

Editorial Board

Simon Cawley

Mental Health Nurse and Dramatherapist, Connect CAMHS and First Steps, Stoke-on-Trent

Richard Cotton

Educationalist, Former SCPHN School Nurse

Josephine Johnson

Project Officer (Public Health) Nursing Directorate NHS England

Stephen Hackney

Director, Lead Health Assessor, Changing Education

Melanie Hayward

(Joint Consultant Editor)
Associate Professor, Buckinghamshire New University (SCPHN - School Nurse and Safeguarding Specialist)

Kath Lancaster

Independent Nurse Consultant

Liz Plastow

Independent Consultant and Professional Adviser to the Association for Nurse Prescribing

Barbara Richardson-Todd

School Nurse Co-ordinator and Practice Teacher, Suffolk PCT

Sarah Sherwin

(Joint Consultant Editor)
Head of Nursing, University of Wolverhampton

Frances Weston

Accredited Counsellor and Psychotherapist, Uttoxeter

Jane Wright

Senior Lecturer, SCPHN School Nursing (retired)

A government's shame as pupils go hungry

Caroline Voogd, editor

With food inflation expected to hit 17% early next year (Nabarro, 2022) there is a sense of foreboding looming over schools at what they will witness in the coming months.

Amid COVID recovery, an unprecedented mental health crisis among children and young people (Newlove-Delgado et al, 2022), and a frightening resurgence of Group A Streptococcus, schools are also witnessing many of their families being pushed to the edge financially.

The cost of living crisis, driven by record inflation levels (around 11% at the time of writing), is pushing many families into poverty and food insecurity. The impact is stark. A survey of 6 200 schools in England finds increased levels of pupils coming to school hungry and non-free school meal families being unable to afford school lunches. They also report pupils unable to concentrate, exhausted, and without adequate winter clothing (Sutton Trust, 2022).

What is more, the Food Foundation's Food Insecurity Tracker reveals that in September four million children found themselves living in homes classified as 'food insecure'—which are households where someone is forced to eat smaller meals, skip meals, go hungry, or not eat for a whole day because they are unable to afford food. The charity warns that the cost of a basic weekly basket of shopping has risen by 14–16% in 6 months.

Free school meals (FSM) eligibility is fast becoming a shameful stain on the government's record. Pupil census information (DfE, 2022) shows that 1.9 million pupils are eligible for FSM as of January 2022 (22.5%), an increase of around 450 000 since 2020. And yet child poverty figures show that the number of children living in relative poverty after housing costs in the UK stands at 3.9 million (27%). It is estimated that 800 000 children living in poverty are still not eligible for FSM.

Expanding FSM for all families on Universal Credit, as the Food Foundation's Feed the Future campaign is calling for, is a no-brainer if as a society we believe in protecting our most vulnerable. The fact that one of the wealthiest countries in the world has so many children living in poverty, living in food insecure homes, and so many pupils whose families cannot afford a school dinner is deeply disturbing—especially when we consider the cost of expanding FSM to everyone on Universal Credit is negligible: just £700m (Patrick et al, 2021). It just takes political will...



British Journal of

Child Health

Write to the editors to share your views:

chhe@markallengroup.com

Follow us on Twitter
(@SchoolNursing)

Department for Education. Academic Year 2021/22: Schools, pupils and their characteristics. 2022. <https://bit.ly/35yjQe2> (accessed 9 December 2022)

Food Foundation. Food Insecurity Tracking. 2022. www.foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking (accessed 9 December 2022)

Nabarro B. UK outlook: Why we need to do things differently, IFS. 2022: <https://bit.ly/3DtbcOr> (accessed 9 December 2022)

Newlove-Delgado T, Marcheselli F, Williams T et al. Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2022. 2022. NHS Digital, Leeds

Patrick R, Anstey K, Lee T, Power M. Fixing Lunch: The case for expanding free school meals. Covid Realities & Child Poverty Action Group, August 2021. <https://bit.ly/38vHZn2> (accessed 9 December 2022)

Sutton Trust. Cost of Living and Education. 2022. <https://bit.ly/3W4NFes> (accessed 9 December 2022)