

# Deprivation skews school children's food habits

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Credit: University of Hertfordshire

New research has found that schools in poorer areas could be doing more to entice young people to eat at school, by making the eating areas more attractive places to socialise and treating pupils more like customers at lunchtime.

The recent study was conducted by researchers at the University of

Hertfordshire and has been published in the April issue of the journal *Children and Society*, as part of a special issue examining [food](#) poverty and inequality. This issue has been co-edited by lead researcher on the study, Professor Wendy Wills, who argues the timely importance of examining young [people's](#) food habits.

'Children today are living through austerity and political arguments about hunger, food banks and families going without. Their experiences highlight what it's like to live in a society where eating a nutritious and socially acceptable diet is not a universal right but a lottery depending on family background. Schools must do as much as they can to ensure that young people access good food at lunchtime.'

## **Reasons behind poor take up of school meals**

As part of the study Professor Wills and fellow academics, examined the reasons for poor take up of school meals and the lure of food outlets within walking distance of secondary schools. It found that socio economic boundaries impact on where school children choose to buy their lunch from; with poorer children preferring to frequent fast food outlets and supermarkets rather than eating onsite at school.

The research involved more than 600 young people aged 13-15 from seven schools, with various levels of deprivation. Interviews were conducted with head teachers and school kitchen supervisors who were asked about the school's food policies and their perceptions of the local area. Additionally, 25 local retailers, where children had been observed shopping were asked about their marketing initiatives, pricing strategies, products they sold and their views about the young people who bought food from them.

## **How relationships affect young people's food choices**

The study concludes that young people are more likely to eat within the school environment if the school cafeteria is seen as a space to socialise in and they are consulted over the menu. The relationship between school staff and pupils also affected young people's [food choices](#); in areas of lower socio economic status pupils described wanting to escape the [school environment](#) at lunchtime and some head teachers expressed exasperation at trying to police, or change, what food pupils selected. Although school meals ought to meet school food standard requirements many of the teenagers perceived the food to be unhealthy and shunned school meals due to long queues, and inadequate seating and social areas within the schools.

The study also found that young people who attended schools in poorer areas preferred to shop in outlets where they liked the staff, received friendly service and value for money. The retail staff at these outlets reported having good relationships with the local school children, many of whom knew their families as well. Young people reported visiting the same shops and takeaways with their families in the evening or at weekend thereby helping to develop ongoing relationships with local businesses in ways that schools cannot match.

In areas of mixed socio-economic status young people struggled to afford to buy food. Some working parents were not eligible for free [school](#) meals (FSM), children said, which meant some individuals felt excluded from buying food with their friends at lunchtime and, in some cases, [young people](#) were hungry and unable to buy enough food to last them through the day.

**More information:** Wendy J. Wills et al. The Socio-Economic Boundaries Shaping Young People's Lunchtime Food Practices on a School Day, *Children & Society* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/chso.12261](https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12261)

Provided by University of Hertfordshire

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