

Article

Deprivation inequalities in the experiences of GCSE students during coronavirus (COVID-19), England: September 2021 to March 2022

The experiences of GCSE students during the coronavirus pandemic in England, by income-related deprivation. Data from the COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study.

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1 . Main points

- During the third national lockdown in England, young people in the most deprived areas were less likely to report that their school had provided real-time online learning (81%) compared with those in least deprived areas (93%); a gap emerged in this period, with no differences found across deprivation groups during the first national lockdown.
- A higher proportion of young people living in the most deprived areas reported that they had fallen behind their classmates because of disruption caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (42%), compared with those in the least deprived areas (26%).
- Young people in the most deprived areas were less likely to report feeling unmotivated and struggling to engage with studies or work during the first and third lockdowns (61% and 54%, respectively) compared with those in the least deprived areas (70% and 61%, respectively).
- More than a quarter (27%) of young people agreed that their school, employer, or training provider was providing additional support to help them catch up on lost learning during the pandemic, with those living in the most deprived areas being more likely to report this (31%) compared with those living in the least deprived areas (23%).
- Around 7 in 10 (71%) young people said they were very or fairly likely to apply to go to university to do a degree; rates were lower for those living in the most deprived areas of England (65%) compared with those living in the least deprived areas (77%).
- A higher proportion of students in the most deprived areas of England reported that they would most likely be looking for work or unemployed (10%), doing an apprenticeship or similar training (19%) or in a full-time job (17%) in two years' time, compared with those in the least deprived areas (6%, 15% and 9%, respectively).

2 . Experiences of GCSE students during coronavirus (COVID-19)

Overview

The analysis presented in this article includes young people attending state comprehensive, grammar, and independent schools, who were in Year 11 in the 2020 to 2021 academic year. During the data collection period, September 2021 to March 2022, the students were in Year 12 or the first year of further education. The Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) has been used to assess deprivation. IDACI measures the proportion of all children aged 0 to 15 years living in income deprived families. Throughout the article, we refer to differences between the most and least deprived areas, which refer to the top 20% and bottom 20% deprived small areas in England. For more information, see [Section 4: Glossary](#).

Lockdown learning

This section explores the education and learning experiences of young people during the first and third national lockdown periods in England.

The first national lockdown in this article refers to the period April to July 2020, however some schools may have been closed outside of this period. From 23 March 2020, schools in Great Britain were closed for most students, except for children of critical workers or vulnerable children who could not be safely cared for at home. End of year examinations were cancelled.

The second national lockdown took place during November 2020. From 5 November 2020, non-essential high street businesses were closed, and people were prohibited from meeting others outside of their “support bubble” in indoor spaces. However, schools remained open, and therefore this period was not included as part of this study.

The third national lockdown refers to the period January to March 2021. From 4 January 2021, the Prime Minister announced another lockdown in England, with rules similar to those in March 2020. Schools were closed from the following day, however remained open for children of critical workers or vulnerable children. End of year examinations were once again cancelled, as there was no guarantee that schools would reopen before the summer holidays.

During the first national lockdown, 4 in 10 (40%) students attended school in person, if only for a few days or on a part-time basis. There were no significant differences in in-person school attendance between the five deprivation groups. During the third national lockdown, just under one in five (17%) students attended school in person, and there were clear differences across deprivation groups, with a significantly higher proportion of students in the most deprived areas having attended school in person, compared with those in the least deprived areas (21% and 13%, respectively). The reduction in numbers by the third lockdown may be because parents or guardians adapted to home schooling and remote learning, allowing their children to study at home. The young people in this study were also a year older during this period, and therefore may have been more able to stay home to continue their education.

Figure 1: A lower proportion of students attended school in person during the third lockdown, with those in the most deprived areas being more likely to attend compared with less deprived areas

Proportion of students in England attending school in person during lockdowns, September 2021 to March 2022

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Proportion of students in England attending school in person during lockdowns, September 2021 to March 2022



Source: COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study dataset from the University College London, Sutton Trust and Kantar Public

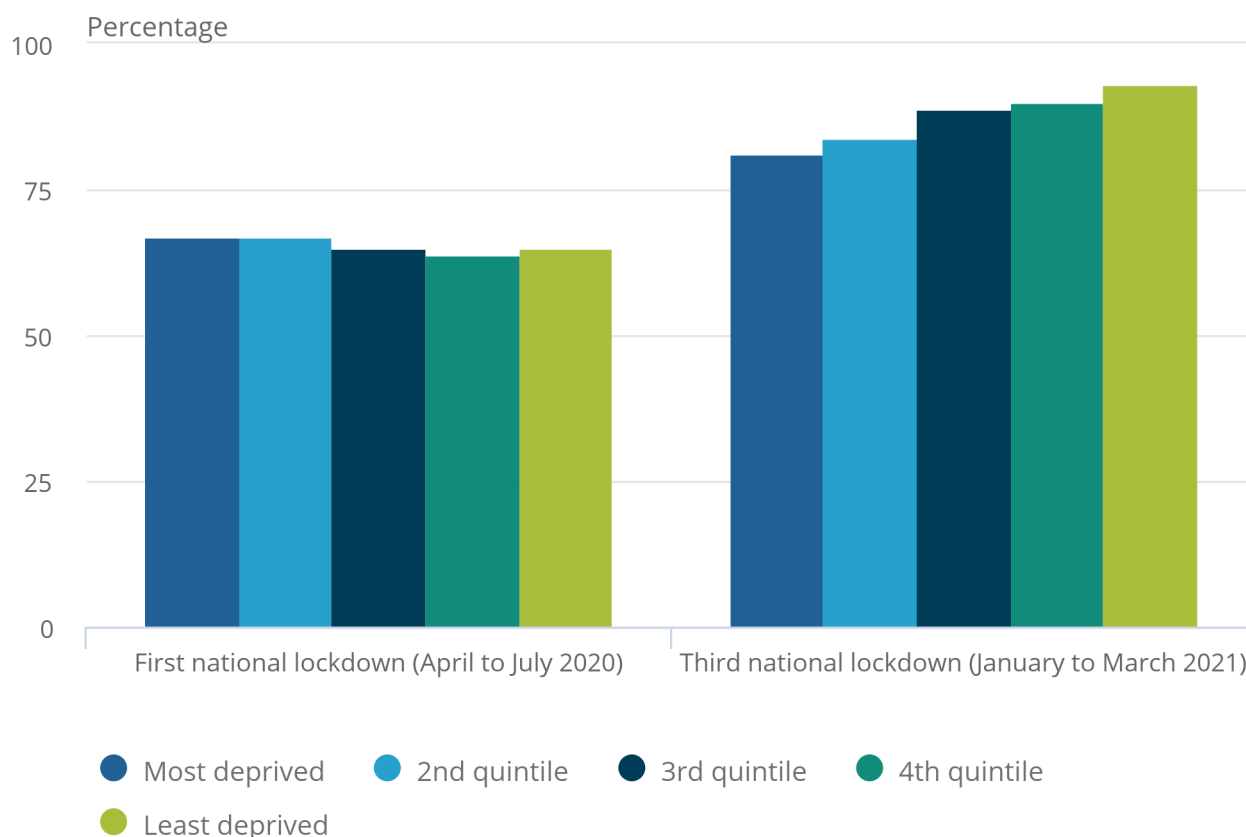
Two-thirds (66%) of young people said their school provided real-time online learning for subject lessons during the first lockdown, with no differences identified across deprivation groups. During the third lockdown period, there was an increase across all deprivation groups, with around 9 in 10 (87%) young people reporting that their school had provided real-time online learning. Young people in the most deprived areas were less likely to report this (81%) compared with those in the least deprived areas (93%). This might suggest schools in less deprived areas faced fewer barriers in improving their online provision compared with schools in more deprived areas.

Figure 2: Students in the most deprived areas were less likely than those in the least deprived areas to be provided with online learning for subject lessons during the third lockdown

Proportion of students in England with access to online learning for subject lessons during lockdowns, September 2021 to March 2022

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Proportion of students in England with access to online learning for subject lessons during lockdowns, September 2021 to March 2022



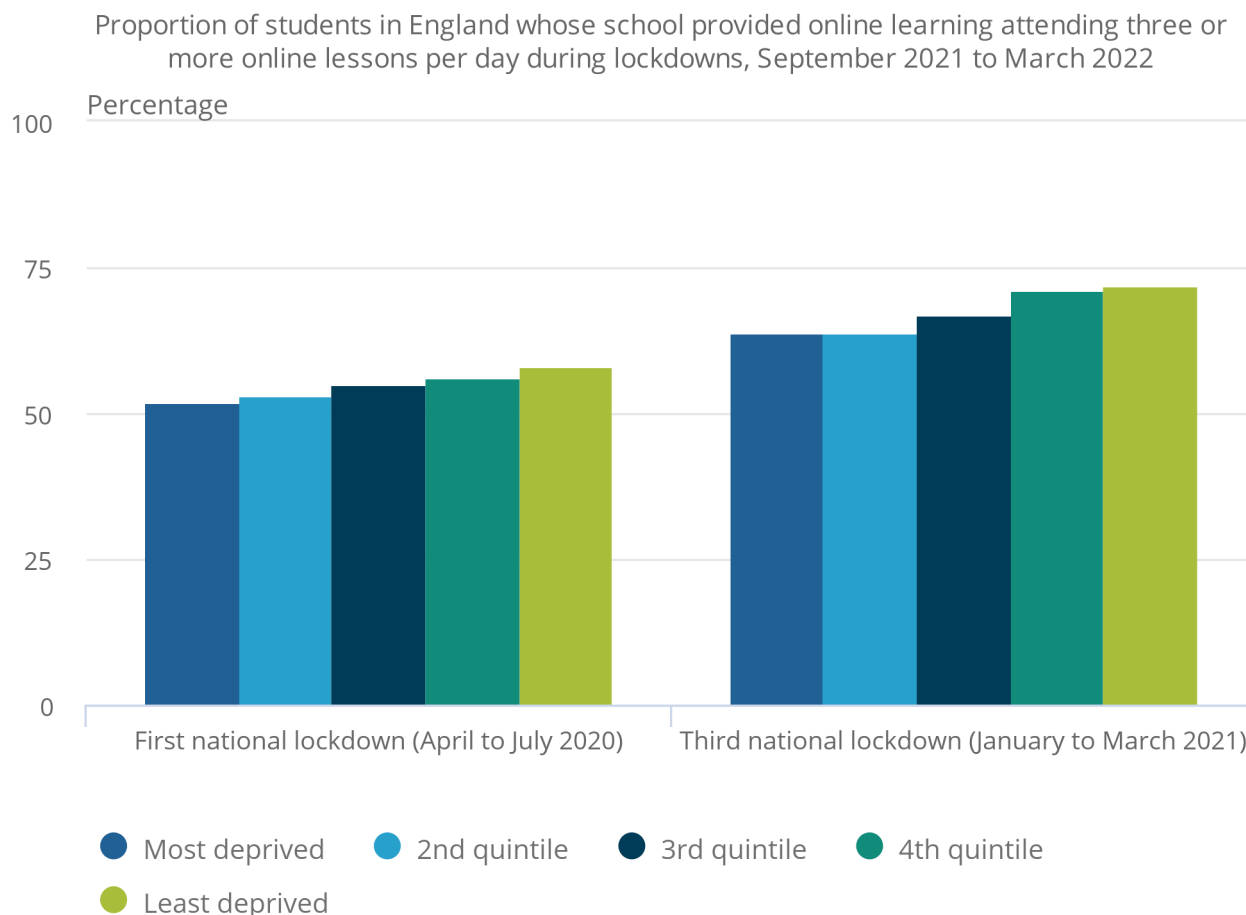
Source: COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study dataset from the University College London, Sutton Trust and Kantar Public

Young people who reported that their school had provided real-time online learning for subject lessons were asked, on average, how many live lessons they attended. During the first lockdown, 55% of all young people reported attending three or more lessons per day, with no significant differences between deprivation groups. However, during the third lockdown, a lower proportion of young people in the most deprived areas reported attending three or more lessons per day (64%) compared with those in the least deprived areas (72%).

Figure 3: Students in the most deprived areas were less likely to report attending three or more online lessons per day compared with those in the least deprived areas during the third lockdown

Proportion of students in England whose school provided online learning attending three or more online lessons per day during lockdowns, September 2021 to March 2022

Figure 3: Students in the most deprived areas were less likely to report attending three or more online lessons per day compared with those in the least deprived areas during the third lockdown



Source: COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study dataset from the University College London, Sutton Trust and Kantar Public

Most students reported having access to a suitable device to complete online work at the start of the first and third national lockdowns in England (86% and 89%, respectively). However, there were clear differences in access to devices between deprivation groups, where a lower proportion of students in the most deprived areas reported having access to a suitable device (such as a laptop, tablet or Chromebook) to access online work (78% at the start of the first lockdown and 83% at the start of the third lockdown), compared with those in the least deprived areas (94% and 95%, respectively). Additionally, having to share devices with other family members was reported as a barrier to remote learning by 13% and 9% of all students during the first and third lockdowns. Young people living in the most deprived areas were more likely to report this during the first (15%) and third (11%) lockdown, compared with those in the least deprived areas (9% and 6%, respectively).

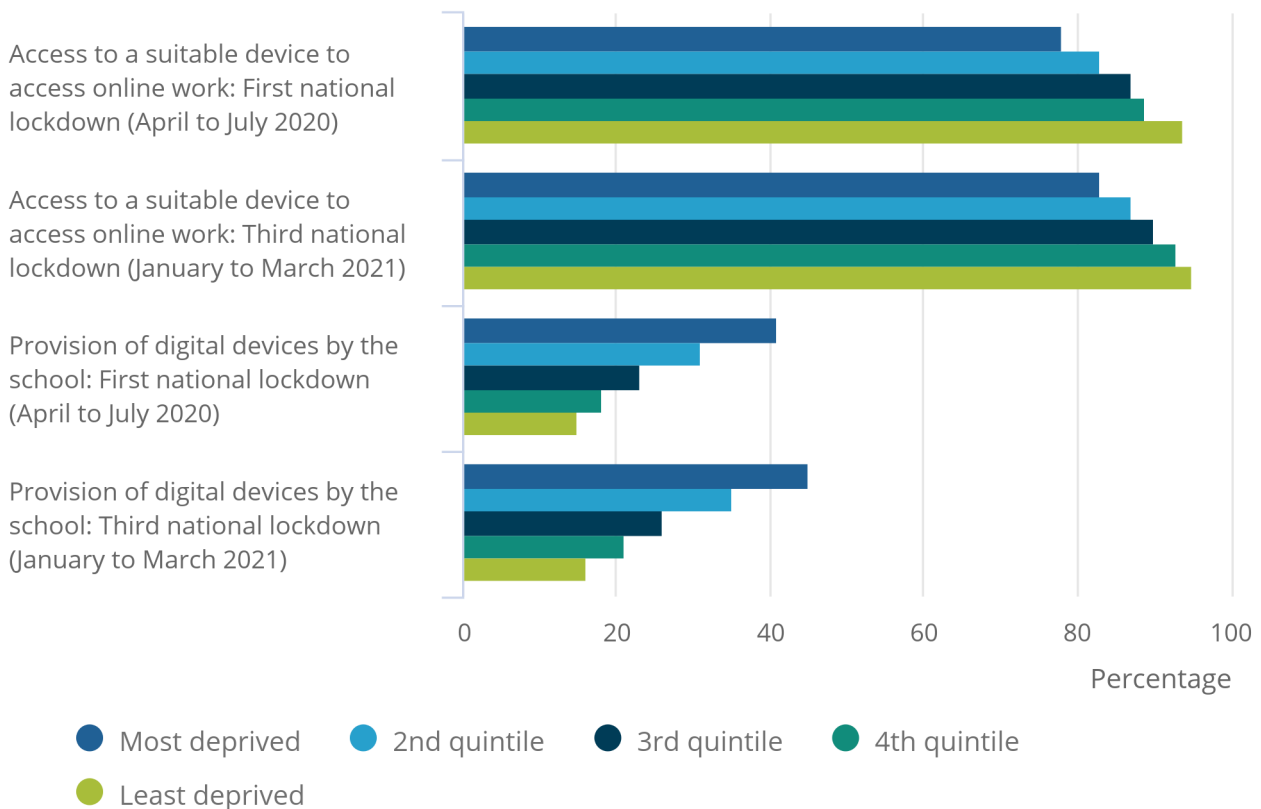
Perhaps indicative of these disparities in access to suitable devices, young people in the most deprived areas were more likely to be provided with digital devices by their school throughout the first (41%) and third (45%) lockdown periods, compared with students in the least deprived areas (15% and 16%, respectively).

Figure 4: Students in the most deprived areas were least likely to have access to suitable devices to complete work, but were most likely to be provided with devices by their school

Proportion of students in England reporting having access to suitable devices and provision of devices by their school, September 2021 to March 2022

Figure 4: Students in the most deprived areas were least likely to have access to suitable devices to complete work, but were most likely to be provided with devices by their school

Proportion of students in England reporting having access to suitable devices and provision of devices by their school, September 2021 to March 2022



Source: COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study dataset from the University College London, Sutton Trust and Kantar Public

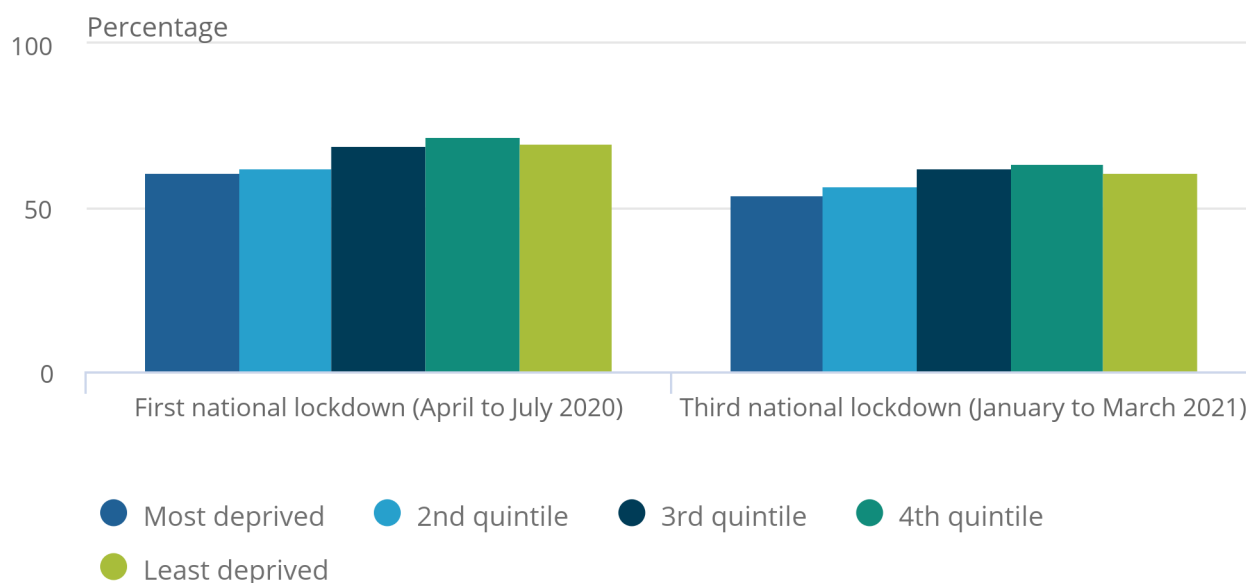
When looking at the barriers to remote learning experienced by young people, we found the most reported barrier during both lockdown periods was feeling unmotivated and struggling to engage with studies or work (reported by 66% in the first lockdown and 59% in the third lockdown). Students living in the most deprived areas were less likely to report this in the first and third lockdown (61% and 54%, respectively) than those in the least deprived areas (70% and 61%, respectively).

Figure 5: Young people in more deprived areas were less likely to report struggling with motivation as a learning barrier, compared with those in less deprived areas

Proportion of students in England reporting feeling unmotivated as a barrier to remote learning during lockdowns, September 2021 to March 2022

Figure 5: Young people in more deprived areas were less likely to report struggling with motivation as a learning barrier, compared with those in less deprived areas

Proportion of students in England reporting feeling unmotivated as a barrier to remote learning during lockdowns, September 2021 to March 2022



Source: COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study dataset from the University College London, Sutton Trust and Kantar Public

Overall, not having a suitable or quiet space to study during the first and third lockdowns was reported by 17% and 16% of all students, respectively. Students living in the most deprived areas were more likely to report this barrier during the first and third lockdown periods (21% and 20%, respectively), when compared with those in the least deprived areas (13% and 11%, respectively).

Similar data collected from our Opinions and Lifestyle Survey during the first lockdown found that among those whose eldest or only child (aged 16 to 18 years) was struggling to continue their education at home, 60% said that their child was struggling with a lack of motivation at home, while 20% reported that their child struggled with having a quiet space for studying. During the third lockdown, these data showed that 71% of adults reported a lack of motivation among their children, with 11% reporting lack of quiet space for studying. These findings may suggest that the outcomes of those living in the most deprived areas were driven by the challenges and barriers faced, rather than an absence of motivation. For more information on these data, please see our [Coronavirus and homeschooling in Great Britain: April to June 2020 article](#).

Further analysis on lockdown learning can be found in [COSMO's Briefing No. 1 – Lockdown Learning article](#).

Education catch-up and recovery

Young people were asked about the disruption to their education as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and how much they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements regarding their education catch-up.

Around 8 in 10 (79%) young people reported they agreed that their progress in Year 11 had suffered because of the disruption caused by coronavirus, with similar rates found across deprivation groups. However, those living in the most deprived areas were more likely to hold the perception that they had fallen behind their classmates as a result of the coronavirus pandemic (42%), compared with those in the least deprived areas (26%).

Young people living in the most deprived areas were less likely to agree that they felt prepared for the education, job, or training course when they started in September 2021 (34%), and that they had been able to catch up on learning they had missed as a result of the pandemic (33%), compared with those in the least deprived areas (43% and 39%, respectively).

Figure 6: Students in the most deprived areas were more likely to report they had fallen behind their classmates due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

Proportions of students in England who agreed with the following statements around catch-up concerns, September 2021 to March 2022

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Among young people who had attended school in person at any point during their final year, those in the most deprived areas of England were more likely to report that their school had offered the following catch-up activities when compared with those in the least deprived areas:

- extra one-to-one or individual tuition or support (31% and 24%, respectively)
- extra tuition or support in pairs or small groups (39% and 29%, respectively)
- additional classes during school holidays or at weekends (33% and 19%, respectively)

Where these activities were offered by schools, a higher proportion of those living in the most deprived areas also reported taking up the offer when compared with those in the least deprived areas. Young people in the most deprived areas were around twice as likely to take up the offer of extra one-to-one tuition (19%) compared with those in the least deprived areas (9%), while 26% of students in the most deprived areas reported taking up the offer of extra group tuition, compared with 18% of those in the least deprived areas. In addition, those in the most deprived areas were more likely to take up the offer of additional in-person classes or support on top of their usual timetable (29%) compared with those in the least deprived areas (24%).

Figure 7: Students in the most deprived areas were more likely to take up the offer of activities in their final year to catch-up on missed or disrupted learning due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

Proportion of students in England taking up catch-up activities in schools during Year 11, September 2021 to March 2022

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Young people were also asked how they felt their overall motivation to study and learn had been affected by the disruption to schools and colleges caused by coronavirus. Around half of young people (51%) reported feeling less motivated to learn and study because of the pandemic, while 25% reported feeling more motivated. Students living in the most deprived areas were more likely to report feeling more motivated to study (27%) as a result of the disruption compared with those in the least deprived areas (23%).

Further analysis on education catch-up and recovery can be found in [COSMO's Briefing No. 2 – Education recovery and catch-up article](#).

Future plans and aspirations

Young people were asked about information, advice and guidance (IAG) they may have received to assist in making decisions about their future. Students living in the most deprived areas of England were less likely to have accessed school-based IAG (66%) when compared with those in the least deprived areas (73%). Similar to the school-based IAG, those in the most deprived areas were less likely to receive informal advice from their parent or guardian, sibling, other family members, friends, or others (89%) when compared with those in the least deprived areas (95%).

Young people were asked how likely it is that they will ever apply to university to do a degree. Around 7 in 10 (71%) students said they thought it was likely they would apply, with rates lower for those in the most deprived areas (65%) compared with the least deprived (77%). Among those who said they were likely to apply to university, students in the most deprived areas have less confidence in their likelihood of getting into university, with 11% saying it is unlikely compared with 4% of those in the least deprived areas.

These figures are slightly below pre-pandemic levels, where [data from the Sutton Trust in 2019 \(PDF, 486KB\)](#) indicated that 77% of students aged 11 to 16 years in England and Wales reported they would be likely to go into higher education when they are old enough.

When young people were asked what they would most likely be doing in two years' time, more than half (54%) said they would be studying full-time for a degree or other qualification. This was reported by fewer students in the most deprived areas (47%), compared with two-thirds (63%) of those in the least deprived areas. In contrast, young people in the most deprived areas were more likely to say they would either be looking for work or unemployed (10%), doing an apprenticeship or similar training (19%), or be in a full-time job doing 30 or more hours a week (17%), compared with those in the least deprived areas (6%, 15% and 9%, respectively).

Figure 8: Just under a half of students in the most deprived areas reported they would be in full time education in two years' time, compared with almost two-thirds of students in the least deprived areas

Proportion of students in England reporting what they are most likely to be doing in two years' time, September 2021 to March 2022

Download this chart

[.xlsx](#)

Further analysis on future plans and aspirations can be found in [COSMO's Briefing No. 3 – Future Plans and Aspirations article](#).

3 . Deprivation inequalities in the experiences of GCSE students during coronavirus (COVID-19) data

[Deprivation inequalities in the experiences of GCSE students in England during coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)

Dataset | Released 2 June 2023

Data on the experiences of GCSE students in England during the coronavirus pandemic, by income-related deprivation. Estimates on experiences of remote learning, education recovery and catch-up activities and aspirations for the future, using the COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study dataset.

4 . Glossary

Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI)

Deprivation is measured using the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI). This measures the proportion of all children aged 0 to 15 years living in income deprived families.

It is a subset of the Income Deprivation Domain that measures the proportion of the population in an area experiencing deprivation relating to low income. The definition of low income used includes both those people that are out-of-work, and those that are in work but who have low earnings (and who satisfy the respective means tests).

"Most deprived" includes the 20% most deprived Lower Layer Super Output Area (LSOAs) in England, while "Least deprived" includes the 20% least deprived LSOAs in England. For more information, see the [English indices of deprivation 2019](#).

Statistical significance

This article presents a summary of results, with further data including [confidence intervals](#) for the estimates shown in the charts presented contained in the associated datasets. Where comparisons between groups are presented, 95% confidence intervals should be used to assess the [statistical significance](#) of the change.

5 . Data sources and quality

COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study

This article uses data from the first wave of the COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities (COSMO) study. This study was run in collaboration between University College London (UCL)'s Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO) and Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS), the Sutton Trust and Kantar Public.

The study made use of a representative sample of around 13,000 young people in England who were in Year 11 in the 2020 to 2021 academic year, and therefore studying for their GCSEs during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The data collection for the first wave was carried out between September 2021 and March 2022, predominantly online, with a subset of web survey non-respondents invited to take part in person.

Weighting

Survey weights were applied to ensure the estimates were representative of the population of interest (young people in Year 11 in the 2020 to 2021 academic year) and could be generalised.

Weights were required to account for the disproportionate sample design and non-response.

More information on the survey weighting can be found in the [COSMO Data User Guide \(PDF, 975KB\)](#).

6 . Related links

[COSMO Study – Wave 1 Publications](#)

Webpage | Latest publication released 26 May 2023

A selection of COSMO headline briefing reports on a range of topics including lockdown learning, education recovery and catch-up, future plans and aspirations, mental health and well-being, and health impacts and behaviours.

[Coronavirus and homeschooling in Great Britain: April to June 2020](#)

Article | Released 22 July 2020

Analysis of homeschooling in Great Britain during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic from the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey.

[COSMO Data User Guide \(PDF, 975KB\)](#)

Guide | Released December 2022

Data user guide for the COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities Study.

7 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 2 June 2023, ONS website, article, [Deprivation inequalities in the experiences of GCSE students during coronavirus \(COVID-19\), England: September 2021 to March 2022](#)