

# FREE SCHOOL MEALS: THIRD OF KIDS IN POVERTY MISS OUT

July 2023

---

## Summary

- A third of school-age children in England (900,000) living in poverty miss out on free school meals.
- The main causes are a lack of universal provision and restrictive eligibility criteria for the means-tested provision that does exist.
- Government action in England lags far behind Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where devolved governments have decided to provide more children with free school meals.
- An urgent **extension of free school meals to all school-age children at a cost of only £2 billion** would mean no children miss out and would provide numerous educational, health and social benefits.

## Introduction

There is only one part of the school day that is means-tested – lunchtime. We believe that all school children should be offered a balanced and filling school meal each day without cost. Studies of universal free school meal provision have found a variety of benefits. Children are better able to engage in learning and make the most of school life and studies have found a **significant effect of universal provision on educational outcomes and even later-life earnings**.<sup>1</sup> Providing a balanced meal each day also **supports child health and well-being**.<sup>2</sup> What is more, where school food is provided universally, this means **children’s experiences of the school day are more equitable** and no one is left feeling isolated or different.

---

<sup>1</sup> P Lundborg and others, '[Long-term effects of childhood nutrition: evidence from a school lunch reform](#)', *The Review of Economic Studies*, 89(2), 2022, pp876-908

<sup>2</sup> J Cohen and others, '[Universal School Meals and Associations with Student Participation, Attendance, Academic Performance, Diet Quality, Food Security, and Body Mass Index: A Systematic Review](#)', *Nutrients*, 13(3), 2021

**FF** 'Free school meal children are treated differently. She is told she can't buy certain foods on free school meals. It's like wearing a big badge saying "I'm poor". It's heart breaking to watch her come home hungry as she would rather not go into the lunch hall and have peers laugh at her.' (Parent)

## Provision

In England, all children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 currently receive a free meal each day (this is referred to as universal infant free school meals or UIFSM). This is more restrictive than in Scotland or Wales, who have committed to rolling out free school meals to all children in primary education. The Mayor of London has also committed to this provision for the next academic year.

From Year 3 onwards, provision of free school meals is means-tested, with the threshold to get free school meals for families in receipt of universal credit being a combined household income of £7,400 or less before benefits.<sup>3</sup> This is a more restrictive income threshold than in Scotland and Northern Ireland. This restrictive provision means that many children from working families in poverty are not entitled to free school meals, despite struggling financially, and they miss out on all the benefits of free school meal provision.

## Analysis

In order to estimate the number of children in poverty who miss out on free school meals through the two national free school meal initiatives, two data sources are used: recently released free school meals data from the Department for Education and household income data from the Department for Work and Pensions.<sup>4</sup> The analysis calculates free school meals entitlement based on household income data, and matches it up with the administrative free school meal data, accounting for universal infant free school meals, transitional protection and migration of households on to universal credit.<sup>5</sup>

**We find that a third (900,000) of all school-age children in poverty are not eligible for government funded free school meals.** Last year, we also found a third of all school-age children in poverty missed out on free school meals, but the total number was only 800,000. This is because in the latest data, there are more estimated total school-age children in poverty.<sup>6</sup>

## Comparison with devolved nations

As mentioned above, there are different eligibility criteria for universal and means-tested free school meals across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Table 1 shows how the number and share of school-age children in poverty who miss out on free school meals differ across the nations. We can see that, unsurprisingly, **England – which has the most restrictive means-tested eligibility criteria and which only provides infant free school meals on a universal basis – has the highest share of school-age children in poverty who miss out on free school meals.** It is worth noting that the highest share used to belong to Wales, which until recently had nearly half of all children in

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix for comprehensive details of free school meal provision across the devolved nations. There is also transitional protection in place which means that pupils eligible for free school meals on or after 1 April 2018 retain their free school meals eligibility even if their circumstances change. If a child is eligible for free school meals, they'll remain eligible until they finish the phase of schooling (primary or secondary) they're in on 31 March 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Department for Education, *Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Academic Year 2022/23*, June 2023; Department for Work and Pensions, *Households Below Average Income 2021/22, 2023*

<sup>5</sup> See Note 3 for more details on transitional protection.

<sup>6</sup> It is impossible to say without further data releases why the number of school-age children in poverty has risen by more than expected.

poverty missing out. However, their commitment to introducing universal primary free school meals means this figure fell to 19 per cent.

Table 1: Children in poverty who miss out on free school meals across the UK

School-age children in poverty who miss out on free school meals		
	Number	Proportion of total school-age children in poverty
England	900,000 <sup>7</sup>	32%
Scotland	20,000	16%
Wales	25,000	19%
Northern Ireland	20,000	22%

Note: Estimates from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are old estimates taken from *Behind the numbers: Free school meals*. The same methodology was used as with the England numbers, with full roll-out of universal primary free school meals factored in in Wales and Scotland, as the devolved governments have committed to this provision. Future work will look to update these numbers when new free school meals stats are released in those parts of the UK.

## Regional analysis

It is possible to break down the figure for England by region. Table 2 shows how the number and share of school-age children in poverty who miss out on free school meals differ across the regions. It is important to note that data limitations make regional analysis of free school meals difficult, but there are two important features to draw out. Firstly, **children miss out on free school meals across all regions of England**. Secondly, the **share of school-age children in poverty who miss out is highest in places with relatively high housing costs and a high share of families living in in-work poverty such as London and the South East**. While the restrictive earnings threshold means children miss out all over the country, it is particularly severe in high cost areas like London.

The recent announcement by the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, to roll-out **free school meals to all children in primary schools in London is forecast to bring down the number of children who miss out by 80,000**.<sup>8</sup> This will take London from one of the regions with the highest share who miss out, to the lowest. However, this provision is paid for using money from the London Mayor's own budget. While CPAG welcomes this in the absence of government support, we believe that it should be the **responsibility of the national government to make sure school food is a core part of the school day and that no child goes hungry at school, not local governments, who have faced substantial budget cuts over the past decade**. It also turns who gets free school meals into a **postcode lottery**, while we believe all children should benefit.

<sup>7</sup> This figure is based on the number of children who miss out on national schemes in England, it does not include local or regional free school meal initiatives.

<sup>8</sup> CPAG previously estimated 90,000 based on old data ([cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/why-universal-free-school-meals-right-move](https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/why-universal-free-school-meals-right-move)). The figure has now fallen to 80,000 as the total number of children estimated to miss out in London has fallen to 180,000 from 210,000. Regional analysis is more uncertain than national analysis as the sample sizes are smaller – again the fall from 210,000 to 180,000 should not be taken as some kind of material improvement, rather the 180,000 represents a better estimate based on the latest available data.

Table 2: Children in poverty who miss out on free school meals across the different regions of England

	School-age children in poverty who miss out on free school meals	
	Number	Proportion
North East	30,000	19%
North West	100,000	26%
Yorkshire and the Humber	80,000	30%
East Midlands	70,000	30%
West Midlands	110,000	29%
East	90,000	39%
London (without universal primary free school meals)	180,000	36%
London (with universal primary free school meals)	100,000	20%
South East	150,000	41%
South West	70,000	33%

Note: See methodology for full details. May not sum due to rounding.

## Conclusion

It is clearly **unacceptable that nearly a million children in poverty are unable to access free school meals**. We therefore call on the government to roll-out universal free school meals to all school-age children. This approach makes the school day more equitable, makes sure all children get access to the same high-quality meals, and ensures all children can make the most of their education. It would help reduce stigma around free lunches and child poverty. It would also **only cost £2 billion, a small price to pay for a big investment in childhood and our country's future**.<sup>9</sup>

We often hear that there is no money left and we cannot raise taxes. However, this is not true. For the UK to tax like an average G7 country, taxes would need to rise by £75 billion.<sup>10</sup> Increasing taxes by £250 billion would bring the UK to the same level of taxation as Denmark. There are also a variety of ways to raise taxes other than income tax, where there are significant behavioral responses.

<sup>9</sup> There would also be capital costs needed to increase the provision of free school meals but these can be seen as investment in school infrastructure.

<sup>10</sup> Author's calculations based on Office for Budget Responsibility, *Economic and fiscal outlook – March 2023*, 2023 and Office for National Statistics, *Gross Domestic Product*, 2023.

## Methodology

The poverty measure used is relative after housing costs (AHC). The estimated number of children in poverty who missed out on free school meals was calculated using Households Below Average Income 2021/22. From that survey data, entitlement can be calculated based on the earnings of the household and the various eligibility criteria for different means-tested benefits, accounting for the migration of households on to universal credit.

There will be some households who currently earn above the eligibility criteria but because of transitional protection on universal credit, they are still eligible for free school meals. The number of these households was calculated using data on the share of free school meal-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 miss out on free school meals who miss out in 2021/22 and 2019/20 and applying this share to the 2021/22 total figure.

## Appendix

Table 3: Free school meal coverage across the devolved nations

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
<b>Universal free school meals</b>	Infants	Primary*	Primary*	None
<b>Means-tested free school meals</b>				
<i>Universal credit threshold</i>	Earnings below £7,400	Earnings below £7,400	Earnings below £7,920	Earnings below £14,000
<i>Working tax credit threshold</i>	Cannot claim free school meals	Cannot claim free school meals	Earnings below £7,920	Earnings below £16,190
<i>Child tax credit threshold (in families not claiming working tax credit)</i>	Earnings below £16,190	Earnings below £16,190	Earnings below £17,005	Earnings below £16,190

\*This policy has not yet been fully rolled-out but there are commitments in both countries to do so.

## About this briefing

CPAG would like to give thanks to Law for Change and Hogan Lovells for generously funding this research.

## 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. *Our vision is of a society free of child poverty, where all children can enjoy a childhood free of financial hardship and have a fair chance in life to reach their full potential.* 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 end poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need.

