

Britain: Free school meals denied to one million children

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Free school meals are being denied to one million children whose families are among a growing number of the "working poor".

Children across England are affected, although the problem is said to be particularly acute in certain London boroughs as well as in Leicester, Wolverhampton, Sheffield, Gateshead and Wakefield.

The household income threshold to qualify for free school meals is £15,575. This is lower than the defined child poverty rate set by the Labour government. Child poverty is defined as any child living in a household with an income 60 percent below the average income before housing costs. This is set at £18,000 for a two-parent/two-child family, and approximately £14,000 for a single parent with two children.

About 14 percent of children in England receive free school meals, whereas 25 percent are living below the poverty line. Between 2006 and 2007 the number of children living in poverty rose to 2.9 million—an increase of 100,000.

These figures do not factor in the massive social consequences of the current economic crisis, which is pushing increasing numbers of families into desperate situations.

Kate Green, chief executive of Child Poverty Action Group, told the *Guardian*, "That so few of those children [who] the government counts as poor are actually entitled to free school meals shows just how inadequate and mean the system is.

"Even of those entitled, the complexity and the stigma in the system means that one in five children who should get a free meal do not. For families in low-pay work, not having an entitlement to free school meals means that, too often, work does not pay and does not lift families out of poverty."

The free school meals system, which is administered by local councils, is so bureaucratic that often the poorest families slip through the net. Many of those who should or do qualify for free school meals are also among a growing number of children who rely on schools to provide breakfast.

That schools are forced to take on a greater responsibility for feeding children is a graphic indictment of the social policy pursued by the Labour government, which has abandoned millions of families. The additional funding for education and child welfare that Labour constantly boasts of has largely disappeared into the setting up systems of referral and accountability, with little or no impact on the lives of the most disadvantaged.

These systems have been a way of replacing social service departments with new structures that principally makes schools the centre of a child's welfare. The 2004 Children Act introduced changes to children's services that had been developing for some years. Through making education and social services responsible for children's welfare in the newly formed Children and Young Peoples Directorate, work previously carried out by social workers have been shifted to school staff.

Free school meals are used as the key indicator of deprivation among children. As a result, all initiatives introduced in the last ten years have been based upon the percentage of children a school has on free school meals. Their provision also forms part of the school accountability system, where the school league tables have a "value added" based on how well it performs taking into account social deprivation.

This is yet another example of how funding is being clawed back in order that other programmes such as Academy schools can be provided with billions of pounds at the expense of struggling state schools. John

Dunford, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said, "We've always recognized that free school meals are a very poor proxy for socioeconomic disadvantage, and a bad basis on which to base funding and accountability systems. The system needs an overhaul to find a better definition of disadvantage so that schools can be given the resources they need to do the job."

The recent annual report from Ofsted—the schools inspection service—drew attention to the fact that "there is a strong link across every sector between deprivation and poor quality provision. Areas with higher deprivation are more likely to have schools in an Ofsted category of concern than more advantaged areas. This means that children and families living in areas already experiencing relative deprivation face further inequity in the quality of care and support for their welfare, learning and development."

The report cites the use of learning mentors and school liaison workers working with families and children as having a beneficial impact. But this is not the total picture. In the early years of the Labour administration, it pioneered the so-called "Excellence in Cities" programme in inner-city schools with the most deprived intakes. This included the role of learning mentors, tasked with helping to make education more accessible to those children and young people with various social and emotional difficulties.

Following the implementation of the 2004 Children Act in 2005, many of these responsibilities were incorporated into the existing school systems through workforce reform. Funding to schools which was previously ring fenced, as in Excellence in Cities, was incorporated into general school budgets and the majority of secondary schools transformed the learning mentor role to a whole school pastoral role—carrying out work that had previously been done by teaching staff with no additional remuneration. Thus many of the benefits that children, young people and their families gained from learning mentors were negated.

In the majority of the schools where the posts and school liaison workers still exist, their remit now parallels that of social workers. Instead of preventing crises and facilitating learning, many spend the majority of their time dealing with social crises. The intractable social issues that schools confront inevitably come to take priority over actual learning by children.



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