

# Disengagement from school among pupils experiencing homelessness in Wales

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## Summary

This Data Insight explores the association between disengagement from school and youth homelessness. The Housing and Homelessness team at ADR Wales analysed data from a screening tool forming part of a youth homelessness prevention scheme in Wales, known as Upstream Cymru. Three forms of school disengagement were measured: exclusions/suspension, truancy, and misbehavior.

Levels of school disengagement were higher among pupils who had experienced homelessness compared to pupils who had not. However, a large proportion of pupils experiencing homelessness appeared to be relatively engaged with school.

The team's findings have implications for the targeting and implementation of youth homelessness prevention interventions in schools.

## What we did

Secondary analysis was conducted using data from Upstream Cymru screening tool assessments completed between September 2020 and May 2024. Schools participating in Upstream Cymru have the flexibility to determine which year-groups undertake screening. Most schools conducted screening with Years 7 to 11 (e.g. age 11 to 16 years old). 12 schools located in the South Wales and Valleys region of Wales have participated in Upstream Cymru.

Pupils can complete a screening tool assessment multiple times during the academic year, and in different years. Therefore, the first screening tool assessment completed by a pupil was retained in this analysis, which after cleaning included 4,550 pupil-assessments.

## Background

Increased attention is being given to prevention within homelessness policy and practice. The aim of prevention is to intervene early to divert people away from homelessness, or to ensure their homelessness is short and does not recur. In Wales, Upstream Cymru is one such preventative approach, aimed at identifying and working with young people at risk of homelessness.

Upstream Cymru uses a universal screening tool, completed in school time, to identify pupils potentially at risk. The tool is universal in the sense that all pupils within a school year group are encouraged to complete an assessment. The screening tool covers a range of topics, including engagement with school, wellbeing, resilience, and experiences of youth and family homelessness<sup>1</sup>.

By explicitly asking young people about their home lives, Upstream Cymru's approach provides young people with an opportunity to describe their situation themselves. 'Universal screening' differs to existing approaches that use observable behaviour and outcomes at school to infer potential risk of homelessness.

This analysis aimed to explore the association between observable signs of disengagement from school and youth homelessness. In doing so, it digs deeper into the logic of using observable school disengagement as a basis for identifying young people who may need support because of homelessness.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/youth-engagement-and-progression-framework-guidance-early-identification-html>

## Youth homelessness measure

Pupils were asked whether they had ever, in the past year, slept away from their parents or guardians because they were kicked out, ran away, or did not feel safe staying. Pupils who responded 'Yes' to this question were flagged as experiencing youth homelessness.

## School disengagement measures

Pupils were asked to indicate on 5-point Likert items—'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'—whether they got into a lot of trouble at school and whether they regularly skipped school. Pupils responding either 'Strongly agree' or 'Agree' were flagged as getting into lots of trouble at school and having truanting to an objective degree. Pupils were also asked whether they had ever been expelled or suspended from school, to which they could either select 'Yes', 'No', or 'Don't know'. A binary measure of suspension/exclusion was generated, set to one where the pupil reported 'Yes' to having been excluded/suspended.

The combination of different elements of disengagement may signal to educators that a pupil needs support. A measure of the intensity of disengagement was therefore created by counting the number of areas a pupil was disengaged in, ranging from 0 to 3 areas.

## Analysis

Cross-tabulations - tables that show the relationship between two or more variables - were used to explore the percentage of pupils reporting each of the three forms of school disengagement, and give a breakdown of the intensity of disengagement, by whether pupils had experienced homelessness. [Logistic regressions](#) were used to assess whether experiencing youth homelessness increased the odds of reporting truanting, getting into trouble, and exclusion/suspension from school. To preserve the count nature of the disengagement intensity measure, [Poisson regression](#) was used to examine whether experiencing youth homelessness increased the number of areas of disengagement. A cutoff of  $p < 0.05$  was used to determine if associations were statistically significant or not.

## What we found

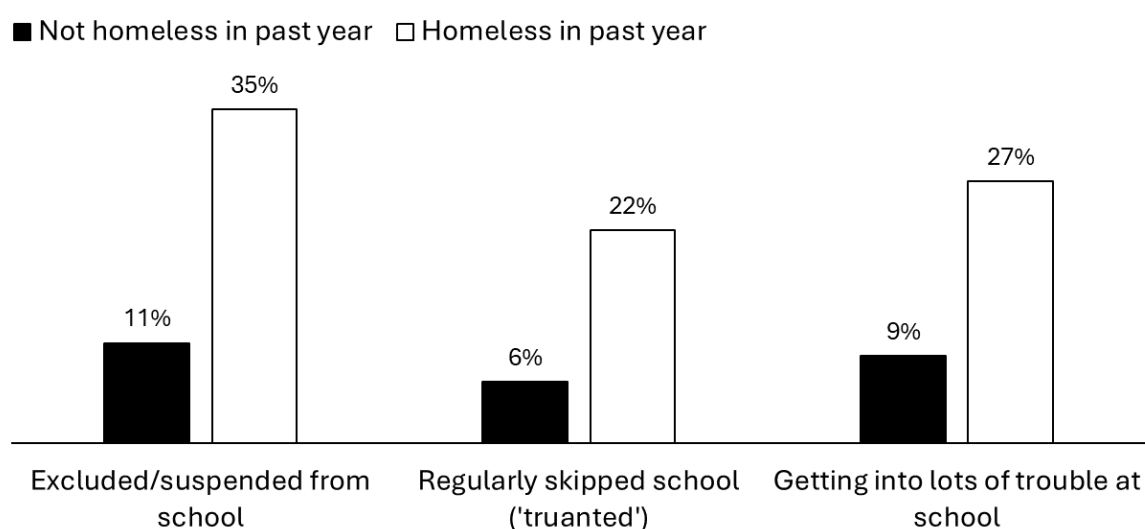
Table 1 provides a summary of the overall prevalence of youth homelessness, the three indicators of school disengagement, and intensity of disengagement for the sample. **6% of pupils (n = 291) experienced youth homelessness**, i.e. were forced to sleep away from their home at some point in the last year. The prevalence of the individual forms of school disengagement varied, with 7% of pupils skipping school, 10% getting into lots of trouble, and 12% of pupils reporting having been excluded/suspended. Overall, **78% of pupils in the sample reported none of the forms of school disengagement measured in this study**, with a minority reporting all three forms (1%).

**Table 1 - Summary of youth homelessness and school disengagement among pupils in the sample.**

	n	%
Experienced youth homelessness	291	6
Excluded/suspended from school	550	12
Regularly skipped school	339	7
Getting into lots of trouble at school	469	10
<i>Number of areas of disengagement from school:</i>		
0	3552	78
1	701	15
2	234	5
3	63	1

Pupils who had experienced youth homelessness reported higher rates of exclusions (35% versus 11%), truanting (22% versus 6%), and getting into lots of trouble (27% versus 9%), compared to those not reporting homelessness (Figure 1). Logistic regression suggested that **experiencing homelessness increased the odds of pupils reporting exclusions<sup>2</sup>, truanting<sup>3</sup>, and getting into lots of trouble<sup>4</sup>** compared to pupils who had not experienced homelessness, with these findings being statistically significant.

**Figure 1 - Percentage of pupils reporting disengagement from school, by type of disengagement and youth homelessness in the past year.**



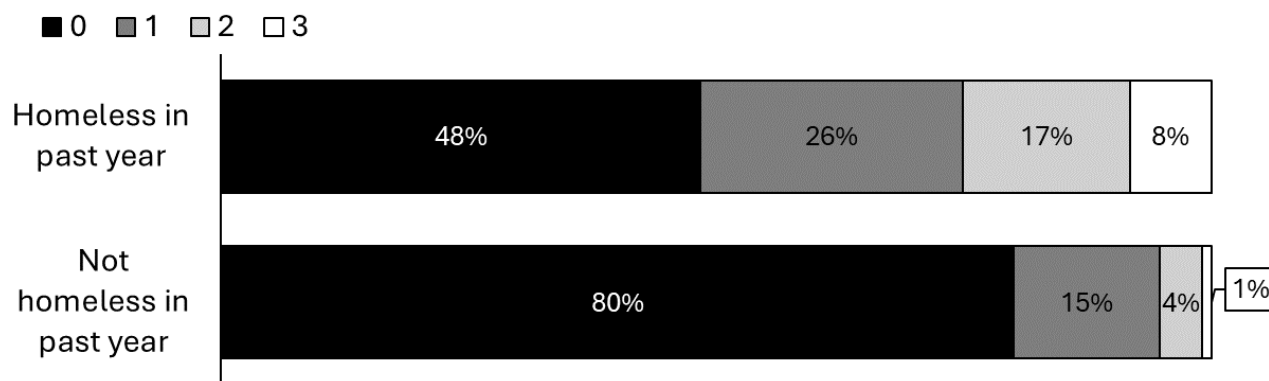
<sup>2</sup>. Odds Ratio (95% confidence interval) = 4.6 (3.5 - 6.0); p < 0.001

<sup>3</sup>. Odds Ratio (95% confidence interval) = 4.2 (3.1 - 5.7); p < 0.001

<sup>4</sup>. Odds Ratio (95% confidence interval) = 3.8 (2.9 - 5.0); p < 0.001

In terms of the intensity of disengagement (Figure 2), 52% of pupils who experienced homelessness showed some form of disengagement from school, compared to 20% of the not-homeless pupils. Intensity of disengagement also appeared to be more pronounced for pupils experiencing youth homelessness: roughly 5% of pupils who had not experienced youth homelessness had two or more forms of disengagement, compared to 25% of youth homeless pupils. Poisson regression found that pupils who had experienced homelessness had higher counts of areas of disengagement compared to pupils who had not experienced homelessness, with this being a statistically significant association<sup>5</sup>.

**Figure 2 - Number of areas of disengagement from school, by youth homelessness in the past year.**



## Why it matters

Youth homelessness is a significant issue in Wales, with nearly 6,500 young people (age 16 to 24 years old) approaching their local authority for assistance in 2023/24. International evidence suggests that moving prevention ‘upstream’ and into schools reduces the number of young people experiencing homelessness<sup>6</sup>. Accurate targeting of homelessness prevention in schools is important to reduce missed opportunities to engage with at-risk pupils prior to experiencing homelessness.

This new analysis supports existing evidence of the association between youth homelessness and school disengagement. Pupils who had experienced homelessness reported much higher rates of all forms of school disengagement measured in the analysis.

However, 48% of pupils who had experienced youth homelessness appear to be relatively engaged with school—showing none of the signs of disengagement measured in this analysis. It is therefore unlikely that these homeless pupils would be identified by educators based on observable disengagement alone. The key implication is that asking directly about home lives using a screening tool is a more effective method of identifying pupils at risk of or experiencing homelessness than inferring from observable behaviour.

<sup>5</sup> Incidence Rate Ratio (95% confidence interval) = 3.3 (2.8 - 3.8); p < 0.001

<sup>6</sup> <https://upstreamaustralia.org.au/project/the-geelong-project-interim-report-2016-2017/>

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ADR Wales unites specialists from Swansea University Medical School and the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data (WISERD) at Cardiff University with statisticians, data scientists and social researchers from the Welsh Government. The cutting-edge data analysis techniques and research excellence developed, along with the world-renowned SAIL Databank – which is an accredited processor under the 2017 Digital Economy Act (DEA) – allow the delivery of robust, secure and informative research that can inform future policy decisions in Wales. The ADR Wales programme of work is aligned to the priority themes as identified in the Welsh Government’s Programme for Government. ADR Wales is part of the Economic and Social Research Council (part of UK Research and Innovation) funded ADR UK (grant ES/W012227/1).

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