

Written evidence submitted by *Understanding Society*, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, University of Essex

Key points

- *Understanding Society*, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, is a world-leading longitudinal survey of continuity and change in UK life. In April, we began a regular new survey to look at the impact of coronavirus on the UK population.
- Our Covid data has been used to examine the reach of the free school meals scheme, and the pros and cons of making it available during holidays.
- Research suggests that half of UK children eligible for free school meals could not access the scheme during the first lockdown.
- Research into the pros and cons of free school meal provision shows that 40% of eligible children lived in families who reported a lack of nutritious food during lockdown or family members going hungry in the previous week, or used a foodbank in the previous month.
- Families which are eligible for working-age benefits but have incomes above the free school meals cap also look less food insecure than those who were eligible for free meals in January.
- The campaign to extend the scheme has seen wide public support, and although the cost of making it permanent would be a substantial extension to spending on free school meals, it could have wider benefits for children's health and attainment.

1. Introduction

1.1. *Understanding Society*, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, is a world-leading longitudinal survey of continuity and change in UK life. From an initial sample of around 40,000 households, the same people are invited to participate in annual surveys. Together with its predecessor, the British Household Panel Survey, the data now span more than 25 years. *Understanding Society* is based at the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex.

1.2. *Understanding Society* is primarily funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), part of UK Research and Innovation, and has received funding from a number of government departments, devolved administrations and agencies. Anonymised data from the surveys are made available to registered researchers to use in their own research projects.

1.3 In April, *Understanding Society* began a regular new survey to look at the impact of coronavirus on the UK population. 42,000 adult participants across the UK were invited to take part, and 17,450 participants completed the survey in the first Wave. Four waves of data (April, May, June and July) are now available.

1.4 The COVID-19 Survey established a pre-crisis baseline by asking about aspects of life in January and February of 2020, as well as at the time of the interview. Also, because the data is longitudinal, it has been possible to compare the answers people gave in April with the answers they gave in previous waves of *Understanding Society*.

2. Who are free school meals reaching?

2.1 Fifty-one percent of eligible children accessed a free school meal, according to data gathered in April 2020. Children in junior schools or above (aged 8+ years) who belonged to low-income families or still attending schools were more likely to receive free school meals.

2.2 Children in Wales were less likely to access free school meals than those in England.

2.3 Receiving a free school meal was associated with increased odds of recently using a food bank but not reporting feeling hungry.

2.4 In the month after the first COVID-19 lockdown, 49% of eligible children did not receive any form of free school meal.

2.5 The research suggests that the voucher scheme did not adequately serve children who could not attend school during the lockdown. More needs to be done to support families relying on income-related benefits, who still report needing to access a food bank.

2.6 If the scheme continues, improvements will be needed to increase its reach.

3. What is the relationship between food insecurity and free school meal eligibility?

3.1 One in six children were eligible for free school meals before the pandemic. Of these, 40% lived in families who reported a lack of nutritious food during lockdown or family members going hungry in the previous week, or used a foodbank in the previous month.

3.2 During the first lockdown, around 80% of these children received vouchers from their school, which suggests that – at least during that part of the national lockdown – the vouchers were only an imperfect support for these families. This likely reflects the financial difficulties that some of these families were in, but difficulties in accessing supermarkets during the lockdown might also have played a role.

[Note: the percentages under heading 3 differ from those above because they refer to children eligible for free school meals before the pandemic. The research in section 2 does not distinguish between means-tested and universal schemes, and so refers to all eligible children.]

3.3 By contrast, children who became eligible for free school meals during the pandemic were far less likely to live in food-insecure households in April. This could be because the shock to households' finances was still, at that point, relatively recent; even families who had qualified for benefits might have been able to use savings, loans, or support from others to help tide themselves over.

4. What is the relationship between receiving benefits and free school meal eligibility?

4.1 Families that are eligible for working-age benefits but have incomes above the free school meals cap also look much less food insecure than those who were eligible for free meals back in January. This likely reflects the direct impact that the income cap has on targeting resources to the poorest families even among a group that is itself among the poorest in society.

5. Improving provision during the holidays

3.5 The push to extend free school meals through the holidays received broad support across society, but after the debate about extending the scheme to cover Christmas and February half term, there will almost certainly be wider discussions about the future of free school meals.

3.6 Making this benefit permanent would cost £270 million in the longer run (assuming benefits caseloads return to their pre-pandemic level). That would be a substantial extension to spending on free school meals, though it could have wider benefits for children's health and attainment.

3.7 Any debate on whether this should be done will hinge on whether the COVID-19 pandemic has put exceptional stress on the budgets of the very poor families who are eligible for free school meals – or whether it has simply laid bare the challenges that families on very low incomes will continue to face even in more normal times.

References

Jennie Parnham, Anthony Lavery, Azeem Majeed, Eszter Vamos, Half of children entitled to free school meals did not have access to the scheme during COVID-19 lockdown in the UK, *Public Health*, October 2020: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2020.08.019>

Christine Farquharson, No free lunch? Some pros and cons of holiday free school meals, Institute for Fiscal Studies, October 2020: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15148>

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