

# Understanding exclusions in Scottish secondary schools

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**This Data Insight explores the patterning of educational exclusions in Scottish secondary schools, including the variation across schools and council areas. It also explores the effects of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the pupils on their likelihood of receiving an exclusion.**

## Background

In Scotland, a school exclusion is a disciplinary measure whereby a pupil is sent home and not allowed to attend school. This can be either for a fixed period of time ('temporary exclusion') or permanently ('removed from register'). The power to exclude a pupil from school rests with the local educational authority, which can delegate such power to the school's senior management team. The Scottish Government's guidance<sup>1</sup> states that exclusions are to be used as a last resort, when it is deemed that allowing a young person to remain in attendance would be seriously detrimental to the order, discipline, or educational wellbeing of learners within the school. This reflects the gravity of the measure itself and of the circumstances leading to it.

There has been marked divergence in the practice and policy of school exclusions between Scotland and England. Permanent exclusions in Scotland have almost been eliminated, from 21 cases in 2012/13 down to 1 single case in 2022/23<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile in England, they have increased from 4,632 in 2012/13 to 6,495 in 2021/22<sup>3</sup>.

According to the Scottish Government<sup>1</sup>, among the groups of young people who face a higher likelihood of exclusion are students who:

- have been assessed or declared as having a disability
- are (or have been) care-experienced
- come from the most deprived areas

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- are identified as having an additional support need, or have an additional support need specifically identified as social, emotional, and behavioural in nature.

Exclusions from schools can have long-lasting effects on the lives of young people. In terms of educational achievement, young people subject to exclusions are far less likely to achieve qualifications at the Higher or Advanced Higher levels (senior phase of secondary school) or, indeed, any qualifications at all in secondary school<sup>1</sup>. Outside of education, excluded young people are more likely to have decreased wellbeing due to shame and fear, loss of relationships, diminished school connectedness and sense of belonging<sup>4,5,6</sup>. Furthermore, exclusions from school can be part of a series of circumstances that lead young people to have an increased risk of anti-social or offending behaviour<sup>7</sup>.

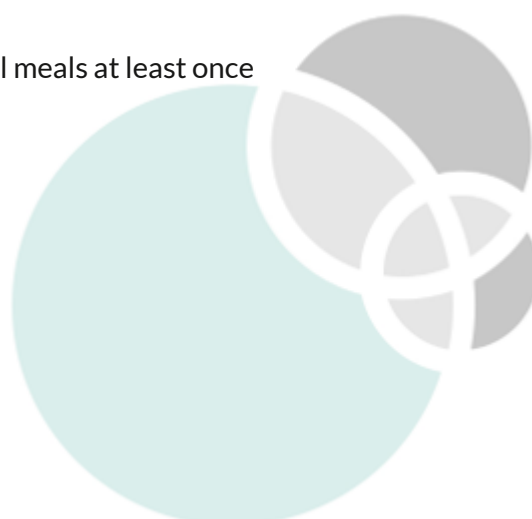
There remain gaps in the knowledge about the contexts, causes and consequences of exclusions in terms of their impact on school attainment and their association with absenteeism<sup>8</sup>, and in the trajectories for young people post-exclusion and post-school<sup>9</sup>. Our research attempts to fill some of these gaps, particularly in relation to quantifying the difference in the likelihood of being excluded according to your school and geographical area. This will ultimately reveal how implementation of policy and practice varies at different levels of governance.

## What we did

This research uses the newly-linked administrative dataset created under the “Children’s Lives and Outcomes” research strand of the Scottish Centre for Administrative Data Research (SCADR), part of ADR Scotland. This linkage, the first of its kind in Scotland, includes data from Education Analytical Services and NHS Public Health Scotland from the period 2007-2019, and from the 2001 and 2011 Censuses. [Read more about the linkage](#)<sup>10</sup>.

To do the analysis, we fitted statistical models for the likelihood of being excluded (temporarily or permanently) at least once in the three academic years: 2014/15 (N = 284,052); 2016/17 (N = 280,319); and 2018/19 (N = 285,512). We controlled for the variation across schools and council areas and the following individual-level characteristics:

- having at least one exclusion in primary school
- having been registered as eligible for free school meals at least once
- sex as registered at birth
- having care experience
- the current year group of the pupil.

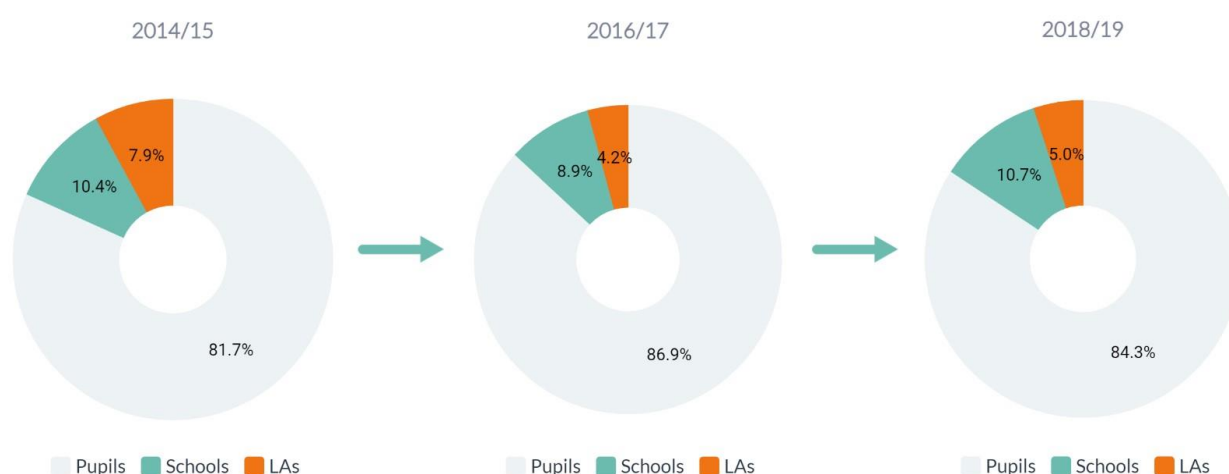


## What we found

### Variation across schools and council areas:

- In the academic year 2018/19, the probability of being excluded ranges from 0.5% to 6.2%\* (analysis not shown).
- Between 13% and 18% of the variation in exclusions in the academic years 2014/15 to 2018/19 is due to factors attributable exclusively to schools or council areas, and not to the pupils themselves.
- The amount of variation in exclusions across secondary schools and council areas is sizable and statistically significant (analysis not shown).

**Figure 1: Estimated total share of variation in exclusions by level of analysis and academic year**



These variations in exclusions reflect differences in socio-economic and demographic inequalities across schools and council areas, as well as different practices and/or policy. This means, for example, that a randomly selected pupil can be more likely to be excluded in one school or local authority than a comparable pupil with no discernible differences other than their place of residence and school attended.

### Factors associated with exclusions:

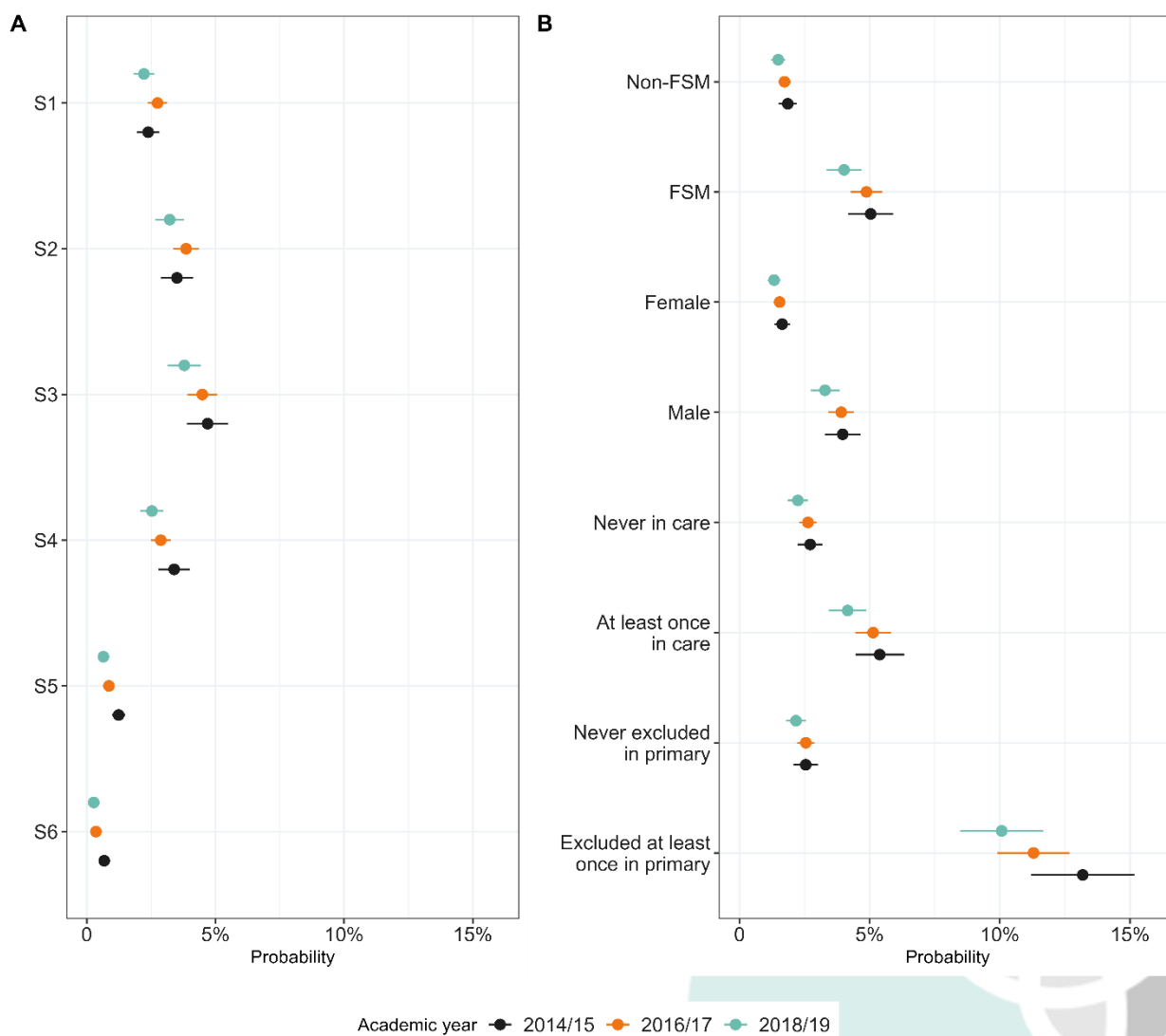
- The likelihood of being excluded from schools can vary significantly and substantially by individual characteristics.

\* The probability of exclusion in a particular school can be understood as a baseline for all its students, which varies from school to school, and which can then vary according to individual circumstances. These baseline probabilities are broadly similar in the other two academic years.

- Young people at greatest risk of exclusion in secondary school are those who have also been excluded in primary school.
- Young people who are care-experienced, and pupils who have been eligible for free school meals at least once, are also at an elevated risk of exclusion. This provides evidence that exclusions have a socioeconomic component.

We estimated the probabilities of a pupil being excluded according to their sociodemographic characteristics. In Figure 2, we illustrate these probabilities with the most recent year at the top of each group. These probabilities allow us to make like-for-like comparisons, considering multiple characteristics of the pupils at once.

**Figure 2: Probabilities of being excluded by academic year, (A) educational stage and (B) pupils' characteristics**



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Figure 2A shows that the peak exclusion period is the third year of secondary school (S3), with average adjusted probabilities ranging from just below 4% to just below 5%. However, although the likelihood is higher in S3, the difference between S3 and S2 is not statistically significant, so we can't say there is a definite difference. As expected, the probability of being excluded in S5 is low (around 1%) and even lower (less than 1%) in S6.

In Figure 2B the young people at highest risk of exclusion are those who were excluded at primary school, with average adjusted probabilities of just above 13% in 2014/15, declining to just over 10% in 2018/19. Although their probability seems to have declined over time, they remain the highest-risk group. Other groups of pupils at higher risk are those who are care-experienced and pupils who have ever been eligible for free school meals, with adjusted probabilities between 4% and 6%, and seeming to decline over time. Male students are also at a slightly elevated risk with mean adjusted probabilities between 3% and 4%; in contrast, female students' probabilities are below 2% regardless of the academic year. Crucially, these adjusted comparisons constitute strong evidence that there is a socio-economic component to educational exclusions that needs to be further explored.

## Why it matters

Our analyses reveal significant variation in exclusions across schools and local authorities in Scotland. While these differences are substantial, they are slightly lower than the variation across schools (12%) and local authorities (7.5%) reported in England<sup>11,12</sup>.

It is important to note that assessing unadjusted exclusion rates, that is, not making like-for-like comparisons, may result in an unfair evaluation of schools and local authorities. This may mean either being too harsh, by ignoring that a larger percentage of pupils at a higher risk of exclusion attend a particular school, or too lenient, when ignoring that certain schools may have a lower number of pupils at-risk of exclusions. This is why understanding the factors affecting the likelihood of exclusion is so important. So far, the identified higher-risk groups for exclusions include male students, those who are care-experienced, those who come from deprived backgrounds, and those who were subject to exclusions during their primary school years.

Understanding the individual and structural factors associated with variation in exclusion is key for change in policy and practice. We have revealed very strong evidence that a relatively large portion of the probability of exclusions is beyond the control of the pupils themselves. This implies that comparable pupils can be more or less likely to be excluded, simply as a result of the differing policy or practices between different schools or education authorities.

There is also strong evidence that for some pupils, the onset of behavioural issues leading to exclusions occurs earlier in their primary school years. This could imply that these children and their families have needs that have gone unmet for a considerable time, which become exacerbated in secondary school. This can lead to disengagement and withdrawal from school and contribute to circumstances that later lead to wider adverse outcomes.

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## What next?

We are at the start of our interrogation of these rich linked datasets and have an analytical plan in place. We will be working with de-identified Census and health data to understand the effects of family and household characteristics, and individual characteristics such as pupils' own mental health, on the risk of exclusion.

Our early analysis provides strong evidence that structural factors, such as socioeconomic circumstances, affect a pupil's likelihood of being excluded. It also reveals that there is substantial variation by school and local authority. Our next steps will be to explore which school and council area characteristics are most significant in this variation. We also plan to understand the role that pupils' additional support needs play on the propensity towards being excluded.

We acknowledge that a school exclusion is not an isolated event, and so will work on understanding the relationship between exclusions and absences, educational achievement and positive post-school destinations. By exploring these interconnected factors, we aim to contribute to a holistic approach informing targeted interventions and support, and ultimately contributing to improving children and young people's lives.

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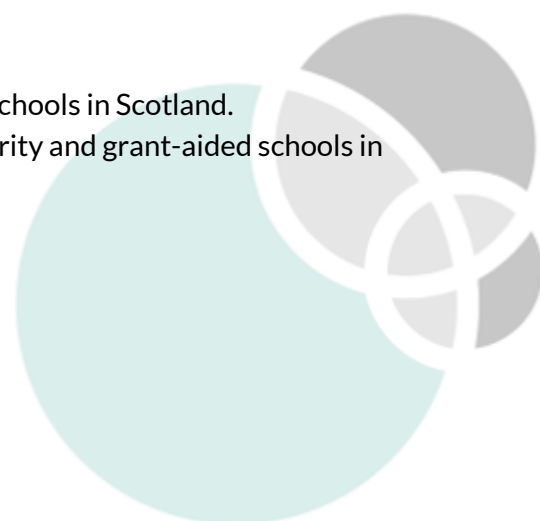
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## Datasets used

The [datasets](#) covered in this Data Insight are:

- **Exclusions:** Exclusions in all publicly funded local authority schools in Scotland.
- **Pupil census:** Children attending publicly funded local authority and grant-aided schools in Scotland.



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## About ADR Scotland

ADR Scotland is a partnership between the Scottish Centre for Administrative Data Research (SCADR) and Scottish Government's Data for Research, Platforms and Legislation Unit. It is funded by [UKRI/ESRC](#), as part of the [ADR UK \(Administrative Data Research UK\)](#) partnership. Our vision is that research and data linkage are valued and used effectively to deliver benefits for the people of Scotland.

Working alongside our delivery bodies (RDS, PHS, EPCC and NRS) we aim to create insights primarily about the Scottish population and their communities; prioritising children's lives and outcomes, lifelong health and wellbeing, health and social care, poverty and fair work, and building safer communities. Our investment in improving access to administrative data and investing in data linkage infrastructure and capacity, enables vital research to be carried out, to better inform policy and public services utilising Scotland's wealth of public sector data.

## About ADR UK

ADR UK is a partnership transforming the way researchers access the UK's wealth of public sector data, to enable better informed policy decisions that improve people's lives. By linking together data held by different parts of government and facilitation safe and secure access for accredited researchers to these newly joined-up and de-identified data sets, ADR UK is creating a sustainable body of knowledge about how our society and economy function – tailored to give decision makers the answers they need to solve important policy questions

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