

# Home learning during Covid-19:

Findings from the Understanding  
Society Longitudinal Study

Eemer Eivers, Jack Worth  
and Anusha Ghosh



## Contents

Executive summary	i
Data sources	i
Key findings	i
Conclusions and recommendations	ii
1 Introduction	1
2 Year 11 and 13 have been provided with little school work	2
3 Remote learning was typically offline activities such as worksheets and videos	3
4 Pupil time spent on school work was related to income and parental education	4
5 Lower-income parents spent more time supporting their child's school work	5
6 One in twenty pupils lives with a clinically extremely vulnerable adult	6
7 Conclusions and recommendations	7
References	9
Appendix A	11

## Executive summary

Since 20 March 2020, almost all school-aged children across the UK have been unable to attend school due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Exceptions are small numbers of vulnerable children and those whose parents are keyworkers. Schools have pivoted to remote delivery of learning using a variety of online and offline resources. This report adds to a growing literature on how long-term school absence affects pupils and their families, and how remote learning might act to mitigate some of its effects. We describe the types and amount of remote learning provided by schools, and the amount of pupil and parent time spent engaging with school work at home. We also estimate how many pupils live with an adult classified as being at increased risk (clinically vulnerable or clinically extremely vulnerable) of serious illness should they contract Covid-19.

### Data sources

This report is based on data from Understanding Society (USoc), a longitudinal study of a representative sample of 40,000 UK households, tracked since 2009 (University of Essex, 2019). In late April 2020, all adults in the USoc sample were invited to complete the first in a series of ad-hoc surveys about how the Covid-19 pandemic had affected them.

Although the survey covered a range of topics, this report focuses on content related to home schooling and remote learning. It is based on the responses of the parents of over 4,000 school-aged children, and it provides a unique snapshot of home learning activities at a specific point in time – after the first month of home schooling. It is possible that the picture provided will differ from early surveys during the first few weeks

of school closures in March and early April. It may also differ from subsequent surveys, as families and schools may have become more familiar with remote schooling. Nevertheless, it contributes to documenting the home learning experience throughout the period of school closures. This can inform how the education system responds once children return to school.

### Key findings

- Almost all pupils received some remote learning tasks from their teachers. **However, almost half of exam-year pupils in Years 11 and 13 were not provided with work by their school**
- Just over half of all pupils taught remotely did not usually have any online lessons, defined as live or real-time lessons. **Offline provision, such as worksheets or recorded video, was much more common than ‘live’ online lessons.**
- Secondary and post-secondary pupils were slightly more likely than primary pupils to have online lessons. However, across all three phases, pupils had access to fewer online than offline lessons.
- Most pupils spent less than three hours per day on remote learning activities. **Pupils from higher-income households, and whose parents had higher levels of education, spent the most time on school work at home, particularly at secondary level.**
- In contrast, **parents from the lowest-income households spent the most amount of time supporting their child with school work.** Parental education was largely unrelated to the amount of time parents spent helping with their child’s school work. Parents of

primary school children spent more time providing support than parents of secondary school children.

- **At least five per cent of pupils live with an adult who is at very high risk (clinically extremely vulnerable) of serious illness related to Covid-19.** A further 19 per cent live with an adult who is at high risk (clinically vulnerable). These estimates exclude any non-responding adults or any pupils who might themselves be at increased risk, meaning the true percentages are likely to be higher.
- Pupils from a black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) background (defined as those with at least one BAME parent) and those whose households fall into the lowest income quartile are significantly more likely to live with an at-risk adult.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The USoc survey data suggests that during the period of school closures some pupils have spent little or no time engaging in remote learning, and that participation was, on average, poorest amongst those from lower income families and those whose parents had lower levels of education. However, wide variation in the experiences of pupils over and above family income and education level is also evident, suggesting that family income alone will not identify which pupils have made most and least progress while they have not been at school.

We suggest that targeted interventions are needed to address the effects of school closures on pupil engagement and attainment. Schools and teachers are best placed to identify which pupils need the most intensive support when schools fully open in September. Nonetheless, our findings support the Education Endowment Foundation’s (EEF, 2020a) assessment that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds will, on average, have made less progress than others during the pandemic.

**We recommend that Government weights catch-up funding towards schools in disadvantaged areas, using the proportion of Pupil Premium pupils in the funding distribution model.**

It is also concerning that almost half of pupils in Years 11 and 13 were not being assigned any school work in April 2020. This is understandably related to the cancellation of their exams. However, it means that, come September, many of these pupils will not have engaged with education for up to six months. A return to education may therefore prove challenging for many, especially if it is in a new educational setting. At present, catch-up funding in England is available only to primary and secondary schools (DfE, 2020a).

**We recommend that Government consider what additional support could be made available for Year 11 students as they enter Key Stage 5 or Further Education.**

At least a quarter of all pupils (more in low income and BAME households) live with an adult at high or very high risk of serious illness related to Covid-19. Other pupils may also themselves have underlying conditions that put them at increased risk. The Government intends that school attendance will again be mandatory from September, and that fines for non-attendance will be reintroduced (DfE, 2020b).

**We recommend that the Government support schools in adopting a flexible approach to children from high risk and very high risk households.** This could include delaying the enforcement of fines until community infection rates are lower, identifying heightened safety measures, and schools providing remote or hybrid learning where circumstances mean a physical return to school is not advisable.

## 1 Introduction

In late March 2020, schools across the UK closed. Since then, almost all children have been unable to physically attend school. Initially, only vulnerable pupils and children of keyworkers could attend school, and even within these groups, relatively few did so (DfE, 2020c). Although some schools partially re-opened in June, a large majority of pupils will only return to school fully in the autumn.

To continue pupils' education and mitigate the effects of long-term school absence, schools adopted remote learning, using a mixture of online and offline resources. However, there are concerns that the variability of engagement with remote learning may exacerbate social inequalities (Andrew *et al.*, 2020; EEF, 2020a). Access to digital technology is not evenly distributed and children in deprived households are least likely to have access. Those with limited access to adequate digital technology or from lower-income families are less likely to engage with remote learning (Andrew *et al.*, 2020; Lucas *et al.*, 2020). More generally, the scale and duration of current school closures are unprecedented, and the potential short- and longer-term consequences for *all* children is a concern.

Documenting the home learning experience during the school closure period can inform how the education system responds once children return to school. In this report we draw on survey data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), also known as Understanding Society (USoc). USoc is the largest longitudinal household survey in the UK and is based on a sample of 40,000 households, tracked since 2009 (University of Essex, 2019). The survey contains extensive data on individuals' employment, education, family life, health and well-being as well as linking to the characteristics of other individuals within the household.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, an ad-hoc series of monthly surveys were developed to gather information relevant to the widespread changes happening because of the pandemic. The first of these surveys was administered online in late April 2020. All adults over the age of 16 in the UKHLS survey sample were invited to take part. A range of topics was covered, including experiences of home schooling, Covid-19 testing and symptoms, underlying health conditions and use of health services, employment, and time use.

The analyses in this report are based on data from the April 2020 survey, weighted to be representative of the population of school-age children in the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) (see UKHLS user guide for details). The survey was a snapshot, so the picture the data provides may differ from surveys conducted earlier and later in the school closure period, as families and schools may have become more familiar with remote schooling over time. The data is combined with information from wave 9 annual interviews on household income, parental education, ethnicity, and perceptions of the importance of education. Our analysis sample contains responses from the parents of 4,168 school-age children in 2,462 households.

Using USoc data, we describe the types and amount of remote learning provided by schools, the amount of time children and parents spend engaging in and supporting school work at home, and how this relates to household income. In addition, we examine how many pupils lived with an adult classified as being at increased risk (clinically vulnerable or clinically extremely vulnerable) of serious illness should they contract Covid-19.

## 2 Year 11 and 13 have been provided with little school work

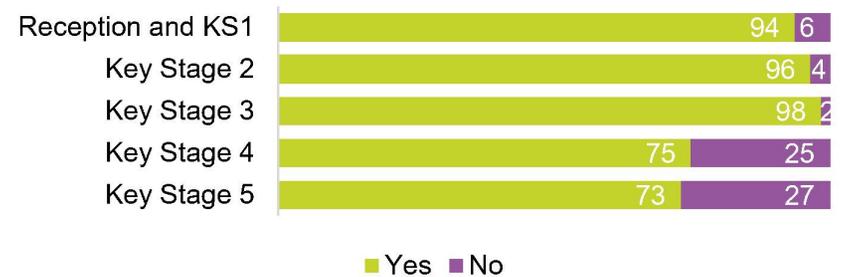
Overall, 90 per cent of parents whose children were not attending school in April 2020 reported receiving some school work to complete at home. At least 94 per cent of primary and Key Stage (KS) 3 pupils received school work, compared to only three-quarters of those in KS4 and KS5. Year group is not included in USoc data, but we can infer it for many pupils using a combination of age and key stage data. For example, we know that 16-year-olds in KS4 are in Year 11 while 16-year-olds in KS5 are in Year 12. Applying this logic, nearly half of pupils in Years 11 and 13 were not being assigned any school work. In contrast, almost all Year 10 and 12 pupils were provided with work.

Exams being cancelled will have played a major part in the relative absence of school work for these pupils. GCSE and A-level qualifications in 2020 will be awarded based on teacher assessment and other inputs, so pupils will obtain qualifications without the need for further work. Many are likely to have completed coverage of the relevant curricula and would have spent April and May revising for their exams, an activity that might seem pointless in the absence of an exam.

Nonetheless, some of these pupils have missed opportunities to learn some content and consolidate their knowledge through revision. Some will have disengaged from education for up to six months. On return, they may find it challenging to engage with the next stage of their education, especially if in a new setting. The Government's 'catch-up' funding in England is available only to primary and secondary schools, meaning pupils starting in KS5 or Further Education will not benefit

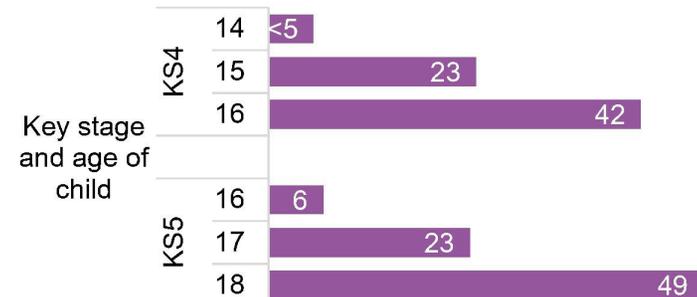
(DfE, 2020a). However, given their extended hiatus, consideration should be given to extending catch-up funding to support these pupils.

### Almost all parents reported that their child was provided school work to do at home by the school



Source: UKHLS Covid-19 survey, April 2020.

### Almost half the parents of Year 11s and 13s reported that the school was not providing school work to do at home



Source: UKHLS Covid-19 survey, April 2020.

### 3 Remote learning was typically offline activities such as worksheets and videos

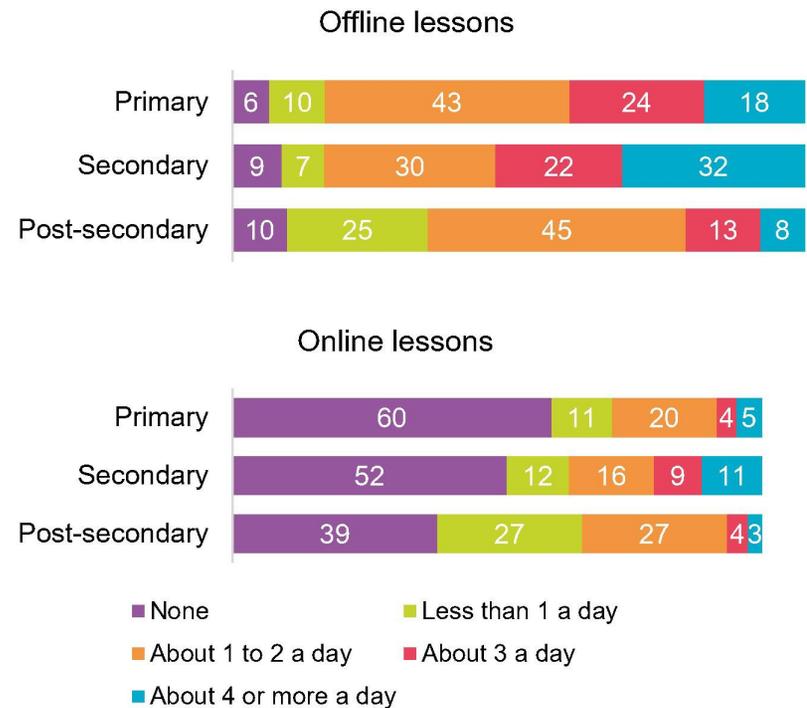
Just over half of all pupils taught remotely in April 2020 did not usually have *any* online lessons, defined as live or real-time lessons. Offline provision (e.g. worksheets or recorded video) was much more common: 92 per cent had at least some offline lessons provided by their school. Recent NFER research suggests that limited pupil access to IT at home is one of the main reasons for using offline methods (Lucas *et al.*, 2020). However, safeguarding concerns may also have been an issue.

Close to half of primary (42 per cent) and secondary (54 per cent) pupils received at least three offline lessons a day, markedly higher than the 21 per cent of their counterparts at post-secondary level (although this does not consider the complexity or depth of lessons provided). Secondary and post-secondary pupils were slightly more likely than primary pupils to have online lessons. About one-third had at least one online lesson a day compared to 29 per cent of pupils in primary. However, across all three phases, pupils had access to fewer online than offline lessons. Access also differed between state and private school pupils (Green, 2020).

The effects of school closures will not be addressed by simply giving all pupils access to many lessons each day. Quality of instruction is more important than quantity or delivery method, and using a variety of approaches to remote learning is likely to be most effective (EEF, 2020b). Nonetheless, access to at least some real-time lessons facilitates peer interaction, which in turn helps motivation and can improve outcomes (EEF, 2020b). NFER research conducted during the pandemic suggests that real-time learning activities were linked with higher pupil engagement (Lucas *et al.*, 2020). That many students did

not access online lessons may therefore be a concern for the quality of their learning experience during this period.

#### Offline lessons were much more frequent than online lessons



Source: UKHLS Covid-19 survey, April 2020.

## 4 Pupil time spent on school work was related to income and parental education

Under normal circumstances, a school day lasts six to seven hours. While that is not all instructional time, it is more than double the time most pupils spent on remote learning activities in April 2020.

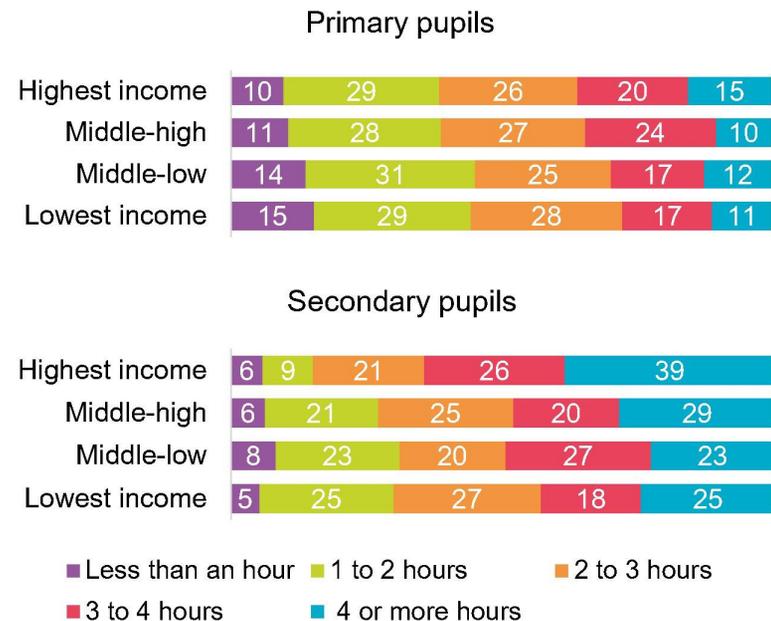
The USoc data shows that pupils from higher-income households spent more time on school work than those in lower-income households, particularly at secondary level. For example, 39 per cent of secondary pupils from the highest-income households spent at least four hours a day on school work, compared to 25 per cent of pupils from the lowest-income households. Only 15 per cent of secondary pupils from the highest-income households spent less than two hours a day on school work, compared to 30 per cent in the lowest-income households.

The relationship between income and school work was not quite as pronounced for primary pupils. Whereas 61 per cent of children from the highest-income households spent at least two hours a day on school work, only 56 per cent of children from the lowest-income households did so. Similarly, pupils (particularly those in secondary school) with more educated parents, spent more time on remote learning activities. For example, 57 per cent of secondary pupils whose parents had a degree spent at least three hours a day on school work, compared to 39 per cent of pupils whose parents had GCSEs or no qualifications.

That so many pupils have spent relatively little time engaged in school work is a concern. It is additionally concerning that pupils from low income households – a group that already tended to underperform educationally – had lowest average levels of engagement. However, we also note that within each income group there is considerable variation.

For example, within the lowest-income households, 25 per cent of secondary pupils spend at least four hours a day on school work, while 5 per cent spent an hour or less. This indicates that family income is only one of many factors affecting pupils’ engagement with remote learning.

### On average, pupils from higher-income households spent more time on school work



Source: UKHLS Covid-19 survey, April 2020.

## 5 Lower-income parents spent more time supporting their child’s school work

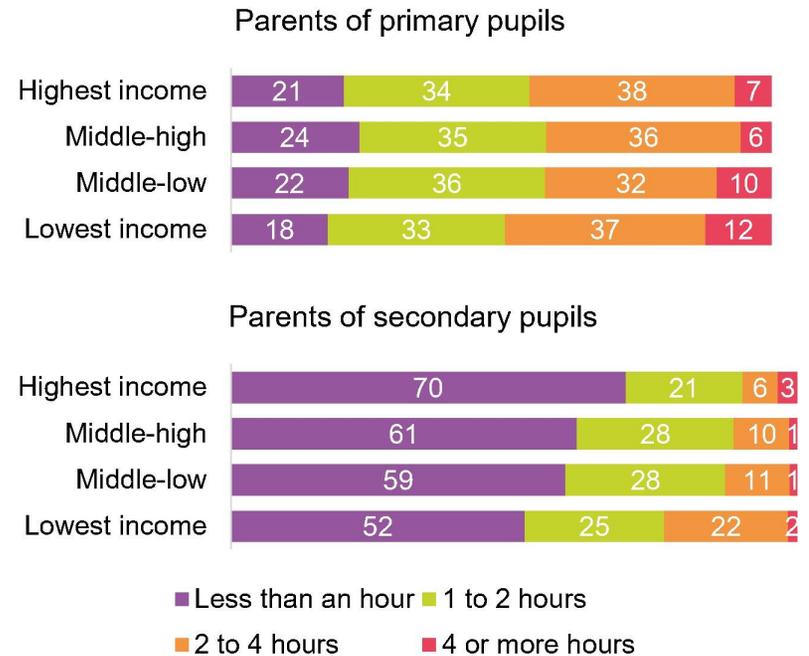
As was the case with pupils, parental engagement with school work was related to family income, but the direction of the relationship differed. Parents from the lowest-income households spent the most amount of time helping their child with school work. However, this finding might not extend to home support for school work or homework more generally. First, to a much greater extent than with normal school work or homework, parents may be able to more easily see when their children are not engaging with remote learning. As pupils from the lowest-income households, on average, engaged least, this may have spurred parental engagement. Second, USoc data show that a larger proportion of parents in low-income households had been furloughed, meaning that, at least in April, they may have had more free time than normal to support their child’s learning.

The relationship between household income and time input was more pronounced for parents of secondary pupils than primary. Whereas 70 per cent of parents in the highest-income group spent less than an hour a day helping their child with school work, only 52 per cent of parents in the lowest income group did so. In addition, 24 per cent of parents in the lowest income group spent at least two hours a day helping their child, considerably more than the nine per cent of parents in the highest-income group who did so.

Unsurprisingly, levels of parental support tended to be higher at primary level, as younger children need greater support with school work. Parents in the lowest-income group spent slightly more time providing support than those in higher income groups. Almost half (49 per cent) spent at least two hours a day supporting their child’s school work,

compared to between 40 and 45 per cent of parents in the other income groups. In contrast, parental education was unrelated to the amount of time parents spent helping their child with school work.

### Parents in lower-income households spent more time helping with school work



Note: Some categories have been combined because of cell sizes.  
Source: UKHLS Covid-19 survey, April 2020.

## 6 One in twenty pupils lives with a clinically extremely vulnerable adult

Children are at lower risk than adults of Covid-19-related health complications, yet they can be a risk to others by contracting and transmitting the disease. USoc data on adult respondents' underlying health conditions was mapped onto relevant NHS guidance to identify those at high risk (clinically vulnerable) or very high risk (clinically extremely vulnerable) of serious illness related to Covid-19.

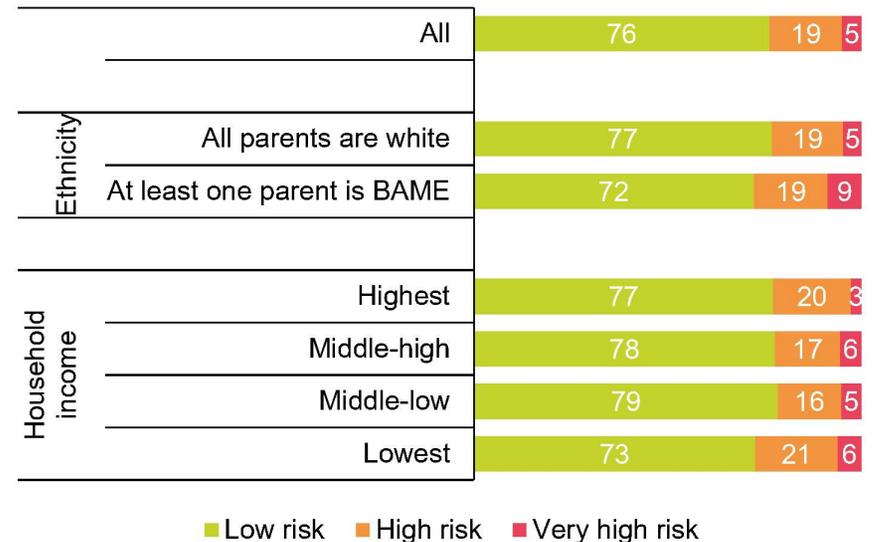
The mapping shows that five per cent of pupils live with an adult who is at very high risk, and a further 19 per cent live with an adult who is at high risk. However, these estimates are likely to under-report risk. USoc risk data is based only on the health of adults in the household who responded to the survey. It excludes non-responding adults and any pupils who are themselves at increased risk due to an underlying health condition.

Measurement caveats aside, risk is not evenly spread between households. Pupils from a black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) background (defined as those with at least one BAME parent) and those whose households fall into the lowest income quartile are significantly more likely to live with an at-risk adult. This dovetails with Public Health England's findings that Covid-19 has a disproportionate impact (on diagnosis and/or death rates) on BAME communities and those living in deprived areas (Public Health England, 2020).

As risk of Covid-19 transmission reduces, the Government plans to reintroduce mandatory school attendance in September, backed by fines for non-attendance (DfE, 2020b). Schools have been asked to identify and engage with pupils anxious about returning, but this may not allay all

concerns. For the small number of children from very high risk households, imposing fines for non-attendance may be counterproductive. More effective approaches might be to delay the enforcement of fines until community infection rates are lower and/or facilitate additional safety measures for these children, while also recognising that remote or hybrid learning may need to continue for some.

### BAME children and children from lower-income households are more likely to live with an at-risk adult



Source: UKHLS Wave 9, Covid-19 survey (2020). Note: figures may not sum to 100 per cent due to rounding.