



# The number of children in poverty not eligible for free school meals, by nation and region

September 2024

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Across the UK, millions of children receive a free school meal (FSM) each day at school. But many miss out. Previous CPAG analysis estimated that, across England, 900,000 school-age children in poverty (one in three school-age children) don't qualify for a FSM under either the national universal infant provision or means-tested schemes.<sup>1</sup> This new piece of analysis shows how this compares to national FSM schemes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The analysis also looks at how this figure is broken down by region in England.

No two nations have exactly the same eligibility criteria for FSMs. Wales and Scotland have the widest coverage through universal schemes. Northern Ireland does not have any universal provision, but it has the highest earnings threshold for means-tested FSMs. In England and Wales, transitional protection applies, meaning that during the universal credit roll-out children retain their FSMs eligibility even if their circumstances change.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All children in England in the first three years of school have access to a universal infant FSM. From Year 3 onwards, free FSMs are means tested. If a household is in receipt of universal credit their income must be less than £7,400 (before benefits and after tax) for them to qualify for a FSM.

<sup>2</sup> Since 1 April 2018 in England and 1 April 2019 in Wales, transitional protections (TP) have been in place which will continue during the roll-out of universal credit. This has meant that pupils eligible for FSMs on or after the date TP was introduced retain their eligibility even if their circumstances change. If a child is eligible for FSMs, they'll remain eligible until they finish the phase of schooling (primary or secondary) they're in on 31 March 2025.

Table 1: FSMs provision across the UK

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Universal FSMs	Reception-Year 2	All primary	P1-P5	None
Means-tested FSMs	Year 3 onwards	Year 7 onwards	P6 onwards	All year groups
Universal credit threshold for means-tested FSMs	Earnings below £7,400 a year (after tax)	Earnings below £7,400 a year (after tax)	Earnings of £796 or less a month (after tax)	Earnings of £15,000 or less a year (after tax)
Working tax credit (WTC) threshold for means-tested FSMs	Cannot claim FSMs	Cannot claim FSMs	Claiming both child tax credit and WTC with earnings below £9,552 a year	Earnings of £16,190 or less a year (before tax)
Child tax credit threshold (in families not claiming WTC) for means-tested FSMs	Earnings of £16,190 or less a year (before tax)	Earnings of £16,190 or less a year (before tax)	Earnings of £19,995 or less a year (before tax)	Earnings of £16,190 or less a year (before tax)
Means-tested FSMs for families with no recourse to public funds	Can claim subject to a maximum income threshold	At discretion of local authority	At discretion of local authority	

## What about children in poverty?

Poverty is a measure of household income (accounting for earnings, social security, housing costs and household size). It does not fit neatly into FSMs eligibility, and therefore FSMs eligibility is not an accurate proxy for poverty. Across all nations and regions of the UK there are children in poverty who do not qualify for FSMs. However, the extent of this depends on the national schemes in place. There is also regional and local action taking place to help plug gaps in provision. In this analysis we focus on the coverage of FSMs by national schemes. We use survey data to estimate how many school-age children live in poverty but do not qualify for FSMs.

Table 2: Number and share of children in poverty who are not eligible for FSMs through national schemes

Nation	Number of children in poverty not eligible for FSMs through national schemes	Share of children in poverty not eligible for FSMs through national schemes
England	900,000	33%
Scotland	25,000	20%
Wales	20,000	15%
Northern Ireland	15,000	20%
<i>Total</i>	960,000	30%

We can see that England has the highest share of children in poverty who miss out on FSMs. Wales fares best through having the most comprehensive universal provision. In Scotland, progress has been made through the roll-out of universal provision to children in P1 to P5. However, further plans for expansion have been delayed, and the Scottish government's most recent commitment is only to: 'Work towards further expanding free school meals to those in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment in Primary 6 and Primary 7'.<sup>3</sup> The promise of extending universal provision to P6 and P7 in the current parliamentary session has been abandoned.<sup>4</sup>

In England, we can break down the national figure by region to understand more about who is missing out across the country.

Table 3: Number of children in poverty who are not eligible for FSMs in each region of England through national schemes

Region of England	Number of children in poverty who are not eligible for FSMs through national schemes
East Midlands	70,000
East of England	80,000
London (without universal primary FSMs)	180,000*
London (with universal primary FSMs)	100,000
North East	10,000
North West	140,000
South East	150,000
South West	70,000
West Midlands	120,000
Yorkshire and The Humber	70,000

\* Emergency funding provided by the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, means all state primary school children in London will receive FSMs until the end of the 2024/25 academic school year. The Mayor of London has also committed to extending the policy beyond this point. The table shows both how many children in poverty in London are not covered by national schemes but also the reach of the regional policy.

At regional level in England, we can see wide variation in the number of children missing out. This can be explained by variation in region size and three other factors: number of children in poverty, number of children who are registered for FSMs and composition of households in poverty. Other factors may exist like differential registration rates between regions, but the data is not good enough to pick up on this. The number who miss out is highest in the South East and London, as high housing costs mean families can earn more than in other parts of the country and still be in poverty after housing costs.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Scottish government, [Programme for Government 2024-25: Serving Scotland](#), September 2024

<sup>4</sup> First minister, Scottish Parliament, [Official Report, 5 September 2024; c12](#)

<sup>5</sup> The North East share who miss out is much lower than other regions. The North East has historically had the highest FSM registration rate but also the highest child poverty rate. This meant the share who miss out is closer to the rest of the regions. However, since Covid, HBAI

## Conclusion

*'I feel as though all young people should be entitled to free school meals, this would support many families whether or not they are in low income or working.'* (Secondary school pupil)

Many children across the UK continue to miss out on FSMs, and that includes around one million children living in poverty. They lose out on a filling meal each day along with the many associated benefits including improved health,<sup>6</sup> learning<sup>7</sup> and social experiences.

In recent years we have seen new FSMs policies being announced and implemented across the UK, with free meals reaching more children in the devolved nations. For example, the roll-out of universal primary FSMs in Wales is now complete. This means every child in a Welsh primary school in autumn 2024 will be offered a meal at lunchtime. Since the roll-out began, Welsh government figures show an additional 26 million meals have been served to children.<sup>8</sup>

Progress has also been made in Scotland with the introduction of universal provision to all children in P1 to P5. In contrast to Wales, Scottish government plans for universal primary FSMs, originally promised for 2022 and significantly delayed, have now been halted. There are plans to provide free meals to P6 and P7 children in families receiving the Scottish child payment, but no firm timescales for this extension.

In Northern Ireland the income threshold for means-tested FSMs has recently been increased from £14,000 to £15,000 a year, and a wider review of the eligibility criteria is currently taking place. England currently lags the furthest behind and has the harshest eligibility criteria of all the UK nations.

While CPAG supports actions taken so far by governments across the UK to expand FSMs, this work must continue. The UK and devolved governments must ensure that FSMs are available to every school child that needs one, regardless of their age, and work towards removing means-testing entirely from the dining hall. We know universal approaches work best for children and families, reducing financial and emotional strain on households and supporting all children to make the most of school life.<sup>9</sup>

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has reported lower than expected poverty levels in the North East, while FSM registration rates have not fallen, meaning the share who miss out has fallen.

<sup>6</sup> Nuffield Foundation, *Impact of the universal infant free school meal policy*, 2020

<sup>7</sup> Lund University, *Free and nutritious school lunches help create richer and healthier adults*, 2021

<sup>8</sup> [Senedd Cymru tabled question on free school meals](#), 2024

<sup>9</sup> CPAG and NEU, *The Universalism Multiplier*, 2023

## Methodology

FSMs data is the latest available and comes from devolved government statistics (see links below).

The estimated number of children in poverty who missed out on FSMs was calculated using Households Below Average Income 2022/23. The data is used as the input for UKMOD (tax-benefit microsimulation software), which is used to estimate a more up-to-date household income distribution, accounting for factors such as the migration of households on to universal credit, the roll-out of the two-child limit and the full impact of the Scottish child payment. From that updated survey data, entitlement can be calculated based on the earnings of the household and the various eligibility criteria for different means-tested benefits.

There will be some households who currently earn above the eligibility criteria but, because of transitional protection in universal credit, are still eligible for FSMs. The number of these households was calculated using data on the share of FSM-eligible pupils in Wales who are covered by transitional protection (similar data does not exist publicly in England). Understanding Society was then used to estimate the number of these households who are above and below the poverty line.

The regional breakdown was calculated by averaging the share of children who missed out on FSMs in 2022/23 and 2021/22 and applying this share to the 2022/23 total figure (as the sample is too small to use a single year).

The data is not of high enough quality to capture numbers of children with no recourse to public funds receiving FSMs.

HBAI data: Household Below Average Income 2021/22, 2022/23. This can be accessed through the UK Data service.

FSM data:

England - [Academic year 2023/24 Schools, pupils and their characteristics](#)

Scotland - [School Healthy Living Survey: school meal uptake and PE provision statistics 2023](#)

Northern Ireland - [School meals – 2022/23 statistical bulletin - 27 April 2023](#)

Wales - [Pupils eligible for free school meals by local authority, region and year](#)

## About CPAG

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights.