

## Universal free school meals scoping

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This scoping document outlines a brief overview of the findings of a scoping search conducted by the Evidence Service to identify sources relevant to outcomes relating to health inequalities arising from the provision of universal free school meals in young children. Although systematic reviews have been identified regarding outcomes associated with universal free school meals, many look at the effectiveness of these interventions in terms of diet, food security, academic attainment etc., but the request was to specifically focus on the effectiveness of universal free school meals in terms of health inequalities and also unintended consequences such as widening health inequalities.

- **Where did you search?**

A scoping search was performed in Google Scholar and Medline on 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> April 2022 to identify sources that may be relevant to the question:

Do universal free school meals address (and not widen) inequalities?

- **What terms did you use?**

A broad search was conducted in Google Scholar using the terms "systematic review" AND "free school meals" AND universal AND equity (or inequity). A date limit of 2015 was applied. Five-hundred and twelve hits were recorded.

A more comprehensive search strategy was used in Medline (see Appendix 1). Two-hundred and fifty-nine sources published from 2015 were recorded.

An additional search was conducted on Joseph Rowntree Charitable Foundation, Institute for Fiscal Studies and The Early Intervention Foundation websites on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2022 using the term 'universal free school meal' with a date limit of 2015 where possible. No additional sources were identified.

- **Did you find any good quality reviews that addressed your topic?**

No. However, in addition to the systematic review identified by stakeholder, [Cohen et al.](#) (2021) which was among those not directly relevant, we did identify some systematic reviews around the topic, which may or may not be useful. These are outlined in table 1.

Most sources identified investigating universal free school meal provision were looking at educational outcomes and meal quality in younger children or meal provision adoption, implementation and participation. Of those looking at health-related outcomes, most focussed on nutritional intake and dietary

behaviour or weight. In addition, many sources identified investigated the impact of breakfast interventions.

- **List any reviews you found with a link to the full text if it's available.**

Table 1 outlines sources of interest that were identified in this scoping search.

**Please note, no quality appraisal has been undertaken so the Evidence Service cannot comment on the methodological quality of sources outlined in table 1. If any paper is to be utilised, please conduct a quality assessment and consider the generalisability of findings to your context.**

Table 1: Sources of interest identified

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<b>Systematic reviews</b>			
<b>Reference</b>	<b>Aim/Question</b>	<b>Abstract or summary</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<p>McGill, B (2020) School meal provision: a rapid evidence review. Prepared for the NSW Ministry of Health: Sydney. Physical Activity Nutrition Obesity Research Group, The University of Sydney.  <a href="https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/24060/School%20meal%20provision%20rapid%20review%20FINAL.pdf?sequence=1&amp;isAllowed=y">https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/24060/School%20meal%20provision%20rapid%20review%20FINAL.pdf?sequence=1&amp;isAllowed=y</a></p>	<p>A rapid review of the literature to determine the research evidence available on impacts of school food provision for socio-economically disadvantaged students, with a particular focus on food security.</p>	<p>School meal programs delivered in high-income countries included breakfast and lunch programs. These were either offered universally or were targeted at disadvantaged students or disadvantaged schools. Free or reduced price school meal programs increased student participation in these programs and have played a role in protecting vulnerable children from food insecurity. Targeted programs have resulted in stigmatisation for vulnerable students, whereas universal free meal programs have reduced the risk of stigma associated with school meal program participation. Although universal school meal provision in schools increased overall student participation in school lunch and breakfast, it is unclear whether these programs increased meal participation in those who needed it most. There were no studies identified that examined the cost effectiveness of school meal programs. A small number of qualitative studies of Australian breakfast programs indicate they were highly valued by school staff, parents and children, for providing breakfast to children in need, but challenges regarding implementation and sustainability were raised.</p>	<p>Includes both breakfast and lunch programmes, and universal or targeted programmes.</p>
<p>Dietrichson, J et al. (2018) Universal preschool programs and long-term child outcomes: A systematic review, Working Paper, No. 2018:19, Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy (IFAU), Uppsala  <a href="https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/201457/1/1042184844.pdf">https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/201457/1/1042184844.pdf</a></p>	<p>What are the long-term effects of universal preschool programs on child outcomes?</p>	<p>26 studies were reviewed using natural experiments to estimate the effects of universal preschool programs for children aged 0-6 years on child outcomes measured from third grade to adulthood. Studies comparing preschool with parental, family, or other informal modes of care show mixed effects on test scores, and on measures related to health, well-being, and behaviour. However, all estimates for outcomes related to adequate primary and secondary school progression, years of schooling, highest degree completed, employment, and earnings indicate beneficial average effects of universal preschool programs. Three of the included studies calculate benefits-to-costs ratios and find ratios clearly above one. Universal preschool tends to be more beneficial for children with low socioeconomic status, and there are not consistently different effects for boys or girls. Only three studies</p>	<p>Not looking specifically at free school meals. Included one study looking at free school meals.</p>

		compare two alternative types of universal preschool programs in terms of long-term outcomes.	
Ng, S et al. (2022) Identifying barriers and facilitators in the development and implementation of government-led food environment policies: a systematic review. Nutrition Reviews. Vol 00(0): 1-23. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1093/nutrit/nuac016">https://doi.org/10.1093/nutrit/nuac016</a>	To identify cited barriers and facilitators to food environment policy (FEP) processes reported in the literature, exploring these according to the nature of the policy (voluntary or mandatory) and country development status.	<p><b>Context:</b> Policy-specific actions to improve food environments will support healthy population diets. Objective: To identify cited barriers and facilitators to food environment policy (FEP) processes reported in the literature, exploring these according to the nature of the policy (voluntary or mandatory) and country development status. Data sources: A systematic search was conducted of 10 academic and 7 grey literature databases, national websites, and manual searches of publication references.</p> <p><b>Data extraction:</b> Data on government-led FEPs, barriers, and facilitators from key informants were collected. Data synthesis: The constant-comparison approach generated core themes for barriers and facilitators. The appraisal tool developed by Hawker et al. was adopted to determine the quality of qualitative and quantitative studies. Results: A total of 142 eligible studies were identified. Industry resistance or disincentive was the most cited barrier in policy development. Technical challenges were most frequently a barrier for policy implementation. Frequently cited facilitators included resource availability or maximization, strategies in policy process, and stakeholder partnership or support.</p> <p><b>Conclusions:</b> The findings from this study will strategically inform health-reform stakeholders about key elements of public health policy processes. More evidence is required from countries with human development indices ranging from low to high and on voluntary policies.</p>	Not directly relevant but is very recent. May contain useful information.
Welch, V et al. (2022) How effects on health equity are assessed in systematic reviews of interventions. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, Issue 1. Art. No.: MR000028. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.MR00028.pub3.	To explore what methods systematic reviewers use to consider health equity in systematic reviews of effectiveness	<p><b>Search methods:</b> We searched the following databases up to 26 February 2021: MEDLINE, PsycINFO, the Cochrane Methodology Register, CINAHL, Education Resources Information Center, Education Abstracts, Criminal Justice Abstracts, Hein Index to Foreign Legal Periodicals, PAIS International, Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, Digital Dissertations and the Health Technology Assessment Database. We searched SCOPUS to identify articles that cited any of the included studies on 10 June 2021. We contacted authors and searched the reference lists of included studies to identify additional potentially relevant studies.</p> <p><b>Main results:</b> In total, 48,814 studies were identified, and the titles and abstracts were screened in duplicate. In this updated review, we</p>	Not directly relevant, but may be useful for topic area



		<p>identified an additional 124 methodological studies published in the 10 years since the first version of this review, which included 34 studies. Thus, 158 methodological studies met our criteria for inclusion. The methods used by these studies focused on evidence relevant to populations experiencing health inequity (108 out of 158 studies), assess subgroup analysis across PROGRESS-Plus (26 out of 158 studies), assess analysis of a gradient in effect across PROGRESS-Plus (2 out of 158 studies) or use a combination of subgroup analysis and focused approaches (20 out of 158 studies). The most common PROGRESS-Plus factors assessed were age (43 studies), socioeconomic status in 35 studies, low- and middle-income countries in 24 studies, gender or sex in 22 studies, race or ethnicity in 17 studies, and four studies assessed multiple factors across which health inequity may exist. Only 16 studies provided a definition of health inequity. Five methodological approaches to consider health equity in systematic reviews of effectiveness were identified: 1) descriptive assessment of reporting and analysis in systematic reviews (140 of 158 studies used a type of descriptive method); 2) descriptive assessment of reporting and analysis in original trials (50 studies); 3) analytic approaches which assessed differential effects across one or more PROGRESS-Plus factors (16 studies); 4) applicability assessment (25 studies) and 5) stakeholder engagement (28 studies), which is a new finding in this update and examines the appraisal of whether relevant stakeholders with lived experience of health inequity were included in the design of systematic reviews or design and delivery of interventions. Reporting for both approaches (analytic and applicability) lacked transparency and was insufficiently detailed to enable the assessment of credibility.</p> <p><b>Authors' conclusions:</b> There is a need for improvement in conceptual clarity about the definition of health equity, describing sufficient detail about analytic approaches (including subgroup analyses) and transparent reporting of judgments required for applicability assessments in order to consider health equity in systematic reviews of effectiveness.</p>	
<b>Primary Studies/ Evaluations</b>			
<b>Reference</b>	<b>Aim/Question</b>	<b>Abstract</b>	<b>Comments</b>

<p>Chambers, S et al. (2020) Learning from the implementation of Universal Free School Meals in Scotland using Normalisation Process Theory: Lessons for policymakers to engage multiple stakeholders, Food Policy, Volume 95,101936, ISSN 0306-9192. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2020.101936">https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2020.101936</a>.</p>	<p>The aim of this study was to use normalisation process theory to understand the implementation of UFSM for children in their first three years of primary school within Scotland, and to use this understanding to identify key areas of learning for any further extension of the policy within the UK and beyond.</p>	<p>In 2014/15, Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) were introduced in Scotland and England for children in their first three years of primary school. This study examined the implementation of UFSM in Scotland using Normalisation Process Theory (NPT), a middle-range theory of implementation, to identify areas of learning for policymakers wishing to introduce or extend similar policies. NPT is predominantly used to evaluate interventions or new technologies in healthcare settings. Qualitative data were collected across Scotland using a case study approach shortly after implementation (n = 29 school-level stakeholders) and in the following school year (n = 18 school-level stakeholders and n = 19 local authority-level stakeholders). Observations of lunchtime in each school were conducted at both timepoints. Data were analysed using a thematic framework approach using NPT constructs and sub-constructs. Results suggested education and catering stakeholders experiences of implementation diverged most around the NPT concepts of coherence, cognitive participation, and reflexive monitoring. Lack of coherence around the purpose and long-term benefits of UFSM appeared to reduce education stakeholders' willingness to engage with the policy beyond operational issues. In contrast, catering stakeholders identified a direct benefit to their everyday work and described receiving additional resources to deliver the policy. Overall, participants described an absence of monitoring data around the areas of greatest salience for education stakeholders. This study successfully used NPT to identify policy learning around school meals. Policymakers must increase the salience of such intersectoral policies for all relevant stakeholders involved before policy implementation and plan adequate monitoring to evaluate potential long-term benefits.</p>	<p>Case study from Scotland. Data taken between March – October 2015.</p>
<p>Ford et al. (2016) Process Evaluation of the implementation of universal free school meals (UFSM) for P1 to P3: Research with schools and local authorities. NHS Health Scotland, Edinburgh. <a href="http://www.healthscotland.scot/media/1309/universal-">http://www.healthscotland.scot/media/1309/universal-</a></p>	<p>This document outlines a process evaluation of the implementation and uptake of the UFSM Policy undertaken across five Scottish local authorities offering free school meals to P1-P3 pupils.</p>	<p>This report focuses on the findings from a process evaluation of the implementation of universal free school meals (UFSM) for primary 1 to 3 pupils in Scotland. The evaluation had three strands, research with parents, schools and local authorities. A detailed report on the research with parents was published in October 2015. This report focuses on the research with schools and local authorities, detailing the methods (Chapter 2) used and key findings for each strand (Chapters 3 and 4). In the discussion (Chapter 5) findings across all three research strands have been synthesised, to inform our conclusions and recommendations (Chapter 6).</p>	<p>Likely to be using same data as Chambers et al. (2020) but unsure as not checked.</p>



<p><a href="#">free-school-meals-main-report_march-2016.pdf</a></p>			
<p>Illøkken, K.E. et al. (2021) Free school meals as an opportunity to target social equality, healthy eating and school functioning: experiences from students and teachers in Norway. Food &amp; Nutrition Research. 65: 7702 - <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.29219/fnr.v65.7702">http://dx.doi.org/10.29219/fnr.v65.7702</a></p>	<p>To explore students' and teachers' experiences of receiving free school meals immediately after the free school meal projected ended and then again five years later</p>	<p><b>Background:</b> There are no national arrangements for free school meals provision in Norway despite this being an important opportunity to improve children's and adolescents' nutritional status and ultimately their physical and cognitive development. During a one academic year (2014–2015), a group of Norwegian sixth graders were served a free healthy school meal in a project called 'The School Meal Project'.  <b>Design:</b> In-depth, semi-structured interviews with separate groups in 2015 and in 2020 were conducted face to face or via telephone or digital platforms. The findings are based on 13 students (aged 12–16) and 5 teacher interviews.  <b>Findings:</b> Thematic analysis identified four main themes that describe the perceived benefits of receiving free school meals: 1) the meal as a social event where students made new friends and learned new skills; 2) as an aid to forming healthy eating habits; and as an opportunity to 3) improve school functioning and 4) increase social equality among students.  <b>Discussion:</b> Our analysis suggests that the free school meal may influence healthy behaviors not only at the individual level but also at the social-, physical-, and macro-levels. Methodological limitations, including self-selection bias, should be considered when interpreting our findings.  <b>Conclusion:</b> This study provides unique insights into the social benefits for students of receiving free school meals. Our findings illustrate the potential of free school meals: eating healthy foods, sharing a meal together, and interaction between students and teachers at mealtime, to promote health, learning, and equality. In order to maximize these benefits through national implementation of free school meals, more understanding is needed of possible facilitators and barriers related to the provision and uptake of free school meals.</p>	<p>This thematic study discusses the potential for free school meals to reduce social and health inequalities between students. May not be relevant as not focused of health outcomes.</p>

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