PHOTO REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES

Persistent disadvantage

Further analysis for Teach First

Jon Andrews

June 2026

About the Education Policy Institute

The Education Policy Institute is an independent, impartial, and evidence-based research institute that promotes high quality education outcomes, regardless of social background. We achieve this through data-led analysis, innovative research and high-profile events.

Acknowledgements

This analysis was carried out in the Secure Research Service, part of the Office for National Statistics (ONS). It contains statistical data from ONS which is Crown Copyright. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the 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.

This report includes analysis of the National Pupil Database (NPD). The Department for Education is responsible for the collation and management of the NPD and is the Data Controller of NPD data. Any inferences or conclusions derived from the NPD in this publication are the responsibility of the Education Policy Institute and not the Department for Education.

About the authors

Jon Andrews is Head of Analysis and Director for School System and Performance at EPI. He has published a wide range of studies including: 'The performance of multi-academy trusts and local authorities', 'School revenue balances in England', 'Access to special schools in England', and 'Grammar schools and social mobility'. He worked in the Department for Education from 2003 to 2016 as a statistician.

Contents

Background 4
Data 4
Analysis 8
Disadvantage gap in attainment at age 16 8
Post-16 participation 15

Background

Pupils who experience persistent disadvantage consistently demonstrate some of the lowest educational outcomes in the system. By the time they reach their GCSEs, these pupils are, on average, nearly two years of learning behind their peers.[1] The Education Policy Institute (EPI) has recently undertaken work for Teach First that explored how persistent disadvantage can be identified and targeted at school level, using publicly available data. This work was particularly relevant given the challenges posed by Universal Credit protections, which complicate the direct measurement of disadvantage.

In order to further support their programme of work, Teach First asked EPI to provide further analysis of the persistently disadvantaged pupil group including analysis of key stage 4 outcomes and post-16 participation. This further analysis is provided in this paper and includes breakdowns by geography, by ethnicity, and by special educational needs status. We also calculated school level measures of the persistent disadvantage gap, analysis of which is included.

Data

Throughout our analysis we use the National Pupil Database (NPD) which captures pupils and students in state funded schools in England.

We focus on:

- Outcomes in GCSE English and mathematics for pupils who completed key stage 4 in the 2023/24 academic year. We include all pupils who attended state-funded schools in England.
- Post-16 participation, for those pupils who completed key stage 4 in the 2021/22 academic year who would typically go on to complete a two-year programme of study by the end of the 2023/24 academic year. We include all pupils who attended state-funded schools in England who reached the end of key stage 4 in 2021/22.

Persistent disadvantage

This report examines the outcomes of pupils who we have classified as “persistently disadvantaged”. Whilst there is no official definition of pupils in long-term poverty, we define this group as pupils who are eligible for free school meals (FSM) for 80 per cent or more of their school lives. We are able to identify these pupils in the National Pupil Database by using pupils’ school census records in the spring term to create a longitudinal picture of each pupil’s length of time being eligible for FSM. For students in 16-19 education, we define persistently disadvantaged students as those who claimed a free school meal for at least 80 per cent of their time in state education, up to the end of key stage 4.

[1] Education Policy Institute, ‘Annual Report 2025’.

Impact of Universal Credit protections

Accurately estimating persistent disadvantage is complicated by wider changes to the welfare system with the roll out of Universal Credit (UC). Prior to April 2018, UC claimants with school-aged children were eligible to claim FSM. From April 2018, an income threshold was introduced so that new UC claimants were only eligible if they earned less than £7,400 per year. To ease this transition the government put in place protections during the period of UC roll out. This meant that any pupil eligible for FSM in April 2018, including those whose eligibility came from legacy benefits, or who became eligible after this point, would retain free school meals until at least March 2025 – even if their family income increased above the threshold during that time.[2]

This means that since 2018, there has been an increasing number of pupils who are eligible for FSM due to transitional protections, rather than their financial circumstances. As a result, our method for identifying persistent disadvantage is capturing a larger group of pupils than those in the deepest poverty. For example, a pupil who is eligible for free school meals in reception would remain eligible for free school meals throughout their time in primary school – and hence be labelled as in persistent poverty – even if their financial circumstances had improved significantly.

Our measure of persistent disadvantage is therefore an imperfect measure. Just as free school meal eligibility itself does not fully reflect those who are in income poverty, our persistent poverty measure does not fully reflect those in the deepest poverty. However, on balance we still believe it is a reasonable measure to use at this time and will further improve with the end of UC protections later this year.

Key stage 4 attainment

Measures of attainment are based on a pupil's outcomes in GCSE English and mathematics. Whilst this is a relatively narrow measure, it is one that is not typically affected by the subjects offered by schools as achieving good grades in these core subjects is often a prerequisite for progressing to further study. Pupils failing, or not entering, a relevant English or maths qualification by the end of key stage 4 receive a score of zero for that component, to reflect the expectation that all pupils should study these core subjects.

We present attainment both in terms of average grade, and in months of learning. To derive gaps in terms of months of learning:

- we rank all pupils by their attainment in English and mathematics;
- we identify the relevant group of interest (e.g. persistently disadvantaged pupils) and calculate the mean attainment rank of pupils in this group;
- we subtract the mean rank of the group of interest from that of the reference group (e.g. non-disadvantaged pupils); and

[2] This date was pushed back over the course of the roll-out of Universal Credit.

- we convert this mean rank difference to a “months of learning” measure, by applying a scalar of 99.

Post-16 participation

To measure gaps in post-16 participation we examine the proportion of students that were not studying towards any substantial qualifications or an apprenticeship at the beginning of year 12. Substantial qualifications in this context means any level three qualification equivalent to at least half an A level, and any qualification at level 2 or below that is equivalent to at least a GCSE.

Note that the definition of substantial qualifications or apprenticeships used in this report yields higher rates of non-participation than official not in education, employment or training (NEET) statistics since we exclude: entry level qualifications; level 1 or 2 qualifications equivalent to less than one GCSE; and employer funded training.

School level analysis

For school level analysis we restrict analysis to those pupils who attended state-funded mainstream schools (therefore excluding state-funded special schools and alternative provision). Outcome data for persistently disadvantaged pupils in around a fifth of schools were suppressed due to small numbers (fewer than 11 pupils). Counts of pupils by school and local authority may differ from those published by the Department for Education because we have applied a consistent group of pupils across all analyses (national, sub-national, and school) whereas official statistics can include pupils at one level and not the other.

Other breakdowns

For geographical breakdowns (local authorities and regions), analysis is based on pupil residency rather than where they attended school. All breakdowns with pupil and student counts are presented in accompanying Excel tables.

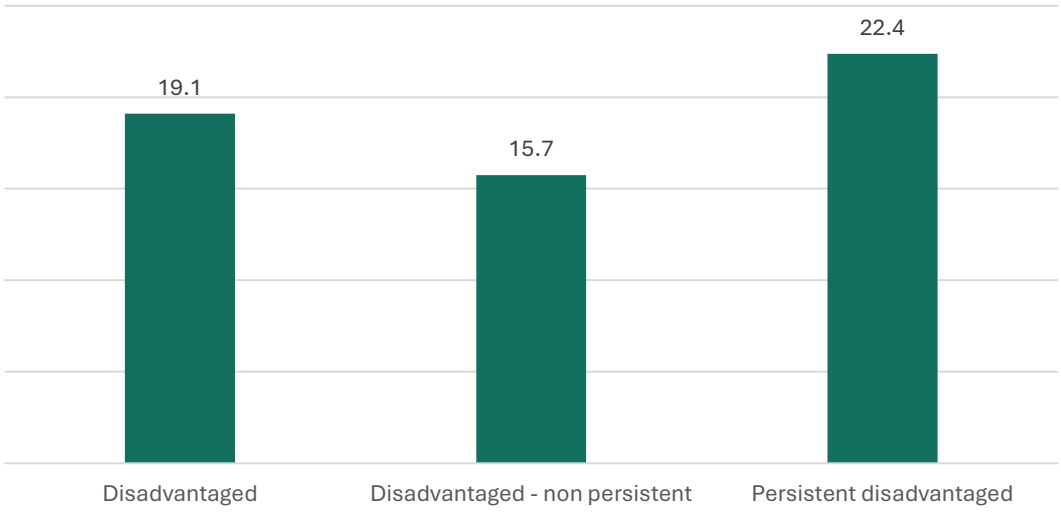
Analysis

Analysis

Disadvantage gap in attainment at age 16

Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are the equivalent of 19.1 months of learning behind their peers by the time they sit their GCSEs.[3] For pupils from persistently disadvantaged backgrounds, this gap is even larger – the equivalent of 22.4 months – whereas the gap for disadvantaged pupils who were not persistently disadvantaged is 15.7 months.

Figure 1: the attainment gap in months at key stage 4 by disadvantage status



In terms of actual GCSE outcomes this means that:

- disadvantaged pupils achieved an average grade in English and mathematics of 3.5;
- persistently disadvantaged pupils overall achieved an average grade of 3.3 while disadvantaged pupils who were not persistently disadvantaged achieved an average grade of 3.8; and
- non-disadvantaged pupils achieved an average grade in English and mathematics of 4.9.

In this analysis we build on this by considering how this gap for persistently disadvantage pupils varies across schools, across regions and local authorities, and the extent to which it varies by ethnic group and special educational needs status.

Schools included in school level analysis

In 2024, there were 3,287 state-funded mainstream schools that had pupils with results at the end of key stage 4.[4,5] When we calculate estimates of the attainment gap for persistently disadvantaged pupils we were required to restrict our analysis to those schools that had more

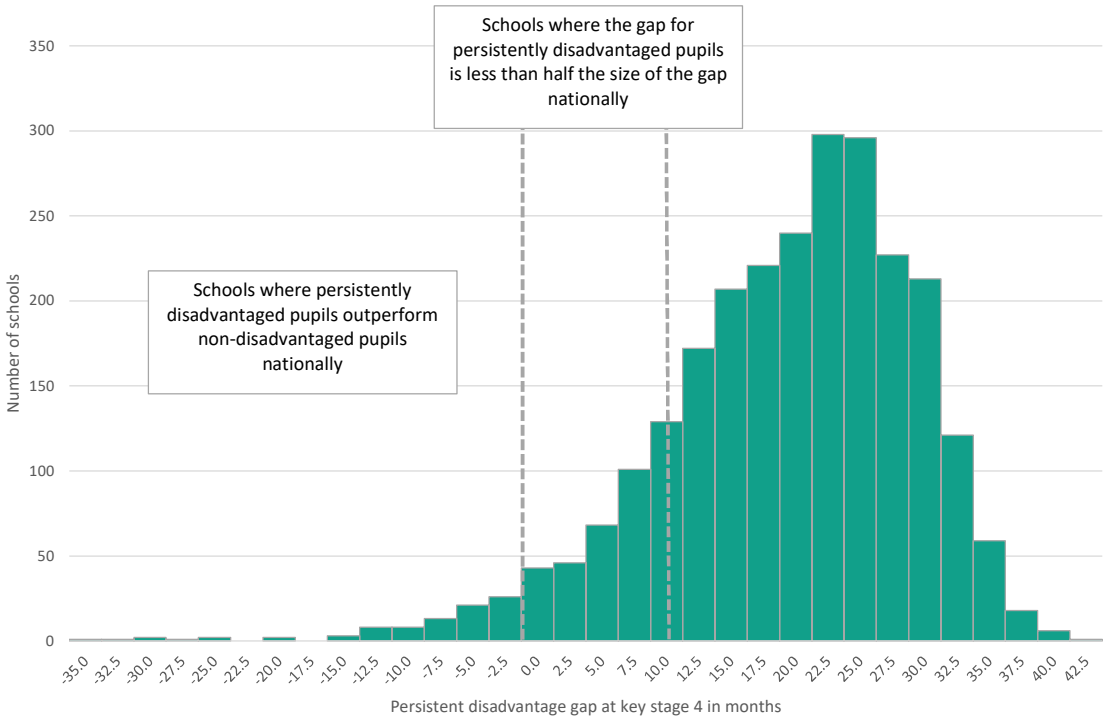
[3] Education Policy Institute, 'Annual report 2025'.
[4] Department for Education, 'Key stage 4 performance: academic year 2023/24'.
[5] Note that we exclude special schools and alternative provision from this analysis.

than 10 persistently disadvantaged pupils.[6] In total we were able to produce results for 2,554 state-funded mainstream schools – around 78 per cent of the total. The schools for which we do not have a measure are on average less deprived than other schools since they do not have at least 11 persistently disadvantaged pupils (this includes nearly all academically selective schools). However, for the purposes of this analysis we are primarily interested in those schools that are serving disadvantaged communities and the extent to which they achieve higher results for those pupils.

Results

While nationally, persistently disadvantaged pupils were on average 22.4 months behind their peers at the end of key stage 4, this varied considerably at school level. Figure 2 shows how the persistently disadvantaged gap varies at school level.

Figure 2: distribution of school persistent disadvantage gap measures at key stage 4 in 2024[7]



This chart shows that, of the 2,554 state-funded mainstream secondary schools for which we could calculate a persistently disadvantaged gap measure in 2024:

- there were 399 schools in which the persistently disadvantaged gap was less than half of the gap nationally (i.e. less than 11.2 months); and of these

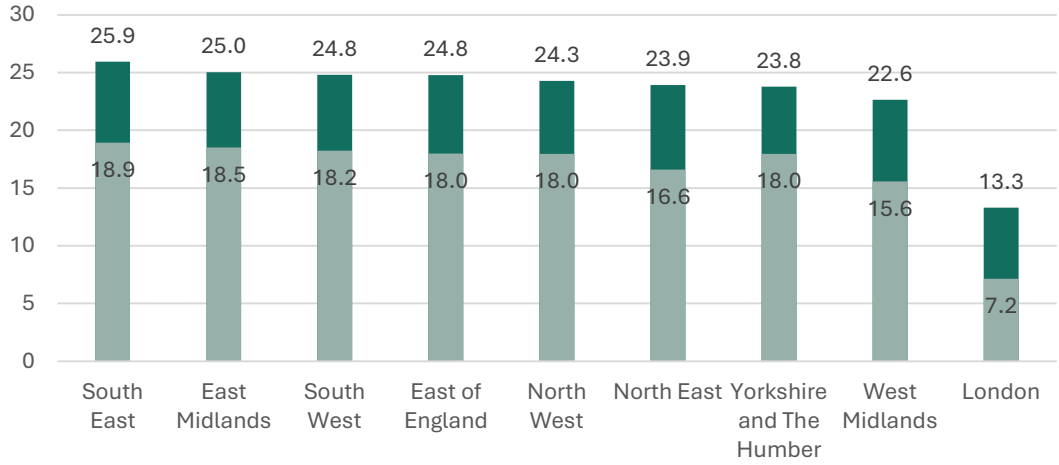
[6] This is to avoid disclosing information about individuals and also ensures our measures are more statistically reliable.
[7] The difference in outcomes between persistently disadvantaged pupils in the school and non-disadvantaged pupils nationally converted into months of learning. Negative scores indicate that persistently disadvantaged pupils in the school achieved higher outcomes than non-disadvantaged pupils nationally.

- there were 88 schools where the outcomes for persistently disadvantaged pupils were better than the outcomes for non-disadvantaged pupils nationally (i.e. they had a gap measure that was less than 0.0 months).
- there were 418 schools in which the persistently disadvantaged gap was at least 30 months – i.e. persistently disadvantaged pupils were the equivalent of 2.5 years behind non-disadvantaged pupils nationally.

We can see clear geographical variation in the size of the persistent disadvantage gap (figure 3). As with results for disadvantaged pupils, the differences were far more pronounced between London and elsewhere than between other regions. In 2024 the persistent disadvantage gap at key stage 4 in London was 13.3 months compared with 22.4 months nationally. In fact, the persistent disadvantage gap in London was almost 6 months smaller than the gap for all disadvantaged pupils nationally. Amongst other regions the gap was largest in the south east (25.9 months) and smallest in the west midlands (22.6 months).

This chart also illustrates variation within the disadvantage group. As well as the attainment gap for persistently disadvantaged pupils it shows the attainment gap for pupils who are disadvantaged but not persistently disadvantaged. The gap between these two groups is typically between six to seven months in each region, mirroring the national gap shown above.

Figure 3: the attainment gap in months at key stage 4 by region for persistently disadvantaged pupils (dark) and disadvantaged but not persistently so pupils (light)



The geographical pattern of attainment gaps is reflected in the school level distribution of the persistent disadvantage gap (figure 4) and in the gap measure at local authority level (figure 5). They show that:

- London accounts for nearly two thirds of the schools where the performance of persistently disadvantaged pupils was higher than non-disadvantaged pupils nationally.
- London accounts for nearly half of all schools where the gap for persistently disadvantaged pupils was less than half of the gap nationally.
- Each region has at least some schools where the gap is relatively small – i.e. less than half of the national average – ranging from 6 per cent of schools in the east midlands, to around 13 per cent in Yorkshire and the Humber (London is 45 per cent).

- Even London has some schools where the gap is large – equivalent to 2.5 years of learning. The proportion of schools at this threshold ranges from 2 per cent in London to 28 per cent in the south east.[8]
- Local authorities in London dominate the group of local authorities where there is good performance for non-disadvantaged pupils and *relatively* good performance for persistently disadvantaged pupils.

[8] Note that the south east has a particularly high proportion (34 per cent) of schools that are excluded from this analysis because of insufficient number of persistently disadvantaged pupils.

Figure 4: number of schools by region and performance of persistently disadvantaged (pdis) pupils

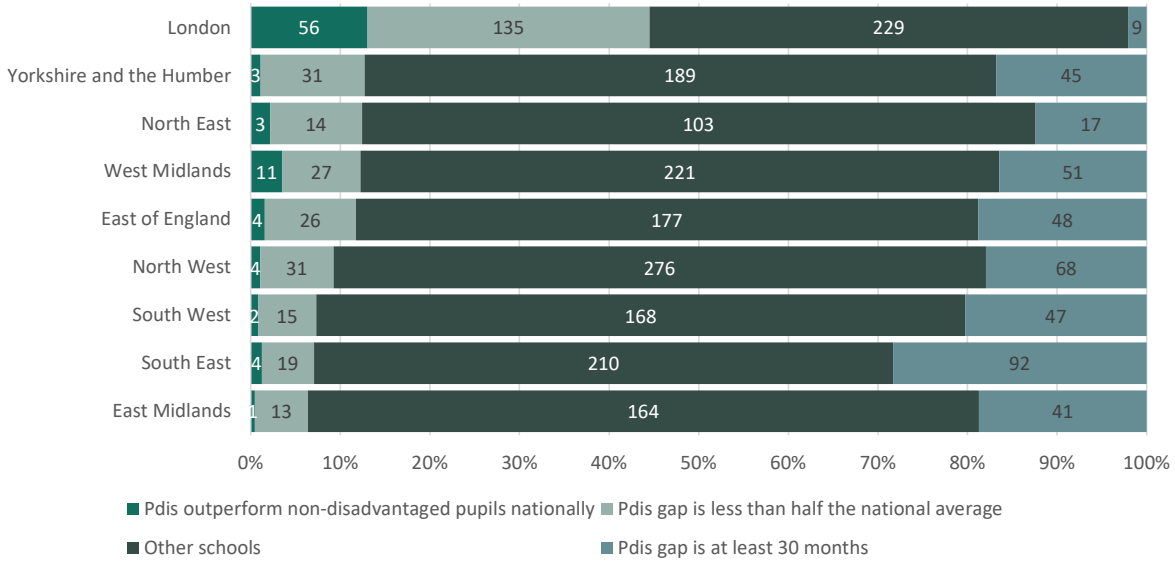
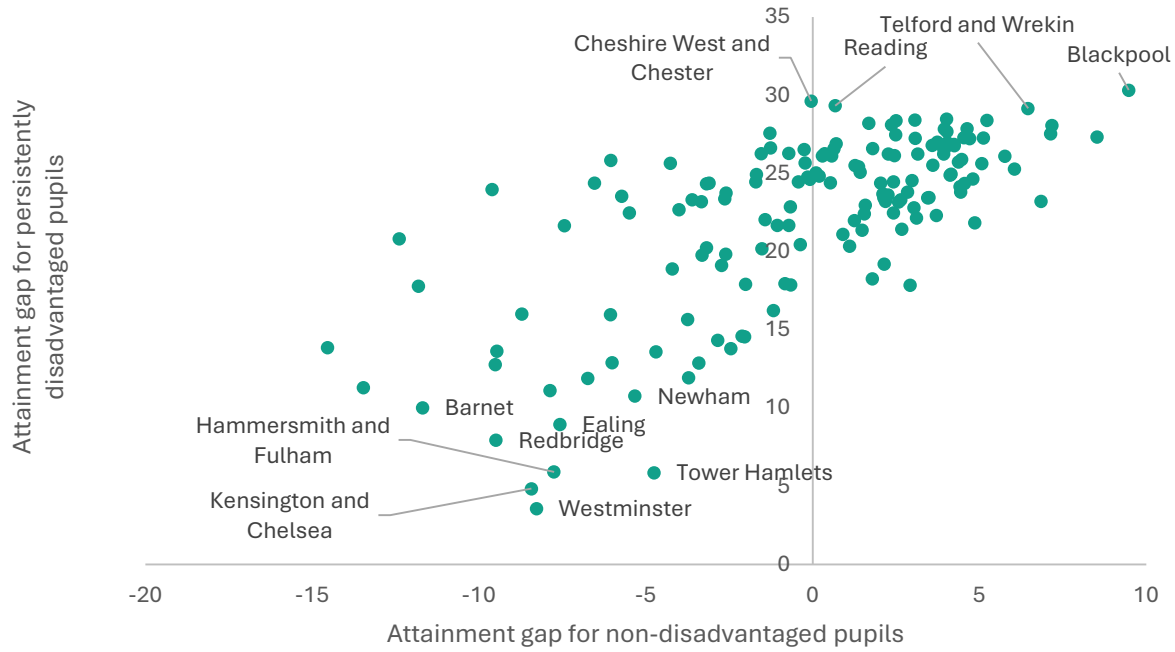


Figure 5: key stage 4 attainment gap in months by disadvantaged status and local authority[9]

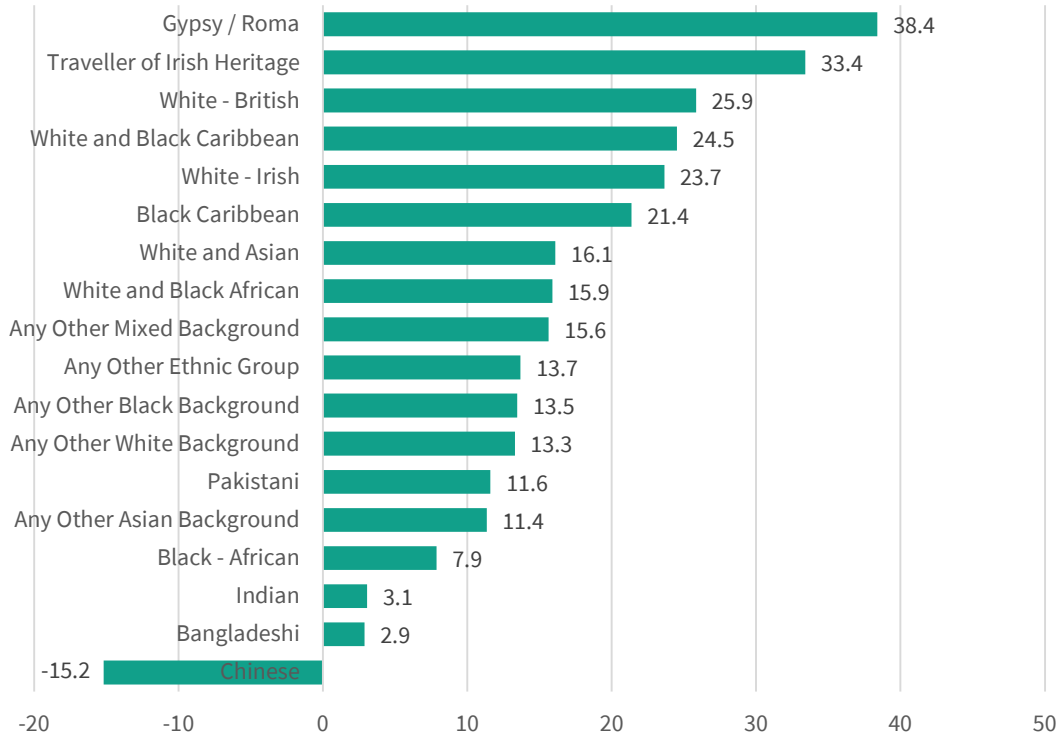


But it is important to consider demographic differences between regions that may be driving some of these differences. Figure 6 shows how the persistent disadvantage gap varies by pupil ethnicity (relative to outcomes for non-disadvantaged white British pupils). Persistently disadvantaged White British pupils have amongst the lowest attainment, with a persistently disadvantaged gap of

[9] In this chart, attainment is shown relative to non-disadvantaged pupils nationally. Negative values mean non-disadvantaged pupils in the authority do better than non-disadvantaged pupils nationally. The lowest performing areas are therefore in the top right of the chart.

just under 26 months. Persistently disadvantaged pupils from Black African, Indian, and Bangladeshi backgrounds all have attainment gaps that are well below average.

Figure 6: the persistent disadvantage gap in months at key stage 4 by ethnicity



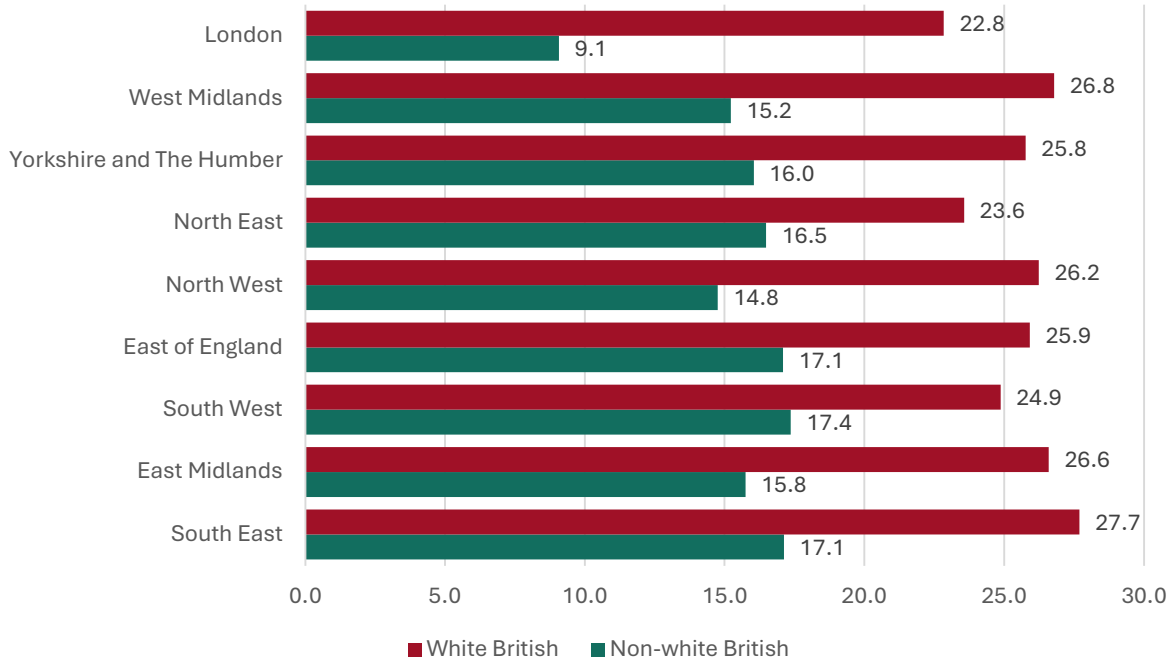
In our Annual Report we highlight a particular phenomenon in relation to the performance of London in terms of the disadvantage gap. Attainment varies by ethnicity and London's more ethnically diverse pupil population could therefore be contributing towards its success.

Previous research has looked at how regional attainment gaps for persistently disadvantaged pupils vary between White and ethnic minority pupils for earlier pre-pandemic cohorts.[10] This has found that persistently disadvantaged White pupils tend to do poorly in all regions, whereas persistently disadvantaged minority ethnic pupils progress far better in London than similar pupils in any other region.

Figure 7 shows the attainment gap for persistently disadvantaged White British pupils, and non-White British pupils by region (the gap is relative to non-disadvantaged White British pupils nationally). We can see that persistently disadvantaged ethnic minority pupils in London outperform persistently disadvantaged ethnic minority pupils elsewhere. But the outcomes for persistently disadvantaged White British pupils in London are nearly 23 months behind non-disadvantaged White British pupils nationally.

[10] Mike Treadaway (2018), 'Long-term disadvantage, part four: our friends in the north'.

Figure 7: the persistent disadvantage gap in months at key stage 4 for White British pupils and other pupils by region[11]

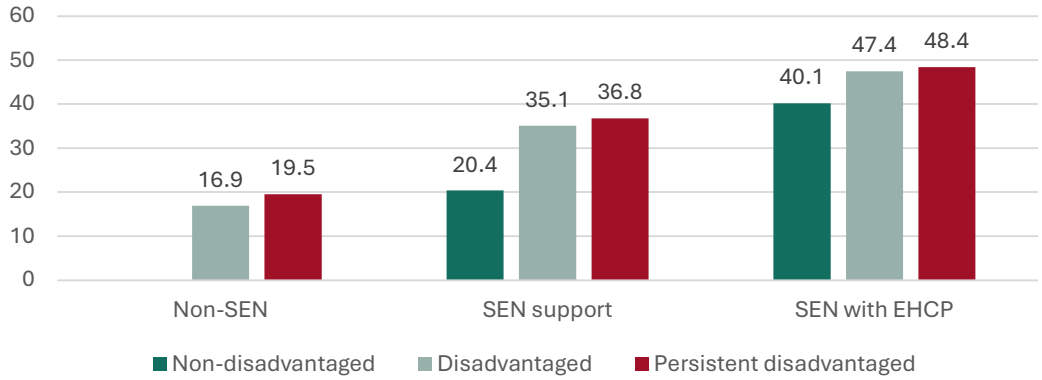


Our annual report includes a measure of the SEN support gap and the EHCP gap. These measure the attainment of pupils with special educational needs relative to non-SEN pupils nationally. We develop that further by considering the gap when intersected with disadvantage – comparing pupil outcomes with non-disadvantaged non-SEN pupils nationally.

Figure 8 shows that disadvantage, and persistent disadvantage, affects pupil attainment on top of the differences seen in SEN eligibility. For example, non-disadvantaged SEN support pupils are 20.4 months behind their non-SEN peers. However, this increases to 35.1 months for disadvantaged pupils on SEN support, and 36.8 months for persistently disadvantaged pupils on SEN support.

[11] Attainment gap relative to non-disadvantaged white British pupils nationally.

Figure 8: the disadvantage gap in months at key stage 4 by SEN status and level of disadvantage



Post-16 participation

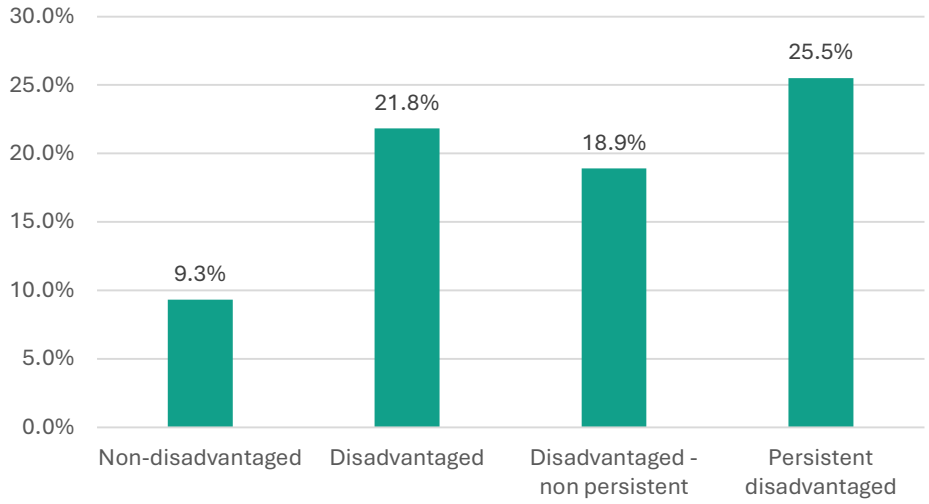
In this section, we consider the gap in participation in post-16 education and training. Specifically, the proportion of students that were not studying towards any substantial qualifications or an apprenticeship at the beginning of year 12. Our analysis is based on students who completed their GCSEs in 2022, who would be finishing a two year post 16 study programme in 2024. Our definition of persistent disadvantage here is based on their status as at the point a student completed their GCSEs, this is consistent with the definition of disadvantage used in our annual report.

Results

Our annual report shows that the proportion of students not studying substantial qualifications or an apprenticeship has been consistently higher for disadvantaged students than it has for non-disadvantaged students. Furthermore, this participation gap has widened in recent years such that for those finishing their GCSEs in 2022, 21.8 per cent of disadvantaged students had no substantial education activity at the beginning of year 12, compared to 9.3 per cent of non-disadvantaged students.

In figure 8, we break this down further by considering how this varies for those that were persistently disadvantaged. It shows that, as with the other measures we have explored, disadvantaged status is the key measure, but persistently disadvantaged students have outcomes that are worse. For those persistently disadvantaged students who completed their GCSEs in 2022, a quarter did not go on to study substantial qualifications or an apprenticeship in year 12.

Figure 8: the proportion of the 2022 key stage 4 cohort who did not go on to substantial qualifications or an apprenticeship at the start of year 12



In figure 9 and figure 10 we consider how this varies across the country, with a particular focus on the persistently disadvantaged group of pupils.

Amongst the 2022 key stage 4 cohort, nearly a third of persistently disadvantaged students in the south west did not go on to substantial qualifications or an apprenticeship in year 12. There were also high rates in the south east, east midlands, and Yorkshire and the Humber. London had the lowest rate with 15.4 per cent of students not going on to a substantial qualifications or an apprenticeship. Correspondingly, London local authorities dominate the group of local authorities with the lowest non-participation rates for persistently disadvantaged students with Brent, Haringey, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets, Camden and Barnet all having rates below 12 per cent. Reading, Blackpool, North Somerset, and Derby all had rates of over 40 per cent.

Figure 9: the proportion of the 2022 key stage 4 cohort who did not go on to substantial qualifications or an apprenticeship at the start of year 12 by region

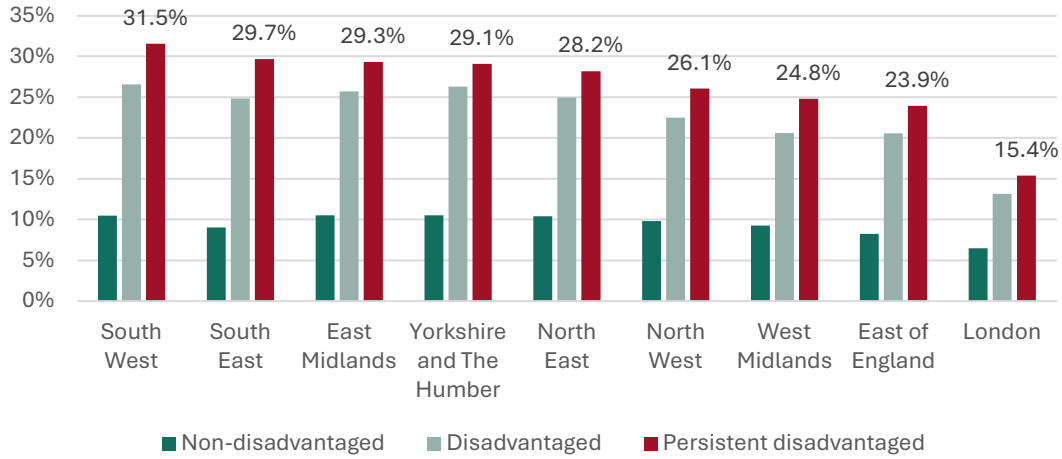
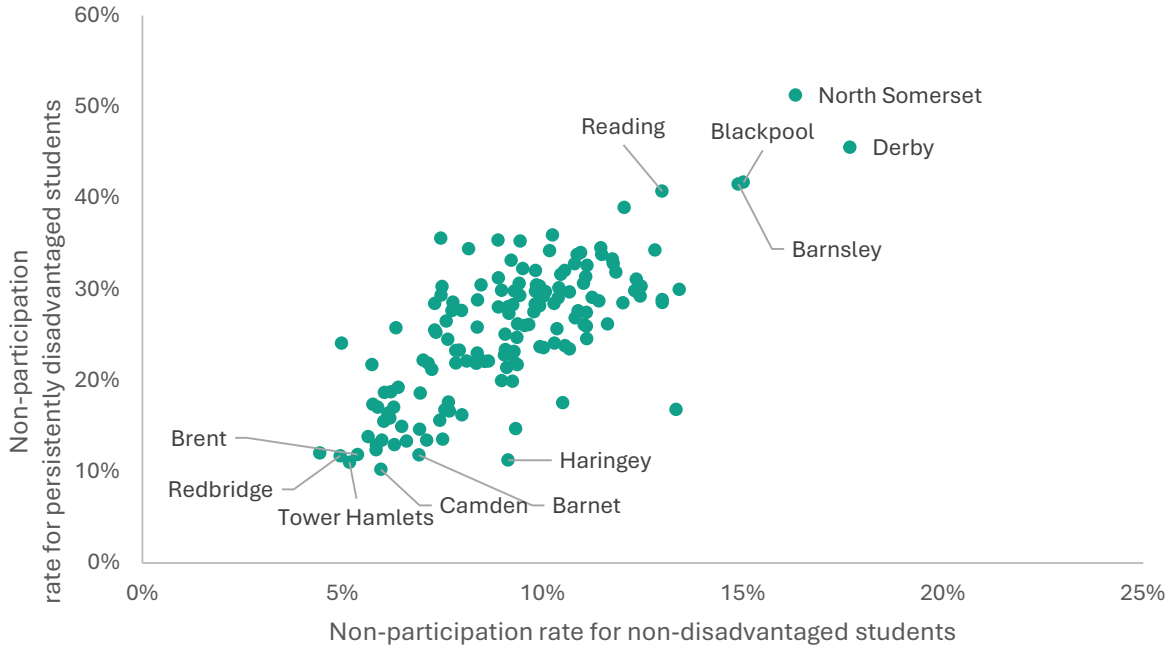


Figure 10: the proportion of the 2022 key stage 4 cohort who did not go on to substantial qualifications or an apprenticeship at the start of year 12 by disadvantaged status and local authority

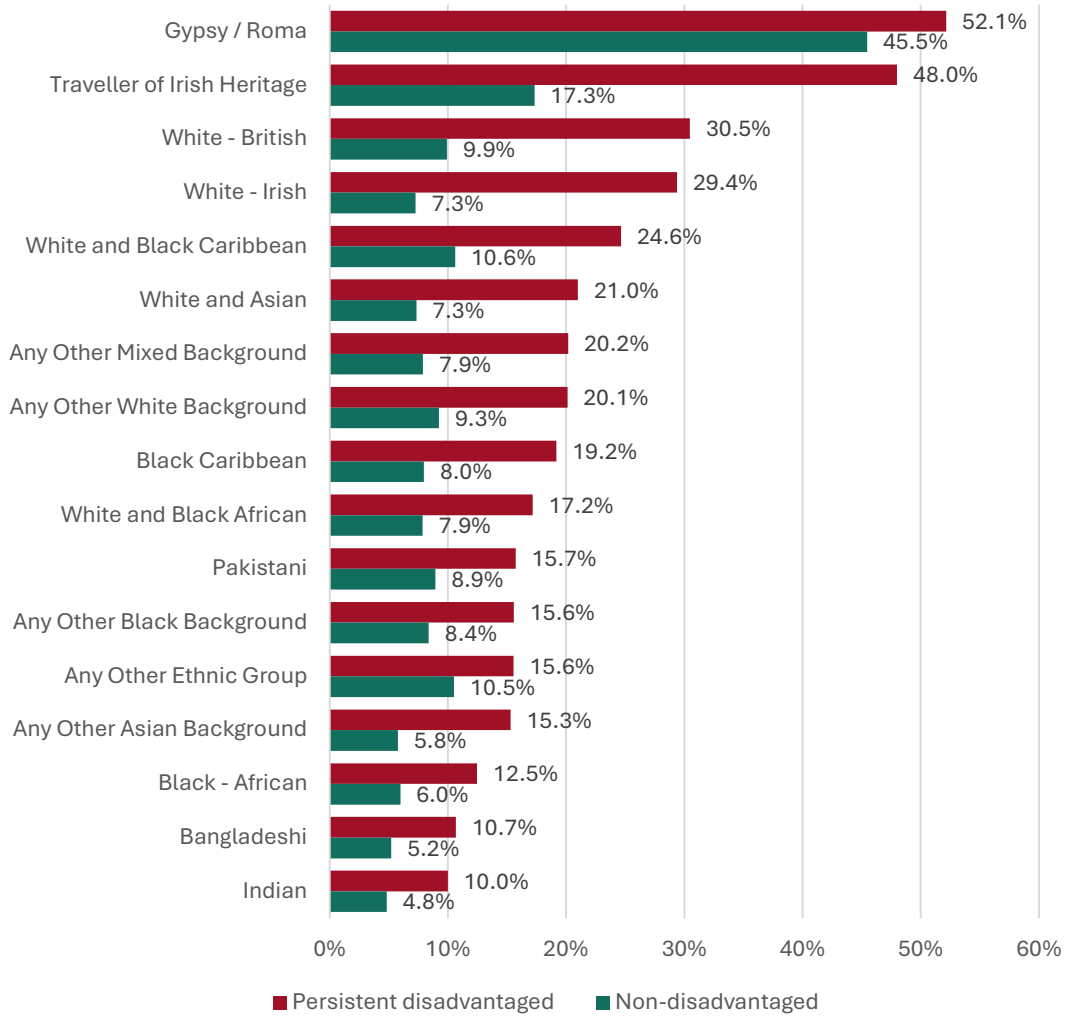


When considering differences between ethnic groups, the non-participation rates for persistently disadvantaged pupils were lowest among Indian, Bangladeshi, and Black African students (figure 11).[12] These groups also had non-participation rates for non-disadvantaged pupils that were amongst the lowest of all ethnic groups.

Disadvantage status appears to matter most – by which we mean, how high is the non-participation rate for disadvantaged pupils relative to non-disadvantaged pupils – for white British, white Irish, and traveller of Irish heritage groups.[13]

[12] Though note that Chinese pupils have been excluded from the analysis because of the low incidence rate.
[13] We calculate an odds ratio of the non-participation rate for disadvantaged pupils versus the non-participation rate for non-disadvantaged pupils. We can calculate a similar ratio for persistent disadvantage.

Figure 11: the proportion of the 2022 key stage 4 cohort who did not go on to substantial qualifications or an apprenticeship at the start of year 12 by disadvantaged status and ethnicity[14]



There is a clear relationship between SEN status and non-participation in post-16 education. This is worsened by disadvantage, and persistent disadvantage, but it is the SEN status that causes the largest differences (figure 12).

[14] Note that this analysis excludes Chinese students due to low numbers in non-participation

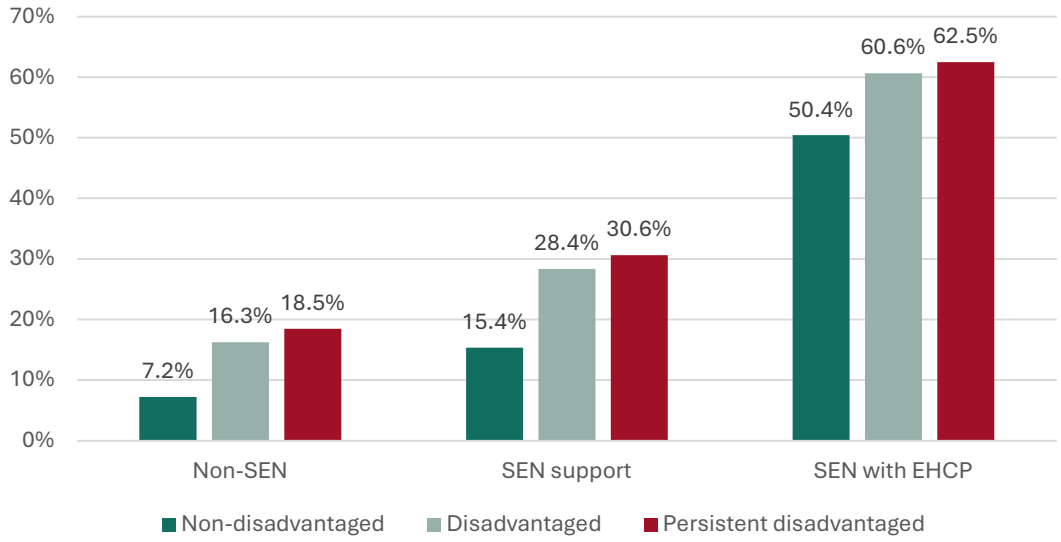



Figure 12: the proportion of the 2022 key stage 4 cohort who did not go on to substantial qualifications or an apprenticeship at the start of year 12 by disadvantaged status and special educational needs