

## Research Briefing

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23 September 2022

# Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals

## Summary

- 1 Food poverty
- 2 Food banks
- 3 Free school meals in England

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## Summary

In 2020/21, 4.2 million people (6%) were in food poverty, including 9% of children.

This briefing 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’. However, 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](#)”.

The increase in the cost of living has increased household food insecurity. In June to July 2022, of the 91% of adults in Great Britain who reported an increase in their cost of living, 95% saw the price of their food shopping go up, and [44% had started spending less on essentials including food](#).

A YouGov survey by the Food Foundation found that in April 2022, [15.5% of all UK households were food insecure](#) (ate less or went a day without eating because they couldn’t access or afford food).

According to the Department for Work and Pensions’ [Households Below Average Income survey](#), in 2020/21, 4.2 million people (6%) were in food insecure households. Among the 10.5 million people in relative poverty, 16% were in food insecure households, including 17% of children. People in relative poverty live in a household with income less than 60% of contemporary median income.

## Food banks

Food banks are run by charities and are intended as a temporary provision to supply emergency food. 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 2021/22, the [Trust supplied 2.2 million three-day emergency food parcels](#), a decrease of 15% on the previous year. The general trend of increasing numbers has continued. In the financial year 2021/22 there was an increase of

14% compared to 2019/20. The big increase in the year 2020/21 was caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2021/22, 832,000 food parcels went to children.

## Free school meals

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

In January 2022, there were around [1.9 million pupils known to eligible for FSM](#). This means there has been an increase in the proportion eligible to 22.5% of state-funded pupils (from 20.8% in January 2021, 17.3% in January 2020, and 15.4% in January 2019).

This increase could be driven by many factors including the Covid-19 pandemic and the continued effect of [the transitional protections during the rollout of Universal Credit](#).

## Free school meals and educational attainment

On average, pupils eligible for free school meals achieve lower GCSE attainment than other pupils. This is based on achieving a “standard pass” in English and maths GCSE. In 2021, [51% of pupils known to be eligible for FSM achieved a standard pass in both subjects](#), compared to 77% of pupils not eligible. This was a gap of 26 percentage points. In recent years this gap has remained broadly the same.

There are also differences in attainment between different groups of pupils receiving FSM. For example, [pupils receiving FSM in London have the highest GCSE attainment](#) (of all pupils known to be eligible for free school meals), and the smallest attainment gap between pupils that are not eligible for FSM, 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”.<sup>1</sup>

Food poverty is often used as synonymous with **household food insecurity**.<sup>2</sup> Household food insecurity is defined in broadly the same way across several countries:<sup>3</sup>

- ‘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.

Households can have low food security even when the UK as a whole has high food security, as discussed in Box 1 on page 10.

### Causes of household food insecurity

#### Income

Food poverty, or household food insecurity, is largely 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.<sup>4</sup> As discussed in section 1.2, high food prices also contribute to household food insecurity.

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. This means that cuts can be made to a food budget that cannot be made to

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

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

<sup>3</sup> This definition is based on the Household Food Security Survey Module, developed by the US Department of Agriculture. Source: US Department of Agriculture, [Food Security in the US](#) [Accessed 28 April 2021]

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

other costs, like rent or fuel payments.<sup>5</sup> Helen Barnard from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggested that food “is quite often one of the first things that people on low income start cutting back on or making trades about.”<sup>6</sup>

Households have cut back on food spending during the cost of living crisis. In May 2022, of the 88% of adults in Great Britain who reported an increase in their cost of living, 36% had started spending less on essentials like food.<sup>7</sup>

### **Access to food**

Household food insecurity can also occur when nutritious food is not available to households because of the area they live in, personal circumstances of household members, 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 home and could not arrange for food to be delivered. The Food Foundation found that, 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 due to shortages, 25% were unable to leave their homes and had no other way to get the food they needed, and 21%

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

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

<sup>7</sup> 11-22 May 2022 compared to the previous month. ONS, [Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: 11 to 22 May 2022](#), 27 May 2022

didn't have enough money to buy adequate food supplies.<sup>8</sup>

### Ability to prepare food

The ability and opportunity to prepare food also affects food security. Factors which could prevent this include disabilities, lack of infrastructure, the energy costs of cooking and the lack of skills or time.<sup>9</sup>

### Sharing food within households

Not everyone in food insecure households experiences it directly. Children in food insecure households do not always experience hunger or insufficient food, as parents often skip meals to ensure their children are fed.<sup>10</sup>

## 1 UK food security versus household food insecurity

The Library Insight [Food security: What is it and how is it measured?](#) (February 2020) discusses 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".<sup>11</sup> The [Agriculture Act 2020](#) introduced a duty on the Government to report to Parliament on UK food security at least every three years.<sup>12</sup> The first report was published in December 2021.<sup>13</sup>

## 1.2

## Food insecurity and the cost of living crisis

Rising prices are affecting household budgets, which means more households are experiencing food insecurity.

<sup>8</sup> The Food Foundation, [A crisis within a crisis: The impact of Covid-19 on household food insecurity](#), 1 March 2021

<sup>9</sup> Defra, [United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021: Theme 4: Food Security at Household Level](#), 22 December 2021

<sup>10</sup> Child poverty Action Group, [Living Hand to Mouth](#), 26 March 2019

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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".

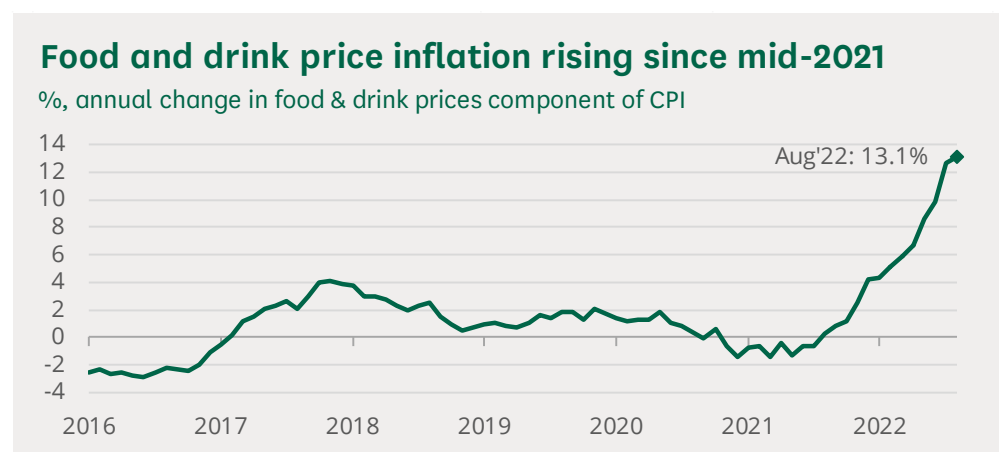
<sup>13</sup> Defra, [United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021](#), 16 December 2021



The Library briefing [Rising cost of living in the UK](#) provides more detail on rising prices and their impact on households, particularly low-income households.

## Food prices have been increasing since mid-2021

Food prices have been rising since the second half of 2021. Food and non-alcoholic drink prices were 13.1% higher in the year to August 2022 on the official Consumer Price Index (CPI) measure of inflation.<sup>14</sup>



Source: ONS, Food and non-alcoholic drink component of CPI, series [D7G8](#) [17 August 2022 update]

This is due to a combination of supply chain problems, labour shortages and rising costs of preparing and transporting food. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is also causing an increase in food prices on international markets, as Russia and Ukraine are important producers of agricultural products like wheat.<sup>15</sup>

## The cost of living crisis has increased household food insecurity

In August-September 2022, 87% of adults in Great Britain reported an increase in their cost of living, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Of these, 96% saw the price of their food shopping go up, and 44% had started spending less on essentials including food.<sup>16</sup>

A YouGov survey by the Food Foundation, a food poverty charity, found that in April 2022, 15.5% of households were food insecure (ate less or went a day without eating because they couldn't access or afford food). In the UK, 12.8% of people had eaten less or skipped meals, 8.8% had not eaten when they

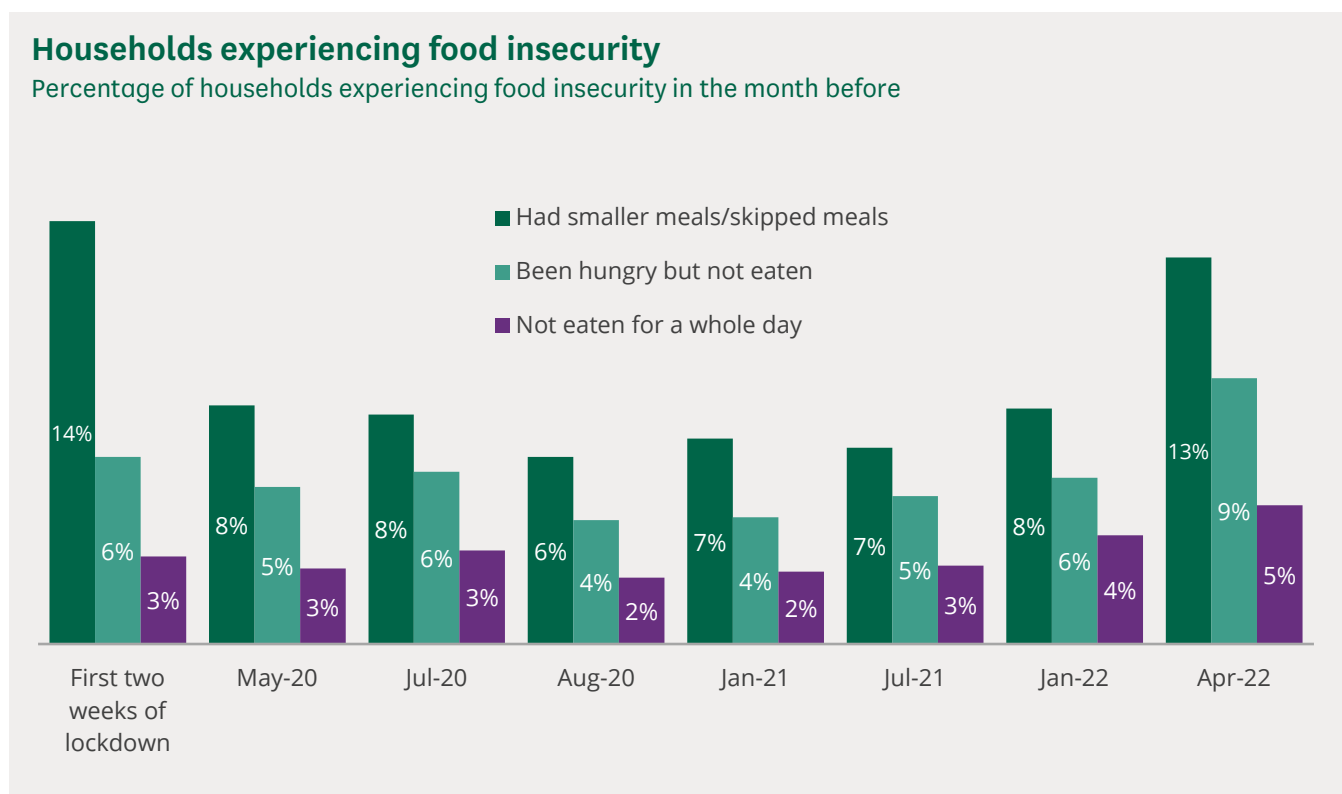
<sup>14</sup> ONS, Food and non-alcoholic drink component of CPI, series [D7G8](#) [20 July 2022 update]

<sup>15</sup> UN FAO Information Note, [The importance of Ukraine and the Russian Federation for global agricultural markets and the risks associated with the current conflict](#) [11 March 2022 update]

<sup>16</sup> 31 August-11 September 2022, compared to the previous month; ONS, [Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain](#), 16 September 2022

were hungry, and 4.6% had gone a whole day without eating in the month to April 2022.<sup>17</sup>

As shown in the chart below, household food insecurity has been increasing since August 2020, and the percentage of people who have not eaten when they were hungry or not eaten for an entire day was higher in April 2022 than it was in the first two weeks of the coronavirus lockdowns.



Source: Food Foundation, [Food insecurity Tracking](#), Round 10

## Some households are experiencing more food insecurity than others

According to the Food Foundation, households with the following characteristics are more likely to have experienced food insecurity:

- **Households with children:** 17.2% of households with children experienced food insecurity in the month to 29 April 2022, compared to 12.7% of households without children.
- **Households receiving Universal Credit:** 47.7% experienced food insecurity in the month to 29 April 2022 compared to 13.3% of households not receiving Universal Credit.

<sup>17</sup> Food Foundation, [Food insecurity Tracking](#), Round 10, [accessed 26 July 2022]

- **Households with members with disabilities:** 36.1% of households with a member who is ‘limited a lot’ by a disability experienced food insecurity in the month to 29 April 2022. This is compared to 17.0% of households with a member who is ‘limited a little’ by a disability and 10.6% of households where nobody is limited by a disability.
- **Households from minority ethnic groups:** 22.9% of Black households, 23.3% of households with Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups, 23.9% of Asian households, and 34.5% of households from ‘other’ ethnic groups experienced food insecurity in the six months to April 2022, compared to 15.7% of White households.
- **Households in Northern Ireland and the North and East of England:** 15.9% of households in Northern Ireland, 15.3% in the North West of England, 15.2% in the North East, 15.1% in Yorkshire and the Humber, and 15.2% in the East of England experienced food insecurity in the month to April 2022. This compares to 11.1% in London, 12.7% in the South East of England, and 12.8% in the West Midlands.<sup>18</sup>

## 1.3

## Food insecurity statistics 2020/21

### ‘Low’ and ‘very low’ food security

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

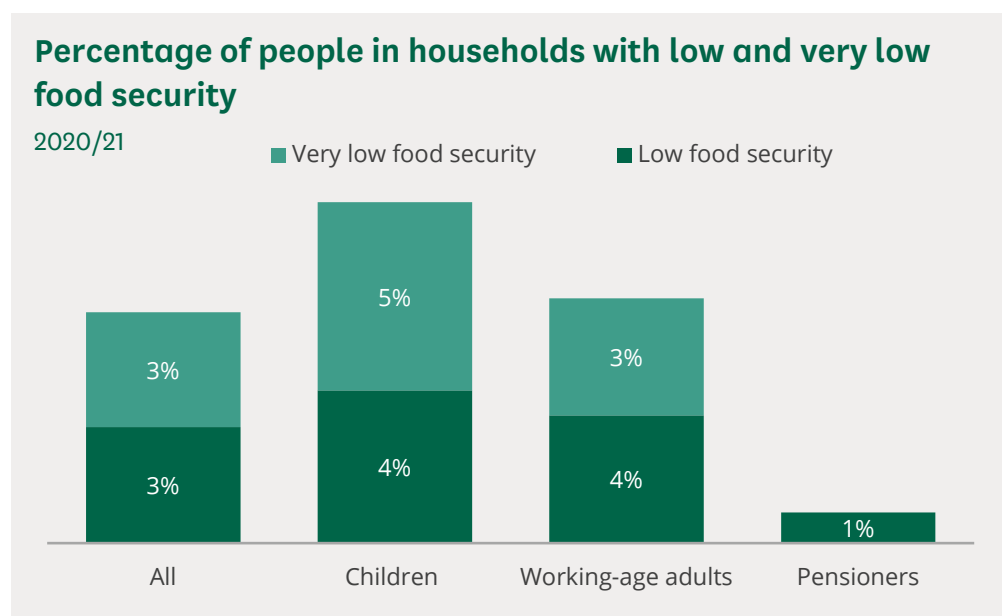
‘Very low food security’ means household members sometimes disrupt eating patterns or reduce food intake because they lack money or other resources for food.

In 2020/21, 4.2 million people in the UK (6%) were in food insecure households in the UK, according to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)’s Household Below Average Income survey. This included 9% of children, 7% of working-age adults, and 1% of pensioners. These rates are all slightly lower than in 2019/20, when 8% of people were in food insecure households, including 13% of children, 8% of working age adults and 2% of pensioners.<sup>19</sup>

The chart below breaks down food security by status (low and very low). 3% of working-age adults and 5% of children lived in households with **very low** food security in 2020/21.

<sup>18</sup> Food Foundation, [Food insecurity Tracking](#), Round 10, [accessed 26 July 2022]

<sup>19</sup> The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) announced it would add household food insecurity questions to the Family Resources Survey in 2019, and [data was first published in March 2021](#).



Source: Department for Work and Pensions, [Households Below Average Income](#), 2020/21

## Poverty and food insecurity

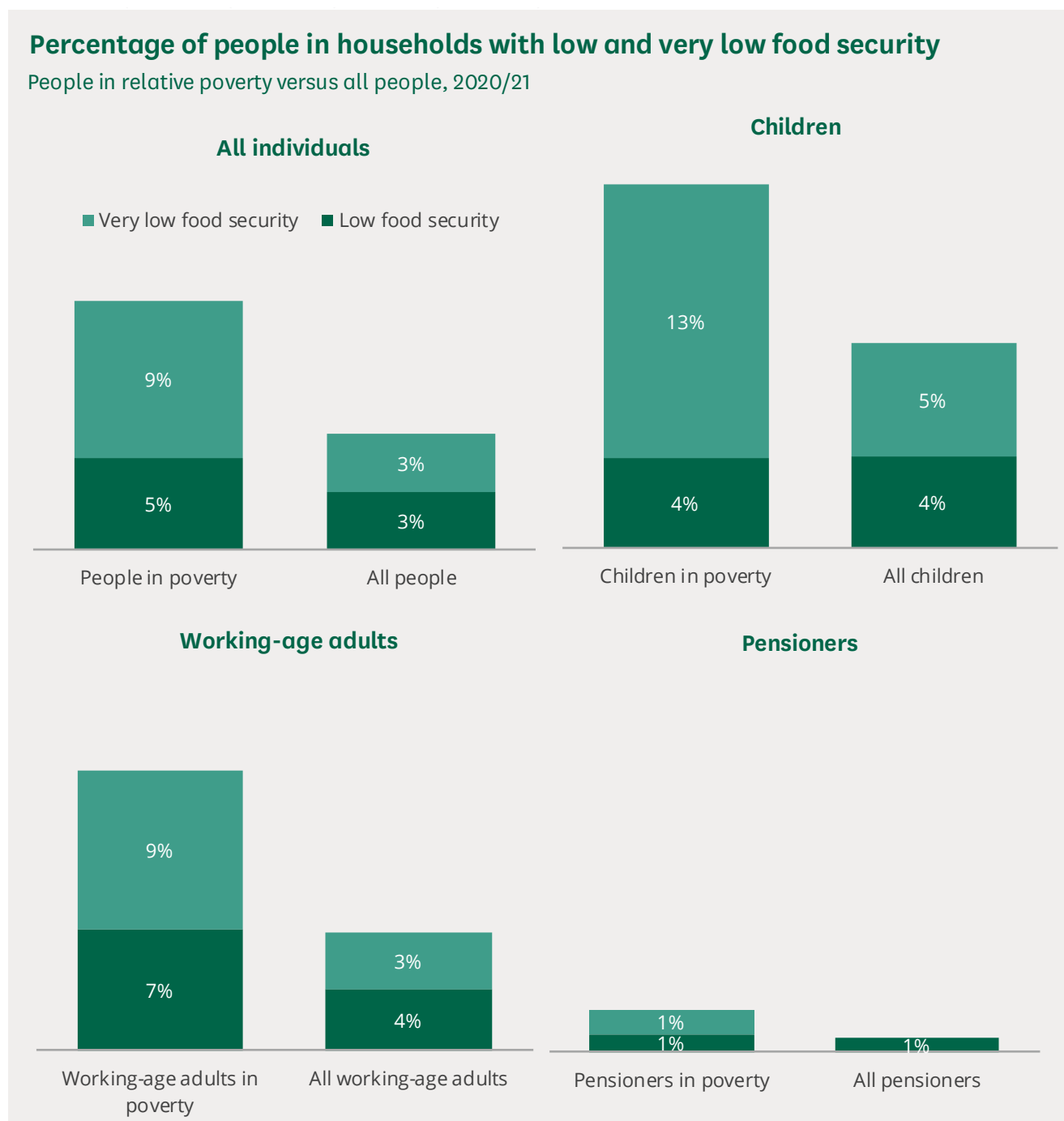
Since household food insecurity in the UK is largely due to low incomes, it is unsurprising that food insecurity is more prevalent in households in poverty.

In 2020/21, 1.4 million people in poverty lived in food insecure households (households with either low or very low food security), including 500,000 children.<sup>20</sup>

The chart below shows that 17% of children, 16% of working-age adults, and 2% of pensioners who were in relative poverty (measured before housing costs are considered) were living in food insecure households. People in relative poverty refers to people living in a household with income less than 60% of contemporary median income. 10.5 million people were in relative poverty in 2020/21. The median is the point where half of household incomes are higher, and half are lower.

9% of working-age adults, 13% of children, and 1% of pensioners who were in poverty lived in households with very low food security.

<sup>20</sup> DWP, [Households Below Average Income](#), 2022



Source: Department for Work and Pensions, [Households Below Average Income](#), 2020/21

In 2020/21, 10.5 million (16%) people were in relative poverty before housing costs, including 2.8 million (19%) of children.

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

## 2 Food insecurity and the coronavirus pandemic

Online surveys commissioned by the Food Foundation found that 4.7 million adults and 2.3 million children lived in households which experienced food

insecurity in the first six months of the pandemic. 12% of households with children were affected by food insecurity.<sup>21</sup>

The Food Foundation found that the following groups have been particularly affected by the pandemic:

- disabled people and clinically vulnerable people
- food sector workers
- people from a minority ethnic group
- households with five or more members
- households with children, particularly lone parents

## 1.4

### Government Food Strategy for England

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 was led by Henry Dimbleby, co-founder of Leon restaurants and lead non-executive director at Defra.<sup>22</sup> The National Food Strategy was intended to cover “the entire food chain, from field to fork”, primarily in England. It intended to ensure the food system “delivers safe, healthy, affordable food; regardless of where people live or how much they earn”.<sup>23</sup>

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 Brexit 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 made recommendations to Government.

Part two was published in 2022, and contained more recommendations, including a plan to “reduce diet-related inequality”.<sup>24</sup>

The Government published a food strategy for England on 13 June 2022. This response to the National Food Strategy review was originally intended to be a White Paper. However, on 22 May, the Telegraph reported it had been

<sup>21</sup> The Food Foundation, [A crisis within a crisis: The impact of Covid-19 on household food insecurity](#), 1 March 2021

<sup>22</sup> Defra, [National Food Strategy - Call for Evidence](#) [accessed 30 April 2021]

<sup>23</sup> Defra, [Developing a national food strategy: independent review 2019 – terms of reference](#), updated 29 July 2020

<sup>24</sup> [National Food Strategy: The Report](#), July 2021, pp144-261

“delayed because of the invasion [of Ukraine] and the paper will now place increased emphasis on food security”.<sup>25</sup>

The Government Food Strategy contained a chapter on healthier and sustainable eating, which highlighted the importance of cooking equipment and skills:

The link between deprivation and dietary outcomes is not only about the cost of healthier food. It is also about having the equipment, cooking skills, and time to prepare and cook healthier food than more convenient alternatives, which can be high in fat, salt and sugar, and may not be as readily available to those on low incomes.<sup>26</sup>

The Government outlined actions it would take in this area, including: funding research into the link between ultra-processed food and obesity; trials of interventions in the food system; learning from the approaches taken by Local Food Partnerships;<sup>27</sup> and promoting a “whole school” approach to school food.<sup>28</sup>

The Government is due to publish a health disparities White Paper, which may cover the areas listed above.<sup>29</sup>

## Responses to the Government Food Strategy

There have been mixed reactions to the Government Food Strategy. The Local Government Association (LGA) said it had missed an opportunity to address problems affecting access to food:

Everyone should have access to healthy and affordable food. The strategy response represents a missed opportunity to tackle the underlying causes of a variety of issues, many of which will continue to be exacerbated by the growing cost of living crisis. Unless the government takes urgent action, health inequalities will widen and its ambition to halve childhood obesity by 2030 will be missed.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, the Food Foundation said the strategy had “missed the mark”:

Hopes were high that the Government’s Food Strategy would set out a long-term plan for incentivising the food system to shift towards the provision of nourishing, sustainable and affordable food, and away from food which makes us sick. With the prices of food and fuel surging, this ambition is more urgent than ever, as more and more households who are struggling to pay the bills are put at even greater risk of diet-related disease. Disappointingly, today’s publication mostly misses this mark.

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<sup>25</sup> The Telegraph, [Gene-edited crops sped up to guarantee food supplies](#), 22 May 2022

<sup>26</sup> Defra, [Government food strategy](#), 13 June 2022, 2.1.6

<sup>27</sup> Local food partnerships “help coordinate action on dysfunctions and opportunities for change in local food systems.” Sustain, [Report: The value of local food partnerships, Covid and beyond](#), 18 March 2022

<sup>28</sup> Defra, [Government food strategy](#), 13 June 2022, section 2.2.4

<sup>29</sup> The NHS Confederation set out what they think should be included in the [Health disparities white paper in their parliamentary briefing](#) on 30 June 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Local Government Association, [LGA response to the Government’s food strategy](#), 13 June 2022

The Food and Drink Federation, which represents the food and drink manufacturing industry, broadly welcomed the strategy but said there was “more the Government can do”. This included helping the food and drink sector invest in technology to increase productivity and ensuring there is regulation (such as new household recycling systems). The Federation said this:

will be critical if the government is not going to drive extra costs into food manufacturing at a time of soaring inflation. The UK Government must also work hand-in-hand with the Devolved Administrations to ensure that different policies affecting our sector don't end up unnecessarily costing households more.<sup>31</sup>

The National Education Union (NEU) highlighted that the Government's Food Strategy excluded recommendations by Henry Dimbleby for Free School Meals to be extended to all households receiving Universal Credit. The NEU described this as “an extraordinary decision, given rising costs and the Government's promises to 'level up'”. The Union added that:

Families receiving Universal Credit absolutely must be able to receive free school meals and we think the extension in eligibility simply can't wait. This policy will result in a great many young people going hungry, and this is a totally unacceptable position for a Government to take. Heads are also concerned that school funding isn't keeping up with the actual cost of free school meals, and this really matters if we want meals to be healthy and nutritious.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Food and Drink federation, [The FDF responds to the UK Government's food strategy](#), 13 June 2022

<sup>32</sup> NEU, [Government food strategy rejects extension of free school meals](#), 13 June 2022.



## 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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

The Library briefing [Food banks in the UK](#) provides statistics on the use of food banks, as well as the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, 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 food banks, but data from the Trussell Trust and the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) can help us estimate how many are in the UK.

The Trussell Trust has the UK's largest network of food banks. It covers 420 locations across all four nations of the UK as of 2020. Many locations have multiple branches, totalling over **1,400 food bank centres**.

IFAN is the UK network for independent (non-Trussell Trust) food aid providers. There are **at least 1,172 independent food banks** in the UK today.<sup>35</sup>

Added to the Trussell Trust's 1,300 this makes **over 2,300 food banks in total**.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Trussell Trust, [Our Story](#) [Accessed 28 April 2021]

<sup>34</sup> Trussell Trust, [Our Strategic Plan](#) [Accessed 28 April 2021], IFAN, [Home](#) [Accessed 28 April 2021]

<sup>35</sup> [IFAN on Trussell Trust and independent food bank numbers](#). 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.

<sup>36</sup> The Government does not maintain statistics on food banks – see [WPO UIN 121155](#)

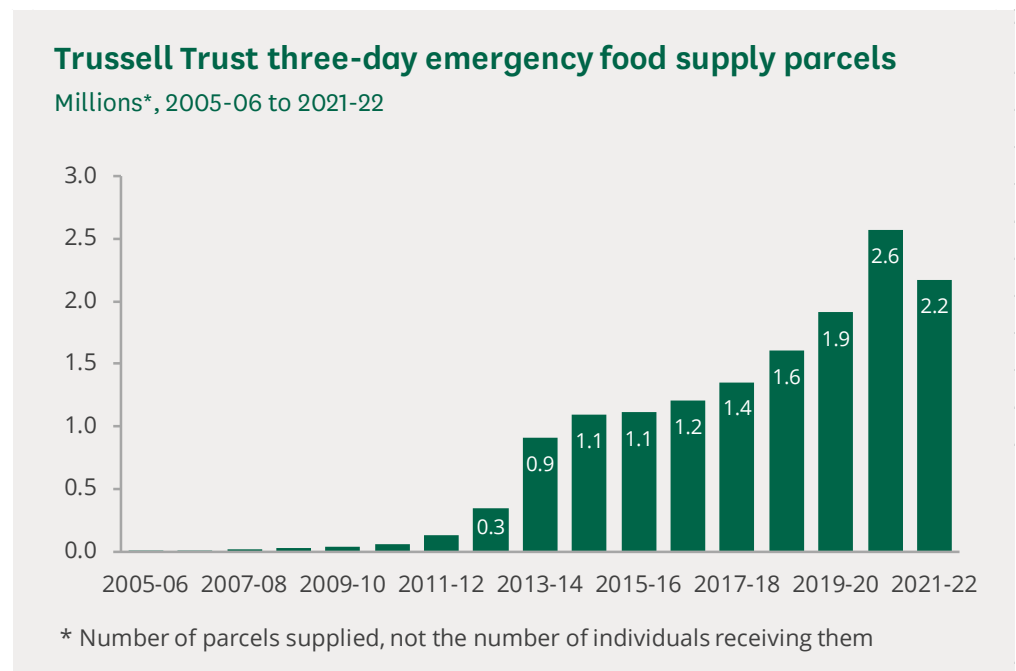
## 2.2

## Food bank use

There is no measure of how many people use food banks 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.

In 2021/22, the Trussell Trust supplied 2.2 million three-day emergency food parcels, a decrease of 15% on the previous year. However, the general trend of increasing numbers continues. In 2021/22 there was an increase of 14% compared to 2019/20. The big increase in the year 2020/21 was caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

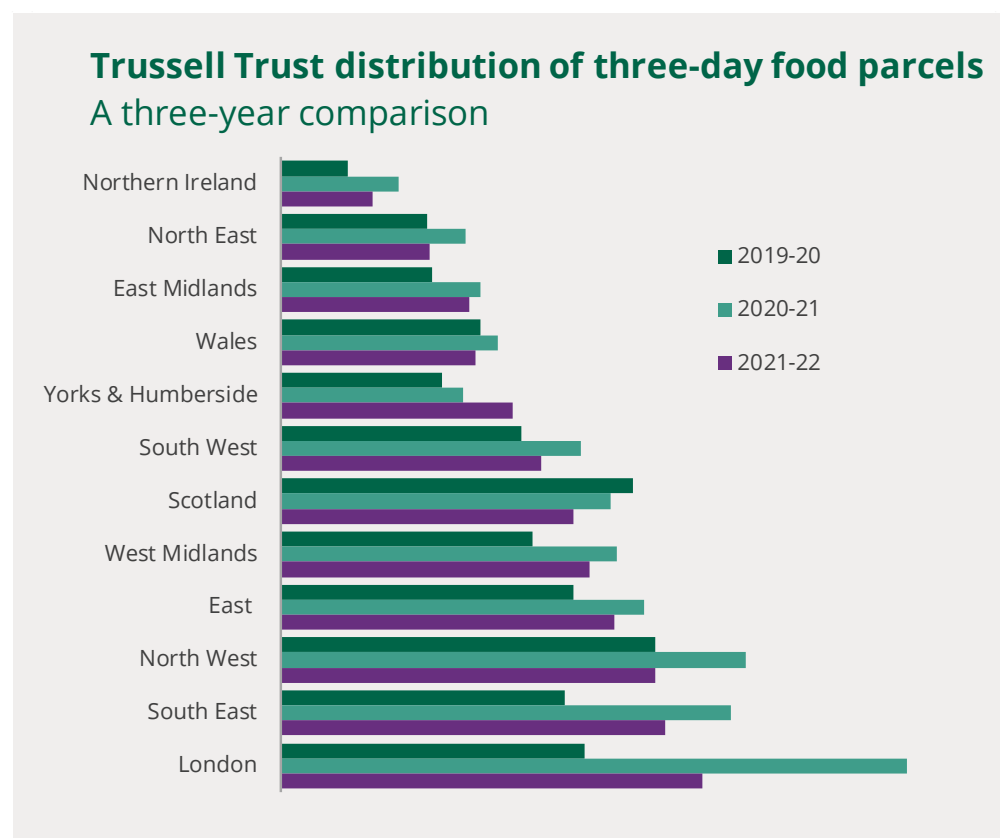
This data does not include all food parcels distributed because of the large number of independent food banks, who also distribute food parcels but are not part of the Trussell Trust network.



Source: [Trussell Trust, End of year Stats, 2022](#)

Food bank usage varies across UK countries and regions. While there was an increase in the number of Trussell Trust food parcels distributed in every region and country of the UK between the financial years 2019/20 and 2020/21, London was the one region where the number more than doubled.

In most regions and countries in 2021/22, the number dropped compared to 2020/21, but was still higher compared to 2019/20, with the spike caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.



Source: [Trussell Trust, End of year Stats, 2022](#)

## 2.3 The rising cost of living means demand for food banks is increasing

The Trussell Trust saw a 22% increase in demand for food parcels in January to February 2022 compared to the same period in 2020.<sup>37</sup>

Trussell Trust research using a YouGov survey in March 2022 found that 17% of those people needed to visit a food bank between December 2021 and March 2022. A third of Universal Credit recipients had more than one day in the previous month where they didn't eat at all or only had one meal, and a third had not been able to afford to heat their home for more than four days across the last month.<sup>38</sup>

The Independent Food Aid Network said in May 2022 that 93% of its food banks had reported an increase in demand since the start of the year.<sup>39</sup> By August 2022 nearly 90% saw a further increase in demand since April and

<sup>37</sup> Trussell Trust, [End of year stats 2022](#)

<sup>38</sup> Trussell Trust, [Two in five Brits receiving Universal Credit forced into debt this winter as payments failed to cover soaring cost of living, says the Trussell Trust](#), 17 March 2022

<sup>39</sup> ["Rising cost of food will push more families to food banks, say charities"](#), Independent, 30 May 2022

19% reported having to reduce their parcel size because of increasing demand and reduced donations.<sup>40</sup>

Disabled people tend to have higher energy needs than the average citizen, (for example, to run essential medical equipment) and poverty and disability charities say disabled people may have to turn to food banks. The charity Carers UK warns that [32% of disabled people “are worried they might have to use a food bank”](#).<sup>41</sup>

The Library briefing [Foodbanks in the UK](#) provides more detail on how the rising cost of living affects foodbanks.

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<sup>40</sup> Independent Food Aid Network, [As the cost-of-living crisis worsens, overwhelmed independent food banks fear they will not be able to meet demand this winter \(PDF\)](#) [Accessed 20 September 2022]

<sup>41</sup> [Disabled people facing ‘impossible choices to survive’ in cost of living crisis](#), The Guardian, 15 March 2022

## 3

# Free school meals in England

In England, free school meals (FSM) are a statutory entitlement available to pupils that meet the eligibility criteria **and** whose parents or carers make an application. 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. However, 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 free school meals.<sup>42</sup>

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

## 3.1

### Current eligibility criteria

Children's' eligibility for free school meals is based on their parents or carers meeting certain criteria (outlined below) **and** if parents make an application for free school meals.

If a pupil receives FSM in a given school year, they remain eligible until they finish their current phase of education (primary or secondary). This excludes [infant pupils that receive meals under the universal policy](#) (reception, year 1, and year 2).

During the coronavirus outbreak, [eligibility for free school meals was extended](#) to **some** groups of children who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF). In March 2022, the Government announced that this extension would be permanent.<sup>43</sup>

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

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<sup>42</sup> House of Commons Library, [School meals and nutritional standards](#), January 2021

<sup>43</sup> Department for Education, [Providing free school meals to families with no recourse to public funds](#), 9 June 2022; UK Parliament, [Update on Children with no recourse to public funds: Statement UIN HCWS714](#), 24 March 2022

- 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)
- Universal Credit (from 1 April 2018 **only in cases with household income of less than £7,400 a year**<sup>44</sup>, with [transitional protections](#) for existing claimants)

## 3.2 Number of pupils known to be eligible

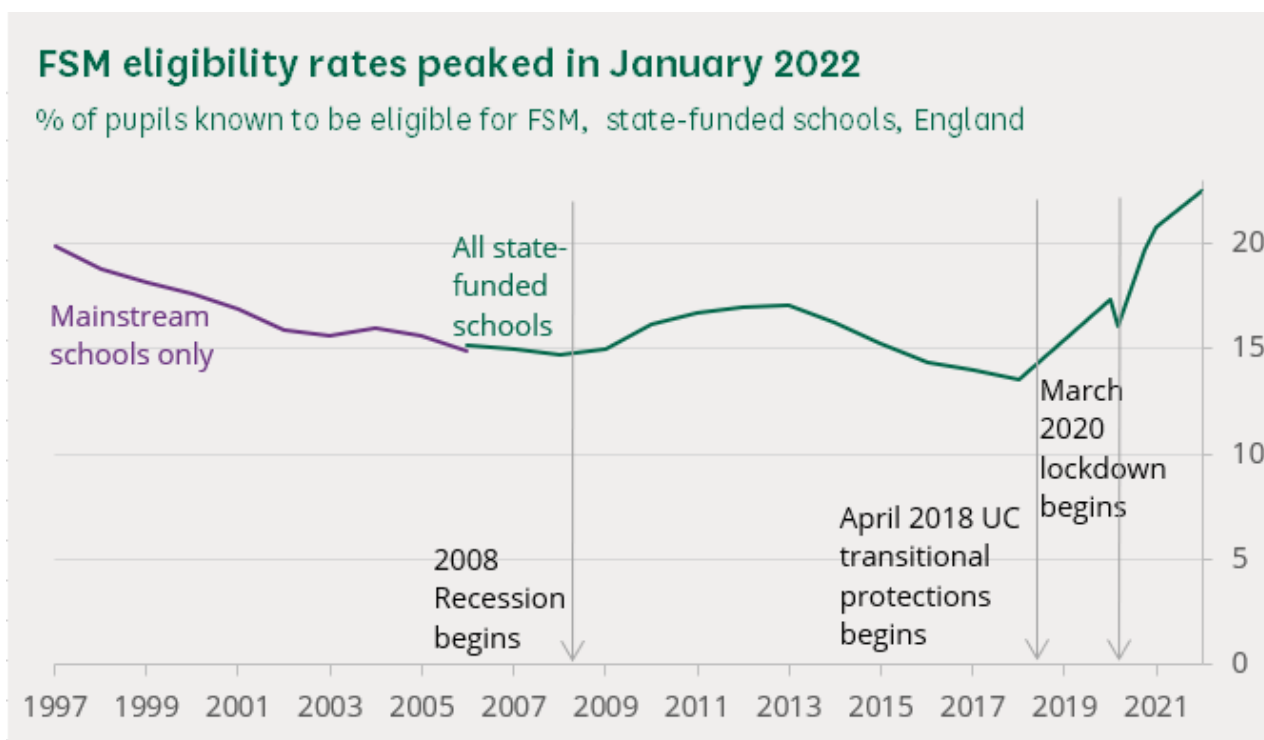
In January 2022, there were around 1.9 million pupils known to be eligible for FSM, representing 22.5% of state funded pupils.<sup>45</sup> This eligibility rate has increased particularly sharply in the last few years (since 2018) and is the highest rate recorded since the mid-1990s.

This increase could be driven by many factors including the Covid-19 pandemic and the continued effect of [the transitional protections during the rollout of Universal Credit](#).

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<sup>44</sup> After tax and not including any benefits

<sup>45</sup> Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2022](#), 9 June 2022



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 from 2006 to 2010. Sources: Department for Education (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 (23.1%) were eligible compared with secondary pupils (20.9%).<sup>46</sup> 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

January 2022, state-funded schools, England

	% eligible	Number eligible (nearest 1,000)
State-funded primary	23.1	1,076,000
State-funded secondary	20.9	747,000
Special schools	44.7	63,000
Pupil referral units	54.6	6,000
<b>All schools</b>	<b>22.5</b>	<b>1,897,000</b>

Source: Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2022](#), 9 June 2022

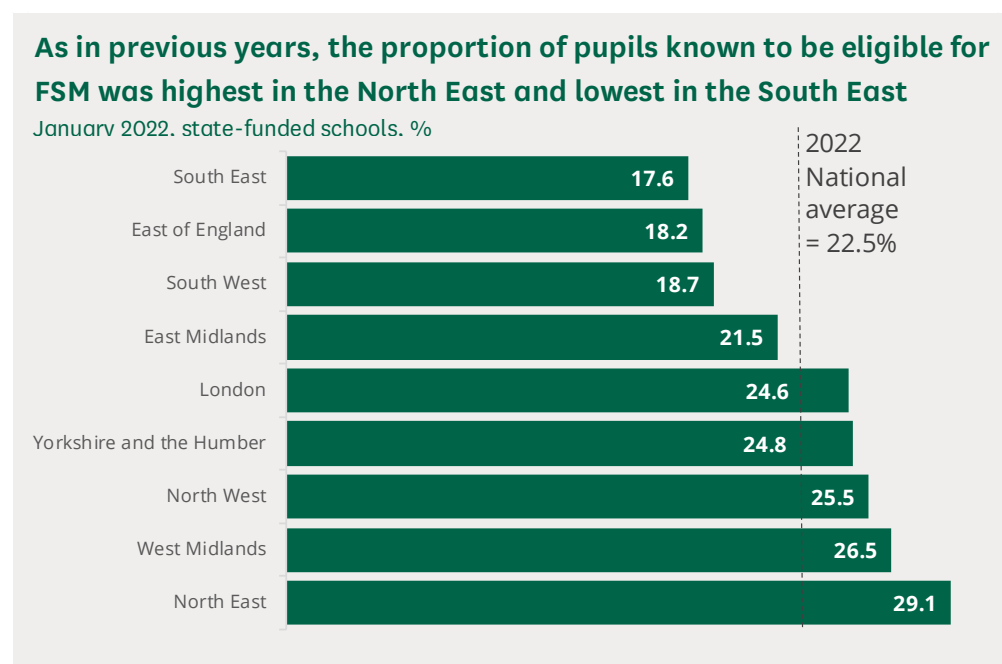
### Regional and local variations in pupils eligible for FSM

In January 2022, the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM in England was 22.5%.<sup>47</sup> However, this is an average and masks considerable regional and

<sup>46</sup> Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2022](#), 9 June 2022

<sup>47</sup> Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2022](#), 9 June 2022

local authority variation. The North East of England recorded the highest eligibility rate in absolute terms (6.6 percentage points above the national average). The South East region had the lowest rate (4.9 percentage points below the national average).



Source: Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2022](#), 9 June 2022

There is much more variation in eligibility rates between local authorities (in absolute terms) compared to regions. In January 2022, Islington was the local authority with the highest eligibility rate (41.1%), and Isles of Scilly the lowest rate (1.9%).

**Local Authorities with the highest and lowest rates of FSM eligibility**  
 January 2022, pupils attending state-funded schools, %

Highest			Lowest		
1	Islington	41.1	1	Isles of Scilly	1.9
2	Manchester	40.8	2	Wokingham	9.0
3	Blackpool	40.4	3	Rutland	9.8
4	Camden	39.2	4	Windsor and Maidenhead	11.7
5	Knowsley	39.2	5	Bracknell Forest	11.8
6	Newcastle upon Tyne	38.8	6	Central Bedfordshire	12.3
7	Hackney	38.8	7	Buckinghamshire	12.3
8	Tower Hamlets	38.4	8	Richmond upon Thames	12.4
9	Middlesbrough	38.2	9	Surrey	12.8
10	Halton	37.3	10	Kingston upon Thames	12.9

Source: Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2022](#), 9 June 2022



The proportion of pupils eligible for FSM increased in every local authority between January 2021 and January 2022 (excluding the Isles of Scilly which decreased by 0.03 percentage points).<sup>48</sup>

Some areas had larger increases than others. In City of London, eligibility increased the most in absolute terms (more than 8 percentage points), the second largest increase was in Westminster (more than 4 percentage points). While in Tower Hamlets it increased the least (less than 1 percentage point). Many of the biggest increases were in areas with already high eligibility rates.

The variation in the increase in eligibility rates was smaller at the regional level (in absolute terms). However, as with local authorities, regions with above average rates of eligibility (the North East and London) had the biggest increases. The South West (with below average rates) increased the least.

### Ethnicity of pupils eligible for free school meals

In January 2022, 61% of pupils receiving free school meals belonged to the White British ethnic group.<sup>49</sup> The second most common group were Black African pupils (5.8% of pupils receiving free school meals) followed by Pakistani pupils (4.9%).

However, this does not account for differences in the number of children belonging to each ethnic group. On this basis, the most overrepresented ethnic group were Travellers of Irish Heritage (63% of whom were eligible compared to the national average of 22.5%), followed by Gypsy/Roma pupils (52% were eligible), and White and Black Caribbean pupils (42% were eligible). Indian and Chinese pupils had the lowest eligibility rates (8% respectively). White British pupils were broadly in line with the national average (22% of this group were eligible for FSM).

## 3.3

### GCSE attainment

On average, pupils eligible for FSM have lower GCSE attainment than pupils that are not eligible.<sup>50</sup> There are many measures of GCSE attainment. One measure is the proportion achieving a “[standard pass](#)” in both English and maths GCSE (9-4 grades in both English and Maths GCSE which is roughly equivalent to achieving A\*-C under the previous letter grade system).

The difference in attainment between pupils not eligible for FSM and those that are, is known as the “attainment gap”.

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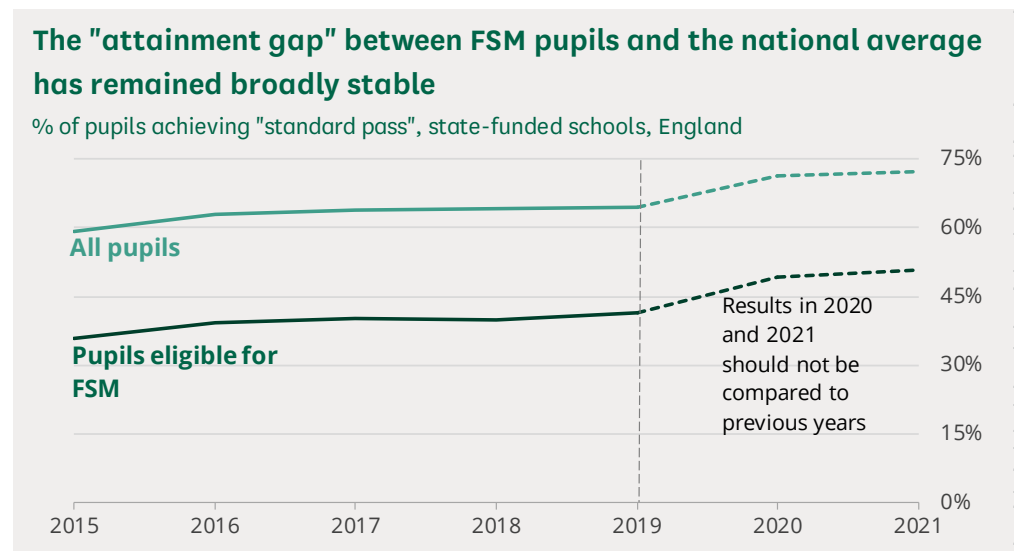
<sup>48</sup> Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2022](#), 9 June 2022

<sup>49</sup> Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2022](#), 9 June 2022

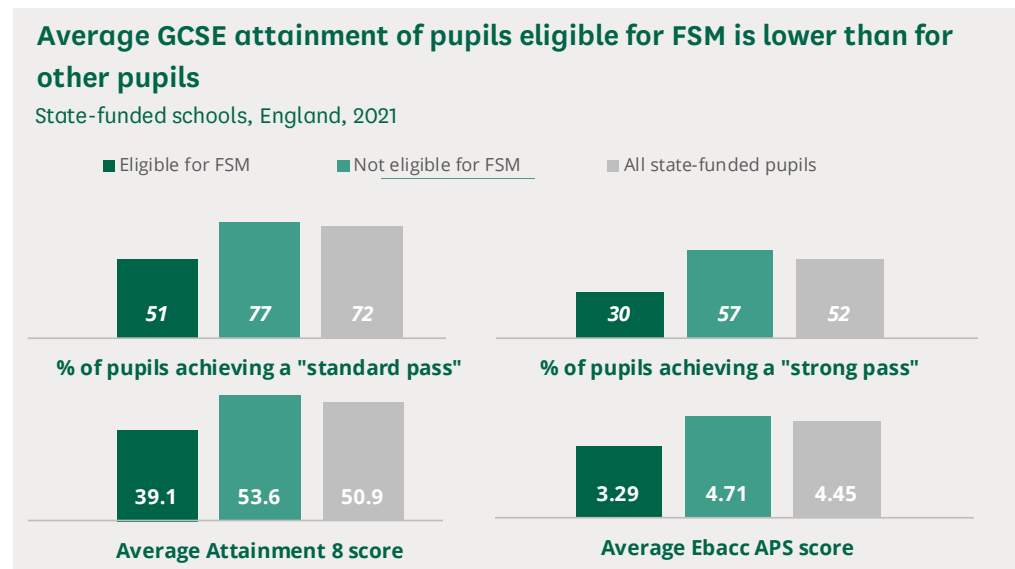
<sup>50</sup> Department for Education, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2020/21](#), February 2022

In 2021, 51% of pupils eligible for FSM achieved a standard pass in both English and Maths GCSE compared to 77% of pupils not eligible. <sup>51</sup> This was an attainment gap of 26 percentage points.

The attainment gap in the standard pass rate has remained broadly the same in recent years. However, as the charts below show, the size of the attainment gap varies depending on the group of FSM eligible pupils (for example the attainment gap in the standard pass rate for FSM eligible pupils attending school in London is much smaller compared to other regions).



Note: A "standard pass" is achieving English and maths GCSE grades 9-4 (roughly comparable to A\*-C). Source: Department for Education, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2020/21](#), February 2022



Notes: A "standard pass" is achieving English and maths GCSE grades 9-4 (roughly comparable to A\*-C). A "strong pass" is achieving English and Maths GCSE grades 9-5. [Attainment 8](#) is an average score based on pupil's best eight grades in a group of GCSEs. [Ebacc APS score](#) is the average score achieved in EBacc GCSE subjects. Source: DfE, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2020/21](#), February 2022

<sup>51</sup> Department for Education, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2020/21](#), February 2022

Pupils eligible for FSM attending school in London had much higher attainment than the other regions (62% achieving a standard pass compared to 51% across all FSM pupils).<sup>52</sup> In addition, the gap between FSM eligible and non-FSM eligible pupils in London was the smallest by far (18 percentage points compared to the national average of 26 percentage points).

The West Midlands and North East of England had the second highest attainment of pupils receiving FSM. The West Midlands had the second smallest attainment gap but was considerably behind London (50% 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 East Midlands. The attainment gap was also largest in the South East (32 percentage points).

There was high variation in the attainment of FSM eligible pupils based on their ethnic group. In 2021, pupils of Chinese ethnicity receiving FSM had much higher attainment than other major ethnic groups. The proportion of pupils of Chinese ethnicity eligible for FSM achieving a standard pass was slightly greater than those of Chinese ethnicity not eligible for FSM (1 percentage point). This was the only ethnic group where those eligible for FSM in the ethnic group performed better than those who weren't.

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

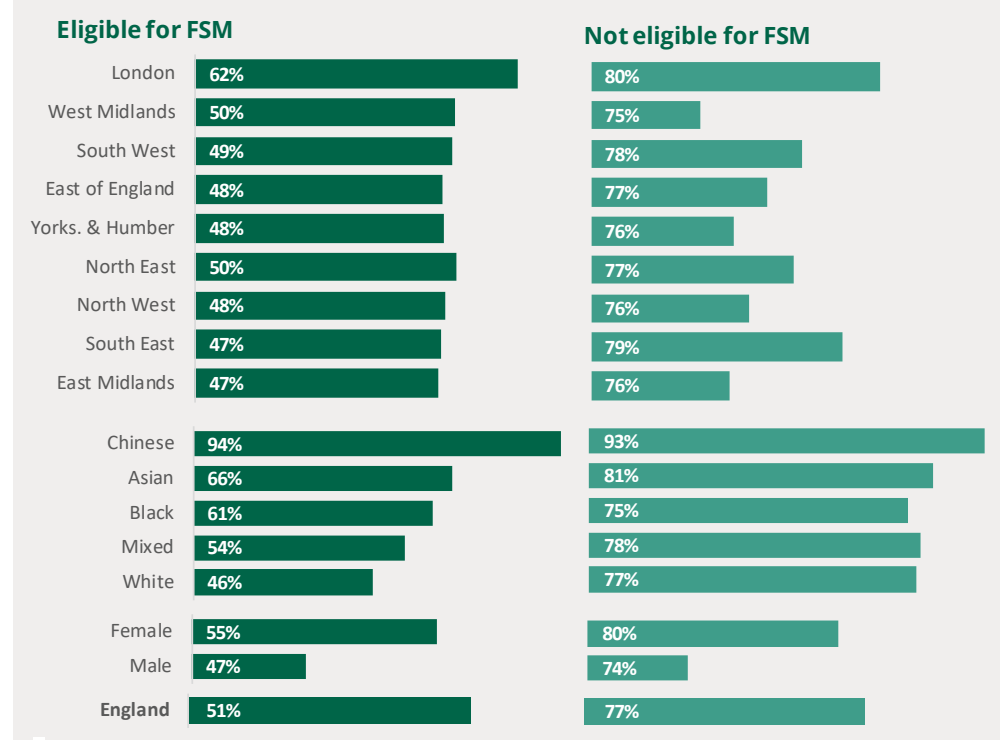
As in previous years, female pupils eligible for FSM achieved higher attainment than eligible boys. The standard pass attainment gap between girls receiving FSM and those not, was also slightly smaller than for boys (25 percentage points compared to 27 percentage points).

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<sup>52</sup> Department for Education, [Key Stage 4 performance: 2020/21](#), February 2022

### Average GCSE attainment of pupils eligible for FSM varies by other characteristics

% pupils achieving "standard pass", state-funded schools, England, 2021



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: 2020/21](#), February 2022

## 3.4

### Free school meals funding

Funding for free school meals has not been ring-fenced since 2011. Funding is available to schools through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), and through the Universal Infant Free School Meal Grant for pupils in years reception to year two. The Department for Education publishes DSG allocations on an annual basis, but breakdowns of certain items (such as FSM) are not published. This means it is not possible to identify the amount of funding allocated for free school meals.

However, it is possible to create a **rough estimate**.

In a [PQ response](#) from November 2021 the Department said that the National Funding Formula (NFF) FSM factor value for 2022-23 is £470 per pupil (£460 in 2021-22).

[NFF allocations are operating in an "indirect" format](#) where the allocations are notional. Local authorities can adjust these notional allocations according to local formula, this means the NFF allocations may not be what

schools receive. In addition, as outlined above this funding is not ring fenced and so schools may choose to spend different amounts on free school meals.

In January 2022 there were around 1.9 million pupils known to be eligible for free school meals.<sup>53</sup> On this basis, and using the £470 figure above, free school meals funding in 2022-23 can be broadly estimated at around £890 million.

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<sup>53</sup> Department for Education, [Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2022](#), 9 June 2022

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