

# Trajectories of school absence from 9 to 13 years of age and over time

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# Agenda

- 01 Introduction
- 02 Literature Review
- 03 Methodology
- 04 Main findings
- 05 Conclusion and policy implications

# Introduction

01

## A multidimensional lens

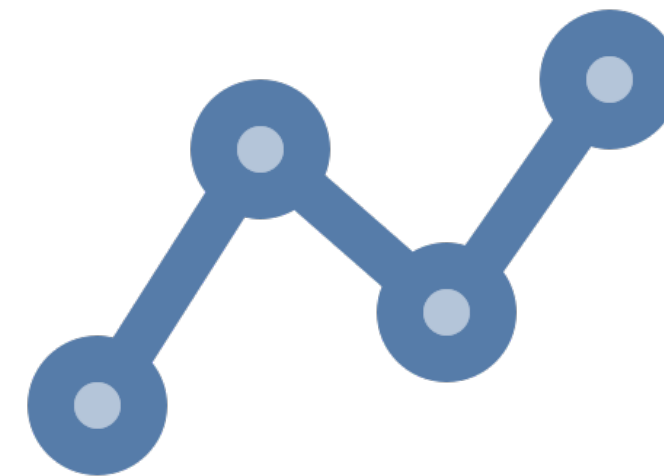
Existing research has pointed to the multiplicity of factors at the individual, family, community and school levels that shape school absence (Gubbels et al., 2019; Sosu et al., 2021). Adopting this multidimensional approach, we consider factors associated with absenteeism, including those that disrupt attendance trajectories.



02

## Trajectories of absence

We also consider attendance trajectories of young people between 9 and 13 years



# Introduction

03

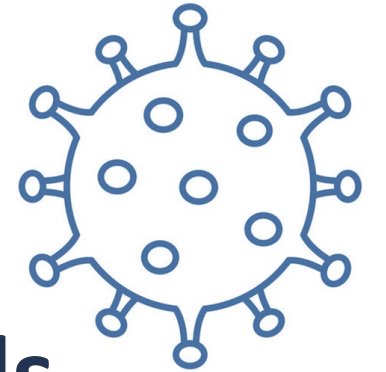
## An intergenerational comparison

Moreover, we adopt an intergenerational perspective by comparing the Cohorts '98 and '08 to examine differences in the levels and patterns of non-attendance among 13-year-olds a decade apart.

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## Recent, post-pandemic trends

Contributing to the limited body of research on recent trends in school absence, we also examine post-pandemic growth in absence and whether particular groups of young people have been disproportionately affected.



We pursue these directions drawing on



*Growing Up in Ireland* data

# Literature review (I)

## *Individual- and family-level characteristics*



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*Socio-economic status:* One of the most widely considered factors in prior literature. However, Sosu et al. (2021) notes that nearly three-quarters of studies examine only one SES dimension, which is problematic given that different aspects of SES may shape attendance in distinct ways.

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*Age and grade:* Several studies position the transition to secondary school as disruptive of attendance. However, almost of the research examining attendance-trajectory groups is based on US data, so any interpretation should be made with some caution.

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*Migration status:* Internationally, migration background has been identified as a contributing factor to absenteeism (i.e., Yang and Ham, 2017). However, prior Irish literature seems to contradict this trend (Thornton et al., 2013). It is important to reassess this relationship, particularly in light of shifting migration profiles in Ireland.

# Literature review (II)



## *School-level characteristics*

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*Compositional features of the school:* little research has examined the possible link between compositional school features and absenteeism. In Ireland, earlier research points to this connection (Smyth, 1999).

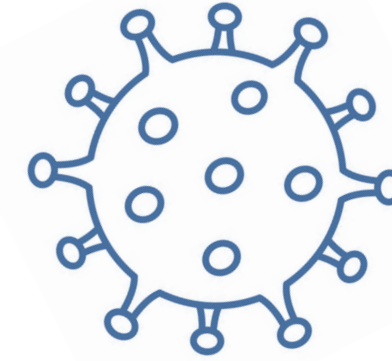
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*Teacher characteristics and relationships:* Supportive relationships have been generally found to be positively associated with student attendance. A study in the US finds that the difference between the effect of a 90th percentile teacher and a 10th percentile teacher is about 90 per cent of an absence SD (Gershenson, 2016).

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*Bullying and peer relations:* A number of longitudinal studies position bullying as a driver of absenteeism, though the relationship is not entirely straightforward (Alanko et al., 2023; Buhs et al., 2006; Daraganova et al., 2014; Juvonen et al., 2000).

# Literature review (III)



## *The role of the pandemic*

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*Absence post-pandemic:* Evidence from various contexts, including the United States (Dee, 2024; Fuller et al., 2024; Swiderski et al., 2025; Malkus, 2024), the United Kingdom (Department of Education, 2023; 2024), Brazil (Lichand et al., 2024), and Australia (Tomaszewski et al., 2023), points to significant disruptions.

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*Reasons for these elevated absenteeism rates:* as Dee (2024) and McDonald et al. (2023) highlight, this pattern requires further investigation. However, several hypothesised explanations have emerged, including mental health, shifting parental attitudes, and disrupted communication between parents and schools.

# Methodology

- Data from GUI Cohort '08 are used to look at the factors associated with school absence at age 13
- *Trajectories of absence*: we exploit the longitudinal nature of the data using latent class analysis to identify trajectories of absence over the period of 9 to 13 years — a timeframe spanning the pandemic
- *Over time*: we conduct cross-cohort analysis, matching data on 13-year-olds in Cohort '08 to those from Cohort '98, investigating changes over time in the level of absence and the extent to which any such change was related to specific factors

# School absence among 13-year-olds

School absence is based on reports by the young person's mother, with over a fifth of the 13-year-olds in the GUI sample missing 11 or more days in 2021/22.



## Risk factors at the individual level:

- Disability is be strongly related to missing school, even taking account of a range of factors, including experiences of school
- No differences found by gender

# School absence among 13-year-olds



## Risk factors at the family level:

- Strongly socially differentiated: higher rates among unskilled manual and non-employed families, those whose mothers have lower levels of education, families experiencing financial strain and lone-parent households
- Migrant-origin young people have better attendance
- Family stressors, including maternal depression and adverse life events
- Family processes and relations, including mother-child conflict, lack of consistency in parenting, a harsher parenting style, and lack of routine

# School absence among 13-year-olds



## Risk factors at the school level:

- DEIS schools (related to the concentration of socio-economic disadvantage)
- Having negative interaction with teachers, such as being reprimanded
- Absence is lower where students are more involved in decision-making
- Having been bullied or picked on at age 9 is related to later absence
- Attending a high-absence primary school



## Risk factors at the area level:

- Rented accommodation and those living in areas with low social capital (that is, with lower community bonds and poorer facilities for teenagers).

# Trajectories of absence from 9 to 13 years

We identify 4 trajectories of absence



Declining levels of  
attendance (22 per cent)



Stable high levels of  
absence (14 per cent)



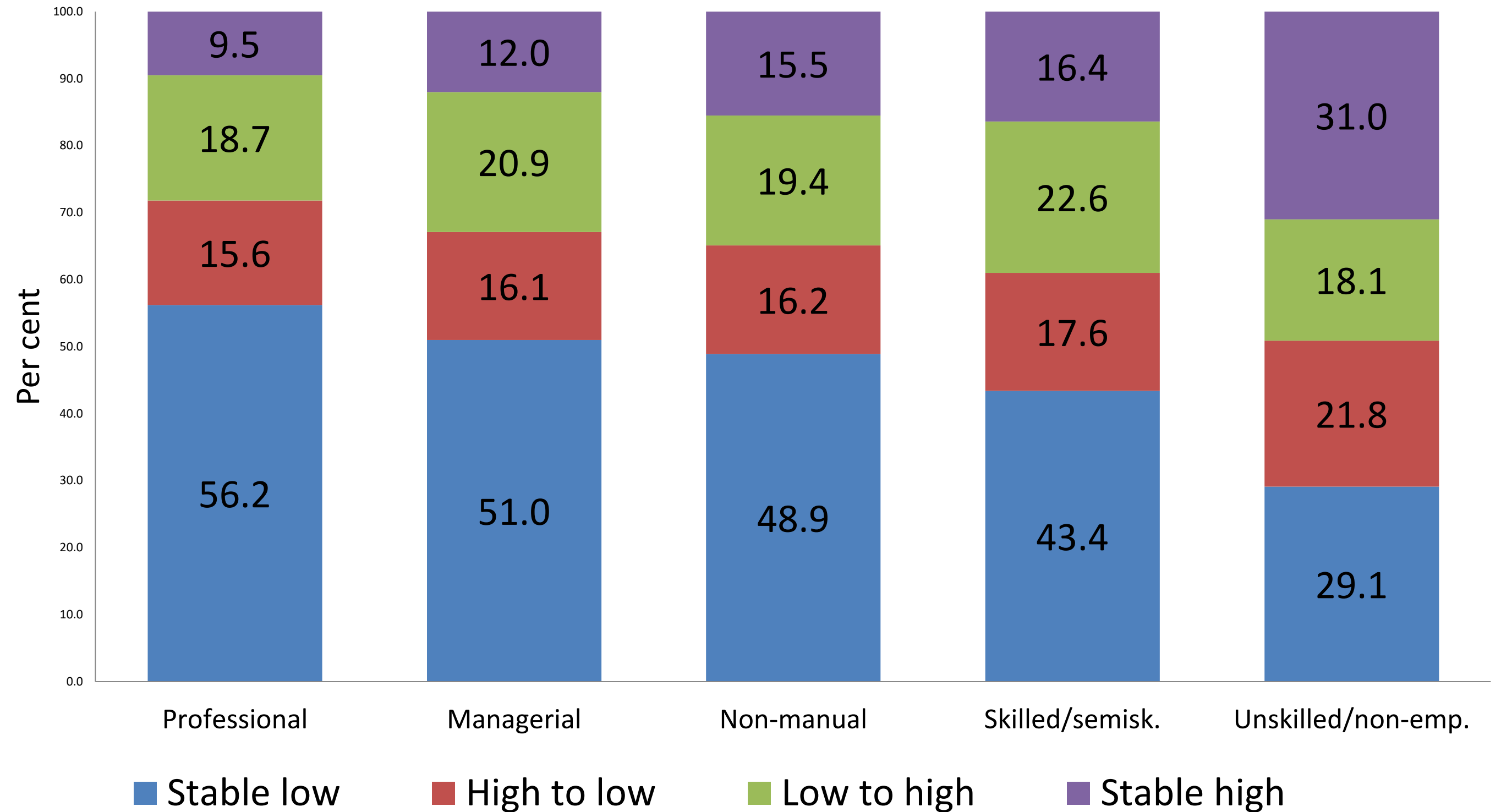
Improving levels of  
attendance (14 per cent)



Low levels of school  
absence (44 per cent)

# Profiles of the trajectories of school absence

The difference between those with stable low absence levels and the other poorer attendance groups reflects the family, neighbourhood and school factors discussed earlier



# Factors affecting trajectories of school absence

Absence levels tend to increase for young people whose disability emerges or is recognised between ages 9 and 13

Adverse events, such as parental separation, bereavement, poorer health, and addiction, between ages 9 and 13 predict increasing absence

Not liking post-primary school and negative interactions with teachers play an important role in maintaining or prompting poor attendance

Attendance disimproves for those who experienced increased socio-emotional difficulties in the wake of the pandemic

# Factors affecting trajectories of school absence: the role of COVID-19



Experiences of remote learning appear to make some difference, with absence levels increasing among those who did not have a quiet place to study during school closures



The pandemic appeared to reinforce pre-existing disengagement, with many of those with poor attendance histories giving up on studying, not engaging in online learning and having more difficulties settling back into school



Teachers going over material after schools reopened did appear to help protect young people from moving into high absence levels

# Trends between cohorts

Absence rates are stable at age 9 but increase significantly among 13-year-olds

The impact of two main factors appears to have changed over time:

- Not liking school is more strongly predictive of absence than previously
- Absence at age 13 has increased more among those who had higher levels of emotional and conduct difficulties at age 9 and those with higher levels of emotional, conduct, hyperactivity and peer difficulties at age 13



# Conclusions



Findings point to the multiplicity of individual, family, neighbourhood and school factors that influence school absence, suggesting the need for policy responses to be multi-dimensional, integrated and dynamic.

# Conclusions

## *Future research*



Disability, particularly a recently identified or emerging condition, emerges as a strong driver of absence, with further research needed to unpack the processes at play. Research could explore the experience of the pilot schools offering additional in-school therapeutic supports

## *Policy at the school level*



Schools can make a difference by

- Fostering positive attitudes to school
- Greater student involvement
- Reducing negative teacher-student interaction
- Addressing bullying behaviour.

# Conclusions

## *Policy at a broader level*

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Socio-emotional difficulties have emerged as an important driver of absence in the wake of the pandemic. While policy has increasingly focused on promoting wellbeing in schools, further support is needed. School and SCP staff may have limited access to referral pathways for young people with more complex needs, particularly given long waiting lists for mental health services and other supports

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Given the socio-economic distribution of absence, school-level attendance interventions should be underpinned by broader anti-poverty policies, family support programmes and community development initiatives