

## FREE MEALS FOR UNDERFED CHILDREN 97

of underfed children in the Metropolitan elementary schools ; and for the last four years returns from the provided schools have been published by the "Joint Committee on Underfed Children" in their annual reports.

These tabulated returns present an imposing appearance, but in fact their accuracy is affected not only by the absence of any consensus of opinion as to the precise meaning of the term "underfed," but also by the widely divergent views taken by the teachers of the moral effect of this form of charitable relief. How this divergence of opinion affects the number returned may be judged by the fact that it is not unusual to find schools in which lavish relief is given in one of the departments whilst little or none is given in the others, although the children come from the same neighbourhood and frequently from the same families. It is a curious fact that this difference of treatment does not show itself as might be expected in a difference in the physical appearance of the children. Thus in the Johanna Street school, which has lately been so much in evidence, very liberal relief has for years been given to the boys, but comparatively very little to the girls, yet when Sir John Gorst and his friends paid their historical visit to this school it is reported that they "found the girls to be in better case." There is indeed abundant evidence to show that, however generous may be the view taken of what constitutes an underfed child, the numbers publicly quoted are largely in excess of the truth, and when (as has been done in many cases) a thorough investigation has been made into the home circumstances of the children upon the dinner list of a school by efficient inquirers the result has always been to show that only a small proportion (not more than a third at the outside) of the children on the list can be truly described as being in want of food, and that even in their case the provision of meals alone cannot be considered an adequate or satisfactory remedy for their distress.

No trustworthy inference as to the extent of under-feeding can therefore be drawn from the published returns, and it is