



Department  
for Education

# Absence rates by gender, age and free school meal status

**Ad-hoc notice**

---

**15 March 2018**

# Contents

Executive summary	3
Background	3
Existing analysis of absence data	3
What absence data do we collect?	3
Characteristics of absent pupils	4
Reasons for absence	4
Supplementary analysis of absence data	4
What does this additional analysis cover?	4
Overall absence rates	5
Absence due to illness	5
Unauthorised absence due to 'other reasons'	6
Annex A: Underlying data	8

## Executive summary

- Pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) have higher rates of absence from school than other pupils at all ages.
- Absence rates for both boys and girls rise from the age of 10. Absence rates for girls are lower than for boys until the age of 13 but girls' absence rates exceed those of boys from the age of 13 onwards.
- The increased absence rate for girls from the age of 13 is seen among pupils eligible for free school meals and also among those not eligible for free school meals.

## Background

There have been recent media reports<sup>1</sup> to suggest that some economically disadvantaged girls are unable to attend school during their periods as they cannot afford sanitary products. We refer to this as period poverty; however, the term period poverty has been attributed to a number of societal issues which may not necessarily relate to school attendance.

This analysis aims to examine our absence data for evidence that disadvantaged girls are not attending school due to not being able to afford sanitary products. Analysis has been undertaken looking at absence rates of pupils by gender, age and free school meal status. In the UK, the median age for menstruation is 12.9 years<sup>2</sup>.

## Existing analysis of absence data

### What absence data do we collect?

Schools are required to provide termly absence data for their pupils through the school census collection. This includes information about the number of sessions missed for each type of absence (illness, medical/dental appointments, unauthorised absence etc) for each pupil each term. We do not collect session-by-session absence data or detailed reasons such as the type of illness.

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.theguardian.com/society/2017/mar/17/girls-from-poorer-families-in-england-struggle-to-afford-sanitary-protection](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/mar/17/girls-from-poorer-families-in-england-struggle-to-afford-sanitary-protection)

<sup>2</sup> <http://adc.bmj.com/content/early/2016/09/26/archdischild-2016-310475>

## Characteristics of absent pupils

In our 2015/16 [absence publication](#), we showed that boys and girls in English state funded schools have similar aggregate levels of absence, 4.5% and 4.6% respectively. The picture is similar for unauthorised absence, with a 1.1% rate of unauthorised absence for both boys and girls in state funded schools. Details about how we collect absence data and produce our statistics can be found in the [Guide to Absence Statistics](#).

The overall absence rate for pupils known to be eligible for and claiming free school meals (FSM) was 7.0 per cent, compared to 4.1 per cent for non FSM pupils. The percentage of FSM eligible pupils that were persistent absentees was 21.6 per cent, compared to 8.2 per cent of pupils not eligible for free school meals.

The overall absence rate for pupil enrolments who have been eligible for free school meals in the last 6 years (FSM Ever 6) was 6.4 per cent, a slightly lower rate than those currently eligible and claiming FSM. The equivalent rate for enrolments who were not eligible for free school meals in the last 6 years was 3.8 per cent. The percentage of FSM Ever 6 enrolments that were persistent absentees was also slightly lower than current FSM pupils at 19.0 per cent.

## Reasons for absence

Illness was the most common reason for absence in 2015/16, accounting for 57.3 per cent of all absence. In 2015/16, of all pupils in state-funded primary, secondary and special schools, 80.8 per cent missed at least one session due to illness, and 36.3 per cent missed at least one session due to medical/dental appointments.

# Supplementary analysis of absence data

## What does this additional analysis cover?

Additional analysis of the Department's 2015/16 absence data has been undertaken to look at rates of absence by reason for pupil's absence by free school meal status, gender and age group. Pupils can be eligible for free school meals on the basis of criteria such as parental income support<sup>3</sup>, this has been used in this analysis as a proxy for economic disadvantage of a pupil.

The following absence reasons are analysed further:

- overall absence rates
- absence due to illness

---

<sup>3</sup> [www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals](http://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals)

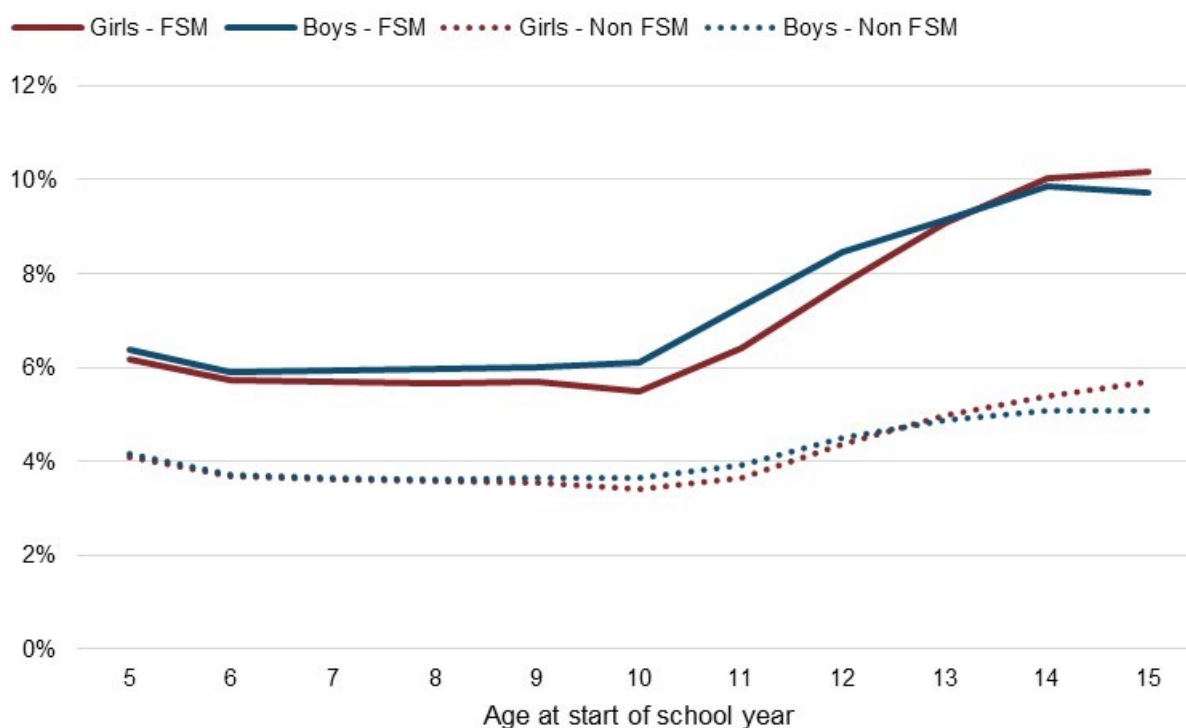
- unauthorised absence due to 'other reasons'.

## Overall absence rates

Pupils eligible for free school meals have higher rates of absence than their peers at all ages. For both groups of pupils (those eligible for FSM and those not eligible), the rate of overall absence remains fairly constant from the age of 5 until around 10, and there is little variation between genders. After age 10, absence rates for boys and girls rise. The rate of increase is higher for FSM pupils than for non-FSM pupils.

Girls have a slightly lower rate of absence than boys until around the age of 12; from age 13 onwards, girls' absence rates catch-up then surpass those for boys. This is true of both FSM and non-FSM pupils.

**Figure 1: Overall absence rate by age, gender and free school meal status, 2015/16.**  
Coverage: School Census, State-funded primary, secondary and special schools.

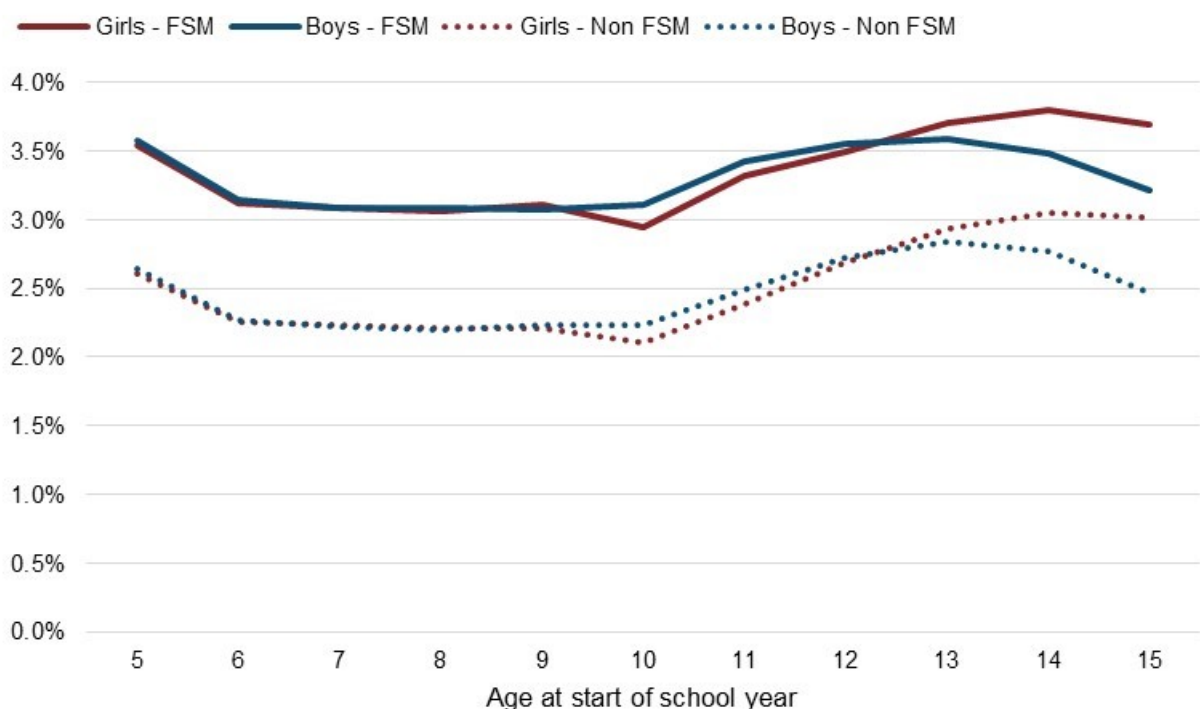


## Absence due to illness

The absence rate due to illness remains fairly constant from the age of 5 until around age 9, with a consistent gap between those eligible for free school meals and other pupils. Between the ages of 9 and 12, boys have slightly higher rates of absence due to illness but the absence rate then fall until age 15. However, for girls, the rate continues to rise, surpassing boys and then declining at age 14.

Although absence rates due to illness are higher for those eligible for free school meals, the pattern by age and gender is very similar for pupils eligible for free school meals and other pupils.

**Figure 2: Absence rate due to pupil illness by age, gender and free school meal status, 2015/16.**  
**Coverage: School Census, State-funded primary, secondary and special schools.**



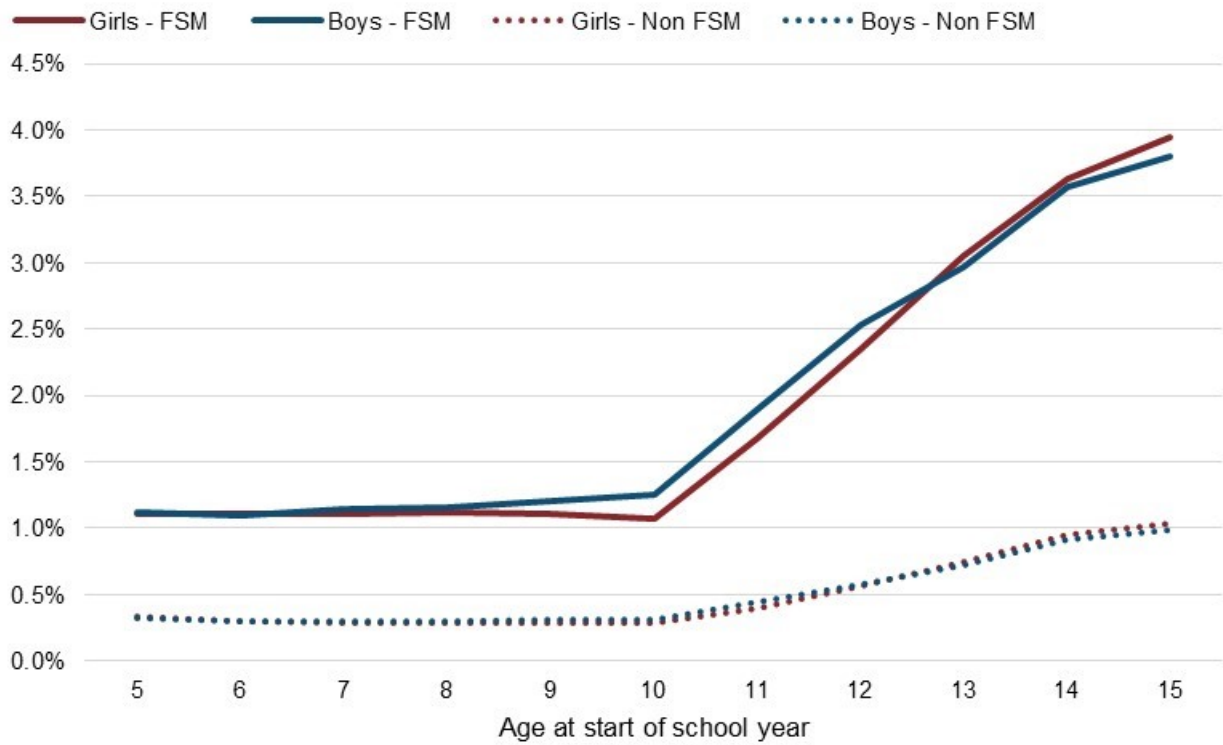
**Unauthorised absence due to ‘other reasons’**

Girls and boys have similar patterns of unauthorised absence due to ‘other reasons’ by age. However, there is a large difference in the pattern of absence rates for pupils eligible for free school meals and other pupils.

There is a steady and generally low rate of unauthorised absence due to ‘other reasons’ until the age of 10 and then a steep increase in such absence for pupils eligible for free school meals but a much smaller increase for other pupils.

**Figure 3: Unauthorised absence rate due to 'other reasons' by age, gender and free school meal status, 2015/16.**

**Coverage: School Census, State-funded primary, secondary and special schools.**



# Annex A: Underlying data

**Table 1: Data presented in figure 1 - absence rate by gender, age and FSM status**

Gender and FSM status	Age at start of school year										
	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Girls - FSM	6.2%	5.7%	5.7%	5.7%	5.7%	5.5%	6.4%	7.8%	9.1%	10.0%	10.2%
Boys - FSM	6.4%	5.9%	5.9%	6.0%	6.0%	6.1%	7.3%	8.5%	9.1%	9.9%	9.7%
Girls - non FSM	4.1%	3.7%	3.6%	3.6%	3.5%	3.4%	3.6%	4.4%	5.0%	5.4%	5.7%
Boys - non FSM	4.2%	3.7%	3.6%	3.6%	3.6%	3.6%	3.9%	4.5%	4.9%	5.1%	5.1%

**Table 2: Data presented in figure 2 - absence rate due to illness by gender, age and FSM status**

Gender and FSM status	Age at start of school year										
	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Girls - FSM	3.5%	3.1%	3.1%	3.1%	3.1%	2.9%	3.3%	3.5%	3.7%	3.8%	3.7%
Boys - FSM	3.6%	3.1%	3.1%	3.1%	3.1%	3.1%	3.4%	3.6%	3.6%	3.5%	3.2%
Girls - non FSM	2.6%	2.3%	2.2%	2.2%	2.2%	2.1%	2.4%	2.7%	2.9%	3.1%	3.0%
Boys - non FSM	2.6%	2.3%	2.2%	2.2%	2.2%	2.2%	2.5%	2.7%	2.8%	2.8%	2.5%

**Table 3: Data presented in figure 3 - unauthorised absence rate due to 'other reasons' by gender, age and FSM status**

Gender and FSM status	Age at start of school year										
	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Girls - FSM	1.1%	1.1%	1.1%	1.1%	1.1%	1.1%	1.7%	2.4%	3.1%	3.6%	3.9%
Boys - FSM	1.1%	1.1%	1.1%	1.2%	1.2%	1.3%	1.9%	2.5%	3.0%	3.6%	3.8%
Girls - non FSM	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.4%	0.6%	0.7%	1.0%	1.0%
Boys - non FSM	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.4%	0.6%	0.7%	0.9%	1.0%





Department  
for Education

© Crown copyright 2018

You may re-use this document/publication (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence v2.0. Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

To view this licence:

visit [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/2](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/2)  
email [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk)

About this publication:

Enquiries [www.education.gov.uk/contactus](http://www.education.gov.uk/contactus)  
Download [www.gov.uk/government/publications](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications)  
lead analyst [jayne.middlemas@education.gov.uk](mailto:jayne.middlemas@education.gov.uk)

Reference: [000-000-000]



Follow us on Twitter:  
[@educationgovuk](https://twitter.com/educationgovuk)



Like us on Facebook:  
[facebook.com/educationgovuk](https://facebook.com/educationgovuk)