

Lost but not forgotten: the reality of severe absence in schools post-lockdown

January 2022

Contents

Foreword	1
Overview	2
The problem:	2
The current picture:	2
The solution:	2
Introduction	3
Where are the “ghost children”?	4
Nearly 800 schools are missing entire classes of children	4
Severe absence is concentrated in pockets of the country	5
Legacy problems surrounding severe absence	6
The costs of absence	7
The “ghost children” of lockdown are some of our most vulnerable children. ...	8
Disadvantaged pupils are more likely to be severely absent	8
Children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities have higher rates of severe absence	8
Pupils in exam critical years are most likely to be severely absent	10
Alternative Providers have the highest levels of severe absence	12
What’s happened to the “ghost children”?	13
Stories from the front line	14
Case study: The Watson Family	15
Case study: Mason	16
Case study: Karl	17
Case study: Johnson	18
Recommendation.....	19

Foreword

Covid-19 has wreaked havoc in our schools. Young people's life chances have been laid to waste by successive school shutdowns and interruptions to their learning. The damage caused by lockdowns could not be clearer than in the case of school attendance: the pandemic has given rise to a generation of ghost children. If we're not careful, we are creating an Oliver Twist generation of children exposed to significant safeguarding hazards including tough domestic situations at home, online harms and joining county line gangs.

100,000 kids have almost entirely disappeared from education since schools returned last year. The existence of these so called "ghost children" is nothing short of a national disaster.

These children are at risk of abuse after failing to come back to school. The tragic case of five-year-old Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, who was cruelly poisoned then beaten to death by his parents, is a painful case in point. Gang-related and other safeguarding risks abound when children disappear from schools. This has been confirmed by charities who work with these children who have seen an alarming spike in safeguarding referrals this year.

Schools provide a safe haven for those in chaotic home environments and are ideally placed to identify problems before they escalate. The stop-start nature of successive lockdowns eroded that protective factor and, in doing so, has put the lives of ghost children at stake.

How can it be that there is still no data or proper action to know what has happened to these children since Autumn 2020? How is it possible that we are still waiting for DfE officials to produce up to date figures on their whereabouts? This lack of data collection means many more children could be at risk of falling off the school roll altogether.

Attendance is the most basic education requirement: it is the first and most important rung on the ladder of opportunity. We cannot afford to discard these children; we must fight for them to return to our classrooms.

This incisive report lays bare the scale of the problem. Severe absence has spread through our school system like wildfire: nearly 800 schools have an entire class-worth of ghost children. In fact, in half of all local authorities over 500 children are severely absent.

These children are some of our most vulnerable. A staggering 1 in 10 of all identified ghost children had a social, emotional, and mental health need. In fact, disadvantaged pupils fare the worst when it comes to attendance. Schools with the most disadvantaged intakes were 10 times as likely to have a whole class worth of severely absent pupils in Autumn 2020, compared to schools with the most affluent intakes. Children who were eligible for free school meals were over three times more likely to be severely absent.

As schools have reopened, we stand at the crossroads and the government must decide if education is about social justice or is simply a case of "survival of the fittest". Charles Dickens wrote of "so many things forgotten, and so many more which might have been repaired". If we are to save the Oliver Twist generation of 'ghost children', we must act now. If we do nothing, we will be haunted by them forever.

Robert Halfon MP

Chair of the Education Select Committee

Overview

Last year, the CSJ revealed that nearly 100,000 pupils have disappeared almost entirely from school. These children are absent more often than they are present: they have effectively become “ghost children”. Our new analysis of Autumn 2020 figures can now reveal just how endemic the issue of severe absence has become.

The problem:

- Severe absence has spread across our school system like wildfire. In Autumn 2020, over 700 schools were missing an entire class-worth of children. In around half of all local authorities, at least 500 children are severely absent.
- Schools with the most disadvantaged intakes were 10 times as likely to have a class-worth of severely absent pupils in Autumn 2020, compared to schools with the most affluent intakes.
- While the magnitude of severely absent pupils has increased dramatically following the pandemic, the bottom five local authorities with the largest number of severely absent pupils has remained identical since 2017.
- Our most vulnerable pupils are those most likely to have disengaged from school. The rate of severe absence is 3.4 times higher for pupils eligible for free-school meals. There is a strong relationship between poor mental health and absence: 1 in 10 severely absent pupils had a diagnosed social, emotional, and mental health need.
- The rates of severe absence are eye-wateringly high for children excluded from school: over a quarter of children in alternative provision are severely absent.
- Regularly missing school makes exclusion much more likely. This, in turn, acts as a conveyor belt into the youth justice system and on into the adult prison estate.

The current picture:

- We do not have the data to tell us what has happened to the severely absent pupils. Statistics on the levels of attendance over Summer 2021 will be published in March 2022. This amounts to a seven-month lag which severely hinders our attempts to investigate severe absence. By the time these figures are published, many of these children will no longer be in school.
- We predict that the number of pupils who are severely absent will have increased over the last year. Charities have told us about increase demand for support this year and the increased complexity of the cases that they are seeing.
- It is also unlikely that schools will have been able to reengage the severely absent children on their registers as those most likely to have an entire class-worth of children missing are also most likely to be dealing with high levels of teacher absences.
- Government plans to tackle absence rates are a step in the right direction, but they do not go far enough to tackle the level of need. Only five attendance advisors have been appointed this academic year. They will offer advice to just tens of schools on persistent absence. Our figures show that hundreds of schools are missing an entire class-worth of children.

The solution:

- The Government should take some of the forecasted underspend from the National Tutoring Programme to ensure that the severely absent pupils are returned to school.
- The Department for Education should appoint 2,000 school attendance practitioners to address the underlying causes of school absence and remove the barriers to engagement for severely absent pupils.

Introduction

Last year, the CSJ revealed that 93,500 so-called “ghost children” were missing almost entirely from the school system.¹ When schools reopened in Autumn 2020, the number of pupils who were severely absent from school (missing 50 per cent or more of possible sessions) had dramatically increased by 33,000 children. This equated to an increase of 54.7 per cent compared to the previous year.

We can now reveal that on top of the cohort of ghost children in mainstream and special schools, a further 6,000 children in alternative provision schools were severely absent in Autumn 2020.²

We started this inquiry after hearing from many charities and organisations from the CSJ Alliance of poverty-fighting organisations. They warned that young people were not returning to school after successive lockdowns. Charities working with school children told us that many had gone missing from formal education settings, becoming vulnerable to local gangs, county lines, and abuse within the home.³

Since the publication of “Kids can’t catch up if they don’t show up” (2021), we have seen growing resolve in Westminster to address school attendance. The Education Select Committee has put the issue of these ‘ghost’ children onto the national agenda: following the devastating case of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, the Chair of the Committee warned that many thousands of young people are lost in the system and could be vulnerable to cruelty at home.⁴

It is profoundly welcome that Secretary of State for Education Nadhim Zahawi MP has committed to tackling pupil absences.⁵ In a pledge to end the postcode lottery of school attendance, the Government has commissioned consultations⁶ and Ofsted reviews.⁷ Recognising that some schools have worse absence than others, the Government has appointed five attendance advisers who will be able to support tens of schools to improve their attendance rates.⁸

The Department for Education has also set up an attendance alliance to investigate school absences.⁹ The Children’s Commissioner, who sits on the alliance, has launched a national campaign to find the ‘ghost children’ of lockdown. Her inquiry aims to find missing students in 10 areas and to assess why they have disappeared from view.¹⁰

But despite the progress being made, we are concerned that the national policy response does not yet meet the severity of the problem. Even though attention has moved onto how we can tackle the endemic poor attendance that gravely disrupts our children’s education, not enough practical support has been offered to find and re-engage the children who have become severely absent. Further evidence and evaluation may be helpful, but by the time that it is published these children may be even further from a school setting.

Practical steps the Government has taken, such as appointing attendance advisers, do not go far enough to address the scale of need. As we reveal in new evidence presented in this paper, there are nearly 800 schools in England where a whole class worth of children is severely absent. If the five attendance advisers appointed by the Department for Education only have the capacity to support tens of schools, it is highly likely that hundreds of other schools will continue to struggle with severe absence.

Worryingly, schools with the highest rates of staff absence are the same schools that are most likely to be struggling with severe absence. Schools in the most disadvantaged areas are 10 times more likely to have a whole class worth of children missing than schools in more affluent areas. The very schools that desperately need to reengage severely absent pupils are those with the least capacity to do so.

In this paper, we unearth the immense scale of educational disruption caused by severe absence; we provide an updated analysis of who these ghost children are; and we offer a plan for the Government which will make sure that the alarming number of missing children are found and return swiftly to the classroom.

1 Centre for Social Justice, 2021. “Kids can’t catch up if they don’t show up”

2 Please note that all new figures in this paper come for CSJ analysis of Freedom of Information Requests to the Department for Education

3 Centre for Social Justice, 2021. “Kids can’t catch up if they don’t show up”

4 Daily Mail, 2021. “100,000 ‘ghost children’ are at risk of abuse after failing to return to school following Covid lockdown, MP warns”

5 BBC News, 2021. “Nadhim Zahawi vows to tackle persistent pupil absences ‘head on’”

6 Department for Education, 2022. “New measures to increase school attendance”

7 Schools Week, 2021. “Zahawi commissions absenteeism ‘deep-dive’ by DfE and Ofsted”

8 Schools Week, 2021. “DfE appoints just 5 attendance advisers (after years of council cuts)”

9 Department for Education, 2021. “Education Secretary launches new attendance alliance”

10 Guardian, 2021. “Hunt launched to find ‘ghost children’ missing from schools in England”

Where are the “ghost children”?

Nearly 800 schools are missing entire classes of children¹¹

The pandemic has allowed thousands of children to slip off the radar while schools have been closed. Now teachers have returned, they are facing a crisis in school absence. **In Autumn 2020, 758 schools reported that at least an entire class worth of children had become severely absent in the first term back. That’s close to 1 in 28 schools where the equivalent of a whole class has gone missing.**

Severe absence has spread across our school system like wildfire. The number of schools experiencing extremely high case rates of severe absence has been growing gradually over time. However, when schools returned from lockdown in Autumn 2020 the number of schools reporting entire classes worth of pupils who are severely absent nearly doubled compared to the year before.

Table: Number of schools with a class of severely absent pupils over time

Term	Number of schools with a class of severely absent pupils	Year-on-year increase
Autumn 2017	248	
Autumn 2018	284	15%
Autumn 2019	403	42%
Autumn 2020	758	88%

These 758 schools account for only 3.5% of all schools but their severely absent cohorts account for 3 in 10 (28%) of all severely absent pupils.

Severe absence is pervasive across secondary schools and AP. In total, around 1 in 6 secondary schools and more than 1 in 5 APs were missing a class-worth of children in Autumn 2020.

Of these 758 schools, the vast majority were secondary schools. The schools where over a class worth of children have disappeared breaks down to 578 secondary schools, 77 alternative providers (AP), 46 all-through schools, 37 primary schools, and 20 special schools.

At the most extreme end, in the first term back one school reported having 137 severely absent pupils. In fact, eleven schools reported having over 100 severely absent pupils on roll in Autumn 2020. This breaks down to six mainstream schools, four alternative providers and one special school.

Schools with the most disadvantaged intakes were 10 times as likely to have a whole class worth of severely absent pupils in Autumn 2020, compared to schools with the most affluent intakes.

Worryingly, severely absent children seem to be hidden from any kind of scrutiny. The Department for Education does not regularly produce statistics tracking this growing cohort of children and, in their inspections, Ofsted does not seem to account for the steps schools are taking to reengage their severely absent pupils. The majority of schools (3 in 5) where entire classes full of children were severely absent in Autumn 2020 were rated either Good or Outstanding according to Ofsted.

These ratings may not reflect the increased rates of school absence, as Ofsted has paused inspections over the cause of the pandemic. However, even when we just look at the schools that have been inspected in 2021, **two thirds of schools where a class worth of children were severely absent received a Good or Outstanding inspection grade.**

¹¹ Please note that we have taken 25 children to be a class worth of children.

Severe absence is concentrated in pockets of the country

The prevalence of severe absence is a national scandal. Nationally, 1.4 per 100 pupils were severely absent in Autumn 2020 and nearly 1 in 28 schools had an entire class-worth of children missing.

This issue is felt in every corner of our country. Every local authority has a cohort of severely absent pupils and **over 500 pupils were severely absent in around half of all local authorities in Autumn 2020.**

However, some local authorities have a greater proportion of severely absent pupils. Birmingham accounts for over 3,500 pupils who were severely absent in Autumn 2020. In fact, the 30 local authorities with the greatest number of severely absent pupils make up half of the entire cohort of severe absence.

Table: Top 10 local authorities with the greatest number of severely absent pupils

Local authority	Region	Number of pupils severely absent
Birmingham	West Midlands	3,524
Kent	South East	2,948
Essex	East of England	2,490
Lancashire	North West	2,148
Hampshire	South East	2,002
Bradford	Yorkshire and the Humber	1,848
Hertfordshire	East of England	1,818
Leeds	Yorkshire and the Humber	1,673
Norfolk	East of England	1,669
Sheffield	Yorkshire and the Humber	1,563

Given that local authorities vary in size, it's worth looking at the rate of severe absence to get a sense of where this issue is particularly acute.

Middlesbrough in the North East has the highest rate of severe absence in the country, followed by Newcastle upon Tyne (which is also in the North East). Their rate of severe absence is 70% higher than the national rate.

Even when converted to rates, three of the top ten with the greatest number of severely absent children continue to rank highly. These are: Birmingham (West Midlands), Bradford (Yorkshire and the Humber) and Sheffield (Yorkshire and the Humber).

Table: Top 10 local authorities with the highest rates of severe absence

Local authority	Region	Rate of severe absence (per 100)
Middlesbrough	North East	2.4
Newcastle upon Tyne	North East	2.4
Sheffield	Yorkshire and the Humber	2.2
Newham	Inner London	2.2
Bradford	Yorkshire and the Humber	2.2
Nottingham	East Midlands	2.2
Doncaster	Yorkshire and the Humber	2.1
Bristol City of	South West	2.1
Birmingham	West Midlands	2.0
Enfield	Outer London	2.0

Our findings can also reveal that there are 10 local authorities in the country where 1 in 10 schools have an entire class-worth of children missing.

Table: Top 10 local authorities with the greatest proportion of schools missing an entire class

Local authority	Region	Proportion of schools missing class-worth of children
Portsmouth	South East	13%
Middlesbrough	North East	12%
Southampton	South East	12%
Newham	Inner London	12%
Newcastle upon Tyne	North East	11%
Bradford	Yorkshire and the Humber	10%
Knowsley	North West	10%
Sheffield	Yorkshire and the Humber	10%
Southend-on-Sea	East of England	10%
Torbay	South West	10%

The rate of severe absence is worse in Yorkshire and the Humber, West Midlands and the North East. In Yorkshire and the Humber, over 1 in 20 schools are missing an entire class of children.

Table: Regions ranked by rate of severely absent pupils

Region	Number of pupils severely absent	Rate of severe absence (per 100)	Proportion of schools missing class-worth of children
Yorkshire and the Humber	11,949	1.7	5.4%
West Midlands	12,132	1.5	3.8%
North East	4,959	1.5	3.4%
South West	9,436	1.4	3.4%
North West	13,855	1.4	3.6%
Inner London	5,046	1.4	2.4%
East of England	10,989	1.4	2.9%
East Midlands	8,163	1.3	2.8%
South East	14,367	1.3	3.5%
Outer London	8,678	1.2	3.3%

Legacy problems surrounding severe absence

While the magnitude of severely absent pupils has increased dramatically following the pandemic, the bottom five local authorities with the largest number of severely absent pupils has remained identical since 2017.

In fact, of the 248 schools identified as having extremely high case rates of severe absence in 2017 (where at least a class worth of pupils was severely absent) 35% have had at least a class worth of severely absent children for every consecutive year including Autumn 2020.

This initial evidence suggests that in some areas of the country there are legacy problems which schools and local authorities find difficult to address.

The costs of absence

Severe absence carries with it considerable short and long-term costs. Notable is the link to crime rates. Studies conducted by the Ministry of Justice and DfE have connected school absence with the likelihood of an individual becoming involved in the criminal justice system. A 2016 analysis found that **90% of young offenders sentenced to custody have a previous record of being persistently absent from school**,¹² and of the adult prison population, **59% reported that they regularly truanted from school**.¹³

The picture is not much better regarding educational attainment. A DfE commissioned study found that as the level of overall absence across the relevant key stage increased, the likelihood of achieving key attainment outcomes at the end of KS2 and KS4 decreased. Accordingly, **every extra day missed from school lowers a pupils' chances of achieving 5 or more good GCSEs**, including in English and Maths, or gaining the EBacc.¹⁴

Severe absence continues to be linked with bleak prospects after formal education. A DfE analysis found that **when looking at the NEET cohort for the year, those who had been absent for over 10% of KS4 were vastly over-represented** when compared to the year's entire cohort. Only those without any A*-C GCSEs were more over-represented in the year NEET group.¹⁵

Children missing from school are also far more vulnerable to exclusion. The Timpson review established that **every extra percentage point of school sessions missed due to unauthorised absence was associated with a one percentage point increase in the likelihood of permanent exclusion**.¹⁶ Fixed-term and permanent exclusions compound the risks already associated with high absence outlined above, including vulnerability to criminal activity, low attainment, and NEET likelihood.

As well as the cost to the absentee, this all has a social cost. **According to New Philanthropy Capital, the average cost to society of a persistently absent pupil is £33,000**¹⁷ (data adjusted to 2020 prices). For a severely absent pupil, this figure is expected to be significantly higher. It should also be considered that **each excluded pupil costs the state approximately £370,000** in additional education, benefits, healthcare and criminal justice costs across a lifetime, with an annual £2.1 billion cost to the Treasury.¹⁸ This makes the strong relationship between absence and exclusion all the more salient.

12 Ministry of Justice and Department for Education, 2016. "Understanding the educational background of young offenders,"

13 Ministry of Justice, 2012. "Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds, Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) longitudinal study of prisoners"

14 Department for Education, 2016. "The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4"

15 Department for Education, 2018. "Characteristics of young people who are long-term NEET"

16 Timpson, 2019. "Timpson Review of School Exclusion"

17 NPC, 2017. "Misspent youth"

18 IPPR, 2017. "Making the difference"

The “ghost children” of lockdown are some of our most vulnerable children.

Disadvantaged pupils are more likely to be severely absent

Despite 1 in 5 of all pupils in England being eligible for free school meals (FSM), nearly 2 in 5 of all children who were identified as severely absent were FSM eligible.¹⁹

2.4 per 100 pupils eligible for free school meals were severely absent in Autumn 2020, compared to 0.7 per 100 pupils not eligible for free school meals: this means that the rate of severe absence for FSM eligible pupils was 3.4 times greater than the rate of severe absences for pupils not FSM eligible.

Table: Severe absence by free school meal (FSM) eligibility

Characteristic	Number of severely absent pupils	Proportion of overall severe absence	Rate of severe absence (per 100)
FSM eligible	35,818	38%	2.4
Not FSM eligible	38,824	42%	0.7
Unclassified ²⁰	18,870	20%	35.8

Children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities have higher rates of severe absence

Pupils within the severe absence cohort are disproportionately likely to have some form of Special Educational Need and/or Disability (SEND).

While pupils on SEN support make up only 12% of all pupils in England, they represent 20% of all severely absent pupils. Similarly, children with an EHCP make up only 4% of all pupils in England but they make up 12% of all severely absent pupils. This pattern is similar to the proportions in 2019.

In Autumn 2020, the rate of severe absence for pupils on SEN support was close to triple the rate of pupils with no identified SEN. The rate of severe absence for pupils with an EHCP was close to six times the rate of pupils with no identified SEN.

Table: Severe absence by SEND provision Autumn 2020

SEN provision type	Number of severely absent pupils	Proportion of overall severe absence	Rate of severe absence (per 100)
No identified SEN	44,745	48%	0.6
SEN Support	18,589	20%	1.7
Statement or EHCP	11,308	12%	3.5
Unclassified	18,870	20%	35.8

¹⁹ Please note that all of the analysis by pupil characteristics only accounts for pupils in mainstream and special settings.

²⁰ Throughout our analysis, we kept finding that the rate of severe absence for pupils who were “unclassified” by pupil characteristics was much higher than any other group. These children consistently accounted for around 20% of all pupils who were severely absent.

We cannot infer much about the pupil characteristics of this group. We have assumed that they were unclassified because the data on absence is collected in areas so by the time that the School Census was updated, the person inputting the data did not know their characteristics because they had been absent for such a length of time. However, more research needs to be done on this large cohort of severely absent pupils.

Pupils with a diagnosed social, emotional, and mental health need made up 1 in 10 of all identified severely absent pupils.

We can also see that of the pupils who had identified SEND, within the severely absent pupils cohort, some types of SEND were more prevalent. While only 3% of the school population has a diagnosed social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) need in England, 10% of the all pupils who were severely absent had SEMH. Their rate of severe absence was nearly eight times that of pupils with no identified SEND.

Table: Severe absence by SEND primary need Autumn 2020

SEN primary need	SEN primary - severe absence enrolments	Proportion of overall severe absence	SEN primary - rate of severe absence
No identified SEND	44,745	47.8%	0.6
Unclassified SEND Provision	18,870	20.2%	35.8
Social emotional and mental health	9,734	10.4%	4.7
Autistic spectrum disorder	4,093	4.4%	2.9
Unclassified SEND Primary Need	3,782	4.0%	9.5
Moderate learning difficulty	3,477	3.7%	1.6
Speech language and communications needs	2,701	2.9%	1.1
Specific learning difficulty	1,851	2.0%	1.4
Other difficulty/disability	1,047	1.1%	2.3
Physical disability	958	1.0%	3.1
Severe learning difficulty	866	0.9%	3.2
Profound and multiple learning difficulty	675	0.7%	8.3
No specialist assessment	462	0.5%	1.3
Visual impairment	174	0.2%	1.5
Multi-sensory impairment	77	0.1%	2.4

Pupils in exam critical years are most likely to be severely absent

Children in secondary school are more likely than those in primary school to be severely absent. However, it was pupils in primary schools who saw the greatest increase in rates of severe absence when schools reopened in Autumn 2020. The rate of severe absence more than doubled in every single year group in primary.

However, the rates of severe absence in primary school are still lower than in secondary schools and the overall number of additional students per year group who became severely absent were broadly similar across both primary and secondary schools.

Table: Difference in severe absence by year group over time

Year Group	Rate of severe absence (per 100) 2020	Rate of severe absence (per 100) 2019	Difference in rate (% change)	Difference in underlying number (figure change)
Year 1 and below	0.6	0.3	106%	2,119
Year 2	0.6	0.3	148%	2,401
Year 3	0.6	0.3	130%	2,103
Year 4	0.6	0.3	137%	2,426
Year 5	0.6	0.3	114%	2,249
Year 6	0.7	0.3	121%	2,488
Year 7	0.8	0.5	61%	1,865
Year 8	1.3	0.9	44%	2,798
Year 9	1.7	1.3	36%	2,998
Year 10	2.1	1.7	22%	2,408
Year 11	2.3	1.9	22%	2,617
Unclassified	35.4	25.4	40%	6,841

In both 2019 and 2020, the rate of severe absence starts to increase between Years 5 and 6 and then continues to increase for each academic year group afterwards. Worryingly, severe absence peaks in exam critical years. In Year 10, 2.1 per 100 pupils are severely absent and in Year 11 this figure rises to 2.3 per 100 pupils. Taken together, these year groups account for 27.4% of all severely absent pupils.

Table: Severe absence by year group Autumn 2020

Year Group	Number of severely absent pupils	Proportion of overall severe absence	Rate of severe absence (per 100)
Year 1 and below	4,144	4.4%	0.6
Year 2	4,094	4.4%	0.6
Year 3	3,812	4.1%	0.6
Year 4	4,211	4.5%	0.6
Year 5	4,173	4.5%	0.6
Year 6	4,499	4.8%	0.7
Year 7	5,016	5.4%	0.8
Year 8	8,525	9.1%	1.3
Year 9	10,531	11.3%	1.7
Year 10	12,258	13.1%	2.1
Year 11	13,356	14.3%	2.3
Unclassified	18,887	20.2%	35.4

Alternative Providers have the highest levels of severe absence

In Autumn 2020, 6,048 pupils in alternative provision were severely absent from school. Translated into rates, **more than a quarter of pupils in AP are severely absent** (26 per 100) compared to just 1.3 per 100 pupils in the general population.

The overall numbers are lower, but scale of the problem is much larger in alternative provision. Pupils in AP have some of the most complex needs, come from some of the most chaotic homes and have consistently worse outcomes than their peers in mainstream.

This is a cohort of young people that stands to benefit the most from high attendance, but for whom the problem of severe absence is the most acute. They are the children with special educational needs, on free school meals, under the care of the state, and at risk of criminality and exploitation – either as victim or perpetrator. We cannot afford to lose sight of them.

In the first term back, 77 AP schools reported an entire class worth of pupils severely absent. This equates to 23% of alternative providers compared to 3% of mainstream schools.

Nevertheless, despite their challenging cohorts, alternative provision offers a glimmer of hope in tackling severe absence. **Whereas mainstream schools saw the number of severely absent children grow at alarming pace last year, the number of severely absent pupils in AP schools declined over the pandemic.**

In fact, the rate of severe absence in AP schools decreased from 30 per 100 in the autumn term of 2019 to 26 per 100 in the autumn term of 2020. Compared to the year previous, 2,476 fewer pupils were severely absent in AP. In one of the most challenging educational contexts this nation has ever seen, in the midst of a global pandemic, alternative providers might have begun to reverse this damaging trend. Further, the number of schools with an entire class-worth of severely absent pupils dropped by 37% in the pandemic from 122 in the autumn term of 2019 to 77 in 2020.

While it is still early days, we are cautiously optimistic. Further research into this area would help us to understand what is driving this trend so that we can replicate successful practice across the wider education system, supporting those with significant attendance issues to return to, and re-engage with, their education.

What's happened to the "ghost children"?

While the Department has not published updated figures calculating the number of severely absent children in Summer 2021, there are some warning signs that things have gotten worse, not better, since Autumn 2020.

We have heard widely from those working in the frontline charity sector of the profound social impact of the pandemic. And the Education charity School-Home Support have provided an invaluable window into the experience of severe absence among pupils in the post-lockdown context.

There is no doubt that, in 2020/21, the need for their services was greater than ever. Practitioner workloads grew by 30% as the number of young people supported, and the frequency of that support skyrocketed.²¹

The number of young people accessing their intensive casework intervention, which supports the neediest pupils, increased by 9%. Practitioners also engaged with these children more: the number of interactions with these pupils rose from 719 in 2019/20 to 1,153 in 2020/21.²²

It's not just the numbers that shot up but the level of need as well. **In the previous year, 65% of children and families they worked with presented with at least two issues, this year that figure was 99%.**

The reasons behind each case of school absence can be complex and multifaceted, however, School-Home Support have seen some overarching trends in the reasons pupils have been referred to them this year. **Pupil mental health is one of the top presenting issues for pupils with low levels of attendance.** Pupils report difficulties with their feelings and behaviour, lacking confidence and self-esteem and struggling with their friendship group. **Meanwhile, parents and carers of pupils with low attendance report being worried about work, finances, and wellbeing – concerns that are unlikely to abate in the current cost of living crisis.**²³

The threat level has also risen dramatically this year. School-Home Support received 272 safeguarding alerts in the year 2020/21 compared with 85 in 2019/20.²⁴ The most shocking example of violence against children to occur during the pandemic was the tragic death of six-year-old Arthur Labinjo-Hughes who was brutally murdered by his parents. He was kept off school and did not return to school after lockdown ended and schools reopened.

This cannot be allowed to happen again. While school attendance is not a panacea, it undoubtably offers opportunities to detect wrongdoing and intervene much earlier.

School-Home Support has been incredibly successful in improving attendance, particularly for severely absent pupils. **Overall, almost 7 in 10 young people they supported in 2020/21 improved their attendance. In 2020/21, severely absent pupils attended school for an additional 30 days with the support of School-Home Support. This equates to an extra half a term.**²⁵

21 School-Home Support, 2022. "Impact Report"

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

Stories from the front line

While this report has illustrated the immense scale of the severe absence, it is important to remember that behind every statistic and number there's a life at stake. These are some of our most vulnerable children who have totally disengaged from education and have fallen off the radar.

The reasons for their absence are varied and multifaceted but the destruction caused by school absence to children's life chances is constant.

Through these case studies from School-Home Support we hope to illuminate the reality of severe absence for many children and to explain the difference attendance practitioners can make to the life chances of these children and their families.

Case study: The Watson Family

The Watson family has three children whose attendance was 10% when schools returned after the first lockdown in 2020. After working with School-Home Support, the children's attendance is now 86% (December 2021).

The family background

School-Home Support worked with the Watson family to address complex issues that were causing their children to have very low attendance.

Ben was originally referred to School-Home Support due to behavioural issues at school. Their Practitioner also supports Ben's sisters, Poppy, who has Global Development Delay, and Mia who regularly needs hospital treatment for a health issue.

The situation

Dad deals with a lot of anxiety, which got more severe during the first lockdown in March 2020. When schools returned in 2020, mum and dad kept all three children out of school due to their anxiety around the children contracting Covid-19. This meant that for over a year, the average attendance of all three children was lower than 10% , which is fewer than 20 days in school.

How did School-Home Support help?

Had they continued on this trajectory they would have each missed over 855 days each of their education over a 5 year period. Equating to nearly four and a half years of schooling. Severely affecting their future life chances, reducing their capacity to earn and costing the taxpayer more money.

School-Home Support changed this path. If sustained, the increase to 86% attendance will significantly increase their chances of achieving 5 or more GCSEs or equivalent at grades A*-C including English and mathematics.

The Watson family's School-Home Support Practitioner, Gemma, set up an online learning plan during the first lockdown period in 2020, making sure that the children were engaged with their education. To reduce the isolation the family were facing, she ensured that they remained in contact with the school community, and regularly visited the family as a keyworker.

After the lockdown period ended, Gemma worked intensively with Mum and Dad to ease their anxiety about letting the children return to school. She had daily contact with the parents, and met with them to explain the safety measures in place at the school.

When the children returned to school in July 2021, Gemma put several practical measures in place for each child to make the transition easier for the family.

Mia has a bowel condition which meant that her parents regularly kept her off school. Gemma made a pencil case for Mia in which she keeps sanitary products to help her with her health condition, and explained how to use them.

Gemma is supporting the family with a CAMHS referral for Ben to help deal with his behavioural issue.

Poppy has Global Development Delay, and communicates in sign language at home. Gemma has organised for Poppy's teacher to learn sign language so that she can communicate with her better, and keep her engaged in her learning.

Gemma regularly brings the children into school if their parents are unable to do so because of illness or anxiety, and is in close contact with the children's teachers regularly to help communicate any anxieties the parents may have.

Case study: Mason

Mason was referred to School-Home Support after his attendance dropped to 39%, and he was at risk of being excluded from school due to behavioural issues. After working with School-Home Support from October 2020-21, Mason's attendance rose to 80%.

The family background

Mason lives with his mum, little brother, young uncle who has learning difficulties, and terminally ill grandmother, who he helped care for.

The situation

Like so many of the families we supported during the pandemic, Mason and Tanya faced multiple challenges.

Mason's caring responsibilities were affecting his school attendance. He had problems controlling his emotions and sometimes had outbursts of anger. He was also struggling with the transition into high school, and had been bullied, causing him to withdraw socially. Mason often fell asleep in the classroom during lessons.

Mason's mum Tanya was struggling financially, as she was caring for her younger brother and her mother.

How did School-Home Support help?

If Mason had continued on his current trajectory he would have missed nearly 600 days of his vital high school years, nearly three years and 1 month.

Where he should be learning, playing and growing up with his peers in the safety of school, he's holding himself and his family together instead. His challenging home life would have affected his ability to access his education and help him develop into adulthood. School-Home Support has altered this path. He has support, plans, tactics and tools to succeed. To help him and his family build resilience.

School-Home Support Practitioner, Zoe, worked closely with Mason to come up with strategies to support him at school and at home.

Zoe was in regular contact with Tanya, and signposted her to services which helped with care and finances. Zoe secured a funded bus pass for Mason's journey to and from school, which alleviated some of the financial pressure.

After Mason formed a friendship with a peer in his class, Zoe organised for them to meet up in a local trampoline park during the summer holidays, making the return to school in September less daunting.

To tackle Mason's tiredness, Zoe supported Tanya to implement a bedtime plan and routine to ensure he was getting enough sleep, and also showed Mason how to use a sleep app.

Case study: Karl

13 year old Karl's attendance was 68% when he was referred to School-Home Support. After working with School-Home Support for eight months to address issues around neglect, housing and parental engagement, Karl's attendance rose to 85%.

The family background

Karl's mum Ladka is a single mother, who lost her job after the amusement arcade she worked at shut down due to Covid-19 restrictions. Karl was referred to School-Home Support to tackle his low attendance and safeguarding concerns.

The situation

Karl would often fall asleep in class. The family lived on a very busy road in an unsafe area, and Karl had to walk down an alleyway with people using drugs on his way to and from school.

As Ladka had lost her income due to Covid-19 restrictions, she was struggling financially. She couldn't purchase items the family needed, and the family didn't have a cooker, or a working fridge. Ladka also couldn't afford to replace Karl's school uniform which no longer fit him, and paying for a bus pass for Karl to attend school was adding further financial strain.

During the 2020 lockdown, Karl didn't have access to a laptop to complete school lessons. He also had anxiety around returning to school once the lockdown lifted.

How did School-Home Support help?

If School-Home Support hadn't stepped in to support Karl and Ladka, he could have missed 243 days equivalent to 1 year and 3 months of his high school education. By investing so much in the family Zoe has helped them invest in themselves.

School-Home Support Practitioner, Zoe, worked closely with the family to create and implement a robust support plan. Throughout the lockdown, Zoe was in regular contact with Ladka and Karl to carry out welfare checks. She also organised for Karl to receive a funded laptop to ensure he was able to continue learning.

Zoe supported Ladka through a house move and put her in contact with Bradford Homes, and the family are now living in a safer area with reduced bill costs.

She organised for the School-Home Support Welfare Fund to provide the family with a new school uniform for Karl and a cooker. Zoe also successfully applied for a funded bus pass for Karl, and organised for the family to receive a funded fridge-freezer.

To help tackle Karl's tiredness, Zoe supported Ladka to book GP and Optician appointments, and Karl is now wearing glasses, which have eased his headaches. Zoe also explained good sleep hygiene practices to Ladka, and Karl is now sleeping better and is ready to engage in class.

When schools returned, Zoe worked with Karl to support him through his anxiety about returning to lessons.

Family testimony

"I was worried at first what School-Home Support was as they do not have things like this in my country but once Zoe explained she was there to support us I felt a lot better. Thank you for all your support you have given me and Karl. It has made a huge difference to our lives."

Case study: Johnson

When Johnson was referred to School-Home Support his attendance was 80%. After working with his Practitioner from 2020-21 to address issues facing his family including housing and anxiety, Johnson's attendance rose to 90%.

Family background

Johnson is 19 and has suspected but undiagnosed learning difficulties. His mother Anne was supporting the family alone whilst facing financial challenges and living in inadequate, damp accommodation.

The situation

The Covid-19 pandemic meant that socialising was much harder, and had left both Johnson and Anne feeling isolated, and had exacerbated the issues the family faced as they were unable to seek help and advice. Johnson had no communication with peers outside of lessons during the pandemic.

Johnson and Anne were referred to School-Home Support Practitioner Amanda after a Safeguarding Alert was raised due to concerns around their finances and security at home. Johnson's low BMI of 16 was under review at an eating disorder clinic.

Anne couldn't afford to purchase a phone, which meant that for five months, the family was out of regular contact with support services as Anne was scared to open the door to a stranger.

How did School-Home Support help?

19 can be a difficult age for young adults trying to get an education to improve their chances- no longer children, but not quite adults. Johnson was missing 20% of the schooling he needed to move to the next stage and set a firm path for life. Practitioner Amanda knew that with help he would flourish, and he did.

School-Home Support Practitioner, Amanda, arranged for Anne to attend parent drop-in sessions at an inclusive community hub so that she could get to know other parents. Additionally, regular visits from Amanda gave both Anne and Johnson opportunities to open up.

Through the School-Home Support Welfare Fund, Amanda organised for the family to receive a new cooker, helping her to cook more nutritious foods. Amanda used the Welfare Fund to provide Anne with a phone to help her stay in contact with her support networks. Having a new phone has meant that Anne can now confidently reach out when they need support, and she has been able to contact relevant professionals herself.

Working closely with Johnson, Amanda recognised that his eating habits were typical of someone with ASC (Autism Spectrum Condition). He was very distressed at a nutritionist's recommendation to eat animal-based foods. To improve his diet and relationship with food, Amanda collaborated with him to create a food poster of vegetarian suggestions to gain weight and vary his diet. Improvements have been seen by his community nurse already, and he is now willing to try new foods and discuss his diet.

With their home-life improving, Johnson had the capacity to focus on his post-16 education. Amanda made contact with City and Islington College so that Johnson could explore his options for the next year. Discussing his options ahead of time has reduced Johnson's anxiety and enabled him to engage in conversations about the future, including his request to consider independent living in the near future – a huge personal achievement.

The family are working with support services to improve their daily living and engage with local networks. Johnson has improved his communication skills and has a better understanding of others' personal space. Amanda also delivered a workshop on family spending and budgeting to reduce financial anxiety. Now, the family have better money management, talk to each other about finances and write out expenses each month. Their knowledge, skills and resilience have increased significantly thanks to Amanda's work, and they are now more capable of dealing with anxiety and living more healthily.

Family testimony

"Thank you for supporting me to get a new phone and for visiting us to see if we are ok. Johnson is able to speak with you too and we didn't know how to ask for help with things because we don't have any other family around." – Anne

Recommendation

We must act now to return these children to the classroom. Each day that we wait is a day that pushes them further from the education system.

While the National Tutoring Programme has great potential to support educational catch up, there are concerns that it is not reaching the most disadvantaged pupils. As we highlighted in our first paper, severely absent pupils in particular will be unable to benefit from this programme as kids can't catch up if they're not in school.

The Government should reallocate the forecasted underspend from the National Tutoring Programme to ensure that the severely absent pupils are returned to school. This money should be reinvested into school attendance practitioners who can address the underlying causes of school absence and remove the barriers to engagement for severely absent pupils.

The support offered would be highly personalised but would entail a practitioner creating a plan for each pupil to improve attendance.

The benefit of this model is that it is seen as independent from school which can provide a platform to build trust with families where relationships have broken down. The independence from school also frees up teachers' time to focus on teaching. By focusing solely on attendance and not imposing strict time constraints, this model offers the flexibility needed to address severe absence.

Evidence presented in this report shows the impact of attendance practitioners on reducing severe absence. The Department for Education should appoint 2,000 school attendance practitioners to address the underlying causes of school absence and remove the barriers to engagement for severely absent pupils, at a cost of approximately £80 million. Each attendance practitioner would cost £40k in total. These practitioners could support 32 individuals each year. Therefore, adopting this model could help the government to reengage over half of all severely absent pupils over the course of this year.

It is critical that we act with urgency to find the "ghost children" of lockdown. The longer we wait, the harder it will be to get them back into the classroom.

Lost but not forgotten

The shocking reality of severe absence in schools

January 2022

The Centre for Social Justice

Kings Buildings

16 Smith Square

Westminster, SW1P 3HQ

t: +44 (0) 20 3150 2326

Twitter: [@csjthinktank](https://twitter.com/csjthinktank)

www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk

