

The learning gap experienced by malnourished children

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The Midday Meal Scheme in India is the largest school meals programme in the world. Credit: Young Lives / Farhatullah Beig

Oxford University researchers have measured the learning gap experienced by five-year old children who are stunted through malnourishment. They are tracking the long-term effects on their schooling and later prospects in the jobs market.

The new analysis, which examines children in four countries across three continents, has been conducted by the research group Young Lives, based in Oxford's Department of International Development. The analysis was commissioned by Save the Children for a report, "Food for Thought," published on 28 May.

Young Lives researchers followed 8,000 children from Ethiopia, India, [Peru](#) and [Vietnam](#), carrying out interviews and tests at key points in their lives. It measured the learning [gap](#) experienced by children who were

stunted at the age of five compared with non-stunted [peers](#) and evaluated the gap in educational achievement and [learning ability](#) at the age of eight.

Effects associated with stunting at the age of five meant that children were nearly one-fifth less likely to be able to read a simple sentence and nearly 13 per cent less likely to be able to write a simple sentence. As stunted children fell behind with their work, they were more likely to be kept back with younger children, with this group being 13 per cent less likely to be in the appropriate grade for their age in school.

The study charts how these disadvantages mount, as children who have to resit their grades were more likely to leave school earlier, a particular problem given many of the children have already received inadequate amounts of schooling because of their delayed learning.

Separate analysis conducted using Young Lives data for Andhra Pradesh, a region of [India](#), estimates that if low-caste children were able to benefit from the same average [nutrition](#) as their upper-caste peers, the current learning gap would be likely to close by 25 per cent.

Previous research by Young Lives carried out in Peru and Vietnam has found that being stunted through malnutrition at the age of one is associated with lower cognitive scores when that child reaches the age of five. In addition, such children at the age of eight were less confident, had lower self esteem and lower aspirations at 12. The research concludes that the effect of malnutrition in early life is also likely put them at a serious disadvantage in the jobs market when they reach adulthood.

Dr Paul Dornan from Young Lives at Oxford University said: 'In this new analysis , we can draw on comparative data of malnourished stunted children and children who are not stunted and see the far reaching

effects. Across four different countries, we see the consequences of poor nutrition at an early age. It not only undermines children's rights, but it undermines [children's](#) learning and puts them at a considerable disadvantage in terms of their [educational achievement](#) and later prospects. Securing better investment in nutrition is an important goal in itself and one which pays off for the wider society too.'

More information: [Young Lives Save the Children Report](#)

Provided by Oxford University

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