

HOW LONG ARE TEACHERS STAYING?

The popular view in the UK is that teachers at schools in poor communities serve their time and quickly move on. But is this actually true or an urban myth? Using new School Workforce Census data collected from all schools in England in Autumn 2010

Rebecca Allen and **Simon Burgess** have started to explore this question systematically, moving beyond a collection of local anecdotes to find out how long teachers actually stay in specific schools.

Overall, it seems that teaching is not a low turnover profession, and like many urban myths, there is a hint of truth in this view that deprived schools experience greater teacher turnover, but not much.

In a typical school, about a fifth of teachers have been there for less than two years, and over half of the teachers have been in that school for less than five years. On the other hand, nearly a fifth have been there at least 10 years, and in fact over five percent have stayed over 20 years. Of course, teachers vary and we compare different groups (see Table 1, page 22). There is very little difference in tenure between female and male teachers, nor between primary and secondary schools.

Averaging over all teachers, the mean time in a school is 6.7 years. Here we need to introduce a technical issue. The data come from teachers in schools, so this is job tenure so far, elapsed tenure. Obviously, a teacher who has just arrived at a school may go on to spend the rest of her career there. Under certain circumstances, the statistical model implies that the average completed tenure is double the average elapsed tenure.

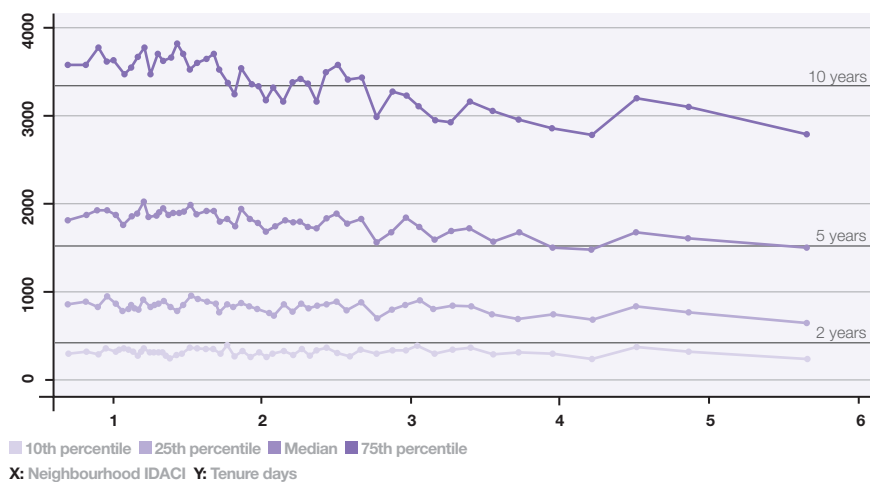
That is the overall picture, what of the differences between disadvantaged and affluent neighbourhoods? We find systematic and statistically significant differences in turnover: schools with many poor pupils do have more short-tenure teachers and fewer experienced teachers.

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Figure 1
Distribution of teacher tenure by school deprivation



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most affluent neighbourhoods have tenure of at least 10 years, whereas the figure in the most deprived neighbourhoods is 17 percent.

Figure 1 gives a flavour of the results. It shows the 10th percentile of tenure in school in days (the lowest line in the figure), across the full range of communities in England, from the richest two percent in the far left-hand side point to the poorest two percent in the far right-hand point.

The 10th percentile comes out at somewhat less than two years, but more interestingly, is flat. The number barely changes across the entire distribution. There is a very slight slope in the 25th percentile and in the median values, reinforcing the point that there are systematic differences but that they are quantitatively small. There is a more noticeable difference in the 75th percentile: in schools serving poor communities, there are slightly fewer experienced teachers.

We also use the richness of the data to breakdown the relationship between turnover and poverty. We show that part can be accounted for by pupil characteristics, perhaps because students in schools in more deprived areas are harder to teach. Part also is accounted for by differences in the local teacher labour market around each school. Controlling for school, student and teacher labour market factors reduces the association between school poverty and turnover, but does not eliminate it.

The remaining association between teacher turnover and poverty is largely accounted for by teacher characteristics, with the poorer schools hiring much younger teachers on average. How should we understand this?

We interpret this as either deriving from the preferences of young teachers, or as reflecting the low market attractiveness of disadvantaged schools. There are a number of possibilities.

First, it could be that this is a desired career path for young teachers. New teachers may look for their first jobs near to where they trained, which implies predominantly urban and therefore on average deprived, schools. Alternatively it could be a desired career path deriving from younger teachers possibly having more idealistic preferences, and welcoming the opportunity to work in deprived schools.

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Under these interpretations, the allocation reflects the desire of younger teachers to work in deprived schools, and the higher turnover in such schools derives from this.

The alternative interpretation is a matching story in which the more effective teachers sort on average into the more affluent schools, and the disproportionate number of inexperienced teachers in the poorer urban schools reflects the realities of the market that these schools face.

So, though we know that poorer schools do indeed experience slightly higher turnover and have a higher proportion of young and inexperienced teachers, distinguishing why this happens is a task for future work. It requires further sweeps of the data and possibly attitudinal data from teachers as well.

It is now widely acknowledged that teacher effectiveness is the single most important factor in raising attainment. Attainment gaps arise in part from students' exposure to teachers of differing effectiveness. The process by which different teachers end up at different schools in front of different children is little understood. Indeed teacher labour markets as a whole are not well understood and we intend to spend the next few years utilising this new data to address this research programme.

Rebecca Allen is a CMPO Research Associate and a Reader at the Institute of Education, University of London. Simon Burgess is a Professor of Economics at the University of Bristol and Director of CMPO.

Table 1
Years in current school (%)

	All teachers	Male	Female	Primary	Secondary
0-2 years	19.4	20.4	19.2	19.5	19.4
2-5 years	36.8	37.0	36.7	36.6	37.0
5-10 years	24.8	23.5	25.2	24.8	24.8
10 years or more	18.9	19.1	18.9	19.1	18.8
Number	343,547	80,704	262,843	172,137	171,410

Note: classroom teachers only, excluding assistant, deputy and headteachers