

# Variation in pupil absence rates in Autumn 2020

## A report for Reconnect London

### Executive Summary

- This report investigates variation in absence rates in Autumn 2020, a period where schools were open for in-person teaching but disruption due to Covid was high.
- We use two measures of absence:
  - % sessions missed due to absence for any reason (including Covid-related)
  - % pupils persistently absent, i.e. missed 10% or more of sessions due to non-Covid-related absence.
- Absent sessions and persistent absence tended to increase with year group.
- Vulnerable groups of pupils missed more sessions and were more likely to be persistently absent than their peers.
- Of the vulnerable groups of pupils considered in this report, those who had ever been referred for a Children in Need assessment or ever been under a Child Protection Plan missed the most sessions and were the most likely to be persistently absent at secondary.
- Around 40% of the variance in absence rates was explained by local Covid case-rates at both primary and secondary.

### Introduction

Following the initial Covid outbreak and subsequent lockdown in March 2020, schools were expected to move classes and pastoral care online.

Full-time in-person teaching began again in Autumn term of 2020. However, it quickly became apparent that disruption to learning was not over. Although schools were open, the number of pupils testing positive for Covid and their self-isolating peers began to rise, leading to lots of children missing school once again.

The impact of this was not felt equally. There was variation in absence rates between regions, between schools in the same region, and between pupils in the same schools. It is this variation which we investigate in this report.

### Research questions

1. How did attendance vary by year group in the autumn term?
2. How did attendance vary in the autumn term for the following groups:
  - a. pupils eligible for free school meals anytime in the last six years (FSM6),
  - b. those with special educational needs (SEN), either with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or receiving other additional support (K), and
  - c. those who have ever been referred for a Children in Need assessment (ever CIN) or have ever been under a Child Protection Plan (ever CPP).
3. How did attendance vary by ethnic background in the autumn term?

Note that pupils who have ever been under a CPP have also been referred for a CIN assessment by definition (i.e. ever CPP is a subset of ever CIN).

We will also link termly absence data at MSOA level to [data from Public Health England on Covid cases](#) (csv download).

## About the data

Absence data for the Autumn term 2020/21 is linked to Autumn and Spring School Censuses for 2020/21 and Children in Need Census data from 2009 to 2020.

Because CIN data is only available from 2009 onwards, numbers of ever CIN and ever CPP pupils will be undercounted in older year groups.

Data for this report are restricted to pupils in mainstream schools whose enrolment status was "current" or "main" and who were in Year 1 to Year 11. An analysis of absence for special and alternative provision schools is provided separately.

This work contains statistical data from ONS which is Crown Copyright. The use of ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates.

## A summary of pupil numbers

Before we look at absence, we first summarise the numbers of pupils in our data by vulnerable group.

## Pupils by region and vulnerable group

**Table 1** Number of pupils by region and pupil group. Proportions of pupils who were eligible for free school meals anytime in the last 6 years (FSM6), with an Education, Health and Care Plan (SEN EHCP), and who have ever been referred for a Children in Need assessment (CIN) or been under a Child Protection Plan (CPP) are shown. Years 1 – 11, mainstream schools, enrolment status current or main. Pupil numbers are rounded to the nearest 10.

		FSM6		SEN EHCP		Ever CIN		Ever CPP	
	Pupils	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank
North East	316,400	34.3%	[1]	1.8%	[7]	12.3%	[1]	3.2%	[1]
West Midlands	766,960	31.1%	[2]	1.7%	[8]	9.9%	[3]	2.3%	[5]
London	1,032,540	30.3%	[3]	2.8%	[1]	9.0%	[6]	1.8%	[8]
North West	935,670	29.5%	[4]	2.1%	[5]	9.4%	[4]	2.4%	[2]
Yorks & Humber	694,850	28.9%	[5]	2.0%	[6]	10.7%	[2]	2.4%	[3]
East Midlands	594,440	24.9%	[6]	1.7%	[9]	8.9%	[8]	2.3%	[4]
South West	638,400	21.9%	[7]	2.5%	[2]	9.0%	[7]	2.1%	[6]
East of England	773,360	21.9%	[8]	2.2%	[4]	6.0%	[9]	1.4%	[9]
South East	1,089,340	20.2%	[9]	2.3%	[3]	9.1%	[5]	2.1%	[7]
Total	6,841,950	26.5%		2.2%		9.1%		2.1%	

Table 1 shows the total number of pupils in each region of England. Alongside, we show the proportion of pupils in each of the vulnerable groups considered by this report.

We see that the North East had the fewest pupils in total, but the highest proportion of FSM6, ever CIN and ever CPP pupils. It had one of the lowest proportions of pupils with an EHCP.

London, which had the second largest total pupil population had a higher proportion of FSM6 pupils than the national average and the highest proportion of pupils with an EHCP of any region. Proportions of ever CIN and ever CPP pupils were slightly below the national average.

Of course, not only does the makeup of the pupil population vary between regions it also varies within. In London, the proportions of vulnerable pupils by Local Education Authority (LEA) varied as follows (the LEA with the highest proportion compared with the lowest):

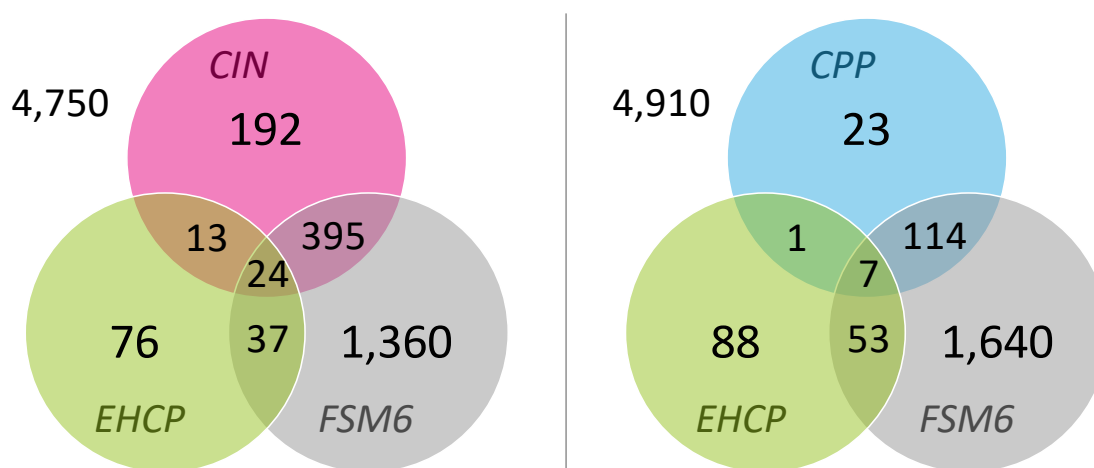
- FSM6: Islington, 52.3% (of 18,710 pupils) to Richmond upon Thames, 14.7% (of 23,540 pupils)
- SEN EHCP: Tower Hamlets, 4.4% (of 34,680 pupils) to Newham, 1.7% (of 50,830 pupils)
- Ever CIN: Islington, 15.1% to Barnet, 3.2% (of 47,570 pupils)
- Ever CPP: Islington, 2.7% to Barnet, 0.7%

### Intersections between vulnerable pupil groups

So far we have looked at these vulnerable groups separately. However, there is overlap between them, for example pupils who are both FSM6 and Ever CIN. The extent of these overlaps is illustrated in Figure 1.

#### Number of pupils (thousands) by FSM6, SEN with an EHCP, ever CIN and ever CPP

Pupils in Year 1 - 11 in English mainstream schools, 2020/21



**Figure 1** Venn diagrams showing the overlap between membership of different vulnerable groups: pupils who were eligible for free school meals anytime in the last 6 years (FSM6), with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), and who have ever been referred for a Children in Need assessment (CIN) or been under a Child Protection Plan (CPP). Note that the population of ever CPP pupils also belong to the ever CIN group. Years 1 – 11, mainstream schools, enrolment status current or main.

We see a lot of overlap between these groups. Specifically, pupils belonging to each group were overrepresented in each of the other two groups, compared with the national average for all pupils.

For example, the proportion of the ever CIN group who were also FSM6 is around 67%: much higher than the 26.5% of pupils nationally who were FSM6. (For ever CPP pupils, a subset of ever CIN pupils, over 80% were also FSM6.)

### The relationship between year group and vulnerable group

To complete this section, we look at how the size of the population in each vulnerable group varied by year group, remembering that numbers of ever CIN and ever CPP pupils in older year groups are undercounted.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of pupils who were FSM6 in each year group, and Figure 3 shows the proportions of pupils with an EHCP, and who were ever CIN and ever CPP. (Both figures are overleaf.)

We see that the proportion of FSM6 pupils increased with year group, peaking at Year 7 and then declining slightly thereafter. This pattern is the same in London as nationally, though the proportion in London is higher than national in every year group. This gap was bigger in secondary than primary<sup>1</sup>.

For pupils with an EHCP, the pattern is similar, though the peak occurred in Year 6 and the subsequent decline was steeper. Again, London had a higher proportion than national in every year group but, unlike FSM6, the gap is bigger in primary than in secondary.

The proportion of pupils who have ever been referred for a CIN assessment was lower in London than nationally in Years 1 – 7, and higher in Years 8 – 11. The proportion who have ever had a CPP in place is lower in London than nationally in every Year group.

---

<sup>1</sup> In this report we use “secondary” to refer to all pupils in national curriculum Years 7 – 11, and “primary” for all pupils in national curriculum Years 1 – 6 regardless of school type.

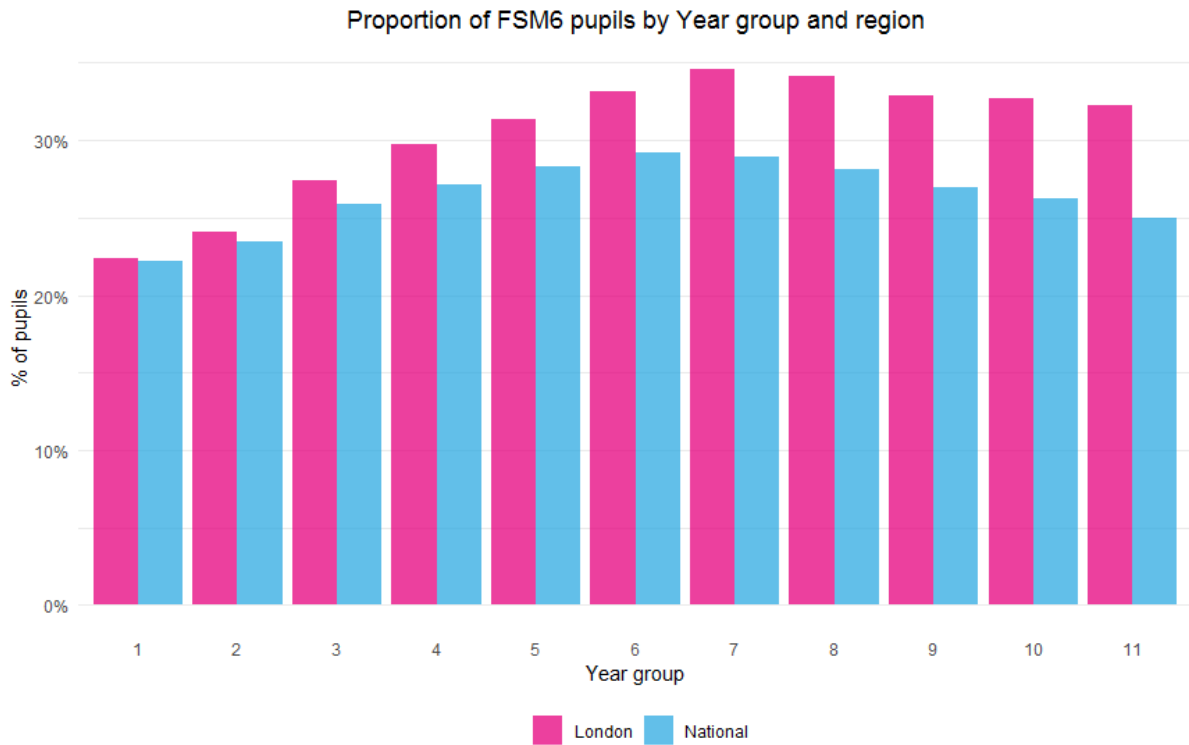


Figure 2 A chart showing the proportion of pupils by Year group who have been eligible for free school meals anytime in the past 6 years (FSM6). London percentages are compared with national. Years 1 – 11, mainstream schools, enrolment status current or main.

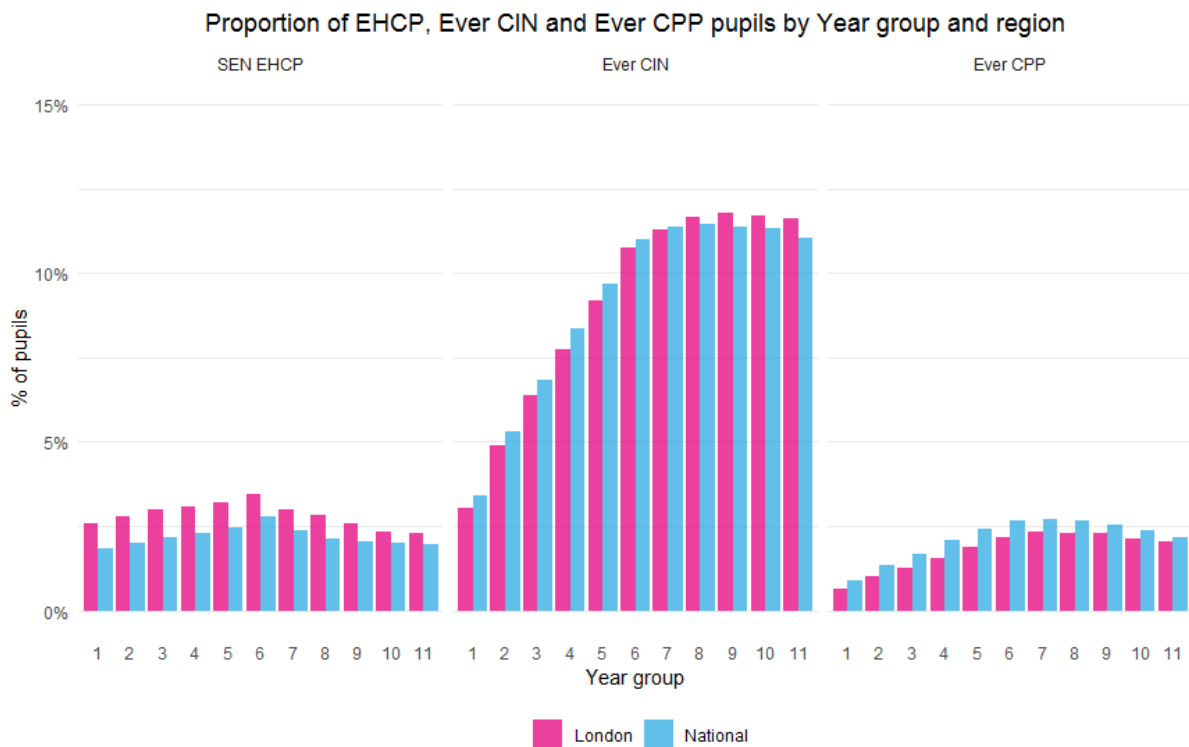


Figure 3 A chart showing the proportion of pupils by Year group who have an Education, Health and Care Plan (SEN EHCP), who have ever had a Children in Need assessment (Ever CIN) or ever been under a Child Protection Plan (Ever CPP). London percentages are compared with national. Years 1 – 11, mainstream schools, enrolment status current or main.

## Results

### Metrics

We summarise pupil absence in two ways:

1. **Absence, % sessions missed:** the percentage of possible sessions recorded as absences. Sessions missed for Covid-related reasons are included as absences and as possible sessions (NB: this is in contrast to the [DfE definition](#) which does not treat these missed sessions as absences).
2. **Persistent absence, % of pupils persistently absent:** the percentage of pupils who were absent for at least 10% of possible sessions. Sessions missed for Covid-related reasons are not included as absences but are included as possible sessions. This is in line with the DfE definition.

There are some circumstances in which an absence we might think of as being “Covid-related” is not recorded as such. In particular, [DfE guidance](#) asks schools to record absences for pupils with a positive Covid test as sickness rather than as “Covid-related”. Results should be interpreted with this caveat in mind.

### Overall levels of absence in Autumn 2020

**Table 2** Percentage of sessions missed and percentage of pupils who were persistently absent by school region and phase, Autumn 2020/21. Sessions missed includes those missed for Covid-related reasons. Pupils are classed as persistently absent if they missed 10% or more of sessions for non-Covid-related reasons. Years 1 – 11, mainstream schools, enrolment status current or main. Pupil numbers are rounded to the nearest 10.

	Pupils		% sessions missed		% pupils persistently absent (@10%)	
	Secondary	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary	Primary
North West	407,300	528,370	16.9%	10.3%	16.1%	9.0%
Yorkshire & Humber	303,910	390,940	16.2%	10.5%	17.5%	9.8%
West Midlands	334,980	431,980	16.2%	10.4%	16.1%	10.1%
North East	138,000	178,390	16.1%	9.8%	18.7%	9.1%
East Midlands	259,450	335,000	13.9%	8.5%	14.9%	8.6%
London	441,740	590,810	13.6%	10.1%	14.6%	10.7%
South East	471,630	617,710	13.2%	8.0%	15.7%	8.7%
East of England	337,880	435,480	12.7%	7.2%	15.1%	9.0%
South West	278,460	359,940	11.5%	6.5%	16.0%	8.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,973,350</b>	<b>3,868,600</b>	<b>14.4%</b>	<b>9.0%</b>	<b>15.9%</b>	<b>9.3%</b>

Table 2 shows that there were higher levels of absence and persistent absence in secondary year groups than primary.

The highest percentage of sessions missed due to absence by secondary pupils was in North West schools (16.9%), and by primary pupils in Yorkshire and the Humber (10.5%). Pupils in South West schools missed the lowest percentage of sessions at both primary and secondary (6.5% and 11.5%, respectively).

Pupils in London schools missed a lower percentage of sessions than the national average at secondary, and a higher percentage at primary: 13.6% of sessions missed at secondary compared with 14.4% nationally, and 10.1% at primary compared with 9.0% nationally.

Persistent absence rates at secondary were highest in the North East (18.7%) and lowest in London (14.6%), while at primary they were highest in London (10.7%) and lowest in the South West (8.0%).

Within London, absence and persistent absence varied as follows:

- % sessions missed, secondary: Havering, 19.5% (among 14,790 pupils) to Wandsworth, 9.1% (among 9,920 pupils)
- % pupils persistently absent, secondary: Islington, 20.3% (of 7,430 pupils) to Kingston upon Thames, 11.7% (of 9,420 pupils)
- % sessions missed, primary: Havering, 15.1% (among 19,420 pupils) to Richmond upon Thames, 6.8% (among 14,210 pupils)
- % pupils persistently absent, primary: Newham, 14.1% (of 29,010 pupils) to Richmond upon Thames, 6.0% (of 14,210 pupils)
- 

### Research question 1: how did absence vary by year group?

**Table 3** Percentage of sessions missed and percentage of pupils who were persistently absent by national curriculum year group and school region, Autumn 2020/21. Sessions missed includes those missed for Covid-related reasons. Pupils are classed as persistently absent if they missed 10% or more of sessions for non-Covid-related reasons. Years 1 – 11, mainstream schools, enrolment status current or main. Pupil numbers are rounded to the nearest 10.

Year group	Pupils		% sessions missed		% pupils persistently absent (@10%)	
	National	London	National	London	National	London
1	631,370	98,050	8.9%	10.2%	9.3%	11.4%
2	633,040	96,730	8.8%	9.9%	8.6%	10.2%
3	643,750	98,060	8.7%	9.6%	8.5%	10.0%
4	659,060	100,010	9.0%	10.0%	9.1%	10.4%
5	657,200	99,510	9.3%	10.2%	9.7%	10.8%
6	644,180	98,460	9.7%	10.5%	10.5%	11.5%
7	619,550	91,140	10.6%	9.9%	10.5%	10.0%
8	623,380	92,630	13.9%	13.4%	15.3%	14.7%
9	598,090	89,230	15.1%	14.2%	17.1%	15.8%
10	576,440	85,710	16.3%	15.7%	18.2%	16.2%
11	555,890	83,030	16.5%	15.0%	18.6%	16.5%
<b>Total primary</b>	<b>3,868,600</b>	<b>590,810</b>	<b>9.0%</b>	<b>10.1%</b>	<b>9.3%</b>	<b>10.7%</b>
<b>Total secondary</b>	<b>2,973,350</b>	<b>441,740</b>	<b>14.4%</b>	<b>13.6%</b>	<b>15.9%</b>	<b>14.6%</b>

Table 3 shows that nationally, absence tended to increase with year group, except for Year 1 where it was higher than in both Years 2 and 3 (and 4, for persistent absence).

In London, the pattern is more complex. Pupils in Year 7 missed a lower percentage of sessions and were less likely to be persistently absent than pupils in Years 4, 5 and 6. Pupils in Year 11 missed a lower percentage of sessions than those in Year 10 (though, as was the case nationally, were more likely to be persistently absent).

## Research question 2: how did absence vary by pupil group?

**Table 4** Percentage of sessions missed and percentage of pupils who were persistently absent by pupil group and school region, Autumn 2020/21. Sessions missed includes those missed for Covid-related reasons. Pupils are classed as persistently absent if they missed 10% or more of sessions for non-Covid-related reasons. Years 1 – 11, mainstream schools, enrolment status current or main. Pupil numbers are rounded to the nearest 10.

		Pupils		% sessions missed		% pupils persistently absent (@10%)	
		National	London	National	London	National	London
Primary	All pupils	3,868,600	590,810	9.0%	10.1%	9.3%	10.7%
	fsm6	1,008,530	165,650	12.7%	12.6%	18.0%	17.9%
	not fsm6	2,860,070	425,160	7.8%	9.1%	6.2%	7.9%
	SEN E	87,370	17,810	14.1%	14.0%	20.5%	19.3%
	SEN K	537,360	76,420	11.3%	11.8%	14.9%	15.6%
	no SEN	3,243,870	496,580	8.5%	9.7%	8.1%	9.6%
	ever CIN	288,640	41,460	13.1%	13.6%	19.4%	20.1%
	ever CPP	71,520	8,390	13.8%	15.0%	21.1%	23.4%
	never CIN	3,579,960	549,340	8.7%	9.8%	8.5%	10.0%
	Secondary	All pupils	2,973,350	441,740	14.4%	13.6%	15.9%
fsm6		805,270	147,260	19.3%	16.0%	27.6%	21.9%
not fsm6		2,168,080	294,470	12.6%	12.4%	11.5%	11.0%
SEN E		62,860	11,590	19.0%	16.8%	26.6%	22.8%
SEN K		366,030	52,220	17.6%	16.4%	24.9%	22.8%
no SEN		2,544,470	377,920	13.8%	13.1%	14.3%	13.2%
ever CIN		336,250	51,300	20.2%	17.6%	30.8%	26.3%
ever CPP		74,330	9,780	22.2%	20.4%	35.2%	33.1%
never CIN		2,637,100	390,430	13.7%	13.1%	14.0%	13.1%

Table 4 shows that vulnerable groups of pupils missed more sessions and were more likely to be persistently absent than their peers.

At secondary, ever CIN and ever CPP pupils missed the most sessions of any vulnerable group, both nationally and in London: ever CIN pupils missed 20.2% of sessions nationally and 17.6% in London, ever CPP pupils missed 22.2% nationally and 20.4% in London. They were also most likely to be persistently absent: 30.8% of ever CIN pupils nationally and 26.3% in London, 35.2% of ever CPP pupils nationally and 33.1% in London.

At primary, pupils with an EHCP and ever CPP pupils missed the most sessions: pupils with an EHCP missed 14.1% of sessions nationally and 14.0% in London, ever CPP pupils missed 13.8% nationally and 15.0% in London. Pupils from these groups were also more likely to be persistently absent nationally: 20.5% of pupils with an EHCP and 21.1% of ever CPP pupils fell into this category.



### Research question 3: how did absence vary by ethnicity?

**Table 5** Percentage of sessions missed and percentage of pupils who were persistently absent by ethnicity and school region, Autumn 2020/21. Sessions missed includes those missed for Covid-related reasons. Pupils are classed as persistently absent if they missed 10% or more of sessions for non-Covid-related reasons. Years 1 – 11, mainstream schools, enrolment status current or main.

		Pupils		% sessions missed		% pupils persistently absent (@10%)	
	Ethnicity	National	London	National	London	National	London
Primary	All pupils	3,868,600	590,810	9.0%	10.1%	9.3%	10.7%
	Traveller of Irish heritage	3,800	720	32.7%	31.3%	56.2%	55.9%
	Gypsy/Roma	14,530	1,190	26.2%	21.7%	47.2%	40.1%
	Pakistani	169,400	26,800	14.0%	12.4%	13.7%	16.0%
	Bangladeshi	64,550	33,460	13.1%	13.0%	13.5%	13.9%
	White and Black Caribbean	61,970	15,390	11.4%	12.4%	15.5%	18.5%
	Black - Caribbean	35,350	21,710	11.3%	11.3%	16.0%	17.4%
	Any other ethnic group	80,680	33,990	10.4%	10.1%	9.6%	10.0%
	White - Irish	9,230	2,720	10.1%	11.1%	13.4%	15.0%
	Any other mixed	96,730	30,890	9.8%	10.5%	10.7%	11.9%
	Information not yet obtained	22,650	4,270	9.8%	11.2%	12.6%	13.6%
	Indian	128,200	41,950	9.8%	9.4%	8.4%	9.7%
	Any other black background	29,800	12,800	9.6%	9.9%	9.6%	11.6%
	Any other Asian background	72,070	27,030	9.5%	9.4%	8.7%	9.3%
	Refused	20,510	5,100	9.5%	10.3%	11.2%	12.7%
	White and Black African	35,350	9,360	9.3%	9.7%	9.9%	10.5%
	White and Asian	62,000	13,090	9.1%	8.8%	8.7%	7.5%
	Any other white background	280,770	90,350	8.9%	9.6%	9.3%	9.4%
	Black - African	143,320	67,370	8.4%	8.4%	6.0%	7.1%
	White - British	2,519,000	147,290	8.3%	9.8%	8.5%	9.9%
	Chinese	18,700	5,340	7.7%	8.2%	6.2%	6.4%
Secondary	All pupils	2,973,350	441,740	14.4%	13.6%	15.9%	14.6%
	Gypsy/Roma	7,990	710	31.1%	29.3%	55.4%	51.7%
	Traveller of Irish heritage	1,240	230	28.3%	36.9%	46.4%	59.7%
	Pakistani	131,490	20,580	18.1%	14.1%	16.5%	16.2%
	White and Black Caribbean	45,910	11,540	17.4%	17.3%	23.6%	24.5%
	Information not yet obtained	31,420	6,910	17.0%	14.4%	21.8%	18.5%
	Bangladeshi	51,910	26,270	16.0%	14.7%	14.1%	14.3%
	Black - Caribbean	33,700	20,520	15.0%	14.4%	17.9%	19.0%
	White - Irish	8,280	2,300	14.6%	14.1%	16.9%	16.4%
	Any other mixed	64,310	20,060	14.4%	13.8%	15.7%	16.8%
	White and Black African	24,850	6,690	14.4%	13.9%	15.7%	14.4%
	White - British	1,962,210	108,000	14.4%	15.5%	16.8%	17.4%
	Refused	26,130	6,100	14.3%	14.0%	16.6%	15.2%
	Any other ethnic group	58,370	27,830	14.0%	12.6%	12.9%	13.8%
	White and Asian	42,460	8,060	13.9%	13.0%	14.4%	12.6%
	Any other white background	184,020	57,920	13.3%	13.4%	14.4%	14.6%
	Indian	91,850	26,280	13.2%	10.6%	8.6%	9.4%
	Any other black background	22,410	9,600	13.1%	12.6%	11.8%	13.9%
	Any other Asian background	54,970	20,650	12.6%	11.2%	10.0%	10.1%
	Black - African	118,200	58,690	11.7%	11.0%	7.3%	8.6%
	Chinese	11,640	2,810	9.5%	9.6%	5.0%	5.5%

The worst absence rates were among pupils from Gypsy/Roma and Irish traveller backgrounds. They missed the most sessions by far and were much more likely to be persistently absent than other pupils, nationally and in London, and at both primary and secondary. This is shown in Table 5.

The next highest percentages of sessions missed were among Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and mixed White and Black Caribbean pupils. At primary, pupils from these backgrounds also tended to have the highest persistent absence rates. At secondary, Bangladeshi pupils had below average levels of persistent absence, while White British and White Irish pupils had above average levels.

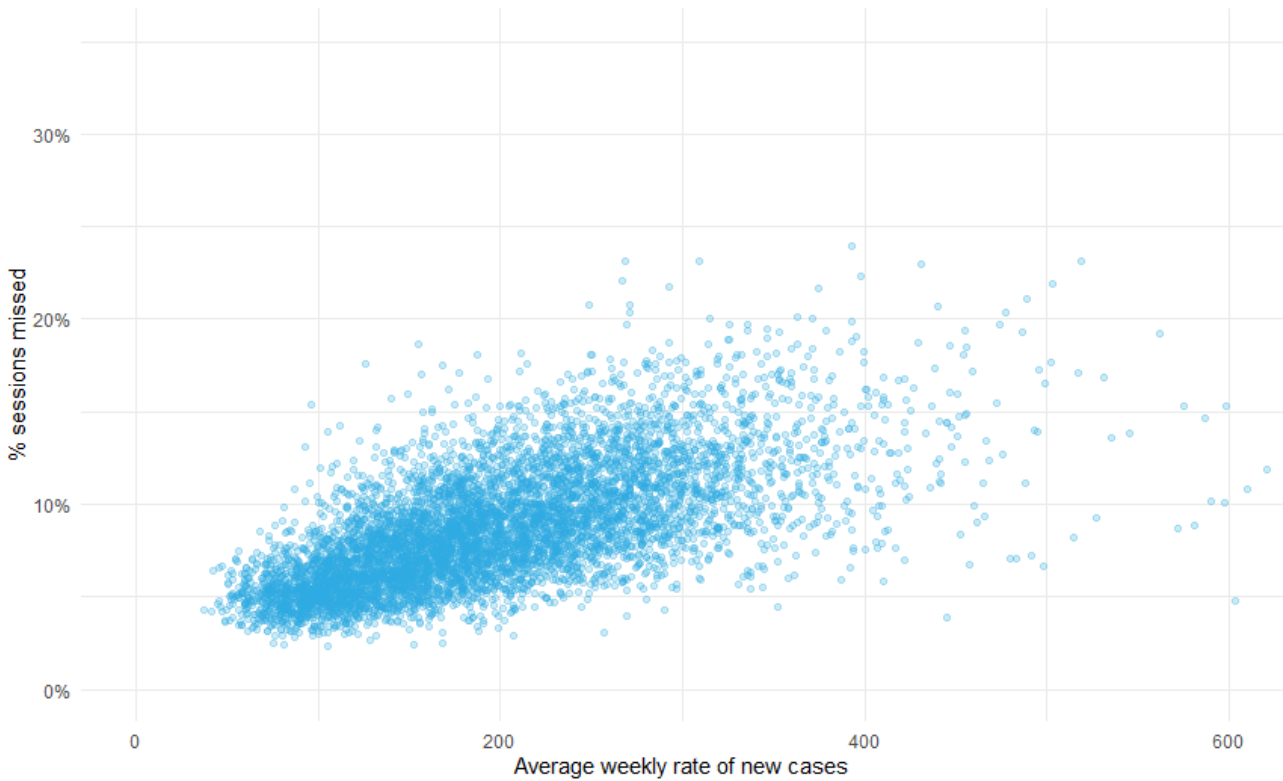
### How did absence vary with local Covid case-rates?

Figures 4 and 5 (both overleaf) show how absence rates in Autumn term 2020 varied with average weekly Covid case-rates. Figure 4 shows this for primary pupils and Figure 5 for secondary.

Overall, we see a moderate positive relationship between Covid case-rates and pupil absence at both primary and secondary, i.e. areas with higher Covid case-rates tended to also have higher rates of pupil absence. For primary pupils, the correlation coefficient was 0.64. For secondary pupils, the correlation coefficient was 0.62.

However, we also see that for any particular case rate, a wide range of absence rates was observed. This indicates that factors other than Covid case-rates were also important in the variation of pupil absence.

Variation of absence by Covid case rates, Autumn term 2020 - primary



Variation of absence by Covid case rates, Autumn term 2020 - primary by region

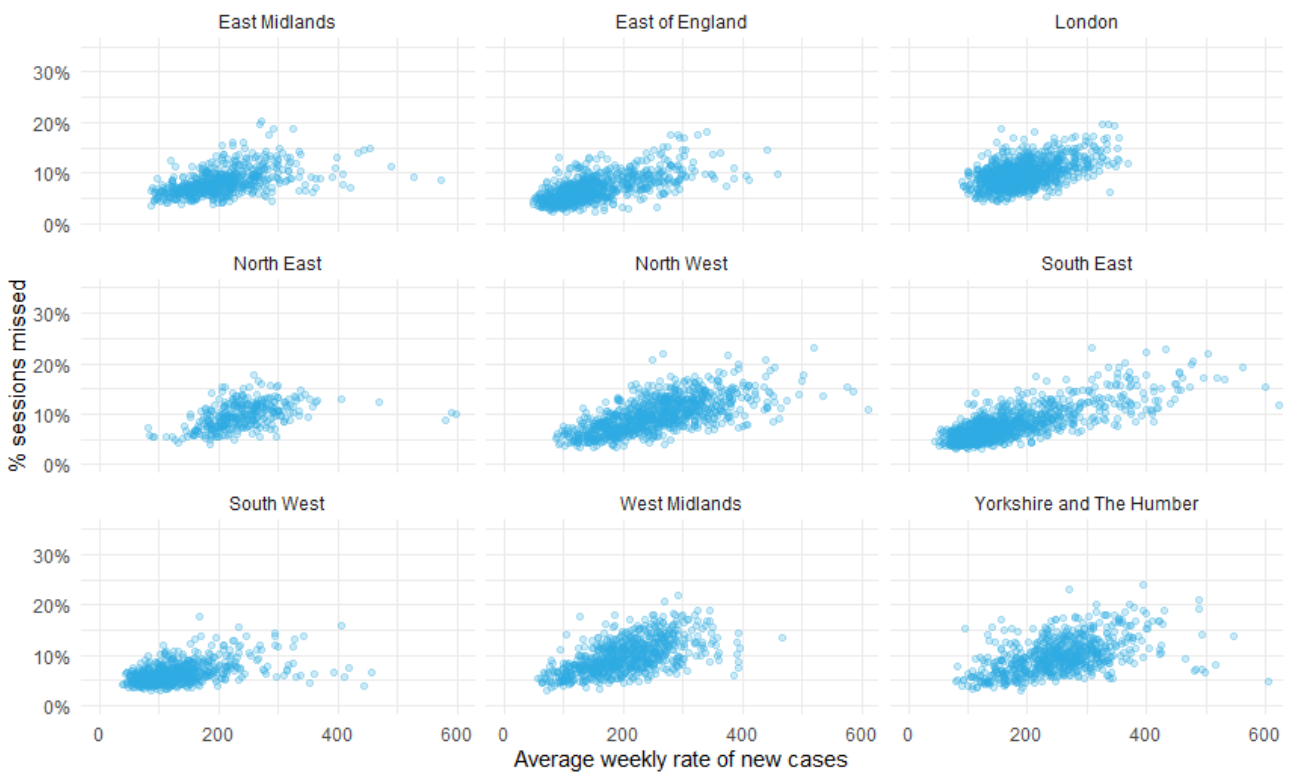
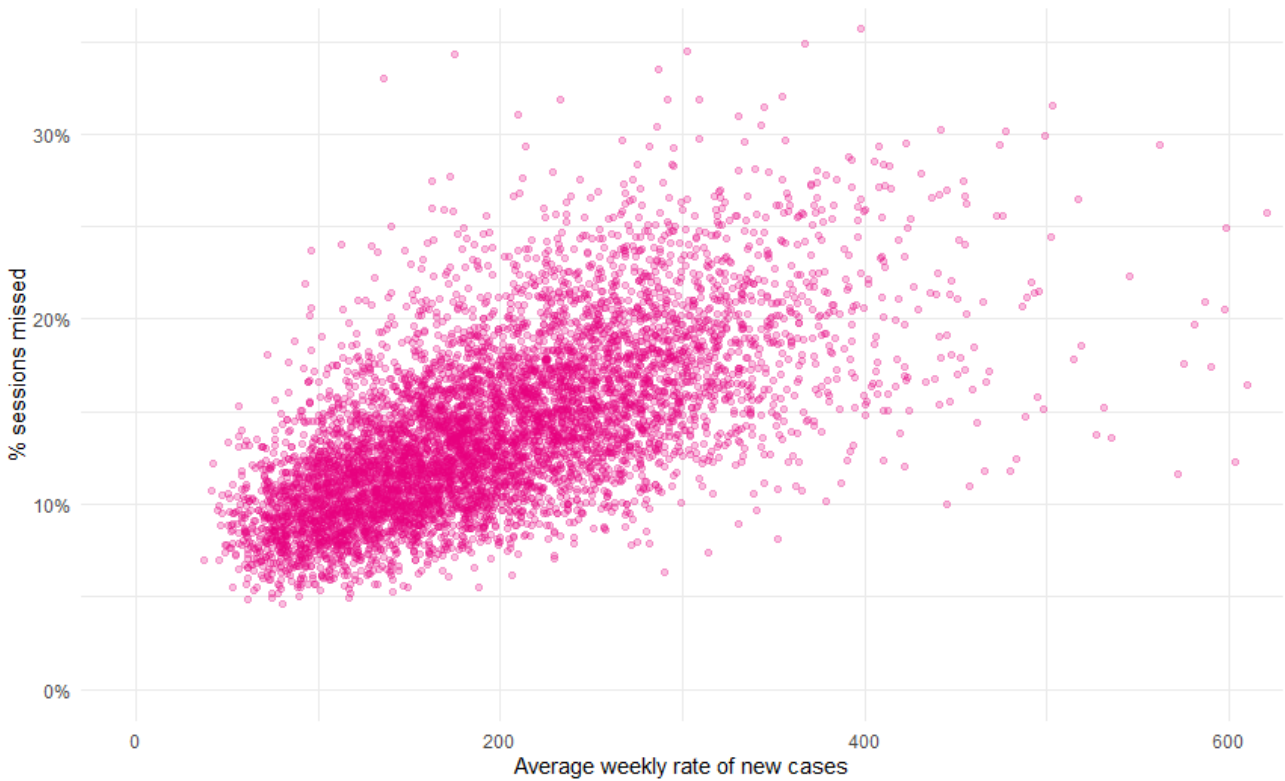


Figure 4 Variation of pupil absence with Covid case-rate by pupil MSOA for primary pupils. Absence is represented by % sessions missed and Covid case-rate by the average weekly number of new Covid cases by specimen date over Autumn 2020. Absence is restricted to pupils in mainstream schools, Years 1 – 11, enrolment status is current or main. The top chart plots MSOAs for all regions together. The bottom chart separates the MSOAs out by region. A small number of MSOAs with case rates > 600 are not shown in this Figure but are included in all calculations.

Variation of absence by Covid case rates, Autumn term 2020 - secondary



Variation of absence by Covid case rates, Autumn term 2020 - secondary by region

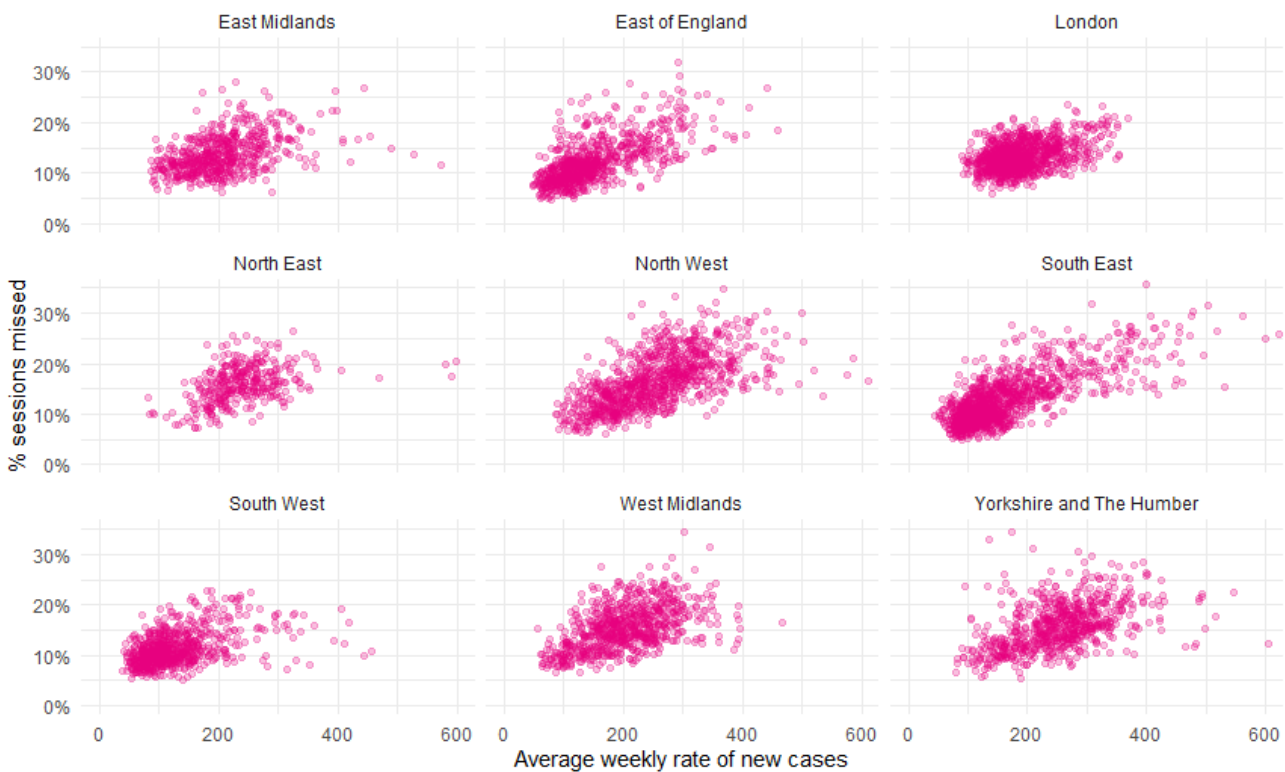


Figure 5 Variation of pupil absence with Covid case-rate by pupil MSOA for secondary pupils. Absence is represented by % sessions missed and Covid case-rate by the average weekly number of new Covid cases by specimen date over Autumn 2020. Absence is restricted to pupils in mainstream schools, Years 1 – 11, enrolment status is current or main. The top chart plots MSOAs for all regions together. The bottom chart separates the MSOAs out by region. A small number of MSOAs with case rates > 600 are not shown in this Figure but are included in all calculations.