

Education and disadvantage

Is the education gap in England narrowing? Explore data from a recent report

The Education Policy Institute (EPI) is an independent research organisation that examines evidence on disadvantage and educational performance in English schools. Its most recent report on the subject was published in October 2023. But what does it mean by 'disadvantage'? For pupils in reception year, disadvantage is defined as being currently eligible for free school meals (FSM). For older pupils, it is being FSM-eligible at any point in the previous 6 years. The EPI measures the 'disadvantage gap' by comparing the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers.

The disadvantage gap

At each key stage, pupils are assessed via their attainment results and this is used to assign them a rank. The EPI then calculates the average rank of non-disadvantaged and disadvantaged pupil groups, and the difference between the two is converted into a 'months of learning' gap. This provides a measurement of how far disadvantaged pupils are behind their peers. The 'disadvantage gap' had recently been narrowing. However,

between 2019 and 2022 the gap at the end of primary school increased from 9.3 to 10.3 months — the second largest gap since the start of the EPI series in 2011, when it was 10.6 months. See Figure 1.

The gap for GCSE English and maths

Today, around one-quarter of all pupils are defined as disadvantaged by the end of secondary school, smaller than the 29% of pupils at the end of primary school. As children get older, their parents are more likely to enter work and exceed the earnings threshold for FSM. The disadvantage gap in GCSE English and maths widened to 18.8 months in 2022 — its largest since 2012. Following progress in narrowing the gap between 2011 and 2014 (from 19.7 months to 18.2 months), the gap then remained at around 18 months in the years leading up to the pandemic. See Figure 2.

Persistent disadvantage

Not only do disadvantaged pupils in England tend to do worse in school than their peers, but those who are disadvantaged for the longest time do worst of all. The EPI report for 2023 considers attainment gaps for 'persistently

disadvantaged' pupils, comprising 14% of all pupils by the end of primary school and 11% by the end of secondary school. The EPI defines 'persistently disadvantaged' as 'those pupils who are eligible for free school meals for 80% or more of their school lives'.

The persistent disadvantage gap at the end of primary school (KS2) in 2022 was 12.2 months, the highest the gap has been since 2017 and matching the long-run average over the period 2011–19. In 2022, the persistent disadvantage gap at the end of secondary school (KS4) was 22.7 months — unchanged from 2019, the latest year unaffected by the pandemic and virtually unchanged since 2011. See Figure 3.

Conclusion

What are we to conclude? Sociologists and policy makers often discuss education as a motor for social mobility. But all the evidence here indicates that, after initial optimism, there has been a lack of progress in gap-narrowing in education for disadvantaged pupils in England over the last decade. In this sense, currently at least, education seems not to 'compensate' for the disadvantages of social background, as some might argue.

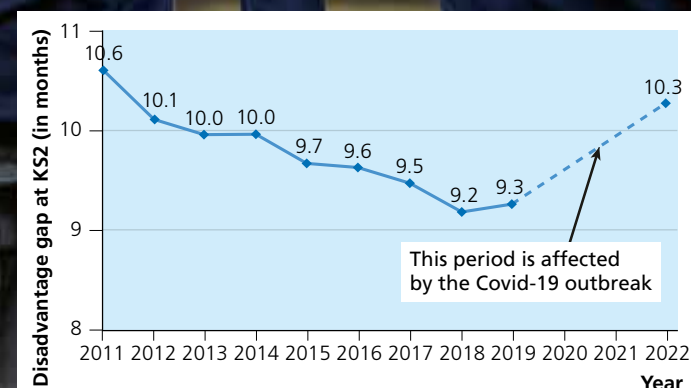


Figure 1 The disadvantage gap at the end of primary school widened in 2022 to above its 2012 level, wiping out a decade of progress in narrowing the gap

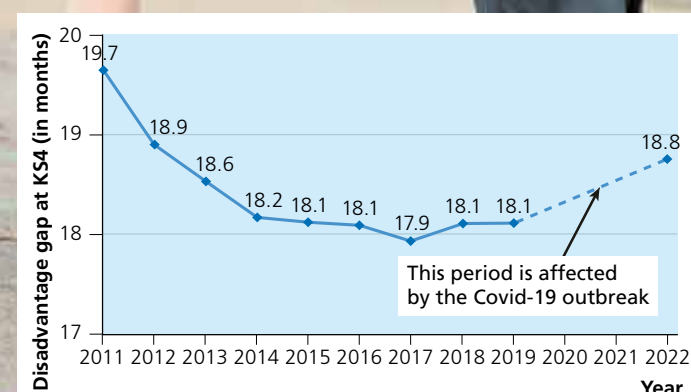


Figure 2 The disadvantage gap in GCSE English and maths widened in 2022 to its largest level since 2012

REFERENCE

Education Policy Institute (2023) *Education Policy Institute Annual Report 2023*. Available at: www.tinyurl.com/ycykaj22

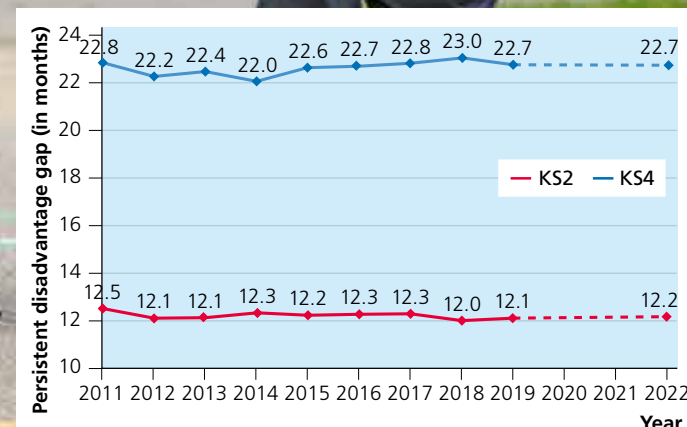


Figure 3 There has been no progress in closing the persistent disadvantage gap over the last decade across key stages

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