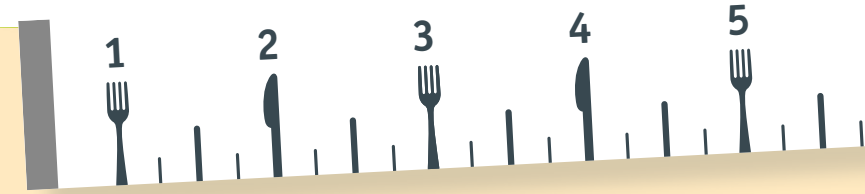
HOW DID UNIVERSAL INFANT FREE SCHOOL MEALS AFFECT CHILDREN'S BODYWEIGHT?



ISER's Nuffield Foundation-funded study looks at the impact of the controversial Government policy on the rising levels of childhood obesity

Since September 2014 all infants in state-funded English schools (those in the first three years in school, or children aged 4-7) have been eligible to receive a free school meal at lunchtime under the Universal Infant Free School Meals policy (UIFSM).

The Department for Education's stated aims for the policy are to improve children's educational attainment; to help families with the cost of living; and to ensure children have access to a healthy meal a day and develop long-term healthy eating habits. It costs £437 per child per year, and over £15m was spent in the first year on improving school kitchens to meet the increased demand. This is a costly policy, and it is important to know whether it has delivered on its aims.

Angus Holford and Birgitta Rabe evaluated the effect of UIFSM on the bodyweight outcomes of English children in their first year of school (aged 4-5). Specifically they looked at the probability that children are of healthy weight, overweight or obese, and their body mass index (BMI). They used school-level data from the National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) from the 2007/08 to 2017/18 academic years. The data come from trained nurses who visit each primary school in England, once per year, to measure children's heights and weights.

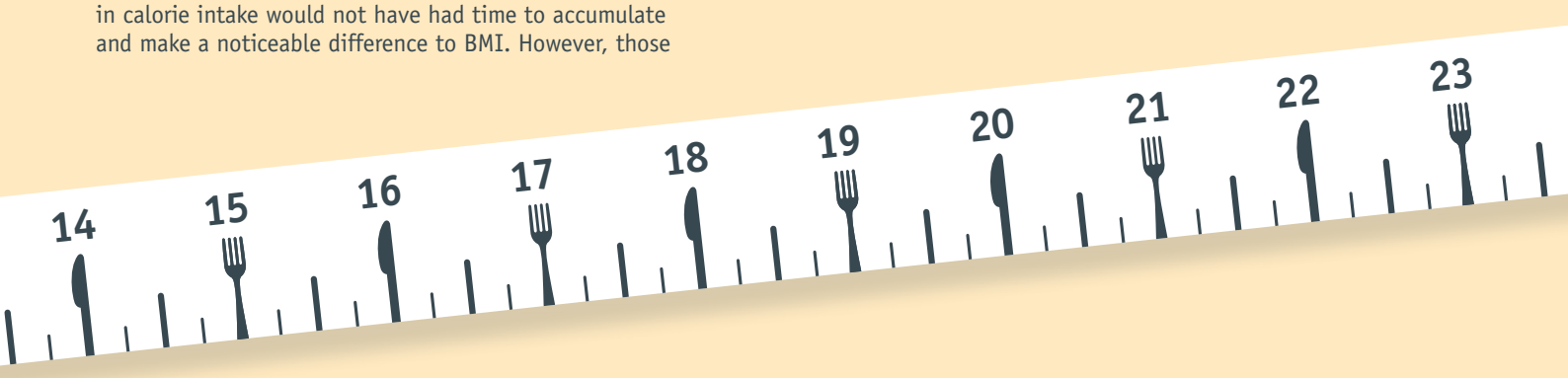
They found that even before UIFSM was introduced, the bodyweight outcomes of children measured later in the school year tended to be healthier than those measured earlier. For example, the prevalence of obesity among those measured in June and July was around 1 percentage point lower than those measured in September and October, and the proportion at a 'healthy weight' accounting for their age and sex around 3 percentage points higher. A similar improvement could still be seen after controlling for other characteristics of the pupils and the schools. In other words, a combination of seasonal effects and the school environment appears to be beneficial for children's bodyweight outcomes even without UIFSM.

The researchers went on to show that children exposed to UIFSM but measured in the first half-term of the school year had very similar bodyweight outcomes to those who never received UIFSM, other things being equal. This was expected, as they will have eaten few Free School Meals by that time, and any daily difference in calorie intake would not have had time to accumulate and make a noticeable difference to BMI. However, those measured later in the school year did show significantly improved bodyweight outcomes compared with those measured at the same time of the school year but who never received UIFSM. For example, the "treatment effect" of a whole academic year of exposure to UIFSM (i.e. for a child measured in June or July) was a 1 percentage point increase in their probability of being a healthy weight, and 0.5 percentage point decrease in probability of being obese.

These effects are large compared with other school-based interventions to improve bodyweight outcomes, delivered either in the classroom (education-based) or playground (physical activity-based), but so are the comparative costs of UIFSM. The results suggest that UIFSM is unlikely to be cost-effective solely for improving this measure of child health, but the authors are continuing to research the effects on school performance, attendance and absences.

Reference:

Holford A, Rabe B (2019) **'The impact of Universal Infant Free School Meals on child body weight outcomes'**, *Conference Paper, Special Session on Health Behaviours, Royal Economic Society, Warwick, April 2019.*



The project has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Visit www.nuffieldfoundation.org

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