

Discretion, dignity and choice: free school meals



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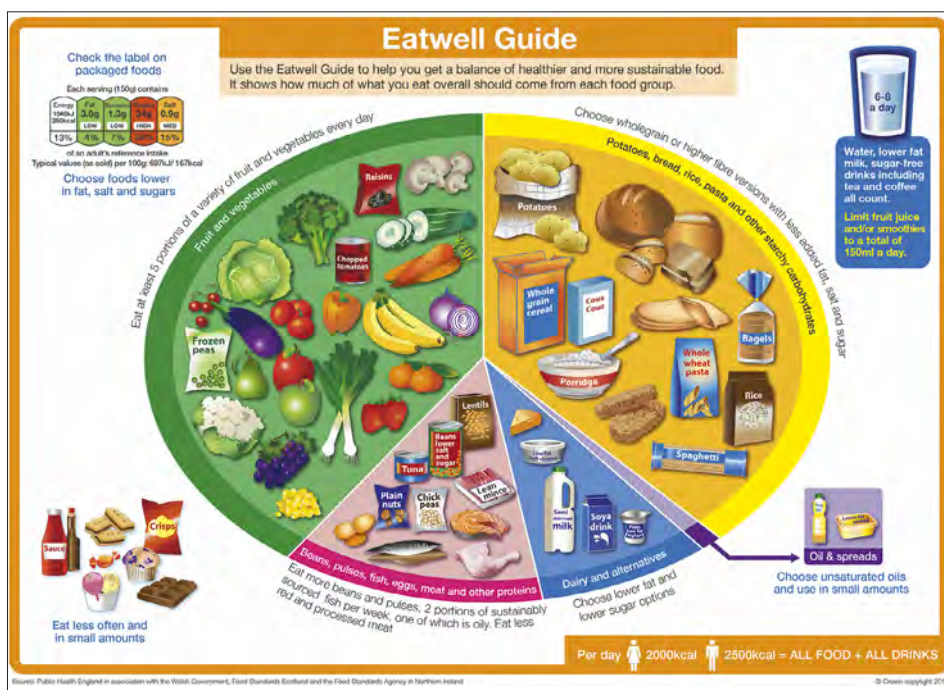
Reducing poverty-related stigma to improve the uptake of free school meals is critical. The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated how millions of families rely on school food to help make ends meet. How are free school meals delivered in different schools and what impact does that have on children? What can be done to reduce shame and stigma for children eligible for free school meals?

Children eat their school meal in the canteen. To ensure children in receipt of free school meals (FSMs) are not stigmatized, their provision should take into account not only hiding who has paid for the meal but also social and relational aspects of food in schools, too. For example, are all children given the same food choices?

The UK government's healthy eating guide. Providing a varied diet largely based on fresh fruit and vegetables can prove to be more expensive than unhealthy options, however.

Since the 1940s, governments across the UK have offered free or subsidised food and drink in schools to improve public health and alleviate child poverty. In the 21st century, these aims continue to underpin the regulations governing school food across the four nations of the UK. The aim of improving public health is primarily achieved through statutory regulation of the nutritional standards of the food provided. The poverty alleviation aims are achieved by subsidising the cost of school food and drink, via a combination of universal and means-tested schemes, such as free milk, free school meals (FSMs) and subsidised fruit and vegetables.

For children in poverty, free or subsidised food in schools can be a critical source of sustenance, especially if they are growing up in homes in which household income is insufficient to purchase the full range of foods considered necessary for optimal health and development. Healthy eating can be unattainably costly. In 2018, affording the ingredients needed to meet Public Health England's Eatwell guidelines would require households in the lowest income quintiles to spend 42 per cent of their disposable income on food alone.¹



Subsidised school meals can also be considered a type of ‘social wage’ that offsets some of the costs of raising children for families on the lowest incomes. In CPAG’s surveys of low-income families during the first and third COVID-19 lockdowns, many parents and carers reported their living costs had increased without the daily support of free meals in school. In particular, families who usually received universal infant free meals but did not qualify for ongoing provision during lockdown reported a negative financial impact because their children could no longer access this free food.²

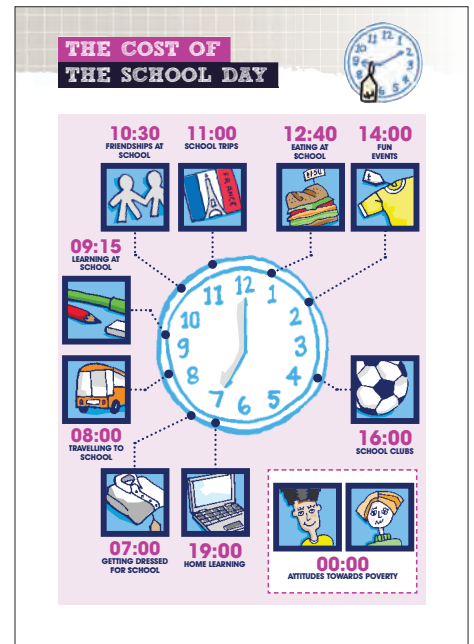
With child poverty rates increasing, and many families with children facing a real-terms decrease in living standards, it is unsurprising that reported levels of household food insecurity are also on the rise.³ The issue of ‘child food poverty’ is now a prominent topic of discussion, with politicians, footballers and civil society organisations all rallying around a mission to ensure no child experiences hunger during the school day.⁴

In spite of this, tens of thousands of children still decide not to take up their free meal on any given school day. Policymakers are rightly concerned with maximising uptake of FSMs, and there is some evidence that poverty-related stigma deters some children from claiming FSMs. In recognition of this potential stigma, the Welsh and Scottish governments both require FSMs to be provided in a discrete manner that prevents recipients from being identified as such to their peers. The introduction of cashless and biometric payment systems in many schools have undoubtedly helped to disguise who is ultimately paying for the meal. This technological solution is not quite the panacea it first seems, however.

Table 1: Uptake of means-tested free school meals 2019–2020

Nation	Uptake
Scotland	76.2% ⁵
Wales	87.8% ⁶
Northern Ireland	80.5% ⁷
England	89.0% ⁸

CPAG’s UK Cost of the School Day project, delivered in partnership with Children North East, speaks to thousands of children and young people about their experiences of food in school. Our practitioners ask pupils if they are able to tell who receives free meals in their school. While many children are unaware of who gets FSMs thanks to discrete administration and cashless systems, some children in receipt of FSMs still experience social exclusion



because they receive their lunch allowance from the state rather than their parents or carers.

Practitioner question: “The government pays for some pupils to have a free school meal. Without naming names, is it possible to know who gets a free school meal in your school?”

Key stage 2 pupil (Wales): “We don’t know who gets free school meals, there’s no way of finding out. You pay online or put it in a bucket at breakfast club.”

Children who rely on free food in schools can find themselves set apart from their peers if they are unable to choose from the same menu; some schools will serve only a hot meal to FSM pupils, and these pupils cannot choose a grab-and-go option instead. Other FSM-eligible children report having to sit apart from their friends who bring in packed lunches from home. Some children face a limited choice because their allowance does not stretch to both a morning snack and a meal with a drink at lunchtime. In secondary schools, some older pupils feel embarrassed if they do not have personal spending money to buy snacks, or leave school grounds and buy food from retailers, unlike their friends.

The experiences of these children and young people show that the stigma created by receiving free school food can be more difficult to navigate than simply disguising who is paying for a meal. If schools wish to truly poverty-proof their dinner halls, they need to consider the social and relational aspects of food in schools, too.

As Ruth Lister reminds us, people experience poverty ‘not just as a disadvantaged and insecure economic condition, but also as a shameful and corrosive social relation’.⁹ Poverty pervades all aspects of a child’s experience of school, and often manifests as an inability to participate in the same activities and experiences that other children take for granted. For children in 21st-century schools, that can include buying a coffee, eating lunch off campus or grabbing snacks between classes and after-school clubs.¹⁰



To produce the below statistics, the Food Foundation collected data from seven rounds of UK-wide surveys monitoring levels of food insecurity impacted by COVID-19 between March 2020 and January 2021. ‘The Food Foundation, A Crisis within a Crisis: the impact of covid-19 on household food security’, 2021, available at [foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/FF_Impact-of-Covid_FINAL.pdf](https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/FF_Impact-of-Covid_FINAL.pdf)

Current picture of Food Insecurity

FINANCIAL IMPACT OF COVID:

22% OF ALL HOUSEHOLDS HAVE LOST INCOME SINCE BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

DRIVERS OF FOOD INSECURITY*

- 55% NOT ENOUGH MONEY
- 31% ISOLATION
- 23% LACK OF SUPPLY
- 8% OTHER

4.7 MILLION ADULTS (9%) have experienced food insecurity in the past 6 months

2.3 MILLION CHILDREN live in households that have experienced food insecurity in the past 6 months (12% of households with children)

41% of households with children on Free School Meals have experienced food insecurity in the past 6 months

1.5 MILLION 8-17-year-olds (20%) reported food insecurity over Christmas/January

1 MILLION 8-17-year-olds (13%) and their families have visited a food bank over Christmas/January

GROUPS WITH HIGHER LEVELS OF FOOD INSECURITY

- Limited a lot by health problems/disability x5 compared to those with no health problems/disabilities
- Food sector workers x1.5 compared to non-food sector workers
- Severely clinically vulnerable x2 compared to average
- BAME x2 compared to white British

*not mutually exclusive

School caterers are required to manage tight budgets and exacting regulations to provide decent meals for all children who require them. In our Cost of the School Day research, we have uncovered many examples of innovative practice by school caterers who want to ensure all children can enjoy eating at school. In a primary school in the South Wales valleys, for example, catering staff and teaching staff liaise to ensure children have additional portions if they have had no breakfast. The children reported that serving sizes were generous, and there was usually the opportunity to have ‘seconds’ if they were still hungry.

In a secondary school in the Midlands, students who are eligible for FSMs are allowed to spend their allowance throughout the school day on a full range of meals and snacks, enabling students to make their own choices about what and when they want to eat. Any unspent money from students’ daily £2.60 allowance is kept on their account so it can be used another day. On occasions when a student’s account has been topped up with money from home, their FSM allowance is always used first so that cost to the family is kept to a minimum and used as a last option.

The school’s catering manager also ensures that there are always cheaper options available so that students who have less money to spend can “still get enough and be included in what’s on offer”. This ensures inclusion for low-income students who do not qualify for FSMs – a situation that affects two in five children in poverty across the UK.¹¹ Furthermore, in the dinner hall, children eating school dinners and those with packed lunches can sit together, so students who have a free meal can still sit with their friends who bring food from home.

Our poverty-proofing work reveals how the stigma of poverty extends far beyond the dinner queue. The entire school day contains many situations that can leave children in poverty feeling embarrassed, ashamed or left out. Children in poverty must continually navigate and reposition themselves within these situations to preserve their dignity and resist being identified as impoverished.

When it comes to eating, dignity can be achieved by consuming the same food as their friends, paid for in the same way and eaten in the same space. By giving children and young people full access to their meal allowances, and full choice of when to spend it, schools can prevent students living in poverty from being isolated from their friends due to their financial circumstances. Universalist approaches to providing food in schools can also be a useful way of normalising eating cooked food in schools – as demonstrated by significant increases in uptake following the introduction of universal infant meals in both England and Scotland.^{12,13}

As governments begin to widen eligibility for FSMs, action must also be taken to co-design inclusive and non-stigmatising ways of providing free meals, in partnership with the children and young people who receive them. Provision that simply seeks to feed children without also nourishing their social needs will ultimately end up being less well-used than an offer that upholds dignity and offers no opportunity for stigma. As those who have lived through poverty attest, dignity is ultimately achieved by having the same choices enjoyed by others, by autonomy to make decisions about how you live your life, and by having the opportunity to participate in your community on the same terms as everyone else.

Ellie Harwood is Wales development manager for CPAG’s UK Cost of the School Day project.

Footnotes

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3. M Brewer, A Corlett, K Handscomb, C McCurdy and D Tomlinson, *The Living Standards Audit 2020*, Resolution Foundation, 2020, available at [resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/07/living-standards-audit.pdf](https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/07/living-standards-audit.pdf); The Food Foundation, *A Crisis within a Crisis: the impact of covid-19 on household food security*, 2021, available at [foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/FF_Impact-of-Covid_FINAL.pdf](https://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/FF_Impact-of-Covid_FINAL.pdf)
4. [endchildfoodpoverty.org](https://www.endchildfoodpoverty.org)
5. *School Healthy Living Survey Statistics 2020*, Scottish Government, April 2020, available at gov.scot/publications/school-healthy-living-survey-statistics-2020
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10. Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit, *Are pupils being served? A secondary review of the sector’s evidence base on school meal provision at lunchtime in Scotland*, Glasgow Caledonian University, 2019
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12. A Halford and B Rabe, *Impact of the Universal Infant Free School Meal Policy*, Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex, 2020
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In October 2020, young people protest outside Downing Street after the government says it will not fund free school meal provision during half term.