

School choice in England – who chooses where and why?

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On the deadline for secondary state-school choices, we summarise our new findings about the choices that parents make. We show how the number of choices parents make in different areas of the country varies, who is successful in getting their first choice school and which parents tend to just choose their closest school. We discuss the incentives and constraints parents face when making these difficult choices. These new findings are discussed in full in our working paper.

We know that the quality of schools influences pupils' later outcomes, such as their academic attainment, university participation and labour market success. Many parents therefore prioritise securing a place at a "good" school. But places at the best state schools in England are limited, so oversubscription criteria are applied. The criteria used are made public and are governed by the Schools Admissions Code. Often, places are rationed by proximity to the school, which leads to increased demand for housing (and therefore prices) close to good schools.

Against this background, parents in England are required to express a preference for the school that they would like their child to go to. Today is the deadline for secondary school choices for the 2018-2019 academic year. Parents must provide a ranking of their preferred school choice(s) on a form that is submitted to their Local Authority (LA). Some LAs allow a maximum of three school choices, while others allow up to six. Some parents make no choice at all and their child would then be allocated to a school with spare capacity.

Using new comprehensive national data on all the choices made by all the parents for the cohort entering secondary school in 2015-2016, our analysis explores the numbers of choices parents make, the probability of admission to the first choice school, and the probability of choosing the nearest school. We show how these key indicators of the school choice process vary across different types of household and geographical areas.

Number of choices

Key facts

- Figure 1 shows the average number of choices made by parents made across different LAs in England. Nationally, 35% of households submit only one choice of school. This percentage is typically lower in urban areas (lowest in Wandsworth where 6% make one choice) and highest in rural areas (highest in Northumberland where 80% make one choice). This suggests that the school choice process is more actively used in urban areas, perhaps due to the number of schools within a commutable distance.
- In contrast, 27% of households make the maximum number of choices permitted by their LA. The number of choices made is typically higher in London and urban areas, but this is partly due to the availability of six rather than three choices.
- Some parents make more choices than others. Households where English is an additional language or where the child identifies as being Black or Asian are more likely to make more

choices, even after allowing for the fact that such households are disproportionately located in urban areas where all parents tend to make more choices.

- Households eligible for Free School Meals (FSMs) make similar numbers of choices to non-FSM households.

Discussion

The number of choices made could be interpreted as the level of engagement with school choice. More choices would therefore indicate higher engagement with the process and possibly parents who place a higher value on education. If we use this interpretation, FSM and non-FSM households are equally engaged, while households who have children identified as having EAL or from a minority ethnic groups are more engaged. Alternatively, fewer choices may also indicate the parent is confident that they will be allocated to their first choice school, for example due to close proximity or a sibling already at the school. Indeed, 97% of households that make only one choice are allocated to this school which suggests that their choice was indeed “safe”.

More choices are made in areas where more choices are allowed. This suggests that restricting parents to three choices in some areas limits choice and possibly distorts choices, by encouraging parents to play it safe and choose at least one school that they are almost guaranteed entry to even if they do not prefer it. Analysis suggests that where more choices are allowed, the first choice school has higher academic quality relative to other local schools, which implies that where parents have more choice they tend to be ambitious in their choices.

Probability of admission to first choice school

Key facts

- Nationally, 85% of households are offered a place at their first choice school.
- Households where English is an additional language or where children identify as being of Black or Asian ethnic origin are less likely to be offered a place at their first choice school, even controlling for local population/school density.
- Households eligible for FSMs are equally likely to be offered a place at their first choice school as non-FSM households.
- Households are more likely to be admitted to their first choice school if it has lower attainment. Figure 2 shows that schools in the top quartile of attainment have the lowest probability of being offered a place, at all levels of local population/school density but particularly in urban areas.

Discussion

An offer of a place at the first choice school is the result of the school’s capacity, the demand from other households, and the “ambition” of the choice made. A first choice offer can therefore be viewed positively – that the household was successful in securing their most preferred school – or more negatively – that the household nominated the school they believed was achievable (rather than most preferred). For example, FSM and non-FSM households are equally likely to receive an

offer from their first choice school, but FSM households choose, on average, schools with lower academic attainment. This may reflect lower preferences for school quality but it also reflects constraints in access to good schools due to current school admissions criteria such as proximity. Families in which English is an additional language on average make more ambitious first choices, which is likely to explain their lower chances of success with that first choice.

First choice school is closest school

Key facts

- Only 39% of households nominate their closest school as their first choice. Only 46% of parents choose a school that is very nearby (within 20% of the distance of the closest school).
- Households where English is an additional language and pupils identify as being of Black or Asian ethnic origin are less likely to choose their closest school as first choice. 44% of White British households make such a choice, compared to 28% of Asian households and 19% of Black households.
- Households eligible for FSM are equally likely to nominate their closest school as first choice when compared with non FSM households. (38% compared to 39%.)
- The closest school is more likely to be bypassed when the academic quality of that school is low. Figure 3 shows that closest schools in the bottom quartile of attainment are least likely to be chosen, for all values of local population/school density.

Discussion

The closest school is the first choice school for only a minority of households. This suggests that parents are using school choice to break the link between home location and school attended. This is especially true when the quality of the closest school is lowest: parents try to avoid such schools. Minority language and ethnic groups are most likely to bypass the closest school, which perhaps reflects a higher ambition in the quality of the school chosen or more engagement with the school choice process.

Conclusions and next steps

Today many parents will finalise and submit their school choices for the next academic year. The choices made may be the result of months of deliberation, an impulse, or merely a formality due to the presence of older siblings.

The descriptive analysis summarised here is clear that school choice is a different process across the country. Rural areas are characterised by fewer choices and a higher proportion of successful first choices. Despite the seeming lack of choice in these areas, the existence of school choice allows households to bypass their closest (or default) school if desired, and therefore play an active part in their child's allocation to school without moving home.

School choice is more pertinent in urban areas, where households typically make more choices, and more ambitious choices. However, the probability of admission may be more uncertain in urban

areas where demand for each school is harder to predict. Many urban areas allow households to make up to six choices which overcomes this to some degree. LAs that currently restrict the number of choices to below six should consider allowing more choices, which would be relatively costless and would easily reduce the need for a strategic or “safe” school choice.

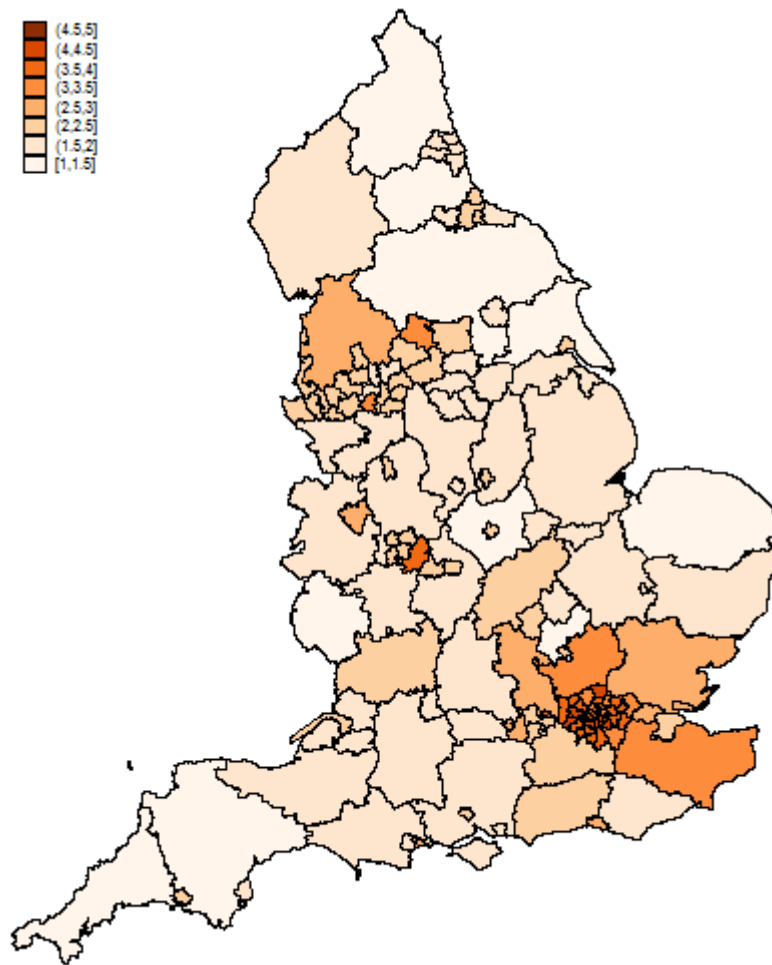
While some households clearly engage with the school choice process, which may therefore encourage schools to improve standards to attract pupils, choice is curtailed for others by the predominant school admissions criteria. Allocating places to over-subscribed schools by proximity means that some households have negligible chance of admission to the best schools. Given limited choices, these households may therefore decide that making such an “ambitious” choice would be a waste. How many parents today have dismissed their most preferred school because there was no chance of being offered a place?

One aim of our research was to consider how the school choice system operates for different families. There is concern that low income households may not be able to make the same kind of choices as those from higher income households. Our analysis of choice shows that FSM and non-FSM households are similar in the number of choices made, the proximity of first-choice, and admission to first choice school. However, non-FSM households still access better schools due to their proximity to higher performing schools. This implies that whilst the school choice process is clearly being actively used by poorer households, it is not able to overcome the disadvantage of not being able to afford to live near a higher quality school.

There is a striking difference between White and Black or Asian households, and between households with and without English as an additional language (EAL). Black, Asian or EAL households make far more school choices and seem to prefer higher performing schools. We cannot conclusively say why such choices are made. Perhaps Black, Asian or EAL families have a greater focus on education or a better understanding of the school choice system.

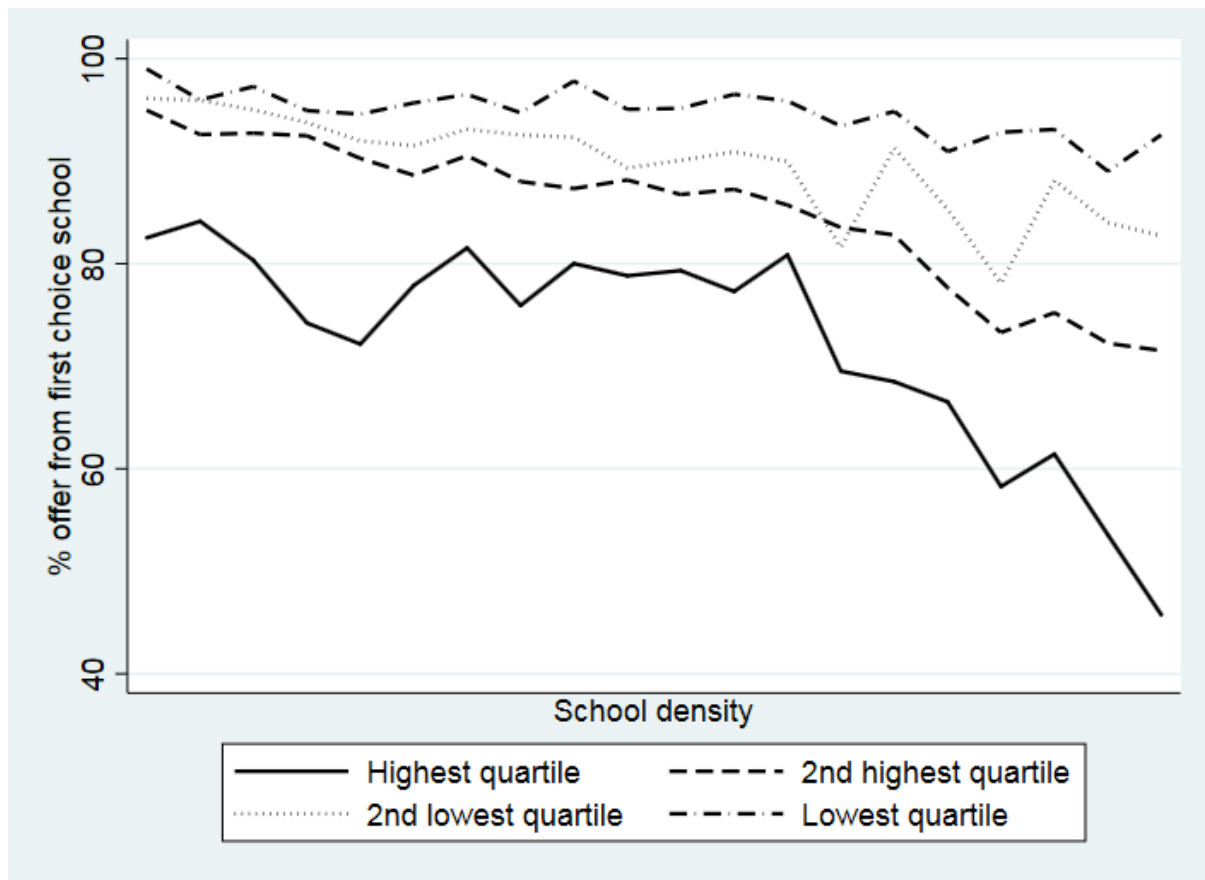
Future econometric analysis will explore the role of parents’ preferences and constraints on school choice in explaining the key facts we observe. We hope to address whether alternative admissions criteria which reduce the importance of location would change the patterns of choice and school outcomes that are currently evident.

Figure 1: Average number of school choices made in each Local Authority in England



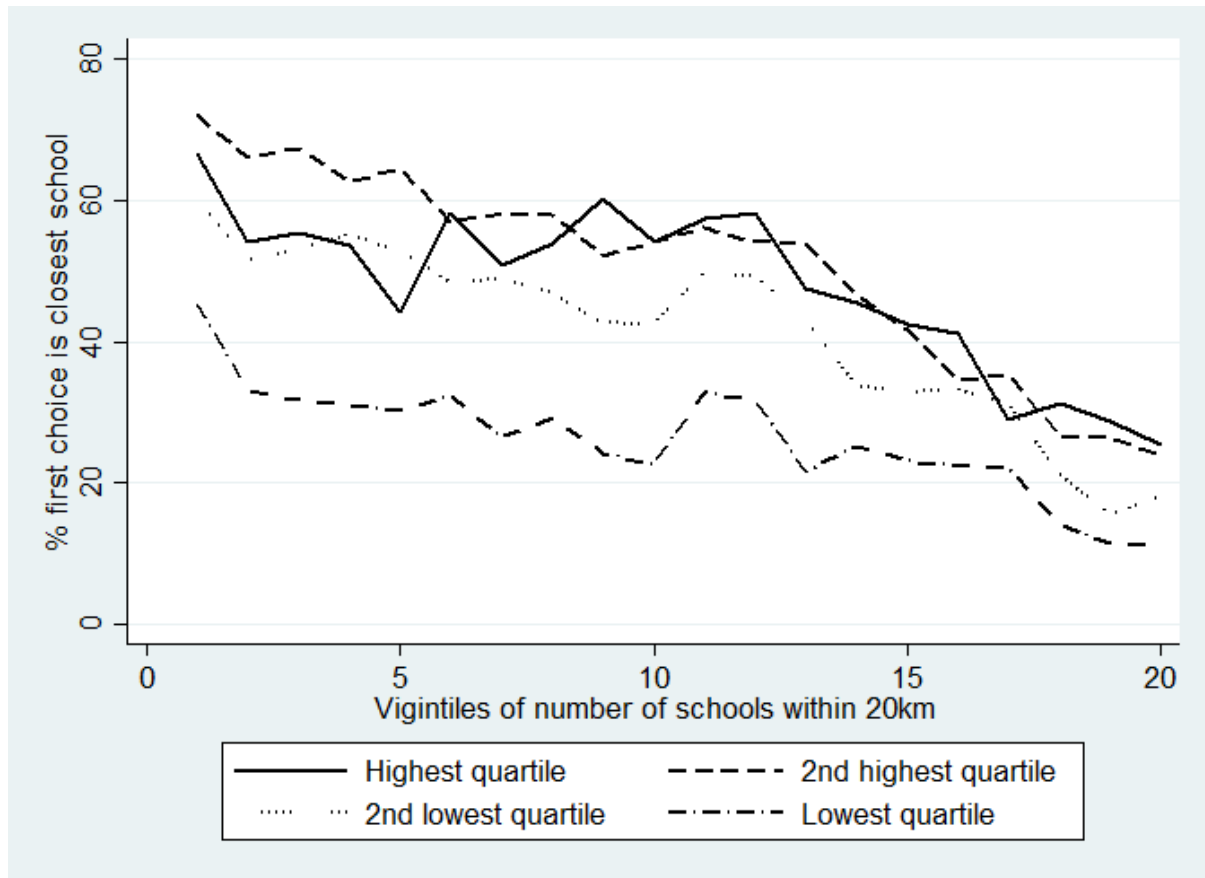
Source: National Pupil Database linked to national parents' preferences data, made available by the Department for Education.

Figure 2: Offer from first choice school, by school density and school quality of first choice school (measured by % 5A*-C inc. English and Maths)



Source: National Pupil Database linked to national parents' preferences data, made available by the Department for Education. School density is measured by the number of schools within 20km of the pupils' home, and split into 20 equally sized groups. The graph shows the percentage of households with an offer from their first choice school in each of these 20 equally sized groups.

Figure 3: First choice is closest school, by school density and school quality of closest school (measured by % 5A*-C inc. English and Maths)



Source: National Pupil Database linked to national parents' preferences data, made available by the Department for Education. School density is measured by the number of schools within 20km of the pupils' home, and split into 20 equally sized groups. The graph shows the percentage of households where their first choice school is their closest school in each of these 20 equally sized groups.