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# Changes in paediatric pneumococcal carriage in Southampton UK during the SARS-CoV2 pandemic

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#### BACKGROUND

The Southampton pneumococcal carriage study of children <5-years-old is in its seventeenth year and continued during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst it has been shown that invasive disease declined during this period<sup>1</sup>, there are data to suggest prevalence remained largely carriage unaffected by social distancing and other Non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs)<sup>2</sup>, although pneumococcal carriage density has been shown to have been impacted<sup>3</sup>.

## AIM

To determine if pneumococcal carriage in children <5-years-old was impacted by NPIs (i.e., periods of lockdown) during the SARS-CoV2 pandemic.

#### **METHODS**

Nasopharyngeal swabs were collected from children <5-years-old attending outpatient clinics at University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust (Site 1) during seventeen consecutive winters (October-March; 2006/7 to 2022/23). Sampling was also done for the most recent six winters, beginning in 2017/18, at community healthcare sites across the Solent NHS Trust area (Site 2).

Presumptive *S. pneumoniae* were plated on Columbia blood agar with an optochin disc and confirmed with a ≥14 mm diameter inhibition zone.

Pre-NPI carriage was compared to the period during NPIs (26<sup>th</sup> March 2020 to 1<sup>st</sup> July 2021) and post-NPI period (on or after the 1<sup>st</sup> August 2021).

# RESULTS

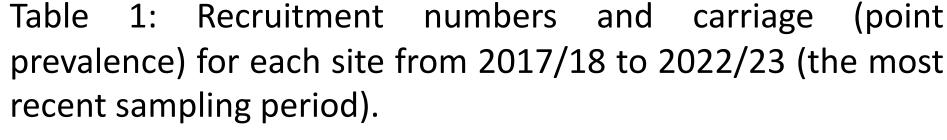
Pneumococcal carriage in the three years preceding the pandemic was 29.9% (95CI: 8.8-33.2), 35.0% (95CI: 32.1-38.1) and 29.7% (95CI: 26.9-32.7) for 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20 respectively. During the period which included NPIs this dropped to 19.2% (95CI: 14.9-24.3) and remained lower at 21.2% (95Cl: 17.1-26.1) and 26.6% (95Cl: 22.3-31.5) in the two most recent years.

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# RESULTS (cont.)

When separated into sampling sites (Figure 1 and Table 1), the immediate rebound seen for Site 1 (Hospital) was not seen for Site 2 (community healthcare sites). Here carriage fell significantly from 27% (n=127/470) in 2019/20 to 20% (n=44/228) in  $2020/21 (\chi^2 (1, N=697) = 4.64, p=.031))$ . In the most recent period, 2022/23, carriage in Site 2 cohorts has increased to 25.3 (95CI: 20.8-30.3) suggesting that prevalence has rebounded.



	YEAR	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
SITE 1	Recruitment (n)	480	542	499	64	46	31
	Pneumococci (n)	158	192	161	12	15	13
	Carriage (%)	31.7	35.4	32.2	18.8	32.6	41.9
SITE 2	Recruitment (n)	322	458	470	228	288	340
	Pneumococci (n)	89	158	127	44	56	86
	Carriage (%)	27.2	34.5	27	19.3	19.4	25.3

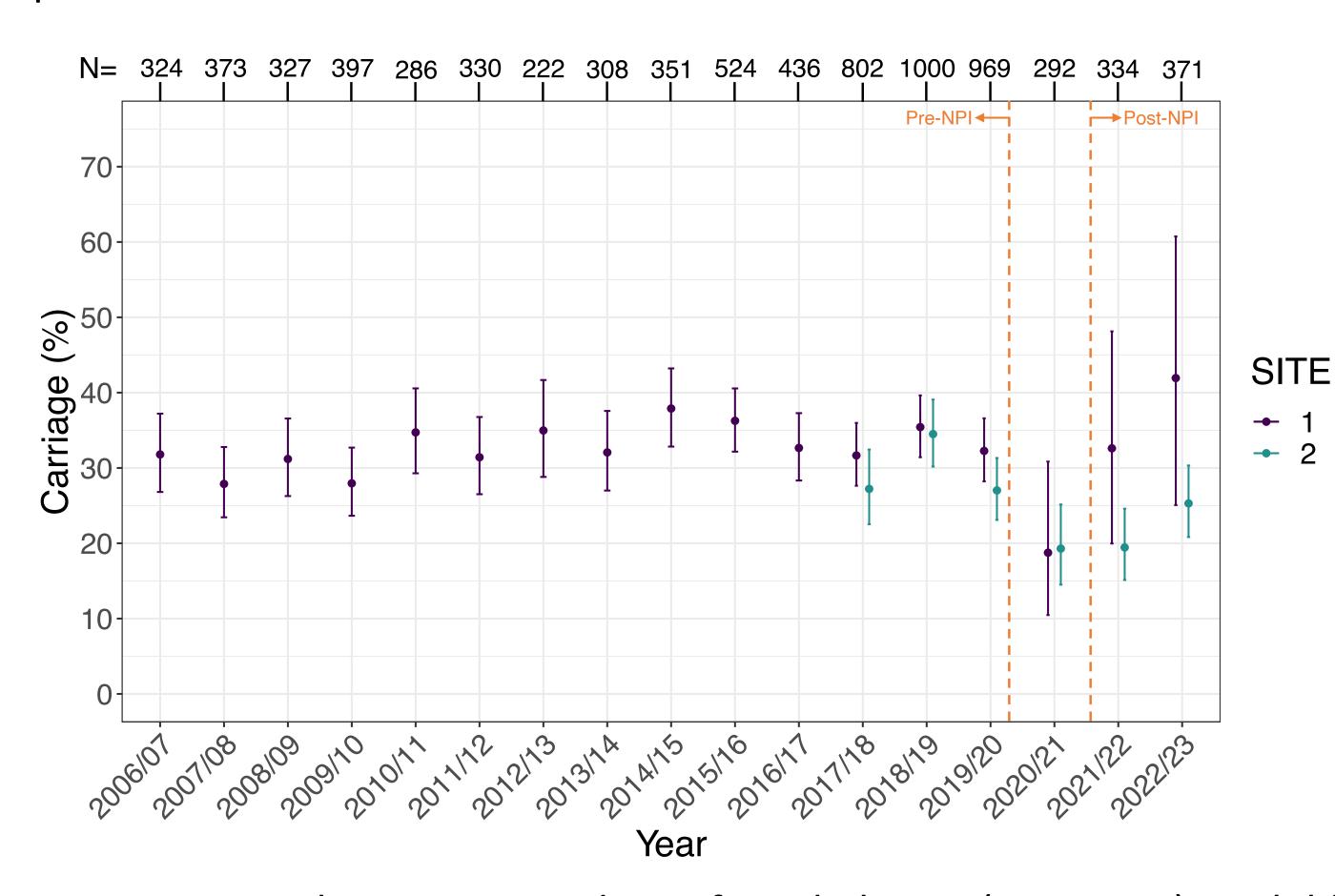


Figure 1 (left): Carriage prevalence (%) of S. pneumoniae (all serotypes). Per year recruitment numbers are shown above. Error bars represent 95% Cl. From 2017/18 onwards data has been split into Site 1 (University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust) and Site 2 (community health-care settings in the Solent NHS Trust area).

Carriage prevalence remained significantly lower (p = 0.017) in children less than 2 years of age in the post-NPI period compared to pre-NPI periods (Figure 2). Carriage during NPIs for both <2 and 2-4 years of age was lower than pre-pandemic levels, but not statistically so. Prevalence in the post-NPI period for both these age groups is reflective of the levels seen pre-NPI period (Figure 2).

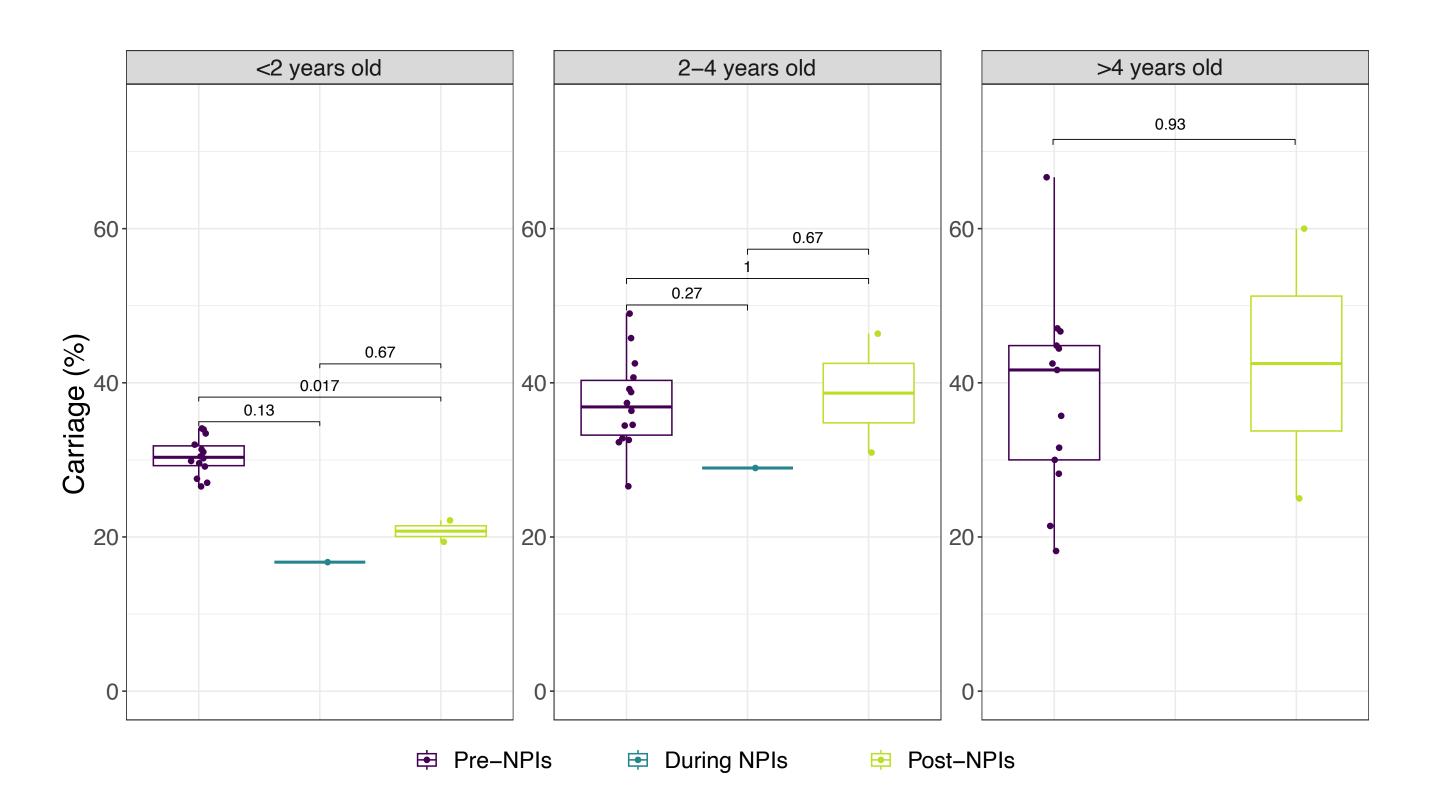


Figure 2 (left): Box and whisker plot of pneumococcal carriage prevalence (%) stratified by age group, with statistical (Kruskal-Wallis) comparisons made between pre-, during (26/03/2020 to 01/07/2021) and post-NPIs. Carriage in children <2 years old is the only age for whom pneumococcal group prevalence has remained low.

## CONCLUSION

- Pneumococcal carriage prevalence declined in children <5-years-old (in Southampton, UK) during the SARS-CoV2 pandemic.
- Carriage prevalence has largely rebounded since NPIs were stopped.
- Carriage in those <2 years of age remains statistically lower than pre-pandemic levels.

## **FUNDING**

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