



ARC East of England

Exploring the impact on children receiving free school lunches

What happens to children's body weight and educational attainment when you offer free school lunches to every child?

Childhood obesity is a serious public health problem. In England, one in ten children aged 4-5 and one in four aged 10-11 were living with obesity in 2021/22. Children consume around one-third of their diet at school, making school meal provision a possible policy lever to improve weight outcomes among children. Some regions offer a free school lunch, which costs around £450 per newly eligible child per

year, plus the additional cost of kitchens and equipment. Therefore, it is important to understand what benefits this scheme delivers.

What was the aim of the project?

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, this project built on an earlier project in which we evaluated the impacts of the national Universal Free School Meal Policy (UFSM)

on children aged 4–7. It was found that the UFSM scheme reduced obesity prevalence among children in Reception and absences from school. For this project, we wanted to understand the impact of offering UFSM throughout primary school on children's Body Mass Index classifications.

What did we do?

We compared data using NHS England's National Child Measurement Programme to see the difference between Local Authorities that never introduced UFSM and what would have changed in the Local Authorities that did introduce UFSM if they had never done so. This allows us to estimate the causal effect of introducing UFSM.

How did we involve people?

We formed an advisory group consisting of public health and school food policy officers who supported us in making our report more accessible and meaningful to decision-makers. We've also presented our work to campaign groups and professional bodies to share our findings and receive feedback on our messages and methods.

What is NIHR ARC East of England?

The National Institute for Health and Care Research Applied Research Collaboration (NIHR ARC) East of England is one of the 15 NIHR ARCs. We collaborate with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough NHS Foundation Trust and the Universities of Cambridge, East Anglia, Hertfordshire and Essex, along with other NHS Trusts, Local Authorities, Integrated Care Systems, patient-led organisations, charities, and industry partners.

What has the impact been so far?

We found that UFSM improved children's bodyweight outcomes in both Reception and Year 6. Children in year 6 who received UFSM throughout primary school experienced a greater impact, indicating that earlier and longer interventions are more likely to effectively reduce children's obesity prevalence. Our evidence has influenced thinking in Local Authorities and groups campaigning for extended or UFSM entitlements.

What next?

We will continue to research the impacts of UFSM on other outcomes, including children's socio-emotional development and behaviour in schools.

For more information about this project

Scan the QR code or contact the Principal investigator, Dr Angus Holford (ajholf@essex.ac.uk).




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