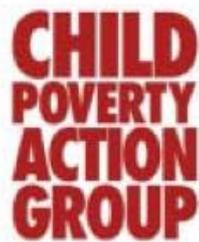


# The Costs of Going to School, from Young People's Perspectives

Rys Farthing  
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British Youth Council, Child Poverty Action Group, Kids Company, National Union of Teachers



Child Poverty Action Group is the leading national charity working to end poverty among children, young people and families in the UK. Our vision is of a society free of child poverty where all children can enjoy their childhoods and have fair chances in life to reach their full potential.

The British Youth Council (BYC) is the Government's key partner in promoting involvement of young people in local and national decision making. The BYC empowers young people aged 25 and under to influence and inform the decisions that affect their lives. It supports young people to get involved in their communities and democracy locally, nationally and internationally, making a difference as volunteers, campaigners, decision-makers and leaders. BYC run the UK Youth Parliament and Young Mayor Network as well as chairing the Votes at 16 Coalition.

Kids Company provides practical, emotional and educational support to vulnerable inner-city children. Its services reach 36,000 and intensively support 18,000 children across London, including the most deprived and at risk whose parents are unable to care for them due to their own practical and emotional challenges. For many, the roles of adult and child are reversed and, despite profound love, both struggle to survive.

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) is the largest teachers' union with over 325,000 members. The Union advocates education policies based on evidence and best international practice, arrived at through consultation with the teaching profession, governors, parents and pupils. The NUT has consistently said that the interests of teachers and children are synonymous and is proud to support the Campaign to End Child Poverty.

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# Executive Summary

This report looks at young people's own perspectives about the cost of going to school.

Through both a survey and four focus groups, 399 young people from across the income spectrum spoke to us about the price of going to school, and what this means for their education.

It explores seven aspects of school costs:

1. The price of studying different subjects, and if this influences the subjects young people select.
2. The price of school meals and what going hungry means for young people's education.
3. The price of school trips and what missing these means to young people.
4. The cost of a uniform and what going without a full uniform because of the cost is like.
5. The cost of buying the right books and equipment for school, and the impact of not being able to do so.
6. The cost of computer and internet access and what going without this means for young people's education.
7. The ability to take part in after-school clubs.

The key findings are that:

- Some subjects, especially 'creative subjects' (art, design and technology, photography) require extra materials and therefore cost more to study. 27 per cent of students on free school meals (FSM); 14 per cent of low-income students; and 8 per cent of better-off students chose not to study arts or music due to the associated costs.
- The price of food left many young people going hungry during the school day. 25 per cent of students on FSM; 55 per cent of low-income students; and 13 per cent of better-off students said that they were going hungry at school because they could not afford to eat. They reported that going hungry left them unable to concentrate at school.
- Many young people reported missing school trips because they were prohibitively expensive. 57 per cent of low-income students and 28 per cent of better-off students said that they had missed at least one school trip because of the price and this had had some impact on them. The impacts of missing school trips included the ability to socialise and make friends, and learn new skills.

- 35 per cent of students on FSM; 25 per cent of low-income students; and 5 per cent of better-off students identified cost as preventing them from having a full school uniform. Those unable to have a full uniform said that this got them into trouble and made them feel different to their peers.
- Most young people reported not having all the books and equipment needed for their studies. 21 per cent of students receiving FSM; 14 per cent of students from low-income households; and 5 per cent of students from better-off families suggested that cost was to blame. A lack of books, revision guides and stationery meant that their ability to study was reduced.
- 9 per cent of young people questioned did not have access to a computer at home or were denied internet access.
- 19 per cent of young people on FSM; 12 per cent of young people from low-income families; and 19 per cent of young people from better-off households reported not participating in after school clubs and extra-curricular activities due to either the cost of the club itself or the cost of transport to the club.

## Introduction

Since 1944, the UK has enjoyed school education free of charge at the point of delivery,<sup>1</sup> but making the most of time in school still comes with a price tag. Books, materials, uniforms and school trips all cost, and missing out on them can have a serious impact on young people's ability to do well at, and enjoy, school. At the time of the last official survey in 2007, the average spend on school-related items amounted to £1,195 per student in secondary school, and £684 per primary school student, and was rising above inflation.<sup>2</sup>

At the time, low-income families were still able to make sure that the vast majority of these costs were met. Families living on incomes below £15,000 a year still spent, on average, £647 a year on a primary school student (95 per cent of the total average) and £1,117 a year on a secondary school student (93 per cent of the total average).<sup>3</sup> This shows that low-income families prioritise spending on their children's education. However, this data was collected before the recession, and before family incomes began to shrink.

Current research suggests that young people from lower income families still miss out on school trips for want of money more often than their richer peers. For example, 10 per cent of young people from families in the lowest income decile miss out on school trips because of their cost, while only one per cent from the highest income decile miss out.<sup>4</sup>

This research aims to explore the impact of family income on young people's ability to meet these costs and make the most of their time at school. It explores the issues from the perspective of the young people themselves, asking them what they feel they need for school, what they can and cannot afford, and what impact this has on their education. It explores both their thoughts about their education itself and about how much they enjoy their time at school.

Through surveys and focus groups, we spoke to 399 young people from families with a range of incomes about the price of going to school and what this means for them. It explored seven aspects of school costs:

1. The price of studying different subjects, and if this influences the subjects young people select.
2. The price of school meals and what going hungry means for young people's education.
3. The price of school trips and what missing these means to young people.
4. The cost of a uniform and what going without a full uniform because of the cost is like.

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<sup>1</sup> Education Act 1944

<sup>2</sup> M Peters, H Carpenter and G Edwards, *Cost of Schooling 2007*, DCSF, 2009

<sup>3</sup> M Peters, H Carpenter and G Edwards, *Cost of Schooling 2007*, DCSF, 2009, p35

<sup>4</sup> Households Below Average Income Dataset 2011/12, DWP, 2013  
[http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai\\_arc](http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai_arc)

5. The cost of buying the right books and equipment for school, and the impact of not being able to do so.
6. The cost of computers and internet access and what going without this means for young people's education.
7. The ability to take part in after-school clubs.

These areas were identified as important by both previous research into school costs,<sup>5</sup> as well as anecdotal evidence known to the Child Poverty Action Group, the British Youth Council, Kids Company, and the National Union of Teachers about the costs associated with going to school.

To gather young people's thoughts about the impact of family income on their ability to do well at school, both an online survey and focus groups were conducted.

## Survey methodology

During February and March 2013, the British Youth Council ran an online survey of 377 young people aged 11-18, asking a series of questions about the costs of going to school.

### *Geography*

The majority of the sample were English, only 3 per cent were Welsh, 2 per cent Scottish and 4 per cent from Northern Ireland.

### *Gender*

Around two-thirds of the sample was made up of young women, and one-third young men.

### *Household income*

Importantly, for this research, young people were also asked two income-related questions:

- Had they ever received FSM?
- Did they identify as coming from a low-income family?
- Responses to these questions are used in this report to identify young people from lower income backgrounds.

Being in receipt of FSM means that, at some stage, these young people are (or were) growing up in households that receive means-tested, out-of-work benefits. Because of the low levels of benefit payments, almost all of these young people are (or would have been at the time) living below the poverty threshold.

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<sup>5</sup> M Peters, H Carpenter and G Edwards, *Cost of Schooling 2007*, DCSF, 2009

While there is no way to verify the household finances of the young people who self-identified as coming from a low-income household, their narratives and experiences within school certainly support their claim. Entitlement to FSM is limited to children from workless households, so these young people may reflect the large number of young people growing up in working households struggling with low wages or under-employment. Currently, the majority of children living below the poverty line (66 per cent) have at least one parent in work,<sup>6</sup> so do not qualify for FSM. It is possible, then, that some of these young people live below the poverty line and their families are 'the working poor', but this is not certain.

This report sometimes refers to young people from both of these categories as 'low-income' or 'lower income'.

Within this survey:

- **52** young people identified as receiving **FSM** at some stage, so most probably had first-hand experience of poverty. Over half of this sample also identified as currently experiencing a low income.
- **28** young people identified as coming from a **low-income household**, but not receiving FSM. These young people are most likely from struggling, working families.
- **297** young people did not identify as on a low income or receiving FSM. They are referred to as the **better-off** below.

Comparisons between these groups are made below, with the implicit assumption that family income increases across these groups. This assumption is potentially validated by the findings, which would appear to confirm this tendency. These are, however, extremely coarse indicators of family income and from non-random samples. The results of this survey should not, therefore, be extrapolated to the broader population.

## Focus group methodology

Outside the survey, four focus groups were held with young people in and around London. Three of these focus groups were held in Kids Company drop-in and dinner centres, located in deprived parts of London. Of these groups:

- one group comprised younger boys, aged 10 and 11;
- one group comprised girls, aged 13 and 14; *and*
- one group comprised boys, aged 14 and 15.

An additional meeting was held in a youth club for young people with disabilities, with boys and girls aged between 12 and 21.

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<sup>6</sup> Before housing costs, Households Below Average Income Dataset 2011/12, DWP, 2013  
[http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai\\_arc](http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai_arc)

In total, 22 young people took part in these focus groups.

While no data were collected about the household income of these young people, their geographic locations, presence at drop-in centres providing free dinners and disability status indicate that they would have an understanding of growing up on low incomes, if not of themselves, then of friends and peers.

The focus groups involved an art-based methodology, in which young people were encouraged to draw and visualise their ideas, with discussions about these activities.

## Not choosing subject because of the cost

I didn't take art GCSE due to the investment.

Young person on FSM

Some subjects cost more than others to study. For example, photography requires purchasing camera film and covering the costs of printing. While little research has explored what this means for young people from lower income households, our survey finds strong evidence that many young people select their subjects based on cost considerations.

- 29 per cent of young people on FSM suggested that they were affected by the cost of subjects at some stage, with 27 per cent stating that they did not study a subject they wanted to because of the associated costs. One young person on FSM said that, while they still chose the expensive subject (photography), they have regretted it ever since.
- 14 per cent of young people from low-income households also reported not selecting subjects based on price. Half of these chose not to take art and half not to take music.

Although I selected 'no' [to 'have you ever not taken a subject you wanted to do because of price?'], I have regretted it since, and wish I had taken a different subject instead. The demand for providing own materials is high, and there are times I have been penalised for not having photos printed because I don't have the necessary equipment, or not got sketchbooks etc.

Young person on FSM
- 10 per cent of young people from better-off families indicated that they selected subjects based on price considerations, although 2 per cent of these appeared to suggest that they chose the subject regardless, but struggled with the costs. This left 8 per cent actively avoiding subjects because of the costs.

Purchasing extra materials has always been an issue for me. I only chose those lessons I didn't had to spend (too) much money on.

Young person on FSM

Subjects that require extra materials, especially photography, art, textiles, design and technology and food technology, were frequently cited as subjects that students on FSM felt they were unable to take. For students from low-income families, but not on FSM, music was also frequently ruled out because of the cost, most often because of the cost of extra tuition. This is not to suggest that music was an option for young people on

FSM. While some schools may provide free tuition for young people on FSM but not those from 'working poor' households, it is possible that, for young people on FSM, music was not even considered an option for their studies by the time they took our survey.

Other students from lower income backgrounds reported that where they have chosen to take an expensive subject, their grades had suffered as a result of not being able to afford to purchase the necessary materials. Students from better-off families also reported falling behind because of the price of materials.

This means that, for many young people, the 'creative subjects' may be prohibitively expensive either to take or at which to do well. Not all of the curriculum appears to be available to all students equally.

*Photography: you need to buy the coursework book £6, film camera £90+ and then a digital camera £100+ also films cost £3 photography paper 100 sheets £15. I ended up leaving the course because it cost too much, and ended up doing ICT studies instead. – Better-off young person*

*I didn't take art as I wasn't prepared to spend lots of money on all the different materials. This meant that I ended up doing a subject I didn't particularly want to do. – Better-off young person*

*Guitar lessons: I got behind because I don't have extra lessons out of school and now I can't take GCSE music because I'm not at the right grade. – Better-off young person*

*Textiles: you have to buy all the fabrics and they're really expensive; [it] affects the garments I make. – Better-off young person*

Textiles: I have still taken the subject. However it's quite expensive. When you're planning on what to make and you choose materials not realising how much it's going to cost. I've used alternative materials which are cheaper and not the same as my initial design idea and I may lose marks for this.

Young person on FSM

## Hunger during the school day

I couldn't concentrate on the lesson because I was really hungry.

Young person from a low-income household

Many young people go hungry at school, and this has obvious implications for their ability to make the most of their time there. As most parents and teachers know, children who are hungry struggle to concentrate. Clinical studies support this, showing that an adequate supply of glucose to the brain enhances cognitive functioning.<sup>7</sup> Young people need to eat properly to learn well.

This link between hunger and learning was recognised by the British government over a century ago. In 1906, it passed the Education (Provision of Meals) Act, which gave local education authorities the capacity to provide meals to children who were 'unable by reason of lack of food to take full advantage of the education provided for them'. This led to the creation of a FSM scheme, which has continued to the present day. This provides free lunches in schools as a means-tested benefit, available to young people from predominantly workless households.

- Around three-quarters of students who were entitled to FSM reported feeling hungry during the school day in our survey, with one-quarter outlining that the high cost of food was the key cause of their hunger (25 per cent).

Many young people on FSM noted that the allowance they were given was not enough to buy a full meal. Others highlighted the stigma of FSM as a problem and some cited their inability to use their allowance for breakfast as an issue.

Food is too expensive for me to afford all the time and I'm not eligible for FSM.

Young person from a low-

- The discrepancies in free school meal entitlement, which means young people from low-income *working* households are not entitled to receive them, were felt by the young people who took part in this survey. Of the young people who identified as coming from low-income families, almost all of them (85 per cent) reported feeling hungry during the school day, with over half of these citing the price of food as causing their hunger (55 per cent).

Food is too expensive so I wait until I am home.

Better-off young person

<sup>7</sup> D Benton, 'Micro-nutrient Supplementation and the Intelligence of Children', *Neuroscience Biobehaviour Reviews* 25, 2001, pp297–309

- However, family income alone does not appear to guarantee young people freedom from hunger. 58 per cent of the young people from better-off households reported feeling hungry during the school day, and some 13 per cent of these said this was because of the high cost of purchasing food.

Furthermore, a number of young people from better-off households suggested that they were aware that some of their peers went hungry because of the high price of food.

Other reasons young people gave for going hungry in the classroom were that they forgot to eat, that their meals (packed or canteen) were too small, that they were hungry teenagers, that there was not enough time to have breakfast, that lunches were too late in the day, or that they forgot to bring their money to school (but not that they did not have money).

Forgot food, and can't afford food at school.

Young person on FSM

Young people from low-income families not in receipt of FSM were twice as likely as their low-income counterparts on FSM and four times as likely as their better-off peers to feel hungry during the school day because of the price of food.

While 1.2 million young people are currently entitled to FSM,<sup>8</sup> some 2.3 million children live in poverty.<sup>9</sup> While not all of these 2.3 million children living in poverty will be of school age, there is still a clear and present discrepancy between these two figures. This means that not every child living in poverty is entitled to FSM, and research suggests that around 20 per cent of children living below the poverty line are not entitled.<sup>10</sup> This is because, while generally entitlement to FSM is linked to parental work status,<sup>11</sup> young people whose parents are in low-paid or part-time work are not eligible.

No lunch card, no FSM (anymore)... I've been so tired/near death starvation.

Young person from a low-income household

Our survey perhaps suggests that FSM do work in reducing the hunger of young people from lower income families, but that the scheme needs to be extended to cover young people from low-income, working families, who, in this sample, were the most likely to be hungry. However, young people on FSM in

8 Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics, DfE, 2012  
<http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001071/index.shtml> , accessed 5 March 2013

9 Households Below Average Income Dataset 2011/12, DWP, 2013  
[http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai\\_arc](http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai_arc)

10 London Economics, Assessing Current and Potential Provision of FSM: economic research on FSM entitlement and exchequer costs, Schools Food Trust, 2008

11 Welfare Benefits and Tax Credits Handbook, Child Poverty Action Group, 2012

this sample were still twice as likely as their better-off peers to go hungry during the school day because of the price of food. This suggests that the free school meal scheme has some way to go before it completely tackles the hunger experienced by young people from workless households.

## Young people's perceptions of the types of food consumed by richer and poorer students

Our focus group data reinforced this survey description, but added some thoughts about the quality of the food young people consume. All the groups (aside from the group of younger 10 and 11 year old boys) felt that the breakfasts consumed by poorer students would be:

- non-existent – i.e., they did not have breakfast;
- lesser in volume – e.g., only six mouthfuls compared with the 22 of their richer peers;
- less healthy – e.g., high in sugar or comprising items that were past their expiry date;
- less varied – i.e., richer students appeared to eat a larger variety of things, from salmon to brown bread 'because it's dearer', and hot and cold foods. Poorer students appeared to have the same thing, such as cold beans every day;
- eaten in the same room in which everything else in the house happens, where as their richer peers might have a dining room or eat at a kitchen table.

They outlined that this left poorer students feeling hungry, sleepy and unable to concentrate in school.

Food is pretty expensive, I end up losing concentration.

Young person from a low-income household

Comparing the lunch boxes drawn by the young people reveals a similar situation, with richer students' lunch boxes brimming, while poorer students' lunch boxes were sometimes empty (often because they were aware that poorer students would be eating FSM). On average:

- The contents of poorer students' lunch boxes were more unhealthy, containing crisps, coke, microwavable food, cheap sandwich fillers, cheap meat products and expired food. Richer students had healthier foods, like chicken, yoghurt and bottled water. The richer students got their 'five a day'.

Food is way too expensive. I think I haven't been able to have a full meal and so my concentration rate has been lower

Better-off young person

- Poorer students' lunch boxes also contained less food. While there was a greater variety of products in poorer students' lunchboxes than in their breakfast bowls, the groups felt that the richer students' lunch boxes would contain more volume of food than those of poorer students.

The richer students' lunch boxes gave students more energy and meant they could learn during the day. It is also worth noting that richer students' lunch boxes – while slightly fantastical – appeared to offer their diners elements of style as well, with silver or gold cutlery and antibacterial handwipes to ensure healthy eating.

Much of this analysis about quality and quantity is played out in research data as well. For example, 6 per cent of children living in households with the lowest 20 per cent of incomes cannot afford to eat fresh fruit or vegetables daily, while no child in the highest income quintile misses out on daily fruit or vegetables for want of money.<sup>12</sup>

*Food is too expensive. – Young person on FSM*

*Our lunch break is 40 minutes – this is really 30 minutes when you factor in getting to and from your lessons/locker. The lunch queue is a minimum of 20 minutes so there often isn't time to eat. – Young person on FSM*

Too expensive in canteen... can't concentrate if not eating enough.

Better-off young person

*Food is too expensive for me to afford all the time and I'm not eligible for FSM. – Young person from a low-income household*

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<sup>12</sup> DWP 2013 Households Below Average Income Dataset 2011/12 (online) [http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai\\_arc](http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai_arc)

## Missed school trips

It made making new friends difficult as it was the Year 7 residential.

Young person on FSM

School trips can be incredibly expensive and we know that young people from lower income households miss out on them more often than their richer peers. 10 per cent of children from households with the lowest 20 per cent of incomes cannot afford to go on a school trip once a term, while only one percent in the highest 20 per cent of incomes misses out because of cost.<sup>13</sup> Beyond this, many young people living in lower income families actively exclude themselves from these educational activities and opportunities because of the costs. Some 7 per cent of children living in families with annual incomes below £15,000 a year do not take notes home to their parents about trips because they know they cannot afford them.<sup>14</sup>

The young people to whom we spoke confirmed this previous research, but also tell us something about the impact of missing school trips from their perspective. For the young people we surveyed, it appeared to be the social and relationship-building aspect of trips and residential that they missed most.

It's hard because school trips are so expensive, but people make really good friends on them and it changes the social dynamic.

Young person on FSM

- 65 per cent of young people on FSM had missed school trips because of cost. About 10 per cent said it had no impact whatsoever on their education or experience of school. This leaves 54 per cent of young people on FSM missing out on school trips because of the cost, and 'feeling' the impact. Some said this affected their education or opportunities, but most said it had a greater impact on their social life and ability to make friends with their peers.
- 71 per cent of young people from low-income families said they had missed out on school trips because they could not afford them. 15 per cent said this had no impact whatsoever (for example, because it was a skiing holiday or a boring trip), leaving 57 per cent of young people from low-income households missing out on school trips because of the cost, and 'feeling' the impact. Again, it was the social impact that seemed to matter.
- 46 per cent of better-off young people said they could not afford a school trip, although 19 per cent said it had 'no' or a 'barely noticeable' impact on their education. This leaves 28 per cent of young people

<sup>13</sup> Households Below Average Income Dataset 2011/12, DWP, 2013  
[http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai\\_arc](http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai_arc)

<sup>14</sup> Peters, M., Carpenter, H. & Edwards, G. 2009 Cost of Schooling 2007 DCSF, London, pp. 157

from better-off households missing out on school trips because of the cost, and 'feeling' the impact.

For these better-off young people, missing out on the social aspects did not seem to matter so much, as they far less frequently discussed feeling left out or excluded. Instead, while some noted that while they missed out on some social aspects, most said that they felt that missing school trips had a minimal impact on their education.

I haven't been able to experience things that others are able to experience, because they can afford it and I cannot.

Young person on FSM

Many schools subsidise trips for young people in receipt of FSM, and this may be why the proportion of young people on FSM and young people from low-income families who miss out on school trips because of cost are about equal. However, the proportions are still alarmingly high. If school trips are

considered a valuable experience for both educational and social reasons, more work needs to be done to ensure that children on FSM and in low-income working families can afford them.

Interestingly, however, this survey data suggest that, although missing out on the social experiences of school trips was sorely felt by young people on low incomes, this experience did not cause the same sense of social exclusion for young people from households with higher incomes. This may be because they can afford other opportunities to socialise, or because their social lives are rich enough already, so that missing out on a trip here or there does not make that much difference. It is also possible that young people from low-income households were missing out on trips more frequently (our survey only captured data about ever having missed a trip). But what is clear is that the social element of school trips appears to be increasingly important for those further down the income scale.

I felt a bit left out, but I wouldn't really say that it would have helped me with my education – it would have just been a life experience.

Better-off young person

*It was unfair because my whole Italian class went to Italy and I couldn't. I missed out on a valuable experience and Italian speaking skills and also I missed out on a chance to go on holiday with my class mates. I felt separated when they got back because they all had stories to tell about Rome. – Young person on FSM*

*Mostly all school studies-related trips are reasonably priced and I have been able to go to all that were important for my studies. However, more leisurely, fun trips are often too expensive which means staying at school while other classmates get to go and have a good time. – Young person on FSM*

*It made me feel poor and that I was alone, not being able to participate in school activities really gave me a negative look on school life which made me less likely to participate in lessons and made me feel alone. At the same time, I felt that the school did not help my family in trying to cover the costs or providing subsidies for lower income families. – Young person from a low-income household*

*It made me feel isolated from my classmates and also in lessons. If a teacher brought something from the trip up I would be clueless as to what they were talking about, whereas my classmates would know this having a slight advantage. – Young person from a low-income household*

*Not a very large impact, because they are usually optional school trips abroad, so there are limited places anyway. The trips do not usually relate to the syllabus tightly. – Better-off young person*

*Miss(ed) out on social aspects but not curricular. – Better-off young person*

Some peers would start rumours about me being poor etc, but also everyone who went got to know each other more and I felt left out a lot of the time ... When it came to pairing up I would sometimes work by myself or with someone I don't know.

Young person from a low-income household

## Not being able to afford a uniform

(Not having a blazer) has a huge effect because instead of teachers teaching you'd get told off for uniform

Young person on FSM

Uniforms are one of the most expensive items that must be purchased to enable young people to attend school<sup>15</sup> and, correspondingly, young people across all income groups reported some difficulty in meeting these costs.

- Many young people who had been on FSM did not have all of the required items for their schools' uniform. 35 per cent of free school meal students said that the cost of their school uniform prevented them from having a complete uniform, and many suggested that this had a direct impact on their experience at school.
- 25 per cent of students from low-income families also identified that the cost of their uniform was prohibitive.
- However, 5 per cent of students from better-off families also noted issues with affording their full school uniform. This perhaps reflects the growing squeeze on family budgets right across the income spectrum.

A lot of the uniform at my school is at a high cost, many people in my PE class struggle to afford the cost of it so end up getting in trouble for not having as they cannot afford it

Better-off young person

Many better-off students who could afford their uniforms were keen to stress that many of their peers could not. They empathetically outlined the unfairness of this situation.

However, this is not to suggest that young people thought that the 'end of uniforms' was the best solution. Many students suggested that they liked having a uniform, and that their schools uniform worked towards equality. Interestingly, these were all better-off young people.

Only one of our focus groups – the younger boys – addressed uniforms. We asked what they thought a poor student looked like and what they thought a rich student looked like when they went to school. The poor student's uniform had holes in it and was ripped, while the rich student was wearing what appeared to be a perfect suit and tie. We asked the boys who drew this if this meant that the poor student would be reprimanded, and they suggested that if the student told someone at the school, such as a social worker, he would not be. If not, he would be in trouble. They also said that people looked at the rich student like he was 'perfect Peter' and the poor student like he was 'horrid Henry', and they felt this was unfair. They said that, in fact, the poor student

<sup>15</sup> Peters, M., Carpenter, H. & Edwards, G. 2009 Cost of Schooling 2007 DCSF, London

had to care more about his education to get out of poverty, and therefore he was 'highly educated'.

*I once couldn't afford a new blazer and so I had to borrow one from the school. It was too big and it embarrassed me! – Young person on FSM*

*(My school tie) was really expensive and I looked different from everybody else when mine did not have the school logo on. – Young person on FSM*

*Sometimes when a piece of my uniform got damaged I couldn't replace it immediately. That would often make me feel trampish. – Young person from a low-income household*

*Our school offers a second hand scheme which allows me to get the uniform I need. (But) If we don't have the correct uniform we get sent home. – Young person from a low-income household*

*I think having a uniform helps to make sure that everyone is treated equally – Better-off young person*

*I only own one jumper due to the cost and by the end of the week this leaves me feeling quite dirty and unpleasant and conscious about putting my hand up. – Better-off young person*

(The whole kit is) too expensive to buy, then we get disciplined or sent home which is destroying our education just because we can't afford something.

Young person on FSM

## Not having the necessary books, stationery or equipment

I was always sent out for not having the correct equipment.

Young person from a low-income household

Studying any subject at school requires some purchases, from the low-end cost of pens and paper to expensive text books and revision guides. Our survey found that young people from lower income households often have difficulty meeting these costs, and that this has an impact on their education.

- Most young people on FSM at some stage reported not having all the books and stationery they needed for their studies, with 21 per cent suggesting that this was because of cost.
- Again, while many students from low-income families reported not having all the books and stationery required to study, 14 per cent said that this was because they could not afford them.
- While some young people from better-off families reported not having the books, stationery or materials they needed, only 5 per cent said that this was because of the cost.

Can't afford them, don't get my work done.

Young person on FSM

Where they could not afford them, the young people suggested that this had a 'big impact' on their studies because they could not revise properly, sometimes could not do the work and because teachers sent them out of class for not

having the right materials. However, some lower income students said that they could afford the bare necessities and/or that their school libraries or generosity of peers sharing made their lives easier.

Our focus group data reinforced these findings, but also spoke of a sense of shame or embarrassment about missing materials. When we asked the young people to draw what they thought were in richer and poorer students' backpacks, they talked extensively about the sense of embarrassment that came with having tatty, old books or scuffed backpacks. They were also able to talk about physical space as a resource, as we asked them to draw the desks of poorer and richer students.

It's too expensive to buy notebooks and folders for every single subject, so I usually just make do with what I have or I can get at school.

Young person on FSM

Specifically, poorer students' backpacks had:

- fewer books, which tended to be second-hand, ripped or old;

- no laptops or other technology;
- ripped, old or cheap backpacks;
- fewer things to make the school day fun, or with which to enjoy themselves. For example, the girls' group thought that richer students' backpacks would contain lots of make-up. Younger boys thought that poorer students' backpacks would contain no toys or sweets, while the group of young people with disabilities thought that there would be no Kindles to read or headphones on which to listen to music. Perhaps important to note is that, for young people in this group, vision impairments make Kindles (which have adjustable reading fonts) extremely helpful if they want to read for fun, and hearing impairments make quality headphones a must to hear any music. Technology and other consumer goods are valued for allowing teenagers to have fun with their peers in and around school.

Their bags also showed the side-effects of crime in their areas. When we talked about poorer students having fewer fun items in their backpacks, we discussed whether they felt this was inevitable, or whether this was possibly a stereotype. They decided that, because the owner of their poorer backpack came from a poorer area, it was more likely that he would have bad influences in his lives. Similarly, the girls and younger boys refrained from adding good phones or laptops to their bags, as they figured that anything 'good' would get stolen.

Aside from the shame and crime, they also outlined how poorer students do badly at school 'down to the quality of their equipment'.

Many of the 'desks' we asked the young people to draw were crossed out for poorer students, as they thought that poorer students do their homework on kitchen tables or at the library. It was felt that, overall, while richer students had 'everything needed for school' on their desks, poorer students had:

- fewer books;
- no computers, laptops or the latest technology, including the internet, that made it easier to do work;
- fewer and poorer quality pens and stationery;
- dirtier and more chaotic desks, containing left-over food (because some poor students ate their dinner at their desk) and dirty clothes. Richer students' desks were organised, clean and tidy.

Cannot afford them. It affects you majorly because you are at a big disadvantage if you do not have things like revision guides.

Better-off young person

I can't afford the software needed.

Young person on FSM

All the poorer students' desks lacked a computer, but as the subsequent chapter highlights, this might be at the extreme end of poverty (as some of the young people involved may have been).

*Can be too expensive to buy all the books I need – not a problem if I can borrow them from an older student or from the library. – Young person on FSM*

*Lost some and haven't got enough money to replace them sometimes. – Young person from a low-income household*

*Can't afford to buy some of the text books that I would benefit from having. – Young person from a low-income household*

*School doesn't provide them and it's expensive to buy everything I need, even second-hand. – Better-off young person*

There are various books that I need but they are around £15 each and I'm unable to purchase them because of this.

Better-off young person

## Lacking access to computers and the internet

It's broken. Can't always do homework so go to youth centre to do it.

Young person on FSM

There is a digital divide between rich and poor people in the UK, with the number of people who have never used the internet steadily decreasing with weekly pay.<sup>16</sup> Reinforcing this, our focus group data suggest that the young people to whom we spoke think that poorer students do not have access to home computers to assist with homework. However, our survey suggests that, within our sample, the proportion of young people without home computers or laptops was extremely low. However, these were more likely to be from lower income families.

- Most of the young people participating in this research had access to a computer and the internet at home. However, some young people on FSM and in better-off families did not have access to computers and the internet because of the cost, and young people on FSM were eight times more likely to miss out. The numbers of young people missing out, however, were extremely small (only 8 per cent of those on FSM).
- A couple of these students said they previously had one, but that it had since broken. They suggested that this meant they spent hours at school or travelling to libraries, because teachers expected homework to be printed or on USB sticks.
- Only one young person from a low-income family suggested they did not have access to a computer for cost reasons, but their description appeared to be suggesting that while they had a computer, they could not afford internet access for it.

I don't have internet access on my computer sometimes because my mum can't afford the bill since she is a single parent with two kids. This means I can't do homework some times and it's late handed in.

Young person from a low-income household

- Five young people from better-off families identified not having a computer at home. Four of these did not elaborate, but the description provided by another suggested that they did have computers, but they were not allowed the internet (they were in care, and their children's home did not provide internet access) This leaves, at most, four young people (1 per cent) who did not have a computer for cost reasons.

16 ONS 2013 Internet Access Quarterly Update Q4 2012  
<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcn%3A77-294263>

However, a number of better-off young people were aware that some young people in their school did not have computers. They were keen to stress that access for these young people was made possible by their schools.

The issue appears not so much to be the complete inability to access a computer or the internet as much as the ease of access and the travel time needed to reach it. That is, for these young people, the digital divide is not as simple as 'not having access to a computer and the internet' versus 'having access', as much as it is about the ease of this access.

*Wasn't allowed to have one at home and I stay back for hours. – Young person on FSM*

*Yes, but no internet as in a kids' home and not allowed. Makes homework hard. – Young person from a better-off household*

*Our school has many computers, both in IT rooms and our school library, so we have many options if we don't have a computer. Also, instead of printing (which can be expensive for some people), we have an email network, so we can email teachers our homework. – Better-off young person*

It keeps breaking, gave up in the end. Yes, a big impact because teachers expect all homework either printed out or on a USB stick. I have to get a train into the next town along just to use the library computers because our library got shut down.

Young person on FSM

## Not taking part in after school clubs

Just meant I was left out, missed out on a good opportunity.

Young person on FSM

Our survey also looked at the cost of participating in after-school and extra-curricular clubs, and if the price of attending these was prohibitive. While many young people wanted to, but could not afford to take part in these activities, there appeared to be little difference between lower income and better-off young people. What they felt they missed out on, however, varied greatly.

- 19 per cent of young people on FSM reported not taking part in an after-school club because of the cost. As with missing out on field trips, it appears to be the social element of this that the students feel they are missing out on. The cost of travel to these activities was also cited as part of the problem.
- 12 per cent of young people from other low-income families reported not attending an after-school club because of the cost. For these young people, however, the social element did not appear to be the most 'missed' aspect, rather it was the opportunity they longed for.
- 19 per cent of young people from better-off families reported not attending an after-school club because of the cost. Among these young people, the group was evenly split between young people who said it had an impact on their study and opportunities, and those who felt they were unnecessary, but fun, activities that had little or no impact on their lives.

Although I was pretty good in badminton, I never could mention it in school because the badminton club was really expensive.

Young person on FSM

Travel was often cited as a barrier to attendance, both financial and physical. Some young people who could afford the clubs could not afford the transport, or the transport did not exist.

*The clubs themselves cost nothing, it was the cost of getting to and from them and staying behind after school that was inconvenient for my parents. It hasn't really affected me, I just think I could have learnt more about a wider array of subjects, and had more opportunities. – Young person on FSM*

*Missed out on extracurricular and social opportunities. – Young person on FSM*

*[I felt] left out. – Young person on FSM*

*Lack of stuff to put on personal statement and CV. – Young person from a low-income household*

*Prevented me from learning an instrument. – Young person from a low-income household*

*Cost of after-school clubs is too high. I don't go to them. – Young person from a low-income household*

*Very little impact but it would have been fun and helped develop a wider range of skills. – Better-off young person*

*I wasn't given the experience. It meant that I had to choose another career path. – Better-off young person*

*Orienteering and netball: my parents couldn't afford the petrol to get me there and back so I couldn't go. It made me feel extremely sad as I was scouted for the town netball team, yet I couldn't afford to join and play. – Better-off young person*

*While the after-school club itself was free, I live 15 miles away from my school and cannot always afford the bus fare home after activities.  
Better-off young person*

I really wanted to play tennis at my school but it was £90 for the lessons (and that was the discounted price). My family couldn't afford it and tennis was a big outlet for me. It made me so depressed and I gained so much weight after stopping. I really wish I could take up tennis again but I wish it was more affordable.

Young person from a low-income household