

“Universal” education: who benefits? Patterns in take-up of the entitlement to free early education among three-year-olds in England

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Background and context: Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in England

- Children in England are educated within school-year cohorts, corresponding to the structure of the academic year (September-August)
- All* English children start primary school in the academic year (September-August) in which they turn five
- All English children are entitled to 15 hours free ECEC from the term after they turn three

*Though increasingly there are challenges to this, with a little more variation being introduced, this is negligible for our years of interest

...ECEC in England

- So autumn-born children are entitled to five terms of free ECEC, spring-borns to four terms, and summer-borns to three terms
- The vast majority of children attend in the penultimate year before primary school (estimated 95-98% in 2011)
- But, among autumn-borns, who are entitled to the most free ECEC, who benefits from this entitlement?

Why are patterns in take-up of interest?

- Spending on young children is increasingly dedicated to ECEC as the key early intervention (15 hours for low-income two-year-olds; 30 hours for 'working parents')
- Some evidence that high-quality ECEC can be beneficial to children's development / school readiness – particularly low-income children
- But children can only benefit if they attend

Key research questions

Among autumn-borns, who are entitled to five terms' free ECEC:

- How does take-up vary by income-level?
- What other factors relate to differences in take up?
- Do other factors explain variation by income-level?

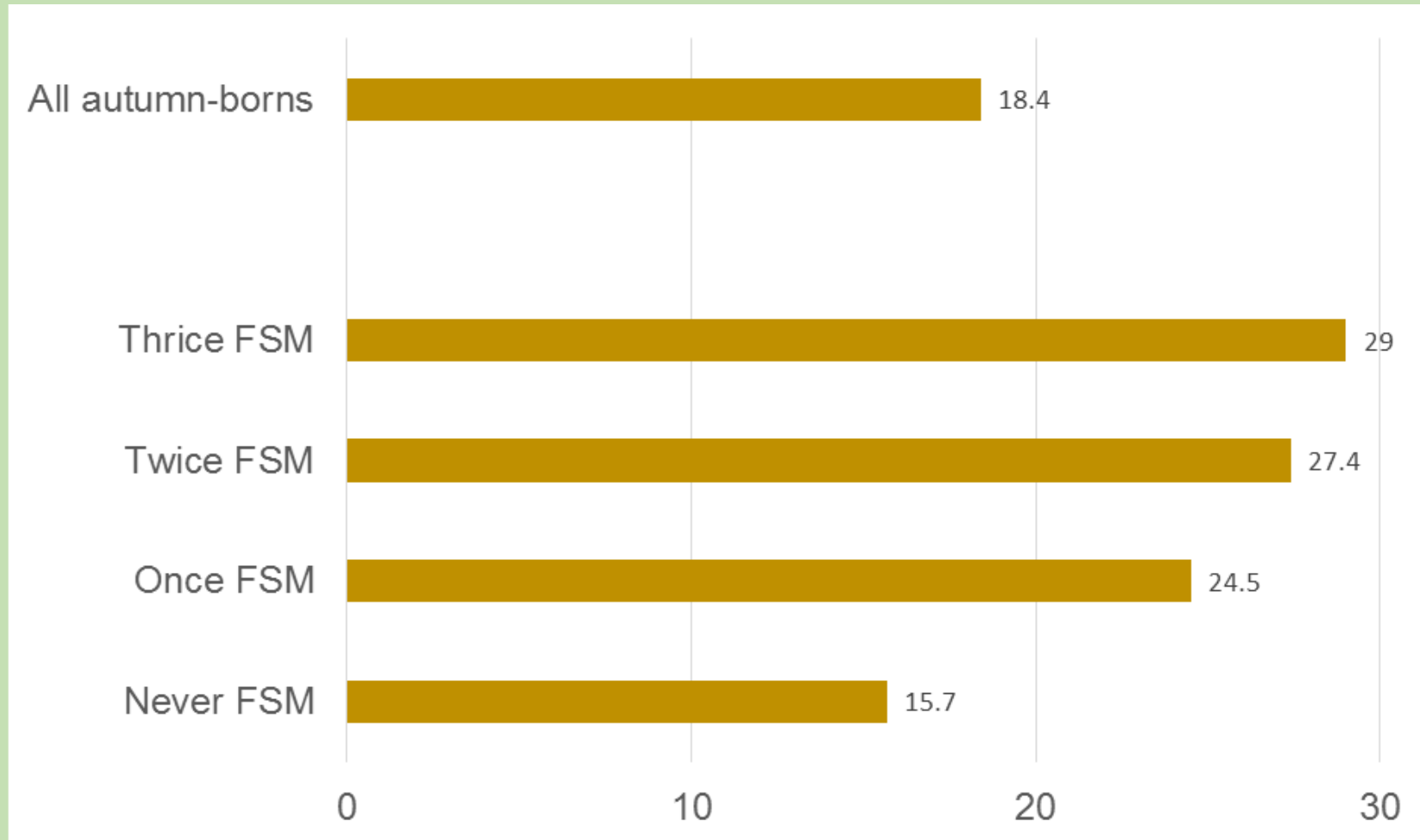
Data and sample

- National Pupil Database (NPD): census of all children in funded state education in England
- 2011 data: 205,865 autumn-borns attended ECEC
- 2010 data: linked to establish whether they also attended in January of the previous year, taking up their full five terms
- NPD also provides measures of low-income (FSM), ethnicity, EAL, locality of child

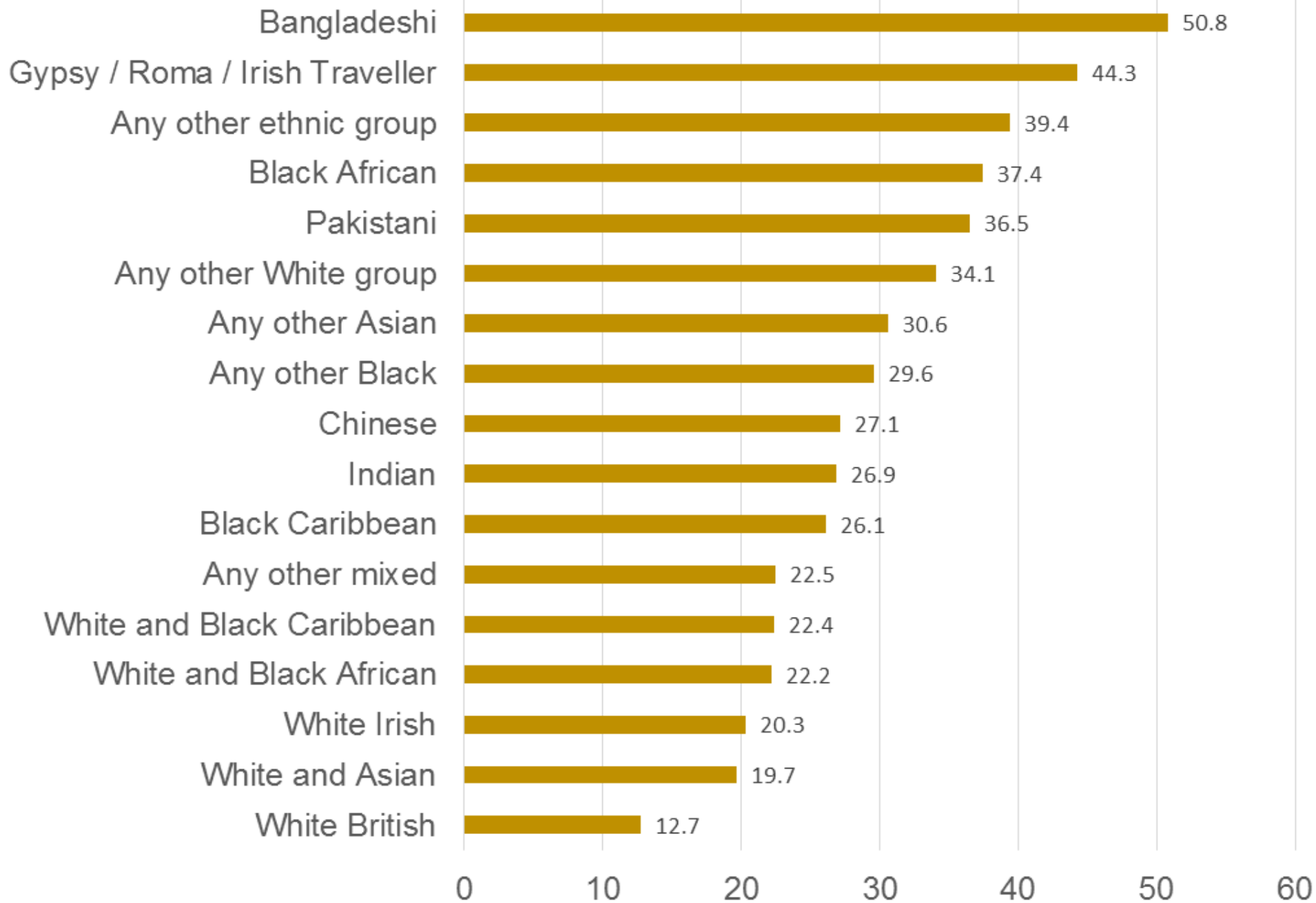
Low-income measure: future FSM

- No measure of family income-level at ECEC stage
- Link data forward to primary school – receipt of free school meals (FSM) recorded: low-income proxy
- Times FSM in the first three years of primary school:
 - Never (77%)
 - Once (5.5%)
 - Twice (5.9%)
 - Thrice (11.7%)

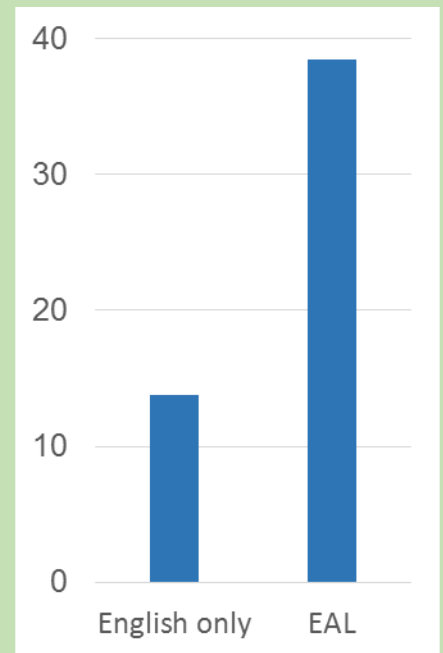
How does non-take-up vary by income-level?



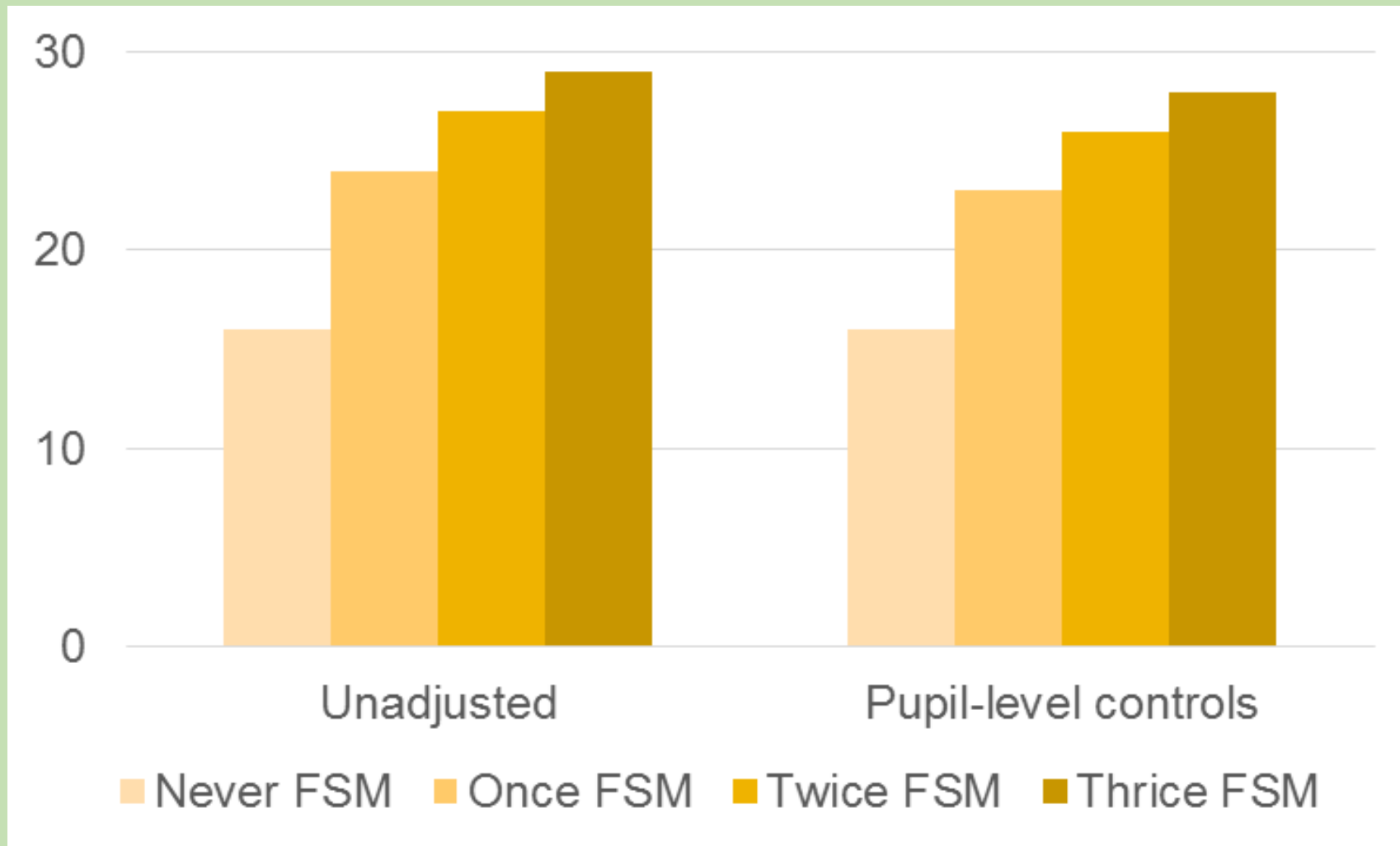
Children who claim FSM for each of the first three years of primary school are least likely to have attended free ECEC for the full duration



Wide variation in non-take-up by ethnicity and home language



Do other pupil-level factors account for variation by income-level?

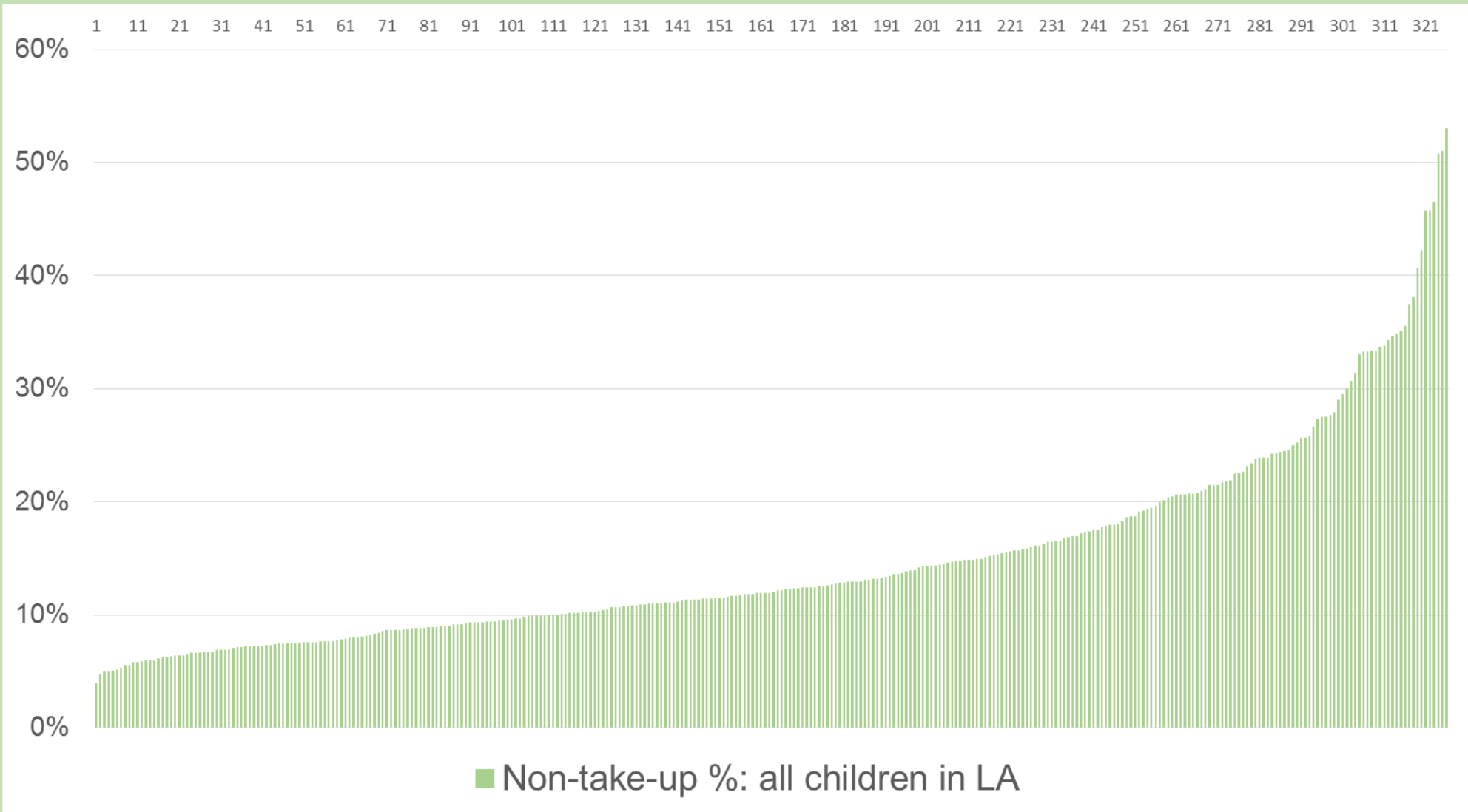


No: never-thrice gap = 13pp vs 12 pp

Predicted probability of non-take-up; logistic regression

Controls = ethnicity, EAL, month of birth, gender

Wide variation by local authority

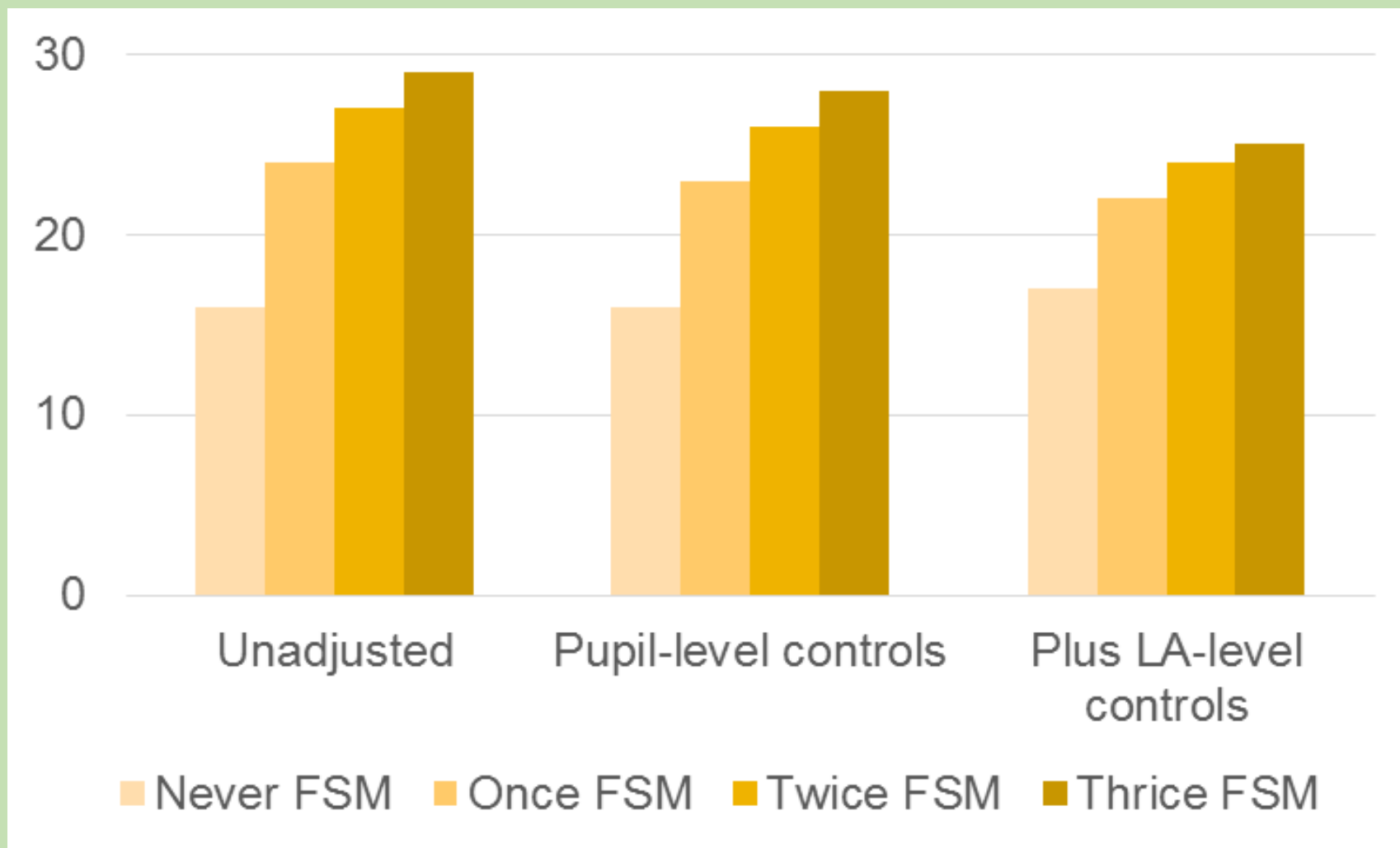


Ranges
from 4%
non-take-
up to 53%

Variation in local factors

	Min	Max	Mean	Standard Deviation
IDACI	0	99.4	22.7	17.0
Local authority provision:				
Maintained	0.2	97.8	46.6	25.5
Voluntary	0	52.6	14.7	12.6
Private	2.2	94.3	32.6	16.7
Sure Start (subset of Vol. and Priv.)	0	25.8	1.1	3.2
All other provision	0	79.7	6.1	8.5

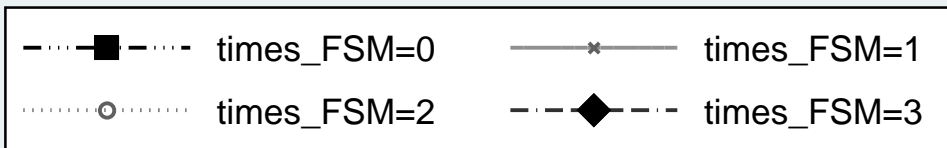
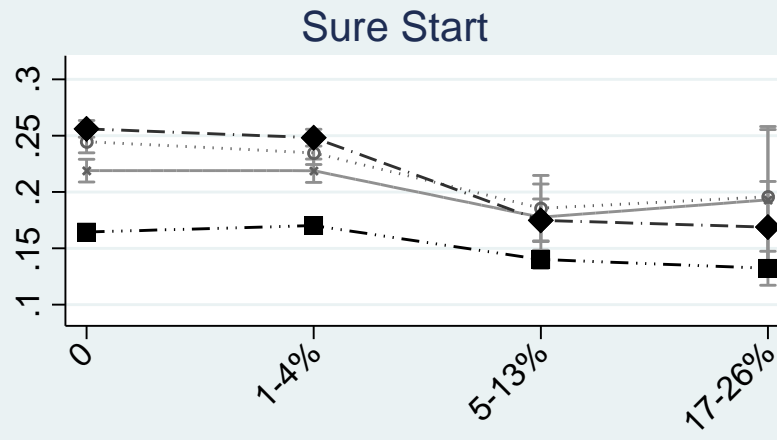
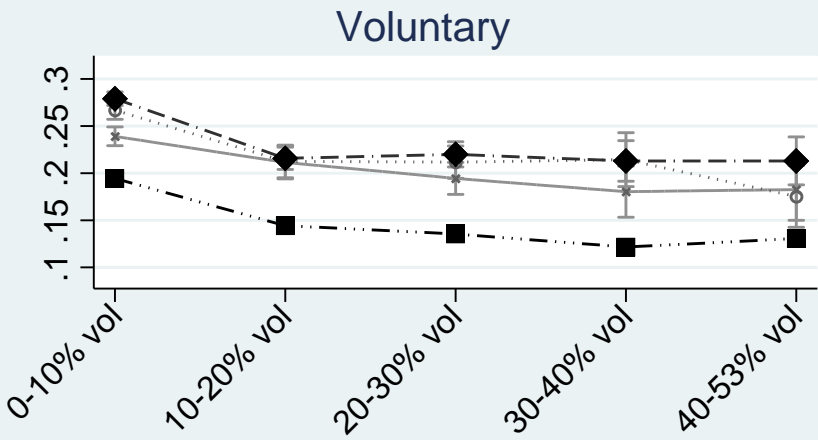
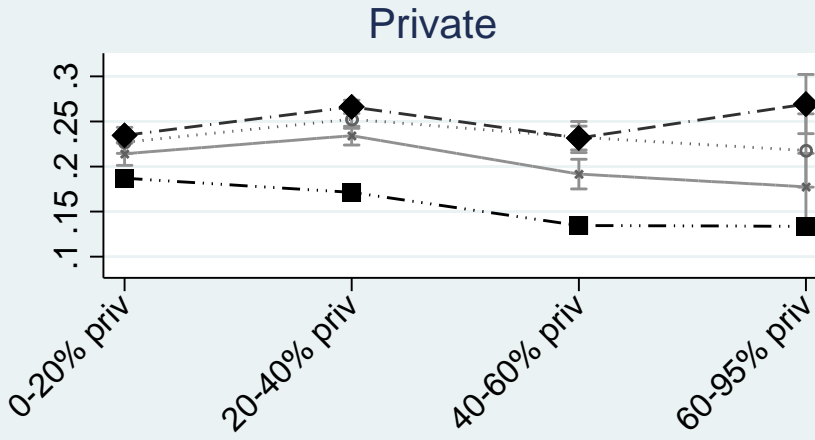
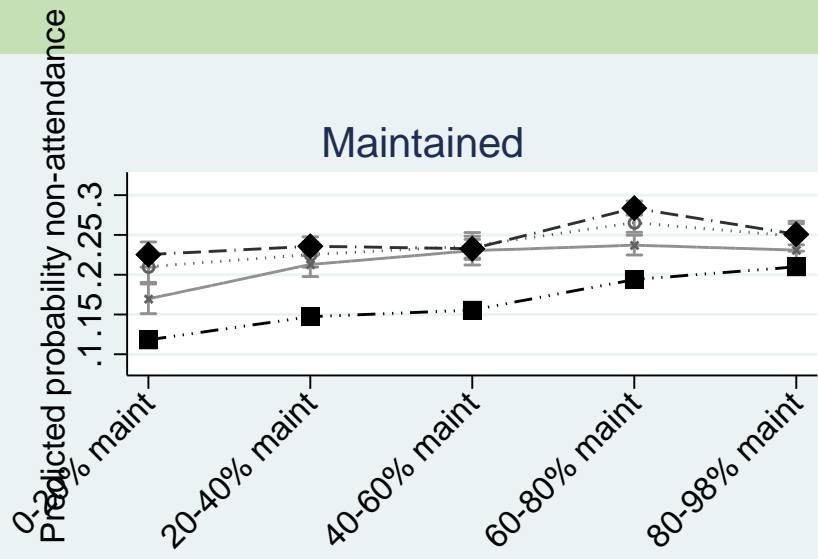
Do local factors account for variation in take-up by income-level?



Partly: never-thrice gap = 13pp vs 8pp

Predicted probability of non-take-up; logistic regression

Pupil-level controls + IDACI and local provision make-up



How does LA provision make-up relate to the gap?

Smallest in areas with more Sure Start / more maintained / less private

Main findings

- Low-income children are less likely to take up the full duration of their free ECEC
- This is not explained by co-existing family-level factors
- It is partly but not fully explained by local factors such as provision make-up
- FSM gap smallest in areas with more Sure Start / more maintained / less private

Implications

- If providing for low-income families and closing developmental gaps is truly a concern, policy on ECEC needs to move beyond simply providing 'entitlements' of which there is uneven take-up
- Provision type / local availability and suitability for different families is one potential lever
- Further investigation of barriers to take-up would be useful...
- ...alongside critical discussion and empirical analyses of the effects of increasing free ECEC entitlements, when it is the more affluent families / children who disproportionately benefit

Thanks for listening

Questions, comments...?

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This project was funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.