

Falling through the gaps: *Free School Meal Access for Children in Food Insecure Households in England*

Rosalyn Arnold¹, David Taylor-Robinson¹, Dougal Hargreaves² and Rachel Loopstra¹

¹University of Liverpool and ²Imperial College London

Contact email: rosalyn.arnold@liverpool.ac.uk

Fewer than one in three food insecure children receive a free school meal in England. Policy reform is recommended to expand provision to more vulnerable children.

Background

- Food Insecurity among households with children is rising in the UK.
- Free School Meals (FSM) can mitigate some of the effects of food insecurity by improving nutrition, educational outcomes and offering support for parents.
- However, not all vulnerable children may be accessing FSM, due to ineligibility or non-uptake (despite being eligible).
- Limited research has examined the gap between food insecurity and FSM access, or explored characteristics associated with ineligibility and non-uptake.

Method

Dataset: 2022/23 Family Resources Survey.

Population: 4089 children (aged 8-17) in full time education in England.
Children aged under 8 were excluded due to universal infant FSM.

Key Variables:

- Household Food Insecurity:** USDA-based, 30-day reference period. Marginal, low or very low level of food security = food insecurity.
- FSM receipt:** parent reported, 7-day reference period.
- Eligibility:** coded based on England's eligibility criteria.

Analyses: Weighted national estimates and logistic regression models to identify predictors of food insecurity among children not receiving FSM and non-uptake among eligible children living in food insecure households.

Free School Meal Eligibility Criteria across the UK

Northern Ireland

Universal FSM: None.

Universal Credit threshold raised to £15,000 which changes annually with inflation.

Scotland and Wales

Universal FSM: For all primary pupils (age 4 – 11).

Roll out in process.

Scotland universal credit threshold raised to £12,750.

England

Universal Infant FSM: Reception to year 2 (age 4-7).

Mean-tested FSM (Year 3+): Households on:

- Universal Credit (earned income <£7400)
- Child Tax Credit (gross income <£16,190)
- Other legacy benefits

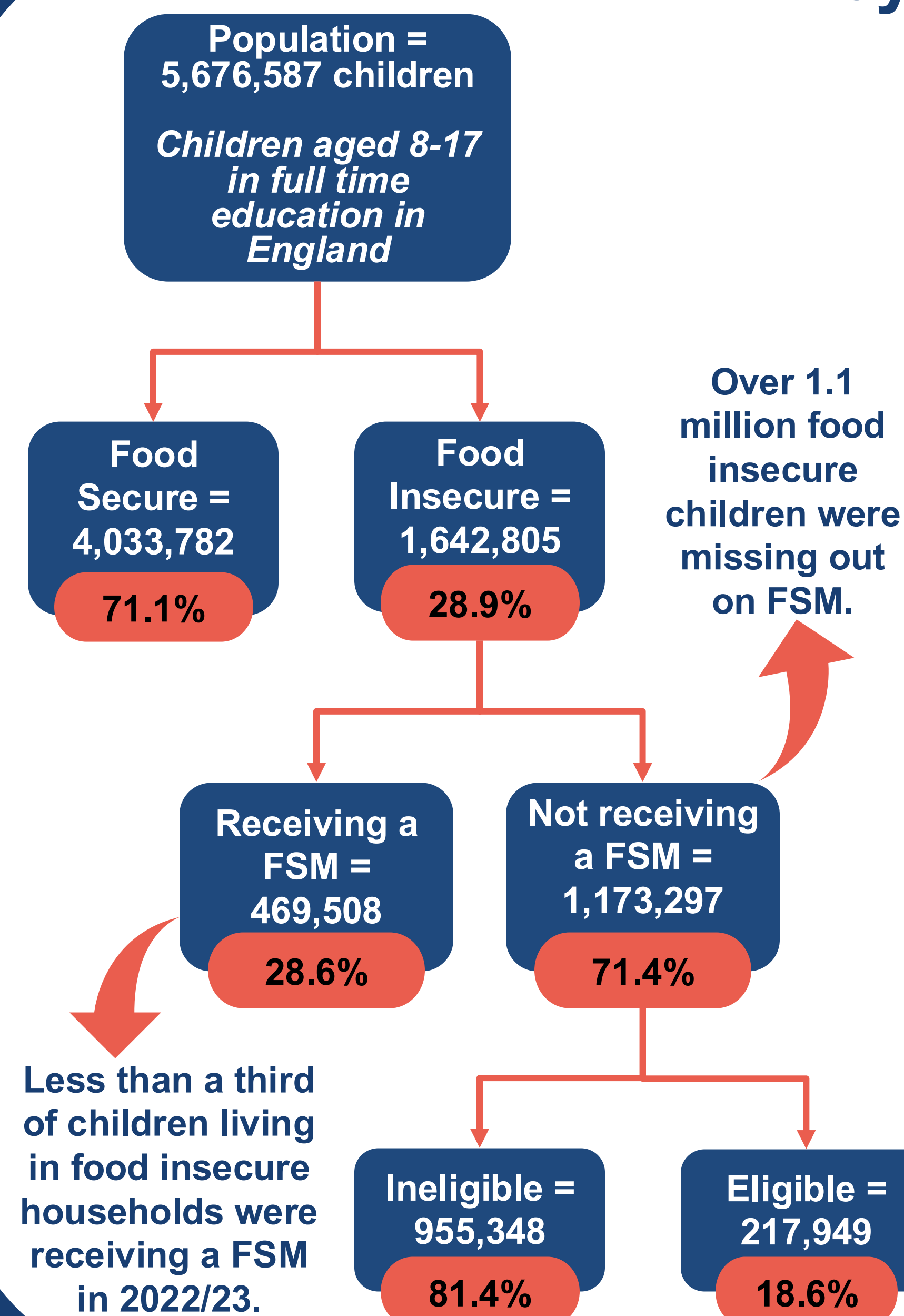
From April 2025: Only families on universal credit under the income threshold are eligible, though transitional protections remain.

No change of income thresholds since 2018.

Aims

- Quantify the gap between food insecurity and FSM receipt in England.
- Assess whether this gap appears driven by ineligibility or non-uptake.
- Identify characteristics of children not receiving FSM despite living in a food insecure household.

Key Findings



**National numbers are estimates*

Predicting food insecurity among children not receiving free school meals (n=2459)

Free School Meal Eligibility: Strongly associated with food insecurity in unadjusted model (OR: 7.19 (5.18, 10.05)), but not after adjustment for other predictors (OR: 1.33 (0.73, 2.42)).

Benefit Receipt: strong independent predictor of food insecurity, even after adjusting for income (Universal Credit OR: 3.27 (2.27, 4.73)).

Broader structural inequalities: Disability (OR: 1.74 (1.38, 2.2)) and black ethnicity (OR: 3.14 (1.91, 5.13)) were strong independent predictors of food insecurity.

Predicting non-uptake among eligible children living in food insecure households (n=330)

Older children: significantly less likely to take up FSM if eligible (*per year increase* OR: 1.15 (1.05, 1.25)).

Children in the South: less likely to take up free school meals than children in the north (OR: 1.89 (1.16, 3.10)).

Children in families **without a disability** significantly more likely to not take up free school meals (OR: 2.75 (1.55, 5.00)).

Interpretations

The majority of unmet need is due to ineligibility but nearly 1 in 5 children are eligible yet not taking FSM up – highlights the need to both expand and improve uptake.

Explaining food insecurity amongst non-recipients of FSM

- FSM Eligibility identifies need but is too narrowly defined to reach all food insecure children.
- Benefit receipt is a strong independent predictor- supports calls to extend FSM to all families on benefits, regardless of income.
- Structural inequalities highlights limitations of using benefits and income alone as markers of need for eligibility.

Explaining non-uptake among those eligible

- Lower uptake among older children may relate to stigma, restrictions on leaving school or dissatisfaction with meal quality.
- Higher uptake in the north may stem from higher eligibility rates, which reduces stigma and normalises FSM participation.
- Families without a disabled member may have less awareness or access to support, contributing to lower FSM uptake in this group.

Policy Recommendations

Short term priorities

- Expand Eligibility** to all families receiving Universal Credit regardless of income.
- Boost uptake amongst eligible children**
 - Through national automatic enrolment of eligible children (as piloted in the *Fix our Food* study) to remove administrative barriers.
 - Improve uptake among older pupils using methods recommended by Child Poverty Action Group such as takeaway lunch options and involving pupils in menu design.

Long term recommendation

Universal Free School Meals across primary and secondary

- Removes eligibility barriers and stigma.
- Reaches all children in need, regardless of background.

Strengths and limitations

Strengths

- First study to quantify how many children in England live in food insecure households but are not receiving FSM.
- Provides insights into drivers of both ineligibility and non-uptake.

Limitations

- Coded FSM eligibility variable and unable to account for transitional protections, potentially leading to some misclassifications of children who are eligible for FSM but coded as ineligible.

Future Research should explore barriers to FSM uptake using qualitative methods, and evaluate impact of differing eligibility across the UK.