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Breaking down the gap

The role of school absence and pupil characteristics

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Foreword

Since we first published our Annual Report on the Disadvantage Gap in England back in 2016, it has become the leading indicator of educational inequalities. It has been used by us, by successive governments, Parliamentarians and other national charities to advocate for resources and evidence-based policies to close the disadvantage gap so that every child, irrespective of their background, has the opportunity to fulfil their potential and to thrive.

Over the past eight years, we have seen the disadvantage gap widen in all phases of education and the Covid-19 pandemic appeared to accelerate the widening of the gap. This report provides new and critical analysis to help us understand why the gap widened between 2019 and 2023.

Its findings are disturbing. In this report, we are confronted with the harsh impact of an education (and wider public service) system that has meant that record numbers of disadvantaged young people are missing school, for a range of reasons, and this has contributed to them falling considerably further behind their peers.

The reasons for these levels of absence are varied and often multi-faceted. Perhaps the "social contract" between parents and schools has been weakened, as some reports have suggested.

But there is evidence that the causes of absence are likely to be much more complex than that.

We know that there are long waiting times and high thresholds for access to Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services, leaving many young people feeling unable to face school. The diagnosis of SEND and then the ability to access appropriate education is still a massive challenge for many families across the country. Poor housing conditions may also be contributing to worsening health conditions amongst children.

This report also confronts us with the impacts of failing to intervene early enough in a child's life, despite a wealth of evidence telling us to do just that.

With SEND contributing to almost a quarter of the disadvantage gap at age 5 and prior attainment being a significant contributing factor to the widening of the gap as a child progresses through school, it is critical that we focus resources on early identification and intervention.

The forthcoming child poverty must genuinely unify public services, including health, education, housing and welfare to ensure that no child slips through the net and that every child thrives.

Executive summary

In EPI's most recent annual report, we presented trends in the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils and other vulnerable groups relative to their peers. In this report, we build on that analysis to provide an in-depth assessment of educational inequalities in England, comparing the pre- and post-pandemic periods, and consider:

- How disadvantage gaps and attainment gaps for other vulnerable groups have changed between 2019 and 2023;
- Whether disadvantaged or other vulnerable groups have lost out compared to their peers over this period, after adjusting for other factors affecting attainment; and
- How the characteristics of disadvantaged students contributed towards the size of the disadvantage gap in 2023.

Key findings

- **Pupil absence is a key, and growing, driver of the disadvantage gap**. If disadvantaged pupils had the same level of absence as their peers in 2023, **the attainment gap would have been almost one month smaller at age 11 and over four months smaller at age 16**. The growth in the gap since 2019 at age 16 can be entirely explained by higher levels of absence for disadvantaged pupils.
- We find that, at all key stages, **half (or more) of the gap is explained by the size of the gap in earlier stages**. For example, almost 60 per cent of the age 11 gap has already emerged by age 7.
- Disadvantaged students fall even further behind when they attend schools and colleges with lower-attaining intakes. This **peer effect adds over 1 month to the GCSE gap** in 2023, and a third of a grade to the 16-19 gap.
- **The attainment gap widened between 2019 and 2023 for pupils in reception year with special educational needs and disabilities compared to their peers**. This is particularly notable for children on SEN support who fell 0.7 months further behind between 2019 and 2023, one of the largest gap-increases of all the vulnerable groups we consider at age 5.
- **The gender gap at GCSE has narrowed,** with boys substantially narrowing the gap with girls between 2019 and 2023. Whilst this is partly a good news story of boys catching-up, it also reflects the slower progress that girls are making during secondary school.
- While the 16-19 disadvantage gap changed little between 2019 and 2023 for those in education, **disadvantaged students have become less likely to continue into this critical final phase of compulsory education**.

More detailed findings by characteristics

Disadvantage

- The disadvantage gap for pupils in reception year widened to 4.6 months in 2023, an increase of 0.4 months from 2019. Even when comparing with non-disadvantaged children who are similar in terms of other characteristics, we still find that the disadvantage gap widened over this period. Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) make a key contribution to the disadvantage gap at age 5, with a higher prevalence of (identified) SEND among disadvantaged pupils accounting for nearly one-quarter (or 1.1 months) of the total gap of 4.6 months in 2023.
- The disadvantage gap at age 11 increased to 10.3 months in 2023. This represents an increase in the gap of 0.7 months since 2019. Around 0.3 months of the increase is associated with rising absences among disadvantaged pupils in key stage 2 (KS2) since 2019.
- In 2023, the disadvantage gap at key stage 4 (KS4) widened to 19.2 months, an increase of 0.5 months since 2019. This growth in the gap since 2019 at age 16 can be entirely explained by higher levels of absence for disadvantaged pupils. After prior attainment, differences in absence levels are now the single biggest driver of the disadvantage gap at age 16, contributing over 4 months to the gap in 2023. The peer effect of learning alongside pupils with low prior attainment also contributes over 1 month to the gap.
- The 16-19 disadvantage gap in 2023 was at a similar level to 2019. However, while the gap for those in education has remained stable, disadvantaged students have become less likely to continue to 16-19 education after the end of key stage 4. Differences in the type of provider attended and the average prior attainment of students' peers make a more substantial contribution to the gap in 16-19 education than in earlier phases.

Gender

- Girls in reception year were already 3.2 months ahead of boys in 2023, a wider gap than in 2019. However, when we adjust for other factors (such as gender differences in the proportion of children with SEND), we find that the gender gap has been stable over this period.
- In 2023, girls at the end of KS2 were 0.6 months ahead of boys, a decrease in their lead of 1.9 months since 2019. After adjusting for differences in prior attainment and other factors, the decrease was reduced to 1.3 months.
- The gap between girls and boys at age 16 decreased by 1.9 months between 2019 and 2023. After adjusting for other differences in characteristics (such as prior attainment and absence) the gap narrowed further still, by 3.2 months.
- In the 16-19 phase, girls' lead over boys narrowed by 0.13 of a grade since 2019. The narrowing of the gap was only marginally more pronounced when prior attainment and other background characteristics were adjusted for.

Special educational needs and disabilities

- The gap for pupils in reception year on SEN support widened by 0.7 months between 2019 and 2023, one of the biggest gap-increases of all the vulnerable groups we consider at age 5. Even when we adjust for other characteristics, such as disadvantage, this finding still holds. The gap also widened among pupils with more complex needs set out in EHCPs, by 0.4 months since 2019 once we adjust for other factors.
- For pupils aged 11, the SEN support and EHCP gaps narrowed by 1.3 and 0.7 months respectively since 2019. After adjusting for prior attainment and other factors, the narrowing of the SEN support gap decreased to 0.9 months, whilst the narrowing of the EHCP gap increased to 0.9 months.
- At age 16, the attainment gap for students receiving SEN support, after adjusting for other characteristics, narrowed by 1.1 months between 2019 and 2023. The EHCP gap saw a more significant reduction, narrowing by 1.9 months. The worsening absence rates among students with SEN slowed the narrowing of the gap over this period.
- Compared to 2019, the 16-19 gap between students with an EHCP and those with no identified needs narrowed by two-thirds of a grade. Similarly, the gap for those with special educational needs without an EHCP narrowed by three-fifths of a grade over this period. When prior attainment and student characteristics are adjusted for, the narrowing of these gaps is reduced by roughly 50 per cent.

Ethnicity and English as an additional language

- White British pupils in reception year had higher levels of development on average than most other ethnic groups in 2023. Looking at changes since 2019, only Gypsy Roma and pupils of any other White background managed to narrow the gap after adjusting for other factors, whilst the gap increased for Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Any other Asian background, and Black African pupils.
- After adjusting for differences in other characteristics, such as prior attainment, pupils aged 11 from Chinese, Indian, and Any Other Asian Backgrounds improved their attainment relative to White British pupils between 2019 and 2023, whilst the attainment of White Irish, Any Other White Background, White and Black Caribbean, and Black African pupils declined.
- Between 2019 and 2023 most ethnic groups improved their progress during secondary school, compared with White British pupils with similar characteristics.
- In the 16-19 phase, the attainment of students from most ethnic groups improved relative to White British students between 2019 and 2023. However, most of these differences could be accounted for by changes in prior attainment or other student and provider characteristics. The most notable exceptions to this were Bangladeshi students, for whom the gap relative to White British students widened, and White Irish and White and Asian students, whose attainment relative to White British students improved, even when compositional differences were taken into account.

- Pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) in reception year were 1.8 months behind their peers in 2023. This marks a small (0.1 month) increase since 2019 but is not statistically different, once we adjust for other factors.
- For students at the end of KS2 and KS4, the gap significantly narrowed for EAL pupils only recently joining the English state-school system, though around half of the narrowing is accounted for by differences in the other characteristics of these pupils.

Region

- Although London had higher levels of development among its reception-aged pupils in 2023 than most other regions, looking at changes between 2019 and 2023, and after adjusting for differences in the pupil populations, we find a narrowing of regional inequalities, with four of the eight other regions catching up.
- At KS2, pupils in London continued to outperform most other regions in 2023. Since 2019, and adjusting for differences in pupil populations, the regional gap further widened for the North East and Yorkshire and The Humber, and narrowed for the West and East of England.
- In 2023, London continued to perform ahead of all other regions at GCSE. After adjusting for differences in student populations, our model shows that, since 2019 the gap widened for the North West, and narrowed for the South West.
- In the 16-19 phase, the gap between London and all other regions widened between 2019 and 2023. In most regions, the extent to which students in London pulled away decreased substantially when differences in student characteristics were taken into account.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, we make the following recommendations:

1. Our analysis confirms that much of the gap at later phases can be traced back to earlier phases, with disadvantaged children already 4.6 months behind on starting school. The government must prioritise early intervention to reduce gaps throughout schooling. To improve school readiness, we recommend **increasing the early years pupil premium to match the pupil premium** in later school years, **ensuring a high-quality early years workforce and improved accessibility** for childcare for disadvantaged children in particular.

2. There is a pressing need to improve outcomes for the youngest pupils with SEND who have been some of the worst affected in the wake of the pandemic. As part of wider SEND reforms, the government should **prioritise training in child development and different types of SEND**, making it a mandatory part of initial teacher training and early career development.

3. High and increasing levels of absence for disadvantaged pupils are the primary reason why the disadvantage gap at age 16 has grown since 2019. The government cannot tackle the disadvantage gap without getting to grips with the root causes of pupil absence. Any **absence strategy needs to include improved SEND identification, better mental health**

support in and outside of schools, fostering pupils' sense of school belonging and plans to improve the evidence base on what works.

4. The 16-19 gap remains stubbornly high and masks that increasing numbers of disadvantaged students are not continuing into post-16 education at all. We therefore reiterate our call for the government to **introduce a student premium for disadvantaged students in 16-19 education**, to help address the cliff-edge in funding for disadvantaged students at age 16. The government also needs to **look again at the most effective way to tackle the drop-off in participation** among disadvantaged students at this critical transition point, such as **increasing incentives for employers to take on younger apprentices.**

5. Given that gaps remain stubbornly high — and in some cases are widening — for disadvantaged and other vulnerable groups, we welcome the joined-up approach that the government is taking to addressing child poverty as one of its top priorities. When it publishes its child poverty strategy in spring 2025, it should specifically consider:
    a. **centralising auto-enrolment for FSM** to ensure more complete coverage;
    b. **abolishing the Two Child Limit and the benefits cap**;
    c. **reintroducing statutory targets** to reduce child poverty, as in Scotland, to signal political commitment and ensure the government is held to account; and
    d. **making free meals available for pre-school children** and funding them adequately.

6. Our analysis shows that disadvantaged students tend to attain less well when they are clustered in schools and colleges with lower attaining intakes, highlighting the need to reduce segregation in the education system. We have previously called for **school admissions to be reformed** to improve access to high-quality, oversubscribed schools for disadvantaged pupils **and better information, advice and guidance** to address high-attaining disadvantaged students opting for post-16 qualifications associated with lower prior attainment (i.e. academic mismatch).

7. Our analysis shows that girls are increasingly making less progress during secondary school than boys since the pandemic. We therefore reiterate our call for more **research to understand the declining attainment of girls** and any links with the widening of the gender mental health gap in recent years.

Introduction and methodology

1. Introduction

Each year, EPI publishes its assessment of the disadvantage gap in England, alongside attainment gaps for other vulnerable groups. In our 2024 publication, we found widening disadvantage gaps across nearly all phases of education based on data for 2023.[1]

The return to normal?

Through this report, we build on that descriptive analysis to improve our understanding of how attainment gaps for different groups of children and young people have changed between 2019 and 2023 across all compulsory education phases, once we take into account other factors that affect attainment. By adjusting for other characteristics of students, their institutions and regions, this report provides an in-depth assessment of how underlying educational inequalities in England are changing. It highlights the vulnerable groups and parts of the country which are falling further behind in the wake of the pandemic and where progress is being made.

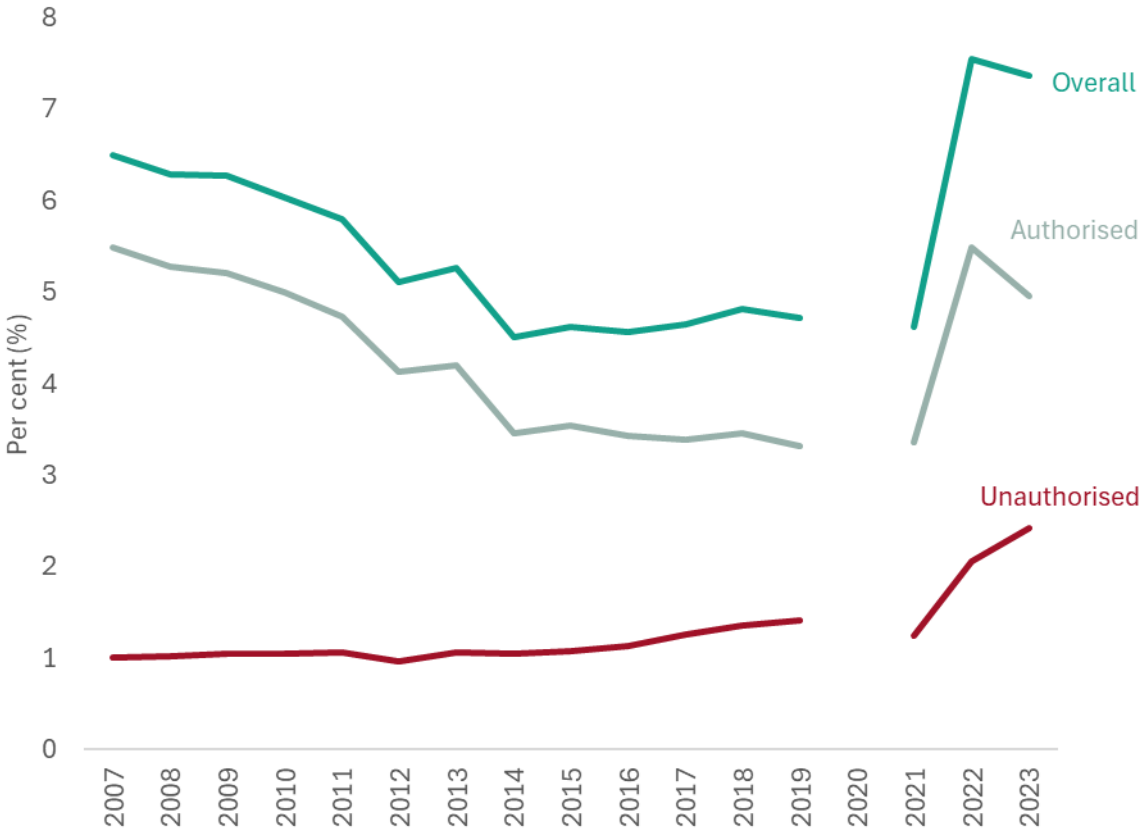
Being able to identify and quantify the underlying drivers of the disadvantage gap is critical for better understanding the state of educational inequalities that the new government has inherited. 2023 was the first 'return to normal' year for education, with exams returning to pre-pandemic grade distributions and schools and colleges becoming accountable for student outcomes once again. But whilst grading systems may resemble pre-pandemic norms, the impact of the pandemic is far from over. Results for disadvantaged pupils in maths and reading remain below pre-pandemic norms, and the wider context remains challenging with rising child poverty, increasing numbers of children with SEND, and the tightest fiscal backdrop to the forthcoming spending review for many years.[2]

Rising absence levels

One of the single biggest challenges facing the education system in the wake of the pandemic has been unprecedented levels of pupil absence. Overall pupil absence levels increased sharply after the pandemic, reaching 7.6 per cent in 2022 and, despite falling since, remain at elevated levels (figure 1).[3] Alongside rising overall rates of pupil absence in the wake of the pandemic, there has been a longer-term trend of rising unauthorised absence. Although this predates the pandemic, the rise has since accelerated, and unauthorised absence rates are now 40 per cent higher at primary school and over 80 per cent higher at secondary school than pre-pandemic.[4]

[1] David Robinson et al., 'EPI Annual Report 2024', Education Policy Institute, 16 July 2024, https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/annual-report-2024/.
[2] Jon Andrews, 'Star Assessments Benchmarking Report 2022/23', Education Policy Institute, 4 March 2024, https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/star-assessments-benchmarking-report-2022-23/.
[3] Department for Education, 'Pupil Absence in Schools in England, Academic Year 2022/23', 21 March 2024, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2022-23.
[4] Louis Hodge, 'Examining Post-Pandemic Absences in England (3)', Education Policy Institute, 9 August 2024, https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/examining-post-pandemic-absences-in-england-3/.

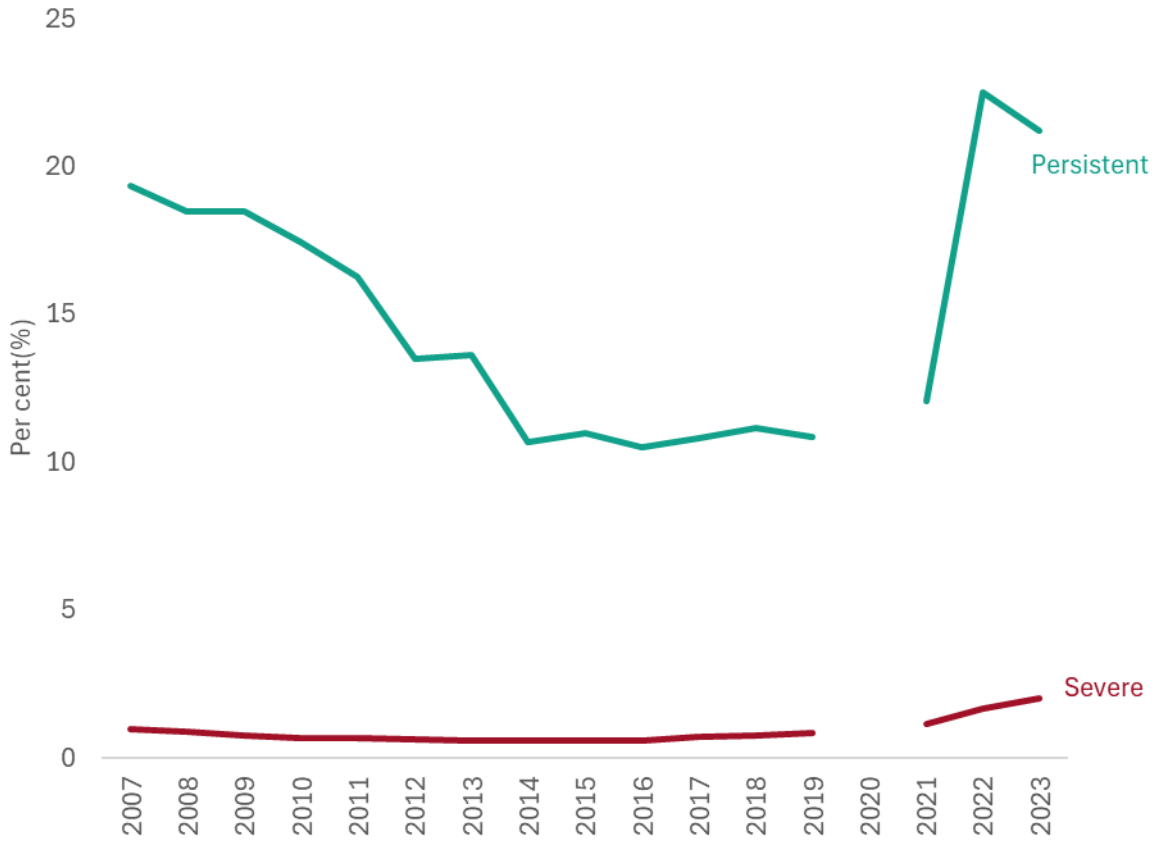
Figure 1: Absence for pupils aged 5-15 in state-funded schools in England from 2007 to 2023 – overall absence, authorise and unauthorised



Even more concerningly, persistent absence, defined as pupils missing at least 10 per cent of school sessions, more than doubled during the pandemic and over one-fifth of pupils remain persistently absent (figure 2).[5] Severe absence, defined as pupils missing at least 50 per cent of school sessions, affects far fewer pupils (2.2 per cent in spring 2024) but has risen even more sharply, almost tripling in relative terms, and does not yet appear to have peaked.[6]

[5] Department for Education, 'Pupil Absence in Schools in England, Academic Year 2022/23'.
[6] Department for Education, 'Pupil Absence in Schools in England, Autumn and Spring Term 2023/24', 17 October 2024, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england.

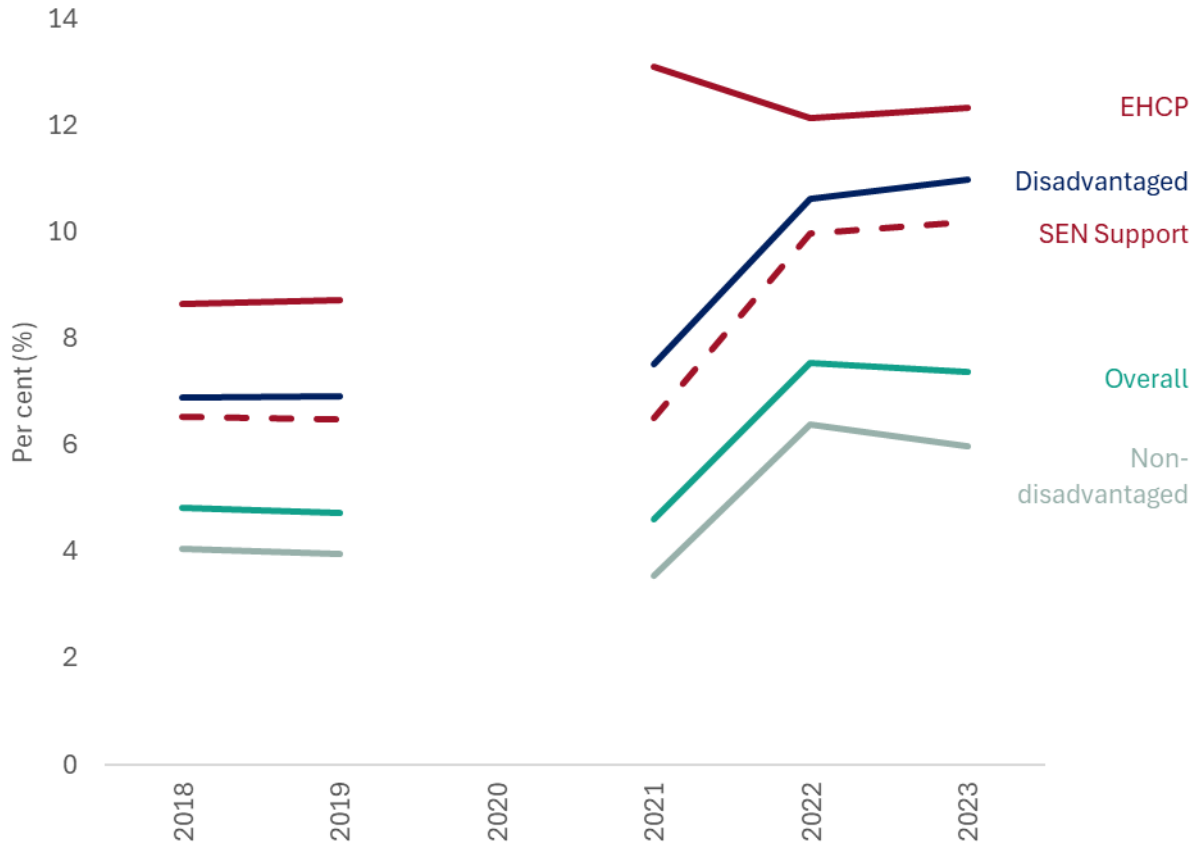
Figure 2: Persistent and severe absence for pupils aged 5-15 in state-funded schools in England from 2007 to 2023



Of key concern has been the impact on the most vulnerable pupils. Disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) have long had higher absence rates than their peers, but absence rates for these groups have risen most sharply since the pandemic (figure 3).[7] And whilst there is a clear link between pupil absence and worse GCSE attainment, as well as longer-term outcomes as young people transition into the labour market, much less is known about the specific role of absence as a driver of attainment gaps for vulnerable learners.[8]

[7] Department for Education, 'Pupil Absence in Schools in England, Academic Year 2022/23'.
[8] Edward Sosu et al., 'Understanding School Attendance, Educational Attainment, and Labour Market Outcomes', 2 September 2024, https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Understanding-School-Attendance-Educational-Attainment-and-Labour-Market-Outcomes-Report.pdf.

Figure 3: Absence for pupils aged 5-15 in state-funded schools in England from 2018 to 2023 for all pupils, disadvantaged pupils and pupils with special educational needs



Research questions

In this context, we consider the following research questions:

1. Did particular groups of learners or areas lose out in 2023 compared to 2019? That is, did attainment gaps widen for vulnerable learners or some regions, once we take into account differences that can be explained by other characteristics?
2. How much of the disadvantage attainment gap in 2023 can be explained by different factors, including pupil absence? Have these factors changed since 2019?

2. Methodology

Data sources

All findings presented in this report are derived from analysis of data held in the National Pupil Database (NPD) — specifically, the early years foundation stage (EYFS) profile, key stages 2, 4 and 5, and pupil-level school census files. For key stages 2 and 4 only, we also analyse pupil absence data derived from the half-termly school census.

We focus on children and young people attending state-funded schools and colleges in England. Our analysis excludes pupils whose sole (or main) registration is in alternative provision, pupil referral units, or hospital schools, as well as those attending independent schools.

Defining disadvantage

We define disadvantage based on eligibility for free school meals (FSM). Specifically:

- In reception, this is based on pupils eligible for FSM in the current academic year.
- In the primary and secondary school phases, it is based on pupils who are eligible for FSM at any point in the previous six years.
- In the 16–19 phase, where FSM data tends to be less reliable, disadvantage is based on whether a student was eligible for FSM at any point during the previous six years, as recorded at the end of secondary school.

Approach

The months of learning and grade gap measures used throughout this report are based on established methodologies, as defined in EPI's 2024 Annual Report.[9]

Our 2024 Annual Report focused on how attainment gaps changed between 2019 and 2023 (pre- and post-pandemic). These descriptive statistics set out the absolute changes, taking no account of compositional differences between cohorts. In this report, we build on our descriptive analysis to estimate how gaps would have changed, having accounted for differences in student, institution and regional characteristics.

To provide a greater understanding of how the attainment of different groups of pupils has changed since 2019, we have produced a number of ordinary least squares regression models. For each phase, we have fitted several models, all with student attainment as the dependent variable, and student, institution and regional characteristics as the independent variables.

Across all phases, our models use data pooled across the years 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2023. We do not include any data for the years 2020 and 2021 when assessments were cancelled (at ages 5 and

[9] Robinson et al., 'EPI Annual Report 2024'.

11) and exams at GCSE and A level were replaced with temporary alternative grading arrangements.

We use characteristic:year interaction terms to look at how the attainment gap for a given characteristic changed between 2019 and 2023 (with 2019 as the reference category). For example, the disadvantage:year term tells us how the attainment of a disadvantaged student in 2023 compares with a non-disadvantaged student in 2019 — equivalent to how much the gap widened over this period, controlling for other factors.

We have built up these models iteratively to allow us to examine how the interaction terms change, as we introduce additional controls for student characteristics, absence, and institutional and regional factors.

For the disadvantage gap, we further decompose the attainment gap in 2023, to estimate the proportion that can be explained by different characteristics, as described in the 'decompositional analysis' box in chapter 3. We have used the two-fold Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition for this purpose. We have aggregated unexplained components into a single category 'uneven effects of characteristics', other than the constant which is shown as 'unobserved factors'. We have included a breakdown of the 2019 gap in Annex A, and full model outputs across all our models will be made available separately on EPI's website.

We have controlled for background characteristics as consistently as possible between phases, but there are some notable differences, outlined below. Where students do not have a complete set of characteristics data for a given phase, they are dropped from our models allowing us to have the same set of students across all regression specifications which consequently removes any compositional differences that could affect our results. Note that by removing pupils with missing data from any of the variables included in our full model, our results are not directly comparable to those in our 2024 Annual Report which are based on the full student sample at each phase.

The one exception is our model for students arriving late to the state school system with English as an additional language (EAL), explained below.

Variables

Early years:

- Attainment is based on the statutory teacher-led assessments for the EYFS profile that take place towards the end of the reception year. Specifically, we use a pupil's total point score across twelve (out of seventeen) early learning goals which correspond to the Department for Education's 'good level of development' measure.[10] For each goal, children are assessed as either meeting the expected level of development at the end of reception year (score = 2) or not yet reaching this level (score = 1).[11] The total points score aggregates

[10] These goals relate to five areas of learning: communication and language; personal, social and emotional development; physical development; literacy; and mathematics.
[11] Although the EYFS was reformed in 2021, we have adjusted our time series to allow us to compare 2023 to earlier years.

scores across these goals, giving a maximum possible score of 24 for pupils meeting the expected level in each goal.

- As this is the first phase of education, it is not possible to account for prior attainment.
- We do not include absence data as a control variable because four-year-olds are not of compulsory school age and their absence information is indicative only.
- All students with English as an additional language are included, rather than just those arriving to the state system within the last two years, as in the key stage 2 and 4 analyses.

Key stages 2 and 4:

- At the end of primary school, pupil attainment is measured by statutory key stage 2 assessments. We base our attainment measure on pupils' average scaled scores in reading and maths.[12] Scaled scores for these domains are derived from national test results and can take values between 80 and 120. We include teacher-assessed attainment scores for pupils who do not reach the lowest measurable test score, with scores ranging from 59 to 79, to ensure their inclusion in the point distribution. Pupils with missing score data receive a score of zero for that component.
- To assess attainment at the end of secondary school, we measure pupils' average GCSE grades across English and maths. Pupils who fail or do not enter a relevant English or maths qualification by the end of key stage 4 receive a score of zero for that component.
- Prior attainment controls are included. For key stage 2, this is based on pupils' attainment at key stage 1 in reading, writing and maths. For key stage 4, this is based on attainment in reading and maths at key stage 2. Measures of key stage 1 and key stage 2 prior attainment have been standardised to allow for comparisons between years. We do not include a prior attainment:year interaction term to account for differences in prior attainment through time.
- Absence controls are included. For our regression models at both key stages 2 and 4, we create a cumulative pupil-level measure of absence averaged across the final three years of primary school (years 4-6) and secondary school (years 9-11).[13] By not going further back in a pupil's school history, we avoid using absence data from 2019/20 which was severely disrupted by the pandemic. We include this overall pupil-level absence measure in our regression models as a control. For our Oaxaca decomposition models, we further break down our absence measure into the percentage of authorised and unauthorised absences over the previous three years so we can separately quantify the individual contributions of these factors.
- Regressions relating to late-arriving EAL pupils do not include prior attainment as, by definition, these pupils do not have prior attainment from within the English state system.

[12] If either subject's result is missing at key stage 2, the average takes the value of the subject the pupil does have a score for.

[13] Our pupil-level cumulative measure of absence captures absences across different settings for pupils who are enrolled in more than one school. However, we filter out pupils who appear to have an implausibly high number of sessions. We set the cap on the overall number of sessions in a year at 418, to reflect the standard 380 sessions that a pupil typically has in any given year, plus 10 per cent tolerance.

Other models that include EAL as a control only include students who are not late arriving, as they are required to have prior attainment to be included in our models.

16-19:

- At the end of 16-19 study, we measure attainment as a total point score over students' best three qualifications, based on qualification size rather than number. We map all Level 1-3 qualifications onto the same scale, expressed as a total point score.
- There are no available absence data to use as a model control.
- Prior attainment controls have been included, along with a prior attainment:year interaction term. This interaction term was not included in models for earlier phases. This is because in the 16-19 phase, the change in participation rates may have caused compositional differences in the prior attainment of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students, in a way we would not expect for earlier phases.
- We do not include a control for English as an additional language in the 16-19 phase, as this data is not available for post 16 students. We do not take this information from their previous school census records as this data operates with too much of a lag and would miss out those who arrived most recently.

Main Findings

3. The disadvantage gap

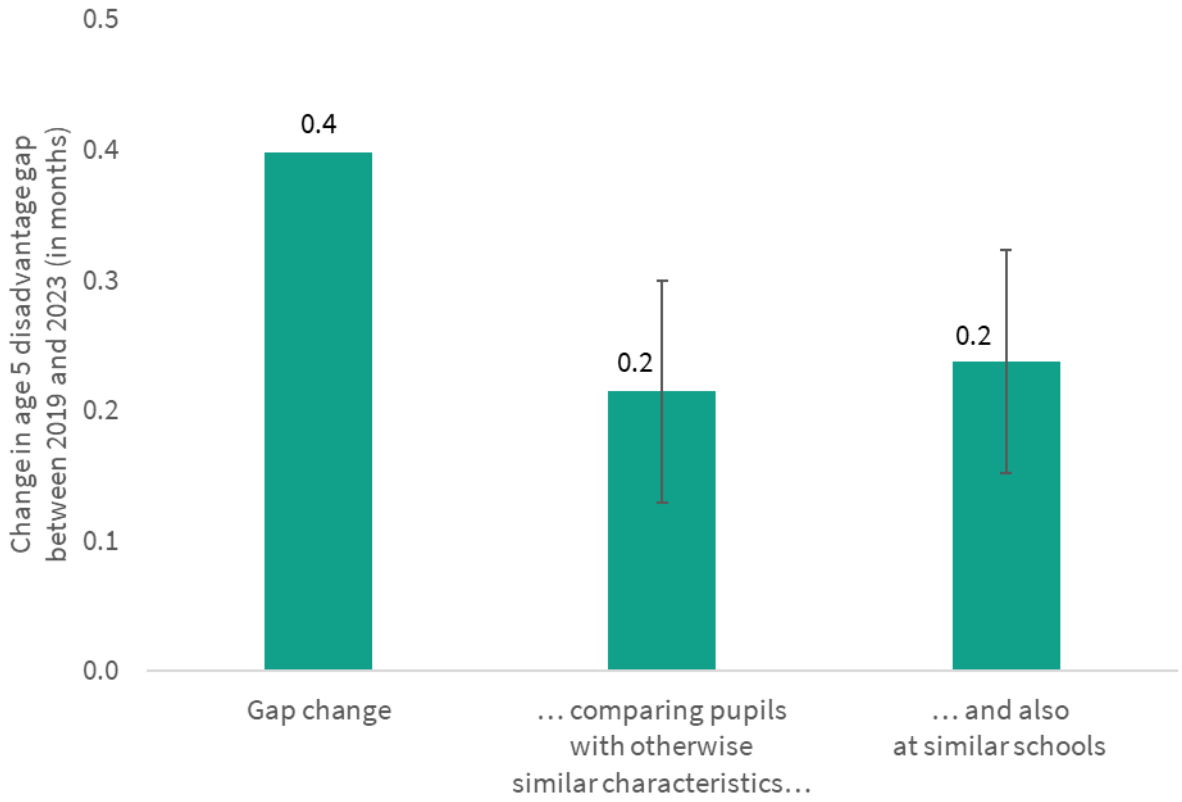
In this section, we consider the disadvantage gap for pupils across all compulsory phases of education. We use free school meal eligibility as our measure of disadvantage. We first present our descriptive gap findings, looking at the 2023 gap compared to 2019, as the latest pre-pandemic year.[14] We then consider the 'modelled gap' which uses additional statistical modelling to examine the gap change in 2023, after we have controlled for a range of student, institutional, and geographic characteristics. By controlling for other characteristics, our analysis indicates whether underlying gaps are widening for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in the wake of the pandemic. Finally, we present a breakdown of the disadvantage attainment gap in 2023 to highlight the individual contribution of different characteristics to the size of the gap and how this has changed since 2019. This helps shine a light on whether certain characteristics – like SEND or pupil absence – have become more important drivers of the disadvantage gap over time.

[14] The descriptive gaps presented here may differ from those presented in our 2024 Annual Report, as they are based on the subset of students who have complete data for all the variables included in our modelling.

Early years foundation stage

Nearly one-fifth (18 per cent) of reception pupils were disadvantaged in 2023. We find that the (descriptive) disadvantage gap at age 5 widened from 4.2 months in 2019 to 4.6 months in 2023 – an increase of 0.4 months. After we control for pupil, school and regional factors, we find that the gap still widened during this period, though by a smaller amount. This model (shown in the final bar chart of figure 4) confirms that, even allowing for a range of other factors, the disadvantage gap widened by 0.2 months between 2019 and 2023. This points to poverty itself as a source of widening educational inequalities in the wake of the pandemic.

Figure 4: Change in the disadvantage gap at age 5 between 2019 and 2023, including for models with pupil, school and regional controls



Note: a positive change in the disadvantage gap indicates that the gap widened between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

In the next section we breakdown the total (descriptive) disadvantage gap at age 5 in figure 1 to get a sense of how well this is explained by the differing characteristics of disadvantaged pupils compared to their peers.

In figure 5, we find that 1.1 months of the total (4.6 month) gap can be explained by differences in the characteristics of disadvantaged pupils at age 5 compared to their peers, including their schools and where they live. This means that three-quarters (3.5 months) of the total gap is unexplained by measurable differences in the characteristics of the two groups that are captured in our model. This is unsurprising given that the impact of family and community disadvantage is felt well before a child enters formal schooling, though our use of National Pupil Database (NPD) data precludes us from including these important pre-school factors in our model.[15]

Figure 5 also shows the contribution of individual characteristics towards the explained part of the disadvantage gap. Of the 1.1 month explained gap – which is capturing compositional differences between disadvantaged pupils and their peers – nearly all of this is explained by SEND. In other words, the higher prevalence of (identified) SEND among disadvantaged pupils is contributing over one month to the total disadvantage gap (of 4.6 months) in reception year. Other differences in (measurable) characteristics

Decomposition analysis

To understand how different factors contribute to the disadvantage gap, we have used the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition. Factors can contribute to the gap in two ways:

- Explained contribution - this is where differences in the composition of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students contribute towards the gap. For example, as disadvantaged students tend to have relatively lower attainment in earlier education phases, differences in prior attainment often contribute to the explained part of the gap.
- Unexplained contribution - this is where the effects of a factor (or characteristic) appear to differ between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students. For example, if an increase of ten scaled score points in pupils' key stage 2 results was associated with an increase of 1 GCSE grade for non-disadvantaged pupils, and only 0.8 grades for disadvantaged pupils, then prior attainment would be making an unexplained contribution to the gap.

The unexplained component of the gap also includes the part of the gap that can't be explained by any of our included factors, labelled as "unobserved factors". This will likely include the actual effect of disadvantage, once other factors are accounted for, as well as the effect of other factors not included in the available data e.g. parental education levels. For clarity, we combine all other unexplained contributions into a single category - "uneven effects of characteristics". Both explained and unexplained factors can either contribute to an increase in the gap or a reduction in the gap. The sum of these positive and negative factors will equal to the size of the gap.

This approach helps identify the sources of disparities between disadvantaged students and their peers which might have implications for where policy ought to focus.

[15] Whitney Crenna-Jennings, 'Key Drivers of the Disadvantage Gap Literature Review. Education in England Annual Report 2018' (Education Policy Institute, July 2018), https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/EPI-Annual-Report-2018-Lit-review.pdf.

between disadvantaged pupils and their peers contribute little to the explained gap.

Even once we allow for compositional differences in the two groups, uneven attainment effects (i.e., for a given observable characteristic) mean that disadvantaged pupils are 2.5 months behind otherwise similar non-disadvantaged pupils. There are also unobserved factors that contribute almost one month to the gap. These are underlying differences between disadvantaged pupils and their peers that are not captured by our model. This could be the effects of poverty itself which go beyond our simple binary measure of free school meal eligibility in reception year, including growing up in long-term poverty. It could also reflect the omission of out-of-school and pre-school factors in our model which are known to be important drivers of early educational outcomes.

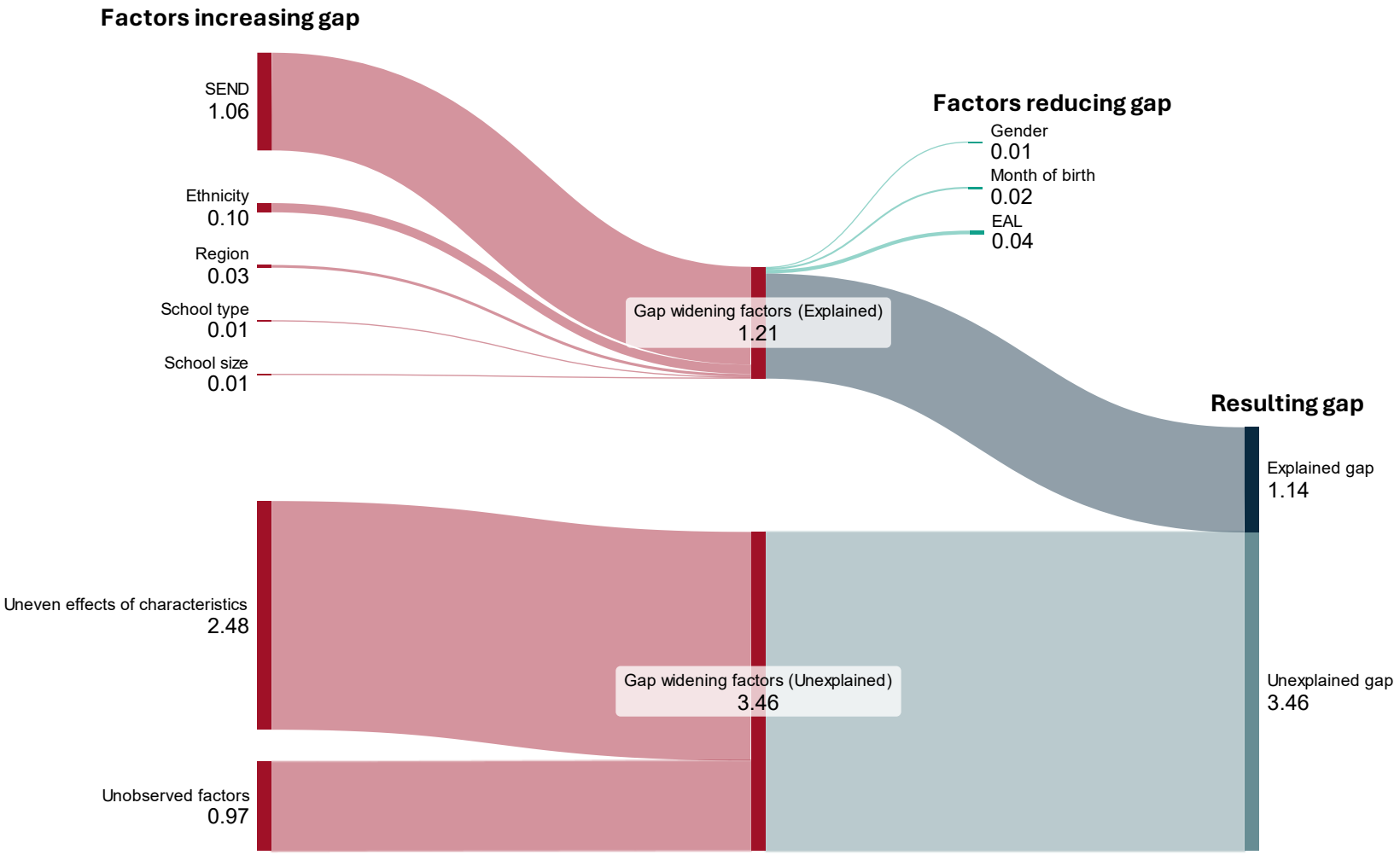
Overall, it appears that identified SEND makes a key contribution to the gap at age 5, with higher prevalence of SEND among disadvantaged pupils accounting for almost one-quarter (23 per cent) of the total disadvantage gap in 2023. When we perform a similar decomposition analysis for the disadvantage gap in 2019, we again find it accounts for a similar proportion (22 per cent) of the pre-pandemic gap.

It is worth noting that interpreting SEND as a driver of the gap at age 5 is not straightforward for several reasons. Firstly, the same teachers who undertake the EYFSP assessment will also advise on whether they think a child has SEND, and this is partly informed by whether the child meets the expected standard in their EYFSP assessment. The two are highly correlated because the EYFSP assessment is partly being used as a diagnostic for SEND.

Secondly, SEND can affect parental employment and earnings (in addition, parents of disabled children are more likely to themselves be disabled), both of which can increase the likelihood of being on benefits such as free school meals.

Thirdly, there are only a limited number of relevant characteristics in the NPD that we can include in our model at age 5. As children grow older, we can incorporate a richer set of variables, including prior attainment, which SEND might be an indirect proxy for at age 5. Further research is needed to understand the role of SEND (including the type and timing of identification) as a driver of the age 5 disadvantage gap.

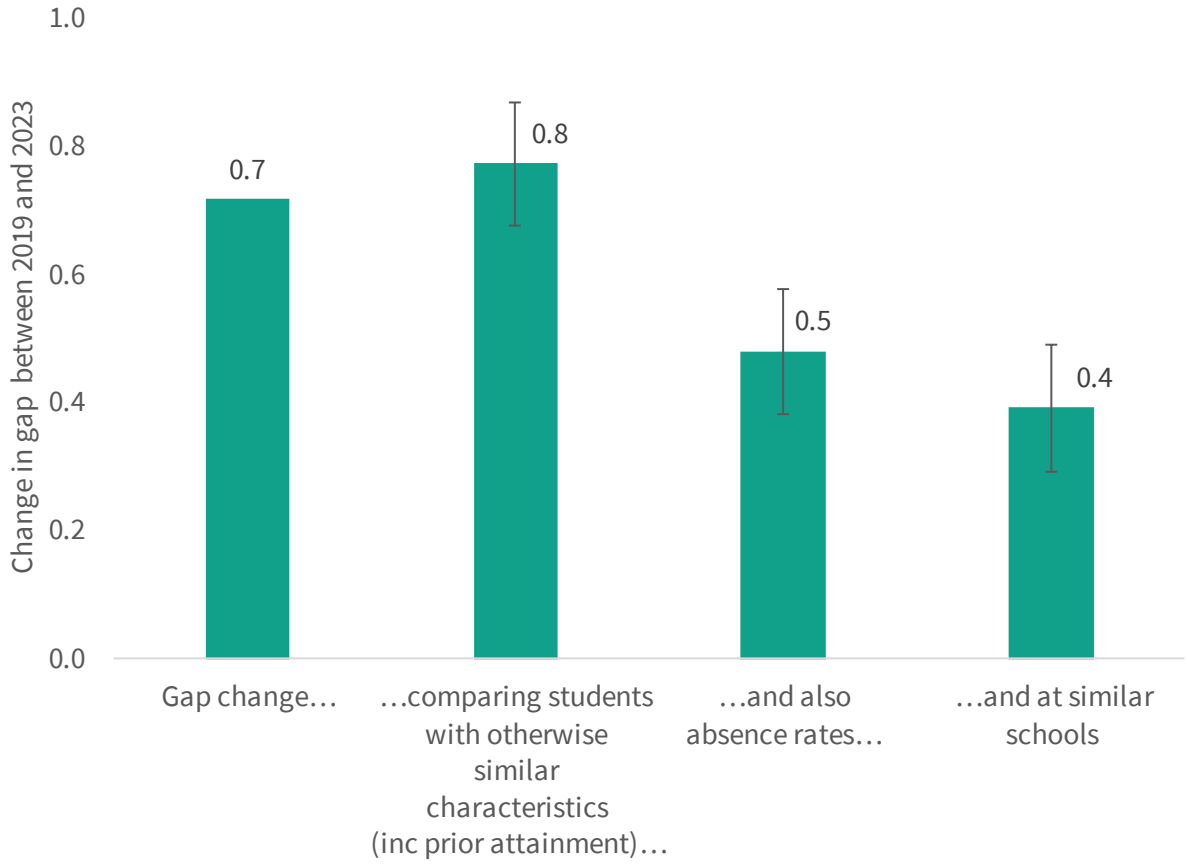
Figure 5: Decomposition of the disadvantage gap (in months) at age 5 in 2023



Primary school

The (descriptive) disadvantage gap in KS2 widened in 2023, to just over 10 months. Figure 6 illustrates how changes in the disadvantage gap between 2019 and 2023 are influenced by various pupil and school characteristics.[16] Incorporating additional pupil characteristics, such as SEND, gender and prior attainment into the model make little difference to the gap. However, adding absence into the model reduces the size of the gap by 0.3 months, suggesting that increasing absence levels for disadvantaged pupils have played an important role in the increase in the gap since 2019. Once we adjust for all factors, the model indicates that the disadvantage gap has widened by 0.4 months.

Figure 6: Change in the disadvantage gap at age 11 between 2019 and 2023, including for models with pupil, school and regional controls



Note: a positive change in the disadvantage gap indicates that the gap widened between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

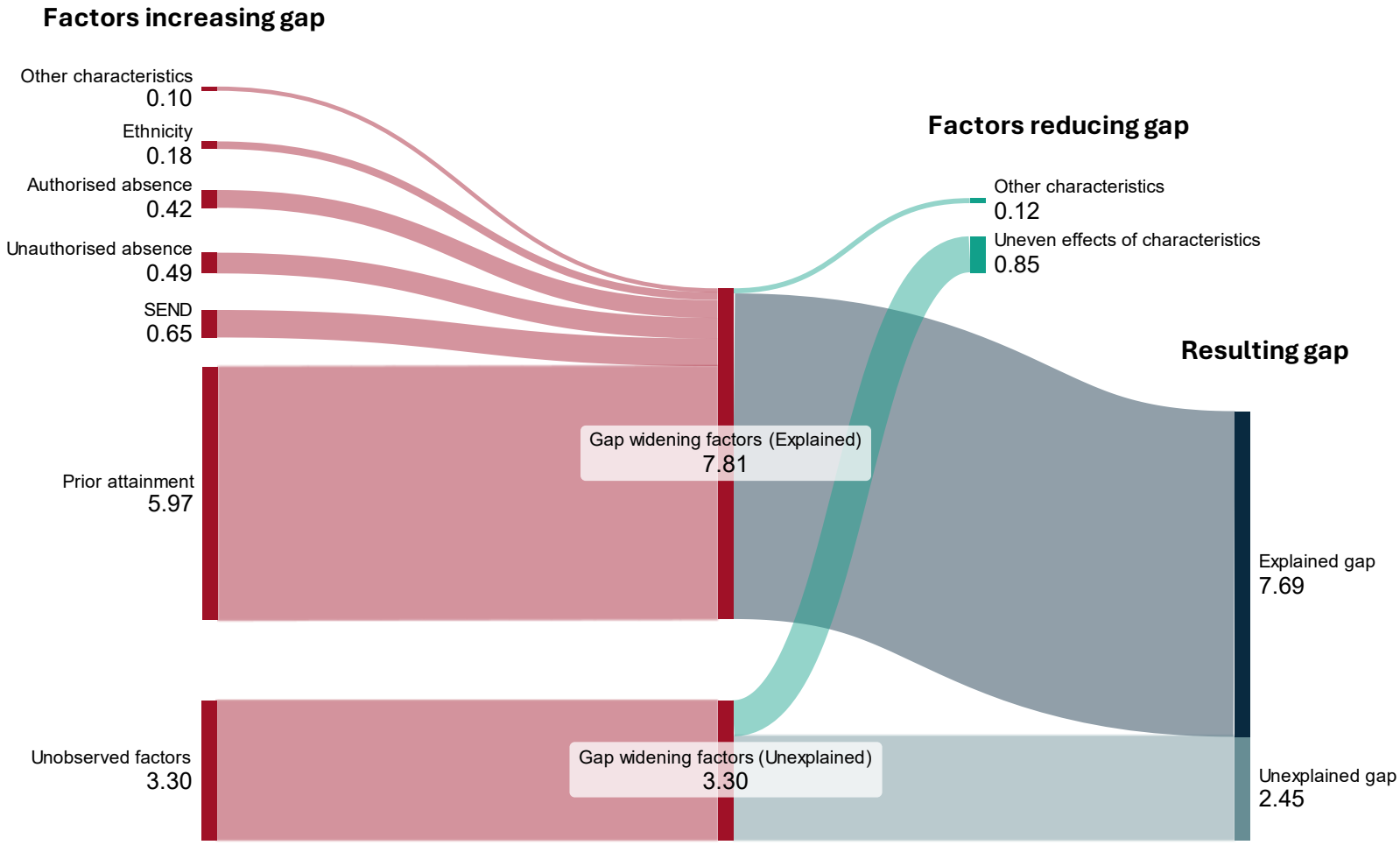
In figure 7, we find that 7.7 months of the total (10.1 month) gap can be explained by differences in the characteristics of disadvantaged pupils at age 11 compared to their peers. The remaining 2.4 months (one quarter) is unexplained and will include the direct impacts of disadvantage.

[16] As discussed in the Methodology, results from this analysis differ to those in our 2024 Annual Report, due to the removal of pupils with missing data from any of the variables included in our full model.

Amongst the factors that increase size of the gap (in red), prior attainment is the most significant (explained) contributor, indicating that the lower prior attainment of disadvantaged pupils accounts for 6 months (or around 60 per cent) of the gap. The higher levels of absence for disadvantaged pupils is the second largest contributor to the gap, accounting for just under a month, with 0.4 months due to authorised absences and 0.5 months due to unauthorised absences. Absence therefore contributes 9 per cent of the total gap at age 11 in 2023, an increase of 0.4 months from 2019 when it accounted for 6 per cent of the gap (see Annex A). Higher levels of SEND among disadvantaged pupils also contributes around 0.7 months to the gap, and an increase of 0.1 months since 2019.

The model also reveals that the gap would be 0.9 months larger if not for the fact that some factors appear to be more beneficial for the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, chiefly the impact of attending different types of school (see Annex A).

Figure 7: Decomposition of the disadvantage gap (in months) at age 11 in 2023



Note: Other characteristics includes region, school size, and month of birth for factors increasing gap, and gender, cohort attainment and school type for factors reducing gap

Secondary school

In 2023, the disadvantage gap in KS4 widened by 0.5 months.[17] Adjusting for pupil characteristics leads to an increase in the gap-widening, suggesting that there has been a decrease in the proportion of disadvantaged pupils with characteristics such as low prior attainment, relative to non-disadvantaged pupils. In contrast, we observed a reduction of the gap when incorporating absence into the model. This suggest that pupil absence has been a key driver of the gap, reflecting disadvantaged students being disproportionately affected by absence since 2019. School and regional differences do not substantially affect the remaining gap.

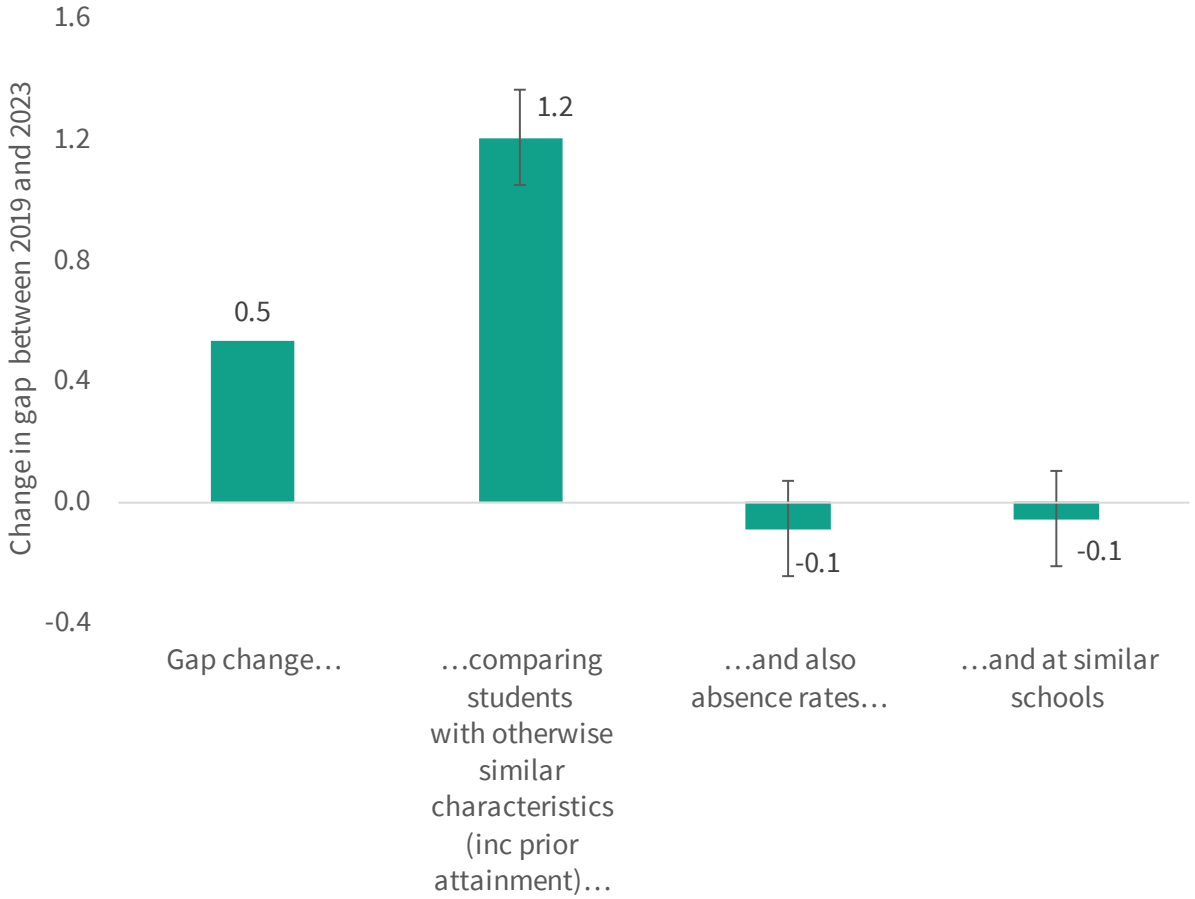
Overall, our findings suggest that absences account for the entire increase in the gap since 2019. However, it is important to note that absences may be symptomatic of, rather than the underlying cause of, the gap-widening which could reflect an unobserved factor (affecting both absences and attainment) such as declining mental health.

In figure 9, we find that 14.2 months of the total (18.6 month) gap can be explained by differences in the characteristics of disadvantaged pupils at age 16 compared to their peers. The remaining 4.4 months (one quarter) is unexplained and will include the direct impacts of disadvantage.

Amongst the factors that increase size of the gap (in red), prior attainment is the most significant (explained) contributor, indicating that the lower prior attainment of disadvantaged pupils accounts for around 9 months (or half) of the gap. The higher levels of absence for disadvantaged pupils are the second largest contributor to the gap, accounting for over 4 months, with 1.4 months due to authorised absences and 2.9 months due to unauthorised absences. Absence therefore contributes 23 per cent of the total gap in 2023, an increase of 1.5 months since 2019 when it accounted for 15 per cent of the gap (see Annex A).

[17] As discussed in the Methodology, results from this analysis differ to those in our 2024 Annual Report, due to the removal of pupils with missing data from any of the variables included in our full model.

Figure 8: Change in the disadvantage gap at age 16 between 2019 and 2023, including for models with pupil, school and regional controls

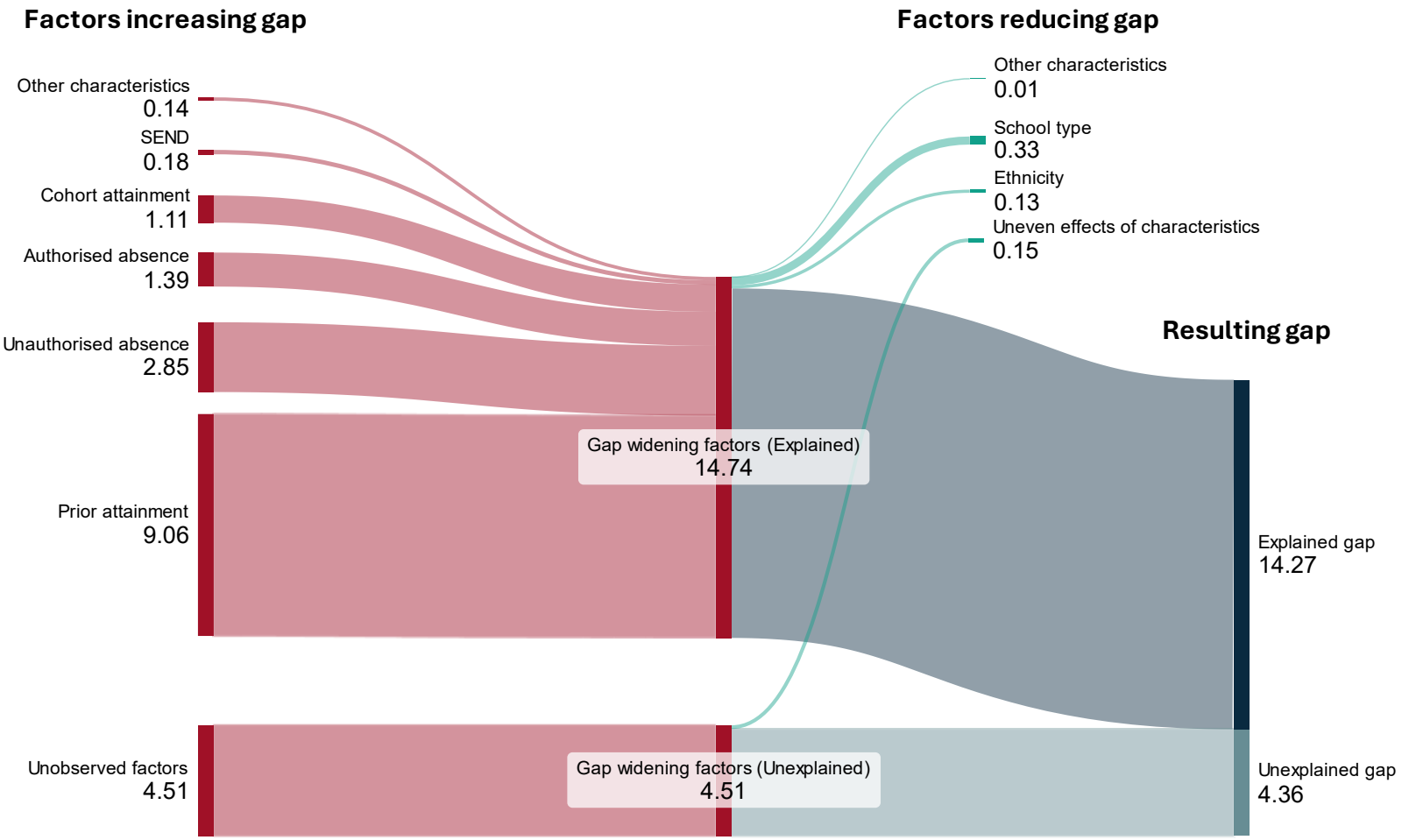


Note: a positive change in the disadvantage gap indicates that the gap widened between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

Disadvantaged pupils also being more likely to be learning alongside peers with low prior attainment also contributes 1.1 months to the gap. This cohort effect has also increased (by 0.2 months) since 2019, which implies that disadvantaged pupils are now more likely to cluster with less able pupils.

Some factors slightly reduced the gap in 2023. The most significant factor is school type. Its effect in narrowing the gap suggests that schools with a higher intake of disadvantaged students have a better capacity to mitigate the effects of disadvantage on GCSE grades. The positive impact of ethnicity suggests that ethnic groups with a higher prevalence of disadvantaged students tend to achieve higher overall attainment, thereby contributing to the narrowing of the gap.

Figure 9: Decomposition of the disadvantage gap (in months) at age 16 in 2023

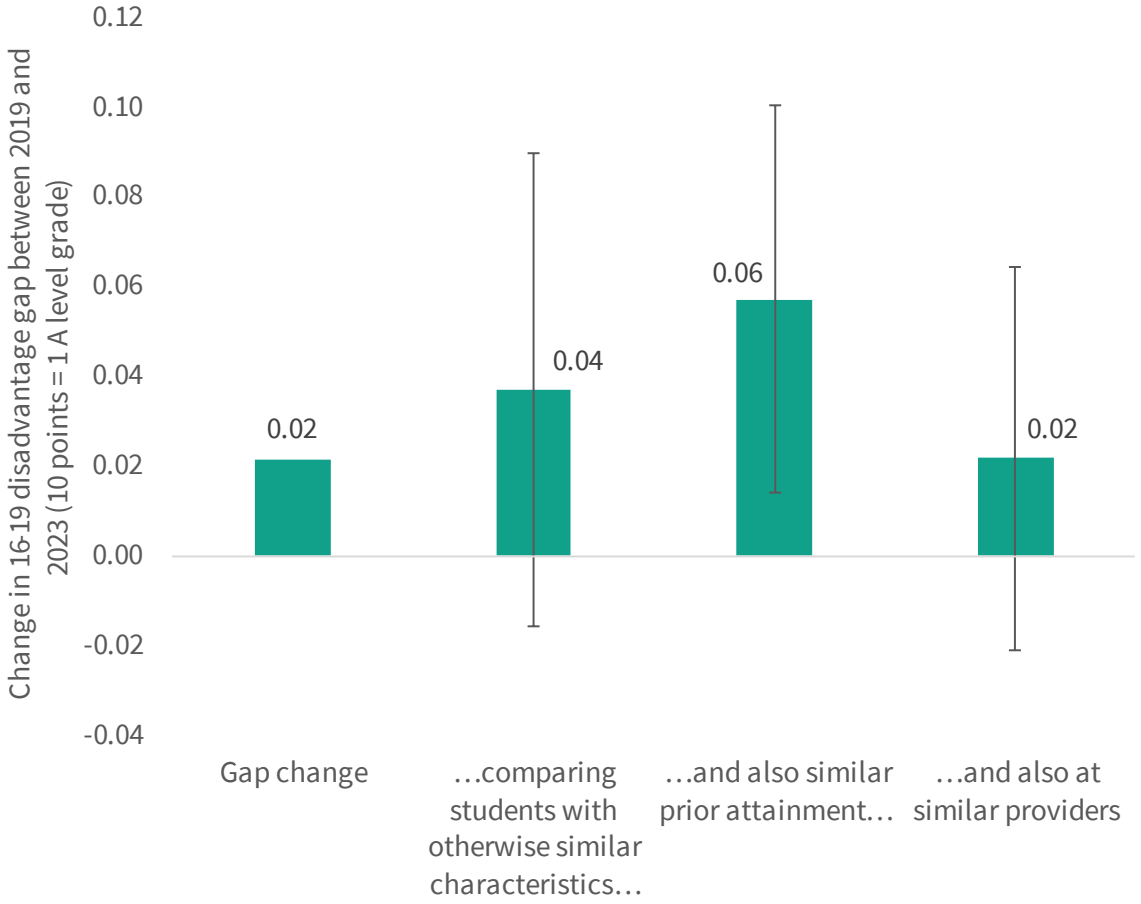


Note: Other characteristics includes gender, and month of birth for factors increasing gap, and school size and region for factors reducing gap

16-19 education

In the 16-19 phase, the disadvantage gap changed very little between 2019 and 2023 (2 per cent of one A level grade over students' best three qualifications). We see a greater widening when we account for student characteristics and prior attainment. Although this change was statistically significant, at just six per cent of one A level grade, it is not a substantial variation to observe year-on-year. When we further control for region and provider characteristics, the widening of the gap was no longer statistically significant.

Figure 10: Change in the 16-19 disadvantage gap between 2019 and 2023, including for models with student, provider and regional controls



Note: a positive change in the disadvantage gap indicates that the gap widened between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

Statistics from the Department for Education show that disadvantaged students finishing key stage 4 between 2017 and 2021 became less likely (-1.1 percentage points) to progress to a 16-19 education destination than non-disadvantaged students.[18]

[18] Department for Education, '"Key Stage 4 National Level Destinations" from "Key Stage 4 Destination Measures", Permanent Data Table', accessed 10 March 2025, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/779a92fd-01c5-4258-01d2-08dd45ba797d.

This drop in participation may have caused underlying differences in the characteristics of the disadvantaged students that finished their 16-19 study in 2023, compared to 2019. However, overall, we see little change in the 16-19 disadvantage gap over this period, regardless of the controls we use in our models.

As economic disadvantage is highly correlated with students' prior attainment, it is not possible to disentangle perfectly the effect of one from the other, so the estimates shown on figure 7 should be treated with caution.

Regardless, although the gap appears stable between the disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students that remained in post 16 education, these findings mask the negative outcomes for the increasing number of disadvantaged students that did not continue beyond the end of key stage 4.

Figure 11 shows that in 2023, the 16-19 attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students measured as a total point score was 34.2, equivalent to 3.4 A level grades. Note that this is slightly different from the 3.2 grade gap we reported in our 2024 Annual Report[19]; because we have excluded students from the modelled analysis if they did not have valid contextual data such as prior attainment records.

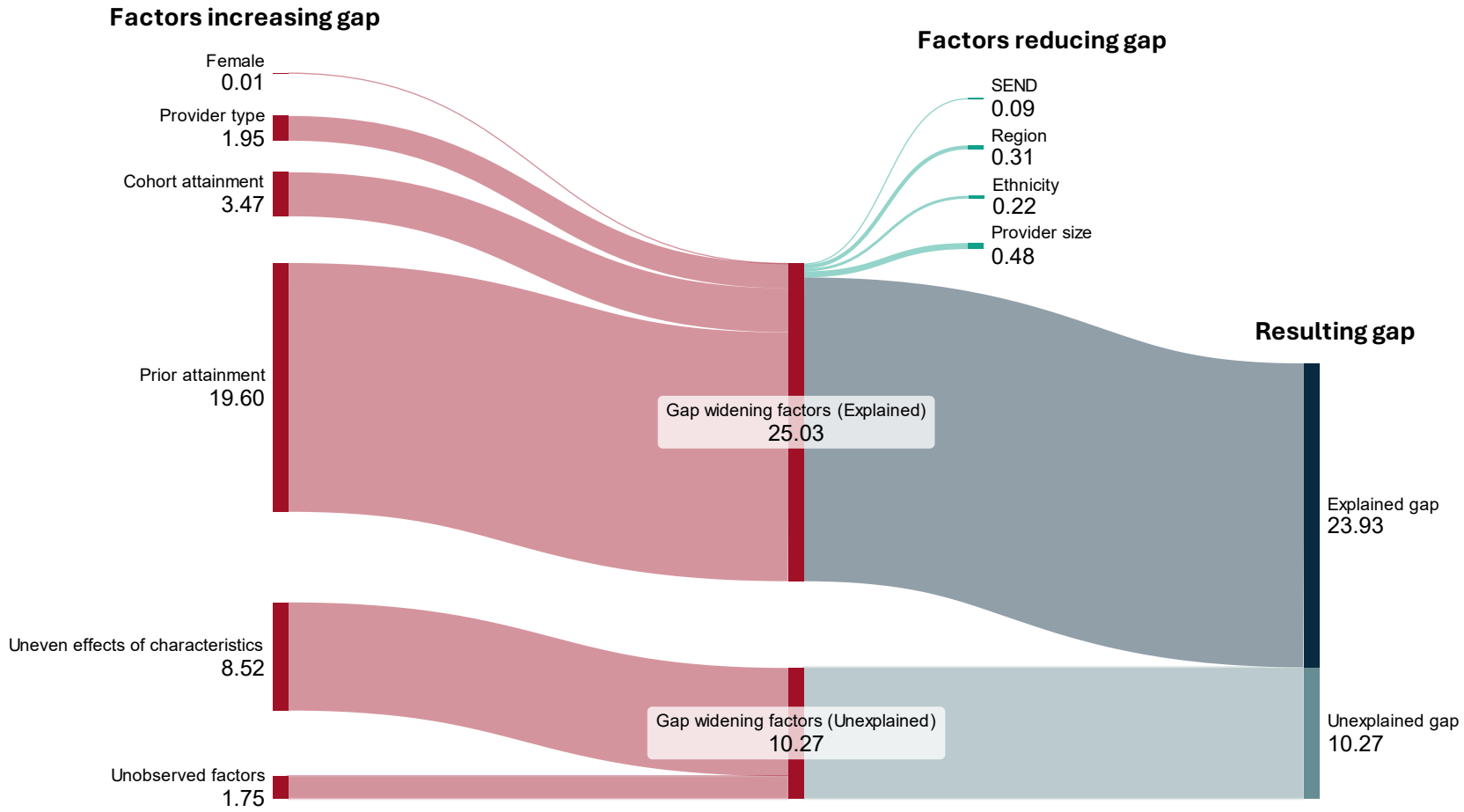
Of the 34.2 point gap, 23.9 points (70 per cent) were explained by the factors included in our models. This means that 30 per cent of the disadvantage gap is accounted for either by factors beyond those we have controlled for, or is a direct consequence of economic disadvantage itself. As we have controlled for prior attainment at key stage 4, this suggests that disadvantaged students continue to fall further behind their peers beyond in the 16-19 phase.

Of the 70 per cent of the disadvantage gap that could be explained by compositional differences in the student and provider characteristics included in our models, 82 per cent was accounted for by prior attainment. This implies that successful efforts to close the disadvantage gap in earlier phases would also help to close the 16-19 disadvantage gap.

Cohort effects were also important, accounting for 15 per cent (or a third of a grade) of the explained component of the gap. This suggests that disadvantage students achieve more highly on average if they attend sixth forms or colleges with more able overall intakes.

[19] Robinson et al., 'EPI Annual Report 2024'.

Figure 11: Decomposition of the 16-19 disadvantage gap (in points) in 2023



Note: 10 points = 1 A level grade

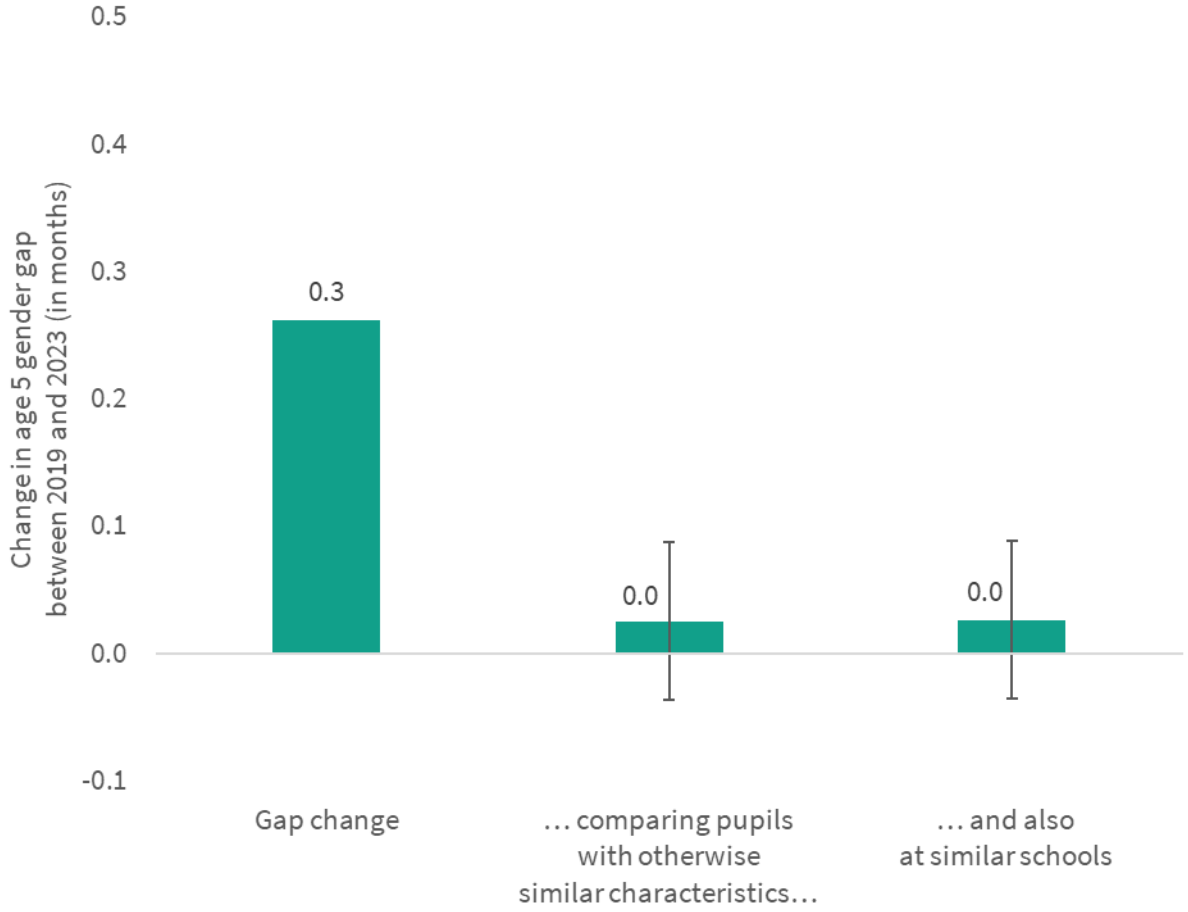
4. The gender gap

Girls tend to outperform boys across education phases, though our previous research has shown that the size of the gap – and trends over time – do vary by subject and phase.[20] Our analysis below uses our headline measures of attainment to explore gender gaps across all compulsory phases of education.

Early years foundation stage

In our 2024 Annual Report, we reported that girls in reception year were already 3.2 months ahead of boys in 2023 – an increase of 0.3 months from 2019. However, our new analysis shows that this widening of the gender gap appears to be explained by other pupil characteristics and once we account for these, the underlying gender gap is stable over this period.

Figure 12: Change in the gender gap at age 5 between 2019 and 2023, including for models with pupil, school and regional controls



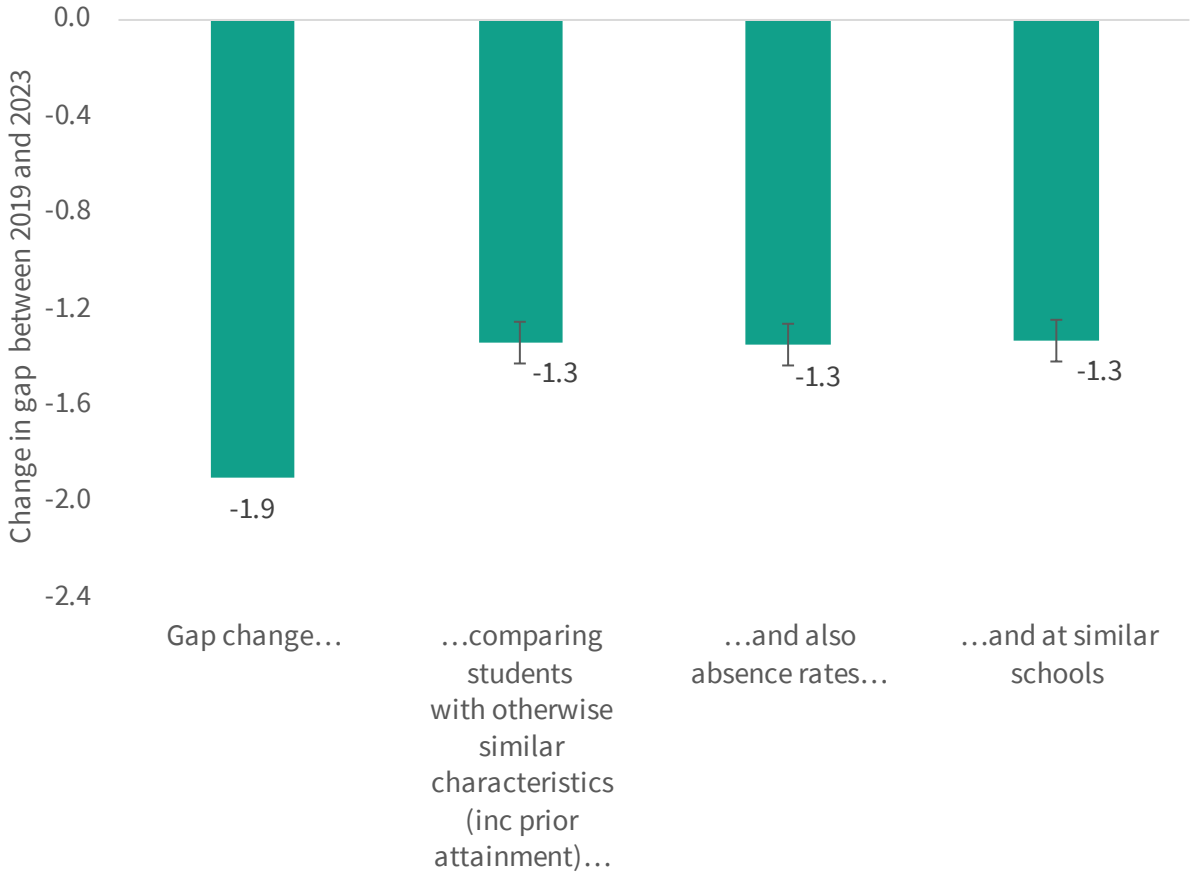
Note: a positive change in the gender gap indicates girls pulled further ahead of boys between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

[20] Robinson et al.

Primary school

The (descriptive) gender gap was 0.6 months in 2023, as reported in our 2024 Annual Report.[21] Based on our modelling, the gender gap narrowed by 1.9 months since 2019 (figure 13). After incorporating all relevant pupil characteristics, including prior attainment, the gap increased significantly, suggesting that the composition of pupils' characteristics of female and male pupils diverged further since 2019, thereby contributing more to the gap in 2023. After accounting for absences and various regional and school characteristics, the gap remained unchanged, suggesting that there are no differences between male and female pupils regarding these contextual factors.

Figure 13: Change in the gender gap at age 11 between 2019 and 2023, including for models with pupil, school and regional controls



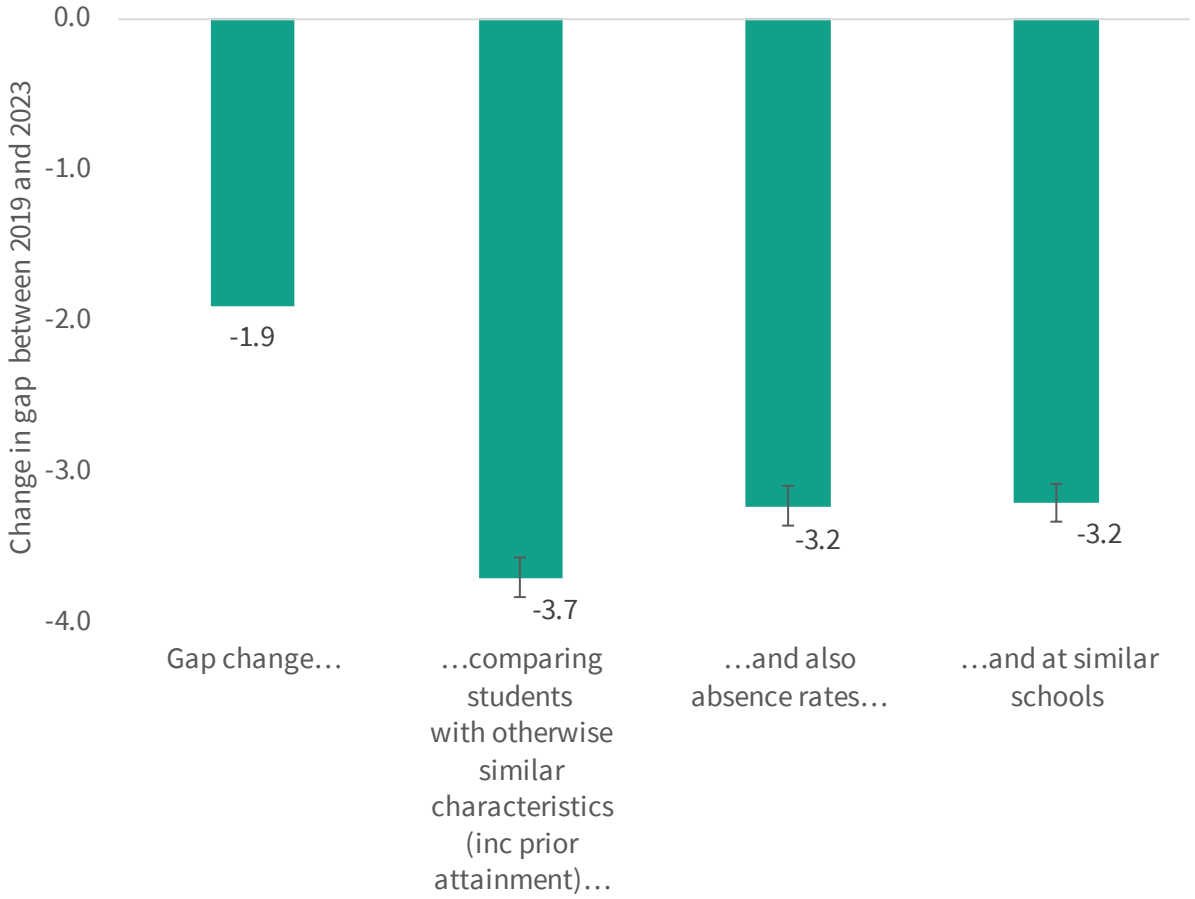
Note: a negative change in the gender gap indicates girls' lead over boys narrowed between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

[21] Robinson et al.

Secondary school

In 2023, female pupils were ahead of male pupils by 4.5 months.[22] This represented a decrease in the gap by 1.9 months since 2019 (figure 14). Pupils' characteristics are by far the most influential factor affecting the narrowing of the gender gap, with female pupils' key stage 1 scores significantly outpacing those of male pupils in 2023. When taking into account all relevant characteristics, the remaining change in the gender gap is 3.2 months, suggesting a significant reduction of the gender gap since 2019.

Figure 14: Change in the gender gap at age 16 between 2019 and 2023, including for models with pupil, school and regional controls



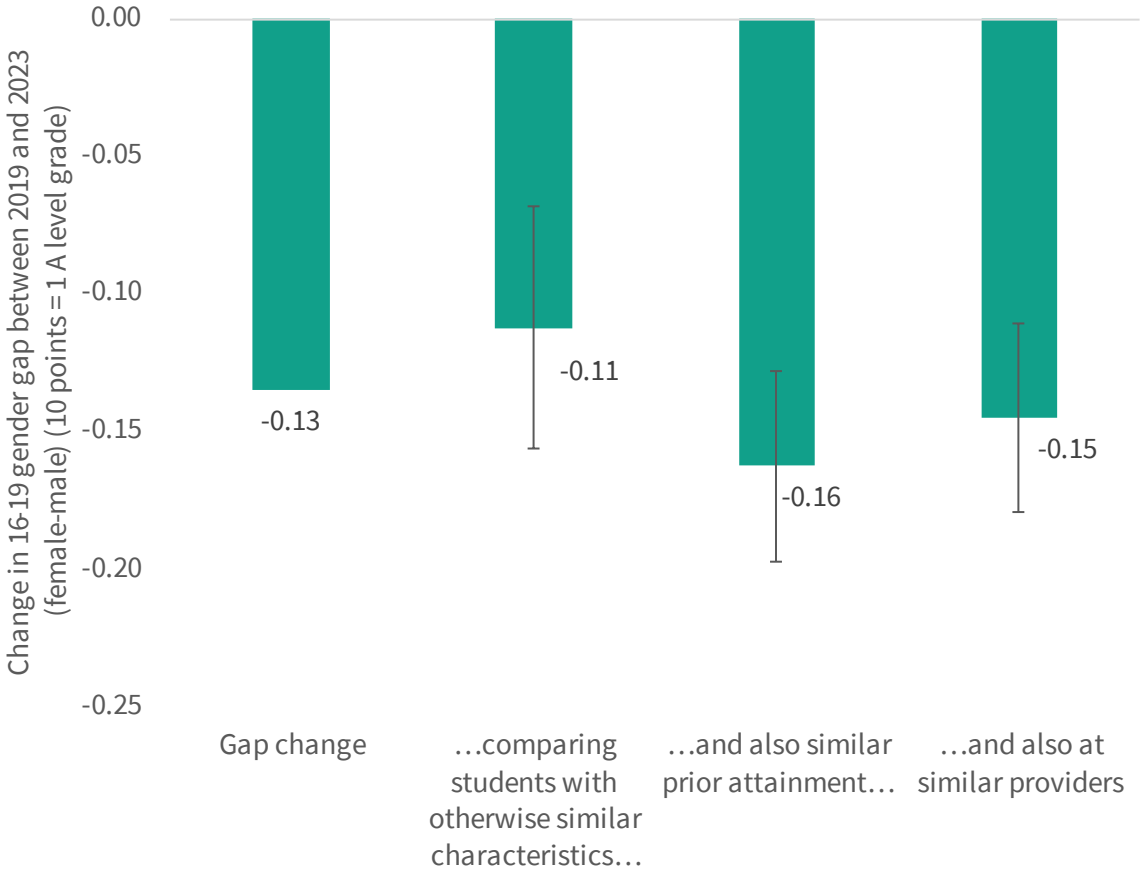
Note: a negative change in the gender gap indicates girls' lead over boys narrowed between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

[22] Robinson et al.

16-19 education

Female students were ahead of male students in 2023, and this gap narrowed slightly by a tenth of a grade (0.13) since 2019. Accounting for prior attainment we see that the narrowing was slightly more pronounced. This implies that there were differences in prior attainment by gender over this period. In practice, this reflects that most students finishing 16-19 in 2023 had prior attainment (GCSE results) from 2021. Under teacher assessed grades in 2021, results for female students increased relative to males, which will explain (at least partly) why we see this trend when prior attainment is taken into account.

Figure 15: Change in the 16-19 gender gap (female – male) between 2019 and 2023, including for models with student, provider and regional controls



Note: a negative change in the gender gap indicates male students reduced the gap relative to female students between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

5. The SEND gap

Our previous research has highlighted that four in ten children are identified as SEND at some point between the ages of 5 and 16 and pupils with SEND are some of the most educationally disadvantaged in the English state school system.[23] In our analysis below we distinguish between pupils who receive support in school (SEN support) and those with more complex needs set out in an education, health and care plan (EHCP), and we compare both groups to their peers with no identified needs. The types of need identified for both groups has changed in recent years which we have previously detailed but do not expand on here.

Early years foundation stage

By the end of reception year, 9 per cent of pupils in 2023 were receiving SEN support and these children were over a year behind their peers with no identified SEN. Our previous research has highlighted this gap was at its highest in 2023 since the start of our time-series in 2013, and 0.7 months higher than in 2019.[24]

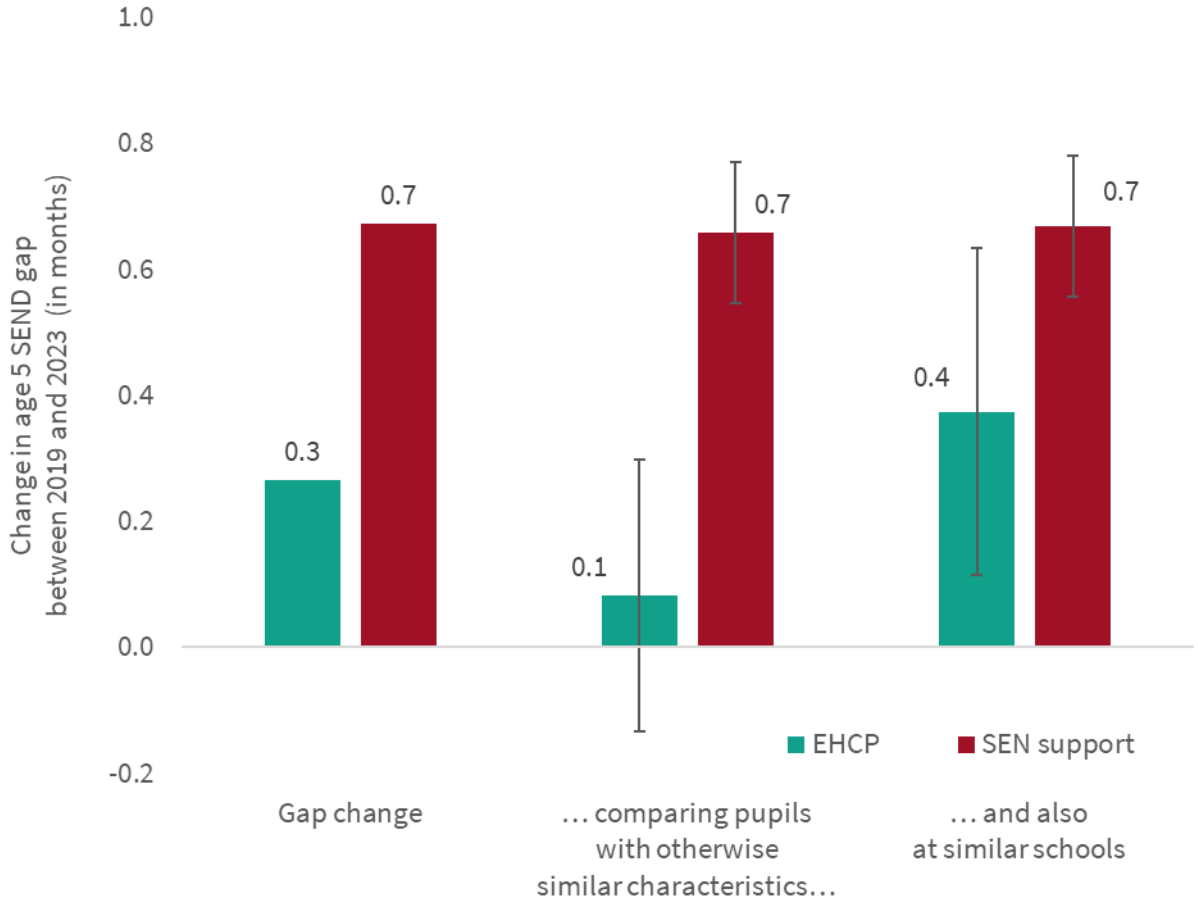
Our new analysis finds that this widening of the SEN support gap is consistent across our models, even when we fully account for pupil, school and regional characteristics. At 0.7 months, it marks one of the biggest gap-increases between 2019 and 2023 of all the vulnerable groups that we consider at age 5.

Attainment gaps are wider still for the 3 per cent of pupils in reception year with more complex needs set out in EHCPs. In 2023, the (descriptive) EHCP gap was 19.9 months – an increase of 0.3 months since 2019 and its largest on record.

As we saw for the SEN support group, the widening of the EHCP gap between 2019 and 2023 is evident even when we fully account for other factors. We find that pupils with EHCPs fell a further 0.4 months behind their peers with no identified SEND in 2023, once we account for other pupil, school and regional factors. Taken together, this analysis confirms that the youngest pupils with SEND have been some of the worst affected in the wake of the pandemic.

[23] Jo Hutchinson, 'Identifying Pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities', Education Policy Institute, 19 March 2021, https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/identifying-send/.
[24] Robinson et al., 'EPI Annual Report 2024'.

Figure 16: change in the gap between 2019 and 2023 for pupils in reception year with special educational needs, including for models with pupil, school and regional controls



Note: a positive change in the EHCP or SEN support gap indicates that children with special educational needs fell further behind their peers with no identified needs between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

Primary school

The SEND gap in primary education has been slowly narrowing over the last 12 years. Even in the wake of the pandemic, the attainment gap between students receiving some SEN support and those that did not continued reducing up to 2023, resulting in a gap of 17.1 months for pupils with SEN support, and 27.5 months for pupils with an EHCP.[25] Our models confirm that the gap has further narrowed since 2019.

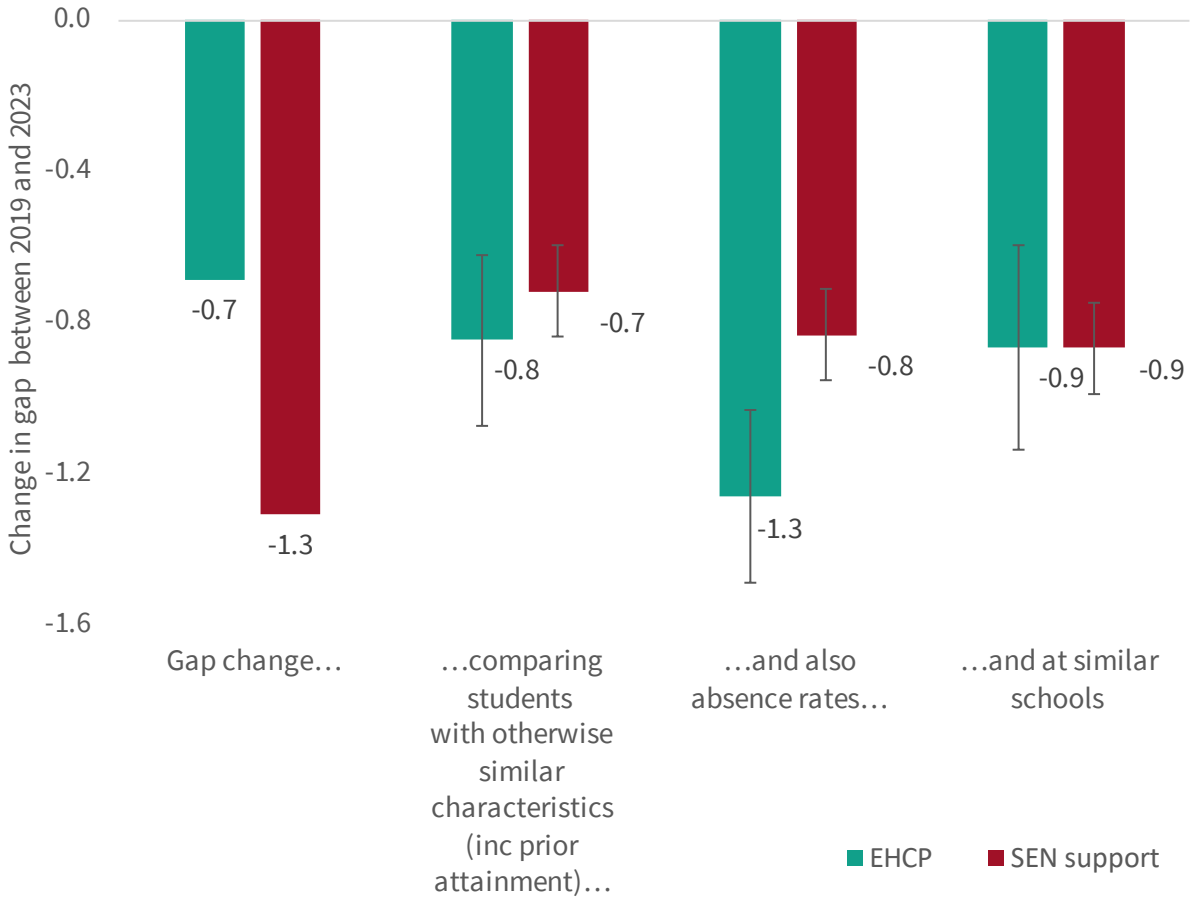
For pupils with SEND support, differences in pupil characteristics (such as prior attainment) contributed to the fall in the gap. This could be due to changes such as the prior attainment of

[25] Robinson et al.

SEND pupils increasing over time, perhaps because of the changing type of need identified for SEND pupils.[26] Further accounting for absence and school type makes little difference to the gap.

For pupils with an EHCP, increasing absence levels of these pupils slowed the narrowing of the gap. However, regional and school factors contributed to the fall in the gap, suggesting SEND pupils are attending more effective environments than in 2019, though more research would be required to confirm this. Overall, our final model suggests that the SEND gap narrowed by 0.9 months since 2019, and this is the same gap reduction for both, pupils with and without a plan.

Figure 17: Change in the gap between 2019 and 2023 for pupils at the end of the primary phase with special educational needs, including for models with pupil, school and regional controls



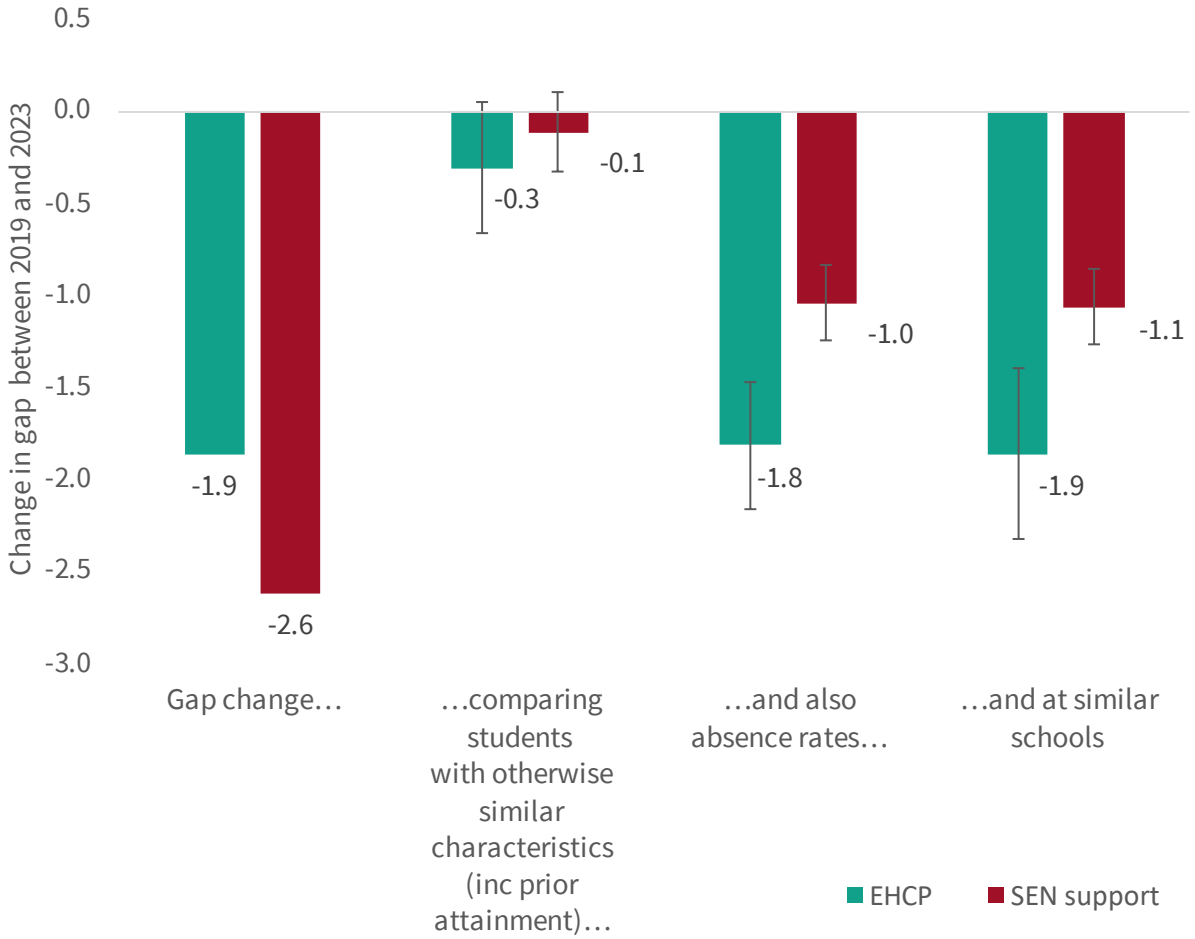
Note: a negative change in the EHCP or SEN support gap indicates that children with special educational needs narrowed the gap relative to their peers with no identified needs between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

[26] David Robinson et al., 'Annual Report 2024: SEND Chapter', Education Policy Institute, 15 July 2024, https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-send-2/.

Secondary school

Since 2011, the SEND gap in secondary education has narrowed almost every year, closing the gap by 6.5 months and 4.7 months by 2023, for pupils with SEN support and pupils with an EHCP, respectively.[27] Differences in pupil characteristics (such as prior attainment) contributed to the fall in the gap. This could be due to changes such as the prior attainment of SEND pupils increasing over time. Conversely, the increasing absence levels of SEN pupils slowed the narrowing of the gap. Moreover, the impact of absences on attainment seems greater for pupils with more complex needs. Our full model indicates that, controlling for other observable factors, the SEND gap in KS4 effectively narrowed since 2019, by 1.06 months for pupils with SEN support, and by 1.9 months for pupils with an EHCP.

Figure 18: Change in the gap between 2019 and 2023 for pupils at the end of the secondary phase with special educational needs, including for models with pupil, school and regional controls



Note: a negative change in the EHCP or SEN support gap indicates that children with special educational needs narrowed the gap relative to their peers with no identified needs between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

[27] Robinson et al., 'EPI Annual Report 2024'.

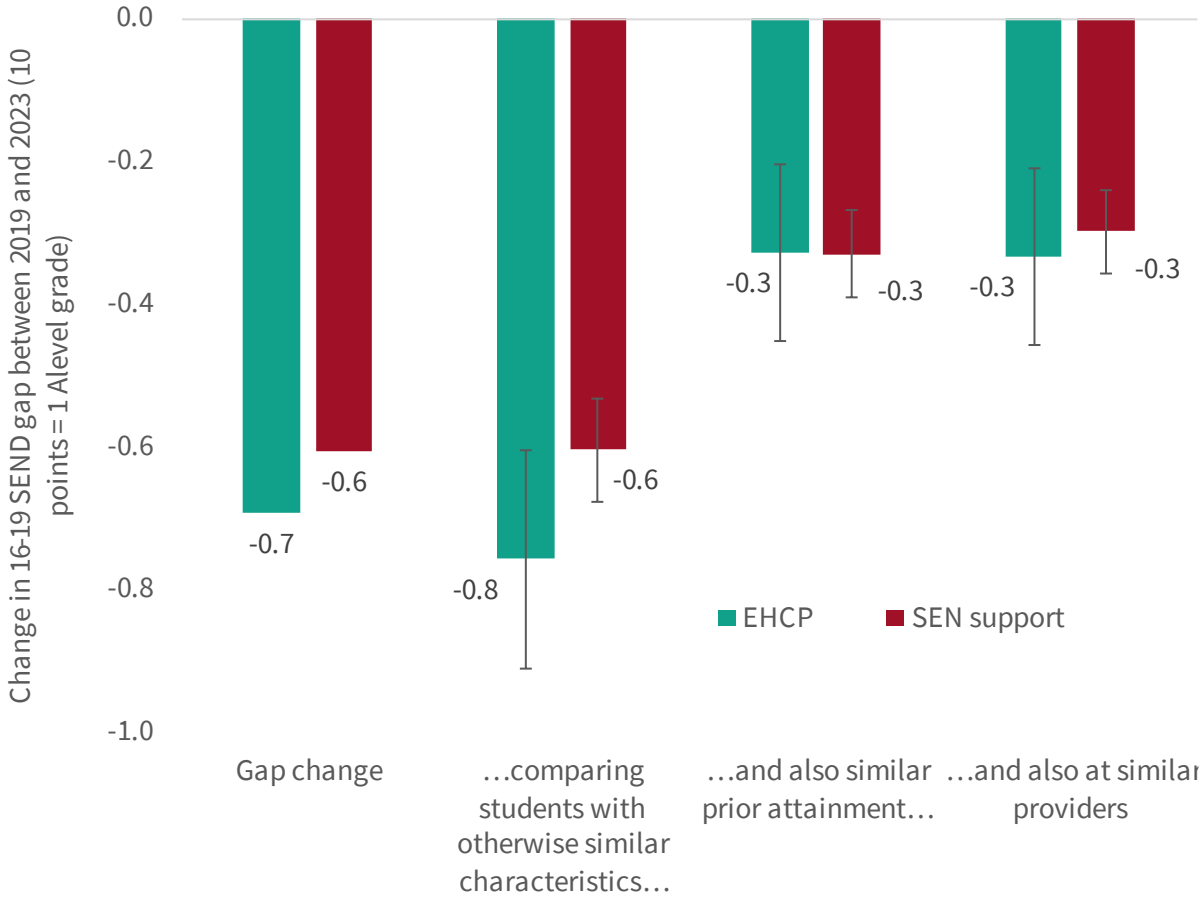
16-19 education

The SEND gap has been narrowing in recent years. The relatively large values in figure 16 compared to those for other characteristics in the 16-19 phase, show that it is narrowing at a greater rate than other 16-19 attainment gaps (more than two thirds of an A level grade since 2019 for students with an EHCP). When accounting for prior attainment, the rate of change roughly halves for both students with an EHCP, and for SEND students with no health and care plan. Given we know that the equivalent gaps at key stage 4 have been closing in recent years, it makes sense that the narrowing prior attainment gap is driving a substantial amount of the trend we are seeing in the 16-19 phase.

However, the narrowing of the gap is substantial and still statistically significant after controlling for all of these factors. This suggests that either:

- there are compositional differences between students classified as SEND between key stage 4 and the 16-19 phase, which could be driven by retention trends;
- those with identified SEND at the end of key stage 4, continued to catch up with their peers during the 16-19 phase.

Figure 19: Change in the 16-19 SEND gap between 2019 and 2023, including for models with student, provider and regional controls



Note: a negative change in the ECHP or SEN support gap indicates that students who had special educational needs recorded at the end of key stage 4 narrowed the gap relative to their peers with no identified needs between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

6. The ethnicity gap

There is substantial variation in pupil attainment by ethnic group and these gaps change across phases and over time.[28] Throughout our analysis below we use White British pupils, the largest group, as our comparison group. Given the number of ethnic groups, in this section we show results for the descriptive and fully specified models only.

Early years foundation stage

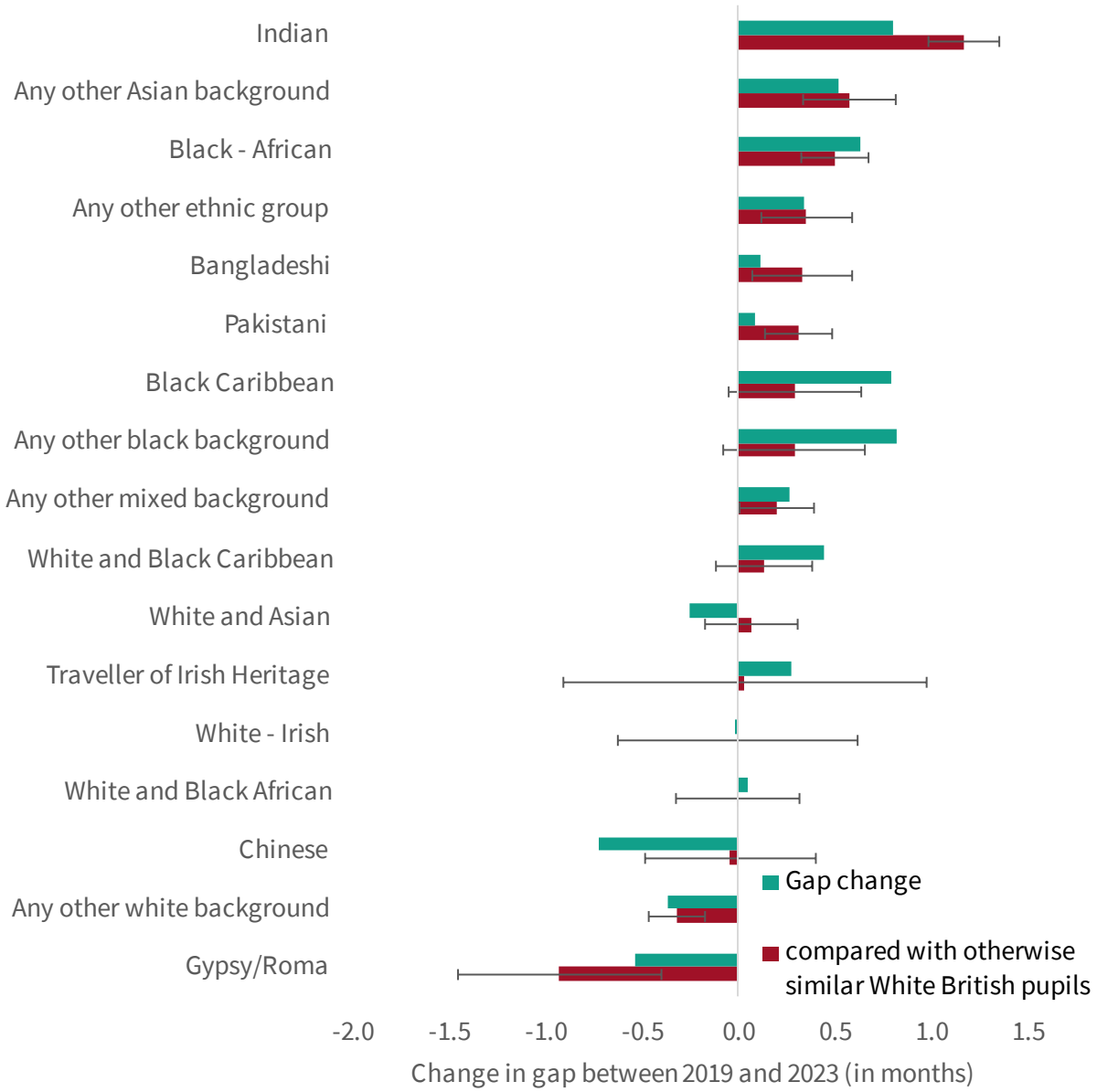
In 2023, 62 per cent of pupils aged 5 were White British and these pupils had higher levels of development on average than most other ethnic groups. Our 2024 Annual Report found that only Chinese, White and Asian, White Irish, and Indian pupils had higher attainment than White British pupils.[29]

In figure 20, we consider how the development of pupils in reception year with different ethnic backgrounds changed between 2019 and 2023. In our descriptive model, we find that White British pupils on pulled further ahead from most other ethnic groups. Just four ethnic groups improved their position relative to White British pupils over this period: Gypsy Roma and pupils of any other White background narrowed the gap, whilst Chinese and White and Asian pupils pulled further ahead of White British pupils.

Once we account for other pupil, school and regional characteristics in our fully specified model, only Gypsy Roma and pupils of any other White background improved their position relative to White British pupils between 2019 and 2023. For Gypsy Roma pupils, this gap-narrowing was equivalent to almost one month. Conversely, several groups had wider gaps in 2023 than in 2019, including pupils of any other Asian background, Black - African, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and pupils of any other mixed background. The biggest change in the gap over this period was for Indian pupils (whose position relative to White British pupils declined by over one month). Meanwhile gaps for all other ethnic groups were stable. Together this means that except for Gypsy Roma and pupils of any other White background, ethnicity gaps in reception year are little changed or have widened between 2019 and 2023 once we take into account other factors.

[28] Robinson et al.
[29] Robinson et al.

Figure 20: Change in the ethnicity gap at age 5 between 2019 and 2023 relative to White British pupils, including for model with pupil, school and regional controls

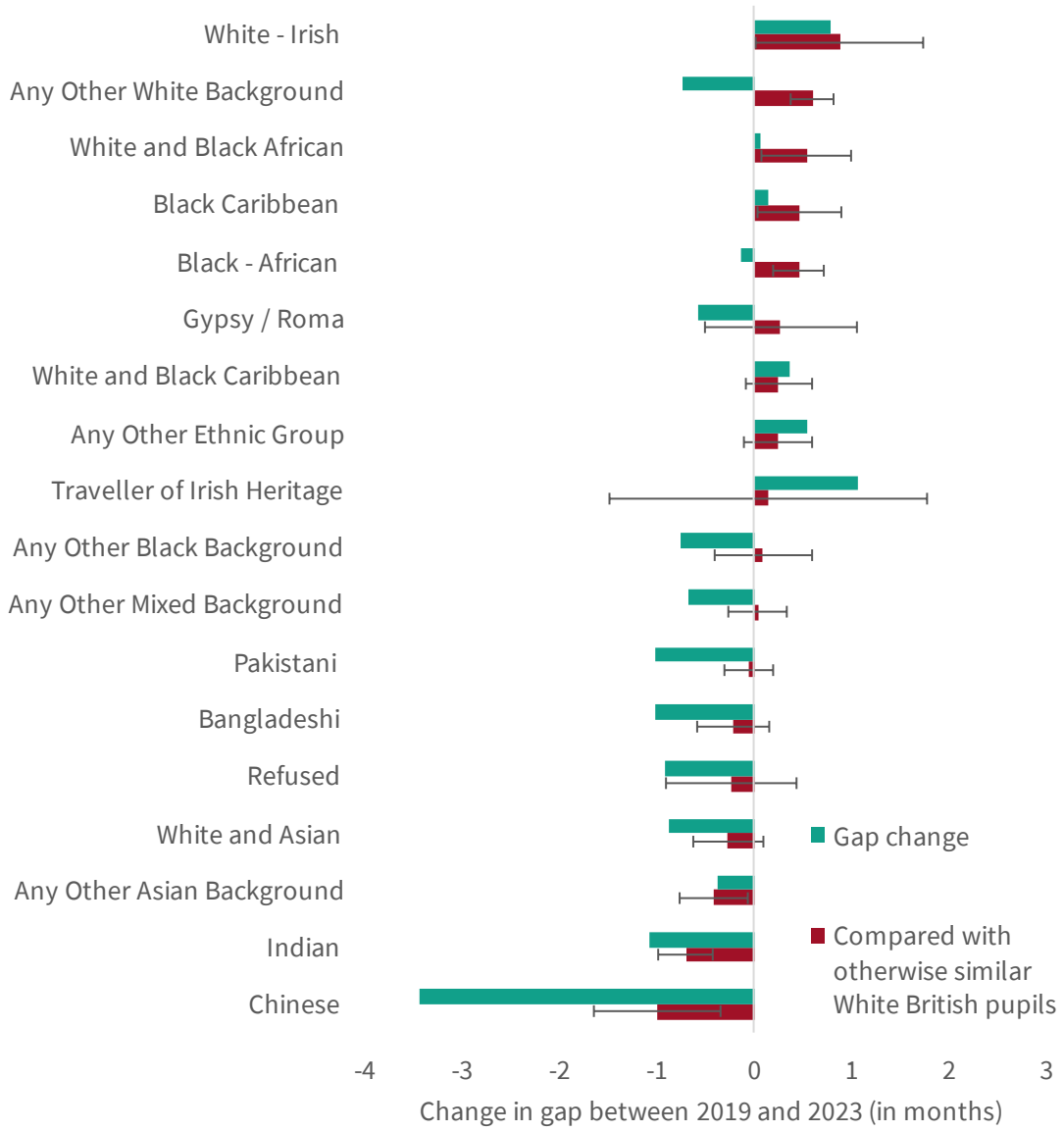


Note: a positive change in the ethnicity gap indicates that White British pupils improved their relative position between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

Primary school

Between 2019 and 2023, 11 ethnic groups saw their attainment improve relative to White British primary aged pupils. However, only Chinese, Indian and any other Asian background pupils made greater progress than otherwise similar White British pupils over this period. Whilst the progress of White - Irish, Any Other White Background, White and Black Caribbean, and Black - African pupils worsened.

Figure 21: Change in the ethnicity gap at age 11 between 2019 and 2023 relative to White British pupils, including for model with pupil, school and regional controls

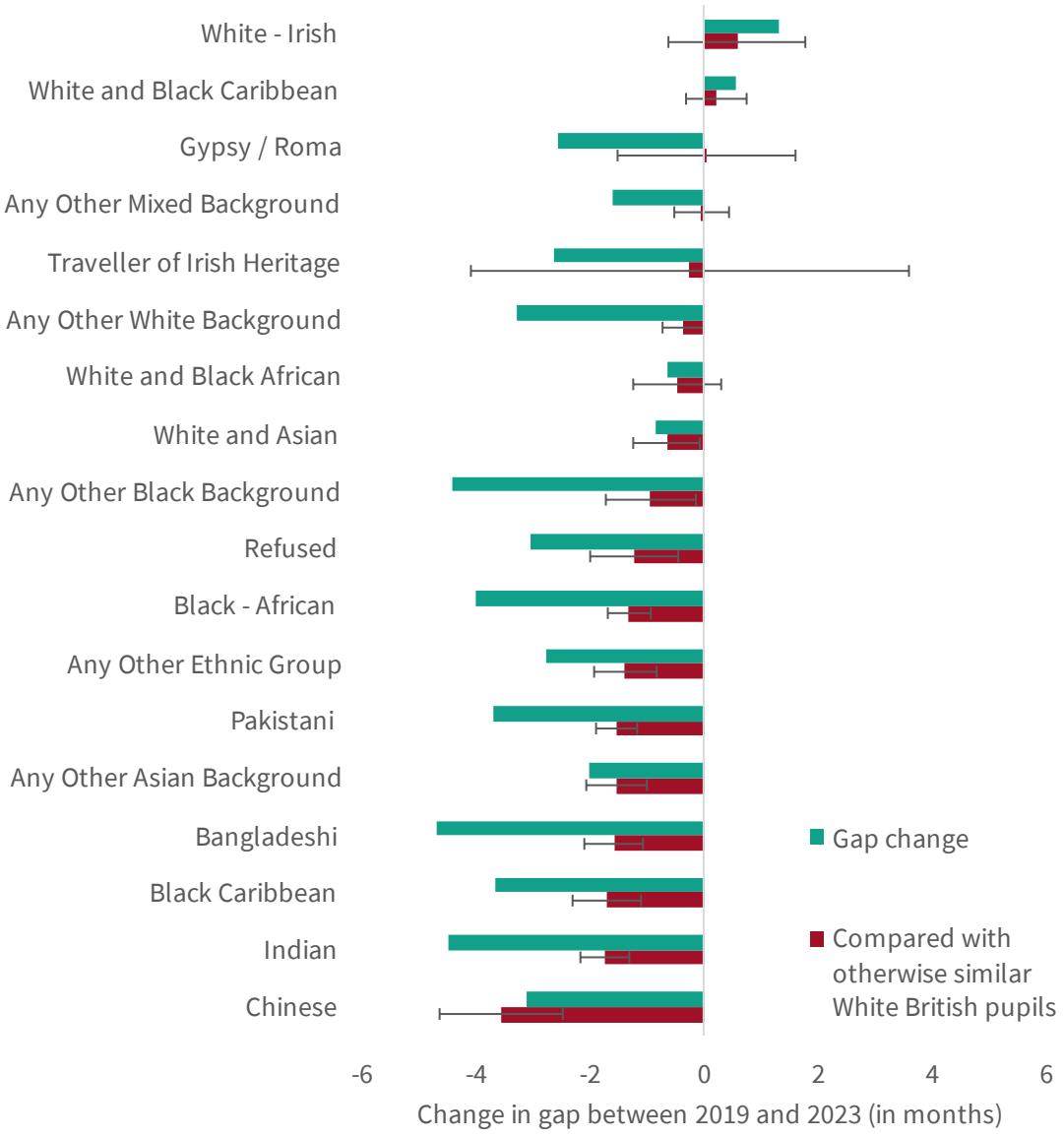


Note: a positive change in the ethnicity gap indicates that White British pupils improved their relative position between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

Secondary school

By the end of secondary school in 2023, most ethnic groups achieved higher GCSE grades than White British pupils. Our full models suggests that 11 ethnic groups improved their grades, after controlling for other factors. Among lower-attaining groups, Black Caribbean pupils saw the biggest improvement, narrowing the gap by 1.71 months since 2019. However, the initial improvement seen in the lower-attaining groups, such as Gypsy/Roma and Traveller of Irish Heritage, was not statistically significant after accounting for other factors. Furthermore, our full model indicates that the decline in average grades observed in the White and Black Caribbean group is not statistically significant.

Figure 22: Change in the ethnicity gap at age 16 between 2019 and 2023 relative to White British pupils, including for model with pupil, school and regional controls



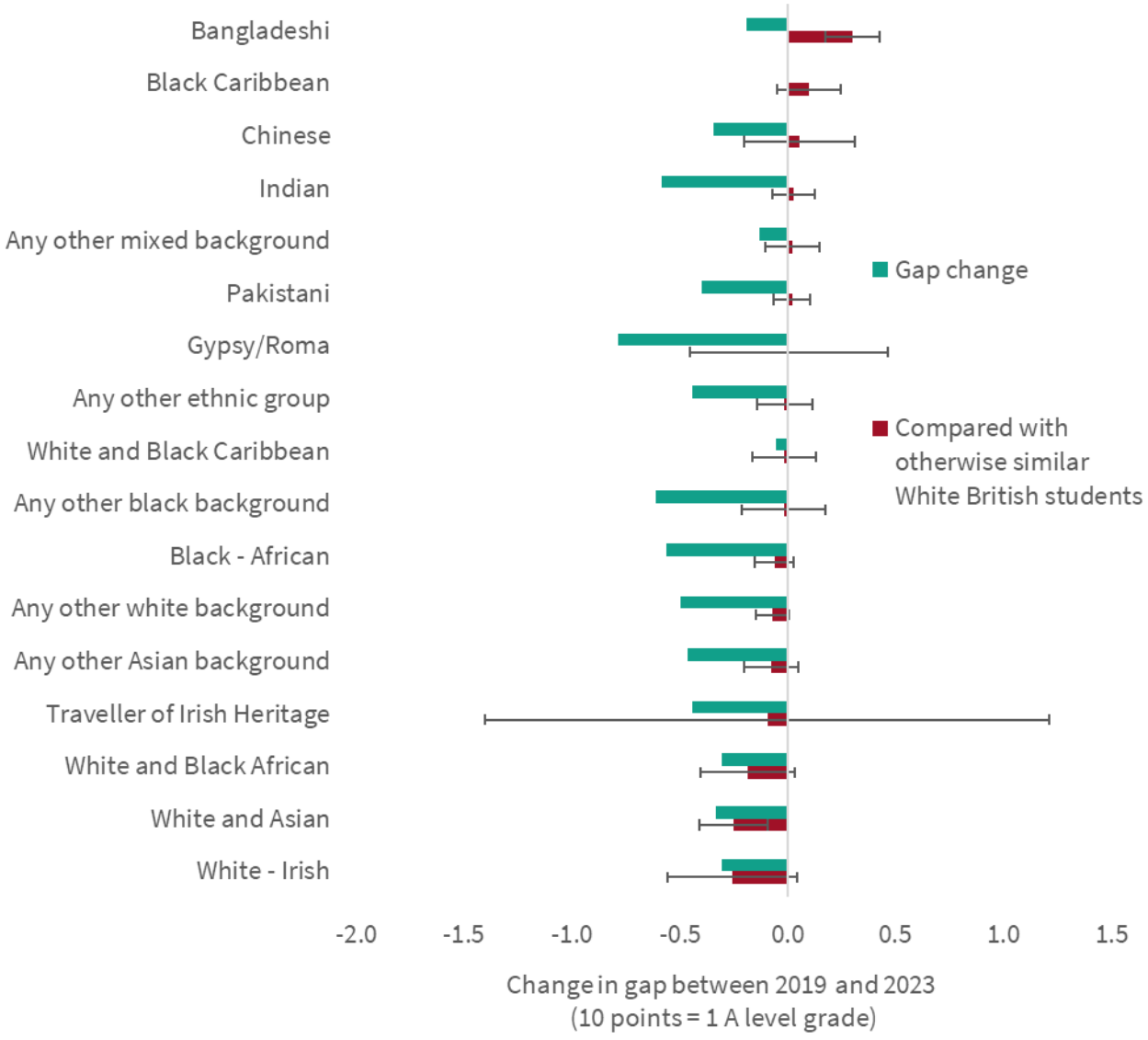
Note: a positive change in the ethnicity gap indicates that White British pupils improved their relative position between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

16-19 education

In the 16-19 phase, the attainment of students from most ethnic groups improved relative to White British students. This is reflected by the negative green bars showing the change in the descriptive gaps since 2019.

However, when controlling for student and provider characteristics (and compositional changes in these characteristics between 2019 and 2023) the change in the gap all but disappears for most ethnic groups. Notable exceptions to this were Bangladeshi students, for whom the gap widened by 0.3 grades (relative to White British), and White – Irish and White and Asian students, for whom the gap narrowed by 0.26 and 0.25 grades respectively when student and provider characteristics are accounted for.

Figure 23: Change in the 16-19 ethnicity gap between 2019 and 2023 relative to White British, including for models with student, provider and regional controls



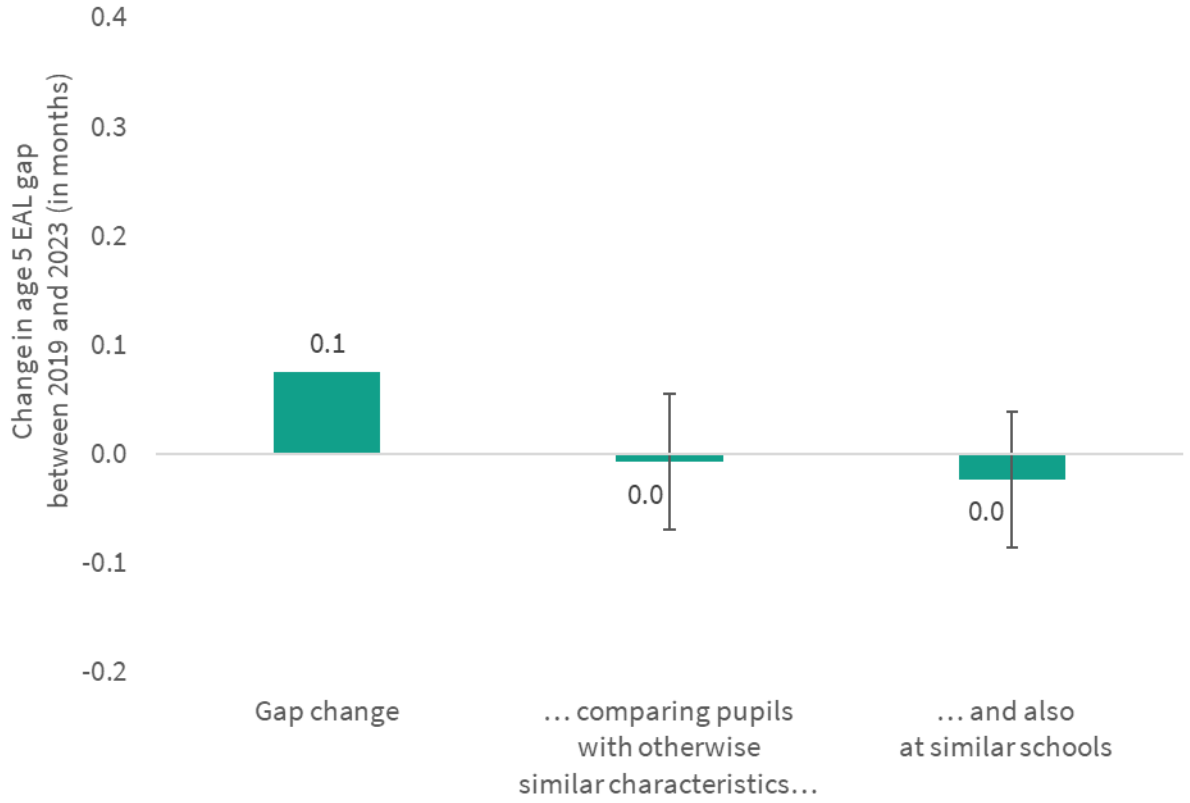
Note: a positive change in the ethnicity gap indicates that White British students improved their relative position between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

7. The EAL gap

Early years foundation stage

In 2023, around one-fifth of pupils aged 5 had English as an additional language (EAL). These pupils had lower levels of development on average than their peers, with a (descriptive) gap of 1.8 months – a gap that has little changed since 2019.[30] This is mirrored in our full model which controls for pupil, school and regional characteristics, and provides further evidence that the EAL gap has remained broadly stable among children in reception year between 2019 and 2023.

Figure 24: Change in the EAL gap at age 5 between 2019 and 2023, including for models with pupil, school and regional controls



Note: a positive change in the EAL gap indicates pupils with English as a first language pulled further ahead of their peers with EAL between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

Primary school

In 2023, approximately 15,000 students with English as a second language joined the English state system during the last two years of primary school. Due to their recent entry, it is common for them to find their school experience more challenging compared to pupils with English as their first language and those with EAL who arrived a long time ago. In our 2024 Annual Report we found

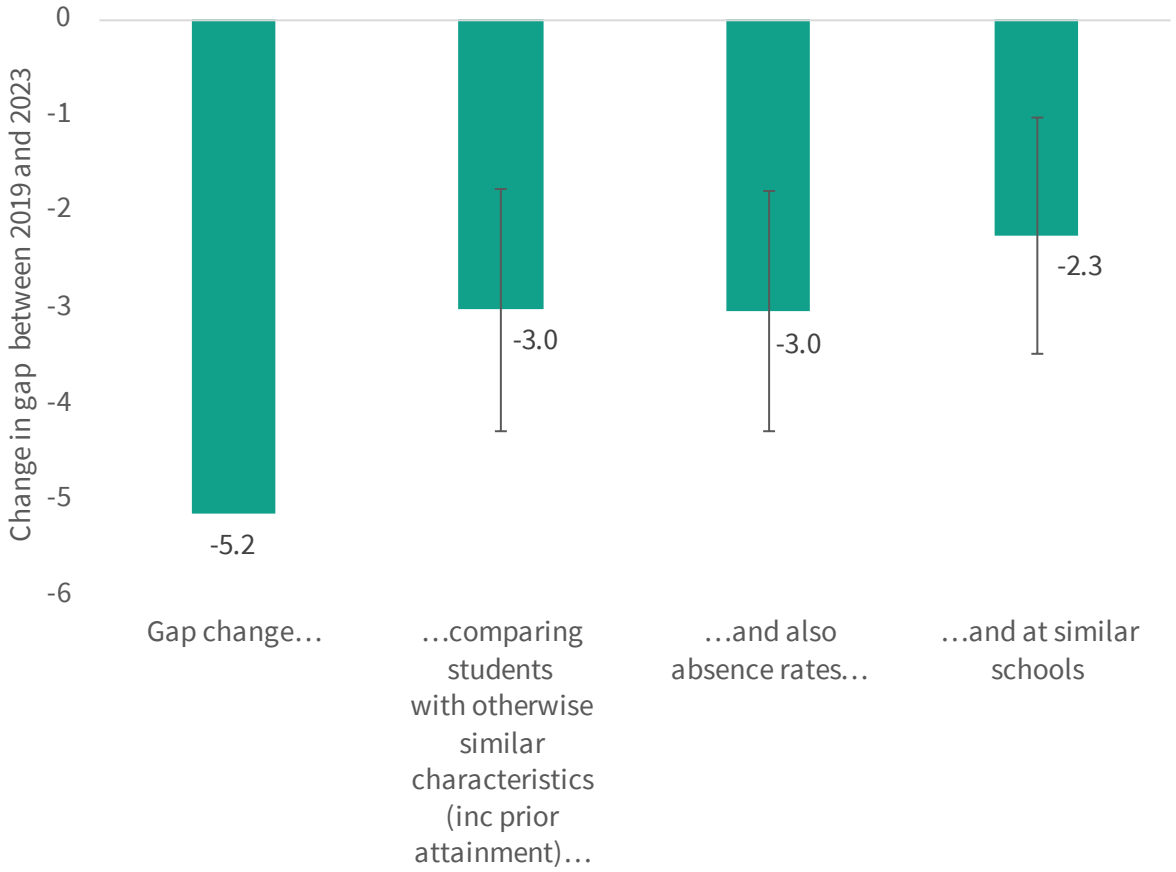
[30] Robinson et al.

a narrowing of the late-arriving EAL descriptive gap since the pandemic, from 15.5 months in 2019 to 9.8 months in 2023.[31]

For our models presented so far, we have excluded pupils without prior attainment data. However, by definition, late-arriving EAL pupil won't have any prior attainment data. Consequently, prior attainment is not included as a control in the models presented in figure 25.

The (descriptive) EAL gap for late-arriving pupils has narrowed since 2019, by 5.2 months. The inclusion of other pupil characteristics reduces the fall in the gap, suggesting that factors such as ethnic composition played an important role in the narrowing of the gap. On the other hand, pupil absence had a minimal impact on the gap, indicating no significant changes in absence rates among EAL pupils since 2019, relative to non-EAL pupils. Finally, the results from the full model suggest that school and regional factors contributed to a fall in the gap. The full model indicates that the EAL gap has narrowed since 2019 by 2.3 months for late-arriving EAL pupils.

Figure 25: Change in the EAL gap at age 11 between 2019 and 2023 for pupils arriving in the last two years of primary school, including for models with pupil, school and regional controls



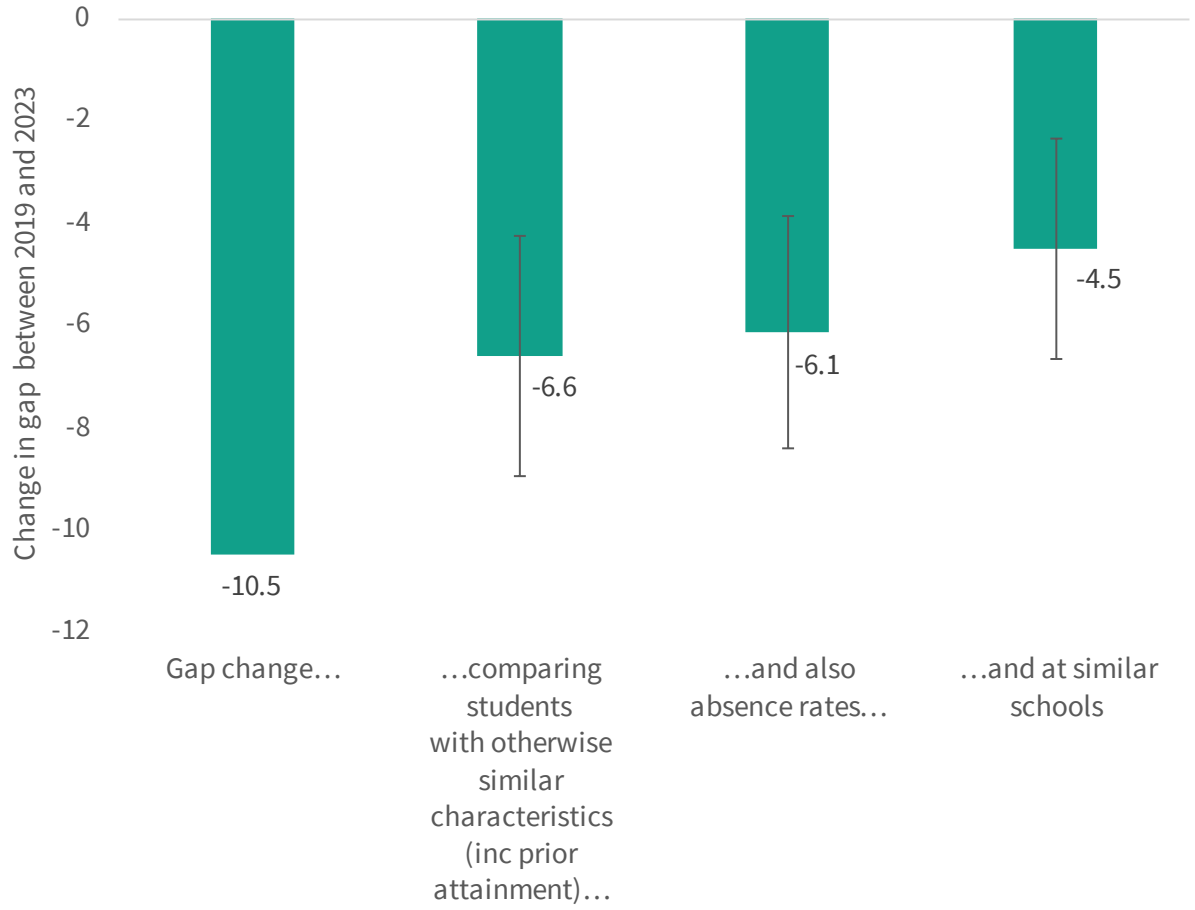
Note: a negative change in the late EAL gap indicates pupils with English as an additional language narrowed the gap with their peers between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

[31] Robinson et al.

Secondary school

Around 9,000 students entered the last two years of secondary school with English as a second language in 2023. In our previous research, we highlighted the major decrease in the late-arriving EAL (descriptive) gap of almost 9 months since the pandemic, from 20.7 months in 2019 to 11.9 months in 2023.[32] Based on our more restricted sample (see Methodology section), the descriptive change in the late-arriving EAL gap since 2019 is larger still in figure 26 at 10.5 months. Similar to the gap for primary pupils, the inclusion of additional pupil characteristics for secondary pupils in the model reduces the fall in the gap, again suggesting that factors such as ethnicity are playing an important role in the narrowing of the gap. Differences in schools and regions also further reduce the fall in the gap. Yet, absence does not appear to be a significant factor influencing the gap. After accounting for all these factors, our full model indicates that the gap has narrowed since 2019, by 4.5 months for late-arriving EAL students.

Figure 26: Change in the EAL gap at age 16 between 2019 and 2023 for pupils arriving in the last two years of secondary school, including for models with pupil, school and regional controls



Note: a negative change in the late EAL gap indicates pupils with English as an additional language narrowed the gap with their peers between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

[32] Robinson et al.

8. Regional gaps

There is substantial variation in how well pupils attain depending on where they live and that different regions have been differentially affected by learning loss in the wake of the pandemic.[33] Throughout our regional analysis we use London as our comparison group and once again, show results for descriptive and fully specified models only.

Early years foundation stage

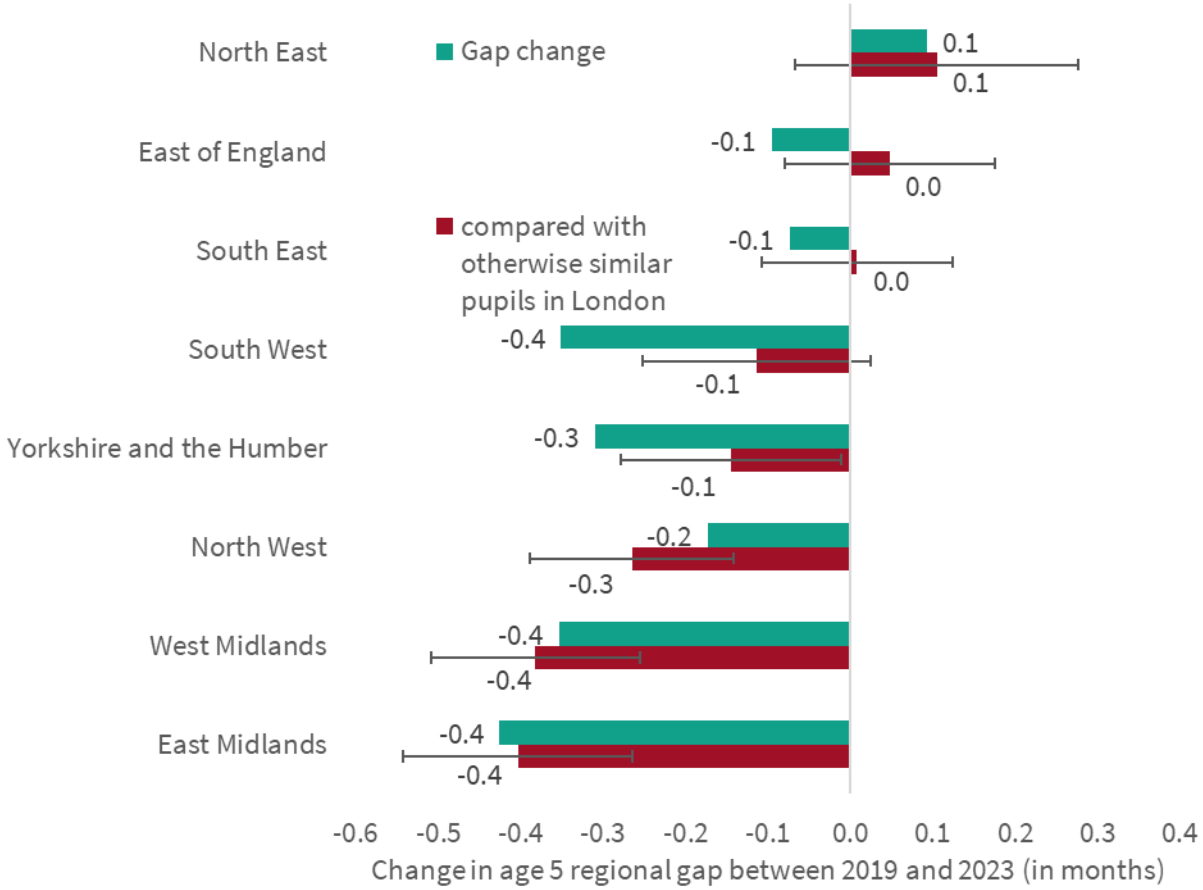
In 2023, London had higher average levels of development among its reception-aged pupils than most other regions, coming second only to the South East and with similar attainment to the South West.

In figure 27, we consider how the levels of development of pupils in reception year in different regions changed between 2019 and 2023. Based on our descriptive model, we find that all regions improved their position relative to London, except the North East.

When we account for the fact that regions vary in their pupil and school characteristics in our full model, we find that four regions narrowed the gap with London between 2019 and 2023: the East Midlands, West Midlands, North West and Yorkshire and The Humber. There was no statistically significant change in the South West, South East, East of England and North East over this period relative to London. Overall, this points to some narrowing of regional inequalities at age 5, as several lower-performing regions caught up with London between 2019 and 2023.

[33] Jon Andrews, 'Star Assessments Benchmarking Report 2022/23'.

Figure 27: Change in the regional gap at age 5 between 2019 and 2023 relative to London, including for model with pupil, school and regional controls



Note: a positive change in the regional gap indicates that London improved its relative position between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

Primary school

In 2023, London continued to outperform most regions for pupils aged 11. Our descriptive findings imply that the regional gap has widened for most areas, shown by the positive bars in figure 28. However, our full model indicates the gap significantly increased only for two of these regions. The gap has widened the most for the North East, which showed a notable increase of 0.7 months, followed by Yorkshire and The Humber, where the gap widened by 0.6 months. Conversely, the West and East of England were the only regions to successfully reduce the gap, by 0.3 and 0.9 months, respectively.

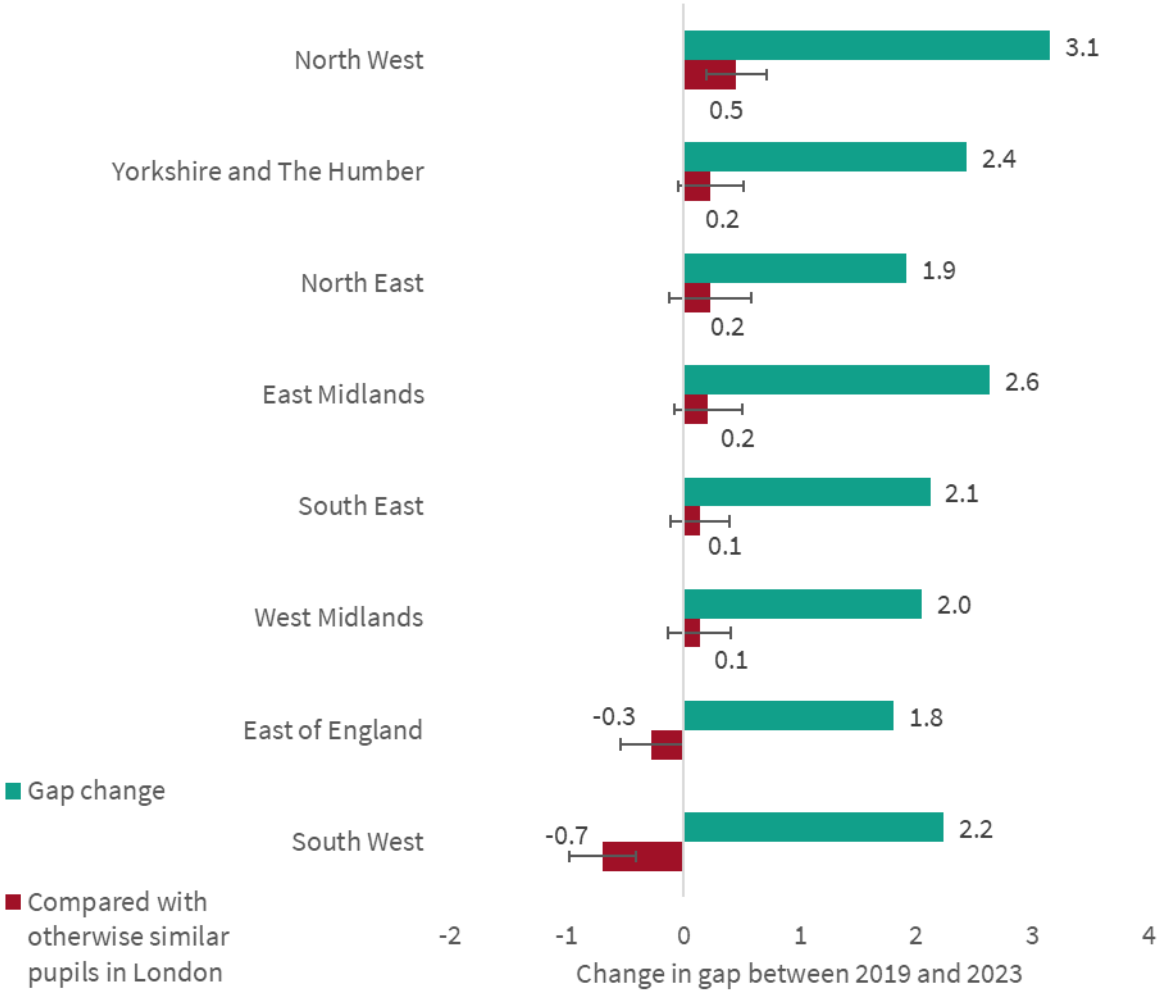
Figure 28: Change in the regional gap at age 11 between 2019 and 2023 relative to London, including for model with pupil, school and regional controls

Note: a positive change in the regional gap indicates that London improved its relative position between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

Secondary school

In secondary education, London continues to lead all other regions. The descriptive gaps, highlighted in green in figure 29, show a significant increase in the gap for all regions. However, after accounting for relevant pupil and school factors, only the North West experienced a widening gap (by 0.5 months), since for many regions the change was not statistically significant. Conversely, the South West saw a statistically significant decrease in the regional gap by 0.7 months since 2019.

Figure 29: Change in the regional gap at age 16 between 2019 and 2023 relative to London, including for model with pupil, school and regional controls



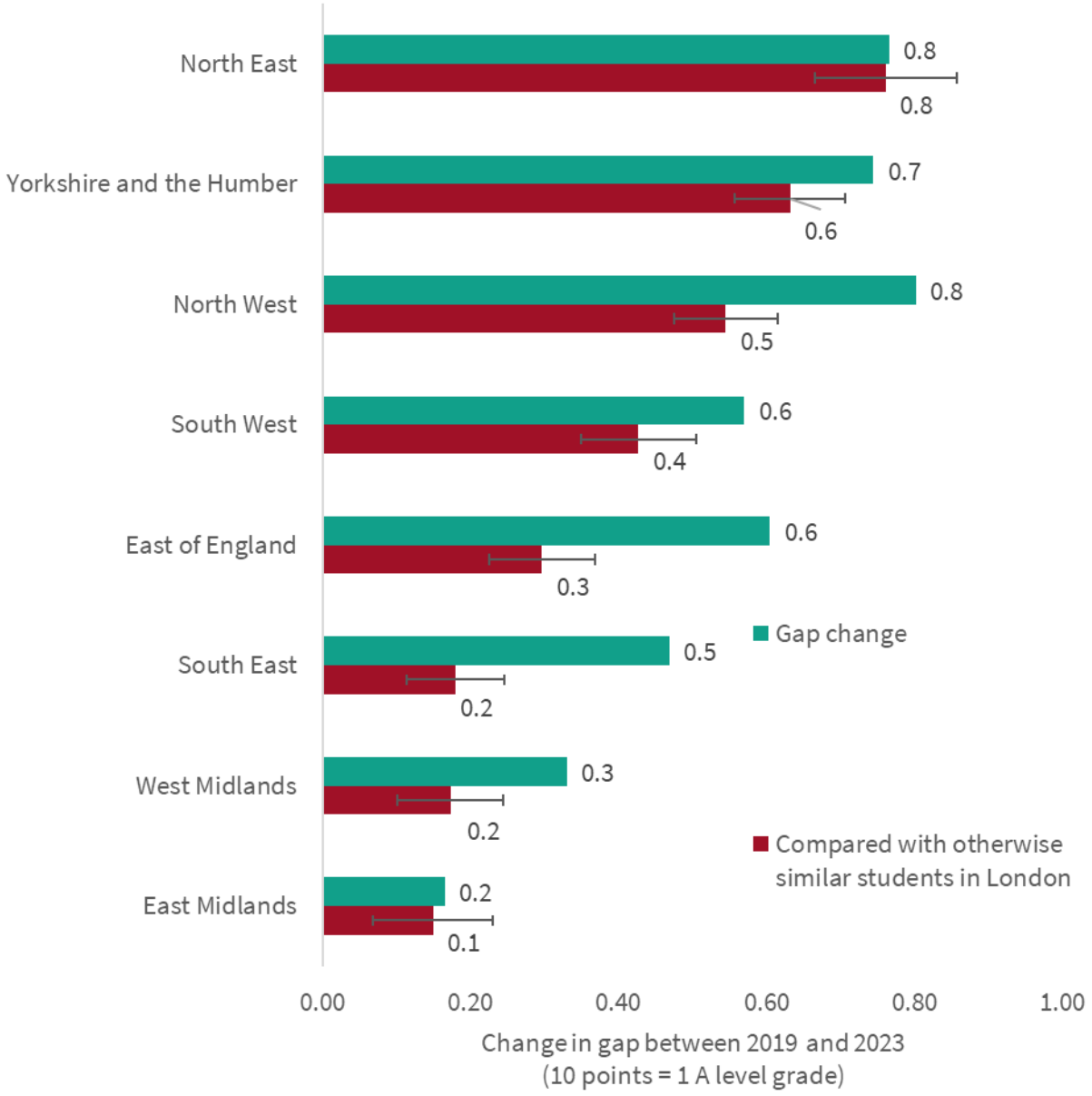
Note: a positive change in the regional gap indicates that London improved its relative position between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

16-19 education

Figure 30 shows that in the 16-19 phase, the gap between London and all regions widened between 2019 and 2023. When we account for student and provider characteristics (and compositional changes in these characteristics between 2019 and 2023), the amount by which London is pulling away decreases. In most regions, the widening of the gap reduces substantially once other factors are controlled for. This suggests that differences in students' characteristics or prior attainment over this period between regions are contributing to the gaps we see.

However, the North East and the East Midlands are notable in that controlling for these characteristics only makes a marginal difference to the change in the gap (0.01 and 0.02 of a grade respectively), suggesting that differences in student characteristics are not an important contributor to the gaps in these areas.

Figure 30: Change in the 16-19 regional gap (relative to London) between 2019 and 2023, including for models with student, provider and regional controls



Note: a positive change in the regional gap indicates that London improved its relative position between 2019 and 2023; bars denote 95 per cent confidence intervals

Conclusions and recommendations

9. Conclusions and recommendations

Through this report, we have provided an in-depth assessment of attainment gaps for different groups of children and young people in 2023, and how these have changed since 2019. We find that educational inequalities in England have worsened for several vulnerable groups in the wake of the pandemic.

Of key concern is widening disadvantage gaps at ages 5, 11 and 16, noting that all the gap-widening at age 16 can be explained by increased absence disproportionately affecting disadvantaged pupils. And while the 16-19 disadvantage gap is little changed between 2019 and 2023 for those in education, disadvantaged students have become less likely to continue into this critical final phase of compulsory education

A key contribution of this research has been to decompose the disadvantage gap at different stages of compulsory education to understand its drivers. This underscores the importance of intervening early to address the sizeable gap that already exists in reception year and mitigate the widening of the gap that occurs as children progress through education:

- 57 per cent of the 16-19 gap was due to the gap at age 16;
- 49 per cent of the gap at age 16 was due to the gap at age 11; and
- 59 per cent of the gap at age 11 had was due to the gap at age 7.

For the first time, our analysis quantifies the importance of pupil absence to the disadvantage gap and how this has changed following the pandemic. We find that absence is a key, and growing, driver of the gap: if disadvantaged pupils had the same level of absence as their peers in 2023, the gap would have been almost 1 month smaller at age 11 and over 4 months smaller at age 16. This is not just a story of post-pandemic spikes in illness absence. It is unauthorised absence that is of key concern, particularly at secondary school. Compared to authorised absence, it contributes more to the GCSE gap, and its contribution has grown faster since 2019. This means without an effective strategy for tackling pupil absence, policymakers' efforts to narrow the disadvantage gap will be limited.

The nature of what is driving the gap appears to depend on the phase of education.[34] Being identified with SEND makes the biggest contribution to the disadvantage gap at age 5 (and the second largest contribution at age 11), reflecting the higher prevalence of additional needs among disadvantaged children. But by age 16, SEND appears to be a less important driver than peer effects. The effect of disadvantaged pupils being clustered in schools with lower-attaining cohorts adds over 1 month to the GCSE gap in 2023, second only to prior attainment and pupil absence as

[34] It is not possible for us to disentangle how much the changing contribution of a given characteristic to the disadvantage gap reflects differences in its relative importance as children get older as opposed to changes in the variables that we are able to include as our controls in our statistical model at different phases.

a gap-driver. It is also a key driver of the 16-19 gap, alongside differences in the type of institution attended.

Across our models, there remains a sizeable proportion of the disadvantage gap that we cannot explain. This unexplained part is largest at age 5 (comprising three-quarters of the total gap), though it is still contributing at least one-quarter of the gap at later phases. This is unsurprising given the limitations of administrative data, but it also reflects the effects of poverty itself, including the profound effects of growing up in long-term poverty.

Alongside our disadvantage findings, we also find widening gaps for some other vulnerable groups, including the youngest children with SEND. However, we also find progress being made, including narrowing gaps for older learners with SEND, and a mixed picture for the gender gap and regional inequalities. The gender gap – which has narrowed substantially at GCSE – is partly a good news story of boys catching-up but also reflects a slight decline in girls' grades in some subjects, against a backdrop of worrying trends in girls' mental health. We find some evidence of narrowing regional gaps at age 5 but widening gaps in 16-19 education, with London pulling away from all other regions.

Based on these findings, we make the following recommendations:

1. Our analysis confirms that much of the gap at later phases can be traced back to earlier phases, with disadvantaged children already 4.6 months behind on starting school. The government must prioritise early intervention to reduce gaps throughout schooling. To improve school readiness, we recommend **increasing the early years pupil premium to match the pupil premium** in later school years, **ensuring a high-quality early years workforce and improved accessibility** for childcare for disadvantaged children in particular.

2. There is a pressing need to improve outcomes for the youngest pupils with SEND who have been some of the worst affected in the wake of the pandemic. As part of wider SEND reforms, the government should **prioritise training in child development and different types of SEND**, making it a mandatory part of initial teacher training and early career development.

3. High and increasing levels of absence for disadvantaged pupils are the primary reason why the disadvantage gap at age 16 has grown since 2019. The government cannot tackle the disadvantage gap without getting to grips with the root causes of pupil absence. Any **absence strategy needs to include improved SEND identification, better mental health support in and outside of schools, fostering pupils' sense of school belonging** and plans to improve the evidence base on what works.

4. The 16-19 gap remains stubbornly high and masks that increasing numbers of disadvantaged students are not continuing into post-16 education at all. We therefore reiterate our call for the government to **introduce a student premium for disadvantaged students in 16-19 education**, to help address the cliff-edge in funding for disadvantaged students at age 16. The government also needs to **look again at the most effective way**

to tackle the drop-off in participation among disadvantaged students at this critical transition point, such as **increasing incentives for employers to take on younger apprentices.**

5. Given that gaps remain stubbornly high — and in some cases are widening — for disadvantaged and other vulnerable groups, we welcome the joined-up approach that the government is taking to addressing child poverty as one of its top priorities. When it publishes its child poverty strategy in spring 2025, it should specifically consider:
    a. **centralising auto-enrolment for FSM** to ensure more complete coverage;
    b. **abolishing the Two Child Limit and the benefits cap**;
    c. **reintroducing statutory targets** to reduce child poverty, as in Scotland, to signal political commitment and ensure the government is held to account; and
    d. **making free meals available for pre-school children** and funding them adequately.

6. Our analysis shows that disadvantaged students tend to attain less well when they are clustered in schools and colleges with lower attaining intakes, highlighting the need to reduce segregation in the education system. We have previously called for **school admissions to be reformed** to improve access to high-quality, oversubscribed schools for disadvantaged pupils **and better information, advice and guidance** to address high-attaining disadvantaged students opting for post-16 qualifications associated with lower prior attainment (i.e. academic mismatch).

7. Our analysis shows that girls are increasingly making less progress during secondary school than boys since the pandemic. We therefore reiterate our call for more **research to understand the declining attainment of girls** and any links with the widening of the gender mental health gap in recent years.

Annex

Annex A: 2019 disadvantage gap decompositions

Figure A1: Decomposition of the disadvantage gap at age 5 in 2019

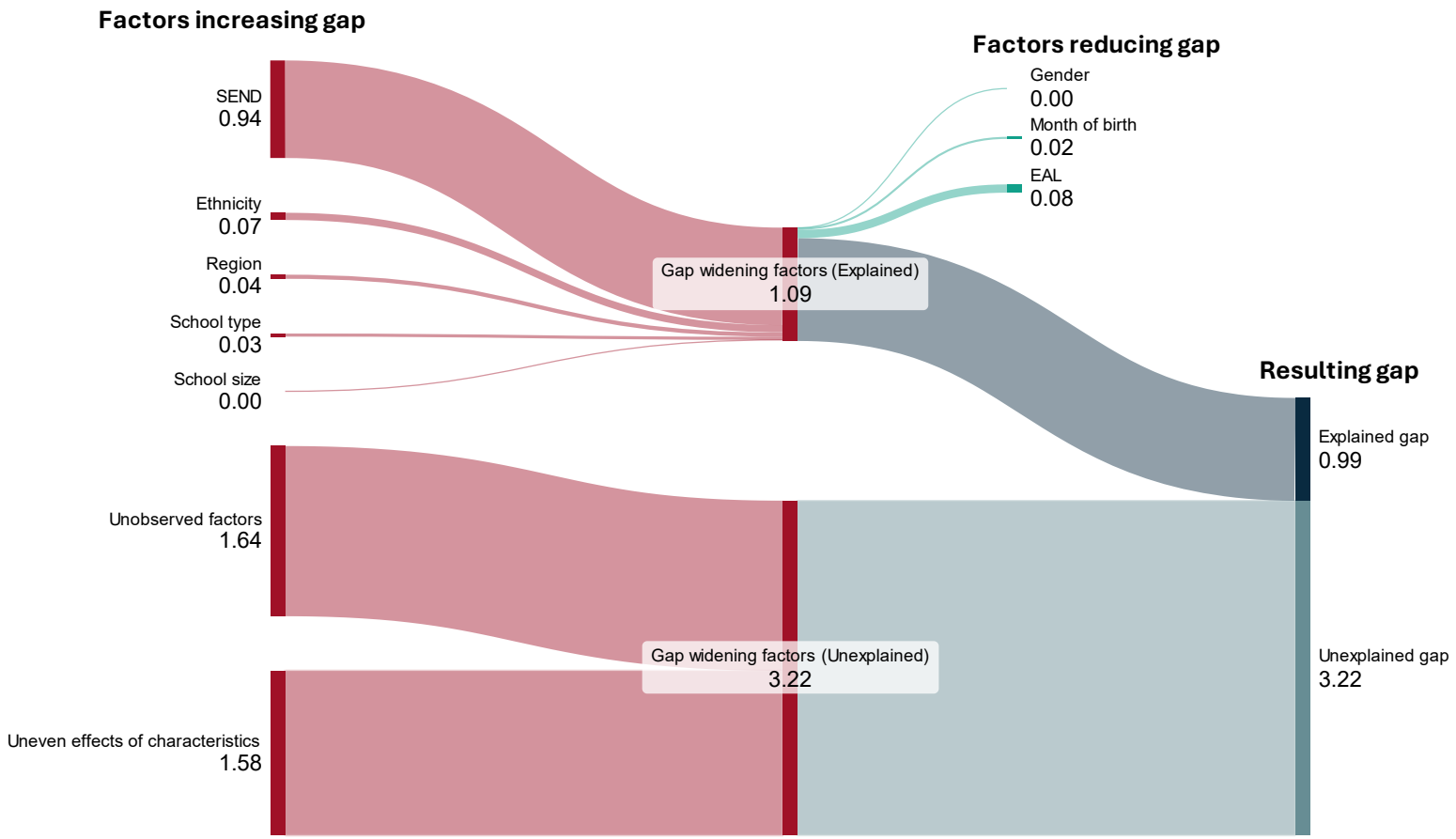


Figure A2: Decomposition of the disadvantage gap at age 11 in 2019

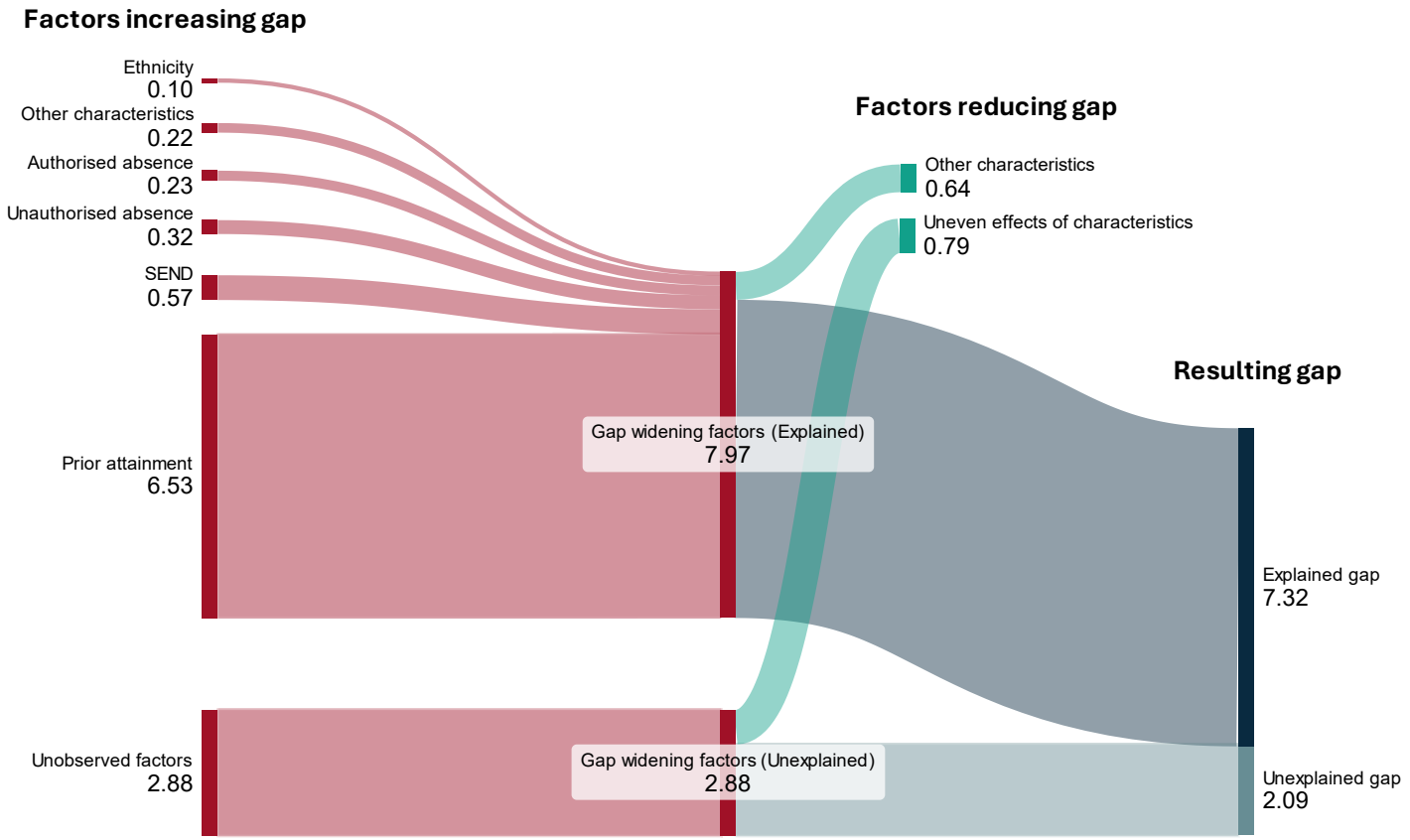


Figure A3: Decomposition of the disadvantage gap at age 16 in 2019

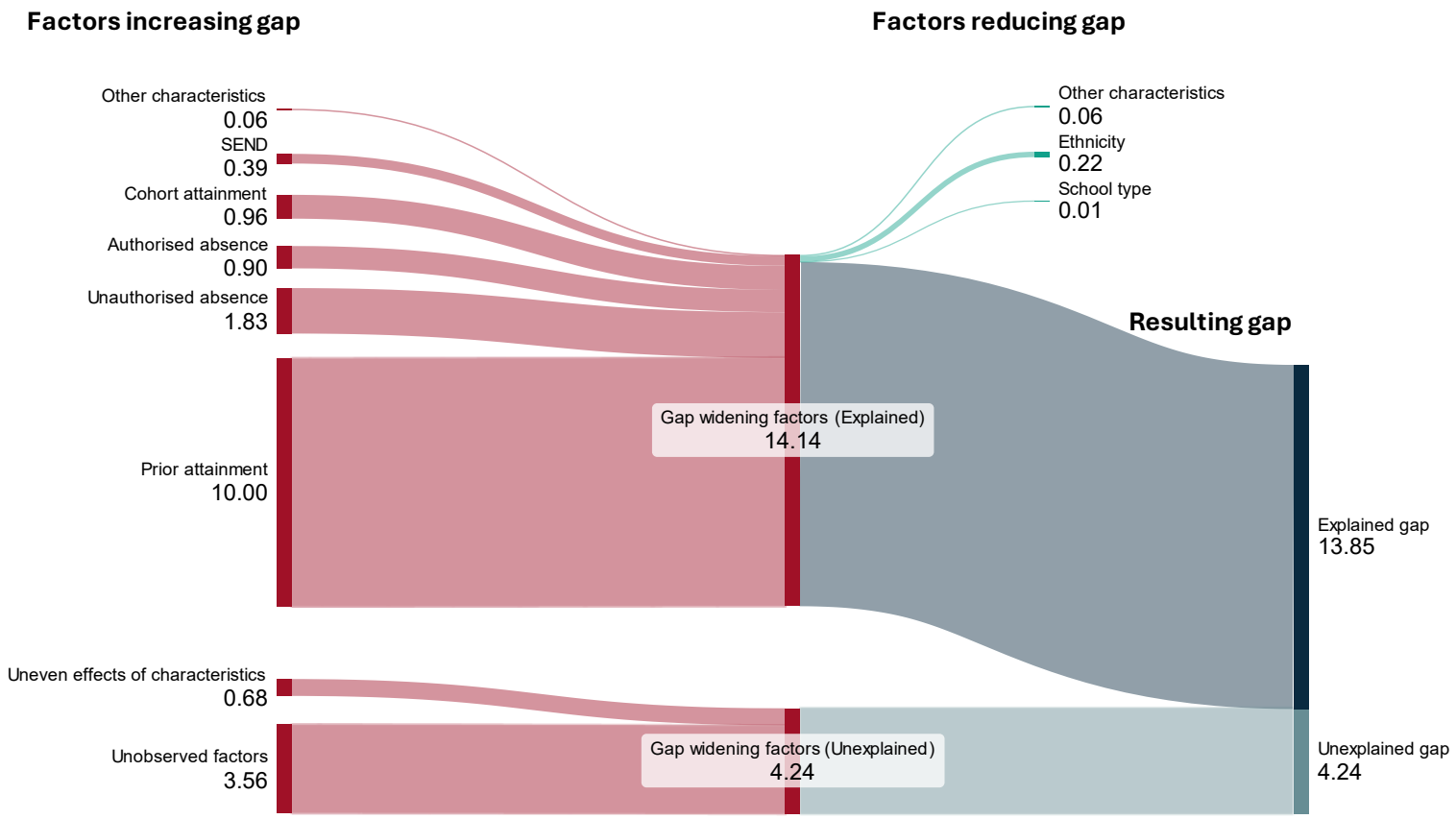
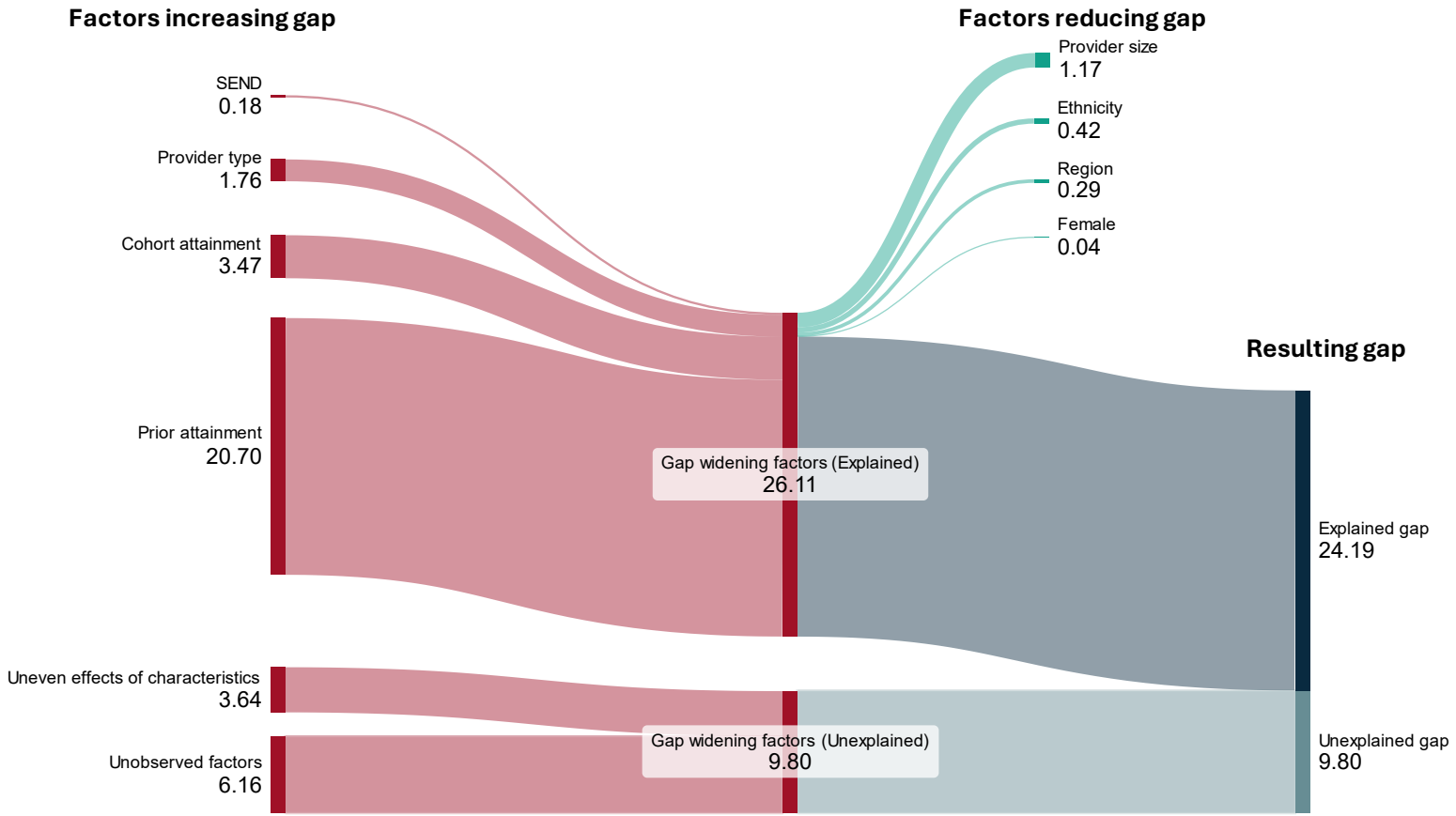


Figure A4: Decomposition of the 16-19 disadvantage gap in 2019



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