

# Priced out of school: how lack of money prevents young people from attending school

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## Summary

In recent years, improving school attendance has been a top priority for policymakers in every nation of the UK. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated a rise in the number of children and young people missing school on a regular basis, and although the latest data shows that average attendance levels are beginning to improve, progress is slow, and some groups still remain below pre-pandemic levels.<sup>1,2</sup> Persistent absence – defined as missing 10 per cent or more of school sessions each term – is more common among children eligible for free school meals, and rates increase as children grow older, with the highest absence rates among children attending secondary school.

Research into the reasons why so many young people are missing from their classes has found the causes are complex and multifactorial. Triggers can include mental and physical health challenges, unmet special educational needs, family illness or disability, feeling excluded at school or falling behind on schoolwork. Absence is sometimes grounded in a combination of these factors. CPAG's research with educators, families, children and young people across the UK also shows that not being able to afford uniforms, school supplies, trips, and transport to school are key reasons why children are not attending their lessons.<sup>3</sup> When families consistently struggle with these costs, the odd missed day can turn into persistent absence.

We wanted to hear directly from young people aged 11-18 about the extent to which lack of money plays a role in attendance at school. We have found that:

- 16 per cent of all 11–18-year-olds in the UK say that they have missed school at least once because they didn't have something they needed to attend.
- This number increases significantly among children who qualify for means-tested free school meals, with more than one-in-four (26 per cent) saying this has been the case.
- Almost half (47 per cent) of all young people who missed school because they didn't have what they needed said they did so because they did not have the correct uniform or kit. Across all secondary school pupils, those in receipt of free school meals were more than three times as likely to give this reason for missing school than their peers.

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<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Library, [School Attendance in England](#), 2024

<sup>2</sup> A Klein and others, [Understanding School Attendance, Educational Attainment and Labour Market Outcomes](#), 2024

<sup>3</sup> CPAG, [Evidence submitted to the House of Commons Education Select Committee inquiry into persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils](#), 2023

- 23 per cent who didn't have what they needed said they didn't attend school because they didn't have the money to pay for school meals, while 20 per cent said difficulty affording a packed lunch had kept them off.
- Children in receipt of free school meals are also sometimes lending their free school meal allowances to friends who need food.
- Children in low-income households were also more likely to report needing time off school for mental health challenges compared to their peers.
- Over a quarter of all young people (26 per cent) who missed school because they didn't have what they needed said this was because they couldn't afford transport to get to school, and more than a quarter (27 per cent) said a lack of money for going on trips meant they sometimes didn't attend school.
- Subject costs also presented challenges, with 16 per cent of all pupils reporting that costs or worries about the cost of some subjects prevented them from choosing a subject to study.
- Children in receipt of free school meals were also twice as likely to report being sent home from school for not having the right uniform or kit compared to those not eligible for free school meals.

This new research shows that lack of money itself prevents children from attending school. It also shows that children in lower-income households are more likely to face sanctions, such as being sent home from school for not having what they need, which further impacts on the amount of time they spend learning.

### **Why lower attendance rates among children from low-income families should concern us all**

Missing lessons makes it harder for children to achieve their full potential throughout school and in their end-of-school assessments, and it deprives them of access to the emotional and social support that schools can provide. As budget cuts have led to reduced spending on community-based youth services, schools remain one of the few places where young people can access additional support. Schools connect young people with mental health support, give access to extra-curricular opportunities like sport and arts, and allow them to make first contact with other services, if they need them. Going to school equips teenagers with the skills, knowledge and exam results that unlock doors for future study, employment and earnings. It's also an important time for friendship and relationship building, refining young people's social skills and developing their understanding of communication with others.

Across the nations, attendance remains more challenging for children in families with incomes low enough to qualify for means-tested free school meals. Through this research we give a voice to young people themselves and the reasons they give for not attending school, as well as the way a lack of money at home can lead to them missing classes.

After 14 years of cuts to social security, the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, wages and benefits have failed to keep pace with inflation. Child poverty in the UK has now reached an all-time high, with 4.5 million children living below the poverty line.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, there is a limit to the support that is available to help with school-related costs such as free school meals and uniform grants and these schemes, where they exist, only reach a small proportion of families.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> DWP, [Households below average income](#), 2025

<sup>5</sup> Eligible families in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland can access national grants to help with the cost of school uniform and kit. England does not have an equivalent grant scheme.

## How lack of money prevents young people attending school

CPAG's new research highlights the ways in which money itself prevents secondary-aged pupils from attending school and limits their time in school. Sixteen per cent of all 11–18-year-olds say they have missed school at least once because they didn't have something they needed to attend. However, this increases to more than one-in-four (26 per cent) among children who are in receipt of free school meals. Below we look at the different drivers of this.

### 1. Uniform costs can prevent attendance and reduce time in classrooms

Most schools require families to purchase a uniform for children to wear to school. While all nations have existing or proposed guidance on uniform affordability, our research shows the majority of all secondary school children (62 per cent) across the UK still say their school uniform is expensive to purchase. More than two-thirds (68 per cent) of secondary pupils in the UK attend schools that still require branded uniform, although this varies across the nations.<sup>6</sup> Sixteen per cent of all pupils say they are required to have five or more branded items of uniform. In England, the government is bringing in legislation to restrict the number of branded items to three items in secondary schools or four, if one item is a tie.

*'Our blazer is compulsory at our school and if you don't have it you get a detention, not everyone has a spare £45 just laying around.'* (Secondary student, England)

CPAG's previous research into the cost of sending children to school shows that families now face paying almost £450 a year for basic secondary school uniform, bags and PE kit.<sup>7</sup>

Lacking suitable uniform can prevent children from attending school in several ways. Children may stay at home if they do not have the right clothes to put on in the morning. Almost half (47 per cent) of young people who missed school because they didn't have what they needed said they did so because they did not have the right uniform or kit. Across all secondary school pupils, those who were eligible for free school meals were three times more likely than their peers to miss school for this reason (13 per cent compared to 4 per cent).<sup>8</sup>

*'We sometimes receive calls to the school to say a certain pupil can't come in today because they maybe only have one uniform and that's in the washing and it's not dry so they'll be off today.'* (Office staff member, secondary school, Scotland)

Young people are also being sanctioned for not having the right uniform and subsequently missing time at school and in classrooms, with certain groups at a higher risk of this. Children in receipt of free school meals were more than twice as likely than their peers to be sent home from school due to incorrect uniform or kit (8 per cent compared to 3 per cent). They are also more likely to miss lessons due to incorrect kit or uniform, with one in 10 pupils in receipt of free school meals saying they were taken out of class or prevented from taking part in activities such as school trips because they lacked the correct clothing.

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<sup>6</sup> In Scotland only 46 per cent of secondary schools required branded uniform, in England and Wales this was 73 per cent and in Northern Ireland 79 per cent.

<sup>7</sup> CPAG, *The minimum cost of education in the UK*, 2025

<sup>8</sup> These figures relate to the whole sample, not just those who answered 'yes' to missing school because they did not have something they needed.

*[The school should] not make everyone buy so much expensive stuff that they don't even have a choice to buy or not because if they don't buy it their child gets detentions.'* (Secondary student, England)

## **2. Not being able to afford food keeps children away from school**

Twenty-three per cent of young people who missed school because they didn't have something they needed reported it was because they couldn't afford to pay for school meals, while 20 per cent said being unable to bring a packed lunch kept them off. Previous CPAG analysis has shown that a significant proportion of secondary-aged children in poverty are not eligible for free school meals due to the continued imposition of tight means-tests and the fact that this age group has not been included in many local free school meal expansions.<sup>9</sup>

*'Lunch alone is 3 pounds which means we pay 15 pounds a week in a month is 60 pounds. People with siblings could make it even harder to manage money wise.'* (Secondary student, England)

*'I worry about the cost of food in the cafeteria. My child seems to spend more than I plan for each week.'* (Parent, England)

*'You don't eat! If you go to the till yeah and then you ask them to put it through and they see you are minus then they ask you to put it back or they'll take it from you and put it back themselves.'* (Secondary student, England)

*'I sometimes have to buy my friends their food because they don't have any money in their accounts.'* (Secondary student, Wales)

Of young people in receipt of free school meals, 84 per cent said they use their allowance either every day or sometimes. For those who don't use it (11 per cent) or don't use it every day (37 per cent), around one in five said this was because they sometimes lend their allowance to friends who need food.<sup>10</sup>

## **3. Mental health related absenteeism is more prominent in lower-income pupils**

Children who face poverty are more likely to experience mental health challenges than their peers.<sup>11</sup> Living without enough food and heating and not being able to socialise or take part in activities can all contribute to low wellbeing and self-esteem. On top of this, poverty-related stigma<sup>12</sup> can also have a detrimental effect on children's and young people's mental health.<sup>13</sup> Our research found that secondary-aged pupils who are in receipt of free school meals were more likely to report missing school for mental health challenges (eg, feeling anxious or depressed) than secondary school pupils more widely. Over one in five (21 per cent) secondary pupils in receipt of free school meals said they have missed school for this reason, compared to just 17 per cent in families who aren't eligible for this benefit.

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<sup>9</sup> CPAG, [The number of children in poverty not eligible for free school meals, by nation and region](#), 2024

<sup>10</sup> Restrictive qualifying criteria for free school meals leaves many children in poverty across the UK ineligible for this entitlement. In England and Wales in secondary schools, families in receipt of universal credit must have earnings below £7,400 a year (after tax) to qualify. In Scotland, earnings must be £850 or less a month (after tax) and in Northern Ireland earnings must be £15,000 or less (after tax) to qualify.

<sup>11</sup> Mind, *Facts and figures about poverty and mental health*, 2021

<sup>12</sup> Poverty-related stigma is a process whereby individuals or communities are devalued, because they live in poverty, and/or access specific services designed to support those living on low income, such as food banks. This is perpetuated in different ways, for example the language used to talk about those living in poverty and the policies and systems that affect them.

<sup>13</sup> The Poverty Alliance, *Report of inquiry into poverty related stigma in Scotland*, 2023

*'A lot of people lose confidence over their financial problems... they're embarrassed about how they're poor, they tend to be quieter.'* (Secondary student, England)

#### **4. Days are missed due to transport costs**

The cost of getting to school was reported as another key reason for non-attendance by more than a quarter (26 per cent) of all children who had missed school because they didn't have what they needed. However, there was wide variation across nations, with the figures much higher in England and Wales compared to Scotland, where there is free bus travel for under 22s.<sup>14</sup> Children in receipt of free school meals were also more likely to say it was difficult to afford getting to and from school compared to their peers (15 per cent compared to 9 per cent). CPAG's research into the minimum cost of education found families in 2024 face paying around £390 a year for a young person to get to and from secondary school.<sup>15</sup>

*'Cost of transport, trains are lot more expensive than buses, but trains are way faster.'* (Secondary student, England)

#### **5. School trips are also a driver of lower attendance**

Despite most nations having guidance requiring schools to offer trips in a way that makes them inclusive of families who cannot afford to pay, a quarter of all young people (26 per cent) say having less money at home makes it harder to participate in school trips. Twenty-seven per cent of young people who have missed school because they don't have what they need say they were unable to attend because they didn't have money for a school trip.

*'I miss [out on] enrichment week and trips, it's too much [money].'* (Secondary student, England)

*'All the trips are too expensive and a lot of parents can't afford them even when they work especially if they have more than one child attending school.'* (Secondary student, England)

*'I really want to go on the history trip but it's not going to be less than 550 pounds so I'm trying to save up as much as possible so I can go.'* (Secondary student, Scotland)

The consequences of missing out on trips can be devastating for young people, leading to them feeling left out and left behind. In previous CPAG research in Scotland, 85 per cent of secondary students said that feeling 'left out and sad' would be a key consequence of missing out on trips due to income.<sup>16</sup>

*'I have never been on a school trip before because they cost way too much, and on a free trip there wasn't even enough coaches so many others couldn't go and have also never been on a trip due to costs.'* (Secondary student, Wales)

Young people have also shared the benefits, including chances to have new experiences, learn more and in different ways, have fun, feel included and go places and try things they would not normally have access to.

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<sup>14</sup> Of those who missed school for money-related reasons, 32 per cent of young people in England and 35 per cent of young people in Wales said transport costs were a driver of this. This compares to just 13 per cent in Scotland.

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 7

<sup>16</sup> CPAG in Scotland, [\*The Cost of the School Day Big Question report: children and young people's views on food, school trips and readiness to learn\*](#), 2024

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*'[You] get to do things you might not be able to afford in your daily life outside school.'* (Secondary student, Wales)

Our research shows that young people who may stand to benefit most from trips and experiences outside of school are also more likely to be excluded for financial reasons.

Subject and curriculum costs, eg, art and design materials and musical instruments, also presented challenges for secondary school pupils, with 16 per cent of all pupils reporting that costs or worries about the cost of some subjects prevent them from choosing a subject to study.

### Key recommendations for the forthcoming child poverty strategy and devolved governments

We cannot ignore the fact that too many children are growing up in poverty. Our research shows this is undeniably a factor in lower school attendance, and a significant barrier to learning. To tackle the root cause of these issues and give all children the best chance at school, families must have enough money to ensure their children can participate in education.

1. The forthcoming UK child poverty strategy must start to restore the value of family benefits by **abolishing the two-child limit and the benefit cap**; set clear child poverty reduction targets; and co-ordinate a cross-government approach to increasing family incomes in the longer term.

Alongside this, governments across the UK must do more to ensure costs don't prevent children attending school and spending time in classrooms.

2. As part of the child poverty strategy, the UK government must **expand free school meals to more families in England**, working towards a universal system, as well as automatically enrolling those children who are already eligible. Devolved governments must build on progress made and continue to **expand free school meal provision** as a stepping stone towards a comprehensive universal system.
3. The UK government must also provide families in England with **cash support to help with the cost of uniform and kit**, as happens in all other UK nations. Devolved governments must **increase the current thresholds for grants** to help with school costs, as the eligibility criteria for the schemes are so restrictive many children in poverty are excluded from this support. Efforts must be made to auto-enrol eligible children for school resource grants, especially in systems that have stopped using a means-test for school meals to passport entitlement to these schemes.
4. Young people across the UK nations should have **access to free public transport**, as is the case in Scotland with free bus travel for under 22s.

### Conclusion

Missing lessons and time at school makes it harder for children to achieve and benefit from all that education has to offer. While there are different triggers of non-attendance, we know that lack of money to pay for transport, school food, trips and uniforms is a driver, particularly for those on the lowest incomes. Children are also missing time in school through being sent home or taken out of classes for poverty-related reasons. But the solutions are clear, families need more money in their pockets and children should not be priced out of school. The government must make good on its promise to children and deliver a child poverty strategy that enables children to get on at school.

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## Methodology

This is a nationally representative survey of 1,701 state secondary school students aged 11-18 living in the UK. The survey was carried out between 17 April and 1 May 2025 by Survation.

## About us

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights. Child Poverty Action Group is a registered charity in England and Wales (294841) and Scotland (SC039339). [cpag.org.uk](https://cpag.org.uk)

Finally, with thanks to CPAG's Youth Panel, who shared their insights and supported the development of this survey.