

## PR: FEAR OF CHILDREN STILL MISSING OUT ON VITAL FREE SCHOOL MEALS<sup>1</sup>

As pupils head back to school this week, nearly a quarter of them are now eligible for free school meals, with numbers set to rise as families face the biggest income squeeze in decades.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, children living in poverty affected by the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition, who are among the most vulnerable in our society because they and their families are cut off from the welfare safety net – are still unable to access free school meals, despite a recent policy change.

- A Department for Education (DfE) policy change in April this year means that children living in poverty whose families are otherwise cut off from the welfare safety net because of their immigration status<sup>3</sup> are now, in theory, eligible for free school meals<sup>4</sup>.
- Yet, five months after the announcement, schools and parents appear largely unaware of this change, and data on uptake is scarce<sup>5</sup>.
- Without clear communication on the policy change, as children return to school they might be missing out on free school meals - just as their families are shouldering the cost-of-living crisis.
- More problematically, to access free school meals for their children, families have to declare their immigration status – even if they currently don't have a visa.
- As the Department for Education has not unequivocally ruled out passing on this information to the Home Office – and as while some Local Authorities have embedded Home Office officials – many parents will decide that applying for free school meals is simply too risky.

This means that children will continue to go hungry<sup>6</sup>.

**Josephine Whitaker Yilmaz, Praxis Policy and Public Affairs Manager, had this to say:**

*“At a time when families are already desperately trying to find ways to weather the storm and shoulder the rise in living costs, children must be able to access the free school meals to which they are entitled to escape hunger.*

*The Department for Education made the right decision in extending free school meals to all children living in poverty, regardless of their parents' immigration status.*

*But the way that the Department is implementing these changes means that thousands of children will continue to miss out on nutritious meals – sadly for many, the only one they'll have in a day - and will continue to go hungry.*

*In this time of crisis, the Department for Education must remove all the obstacles families are facing in accessing free school meals for their children, so they can escape hunger.”*

---

<sup>1</sup> Find out more in our briefing:

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d91f87725049149378fce82/t/63186861cca3cf5bdab6afde/1662543970104/FSM+and+children+with+NRPF+briefing\\_September+2022+public+2.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d91f87725049149378fce82/t/63186861cca3cf5bdab6afde/1662543970104/FSM+and+children+with+NRPF+briefing_September+2022+public+2.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/region-number-children-poverty-not-eligible-free-school-meals>

<sup>3</sup> An estimated 1.3 million people in the UK don't have access to the welfare safety net because of conditions placed on their leave to remain (known as the No Recourse to Public Funds policy, or NRPF). Until recently, this included children, who were prevented from accessing free school meals – even if their families were facing poverty or crisis. In addition, an estimated 650,000 people (including children) don't have access to public funds because they don't have a valid leave to remain.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools-and-local-authorities/providing-free-school-meals-to-families-with-no-recourse-to-public-funds-nrpf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2022-07-20.40776.h&s=no+recourse+to+public+funds%22%20\l%20%22g40776.q0>

<sup>6</sup> This is affecting families who are already experiencing higher levels of poverty than the general population. Pre-living cost crisis research shows that **81%** of people with NRPF are behind on at least one bill, compared to 1 in 5 (20%) people in the UK at large, and nearly **1 in 5** (18%) have been unable to feed themselves or their household because of NRPF <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/our-work/policy/policy-research-topics/welfare-policy-research-surveys-and-consultation-responses/welfare-policy-research/how-do-i-survive-now-the-impact-of-living-with-no-recourse-to-public-funds/>

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

- Josephine Whitaker-Yilmaz, Praxis' Policy and Public Affairs Manager

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

Email: [laura.stahnke@praxis.org.uk](mailto:laura.stahnke@praxis.org.uk) Phone: 07862007367

3 – Find out more about current barriers in accessing free school meals for children affected by No Recourse to Public Funds – and what we think should change - in our briefing here.

4 – 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, until recently children whose families are affected by the No Recourse to Public Funds policy couldn't usually have free school meals, even if they live in poverty.