

## Government considers taking away free school meals from some children in poverty

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Praxis, a charity working with migrants and refugees in London, is sounding the alarm over a government review that could end up taking free school meals away from thousands of children living in poverty because of their parents' immigration status.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government took the welcome step of changing the rules so that some of these children could get free school meals. This was an important move, guaranteeing thousands of children one hot, freshly cooked meal per day.

However, this is a temporary rule change which has been under review for more than a year, and the Government have given no public indication of when it may conclude. At a time when prices are skyrocketing, piling pressure on family budgets, and child poverty is on the rise, taking free school meals away from some of the poorest and most vulnerable families in the country risks leaving thousands of children hungry.

Around 2 million people are affected by the Government's 'No Recourse to Public Funds' policy, which means they're denied access to almost all government support, even if they're working for little pay, or face a crisis. It's estimated that 390,000 children are affected by this policy.

The No Recourse to Public Funds policy has been shown<sup>1</sup> to negatively impact children in particular, because it stops families from accessing support that is meant to protect them from poverty, including free school meals.

### **Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz, Policy and Public Affairs Manager at Praxis, says:**

*"During the pandemic, the Government rightly recognised that children living in poverty should have access to free school meals, even if their parents have No Recourse to Public Funds. This was the right thing to do.*

*As prices rise, families urgently need certainty that they will continue to be able to rely on this vital support, so that no child ends up going hungry. That's why we're calling on Secretary of State Nadhim Zahawi to urgently make permanent the temporary extension of free school meals to all children who need them. Parental immigration status should have no bearing on whether a child living in poverty is entitled to a school dinner."*

### **Favour\*, a woman whose children can't get free school meals , says:**

*"It's very difficult to feed four children all by myself. I always give them healthy things to eat, but now, everything is more expensive! You go to the market and what you used to pay 50p is now 80p, 90p, it's getting very difficult. Some children go to school without breakfast because their parents can't afford it, how can they concentrate? They see their mates eating, can you imagine how they feel knowing that they can't eat? It's just like segregating children between those whose parents have the right papers and those who don't."*

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<sup>1</sup> The Unity Project, June 2019: 'Access Denied: The Cost of the 'No Recourse to Public Funds' Policy'  
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/590060b0893fc01f949b1c8a/t/5d0bb6100099f70001faad9c/1561048725178/Access+Denied+-+the+cost+of+the+No+Recourse+to+Public+Funds+policy.+The+Unity+Project.+June+2019.pdf>

## Notes to editors:

1 – **Praxis** is a human rights charity. For over 35 years we have supported people who have made the UK their home with immigration advice, peer support and campaigning. We use the evidence from our frontline work to influence change so that all people in the UK can live in safety and dignity.

2 – The **No Recourse to Public Funds Action Group** is a group of people with lived experience of the immigration system campaigning to abolish this policy. You can find out [more about them here](#).

3 – Spokespeople – the following are available to talk about this campaign:

- Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz, Praxis' Policy and Public Affairs Manager
- Pascale Robinson, Campaign Coordinator
- Favour and Joy, two women and mothers with live experience of No Recourse to Public Funds whose children can't access Free School Meals

Please contact Laura Stahnke, Stories and Media Coordinator, if you'd like to arrange an interview.

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4 – Find out more about free school meals, and why the extension to children in families affected by the No Recourse to Public Funds policy should be made permanent, in our policy briefing, which is available [here](#).

5 – Policy Notes:

### **No Recourse to Public Funds**

No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) is a government policy which prevents millions of people who have made the UK their home from accessing most forms of public support, even when they are experiencing crisis. The policy is applied based on a person's immigration status, to people in one of two categories: (i) those who have permission to live and work in the UK on the condition that they don't access public support (estimated 1.3M people), and (ii) those without legal permission to be in the UK (estimated 650,000 people).

No Recourse to Public Funds prevents people from accessing most publicly funded forms of support, including but not limited to child benefit, housing benefit, universal credit and free school meals. The condition deprives people of a safety net when the worst happens – loss of a job, an accident, domestic violence, illness or even death can remove a family's entire income.

As such, No Recourse to Public Funds has been shown to be a key driver of poverty in general, and food poverty in particular. This is because it denies families the financial means, either through work or benefits, to access sufficient nutritious food. They're also more likely to be living in temporary or inadequate accommodation, without access to cooking or food storage facilities, and often rely on food aid from charities, friends and religious institutions. One study found that over half of parents affected by the policy had been unable to give their child a hot meal all day because they could not afford it, on at least one occasion.

While many people with No Recourse to Public Funds are working, those on low incomes or in precarious jobs are pushed into destitution because they cannot access benefits designed to top up incomes and prevent in-work poverty. Even those who are unable to work, for example due to care responsibilities, are denied access to government support. Having no safety net also means that a crisis, such as the loss of a job, injury at work or an episode of poor mental health, can easily push families into deep poverty. Families affected by

NRPF are therefore more likely than the general population to be living in destitution, often for extended periods, putting them at high risk of homelessness, exploitation and abuse.

### **Free School Meals**

Free school meals is a long-standing policy designed to protect children living in the poorest households from hunger when there's not enough to eat at home. Although not a magic bullet, the benefits of guaranteed access to one hot, nutritionally balanced meal per day for children living in poverty are well documented, and range from boosting learning and attainment to reducing pressure on family budgets.

All school-age children get free school meals until year 2. In year 3 and beyond, access to free school meals is means-tested, and determined largely by whether parents are in receipt of certain benefits, such as universal credit, and/or have total earnings below a certain threshold. Since people who are denied access to state support by their immigration status cannot access these benefits, no child whose family is affected by the No Recourse to Public Funds policy can usually have free school meals, even if they live in poverty.

The extension of free school meals to families affected by No Recourse to Public Funds didn't apply to children whose parents do not have leave to remain (total population estimated to be 650,000 people). These children have largely been left with no free school meals altogether throughout the pandemic.