

IF NOT NOW, WHEN?

Action for our children's future

KEYNOTE: THE POLICY MENU FOR SCHOOL LUNCHES

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The policy menu for (free) school meals



Economic
and Social
Research Council



Why do we have free school meals?

What are free school meals for?

Historically, many motivations for school meal programmes

- Supporting farmers: Government buys up extra food, giving farmers income
 - E.g. the US school meals programme was developed through the Depression
- Helping parents to work: Meals at school make life easier for parents
 - Ensuring that children can stay at school for the full day
- Improving children's outcomes
 - Very much a focus for the UK
 - 1944 Education Act: all children to receive a meal 'suitable in all respects as the main meal of the day'

What are free school meals for?



1. Improving children's health and nutrition

- School meals are, on average, healthier than packed lunches → possible benefits for children's diets
- Evidence from England suggests free school meals reduce obesity

What are free school meals for?

- 1. Improving children's health and nutrition**
- 2. Improving wider outcomes, like attainment**
 - Studies in England find that free school meals can help raise attainment
 - More nutritious meals = bigger benefits
 - Some international evidence that these benefits can persist into adulthood

What are free school meals for?

- 1. Improving children's health and nutrition**
- 2. Improving wider outcomes, like attainment**
- 3. Helping families with the cost of living**
 - Free lunches worth ~£460 per pupil per year
 - Eligible families save on groceries – though only half as much

What are free school meals for?



1. Improving children's health and nutrition
2. Improving wider outcomes, like attainment
3. Helping families with the cost of living

The benefits we want to get shape the school meal policy we design.



Challenges facing free school meals today

The current offer for free school meals

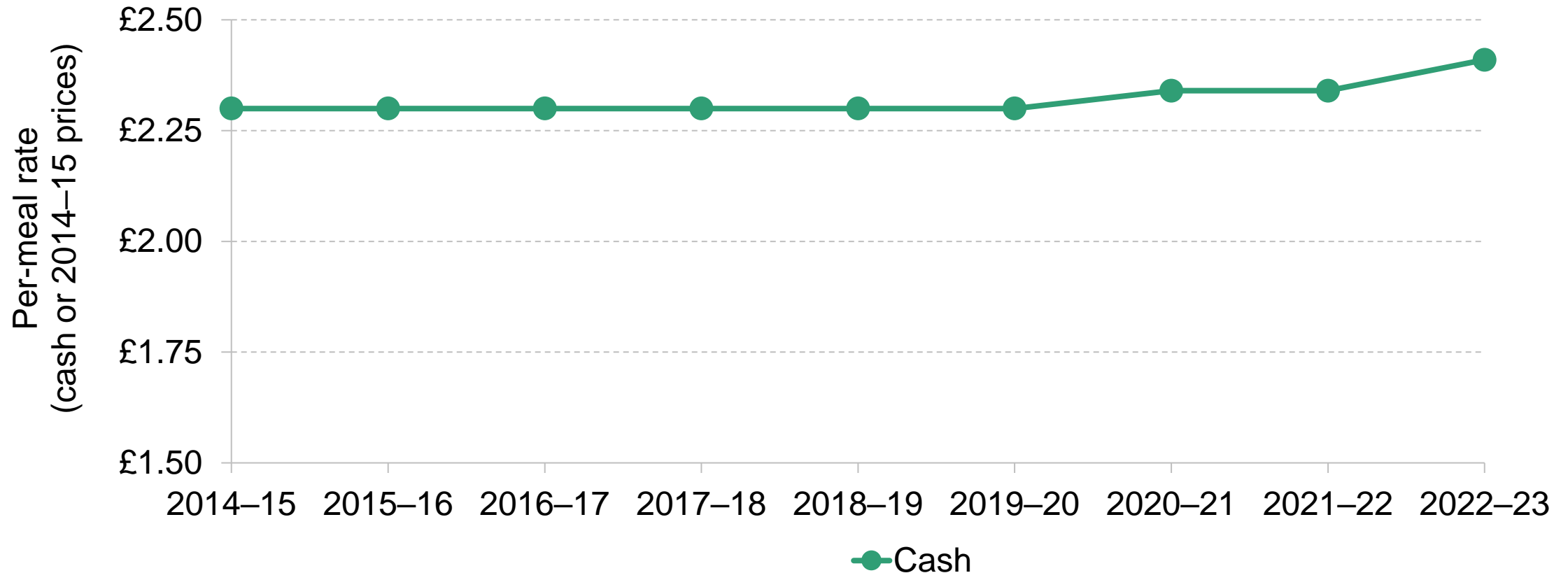


There are two free school meals programmes in place:

1. **Means-tested** free school meals offer lunches to children in low-income families
2. **Universal infant free school meals** cover all children in Reception – Year 2

Challenge #1: Funding freeze

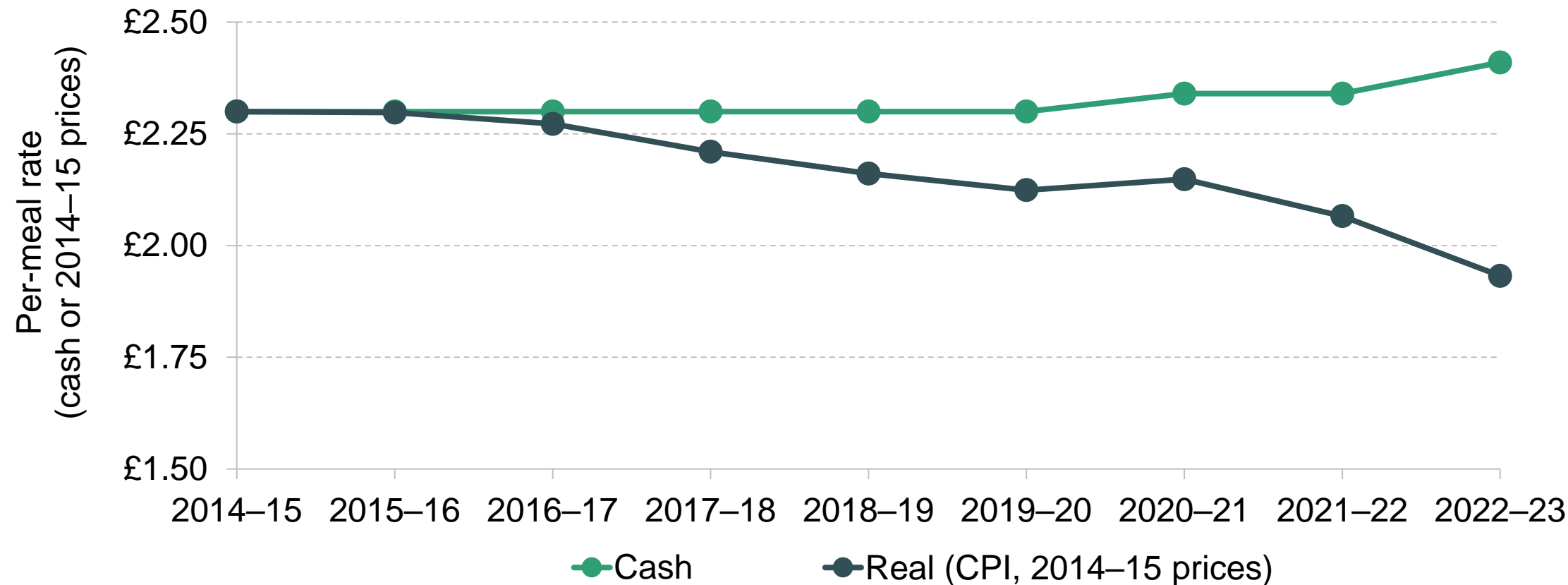
Funding rate per meal for UIFSM in England



Source: Figure 2, Cribb et al. (2023), '[The policy menu for school lunches](#)'.

Challenge #1: Funding freeze

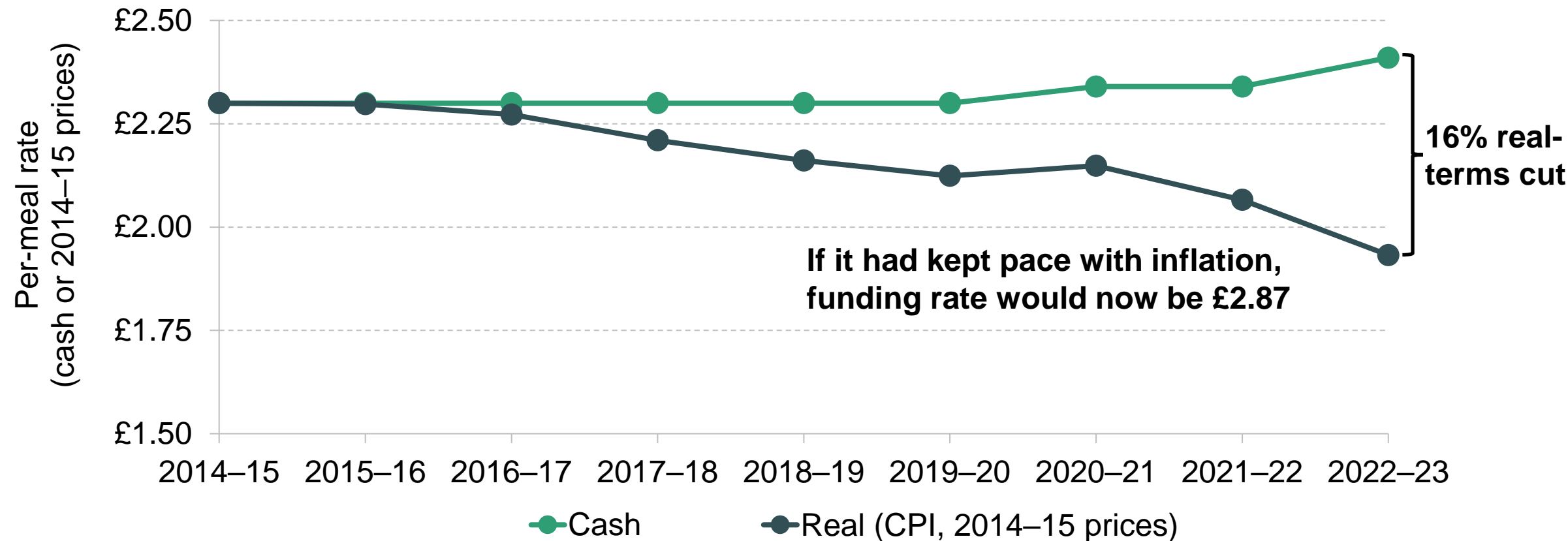
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Challenge #1: Funding freeze

Funding rate per meal for UIFSM in England



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Challenge #2: Changing eligibility



1. Frozen eligibility thresholds mean fewer children are eligible for FSM

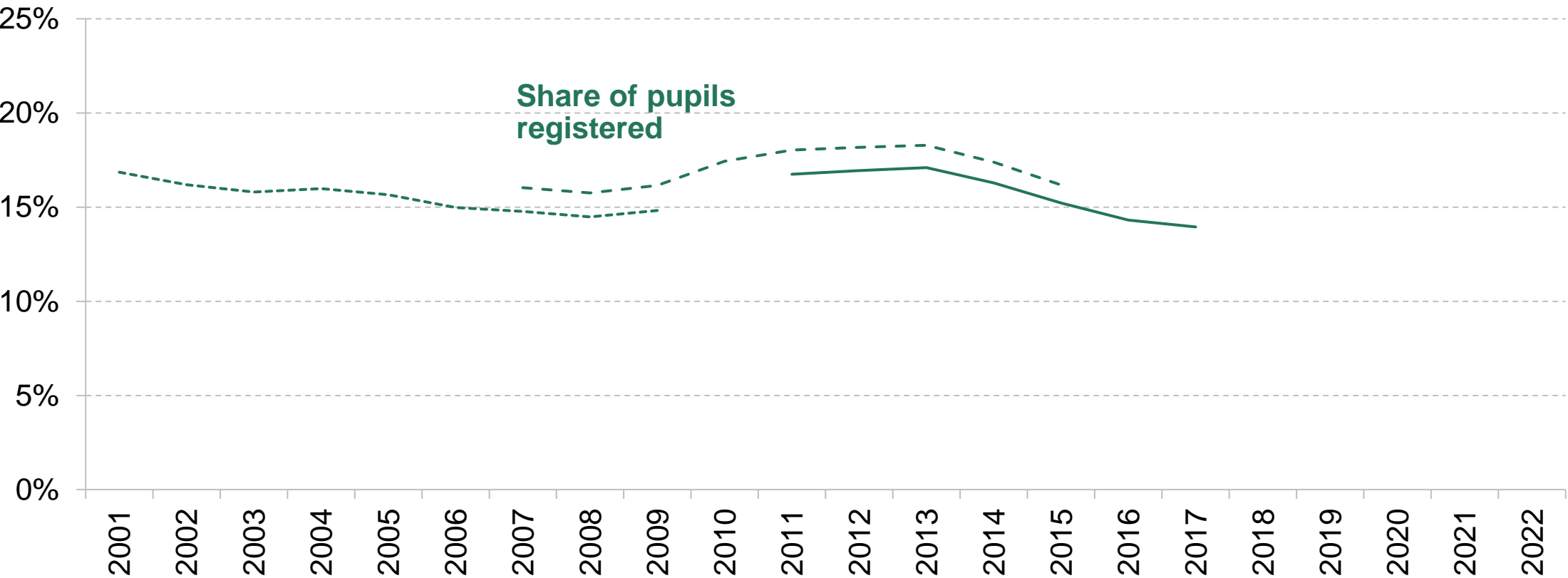
- Max after-tax household income for those on Universal Credit: **£7,400 a year**
- Frozen in cash terms since 2018
 - Would now be about **£8,700 a year** if it had risen in line with inflation
- Threshold for legacy benefit claimants frozen since 2010-11

2. Transitional protections introduced in 2018, now set to end March 2025

- Pupils who have ever been eligible since March 2018 will stay eligible until the end of the phase of education they're in in 2025
- For older cohorts, close to an 'ever FSM' measure

Challenge #2: Changing eligibility

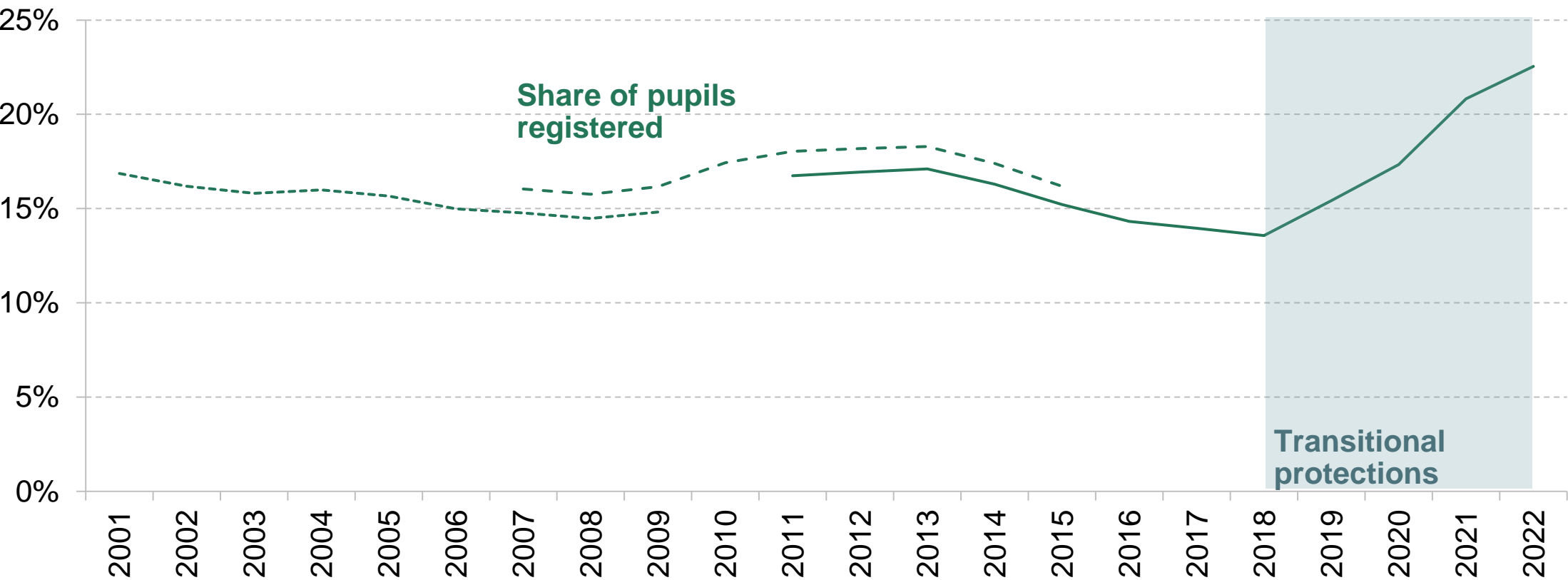
Registrations and take-up of FSM



Source: Figure 1, Cribb et al. (2023), [‘The policy menu for school lunches’](#).

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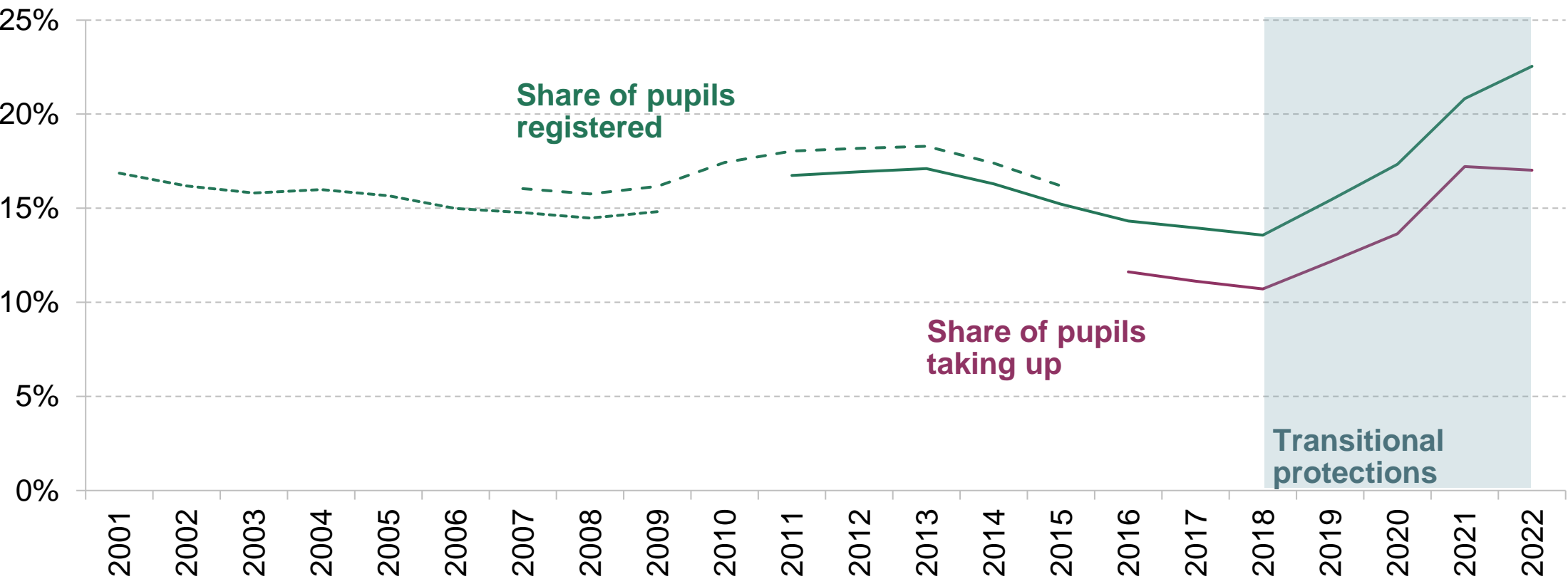
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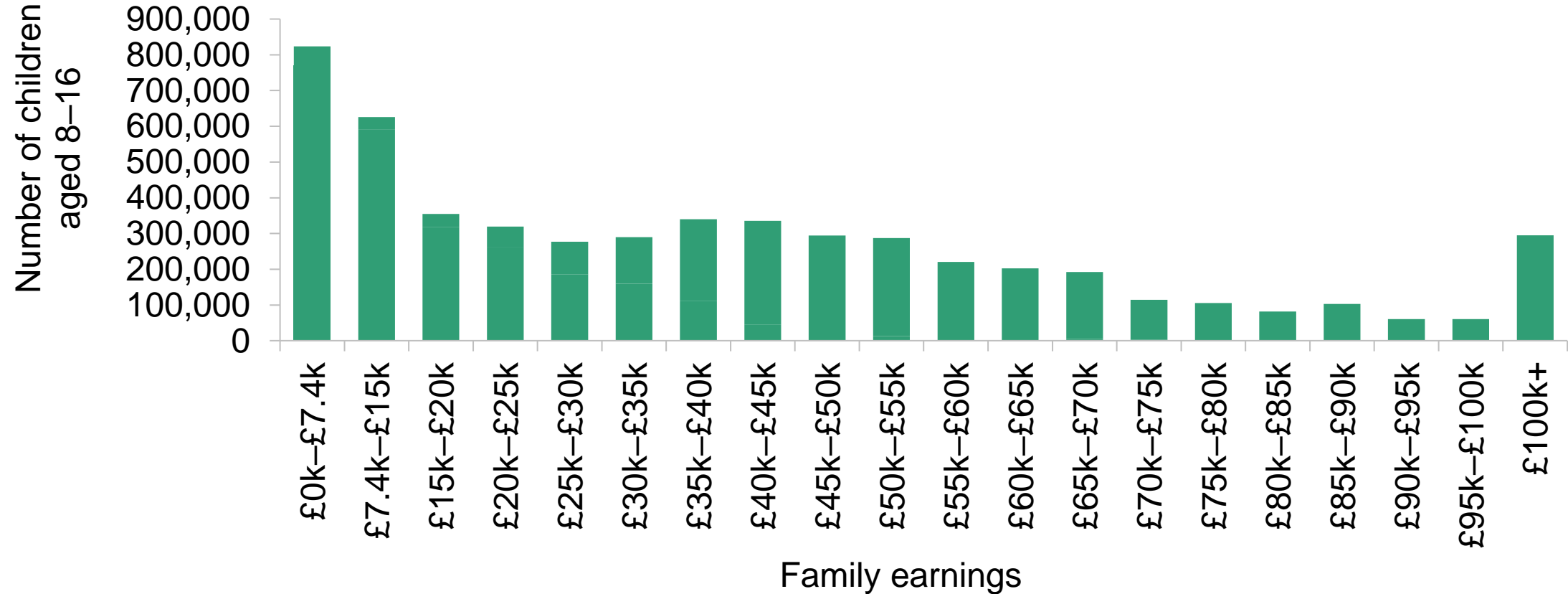
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Who gets (means-tested) FSM?

Who gets (means-tested) FSM today?

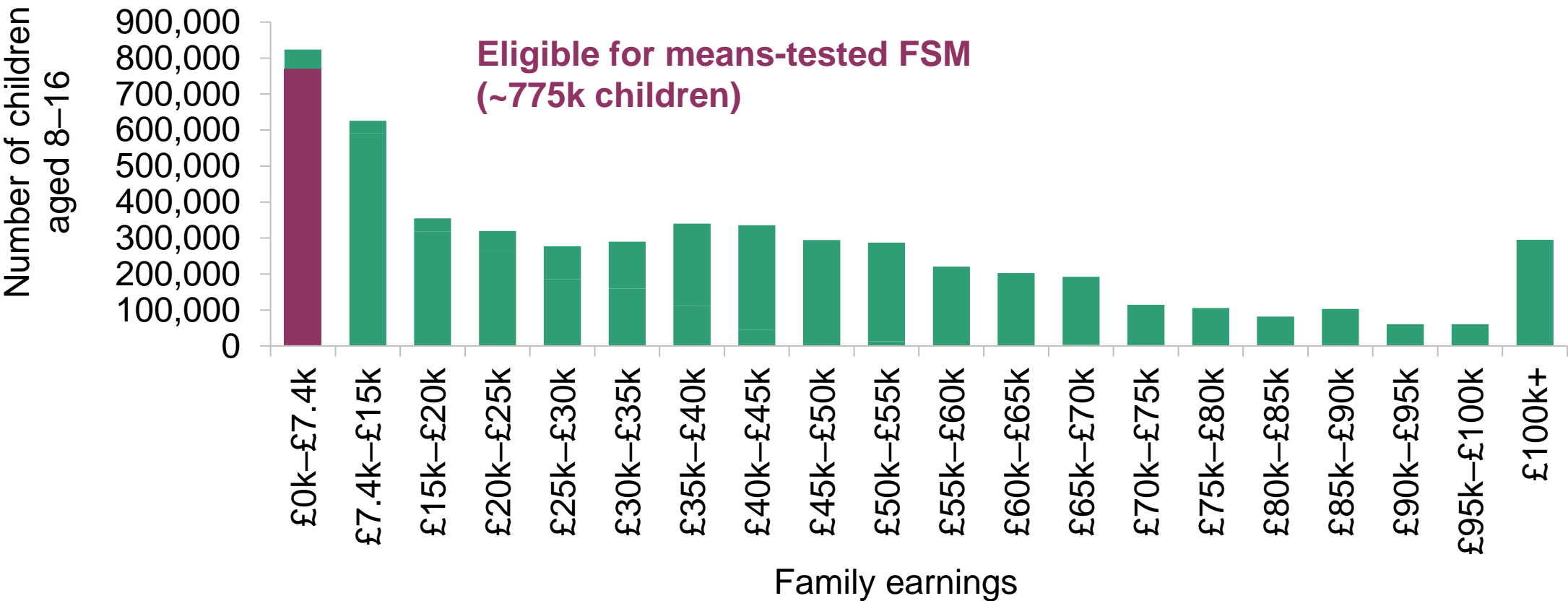
Number of children aged 8-16, by family net earnings



Source: Figure 3, Cribb et al. (2023), [‘The policy menu for school lunches’](#).

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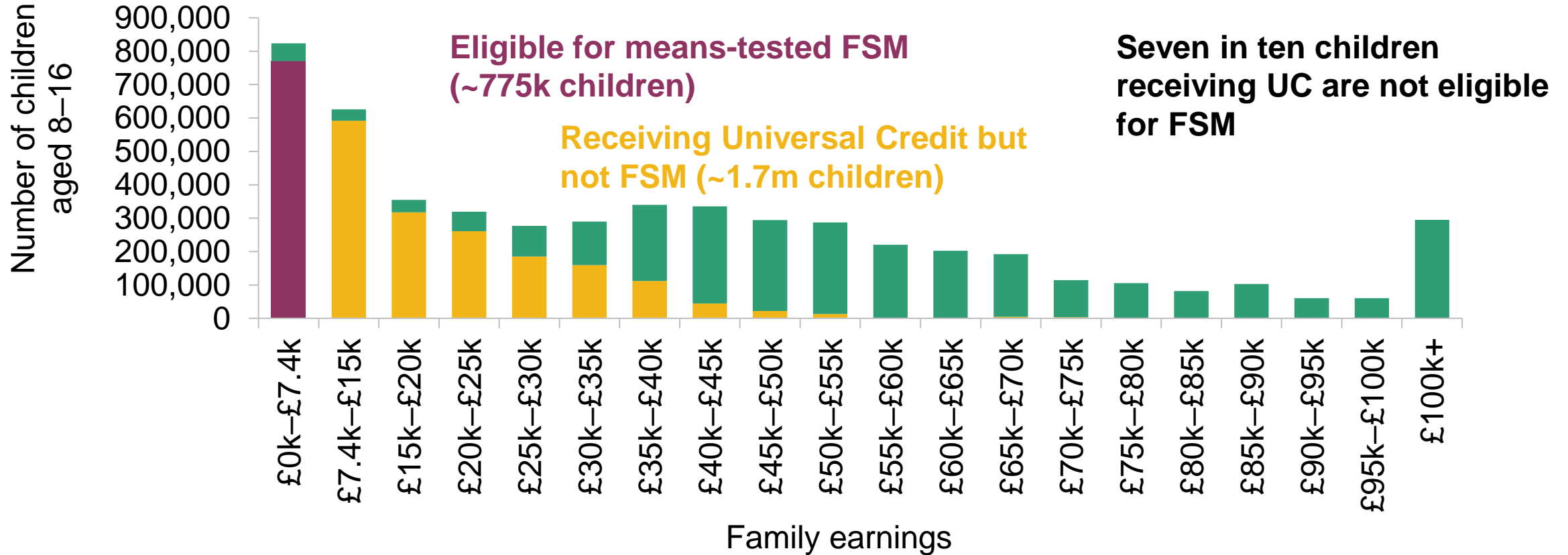
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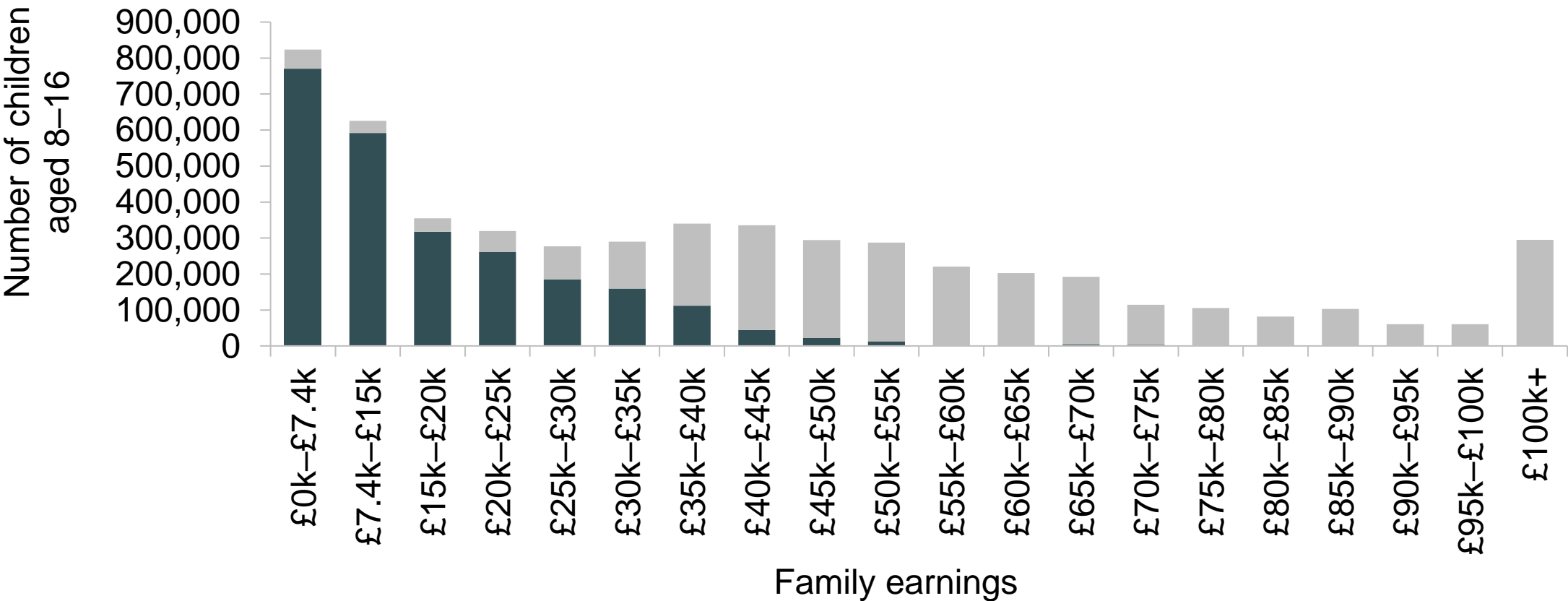
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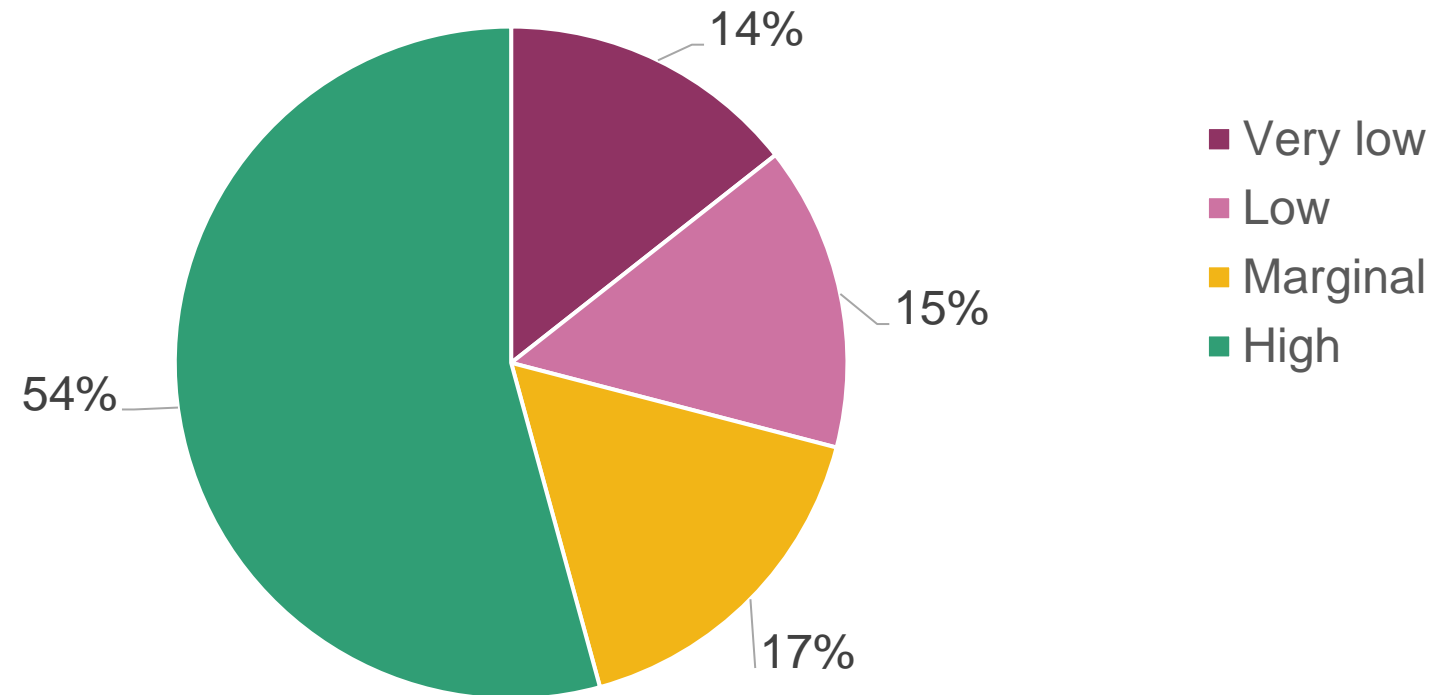


Source: Figure 3, Cribb et al. (2023), [‘The policy menu for school lunches’](#).

Food insecurity is worst among the poorest



Food security among families with children claiming UC



Note: Among households claiming universal credit, living in England with dependent children.

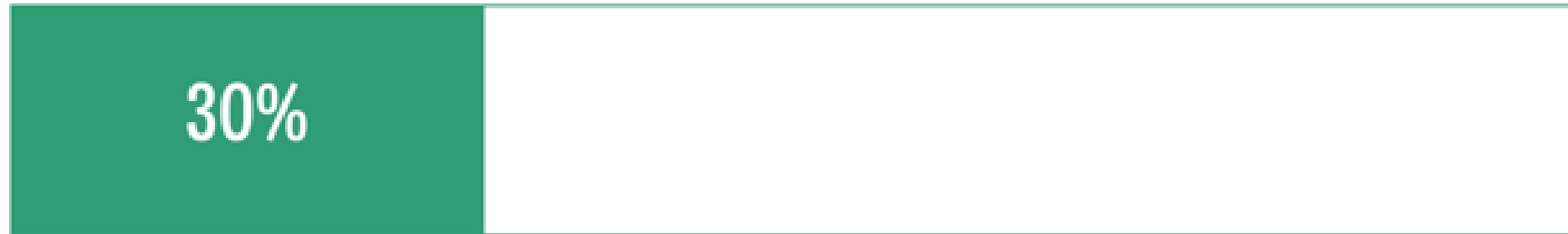
Source: FRS 2021-22 'Household food security' dataset, accessed via StatXplore.

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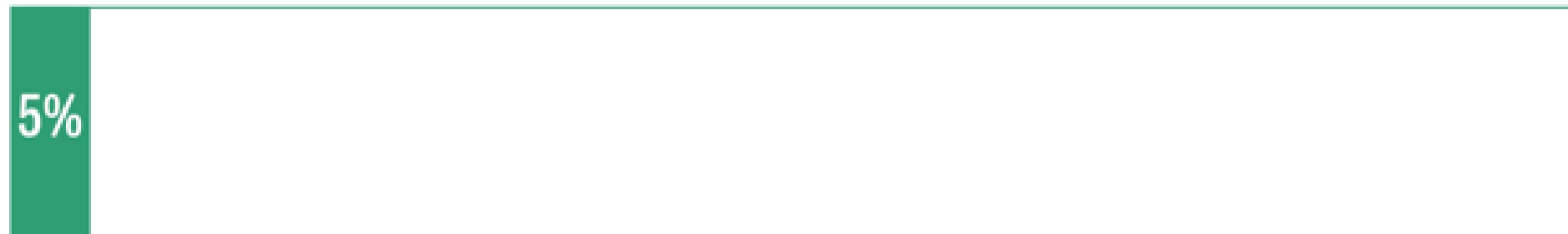


Share of families with 'low' or 'very low' food security in 2021-22

Among families on universal credit



Among families on not on universal credit

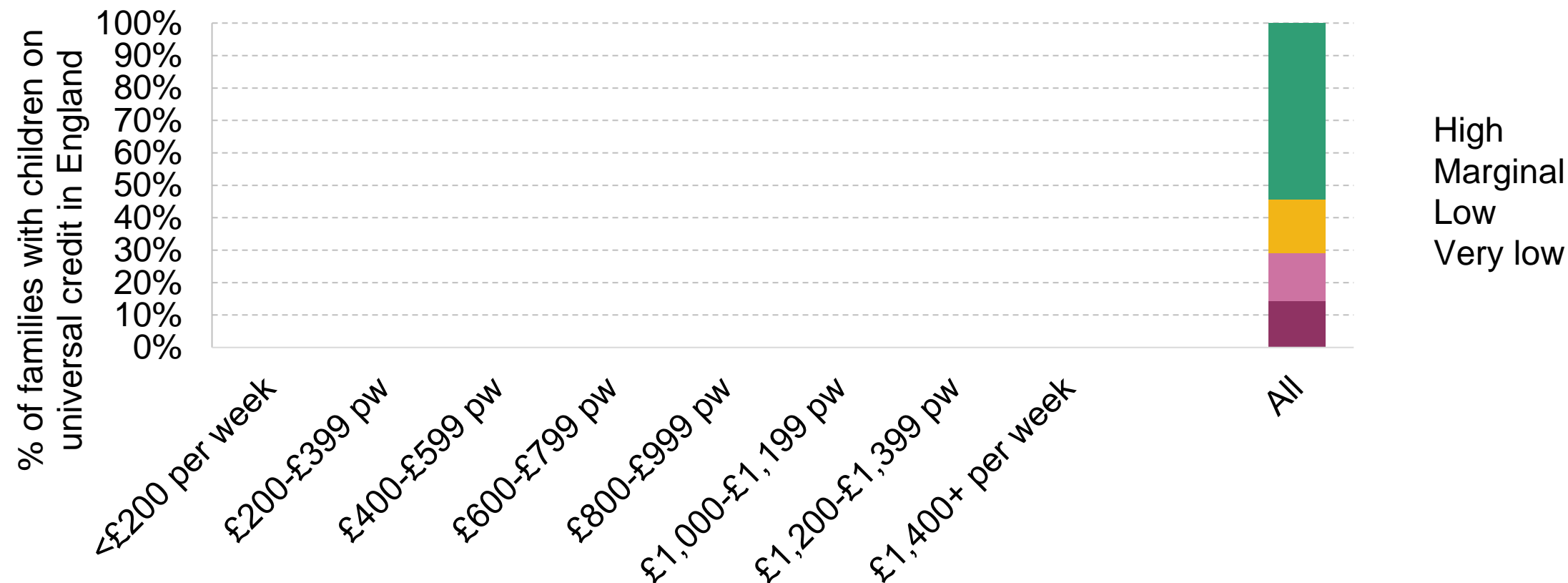


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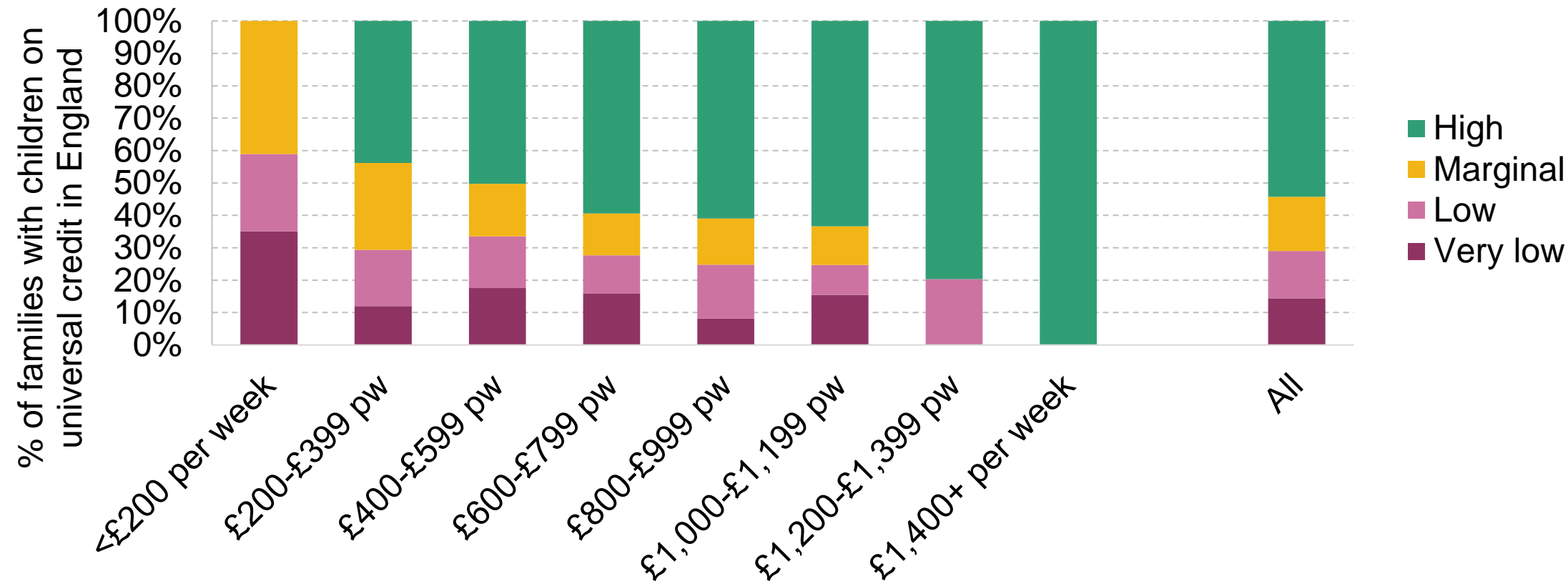


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Food security among families with children claiming UC



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What options are on the table?

Spending more on those who are already eligible

1. Restoring funding per meal to its 2014-15 level (in real terms)
2. Offering cash support outside of term time

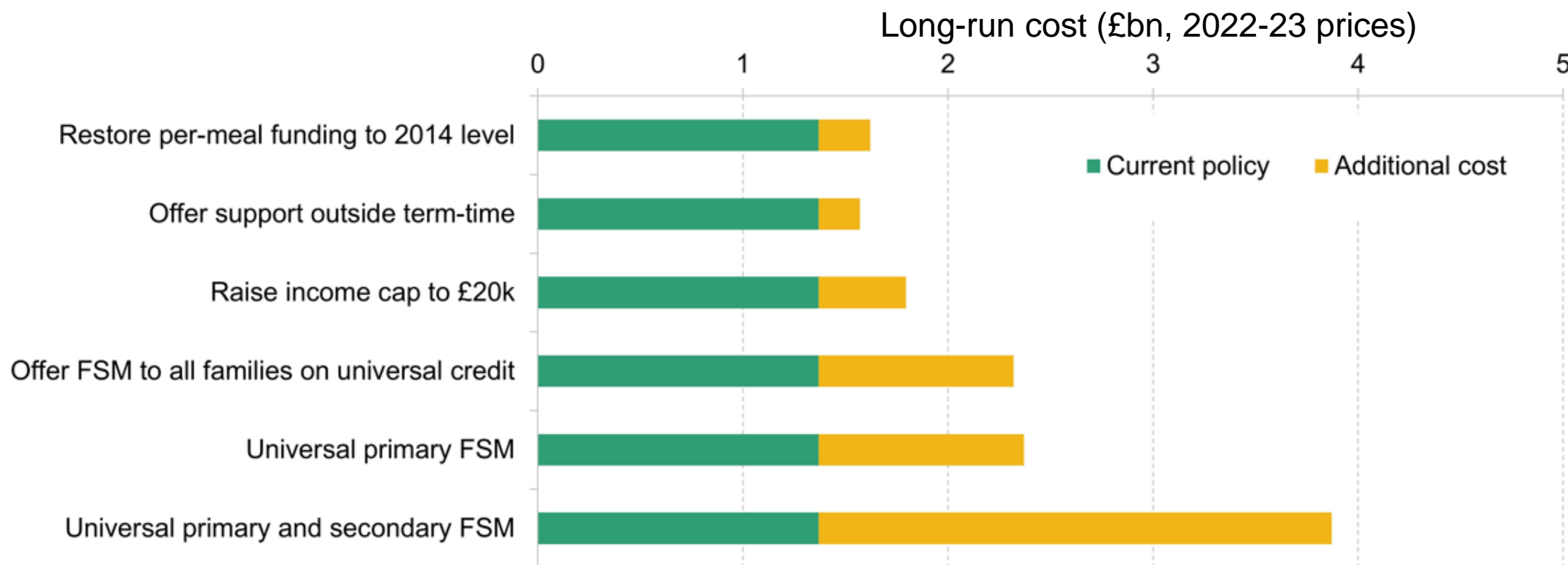
Expanding eligibility to more low-income families

3. Raise the income cap to £20k a year
4. Offer free school meals to all pupils getting Universal Credit

Making eligibility universal

5. Universal free school meals for all primary state school pupils
6. Universal free school meals for all state school pupils (Reception – Year 11)

No such thing as a free lunch?

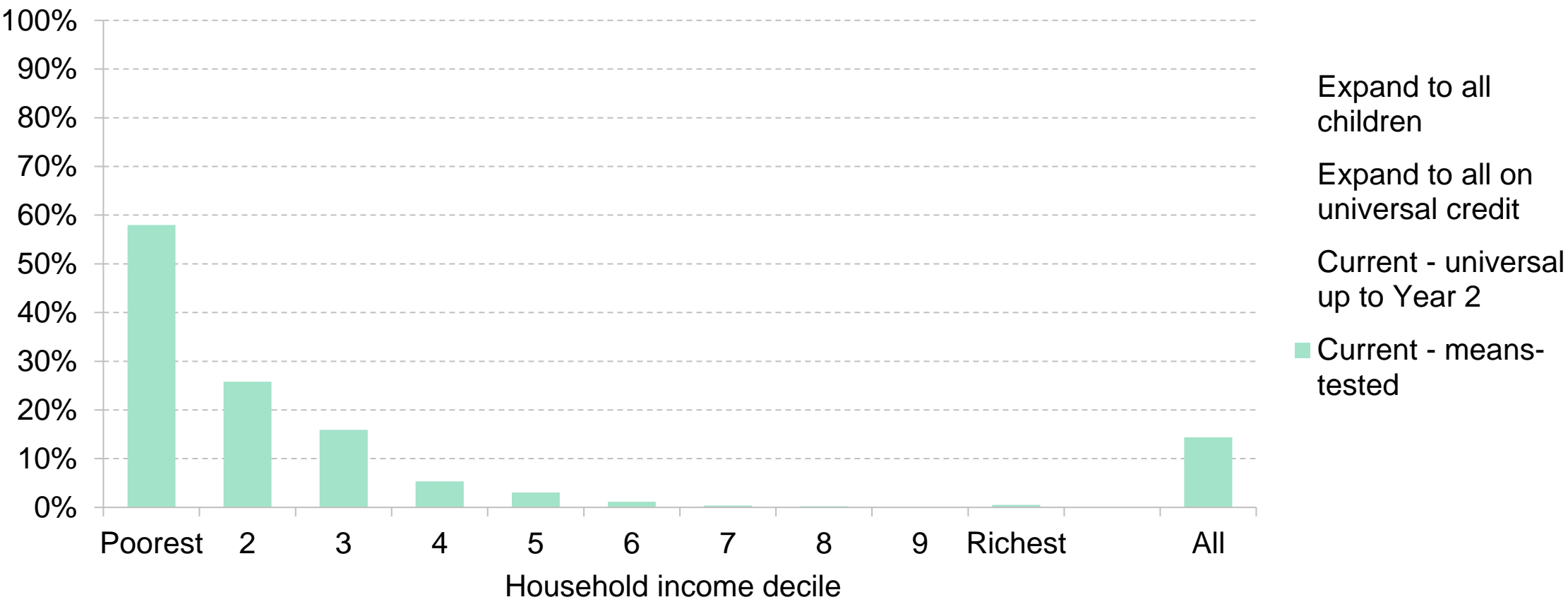


Note: All costs are long-run costs, excluding the impact of transitional protections. Costings assume that per-meal funding is frozen in real terms at 2022-23 levels (unless otherwise specified). We assume full take-up of meals among eligible pupils. Capital costs are not included.

Source: Based on Table 1, Cribb et al. (2023), [‘The policy menu for school lunches’](#).

Who benefits from expanding FSM?

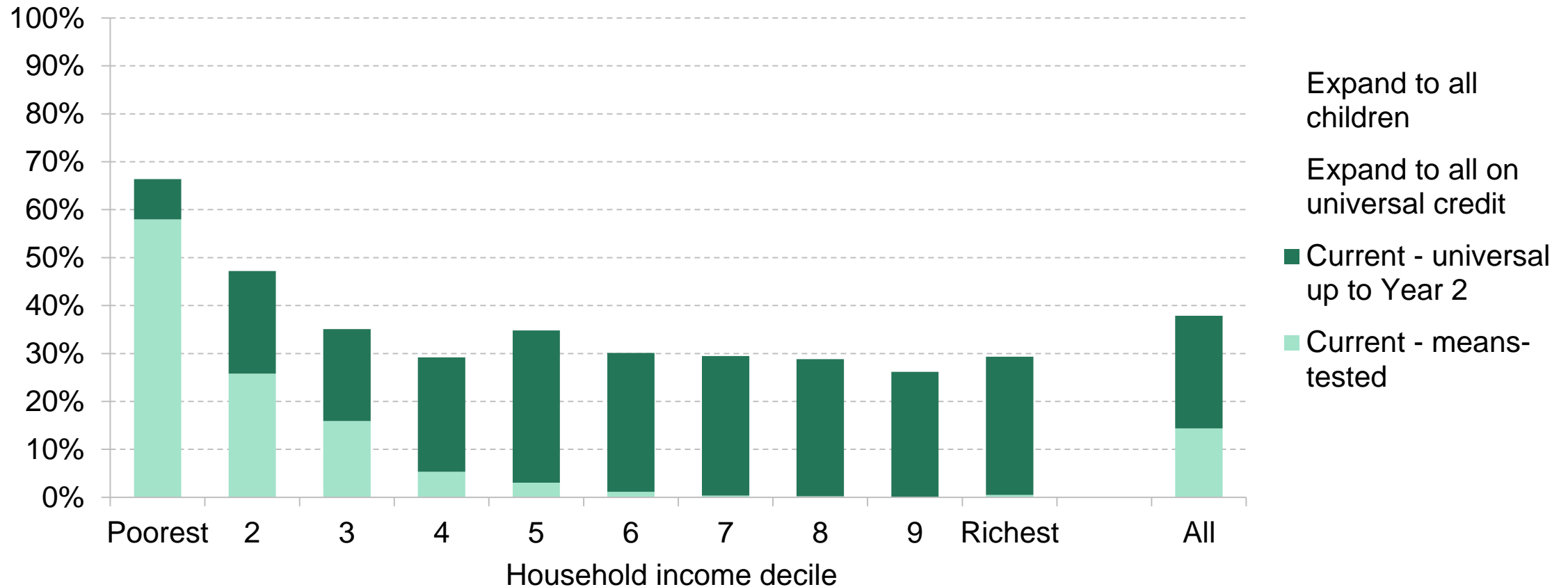
Share of children eligible for FSM under different policies



Source: Figure 4, Cribb et al. (2023), [‘The policy menu for school lunches’](#).

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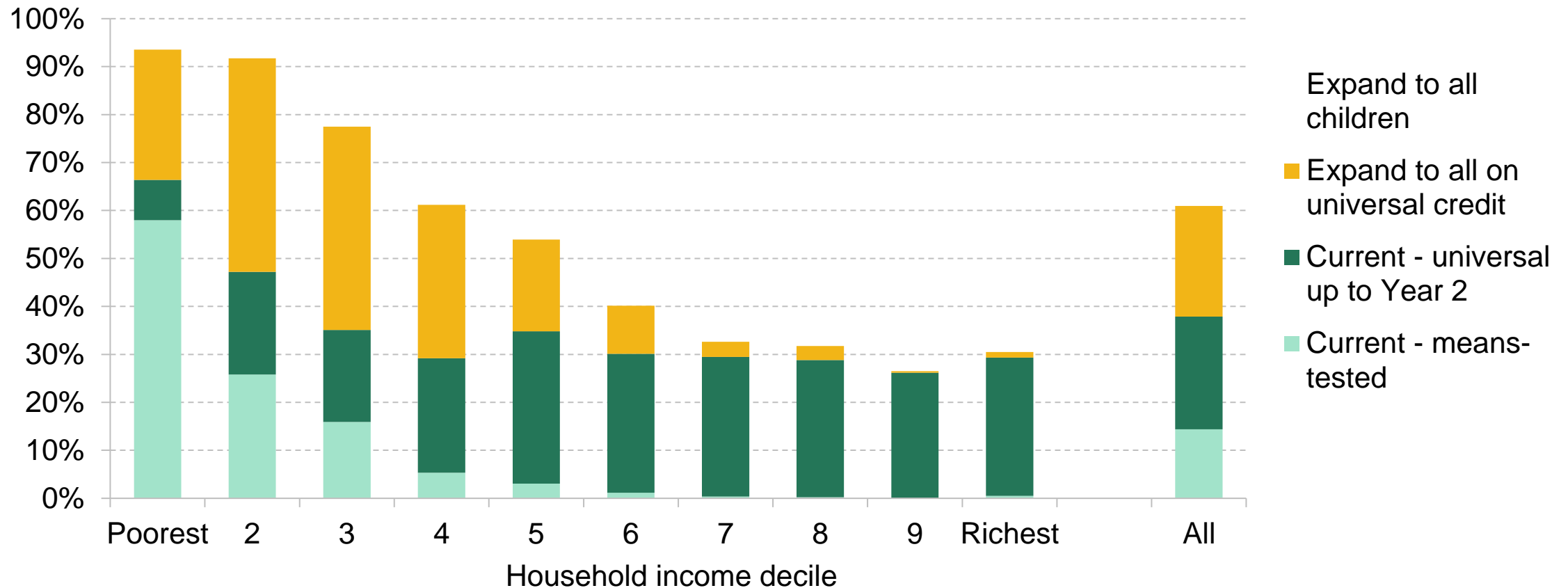
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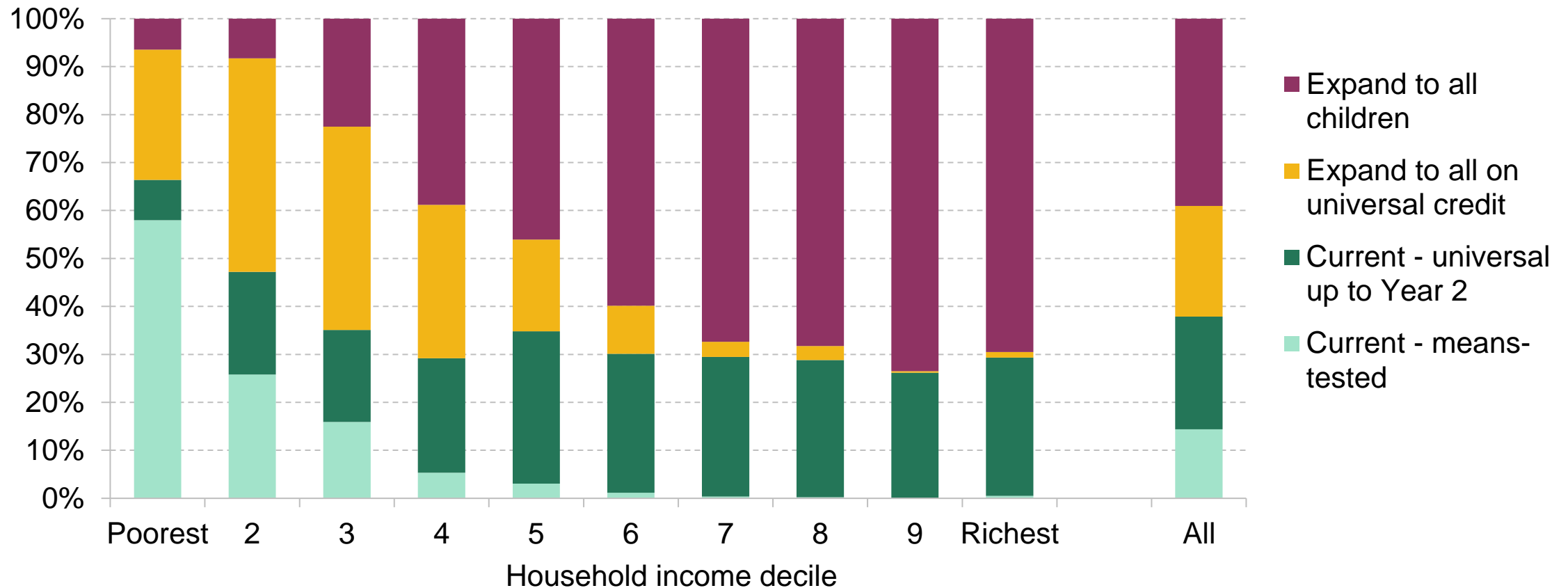
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Takeaways



The policy menu for free school meals

A high-inflation environment poses challenges for free school meals

- Rising costs and funding not keeping pace – rate would be £2.87 if it had risen with inflation
- Frozen eligibility thresholds squeeze families out of eligibility (once transitional protections end)

Current eligibility rules are fairly tightly targeted at the poorest

- Seven in ten children on universal credit aren't eligible
- Food insecurity is highest among the very poorest

Many options for reform – all with different costs and benefits

- Spending more on existing claimants will make the system more progressive
- Expanding eligibility to all on universal credit largely helps poorer families
- Universal free school meals ensures we include all children – but costs are much larger, and impacts on poorer families are modest

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