

## **The Free School Meal Voucher Scheme: What are children actually eating and drinking?**

Professor Greta Defeyter<sup>1\*</sup> & Dr Emily Mann<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Healthy Living Lab, Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE7 7XA, UKNorthumbria University

\*Corresponding author: greta.defeyter@northumbria.ac.uk

A new research study conducted by academics within the Healthy Living Lab, at Northumbria University, has revealed lower fruit and vegetable consumption, and an increase in the consumption of sugar sweetened beverages in school-aged children, eligible for free school meals during the Covid-19 lockdown.

On Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> March, the WHO declared the Covid-19 outbreak to be a pandemic. On Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020, schools across the UK closed their doors to all but the most vulnerable pupils and children of key workers. This resulted in children who normally receive free schools meals facing the possibility of missing meals or consuming meals of lower overall nutritional quality, potentially negatively impacting dietary habits, future disease risk and educational attainment. An excellent summary of the UK Government's actions, and the actions of the devolved authorities, can be found in a [report by Human Rights Watch](#).

School closures for all children, apart from the children of key workers, has required the UK Government to provide alternative arrangements for children normally in receipt of free school meals. At the end of March, the DfE developed a scheme to provide supermarket vouchers to the adult with caring responsibilities for said child via an online portal, with the costs being covered by central government. The devolved Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland each adopted different approaches that included a range of methods including cash transfers, food parcels and other schemes. For families in England, the financial value of vouchers was set at £15 per week for every child eligible for benefits-related free school meals, not currently attending school and advice was published on how these vouchers should be spent. However, a large number of schools and parents have experienced significant issues in accessing vouchers, being limited to

certain supermarkets, shops refusing to accept vouchers and the length of time taken to receive vouchers, and the [Food Foundation estimates](#) that 200,000 children have had to skip meals. In terms of the continuation of support across the school summer holiday there are differences between England and the other devolved UK nations. As at 29<sup>th</sup> May 2020, the DfE has only committed to the originally planned £9M funding for holiday provision, across a limited number of areas, despite [academics](#), [parliamentarians](#), and [food campaigners](#) having campaigned for year-round access to food and activities. [Northern Ireland has reported](#) that the cost of continuing provision across the summer holidays is too expensive, and that cash transfers would cease at the end of June 2020; while some local authorities in Scotland are supporting holiday provision. However, the Welsh Authority has committed to continue funding of free school meals at a rate of £19.50 per child per week until the end of August 2020.

Generally, there is emerging evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown has resulted in changes to dietary intake (Hubbub, 2020; Wall, 2020). Since lockdown, the Hubbub report (2020) found that 43% of respondents are worried about the extra cost of providing food for their household, and 31% of respondents state that they are not eating as much fresh fruit and vegetables as usual due to staying at home and limiting their visits to grocery shops. However, little is known about what children, who are in receipt of meal vouchers, are actually eating and whether their diet has changed as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown?

In order to investigate what children are eating, the research team conducted a study involving 57 nine-to- twelve year-olds who live with a parent/guardian who was using free school meal vouchers to purchase food. The children completed the 'Day in the Life Questionnaire' across six days; three consecutive days in the week prior to school closures and three consecutive days approximately two months following school closures. The Day in the Life Questionnaire has been used in a number of evaluations and asks a number of child-friendly questions on what, when and where children eat; physical activity, sleep etc. Following questionnaire completion, at each time point, parents returned their child's questionnaire to the research team in pre-paid envelopes. For the purpose of the current paper, only the key findings relating to diet will be discussed. For each child, the total food and drink intake, for each day and for each time point (pre- and post- school closures) was entered into a statistical analysis package. An overall total for each child's food and drink consumption across all three days, prior to and post-school closures was calculated. Data were subjected to statistical analysis to investigate potential changes in diet following school closures. All the following findings are significant at alpha 0.05 level. The preliminary findings show that children

are consuming significantly fewer portions of fruit following school closures; with an average intake of fruit across the three days, decreasing from just over 1 portion a day to an average of ½ a portion per day. Moreover, 45% of children reported that, following school closures, they did not eat any fruit on any of the three days on which they completed the questionnaire. Similar results were found regarding children's vegetable intake. Children's mean vegetable intake dropped from just over 2 portions of vegetables per day (when attending school) to an average of approximately ½ a portion per day. In addition, 55% of children reported that they consumed no fresh vegetables on any of the three days for which they completed the questionnaire. Conversely, the number of sugar sweetened beverages children consumed increased four-fold following school closures, with an average consumption of 2 servings per day. We also asked children about snack consumption. Children's consumption of crisps, chocolates and sweets increased from an average of 1 portion (e.g. one bag of crisps, one bar of chocolate, one small bag of sweets) across three days to an average of 6 portions across three days. Finally, we examined if, and how frequently, children skipped meals and whether there had been a significant change following school closures. Our data show that prior to school closures, approximately 25% of children skipped at least one meal a day, with breakfast being the most frequently skipped meal. Following school closures, this percentage increased to 35% of children skipping one meal a day, with 10% skipping more than one meal per day and families and children relied on snacks consisting of ultra-processed foods to ward off hunger.

The preliminary findings of this report are important as they clearly demonstrate that the free school meal voucher scheme operating across England is failing disadvantaged children in our society. Although the sample size in this study is small, an advantage of this study is that it utilises a repeated measures design with children acting as their own controls across the two time periods. This study provides clear evidence that the disadvantaged children tested in the current study are both skipping meals and consuming diets that are poor in terms of fruit and vegetable intake; eating more than the recommended number of ultra-processed snacks and drinking more than the [recommended intake of sugar sweetened beverages](#). This is hardly surprising as it is evident that households with children in the bottom two deciles, earning less than £15,860, would need to spend 42% of income (after housing) to meet the [Eatwell Guide costs](#). The additional £15 from food vouchers has not enabled households to move out of the risk of children experiencing food insecurity, especially at a time when household income is likely to have suffered. As this study captured the food intake of a sample of children whose parent / carer were able to access the food voucher scheme, these findings suggest that children of a parent / carer unable to access the

voucher scheme could be at risk of severe food insecurity. Furthermore, the findings from this study support findings from [Food Foundation's](#) YouGov survey (May 2020) that households with children eligible for free school meal provision are at increased risk of food insecurity.

Concerns about the negative effects on children's health combined, with new reports on educational learning loss, suggest that there is a high probability that the poorest children will be most disadvantaged when they start the new academic year. The findings of this report do not lend support to the UK government's decision to withdraw the free school voucher scheme. Indeed, our findings suggest that additional financial support is required.

One potential solution would be to open schools across the school summer holiday in an attempt to reverse any learning loss and to ensure that children receive their free school meal. However, there are a number of reasons that this approach requires careful consideration. First, there is no guarantee that such a programme will be effective as parents are currently not required to send their children to school over the summer. Second, if such a scheme was optional, it is unlikely that it will impact those children who have experienced the greatest loss in learning and poorest diets as a result of lockdown. Third, the majority of teachers have continued to work even though school gates have closed to the majority of pupils. Asking teachers to work throughout the summer holidays is likely to result in a stressed and tired workforce at the start of the to begin next academic year, as preliminary survey data collected by School Zone and Durham University shows that teachers are already feeling exhausted and stressed.

Other alternative approaches include increasing the funding for the DfE's holiday activities and food programme, and an extended schools programme to commence at the start of the new academic year combined with an increase in funding to existing programmes (e.g. the National School Breakfast Programme, school meal provision). These existing programmes could easily be scaled up to provide sustainable. Longer-term interventions to ensure that all children can access nutritious and healthy food, educational, cultural and social activities during school term time and during the school holidays.