

# Male school inspectors award more lenient grades than female inspectors, says paper

February 3 2023

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Male school inspectors are more likely to award higher Ofsted grades than female inspectors when inspecting similar primary schools, according to new research by UCL and the University of Southampton.

Released today as an academic working paper, the study examines the Ofsted grades awarded by 1,376 different inspectors across 35,751 school inspections conducted between 2012 and 2019. It is the first independent research into how school inspection outcomes are linked to characteristics of the lead inspector, either in England or worldwide.

The researchers found that male lead inspectors awarded a low grade ("Requires Improvement" or "Inadequate") to around a third (33.1%) of [primary schools](#), but female lead inspectors awarded a low grade to 36.4% of primary schools.

This difference was particularly pronounced for the lowest inspection grade—"Inadequate"—which can often result in headteachers of the inspected schools losing their jobs. Female lead inspectors were one third more likely to award an "Inadequate" grade to primary schools than their male counterparts (5.9% versus 4.5% respectively).

To control for whether female inspectors were more likely to be sent to inspect low performing schools, the study also compared the inspection grades awarded to schools with the same prior Ofsted inspection rating, [exam results](#), levels of pupil absences, pupil intake, and in the same region of the country. The study reveals that, even when comparing primary schools that are similar on all these characteristics, female inspectors remain more likely to award a low Ofsted grade.

There were no clear differences in the grades awarded by male and female inspectors inspecting secondary schools.

Study co-author Dr. Sam Sims (UCL Center for Education Policy & Equalizing Opportunities) said, "Given the high-stakes nature of school inspections for parents and teachers, with many parents using these school inspection grades to help choose a school for their children, one would hope that Ofsted grades accurately reflected the quality of

schooling on offer.

"But our new research shows that characteristics of the lead inspector can influence the Ofsted grade awarded to a school—and it appears that even similar schools receive different grades based on something as arbitrary as the gender of the lead inspector."

In addition to gender differences, the study also found that freelance inspectors (Ofsted Inspectors) were more likely to award a higher Ofsted grade than inspectors employed on a permanent contract (His Majesty's Inspectors).

In total, 32% of primary schools inspected by a freelance inspector received a low grade compared to 44% of primary schools inspected by those holding a permanent contract with Ofsted. However, the authors note that inspectors who hold a permanent contract with Ofsted are also more likely to be assigned to inspect lower performing schools, which likely explains some of this difference.

The study found no significant differences in the inspection grades awarded by inspectors with more or less experience, those working inside or outside their home region, or when inspecting schools within their primary or secondary school specialism.

Study co-author Professor Christian Bokhove (University of Southampton) added, "Many [important decisions](#)—driving tests, judicial sentencing, penalties in football matches—rely on human judgment. This inevitably leads to some inconsistency in the decisions made, with different individuals interpreting the evidence in different ways. As school inspections also involve on human judgment, it is no surprise that their outcomes also depend in part on the characteristics of the inspector(s) assigned."

Dr. Sims added, "On the basis of these findings, we recommend that Ofsted publish further details on how it quality assures inspections—especially when an 'Inadequate' judgment is reached. It should also publish details about how inspectors are deployed.

"Lastly, we recommend that Ofsted deposits in the Office for National Statistics Secure Research Service an inspection-inspector linked dataset, enabling further independent research into [school](#) inspections."

The researchers note that a new inspection framework was introduced by Ofsted in September 2019, which puts less emphasis on performance in national examinations and more on the quality of the curriculum. Since inspections were suspended during the pandemic, this analysis was based on inspections prior to the most recent framework change.

Commenting on the findings, Ruth Maisey (Program Head for Education at the Nuffield Foundation) said, "The new [inspection](#) framework is arguably more subjective than its predecessor, placing more emphasis on how the curriculum is taught, rather than data. As a result, we might expect differences between inspectors to be greater. We would like to see Ofsted reflecting on these findings and seeking ways to improve the consistency of inspections."

**More information:** Are some school inspectors more lenient than others? [blog.soton.ac.uk/mshe/files/20...cts\\_FINAL\\_020223.pdf](http://blog.soton.ac.uk/mshe/files/20...cts_FINAL_020223.pdf)

Provided by University College London

Citation: Male school inspectors award more lenient grades than female inspectors, says paper (2023, February 3) retrieved 23 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-02-male-school-inspectors-award-lenient.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.