

Unexplained pupil exits from schools: a growing problem?

Introduction and background

In recent years there has been growing concern about the prevalence of pupils being taken off school rolls without being formally excluded. There have been accusations that some schools and multi-academy trusts (MATs) are gaming the system to remove pupils so that they do not appear in school league tables. There may be other motivations such as financial pressures and the cost of accommodating pupils with additional needs. This practice is known as 'off-rolling' and has been defined by Ofsted as 'the practice of removing a pupil from the school without a formal permanent exclusion or by encouraging a parent to remove a child from the school roll when the reason is primarily in the interests of the school rather than in the best interest of the pupil'.

Although the numbers of school exclusions are recorded by the government, little is known about pupils who are removed from school rolls unofficially. Unexplained moves are therefore neither recorded nor regulated. There is a pressing need to better understand the scale of the issue, particularly the extent to which it affects vulnerable learners.

This new report aims to close the evidence gap. It was sponsored by the National Education Union (NEU) and published by the Education Policy Institute (EPI). Researchers have analysed data from the National Pupil Database (NPD) spanning over 10 years. They have tracked pupil exits in 3 separate age groups through their whole time in secondary education. The cohorts tracked are: the 2017 cohort (pupils who started secondary school in 2010 and left in 2017; the 2014 cohort who joined in 2009 and left in 2014; and the 2011 cohort who joined in 2006 and left in 2011). Researchers began by tracking pupils who exited their school at some point in time between the autumn, spring and summer censuses in Years 7 to 11. From this group, they removed exits due to middle school transitions. From the remainder, they removed exits that were likely to have been driven by family reasons as discernible from the available data, as well as permanent exclusions. They were then able to focus on exits that we are calling 'unexplained' as they do not appear to be due to family or non-school related factors captured in the data. It is worth noting that this is the first piece of research which has taken into account moves which are probably due to family reasons.

This is the first of 2 reports which EPI is intending to publish on this issue. For the second report it intends to further develop the methodology used; it is therefore inviting feedback on this aspect of the report. In the interests of brevity, a detailed account of the methodology is not included in this summary.

Key points

Prevalence of unexplained exits

- After removing family-driven exits and official permanent exclusions, the total number of unexplained exits from schools for each cohort was: 47,225 in the 2011 cohort; 49,051 in the 2014 cohort; and 53,309 in the 2017 cohort.
- The increase in unexplained exits for the 2017 cohort was largely driven by increased exits in Years 9-11. For example, the number of unexplained absences in Year 11 between spring and summer rose from 106 in 2011 to 229 in 2017. Between autumn and spring the number increased from 459 to 641.
- The number of pupils with at least one unexplained exit from school was: 46,759 in the 2011 cohort (7.8 per cent of the total number of pupils); 44,307 in the 2014 cohort (7.2 per cent of the cohort; and 49,101 in the 2017 cohort (8.1 per cent of the cohort).

- A larger number of pupils in the 2017 cohort experienced more than one exit, compared to previous years. In 2014, 4,289 pupils (0.7% of the cohort) experienced more than one exit. In 2017 the figure rose to 5,389 (0.9 per cent of the cohort).

Breakdown of family-driven exits

- Across all cohorts the most common type of family-driven exit is a change of home address. The second highest is a move to a higher-rated school, although numbers of moves for this reason have decreased from 18,452 in the 2011 cohort to 11,245 in the 2017 cohort.



Unexplained exits by origin and destination school type

- Moves to special schools from any type of school are classified as 'family-driven' moves, because the SEND code of practice means it is very likely that moves into special schools are with the agreement and support of the child's parents.
- In the 2011 cohort, the proportion of pupils exiting academies to any destination was approximately 14 per cent of the total pupils in academies, compared with 10 per cent of pupils in LA maintained schools. However, this trend is reversed in the 2014 and 2017 cohorts, with the proportion exiting academies being lower than the number exiting LA maintained schools. In 2017, 36,282 pupils exited LA maintained schools, whereas 11,583 exited academies.

School level distributions

- This section of the report focusses on the 2017 cohort, noting that figures for the 2 previous cohorts are broadly similar.
- The number of unexplained exits per school during secondary school ranged from 0 to 116 for pupils in the 2017 cohort.
- The data reveals that high numbers of unexplained exits in secondary school are concentrated among a small number of schools; these schools are mostly mainstream schools. In all, 330 schools (or 6% of the total number of schools in the 2017 cohort) had at least 30 unexplained exits from their school during the five years of secondary. The threshold of 30 pupils was chosen as this approximates to a class size. These schools accounted for over a fifth (23%) of the total number of unexplained exits experienced by the cohort in secondary school. A total of 105 schools had between 40 and 116 exits.
- The prevalence of unexplained exits by school disadvantage quintile for all three cohorts illustrates that they are concentrated in schools in the middle of the disadvantage distribution (i.e. in the 3rd quintile). In the 2017 cohort, schools with the least disadvantaged intake accounted for the smallest proportion of total moves (5%), while schools with the most disadvantaged intake accounted for the second lowest proportion of total moves (13.8%). Between the 2011 and 2017 cohorts, the proportion of unexplained exits accounted for by the least disadvantaged schools rose (from 1.1% to 5%), while the proportion accounted for by the most disadvantaged schools has fallen (from 23.5 per cent to 13.8%).

Pupil risk factors for unexplained exits

- In all three cohorts, the same groups of pupils were more likely to experience unexplained exits. This section focusses on the 2017 cohort.
- Of pupils who had a high number of authorised absences, 40.9 per cent experienced at least one unexplained exit.
- A large proportion of children who entered the care system in the secondary phase had at least one unexplained exit (34.6%).
- Also, at high risk were pupils who have been permanently excluded (32.1% having at least one unexplained exit) or experienced a fixed term exclusion (21.8%).
- Of those children with social, emotional or health needs, 24.3 per cent had at least one unexplained exit.
- Thirteen per cent of pupils with Black or mixed Black and White ethnic backgrounds had at least one unexplained exit. The ethnic groups with the lowest rates of unexplained exit were Chinese (4.6%), Indian (5.1%) and other Asian background (5.9%).

- Of pupils who had ever been eligible for free school meals, 13.5 per cent had at least one unexplained exit.

Unexplained exits for pupils with additional needs

- A high proportion of children who have ever been looked after had at least one unexplained exit (27.5% in the 2017 cohort).
- Looking at the data by type of special educational need shows that the highest proportions of unexplained exits are among children with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (24.3%). Of pupils with an autistic spectrum disorder need, 12.5 per cent have at least one unexplained exit; the figure for children with speech, language and communication needs is 9.9 per cent.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/unexplained-pupil-exits/>