

CHARACTERISTICS OF NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH AND SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

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Background

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) are federally sponsored subsidized nutrition programs that operate in the nation's schools. All public and private nonprofit elementary and secondary schools are eligible to participate. A student attending a participating institution is eligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals if his or her family income is no greater than 130 or 185 percent of the poverty level, respectively. To receive these benefits, the student's parent or guardian must submit an application, and the student must be certified by school officials, or the student can be certified by direct certification. Students whose household income does not meet these income criteria, as well as low-income students who do not become certified, may still participate in the USDA meal programs but must purchase "full-price" meals. Even full-price meals receive USDA subsidies in the form of cash (\$0.1725 per meal) and commodities (at least \$0.1425 worth per meal).

This report presents the characteristics of schools and students by their school meal program participation and certification status in the spring of 1992. The analysis is based on data from the most recent school nutrition data collection effort, the 1992 School Nutrition Dietary Assessment (SNDA) survey. First, we compare the demographic and economic characteristics of schools that offer both the NSLP and the SBP to schools that offer only the NSLP and schools that offer neither meal program.

Second, we compare the attributes of students certified to receive free meals to those certified to receive reduced-price meals and those not certified. We also examine differences between participating and nonparticipating students.

Major Findings

Characteristics of Participating and Nonparticipating Schools

More than 90 percent of eligible U.S. schools participated in the NSLP in the spring of 1992. Just over half (52 percent) of participating schools offered only the NSLP, and just under half (48 percent) offered the SBP as well as the NSLP. No schools offered the SBP without also offering the NSLP.

The SBP was originally established to provide breakfasts to children in low-income areas and areas where children had to travel long distances to school, although it has since expanded to include non-low income schools. Consequently, schools that offer both the NSLP and the SBP are more likely to serve needy students. Schools offering both programs are largely public schools located in urban or rural areas, rather than in the suburbs. Approximately a third of the enrollment in a typical NSLP and SBP school is minority. On average, over 40 percent of students attending these institutions are certified to receive free or reduced-price meals.

NSLP-only schools tend to be public and parochial schools located in the suburbs. These schools are predominantly white; on average, just 16 percent of their enrollment is minority. The percentage of students certified for free or reduced-price meals in these institutions is lower than that of schools that offer both the SBP and the NSLP; on average, about 20 percent of students in NSLP-only schools are certified for free or reduced-price meals.

Schools that offer neither program tend to be relatively small, private and parochial, elementary institutions. Most are urban schools, and over a third are located in the Midwest. These nonparticipating institutions are predominantly white and non-Hispanic; on

average just 2 percent of the enrollment is black and 4 percent is Hispanic.

Characteristics of Certified and Noncertified Students

Fewer than a third of students in USDA-participating elementary and secondary nonprofit schools are certified to receive free or reduced-price school meals. Of the 11.5 million students certified in the spring of 1992, 85 percent were certified to receive free meals.

The demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of students certified for the school meal programs differ markedly from those of noncertified students. On average, students certified for free or reduced price meals are younger and attend a lower grade than those not certified. Unlike noncertified students, certified students are disproportionately black and Hispanic. Certified students are more likely than noncertified students to live in either urban or rural areas, rather than in the suburbs. The local unemployment rate is higher, on average, in the areas where certified students live than in the areas where noncertified students live.

Students who are certified for free or reduced-price meals have lower family incomes than students who are not certified. Over 40 percent of children who are certified for free meals come from families earning under \$10,000 a year, compared to just 5 percent of students certified for reduced-price meals, and 3 percent of noncertified students. A third of the students certified for free meals receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or another form of welfare income, and nearly half

participate in the Food Stamp Program (FSP). Because of eligibility requirements, few students certified for reduced-price or full-price meals come from families that receive welfare or food stamps.

Characteristics of Participating and Nonparticipating Students

Not all students who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals become certified to do so, and not all certified students participate. Less than three-quarters of students who are eligible for free meals on the basis of their family income become certified, and only one-fifth of students who are eligible for reduced-price meals become certified. Rates of participation by certified students decline as the price a student must pay increases: on a given day, 79 percent of students who are certified to receive a free lunch and 71 percent of students certified to receive a reduced-price lunch actually do so, while less than half of noncertified students who must pay full-price for a meal purchase a USDA lunch. For every certification category, participation rates are substantially higher for the NSLP than for the SBP.

The characteristics of participants differ from those of nonparticipants, especially in terms of age, grade, and family income. For every certification category, the average participant is younger and in a lower grade than the average nonparticipant. Certified free participants have lower family incomes than certified free nonparticipants, and participants are more likely to be poor than nonparticipants.

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