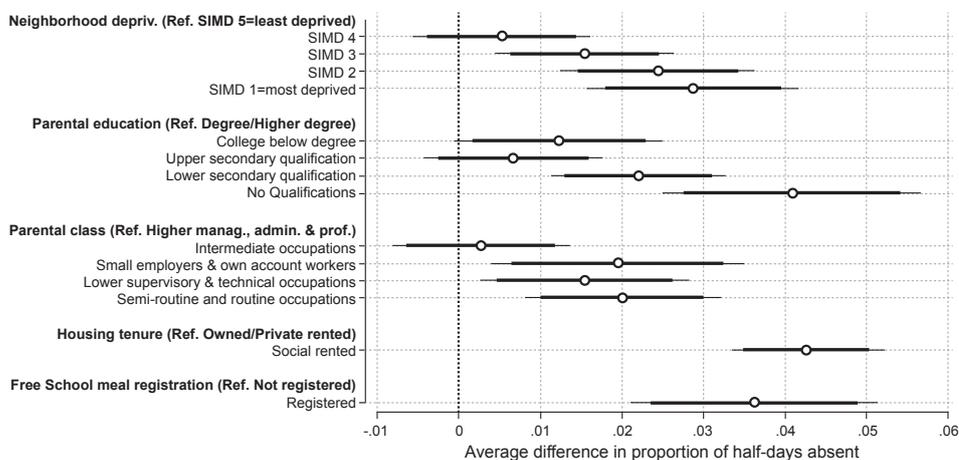


Figure 1: Socioeconomic dimensions and overall absenteeism.  
Source: Scottish Longitudinal Study (SLS)

**Note:** Analysis based on data from the Scottish Longitudinal Study; Estimates (with 95% and 90% confidence intervals) refer to Average Marginal Effects derived from a fractional logit model; N=4620.

In summary, our findings are consistent with the body of previous work in showing that socioeconomic status is a strong predictor of school absenteeism. What is unique about our study is that it reflects that different dimensions of socioeconomic status are independently associated with absenteeism. It also indicates that to fully understand the links between socioeconomic background and absenteeism, research must account for multiple dimensions of each.

## COVID-19 and inequalities in attendance

The closure of schools due to COVID-19 is likely to perpetuate socioeconomic inequalities in school attendance. For instance, there is emerging evidence that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds spend less time in educational activities during the lockdown than their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Alison et al., 2020; Cullinane & Montacute, 2020;). Additionally, data on school attendance post-lockdown in England show that primary students growing up in more deprived areas were less likely to return to school than students from more affluent areas (Teacher Tapp, 2020). This socioeconomic gap is consistent with survey results asking parents about their intentions to send their children back to school when schools reopen (Alison et al., 2020). While it is still too early to draw strong conclusions, it looks likely that the associations between SES and absenteeism may be stronger now that schools have returned.

## Policy Implications

Our research has significant implications for policy. Robust evidence from the US shows that absences from school are detrimental to children's educational attainment (e.g. Morrissey et al. 2014). Since our findings show that school absenteeism is socially stratified, being absent from school is likely to be an important reason for the poverty-related attainment gap in Scotland (Sosu

& Ellis 2014). It is therefore essential for policy and practice interventions to reduce all forms of absenteeism among children and particularly among those from lower socioeconomic groups. This call is urgent given emerging evidence around COVID-19 related socioeconomic inequalities in school attendance.

It may also be necessary to give more scrutiny to policy decision-making that is driven by a single measure of socioeconomic background. Within the Scottish context, this may mean shifting from over-reliance on the SIMD to incorporating multiple socioeconomic measures when making decisions to close the attainment gap.

## Key points:

- Absenteeism from school is socially stratified and being absent from school is likely an important contributor to the attainment gap in Scotland.
- All dimensions of socioeconomic background increased the risk of overall absenteeism from school.
- Pupils from socially rented households, and households with no qualifications are the most likely to be absent from school, and these factors are consistently associated with all forms of absenteeism (overall, sickness based, truancy, temporary exclusion) except family holidays.
- The association between socioeconomic background and absenteeism did not vary across gender or place of residence (urban vs rural).
- It is likely that COVID-19 related school closures will exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities in school attendance.
- There is an urgent need to address socioeconomic inequalities in school absenteeism

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