

The poorest pupils spurn school meals, study finds

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Pupils from the poorest backgrounds are the ones most likely to leave school at lunchtime to buy food, a University of Hertfordshire investigation revealed today—and the choice is often chips together with other items high in fat, sugar and salt.

The new research which surveyed more than 500 teenagers from seven UK [secondary schools](#), found 90% of those from the most socio-economically deprived backgrounds were rejecting [school meals](#) in favour of [food](#) from outside the [school](#) grounds. This was in sharp contrast to pupils from more affluent backgrounds where only four in ten visited nearby outlets and parents regularly called staff to discuss diet concerns.

The research found:

- 17% of pupils did not eat or drink anything before school on the day they were surveyed
- 12.5% reported consuming a drink only—for some of these young people this was reported to be a glass of water.
- Only 6.6% of teenagers in the better-off area said they ate or drank nothing before school

The findings come as The Children's Future Food Inquiry published its [final report](#), which said that millions of British children were living in households with [food insecurity](#), but the nature, extent and effects were poorly understood. The report included a contribution from the

University of Hertfordshire.

The University of Hertfordshire's research out today reports the reasons that the pupils gave for going to chip shops and fast food outlets. These included a negative view of the quality of food and service in school, [high prices](#), poor value for money, the overall eating environment and having to queue.

One pupil told researchers: "If I was to stay in school all the time...I'd spend a lot more money than I do outside school...the pizza is £4, the popcorn is 60p, the juice is 25p, that's £4.50... so I'm better going to the shop."

Others said there was nowhere to sit in the school canteen and it was annoying that they were required to have the correct money or had to queue to charge their lunch payment cards.

The University of Hertfordshire is now calling on schools to find ways to work with young people to create appropriate eating environments. This includes selling food at a price they can afford, offering tasty food and value for money and providing the same level of service they get on the high street where retailers work hard to develop relationships.

Wendy Wills, Professor of Food and Public Health, University of Hertfordshire, said :

"There is a clear need for effective ways to engage young people, their teachers and their caterers in holistically addressing the dining environment to overcome barriers to eating in school.

To ignore evidence from studies that clearly show the important and embedded ways that socio-economic status informs the food practices of young people is, in our view, immoral. Families and [young people](#) cannot

be held to account for what they eat without greater reference to the way that socio-economic inequalities develop and persist."

More information: Wendy Wills et al. Socio-Economic Factors, the Food Environment and Lunchtime Food Purchasing by Young People at Secondary School, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2019). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph16091605](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16091605)

Provided by University of Hertfordshire

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