

Free School Meals criteria needs to be widened to reduce hunger and anxiety, according to study

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A significant number of children who do not meet the eligibility criteria for Free School Meals are going hungry, a new study has shown.

The researchers from the University of York and the Bradford Institute for Health Research have called for Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility to be widened in order to reduce both child hunger and the stigma associated with FSM.

Families that meet the criteria for FSM are considered to be living in [poverty](#), and researchers have now shown that the stigma attached to this has an impact on a [child's mental health](#), whilst they continue to experience food uncertainties due to the quantity and quality of food available within the home.

The study showed that 20 percent of children surveyed that did not meet the criteria for FSM, also experienced food insecurities, suggesting that the criteria to access FSM needs to be widened, and not just targeted at families considered to be living below the poverty threshold.

Stigma

Dr. Tiffany Yang, Principal Research Fellow at the Bradford Institute for Health Research and Visiting Research Fellow at the University of York, says that their "study suggests that the benchmark to qualify for Free School Meals is too low, and misses a significant number of children; these children may not meet the strict income eligibility to qualify for Free School Meals, but they still face food insecurities in [low-income households](#)."

"If this eligibility threshold was raised, then not only would it shake the stigma of Free School Meals being associated with poverty, it would mean fewer children overall would go hungry and fewer children would experience anxiety and stress on a daily basis."

Pandemic

Researchers investigated the link between [food insecurity](#), FSM, and the subsequent stress and anxiety related to this during the pandemic, using data from the Food Foundation commissioned surveys carried out by ChildWise.

The number of children eligible for FSM surged during the pandemic to 19.7 percent of all state-funded pupils in 2021, up from 17.3 percent in 2020 and 15.4 percent in 2019.

Stressed and worried

Bob Doherty, Professor of Marketing and Dean of the School for Business and Society, and Principal Investigator of the FixOurFood project, said: "We found that 35 percent of children surveyed experienced food insecurities."

"Of the number of children that received FSM, 60 percent reported food insecurities, which was related to feeling hunger from not having enough food at home. On top of this 51 percent felt stressed and worried on a daily basis, largely due to the stigma attached to having to access free meals and other poverty-related issues."

Of the 20 percent of children who also had food insecurities, but did not qualify for FSM, 29 percent were at a higher risk of feeling stressed or worried on a daily basis, with this figure increasing to 51 percent if they received FSM.

Well-being

In May this year, teaching unions and other organizations representing [school staff](#) in England, wrote to Chancellor Rishi Sunak and Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi, requesting urgent change to FSM to allow

more [vulnerable children](#) to access free school meals.

Children receiving FSM get a higher proportion of their daily energy and nutrient intakes from their school meals compared to those who pay and so FSM may reduce health inequalities as well as improving health and well-being.

Poverty marker

Dr. Maria Bryant, Reader in Public Health Nutrition from the University of York's Department of Health Sciences, and the Hull York Medical School, says that "despite its obvious benefits, FSM is not universal and is determined by strict income-defined [eligibility criteria](#) meaning that FSM can be a marker of poverty."

"It is clear from our research that it should not be a marker of poverty, not only to allow more [children](#) feeling daily hunger access to the scheme, but to reduce the stress and anxiety of being labeled as a child living in poverty."

The research was published in *BMJ Open*.

More information: Tiffany C Yang et al, Are free school meals failing families? Exploring the relationship between child food insecurity, child mental health and free school meal status during COVID-19: national cross-sectional surveys, *BMJ Open* (2022). [DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2021-059047](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-059047)

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