



English summary
of Fafo-rapport 2023:13

Worrying school absence levels: A Scandinavian literature review

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The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, which commissioned this report, wants to strengthen the knowledge base on high absence levels in Norwegian schools. They have received signals, including from county governors and sector organisations, that more pupils than before have worrying school absence levels.

In this report, we collate Scandinavian research in a literature review on worrying school absence. We discuss terms used in the research field and the signals that they may give. We then examine the causes of high absence levels, the prevalence of high absence levels in Norway, and what the literature says about measures that can reduce it.

We found that the terms differ considerably in the literature, and that there is no consensus on them. Some of the literature talks about high absence levels, while some refer to it as worrying, long-term or problematic absence. Some believe that the threshold for 'worrying' should be 10 per cent, while others think it should be 25 per cent over two weeks or 10 school days over a 15-week period. Others believe that all absence is worrying if it affects the pupil's learning. 'Worrying' and 'high' are also used as synonyms or in combination, but a worrying absence level is not necessarily a high absence level – and in some cases, high absence levels are not necessarily worrying.

There is also a lack of consensus in the literature on whether there is an analytical distinction between truancy and school refusal. The distinction lies in the authors' perspectives on the reasons for the absence. Some believe both of these terms can contribute to stigmatisation and should be avoided.

Why do some pupils have high absence levels? On the whole, the literature distinguishes between individual, family-related and school-related reasons. Examples of individual explanations can be found in studies that look at psychological problems such as anxiety and depression, lack of sleep and somatic and subjective symptoms. Family-related explanations can include parents' health, education, employment and background. Abuse can also be a risk factor. School-related explanations can relate to the school environment, relationships with fellow pupils and teachers, bullying or problems with school work. In addition, the research indicates that good cooperation between the school and home can be decisive in identifying and preventing high levels of absence. Most of the studies we have reviewed emphasise that the reasons for absence are complicated and complex, and no one can state with certainty that one of these factors plays a

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greater role than another. Only a few of the studies we found have performed a comparative analysis of multiple causes.

The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training have stated that the lack of national statistics makes it difficult to prove or disprove that worrying absence levels in Norway are increasing. It is difficult to obtain an overall picture of the prevalence of absenteeism at a national level. The Directorate has statistics on absence in Year 10 and upper secondary school, but since pupils can have up to 10 days of absence deleted from their school report every school year, these statistics do not give a complete picture. Our literature review confirms this. In the literature, there is no clear indication of the extent of high absence levels in Norway. Nor does it tell us anything about changes in absence levels over time. A lack of systematic registration of absence may be one of the reasons for this. The few research papers that address the prevalence of high absence levels have clear weaknesses, such as the absence being reported by the pupils, and in some cases it is only the pupils who are present at school who are respondents. The lack of the authors' consensus on what constitutes a 'high' or 'worrying' absence level is also a challenge.

We find few evaluated measures aimed at reducing absenteeism in Scandinavia. The majority of the measures we have reviewed are aimed at the school. This is in contrast to findings in international research reviews, which show that most measures in many other countries are aimed at individual pupils. The lack of evaluated measures may be linked to the weaknesses in Norwegian data on absenteeism, because researchers do not have a good baseline for their evaluations. It may also be because the topic has not been put on the agenda or that it is part of the school's ongoing efforts and not something they try to solve with programmes or measures that are later evaluated. It may also be connected to the fact that the complexity of the causes of absence makes it extremely difficult to research this topic.

In order to form a good knowledge base for the authorities to develop further measures, this literature review should be supplemented with better national data and further research. Better national data could include a national database of absence levels in all school years, which reports on both documented and undocumented absences. Furthermore, we see that in terms of policy development, there may be a need for national authorities to set a threshold for when absenteeism is considered to be too high – not because that is the point when measures should to be introduced, but in order to follow trends in the phenomenon over time, or to establish a baseline that can be used to measure the effects. In order to find the relevant threshold, the research should be supplemented with the views of affected pupils, parents and teachers. In the literature we have reviewed, it is the pupils' voices that are least present.