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SCHOOL HEALTH
RESEARCH NETWORK

Summer holiday experiences and mental wellbeing on return to school

School Health & Wellbeing Research Brief, November 2019

The UK is one of the most unequal countries in the developed world. Inequalities in a range of health behaviours and in mental health emerge and widen throughout childhood and adolescence, meaning that young people from less affluent homes are more likely to experience poor health and do less well at school than their more affluent peers. But do young people's experiences in the school summer holidays have any bearing on this?

What we already know...

Food insecurity is increasing in the UK, with one in five young people living in homes with moderate to severe food insecurity.

Long school summer holidays can increase financial stress on less affluent families, constraining their ability to provide opportunities for their children for physical activity and social activities.

Young people from less affluent homes experience a greater degree of learning loss over the summer holiday than their peers from more affluent homes.



What we did...

- We used data from 101,910 students aged 11 to 16 who took part in the 2017 Student Health and Wellbeing Survey.
- Students were asked about spending time with friends, exercising, hunger and loneliness in the summer holidays, as well as questions to measure their family's level of affluence.
- They were also asked about their current mental wellbeing and about four symptoms of anxiety and depression: feeling low, irritability, feeling nervous or difficulties getting to sleep.
- We investigated the impact of summer holiday experiences on mental wellbeing and anxiety and depression on return to school and whether the impact differed between students from more or less affluent homes.

In a nutshell

- **Summer holiday experiences were linked to mental wellbeing on return to school. Students who exercised or spent time with friends in the holidays had higher mental wellbeing, whilst those who experienced hunger or loneliness had lower mental wellbeing.**
- **Students from less affluent homes were more likely to have lower mental wellbeing and more likely to report negative summer holiday experiences.**
- **Negative summer holiday experiences explained much of the relationship between family affluence and mental wellbeing, suggesting that improving summer holiday experiences for students from less affluent homes could reduce inequalities in mental wellbeing.**



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What we found...

School holiday experiences

- Nearly **1 in 6** students reported frequent experiences of loneliness in the summer holidays.
- **1 in 6** students said they 'never' or 'rarely' spent time with friends in the summer holidays.
- **1 in 16** students reported 'often' or 'always' going to bed hungry during the summer holidays.
- **1 in 4** students reported 'never' or 'rarely' exercising vigorously during the summer holidays.
- Students from less affluent families were more likely to report loneliness and going to bed hungry and less likely to report spending time with friends and exercising in the summer holidays.

Mental wellbeing

- Summer holiday experiences were linked to mental wellbeing on return to school. Students who exercised or spent time with friends in the holidays had higher mental wellbeing, whilst those

who experienced hunger or loneliness had lower mental wellbeing. The strongest relationship was seen between loneliness and wellbeing.

- Students from less affluent families had lower mental wellbeing on return to school, but nearly two-thirds of this relationship was explained by their summer holiday experiences.

Anxiety and depression

- Summer holiday experiences were also linked to symptoms of anxiety and depression on return to school. However, the relationship between experiencing these symptoms and family affluence was largely explained by students' summer holiday experiences.



Issues to consider

The lead researcher of this study was funded by Health and Care Research Wales.

The four symptoms used to assess anxiety and depression have not yet been validated as a measure for this.

Whilst students were asked about their past summer holiday experiences and their current wellbeing, the cross-sectional design of the survey means we cannot be sure that the former are a cause of the latter.

Some food insecure households may have been missed in the analysis if parents were skipping meals to provide for their children.

What does this mean for my school?

- **Students from less affluent families are more likely to experience poorer wellbeing on their return to school and their experiences during the summer holidays are important determinants of this.**
- **School holiday interventions to reduce loneliness, provide nutritious food and opportunities for physical activity may help to improve students' mental wellbeing on return to school and reduce inequalities in mental wellbeing.**

Read the research paper in full. Download for free here:

<https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/16/7/1107>

Morgan K et al (2019) Socio-Economic Inequalities in Adolescent Summer Holiday Experiences, and Mental Wellbeing on Return to School: Analysis of the School Health Research Network/Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children Survey in Wales. *International Journal of Environment Research and Public Health* 16(7): 1107