



BRIEFING PAPER

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Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals

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Summary

Over the last year, household food insecurity increased, food bank usage reached its highest levels, and campaign groups highlighted the importance of free school meals for families in the UK. This paper provides statistics on food poverty in the UK, including food banks and free school meals.

Food poverty

There is no widely accepted definition of 'food poverty', but a household can broadly be defined as experiencing food poverty or 'household food insecurity' if they cannot (or are uncertain about whether they can) acquire 'an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways'.

In 2019/20, 5 million people (8%) were in food insecure households. Among those in relative poverty, 19% were in food insecure households, including 26% of children.

Household food insecurity increased during the coronavirus pandemic. The Food Foundation found that 4.7 million adults and 2.3 million children lived in household which experienced food insecurity in the first 6 months of the pandemic, including 12% of all households with children.

Food banks

Food banks are run by charities and are intended to be a temporary provision to supply emergency food aid. There are no official statistics on food banks, but there are around 1,300 Trussell Trust food banks and 1,034 Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) food banks in the UK.

In 2021-21 the Trussell Trust supplied more than 2.5 million three-day emergency food parcels, an increase of 33% on the previous year. Around 40% of these went to children. IFAN reported a 126% increase in the number of emergency food parcels distributed between February 2020 and May 2020.

Free school meals

In England, free school meals (FSM) are currently a statutory entitlement available to eligible pupils. Local authorities are responsible for providing free school meals.

As of 1 October 2020, there were 1.63 million pupils known to eligible for FSM. This means there has been an increase in the proportion eligible to 19.7% of all state-funded pupils (from 17.3% in January 2020, and 15.4% in January 2019).

Around 302,000 pupils were "newly eligible" since the first lockdown on 23 March 2020. This is a much larger increase compared to the same period the previous year (March to October 2019) when around 209,000 children became eligible. This suggests the pandemic has affected the number of pupils eligible. However, other factors could also be contributing to the increase, such as the continued effect of the transitional protections during the rollout of Universal Credit.

On average, pupils eligible for free school meals achieve lower GCSE attainment than other pupils. In 2020, 49% of pupils eligible for FSM achieved a "standard pass" in both English and Maths GCSE compared to 75% of pupils not eligible. This was a gap of 26 percentage points. This gap has remained broadly stable in recent years. However, there are also large differences in both attainment and the attainment gap between different groups of FSM eligible pupils. For example, FSM pupils in London have the highest attainment, and smallest attainment gap of any region.

1. Food poverty

1.1 What is food poverty?

There is no widely accepted definition of food poverty, but a household can broadly be defined as experiencing food poverty if they cannot (or are uncertain about whether they can) acquire 'an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways'.¹

Food poverty is often used as synonymous with '**household food insecurity**'.² Unlike food poverty 'household food insecurity' is measured in broadly the same way across a number of countries, based on the Household Food Security Survey Module, developed by the US Department of Agriculture.³ In this measure, 'low food security' means that the household reduces the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, and 'very low food security' means that household members sometimes disrupt eating patterns or reduce food intake because they lack money or other resources for food.

Households can have low food security even when the UK as a whole has high food security, as discussed in Box 1 below.

Aspects of household food insecurity

Income

Food poverty, or household food insecurity, is largely an example of a symptom of low income. Food insecure households may not be able to afford the cost of enough good quality food, or the associated transport or delivery costs. In this way, food poverty is similar to other types of poverty'.⁴

One reason why food poverty is a particularly visible form of poverty is that food budgets are relatively elastic compared to other essential living costs, so often cuts can be made to a food budget that cannot be made to rent or fuel payments.⁵ In a submission to the House of Lords Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment, Helen Barnard suggests that food "is quite often one of the first things that people on low income start cutting back on or making trades about."⁶

Access to food

Household food insecurity can also occur when a nutritionally adequate foods are not available to households, because of the area in which a household lives, personal circumstances of members of the household, or external factors. For example, in the first weeks of the coronavirus pandemic, households reported being food insecure because supermarket shelves were empty, or because they were shielding at

¹ Child Poverty Action Group, [Living Hand to Mouth](#), 26 March 2019

² Sustain, [What is food poverty?](#), and Child Poverty Action Group, [Living Hand to Mouth](#), 26 March 2019.

³ US Department of Agriculture, [Food Security in the US](#) [Accessed 28 April 2021]

⁴ House of Lords Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment, [Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food](#), 6 July 2020, p41

⁵ Child poverty Action Group, [Living Hand to Mouth](#), 26 March 2019

⁶ Select Committee on Food, Poverty, Health and the Environment, [Hungry for change: fixing the failures in food](#), 6 July 2020, p41

home and could not arrange for food to be delivered. This is discussed further in Section 1.3.

Box 1: UK food security versus household food insecurity

The Library Insight [Food security: What is it and how is it measured?](#) (February 2020) provides an introduction to food security.

Food security includes the ability of individual households to obtain food, but it can also be used at a national level to refer to a country's ability to feed itself. This means individual households in the UK can have very low food security, even while the UK as a whole has very high food security.

The Government last undertook a full assessment of UK food security in 2009-10, when it found that "by any objective measure, we enjoy a high degree of food security in the UK today".⁷ The [Agriculture Act 2020](#) introduced a duty on Government to report to Parliament on UK food security by late 2021, and at least every three years after that.⁸ During the passage of the Act, Defra Minister Lord Gardiner said that "this first report will include an analysis of statistical data relating to the effects of coronavirus on food security in the UK".⁹

1.2 Food insecurity statistics

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) announced that it would add household food insecurity questions to the Family Resources Survey in 2019,¹⁰ and data was first published in March 2021.¹¹

In 2019/20, 5 million people (8%) were in food insecure households. This included 13% of children, 8% of working age adults, and 2% of pensioners.

The chart below provides a further breakdown by food security status. 4% of working age adults, 6% of children, and 1% of pensioners lived in households with very low food security in 2019/20.

'Low' and 'very low' food security

'Low food security' means that the household reduces the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets.

'Very low food security' means that household members sometimes disrupt eating patterns or reduce food intake because they lack money or other resources for food.

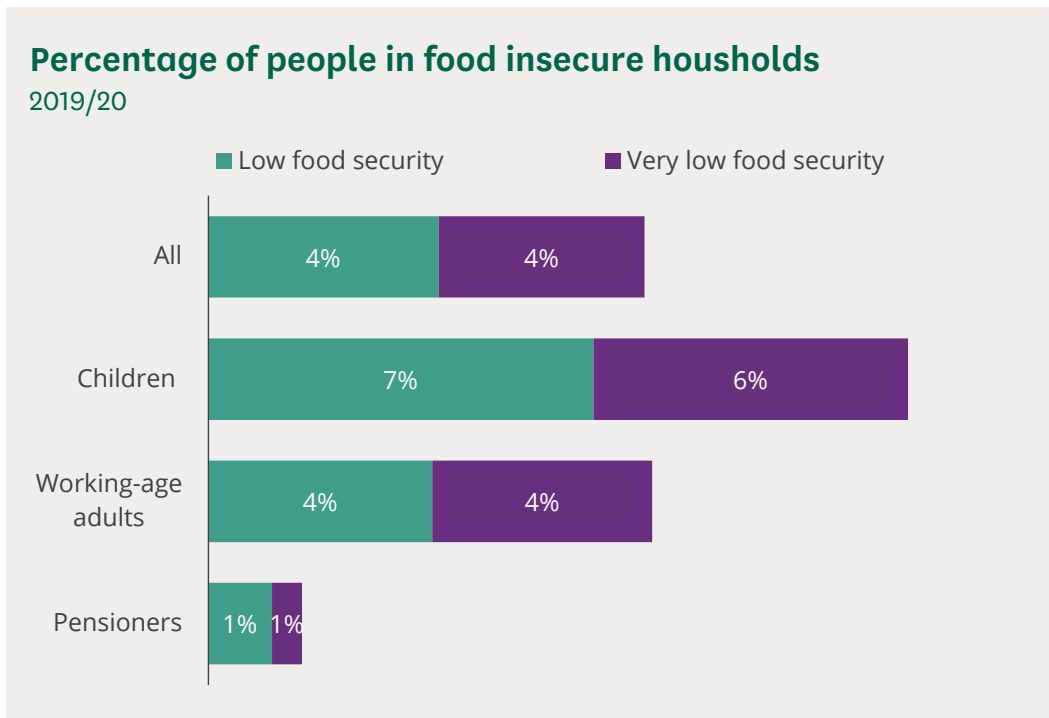
⁷ Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, [Food security](#) [archived 2 April 2013]. The Food Security Assessment was reviewed by the Coalition Government in 2012 and found to be still relevant; see Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Food security](#), HC 243, 1 July 2014, para 5.

⁸ [Agriculture Act 2020, section 19](#). The first report falls due "on or before [...] the last day before 25 December 2021 which is a sitting day for both Houses of Parliament".

⁹ HL Deb 17 Sep 2020, [c1431](#)

¹⁰ Department for Work and Pensions, [New poverty statistics developed to help government target support](#), 17 May 2019

¹¹ Department for Work and Pensions, [Households Below Average Income, 2019/20](#), 25 March 2021



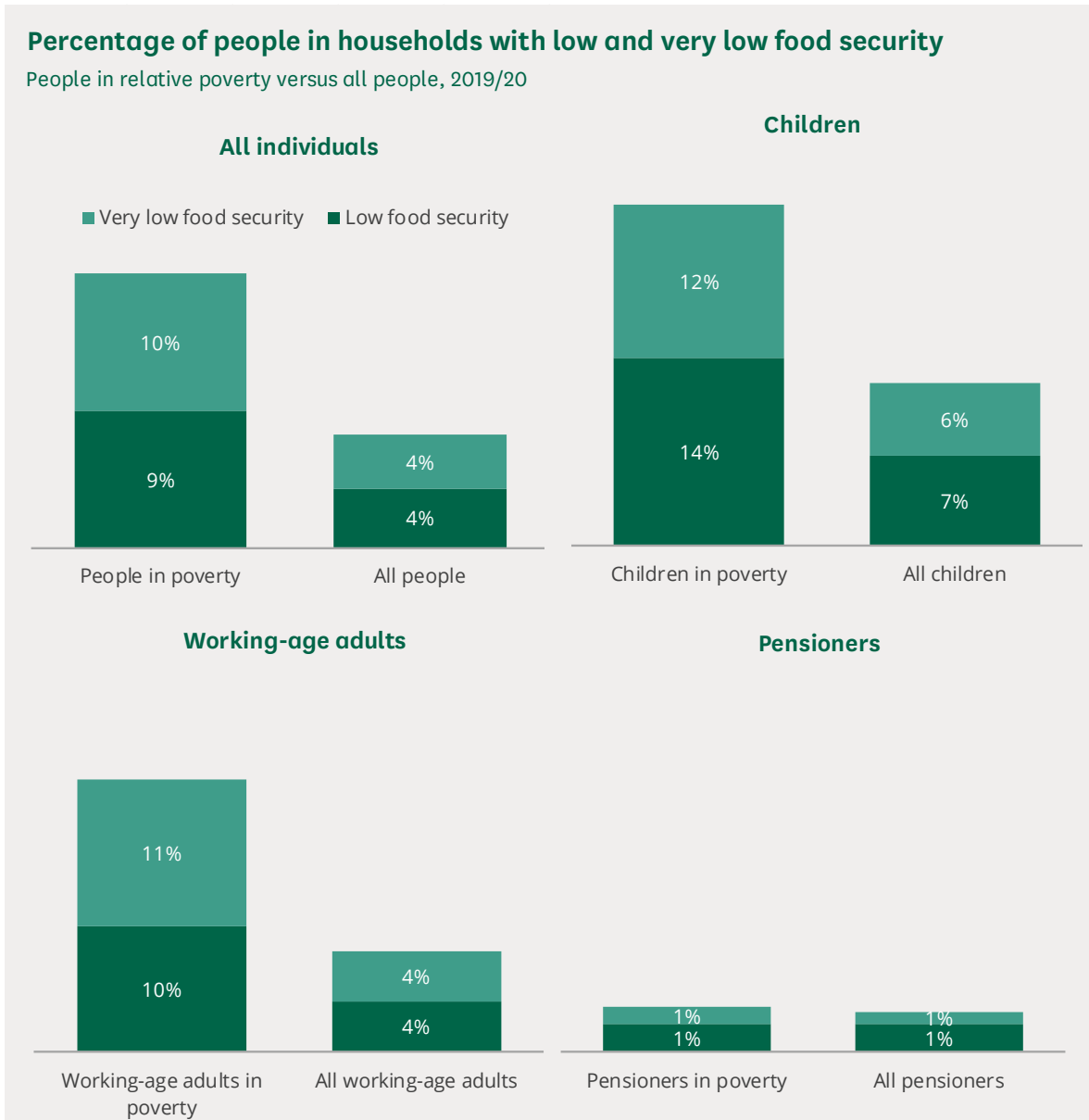
Source: Department for Work and Pensions, [Households Below Average Income](#), 2019/20

Poverty and food insecurity

Since household food insecurity in the UK is largely due to low incomes, it is unsurprising that food insecurity is more prevalent in households in poverty.

In 2019/20, 2.2 million people who were in relative poverty before housing costs lived in food insecure households (households with either low or very low food security), including 800,000 children.

The chart below shows that 26% of children, 21% of working age adults, and 2% of pensioners who were in relative poverty before housing costs were living in food insecure households. 12% of working age adults, 11% of children, and 1% of pensioners who were in poverty lived in households with very low food security.



Source: Department for Work and Pensions, [Households Below Average Income](#), 2019/20

Here, 'people in poverty' refers to people in relative poverty: people living in a household with income less than 60% of contemporary median income. The median is the point where half of household incomes are higher, and half are lower. In this data, incomes are measured before housing costs are taken into account.

In 2019/20, 11.7 million (18%) people were in relative poverty before housing costs, including 3.2 million (23%) of children.

The Library paper [Poverty in the UK: statistics](#) provides more information and statistics about poverty.

Box 2: Recommendations to the Government: The National Food Strategy

In 2019, the then Defra Secretary of State Michael Gove commissioned “an independent review to help the government create its first National Food Strategy for 75 years”. The review is being led by Henry Dimbleby, co-founder of Leon restaurants and lead non-executive director at Defra.¹² The [National Food Strategy](#) is intended to cover “the entire food chain, from field to fork”, and its scope is primarily England. Among its purposes is to ensure that the food system “delivers safe, healthy, affordable food; regardless of where people live or how much they earn”.¹³

Part One of the review was published in July 2020. It contained “urgent recommendations to support this country through the turbulence caused by the Covid-19 pandemic”, as well as to prepare for the end of the EU exit transition period in December 2020. It included a chapter on “Jobs and Hunger”, examining “the ways in which poverty can lead not only to people going hungry, but also to them relying on diets that are more likely to damage their health”, and making recommendations to Government.¹⁴

Part Two is expected to be published in 2021, and contain “a comprehensive plan for transforming the food system”.¹⁵ The Government has committed to responding with a White Paper six months after this.¹⁶

1.3 Food insecurity and the coronavirus pandemic

The statistics on food insecurity above are for 2019/20, before the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. There are no official statistics about the coronavirus’ impact on household food insecurity, but initial research by the [Food Foundation](#) finds that that food insecurity has become more prevalent since the start of the pandemic.

The Food Foundation commissioned seven surveys about food insecurity between March 2020 and January 2021 and found that 4.7 million adults and 2.3 million children lived in household which experienced food insecurity in the first 6 months of the pandemic, including 12% of all households with children.¹⁷

At the start of the pandemic food insecurity wasn’t all about income

Food insecurity spiked in the first two weeks of lockdown, with 15.6% of households experiencing food insecurity, and has gradually fallen since then. Unusually for the UK, this rise was driven by supply issues like empty supermarket shelves and the closure of restaurants, rather than economic issues.

¹² Defra, [National Food Strategy - Call for Evidence](#) [accessed 30 April 2021]

¹³ Defra, [Developing a national food strategy: independent review 2019 – terms of reference](#), updated 29 July 2020

¹⁴ [National Food Strategy: Part One](#), July 2020, pp 48-59

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8

¹⁷ The Food Foundation, [A crisis within a crisis: The impact of Covid-19 on household food insecurity](#), 1 March 2021

Of the 8 million adults who experienced food insecurity in the first two weeks of lockdown, 50% were unable to get the food they needed from the shops due to shortages, 25% were unable to leave their homes and had no other way to get the food they needed, and 21% didn't have enough money to buy adequate food supplies.

In comparison, in January 2021, 53% of the 2 million adults who reported food insecurity said economic issues were the primary cause. Issues with isolation remained relatively consistent throughout the pandemic.¹⁸

Some groups have been more affected than others

The Food Foundation found that the pandemic has widened inequalities in food security, and that the following groups have been particularly affected:

- Disabled people and clinically vulnerable people
- Food sector workers
- People from a minority ethnic group
- Households with 5 or more members
- Households with children, particularly lone parents

Households with children

Children in food insecure households do not always experience hunger or insufficient food, as parents often skip meals to ensure their children are fed.¹⁹

The Food Foundation found that 12% of adults living with children reported skipping meals because they could not afford or access food in the first 6 months of the pandemic, while 4% of adults with children reported going for a whole day without eating.²⁰

¹⁸ The Food Foundation, [A crisis within a crisis: The impact of Covid-19 on household food insecurity](#), 1 March 2021

¹⁹ Child poverty Action Group, [Living Hand to Mouth](#), 26 March 2019

²⁰ The Food Foundation, [A crisis within a crisis: The impact of Covid-19 on household food insecurity](#), 1 March 2021

2. Food banks

Unlike free school meals, discussed in Section 3, food banks are run by charities and have only existed in the UK in their current form for around twenty years.²¹ Organisations who run and coordinate food banks like the [Trussell Trust](#) and the [Independent Food Aid Network](#) (IFAN), say they intend food banks to be a temporary way to supply emergency food aid, not a long term solution to household food insecurity.²²

Library briefing paper [Food banks in the UK](#) provides statistics on the number of use of food banks in the UK, as well as the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, specific data for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and information on other food aid provision like meal providers, social supermarkets and breakfast clubs for school children.

2.1 How many food banks are there in the UK?

There is no one database of UK foodbanks, but data from the Trussell Trust and the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) can help us estimate how many there are in the UK.

The Trussell Trust has the UK's largest network of foodbanks. It covers **429 locations** across all four nations of the UK as of 2020. Many locations have multiple branches, totalling over **1,300 individual food bank centres**.

IFAN, the [Independent Food Aid Network](#), is the UK network for independent (non-Trussell Trust) food aid providers. There are **at least 1,034 independent food banks in the UK today**.²³

Added to the Trussell Trust's 1,300 **this makes over 2,300 food banks in total**²⁴.

2.2 Food bank use

There is no measure of the number of unique users of foodbanks in the UK. The Trussell Trust provides 'three-day emergency food parcels', and this is their standard unit of measurement. It does not record the number of individual users of food banks.

The Trussell Trust publishes statistics twice a year on its website, explaining that: ²⁵

²¹ Trussell Trust, [Our Story](#) [Accessed 28 April 2021]

²² Trussell Trust, [Our Strategic Plan](#) [Accessed 28 April 2021], IFAN, [Home](#) [Accessed 28 April 2021]

²³ This does not include those operating from schools, mentioned in the [National Governance Association Report](#) of 2 September 2019. [This report](#) notes an increase in the number of governors reporting that their school does provide a food bank.

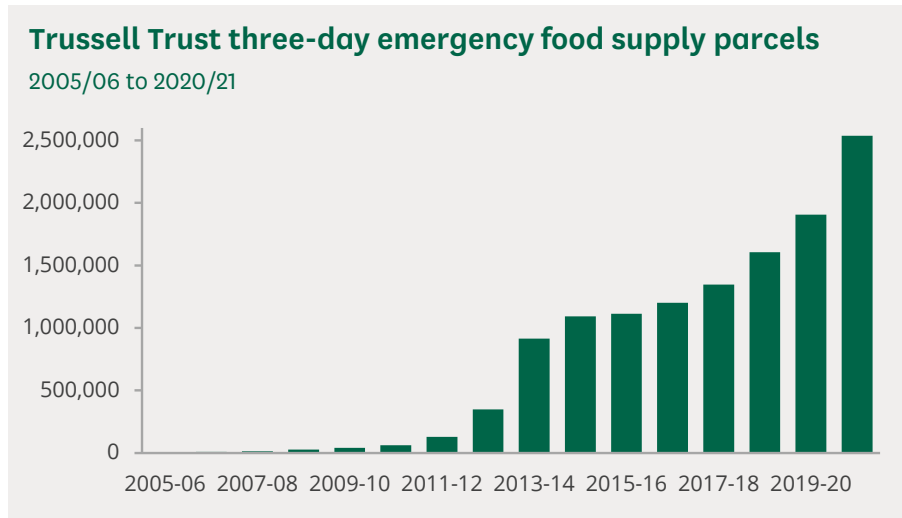
²⁴ The Government does not maintain statistics on food banks – see [WPO UIN 121155](#)

²⁵ The Food Foundation, [A crisis within a crisis: The impact of Covid-19 on household food insecurity](#), 1 March 2021

Our statistics are a measure of volume rather than unique users, and on average people needed around two food bank referrals in the last year.²⁶

In 2020-21 the Trussell Trust supplied more than 2.5 million three-day emergency food parcels, an increase of 33% on the previous year. Around 40% of these went to children.

Note that this data does not include all food parcels distributed because of the large number of independent food banks who also distribute food parcels but are not part of the Trussell Trust network.



Source: [Trussell Trust, End of year Stats](#), April 2021

2.3 Foodbanks and the coronavirus pandemic

On 1 May the Trussell Trust confirmed its network's busiest ever period, with an 84% increase in emergency food parcels being given out across the UK, including 122% more parcels going to children, compared to the same period in 2019. The Trussell Trust found that almost 100,000 households received support from a food bank in the Trussell Trust network for the very first time between April and June 2020.²⁷

Throughout 2020/21, food bank use fluctuated, usually increasing during lockdowns. Levels of need were highest in early months of the crisis, decreased during the summer (but remained at historic levels) and increased again in the autumn.²⁸

Children have been more likely to be impacted by the pandemic. Between April 2020 and March 2021, 2,685 parcels were given to children on the average day. This is an annual increase of 36%, compared to an annual increase for adults of 32%.

London saw the largest percentage increase compared to the previous financial year, where parcels distributed more than doubled (a 106% increase). Northern Ireland was the UK country with the largest percentage increase (75%). Scotland saw a small decrease (-7%), but

²⁶ [Mid-year stats](#), Trussell Trust

²⁷ Trussell Trust, [Lockdown, lifelines and the long haul ahead. The impact of Covid-19 on food banks in the Trussell Trust network](#), September 2020

²⁸ Trussell Trust, [End of year stats](#), April 2021

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the Trussell Trust note that this is unlikely to be caused by declining rates of destitution or poverty and could be due to additional emergency food provision through local authorities, and community organisations.²⁹



Source: [Trussell Trust, End of year Stats](#), April 2021

IFAN reported a 46% increase in the number of emergency food parcels distributed between February 2020 and March 2020, a 126% increase between February 2020 and April 2020, and a 148% increase between February 2020 and May 2020.³⁰

²⁹ Trussell Trust, [End of year stats](#), April 2021

³⁰ [Independent food bank emergency food parcel distribution in the UK: Comparing February – May 2019 with February – May 2020](#), IFAN, 9 July 2020

3. Free school meals in England

In England, free school meals (FSM) are currently a statutory entitlement available to eligible pupils. Local authorities are responsible for providing free school meals.

The [Education Act 1944](#) made it a duty of all Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to provide school meals for those who wanted them. For a brief period under the post-war Labour Government, the full net cost of school meals was met by the Government, but this proved costly and LEAs were allowed to charge for meals while still providing some meals free to disadvantaged pupils. The eligibility criteria for free school meals have varied since they were introduced.

Since 2014 all infant school pupils (reception, year 1, and year 2) in state-funded schools are eligible for a free school meal.³¹

Additional background information is available in the House of Commons Library briefing paper [School meals and nutritional standards](#).

3.1 Current eligibility criteria

Parents and carers in England do not have to pay for school lunches if their child is known to be eligible for free school meals. Children are eligible if their parents meet certain eligibility criteria **and** if they make a claim for FSM. As stated in the previous section, all infant school pupils receive free school meals, regardless of household benefit status.

If a pupil is known to be eligible for FSM in a given school year, they remain eligible until they finish their current phase of education (primary or secondary).

During the coronavirus outbreak, eligibility for free school meals was [extended](#) on a temporary basis to **some** groups of children who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF). Further guidance on who qualifies under the extension can be found on the [gov.uk website](#).

Parents currently meet the eligibility criteria if they receive any of the following:

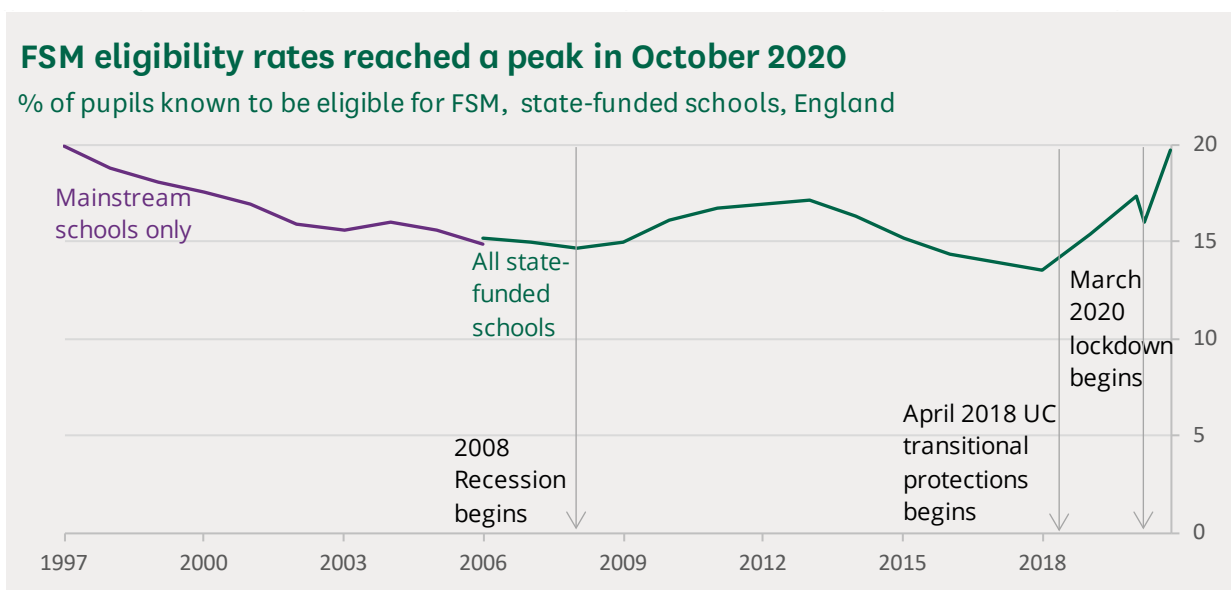
- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseekers Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- the guaranteed element of State Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided they are not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)
- Working Tax Credit run-on – paid for 4 weeks after a person stops qualifying for Working Tax Credit

³¹ House of Commons Library, [School meals and nutritional standards](#), January 2021

- Universal Credit – **with household income of less than £7,400 a year** (after tax and not including any benefits) from 1 April 2018, with [transitional protections](#) for previously existing claimants.

3.2 Number of pupils known to be eligible

As of 1 October 2020, there were **1.63 million pupils** known to be eligible for FSM.³² This means there has been an increase in the proportion eligible to **19.7% of all state-funded pupils** (from 17.3% in January 2020, and 15.4% in January 2019).



Notes: The two series are not comparable. Data is as of January each year (excluding 2020 which is as of January and October). Eligibility requirements for underlying benefits have changed over the period. “All state-funded schools” excludes alternative providers 2006-2010. Sources: DfE, [schools pupils and their characteristics](#); various years; DfE, [Free school meals Autumn term 2020](#).

As in previous years, a higher proportion of state-funded primary school pupils (20.2%) were eligible compared with secondary pupils (18.2%). However, the highest rates by far were in non-mainstream settings (more than half of pupils in pupil referral units were eligible).

Pupils known to be eligible for FSM		
October 2020, state-funded schools, England		
	% eligible	Number eligible
State-funded primary	20.2	933,000
State-funded secondary	18.2	637,000
Special schools	41.2	56,000
Pupil referral units	51.3	6,000
All schools	19.7	1,634,000

Notes: number of pupils eligible rounded to nearest 1,000.
 Source: DfE, [Free school meals: Autumn term 2020/21](#), March 2021

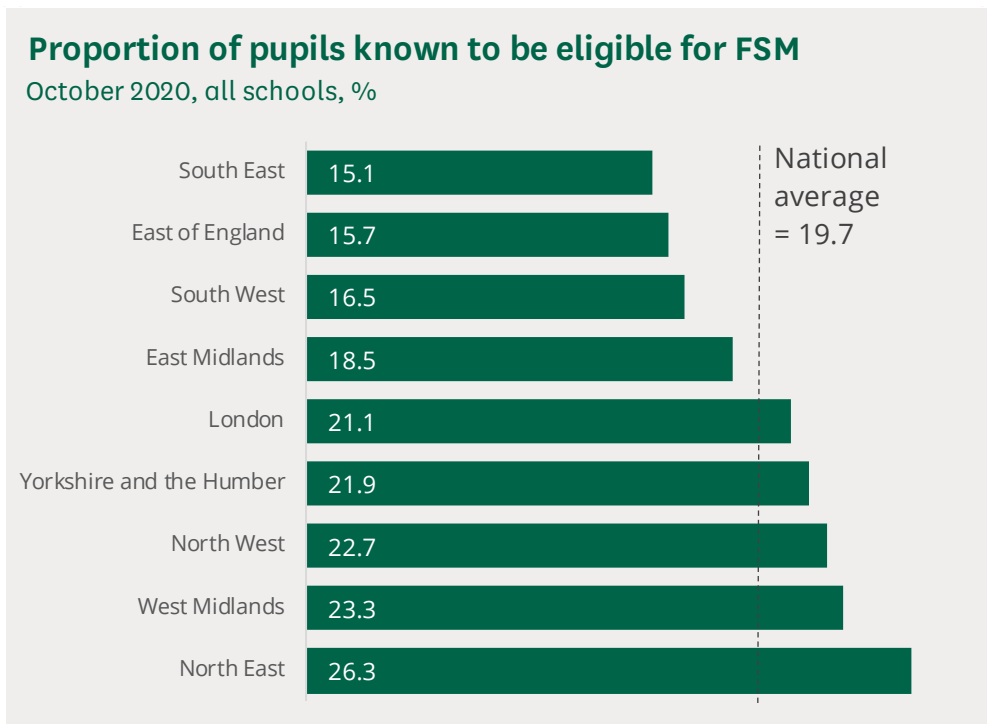
³² DfE, [Free school meals: Autumn term 2020/21](#), March 2021

Around 302,000 children were “[newly eligible](#)” since the first lockdown on 23 March 2020. This is a much larger increase compared to the same period the previous year (March to October 2019) when around 209,000 children became eligible.

This suggests the pandemic has affected the number of pupils eligible. However, other factors could also be contributing to the increase, such as the continued effect of the [transitional protections](#) during the rollout of Universal Credit.

Regional and local variations in pupils eligible for FSM

In October 2020 the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM in England was 19.7%. However, this average masks considerable regional and local variation. The North East was the region with the highest eligibility rate in absolute terms (6.6 percentage points above the national average) and the South East the region with the lowest rate (4.6 percentage points below the national average).



Source: DfE, [Free school meals: Autumn term 2020/21](#), March 2021

There is much more variation in eligibility rates between local authorities (in absolute terms) compared to regions. In October 2020, Knowsley was the local authority with the highest eligibility rate (17.3 percentage points above the national average), and Isles of Scilly the lowest rate (17.3 percentage points below the national average).

LAs with the highest and lowest rates of FSM eligibility

October 2020, all schools, %

Highest			Lowest		
1	Knowsley	37.0	1	Isles Of Scilly	2.4
2	Blackpool	36.8	2	Wokingham	7.8
3	Islington	36.4	3	Rutland	8.6
4	Manchester	35.8	4	Windsor and Maidenhead	9.7
5	Tower Hamlets	35.6	5	Bracknell Forest	9.8
6	Newcastle upon Tyne	35.0	6	Buckinghamshire	10.3
7	Hackney	34.8	7	Central Bedfordshire	10.5
8	Camden	34.4	8	Richmond upon Thames	10.5
9	Halton	34.2	9	West Berkshire	10.9
10	Middlesbrough	34.1	10	Surrey	10.9

Source: DfE, [Free school meals: Autumn term 2020/21](#), March 2021

The proportion of pupils eligible for FSM increased in every local authority between January and October 2020.

Some areas had larger increases than others. In Newham eligibility increased the most in absolute terms (more than 5 percentage points), while in Redbridge it increased the least (less than 1 percentage point). Many of the biggest increases are in areas with already high eligibility rates.

The variation in the increase in eligibility rates was smaller at the regional level (in absolute terms), but as with local authorities, regions with the highest rates of eligibility (North East and West Midlands) had the biggest increases while those with the lowest rates (South East and East England) increased the least.

Percentage point increase in proportion of pupils eligible for and claiming FSM in England

% point increase in eligibility in October 2020 compared to January 2020

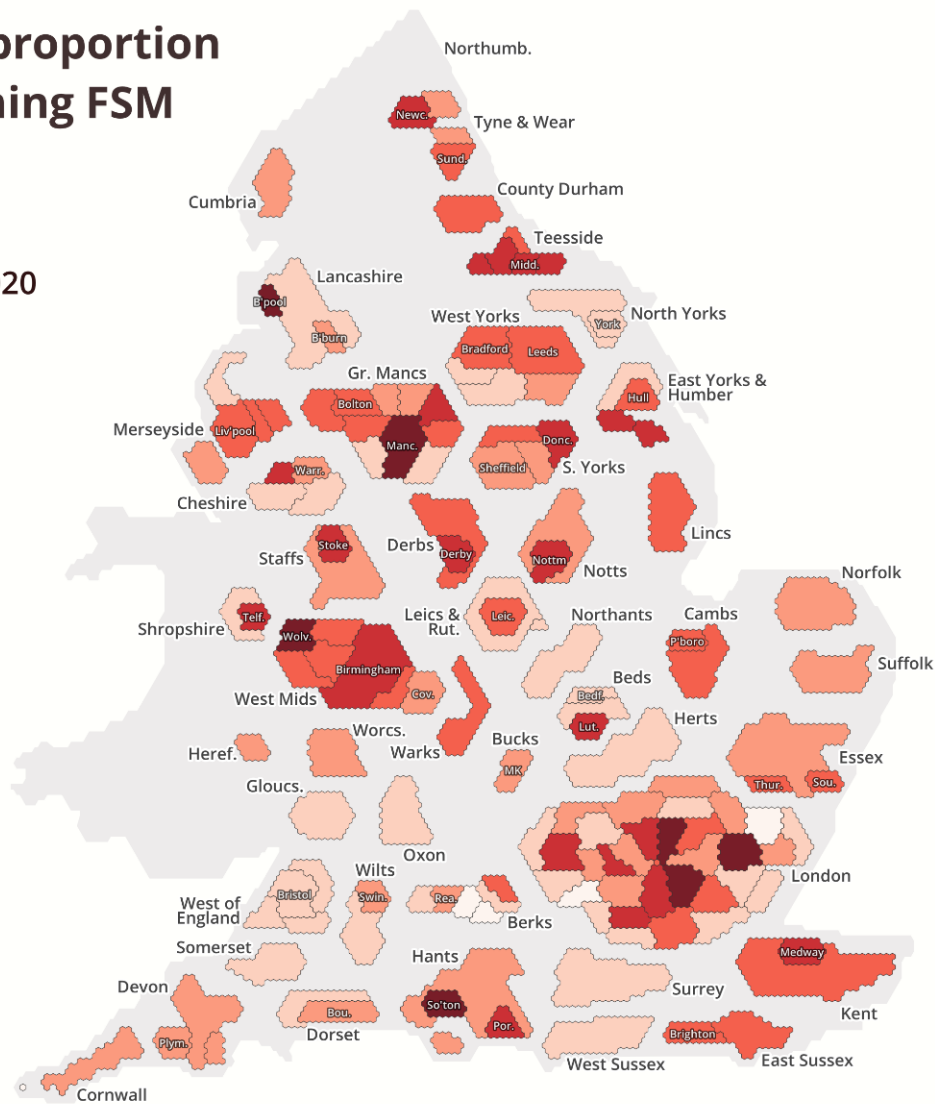
- Less than 1.0
- 1.0 - 2.0
- 2.0 - 2.5
- 2.5 - 3.0
- 3.0 - 4.0
- 4.0 and above

How to read this cartogram

On this map, local authority areas are approximately scaled in size according to their populations.

Areas are grouped by ceremonial counties (e.g. Kent), conurbations (e.g. Greater Manchester), and other recognisable sub-national areas.

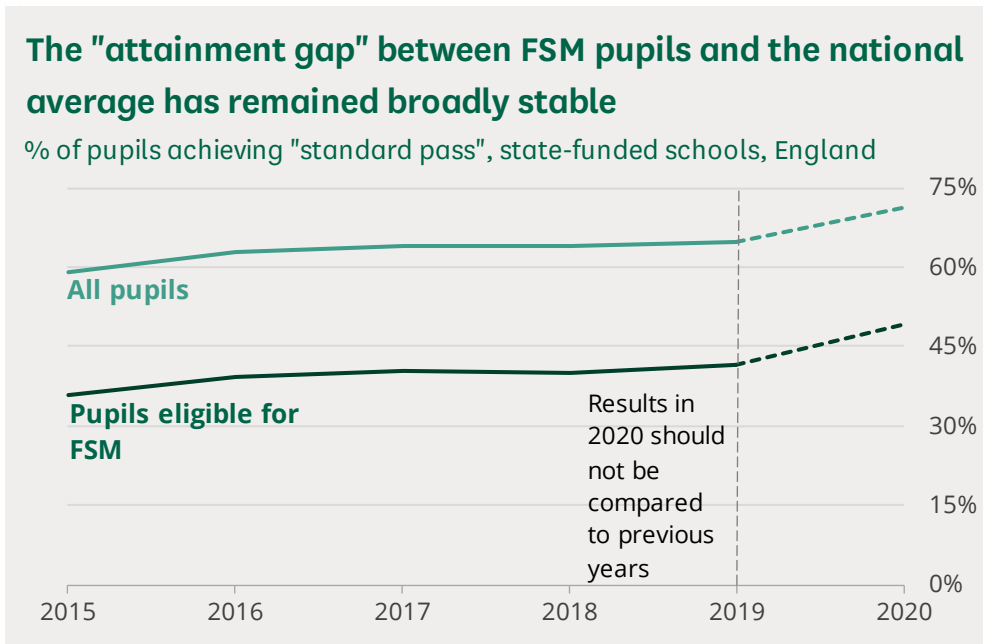
Grey shaded areas between groups don't represent data and serve only as a background.



Source: Department for Education, FSM: Autumn term, 30 March 2021
 Cartogram template: House of Commons Library (tinyurl.com/HCL-hex-cartograms)

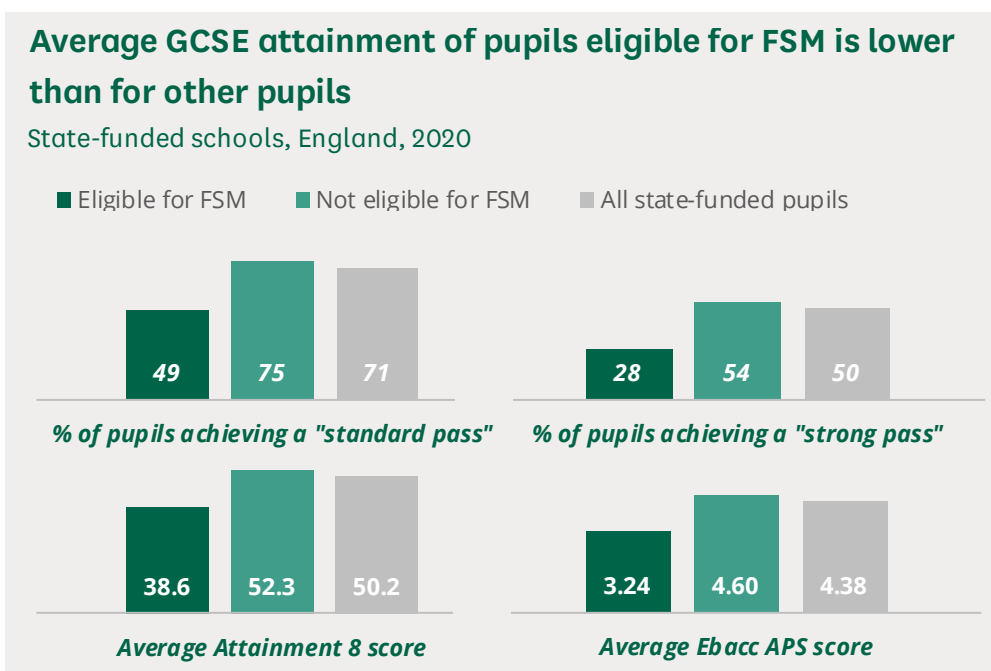
3.3 GCSE attainment

On average, pupils eligible for FSM have lower GCSE attainment than pupils that are not eligible. This difference in attainment or “attainment gap” has remained broadly stable in recent years. However, there are also large differences in both attainment and the attainment gap between different groups of FSM eligible pupils.



Note: A “standard pass” is achieving English and maths GCSE grades 9-4 (roughly comparable to A*-C).

Source: DfE, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2019/20](#), April 2021



Note: due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic this data from 2020 should not be compared to previous years.

Source: DfE, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2019/20](#), April 2021

In 2020, 49% of pupils eligible for FSM achieved a “standard pass”³³ in both English and Maths GCSE compared to 75% of pupils not eligible. This was a gap of 26 percentage points.

Pupils eligible for FSM attending school in London had much higher attainment than the other regions (62% achieving a standard pass) and the gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils in London was the smallest by far (17 percentage points). The West Midlands had the second highest attainment of FSM pupils and second smallest attainment gap but was considerably behind London (49% achieving a standard pass and an attainment gap of 25 percentage points).

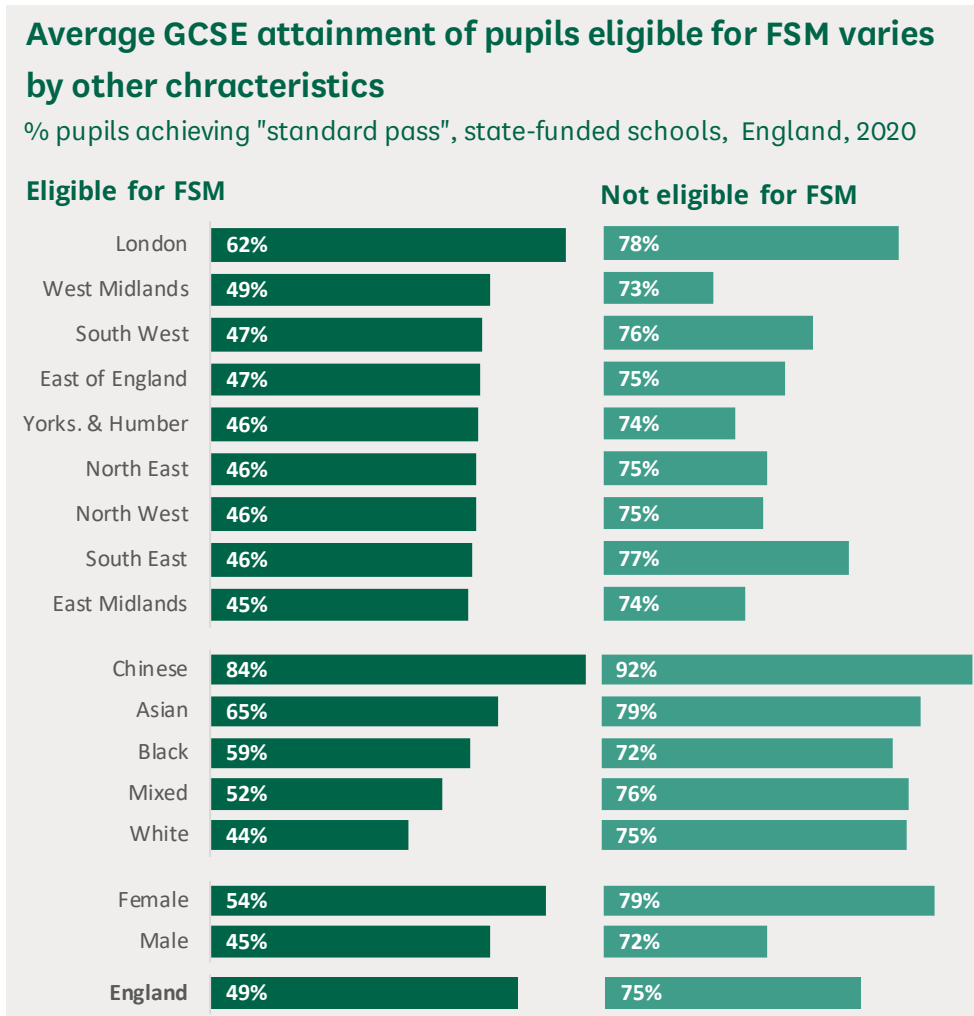
The attainment of pupils eligible for FSM was lowest for pupils attending schools in the South East and the attainment gap was also largest in the South East (31 percentage points).

There was also high variation in the attainment of FSM pupils broken down by ethnic group. In 2020, FSM pupils of Chinese ethnicity had much higher attainment than other major ethnic groups, and the gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils of Chinese ethnicity was the lowest (only 8 percentage points).

The attainment of FSM pupils of White ethnicity was lower than any other major ethnic group, and the gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils of White ethnicity was the largest by far (31 percentage points).

As in previous years, female pupils eligible for FSM achieved higher attainment than eligible boys. The gap between FSM females and non-FSM females was also slightly smaller than for males (25 percentage points compared to 27 percentage points).

³³ Achieved 9-4 grades (roughly comparable to A*-C under the previous letter grade system) in English and maths GCSE



Note: A "standard pass" is achieving English and maths GCSE grades 9-4 (roughly comparable to A*-C). Due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic this data from 2020 should not be compared to previous years.

Source: DfE, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2019/20](#), April 2021

3.4 Ethnicity of pupils eligible for FSM

The DfE does not publish the characteristics of pupils known to be eligible for FSM on a regular basis. The most recent data available for FSM pupils broken down by ethnicity is as of January 2020.³⁴

In January 2020 Black pupils were the group which were most overrepresented (in absolute terms) in the FSM population (this means that a higher proportion of Black pupils were eligible for FSM compared to their proportion of the general pupil population). Black pupils made up 9% of FSM pupils but only 6% of pupils overall. Mixed ethnicity pupils and pupils of any other ethnicity were also overrepresented.

White pupils were the most underrepresented group making up only 68% of pupils eligible for FSM but 73% of pupils overall. Asian and Chinese pupils were also underrepresented.

³⁴ Department for Education, [PO 63494](#), June 2020

Black pupils are overrepresented in the FSM population

January 2020, England

	Number FSM eligible	% of all FSM pupils	Number belonging to ethnic group	% of all pupils belonging to ethnic group
White	983,000	68%	6,049,000	73%
Asian	139,700	10%	948,100	11%
Black	127,300	9%	474,600	6%
Mixed	121,200	8%	515,100	6%
Chinese	2,900	0.2%	37,700	0.5%
Any other ethnic group	44,300	3%	168,800	2%
Unclassified	22,400	2%	119,400	1%
Total	1,440,600	100%	8,312,600	100%

Notes: pupils rounded to nearest 100.

Source: Department for Education, [PO 63494](#), June 2020; [Schools pupils and their characteristics: 2019/20](#), February 2021

3.5 Cost of providing FSM

Funding for free school meals hasn't been ring-fenced since 2011. Funding is available to schools through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). The Department for Education publishes DSG allocations on an annual basis but this does not include a breakdown for the provision of free school meals.

Unit funding for Universal Infant FSMs in the academic year [2020-21](#) was £2.34 per pupil per day, which can provide a rough guide to the amount of funding allocated for the free meals of older pupils. Taking this figure, and the 1.63 million pupils known to be eligible for FSM in England as of October 2020,³⁵ the rough estimated cost of providing free school meals for one day was around £4 million.

However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, during some of the school holidays and some of the school closures, families eligible for FSM could claim shopping vouchers worth £15 per week per child (this equates to £3 per school day) or opt to receive food parcels (schools were able to claim an additional £3.50 per week to provide these).³⁶

These different methods of receiving meals means that producing reliable estimates for the cost of providing free school meals during the pandemic is very uncertain.

³⁵ DfE, [Free school meals: Autumn term 2020/21](#), March 2021

³⁶ Department for Education, [Providing school meals during the Covid-19 outbreak](#), April 2021

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