# One in four UK pupils face poor mental health driving surge in school absences



One in four pupils in the UK are reported to have poor mental health, a statistic that significantly contributes to the ongoing crisis of school absenteeism. Recent government data reveals that students grappling with mental health issues are seven times more likely to miss over 15 days of school compared to their counterparts. This alarming trend was uncovered in a longitudinal study examining more than 7,000 children and is the first to explicitly identify the correlation between mental health and school attendance.

Baroness Anne Longfield, executive chair of the Centre for Young Lives, emphasises that this data supports what many educators have long asserted: that a considerable number of students missing school are facing mental health challenges. She remarked, “We have both a children’s mental health crisis and a school attendance crisis,” highlighting how feelings of alienation and anxiety can fuel further mental distress among pupils.

The school absence crisis itself is deepening. Recent figures from the Department for Education show that 150,000 children in state schools were classed as severely absent during the 2022-23 academic year, meaning they missed over half of their schooldays. This figure represents a 30,000 increase from the previous year and marks a staggering 150% rise compared to the pre-pandemic statistics of 2018-19, when about 60,000 children were considered severely absent.

The new study aligns with the concerns expressed by educational leaders across England. Nearly 90% of secondary school heads have noted a significant rise in pupil absences linked to mental health issues since the COVID-19 pandemic, reinforcing the need for immediate action in improving mental health support within schools.

Evidence from the study indicates that the mental health conditions of severely absent children are approximately twice as severe as those who maintain regular attendance. Cannabis users displayed mental health outcomes that were twice as poor as those who abstained, while students who had experienced bullying reported mental health states three times worse than their non-bullied peers. This stark contrast underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions that can address the unique circumstances influencing each child’s wellbeing.

The findings are echoed in other reports revealing that 12.6% of children with mental health disorders missed over 15 days of school, a figure more than three times that of their peers without such conditions. Additionally, as anxiety levels among students rise, the number of absences attributed to mental health issues has also surged — from 16% in March 2022 to a quarter of pupils absent in June 2023.

Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson acknowledges this "linked crisis" and has warned of a deteriorating state of child wellbeing. She has committed to providing every school with access to a specialist mental health professional and will soon announce new measures to enhance attendance rates and mental health support. Efforts such as recruiting 6,500 extra teachers aim to ensure that educational settings are equipped to meet both academic and emotional needs.

As local councils further articulate, the rise in school absences is intrinsically tied to a lack of adequate support mechanisms, particularly following the challenges posed by the pandemic. They call for enhanced mental health services to help alleviate the growing pressure on students, many of whom face compounded stressors stemming from socio-economic hardships.

The relationship between mental health and attendance is undeniably complex, affecting not just individual pupils but the educational landscape as a whole. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive strategy that integrates mental health resources within schools, fostering an environment where every child feels secure and supported in their educational journey.

For anyone in need of support, organisations such as Mind offer resources and guidance to navigate these challenges.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: (1)
2. Paragraph 2: (1), (2)
3. Paragraph 3: (1), (4)
4. Paragraph 4: (2), (5)
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7. Paragraph 7: (1), (7)
8. Paragraph 8: (1), (5)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

* <https://inews.co.uk/news/education/one-in-four-pupils-have-poor-mental-health-driving-school-absence-crisis-3687782> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
* <https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/jun/14/mental-health-anxiety-absences-pupils-schools-covid-pandemic-headteachers> - An article from The Guardian reports that nearly 90% of secondary school leaders in England have observed a significant increase in pupil absences due to mental health issues since the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department for Education's figures indicate a 150% rise in severely absent children compared to pre-pandemic times. Headteachers emphasize the need for enhanced mental health support to address this crisis.
* <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/pupils-poor-mental-health-3-times-more-likely-miss-lessons> - According to a survey highlighted by Tes, pupils with probable mental health disorders are more than three times as likely to miss over 15 days of school compared to their peers. The survey, part of the Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2022 report, reveals that 12.6% of children with mental health issues missed more than 15 days, compared to 3.9% of those without such issues.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/apr/23/rise-in-school-absences-since-covid-driven-by-anxiety-and-lack-of-support-say-english-councils> - The Guardian reports that English councils attribute the rise in school absences since the COVID-19 pandemic to increased anxiety and insufficient support. Data from the Department for Education shows a 50% increase in absences compared to pre-pandemic levels. Councils highlight the need for better mental health services to address this growing concern.
* <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/rise-illness-absence-due-anxiety> - Tes reports that a quarter of pupils absent from school in June 2023 cited anxiety or mental health problems as the reason. This marks an increase from 16% in March 2022. School leaders are calling for the government to intensify efforts to address the growing mental health challenges among students.
* <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/school-absence-high-semh-pupils-sen> - An analysis by Tes reveals that school absence among pupils with social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs is twice as high as among those without identified special educational needs or disabilities. The Education Policy Institute's research indicates that pupils with SEMH needs missed an average of 9.4 days over the autumn term, compared to 4.5 days for their peers.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jun/28/covid-poverty-pupil-absence-england-schools-social-economic-pandemic-families> - The Guardian discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis have exacerbated pupil absences in England. Data shows that pupils eligible for free school meals have higher absence rates, with the absence rate for these pupils being more than double that of non-eligible pupils. The article highlights the compounded challenges of mental health issues and economic hardship affecting school attendance.