

Are children who are home from school at an increased risk of child maltreatment?

Authors

Shabeer Syed, MSc^{1,2*}

s.syed.16@ucl.ac.uk

+44 (0) 7999221230

Ruth Gilbert, MD^{1,3}

r.gilbert@ucl.ac.uk

Affiliations

¹ Population, Policy and Practice, University College London Great Ormond Street, Institute of Child Health, 30 Guilford Street, London, WC1N 1EH, UK

*Corresponding author

² Institute of Health Informatics and Health Data Research UK, University College London, 222 Euston Road, NW1 2DA London, UK

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On April 8, 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) raised concerns for increased risks of child maltreatment (CM; defined as abuse or neglect) during COVID-19.¹ WHO warned that the longer time spent with abusive carers, without the safety of school services including teachers and social workers will likely increase maltreatment. Fuelling these concerns are previous increased reports of CM to services when children are home during summer holidays, along with recent reports from United Nations of domestic violence during COVID-19.^{2,3}

We sought evidence for increased incidence rates of CM-related service presentations during school holidays compared with a preceding two-week control period during term-time for each holiday (starting at the midpoint of each half-term). We used data from 258,757 children (born January 1, 1999 to December 31, 2014) in the Clinical Practice Research Datalink mother-baby-link (CALIBER), linked to Hospital Episode Statistics and Office for National Statistics for death records.⁴ We followed all children for at least one full school year between August 2003 and August 2018. Each child could only present once, keeping the first CM recording per child. For each holiday and control period, we calculated daily incidence rates by dividing the number of children with a recording by the days available during that period. We compared incidence rates in school holidays with term-time control periods using Poisson regressions to compute incidence rate ratios.

We found a consistently higher daily incidence of CM-related presentations during the school terms/control periods, compared with the subsequent holidays (figure 1). Children in primary school showed higher daily incidences of CM (5-10 years) than those in secondary school (11-16 years). The incidence rate ratio remained relatively unchanged when allowing children to present multiple times per school year (appendix).

Our results do not support the suggestion of heightened risks of CM presenting to services during school holidays. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution. First, CM in GP, hospital and death records reflect only a small proportion of affected children presenting to services.⁵ Second, recorded healthcare presentations do not necessarily coincide with the timing of maltreatment. Third, increased CM-presentations during school term may be influenced by increased observation and reporting by school services. Fourth, as the data was collected before COVID-19, it is unclear whether findings translate to the COVID-19 lockdown. Given these limitations and the socio-economic pressures this summer,⁶ surveillance studies with self-report questionnaires or family interviews are urgently needed to assess the burden of family adversity and inform policies during, and after COVID-19.⁷

References

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Conflict of interest

We declare no competing interests.

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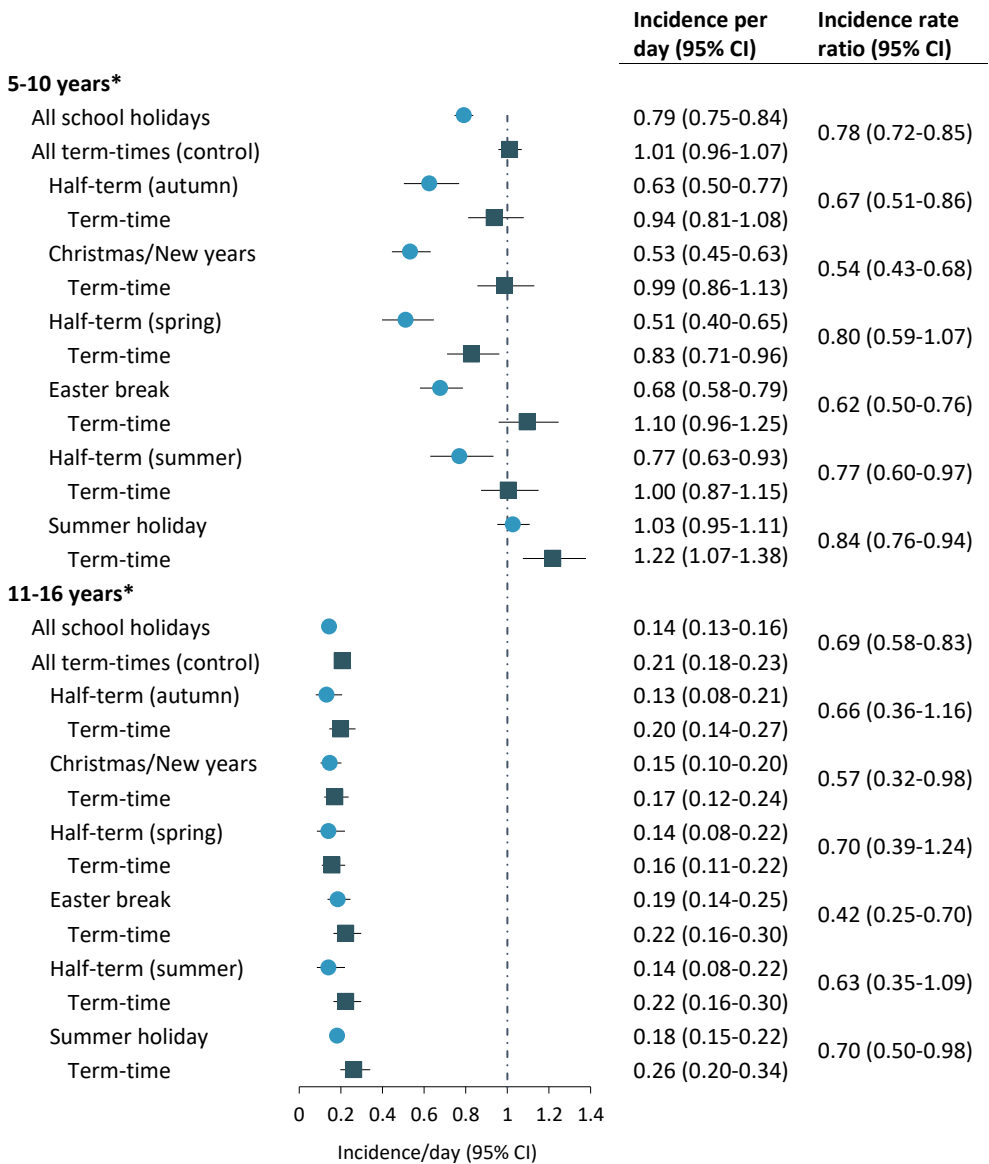
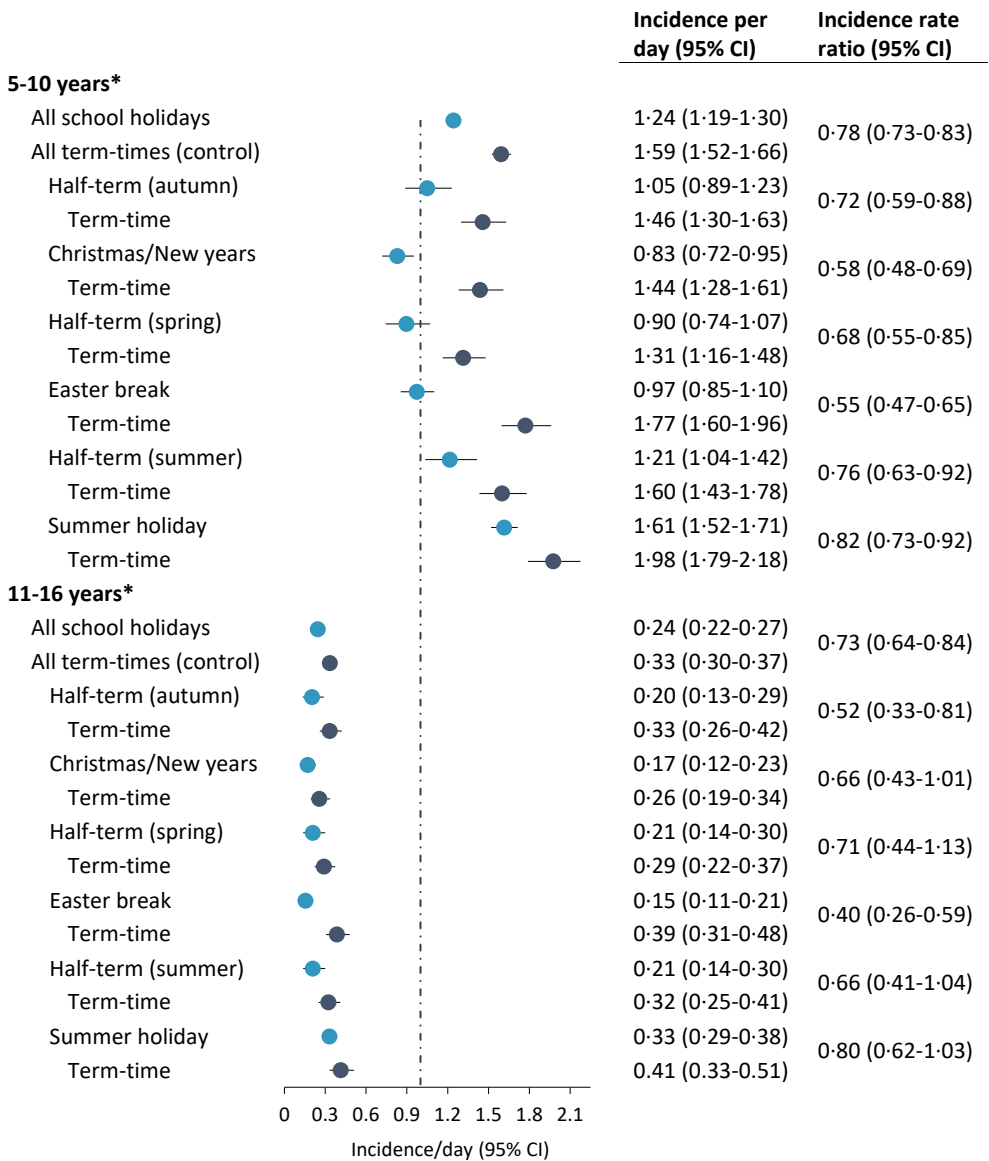


Figure. Daily incidence of recorded child maltreatment cases during school holidays and preceding term-times (control periods) among children aged 5-10 and 11-16 years in England (2003-2018).

Blue circles represent holiday periods and grey squares represent control periods. School holiday periods represents the total number of holiday days between 2003-2018, accounting for year-specific holiday dates. Control periods represents the total number of days in a preceding two-week term-time interval for each holiday, starting at the midpoint of each half-term. The dashed line marks the threshold for one case per day.

*The population at-risk ranged from 104,007 to 258,757 for children aged 5-10 years, and from 17,940 to 85,018 for children aged 11-16 years.



Appendix figure. Daily incidence of recorded child maltreatment cases during school holidays and preceding term-times (control periods) when allowing the same child to present multiple times per school year.

Blue circles represent holiday periods and grey circles represent control periods. School holiday periods represents the total number of holiday days between 2003-2018, accounting for year-specific holiday dates. Control periods represents the total number of days in a preceding two-week term-time interval for each holiday, starting at the midpoint of each half-term. The dashed line marks the threshold for one case per day.

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