

POOR HIT HARDEST BY SCHOOL LOCKDOWNS

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Poor children suffer more from school closures than their classmates. Analysis of the DfE’s final updated data¹ on pupils’ results in 2022 shows that the disadvantaged fared worse than before the pandemic. They had fallen even further behind at every level – in Sats in primary schools and in both GCSE and A-levels in secondary schools.

Paradoxically, the grades were higher in GCSEs and A-levels in 2022 than in 2019, but this was because they had already been fixed at this level. Of the extra grades available, the disadvantaged took a smaller share so the gap increased.

GCSE

Table 1 shows the results for what has become the most quoted performance measure for GCSEs, Attainment 8, the highest score attained across eight subjects in three specified groups.

Table 1: GCSE Attainment 8 Points¹ Scores

Category	2019	2022
Disadvantaged ²	36.7	37.6
All Other Pupils	50.3	52.8
Gap	-13.6	-15.2

1. Attainment 8 is the best score obtained from 8 GCSEs comprising English and Maths double weighted, 3 EBacc subjects and any 3 other approved qualifications.

2. Children classified as disadvantaged are those who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the past six years, children who have been looked after at some point between the ages of four and 15, and those adopted from care.

Already a long way behind in 2019, the disadvantaged fell even further behind other pupils in 2022. It might be thought we are overclaiming since the scores of the disadvantaged actually went up that year. But it must be remembered that there was

¹ Department for Education (3 Feb 2023). Key Stage 4 Performance Revised, Academic Year 2021/22. A level and Other 16 to 18 Results, Academic Year 2021/22. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/>

considerable grade inflation in the two years of emergency teacher assessment. Recognizing that the 2022 cohort had been impacted too, the Government gave notice that it wanted both the exams to be softened and the results to come at about halfway between those in 2019 and 2021. The better scores were therefore pre-set in advance.

A similar picture of higher grades, but the disadvantaged falling further behind, emerges in other measures of GCSE performance. Table 2 shows the percentages awarded Grade 5 and above in both English and maths. The pattern is exactly the same.

Table 2: GCSE English and Maths Grade 5+¹

Category	2019	2022
Disadvantaged ²	24.7	29.6
All Other Pupils	49.9	57.0
Gap	-25.2	-27.4

1. Percentages achieving both English and maths at Grade Five and above.

2. See footnote to Table 1.

A-Level

It is replicated again in Table 3 where ‘Points Scored Per A-level’ are tabulated in the same way, but the increase here is much smaller. This is to be expected because all children are intended to take GCSEs, but A-levels are a matter of choice, and many fewer disadvantaged children stay on post-16 to take them.

Table 3: A-Level Points Per Entry¹

Category	2019	2022
Disadvantaged ²	28.7	33.5
Not Disadvantaged	33.6	38.6
Gap	-4.9	-5.1

1. Total points scored from A-level and equivalent qualifications divided by the number entered.

2. See footnote to Table 1.

Interestingly, setting the bar lower reveals another factor. In Table 4 we compare the proportions of children passing any two A-levels. With this as the criterion, the gap appears to have narrowed. The most likely explanation of this surprising outcome, in view of the other findings, is the adjustments to the 2022 exams. Advance notice was given of the question topics, the syllabus was restricted, and grades were pre-set to be higher than those in 2019. This would have made them easier to pass which would have

allowed more borderline students to get through, among which the disadvantaged are likely to have been over-represented. This would have raised their pass rate in comparison with those who would have passed anyway, and hence the gap would have narrowed.

Table 4: Per Cent Two or More A-Levels¹

Category	2019	2022
Disadvantaged ²	71.7	81.5
Not Disadvantaged	81.8	88.5
Gap	-10.2	-7.0

1. Percentage of A-level students passing two or more.

2. See footnote to Table 1.

Primary

Our tables for GCSE and A-level results were compiled by quarrying the data recently put up on the DfE’s website, but for primary we have taken the aggregated numbers directly from what is there². Table 5 shows that the percentage of pupils achieving the expected standard in all three of reading, writing and maths actually fell in 2022 compared with 2019.

Table 5: Sats Results¹

Category	2019	2022
Disadvantaged ²	51	43
Not Disadvantaged	71	66
Gap	-20	-23

1. Percentage of pupils meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths.

2. See footnote to Table 1.

Since education was disrupted for all children during the pandemic years, this is to be expected if the tests were held at the same standard. In spite of this overall reversal of direction, as at GCSE and A-level when high-end measures are used, the gap between the disadvantaged and the rest widened during the Covid years.

² Department for Education (22 Dec 2022). Key Stage 2 Attainment Revised, Academic Year 2021/22. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/>

Other Evidence

In reporting our analysis, we have presented actual GCSEs and A-level results so that they can be readily understood. The DfE has taken a more statistically sophisticated approach by creating a ‘Disadvantage Gap Index’. This ranks data to allow consistent comparisons over time, even though there may be changes to the tests and exams. Table 6 shows the position to have worsened for children from poor backgrounds at both primary and secondary levels with a widening disadvantage gap.

Table 6: Disadvantage Gap Index¹

Category	2019	2022	%Increase
Primary	2.91	3.23	11.0
Secondary Age 16	3.70	3.84	3.8
Difference	0.79	0.61	-22.8

1. The ‘disadvantage gap index’ summarises the relative attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and all other pupils. It relies on ranked data and not actual grades, and can be calculated in the same way even though the tests and exams have changed. It thus enables consistent comparisons to be made over time.

Although not easy to relate to the actual results, the DGI does reveal two important aspects of disadvantage. First, it increases with age rather than narrowing as would be hoped for from the years in primary education. And, secondly, the impact of closures is much greater in primary schools. In terms of the DGI, the gap in the primary schools increased almost three times as much over the period of the pandemic as it did in secondary schools, significantly narrowing the difference between them. But here narrowing the gap is bad news, reflecting as it does the much greater extent to which disadvantaged children have fallen behind in the Sats tests.

Disadvantaged children in the normal run of things have the odds stacked against them, and these have been increased still further by Covid closures. To lack of access to today’s essentials for learning at home such as computing equipment, reliable broadband, and quiet space, has been added long-term absence from school. Some pupils have grown so used to not being able to go to school – particularly the disadvantaged – that they still regularly absent themselves. School attendance figures have plummeted since the pandemic.

Absenteeism has emerged as one of the main ways Covid continues to impact on schools. It is evident that there is an equivalent in education of long Covid. The impact

on primary pupils is even greater than on those in secondary schools. We do not know how quickly lost ground can be made up, particularly if schools face closure for other reasons.

The effects of Covid on schools could well stretch into the 2030s, given even very young primary school pupils will have been affected. The National Audit Office³ has expressed concern about the current catch-up plans. Getting pupils back to where they were pre-pandemic will be a major challenge, let alone helping them to fulfil their full potential.

³ National Audit Office (1 Feb 2023). Education Recovery in Schools in England. <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/education-recovery-in-schools-in-england/>