

**CHILD
POVERTY
ACTION
GROUP**

SCHOOL SUMS

What does going to school really cost families?

May 2023





'Things at school cost money, like food and uniform. People in poverty might not have the money for that.'

Primary school child

Report summary

Researchers have found that going to school in the UK costs families of primary school children at least **£864.87 a year, or £18.69 a week**. This is before childcare costs are accounted for. For families of secondary school children, the cost of sending a child to school is at least **£1,755.97 a year**. This is **£39.01 a week**.

This means the total cost of meeting a child's minimum educational needs across all 14 years of school (primary and secondary but excluding household costs such as laptops) is **£18,345.85**. This can be broken down as **£6,054.09** for seven years at primary school and **£12,291.76** for seven years at secondary school.

Most families across the UK accessing state-funded education face these costs. Some families receive government support to help cover educational essentials, but this is most commonly means-tested and targeted at families on the lowest incomes. This research shows that far more support is needed so all children have the essentials required to take part in school and learn. It also highlights that where you live in the UK matters when it comes to government help, with families in Scotland faring best overall, but particularly when comparing support for families on the lowest incomes across the UK. Families in England receive the least government support with the cost of going to school.

Child Poverty Action Group is calling on governments across the UK to ensure all children have what they need to take part and thrive in education.



**Primary school costs
£18.69 a week
£864.87 a year**



**Secondary school costs
£39.01 a week
£1,755.97 a year**



'It's like as a parent, this is what they need to function as a family and have a life, not just live. You know they've got to be able to like you say, join in with society. So that the kids don't feel left out, so they're not the kid that doesn't have this you know, not so much with items of clothing, but "I'm able to do my homework" and "I'm able to have school shoes"...'

Parent of primary school child

Background

Child Poverty Action Group's research as part of the UK Cost of the School Day project has shown that attending school comes with lots of hidden and often unacknowledged costs. We know these can be difficult, and sometimes impossible, to afford for low-income families and can add up to significant amounts across the school

year. For the first time, the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University has calculated the actual costs families face sending their children to school. This is based on the Minimum Income Standard research, and specifically **what parents and carers with school-aged children think are the essential items every family should be able to afford for their child’s education and participation at school**. This research unequivocally shows that the essential costs associated with going to school in the UK are significant.

For the overwhelming majority of children in the UK, education is ‘free’ at the point of access. But the reality is that accessing education comes with numerous costs. Being able to participate fully in school life, having the resources necessary to do homework, having what you need to join a school sports team and go on educational school trips, and having a school uniform that fits all come at a cost. We know from our research in schools that many are working hard to bring down these minimum costs and are finding ways to prevent children in lower-income households from missing out on school life and education.

But most families are paying hundreds of pounds a year for what are deemed the essentials needed for a minimum education, and this is before we account for what is required to support children to thrive and feel included at school such as owning a musical instrument, attending a trip abroad or visiting the school fair. School plays a key role in childhood, offering opportunities and exposure to experiences, and it helps set children up for adult life. However, this research shows that the minimum school experience comes with a hefty price tag, which governments across the UK must urgently address or risk undermining what is supposedly a universal education system.



‘Yes, I have had to put other payments on hold to pay the school.’

Parent

Key findings

The minimum costs associated with sending a child to school each year are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The minimum annual costs of sending a child to school

	Primary school annual costs	Secondary school annual costs
Learning	£0	£279.76
Uniform, kit shoes and bags	£352.86	£481.77
Packed lunches ¹	£347.85	£349.64
Transport	£0 ²	£487.54
Enrichment eg, trips and celebrations	£164.16	£157.26
Total	£864.87	£1,755.97

¹ In research discussions, although many parents highlighted the benefits of hot school lunches and agreed these would be optimal, the groups concluded that a homemade packed lunch each day was sufficient as a minimum and meant parents can make sure they are giving their children something they like to eat. In this briefing, the costs outlined under ‘packed lunches’ also include the cost of a lunch box and water bottle.

² This is based on the assumption that it is more likely that primary school children can walk to school, and where this isn’t possible, the cost of this travel would be covered by the family’s motoring budget, not education budget. As there are fewer secondary schools, secondary school pupils are more likely to have to travel further to reach their school, so the cost of a daily bus fare is included as a minimum.

Additional costs not in the cost of sending a child to school calculation:

Wrap-around childcare (urban UK)	£5,031.92	£0
Household costs eg, laptops and printer ³	£93.15	£93.15

By costing up what parents and carers with school-aged children agree is needed for a minimum socially acceptable standard of education it was found that:

- School uniform for both primary and secondary school pupils is one of the most significant educational outlays that families face and often have to be paid as lump sum payments. As well as clothing, shoes, bags and extensive PE kit lists contributing to the overall cost, since the research began in 2008, families are increasingly being required to purchase more items from specialist or designated suppliers and with school branding.⁴
- The most significant weekly costs for secondary school pupils are the costs of packed lunches and the cost of transport to and from school. For primary school pupils, the largest weekly costs are also packed lunches.
- Taking part in the curriculum and undertaking learning at both home and school requires families to purchase and have access to resources and equipment. This includes IT equipment like a laptop, phone and printer as well as internet access. Secondary school pupils also need at a minimum a scientific calculator, a pencil case, textbooks, revision guides and set texts. Families can also face costs for subject-specific resources such as ingredients and aprons for food and nutrition lessons, and contributions to materials for design and technology.
- School calendars are packed with additional experiences including day trips, residential trips, proms and charity days. Children and young people being able to take part in the social life of school alongside their peers is an accepted societal norm. At a minimum, taking part in these parts of life at school costs families more than £150 per child per year.



'I think that paying for trips and uniform are the hardest things to pay for families who have less money.'

Secondary school pupil

It is important to stress that these numbers are the *minimum* cost of going to school, based on families spending only what is needed for their child's time at school according to parents and carers in focus groups. We know from speaking to children and families through the UK Cost of the School Day project that costs can be significantly higher if children are trying to keep up with *everything* school has to offer.

³ Parents and carers in focus groups agreed children need access to technology at home, but these items can be shared between family members meaning the cost differs depending on household size. This is therefore an indicative cost, assuming the items are just being used by one child. This amount does not include broadband or internet costs.

⁴ The most recent focus groups with parents were carried out in 2022, meaning the effects of the new uniform bill in England will not necessarily have been captured in the research given the time taken to implement new policies.

Wrap-around childcare

As well as significant costs associated with the compulsory time that children spend in school, captured above, many parents with primary school children face additional costs for before- and after-school childcare including breakfast clubs and after-school clubs. The need for and use of wrap-around childcare for school-age children varies depending on working patterns and status, and the availability of wrap-around care. The cost and type of this provision also varies considerably across the UK.

However, an indicative minimum cost of childcare is **£96.50 a week**, or **£5,031.92** a year. Wrap around-childcare is the largest cost that many families of primary school children face. When combined with the cost of going to school, families of primary school children who also require before- and after-school childcare to accommodate their working patterns are spending **£5896.79**.



'People who have money can go to clubs, if you can't afford it you can't go... I feel like everybody should have the same chances.'

Primary school child

Policy implications

The consequences of being excluded from participating fully in school life are costly, both in the short term – missing out on choices and opportunities that are ordinarily accepted as social norms within our society – and in the longer term, with impacts on educational outcomes and trajectories. This can have a knock-on effect on children's experiences of school life, attendance and attainment.

We know and have many examples from the UK Cost of the School Day of schools recognising the burden that these costs place on families and the impact that it has on children when they miss out. Increasing numbers of schools are taking action to lower the overall cost of the school day, for example, by reviewing uniform policies, fundraising for school trips and setting up their own breakfast clubs. While these initiatives undoubtedly make a difference for some children and their families in individual schools, they are not universally rolled out across the UK's education systems, and this research further highlights that schools cannot be expected to do it all. For a universal education system to be fit for purpose and genuinely provide equity of experience for all children and young people, national governments must intervene and ensure that everyone has what is needed for a minimum education at the very least.



'It's not fair, because if you can't pay [for the school trip], you can't pay. Sometimes there might be other things to pay at home, like bills and stuff.'

Primary school child

School funding

Across the UK, schools are provided with additional funding eg, pupil premium (in England and Northern Ireland), pupil equity funding (in Scotland) and the pupil development grant (in Wales), to support the educational outcomes of children in the poorest households. Many schools do use this money to help offset some of the costs families face, for example, by providing resources or breakfast clubs. However, many children facing poverty and living in low-income households do not qualify for this additional school funding which means schools are limited

in the support they can provide.⁵ What's more, schools may also use this funding for initiatives that aren't related to reducing school costs, for example, to pay for additional teaching staff, so we cannot rely on this funding to bring costs down for families.



'I cannot always afford these costs and have to ask family for money.'

Parent

Existing national support with school costs

In recent years governments across the UK have taken action to reduce school-related costs, but there remains significant variation in the support that families receive to meet the minimum cost of education. Much of the national support available is also means-tested and can therefore only be accessed by a small proportion of low-income families.

⁵ Across the UK, this additional school funding, ie, PP, PEF and PDG, is linked to eligibility for means-tested free school meals. Although the earnings threshold for means-tested free school meals varies depending on the UK nation, none of the nations have an earnings threshold that covers all children living in poverty. [Behind the numbers: free school meals](#), CPAG, 2022

Table 2: Current policies that support families with education costs across the UK

	Wales	Scotland	England	Northern Ireland
Food	<p>Universal free school meals for the youngest year groups.</p> <p>Commitment to universal free school meals for all primary pupils by 2024.</p> <p>Free breakfast in primary schools scheme.</p> <p>Means-tested free school meals for secondary school pupils (universal credit earnings threshold: £7,400 or less).</p>	<p>Universal free school meals for all children in P1-P5.</p> <p>Commitment to universal free school meals for all children in P6-P7, starting with those eligible for the Scottish child payment.</p> <p>Means-tested free school meals for secondary school pupils (universal credit earnings threshold: £7,920 or less).</p>	<p>Universal infant free school meals for Reception, Year 1 and Year 2.</p> <p>Means-tested free school meals for all other school-aged children (universal credit earnings threshold: £7,400 or less).</p>	<p>Means-tested free school meals for all school-aged children (universal credit earnings threshold: £14,000 or less).</p>
% of children in poverty not eligible for free school meals through national schemes:				
	19 per cent	16 per cent	31 per cent	22 per cent
Uniform	<p>Means-tested support with uniform costs available to families eligible for free school meals through the pupil development grant-access (PDG-A).</p> <p>Statutory guidance for schools and governing bodies on the cost of uniforms.</p>	<p>Means-tested school clothing grant available nationally. Minimum of £120 per primary pupil and £150 per secondary pupil. Eligibility criteria varies by local authority.</p> <p>Upcoming statutory uniform policy guidance for schools.</p>	<p>Statutory guidance for schools and governing bodies on the cost of uniforms.</p> <p>Inconsistent provision of clothing grants, with differing levels of support and eligibility criteria dependent on local authority.</p>	<p>Means-tested clothing allowance scheme available nationally, supporting families eligible for free school meals with uniform costs.</p> <p>Non-statutory guidance available for schools.</p>
Learning		<p>Commitment to devices for all learners by end of this parliamentary term, currently being rolled out.</p> <p>Removal of curriculum charges for practical subjects in secondary schools and music tuition. This policy applies to all children.</p>	<p>Statutory guidance on charging for activities at school, which details what schools can ask families for contributions for.</p>	

Participation		Commitment to supporting schools to provide inclusive trips and activities for all, and ensuring consistent practice across Scotland.	
Transport	<p>Primary school children can access free school transport if they live 2 miles or more from the nearest suitable school.</p> <p>Secondary school pupils can access free transport if they live 3 miles or more from the nearest suitable school.</p>	<p>Universal free bus travel for young people under 22 years old.</p> <p>Free transport provided for children under 8 years old who live more than 2 miles away from school, and for those over 8 years old who live more than 3 miles away from school.</p> <p>Some local authority provision is more generous than this.</p>	<p>Free transport provided for children under 8 years old who live more than 2 miles away from school, and for those over 8 years old who live more than 3 miles away.</p> <p>Free transport also provided for children who do not have a safe walking route to and from school, and who cannot walk to school because of their special educational needs, disability or mobility problems.</p>
Childcare, before and after school	<p>Free Breakfast in Primary Schools scheme available in some schools.</p> <p>Community focused schools programme provides support to schools to co-locate services and offer activities and support to families outside school hours.</p>	Government commitment to building a system of ‘wraparound’ childcare, including before and after school and all year-round care. It will be free to those on the lowest incomes and others will pay a contribution.	<p>Government commitment to new wraparound childcare pathfinder scheme, where all parents of primary school children can access care in school from 8am-6pm by 2026. However, it is unclear what the cost will be to families.</p> <p>The extended schools programme provides eligible schools with additional money to run activities outside the school day.</p>
Additional support	<p>Means-tested PDG-A grant given to families eligible for free school meals to cover school-related costs including uniform, laptops and equipment for home learning. Families in receipt of eligible benefits can apply annually for the grant. The rate is currently £225 per learner, and £300 for those learners entering year 7.</p> <p>Eligible 16-19-year-olds can receive £30 a week education maintenance allowance to support continued learning at school.</p>	<p>Means-tested best start grant school-age payment. Parents in receipt of eligible benefits can apply for a £267.65 grant to cover the costs of their child starting school.</p> <p>The Scottish child payment is £25 a week for under 16s in families in receipt of eligible benefits.</p> <p>Eligible 16-19-year-olds can receive £30 a week education maintenance allowance to support continued learning at school.</p>	

National support packages in practice: what policies mean for families

Case study: parent with primary school children

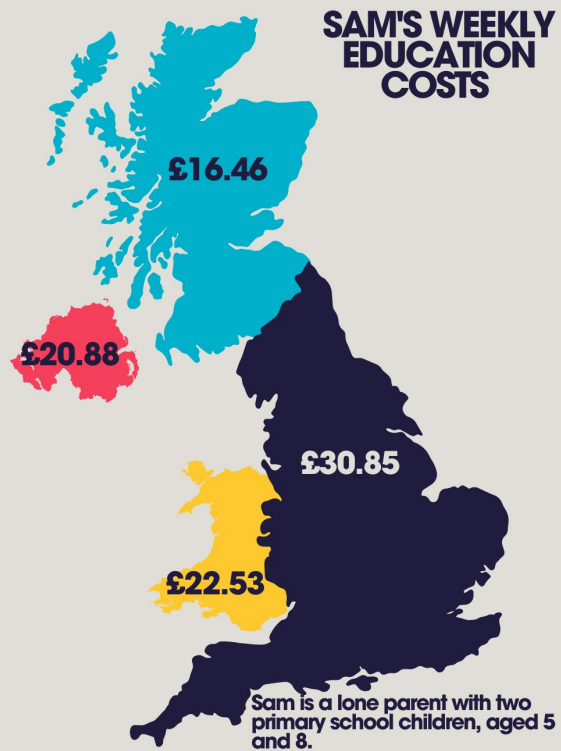
Lower-income parents in England with primary school children are paying nearly double (£30.85 a week) for their children's education, compared to families in Scotland (£16.46 a week).

Sam is a lone parent with two primary school children, one aged 5 (equivalent of Year 2 or P3) and the other aged 8 (Year 4 or P5). She is working part time and earns £10,000 a year. She receives universal credit and child benefit. Her total household income is £626 a week. If Sam lived in Scotland, she would also receive Scottish child payment of £50 a week (£25 for each child), increasing her income to £676 a week.

As a family, the minimum cost of education each week is £39.17. If Sam requires before- and after-school childcare, then this increases to £232.17 per week.

Depending on where Sam lives, she gets different levels of national support in covering these costs.

- In Scotland, due to the best start grant, universal free school meals for both children and the clothing grant for both children, just under two-thirds of Sam's minimum education costs are covered by government support. Sam is paying £16.46 towards a minimum education not including childcare costs.
- In England, she only receives universal free school meals for her Year 2 child. Sam doesn't receive any other help with school costs meaning she is paying £30.85 each week towards the minimum cost of education.
- In Wales, government support through universal free school meals for both children covers around £17 a week of her minimum education costs. She does not qualify for the PDG-A grant because she is above the income threshold. This means that Sam is paying just over half of the costs at £22.53 each week towards the minimum cost of education.
- In Northern Ireland, Sam qualifies for means-tested free school meals for both of her children because the earnings threshold is £14,000 or below for those receiving universal credit. Along with the uniform grant for both children (£42.90 a year) government support covers around £18 a week of Sam's minimum education costs, meaning Sam is paying £20.88 towards a minimum education.



While lower-income families across the UK need far more support to meet their minimum educational needs, it's clear that where you live matters when it comes to government help with essential education costs.

Case study: parents with secondary school children

Lower-income parents with secondary school children in Scotland are paying around a quarter less (£59.78 a week) for their children's education than families in all other nations (£78.03 a week).

Ash and Gaz live with their two secondary school children, aged 12 and 15. Ash works full time on the minimum wage, earning £18,575 a year. Gaz works part time, earning £10,000 a year. They receive universal credit and child benefit. Their total household income is £647 a week.

If Ash and Gaz lived in Scotland, they would also receive Scottish child payment of £50 a week (£25 for each child), increasing their income to £697 a week.

As a family, the minimum cost of education each week is £78.03.

Depending on where they live, they get different levels of national support in covering these costs.

- In Scotland, due to the clothing grant for both children (£150 a year) and eligibility for free bus travel, around £18 a week of the family's minimum education costs are covered by government support, meaning Ash and Gaz are paying £59.78 towards a minimum education.
- In England, Wales or Northern Ireland, they get no additional support with the cost of education.

As with primary school children, it's clear that where you live matters when it comes government help with essential education costs.

Principles

We welcome the action taken to date, but current support with school costs is inconsistent across the UK, and in all nations school costs remain high and unaffordable for too many families. This research highlights the big budget items for families that require a national response if we want all children across the UK to have their minimum educational needs met.

There is much more that can and should be done by policymakers to ensure that our school system really is free, accessible and inclusive for all families, but particularly those families currently living on a low income.

Cost of the School Day principles for education

Across the UK, governments must ensure that all children and young people have as a minimum:

- Access to affordable school uniform with support available to those who need it.
- Access to a free hot, balanced meal as part of the school day.
- The opportunity to attend school residentials and all school trips that enhance learning, with no one missing out due to cost.
- Access to free transport so that all children and young people can get to and from school every day.
- Access to a free curriculum with no hidden subject-related costs or charges.

Alongside this, families must also have access to affordable childcare and before- and after-school activities while children are at school.

Recommendations

England

Policymakers in England must recognise the impact that poverty and school costs are having on children and families, and take much more action to bring down the cost of the school day. The government should:

- Provide universal free school meals to all school-aged children so that all pupils have equitable access to food while at school.
- Ensure data is shared effectively between government departments and schools so schools receive their full pupil premium allocation.
- Undertake an in-depth review of curriculum costs to further understand how the current guidance on charging for school-related activities and trips is working in practice. Consult with a wide range of stakeholders including parents and schools to update the guidance to ensure that hidden costs are removed for families and do not pose a barrier to learning or participation at school.
- Provide support for all low-income families with uniform costs through the introduction of a nationally available uniform / clothes grant. England is the only nation that does not currently provide this support.
- Provide free bus travel for all children of statutory school age so that no family in England faces additional charges for their child to travel to and from school. This will also end the regional variation that currently exists.

- Support families with childcare costs, provide a statutory framework, strategy and additional ring-fenced funding so schools in England can provide enriching programmes, activities and services that go beyond the core function of classroom education, such as breakfast and after-school clubs.

Wales

The Welsh government must build on the policies and commitments that have already been made to help families with school costs. It should:

- Continue the roll out of universal primary free school meals, ensuring this reaches every primary school learner by 2024, and then extend universal free school meals to young people in secondary schools.
- Provide funding, guidance and accountability mechanisms to ensure that families on lower incomes do not face costs for curriculum-related trips and activities; that all pupils are able to attend 'rite of passage' trips such as residential; and that all secondary school pupils have a minimum entitlement to attend at least one 'optional' trip during their time at school.
- Ensure the PDG-A more closely reflects the actual costs associated with school, and review the eligibility criteria to ensure more families in low-income households are supported.
- Support automation of the PDG-A and other entitlements in every local authority to remove barriers to application and boost uptake.
- Review the existing free primary breakfast policy to ensure a free breakfast is available to all primary children, regardless of which school they attend.

Scotland

The Scottish government must keep its commitments to supporting schools to reduce the cost of the school day for their children and families, and:

- As a matter of urgency, move forward with the delayed P6/7 universal free school meal commitment, keeping the commitments to free school breakfasts and lunches for every primary school pupil in Scotland. In addition, extend universal free school meals to young people in secondary schools.
- Ensure that every child in Scotland has a device to get online, including an internet connection and the support to use it.
- Continue progress towards equal access to the whole curriculum by permanently removing core curriculum charges for all pupils and ensuring that funding settlements with local authorities and schools are sufficient to provide high quality learning experiences for pupils.
- Support schools to provide inclusive trips and activities for all, ensuring that families on lower incomes do not face costs for curriculum-related trips and activities; that all pupils are able to attend 'rite of passage' trips such as P7 residential; and that all secondary school pupils have a minimum entitlement to attend at least one 'optional' trip during their time at school.
- Ensure that forthcoming statutory national guidance on school uniform policies is widely promoted and implemented successfully so that uniform costs for families are consistently reduced. Ensure that the national minimum school clothing grant increases each year at the very least in line with inflation. In addition, widen eligibility criteria to ensure that support is reaching the right children.
- Progress automation of school clothing grants and free school meals in every local authority to remove barriers to application and boost uptake. Invest in welfare rights advice in education settings to ensure that families are receiving the support to which they are entitled.

- Introduce a system of ‘wraparound’ childcare, providing care before and after school, all year round, with those on the lowest incomes paying nothing and others making affordable contributions.

Northern Ireland

As CPAG’s Cost of the School Day project has not involved direct research in schools in Northern Ireland, we do not have detailed recommendations for the education system. However, the overarching principles for education (outlined above) apply to all UK nations and the Northern Ireland Executive should consider these when developing education policy.

Conclusion

This Minimum Income Standard research provides useful insights into the cost of meeting minimum education needs for primary and secondary school children, and shows unequivocally that these essential costs are substantial and need to be addressed. These minimum needs include significant ongoing costs associated with school uniforms, packed lunches at school, and travel costs for secondary school children, as well as larger costs such as the prom, celebrations and trips.

This research also raises much broader questions: what do policies and systems of support which enable all young people to thrive in education, not just meet their minimum needs, look like? And how can we make sure these are developed and implemented across the UK?

Through CPAG’s UK Cost of the School Day work, we have spoken to over 12,000 children and young people. They have told us that to get on well in school and take full advantage of everything it has to offer, there are many more associated costs than those outlined in this report. From the multiple dressing up days, school fairs, trips abroad, after-school clubs, breaktime snacks and school celebrations – going to school has countless costs. And while these might not all be deemed essential, children have told us that without them school life and learning is harder.

School is a time for rich opportunities and experiences, but if we want every child and young person to thrive and benefit from these, we need to take urgent action on the significant costs attached to going to school in the UK.



‘It’s just really nice to make sure that everyone’s equal in this school. No one’s singled out at all.’

Secondary school child

About CPAG

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights.

About the Cost of the School Day

The Cost of the School Day project was initially developed by CPAG in Scotland as a [Glasgow Poverty Leadership Panel](#) project in 2014, inspired by the success of Children North East's Poverty Proofing the School Day. It had the aim of reducing the financial barriers that prevent pupils from fully participating in the school day. The Cost of the School Day approach involves working with whole-school communities (pupils, parents, teachers and school staff) to identify and reduce cost barriers faced by pupils from low-income backgrounds. Following the success of this project in Glasgow and Dundee, CPAG partnered with 'poverty proofing' experts Children North East to expand the project to local authorities in England, Wales and new parts of Scotland. This expansion, the UK Cost of the School project, was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund between 2019-2022. Cost of the School Day work now continues in different forms across England, Scotland and Wales. In Scotland, it is funded by the Scottish government as a Scottish Attainment Challenge national programme. cpag.org.uk/CoSD

This briefing was written by CPAG's Cost of the School Day team based on the research from *The Minimum Income Standard: understanding the cost of education to households in the UK* report written by Matt Padley and Abigail Davis from The Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University.

About The Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University

The Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) is an independent research centre based in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at Loughborough University. Over the past 40 years, it has built a national and international reputation for high quality applied policy research and analysis focused on issues related to poverty, living standards and income adequacy.

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