

**REGIONAL OFFICE REVIEW OF APPLICATIONS (RORA) FOR SCHOOL MEALS 2013
SUMMARY**

Abstract

This is the ninth in a series of annual reports that examines the administrative accuracy of eligibility determinations and benefit issuance for free or reduced-price meals in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). In School Year (SY) 2012/13, about 96 percent of students submitting applications for meal benefits were certified for the correct level of meal benefits, based on information in the application files. This was slightly lower than the 97-percent accuracy rate found in the previous school year, but this difference is not statistically significant.

Background

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) provide over 7 billion meals each school year including more than 5 billion meals provided free or at a reduced price to children from low-income households. Concerns have been raised about the accuracy of the approval process of applications used by local educational agencies (LEAs) to establish free and reduced-price eligibility. Annually since 2005, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has reported on the administrative accuracy of LEA approval and benefit issuance for free or reduced-price meals based on household applications. Results are based on a review of 2,800 applications obtained from 56 LEAs nationwide, weighted to national estimates.

This summary highlights just a small portion of the overall findings from the full report, available on the FNS Web site.

Research Questions

The key research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

- (1) Based on the information provided on applications, did the LEAs accurately determine household size and gross monthly income? What types of administrative errors were made?
- (2) Based on the information provided on applications, did the LEAs make the correct meal price status determination during certification? What types of administrative errors were made?

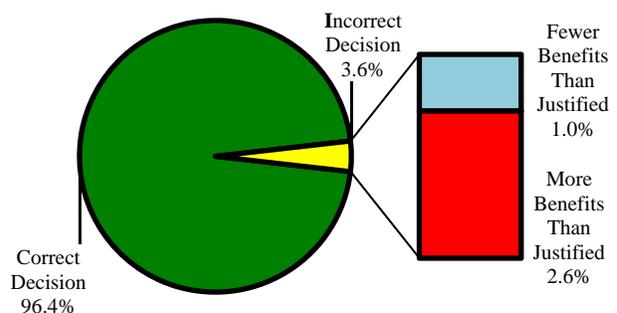
(3) Based on the documentation on file, were students receiving the correct meal benefits?

(4) Has the accuracy of LEA certification and benefit status determinations changed?

Findings

- **LEAs correctly certified 96.4 percent of students applying for meal benefits.** Of those incorrectly certified, slightly less than three quarters (72 percent) were certified for more benefits than were justified based on the documentation available while just over a quarter (28 percent) of the students certified in error were certified for a lesser benefit level than was justified.

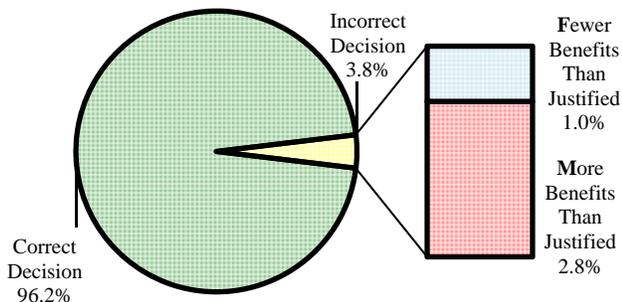
Figure 1: Accuracy of LEA Eligibility Certification Determinations Among Approved and Denied Applicants, School Year 2012/13



- **Among categorically eligible applications, the prevalence of certification error during processing was lower than the overall error rate, at just 2.3 percent.**
- **Among income-based applications, LEAs made more than twice as many errors in determining gross monthly income than in determining household size.** In school year 2012/13, household income and household size were accurately calculated for 94.6 and 97.8 percent of the applications, respectively.

- **Meal benefit issuance status was correct for 96.2 percent of the students who applied for meal benefits, based on the information on the application.**

Figure 2: Accuracy of Benefit Status Determinations Among Approved and Denied Applicants, School Year 2012/13



- **Between SY 2011/2012 and SY 2012/13, certification and benefit issuance error increased slightly, but the changes were not statistically significant.** The rates across all years from SY 2004/05 through SY 2012/13 were similar (See Table 1).

Overall Conclusions

In SY 2012/13, 96 percent of the students were certified correctly and assigned the correct meal benefit status.¹ Slightly over 72 percent of students who were assigned the wrong status were approved for more benefits than they were entitled. More errors continue to be made processing income-based

¹Note that meal benefit issuance and certification errors are not additive. Meal benefit issuance refers to a student's final recorded eligibility status in school roles and is inclusive of all administrative errors in certification and data recording.

**Table 1: Comparison of Certification and Benefit Status Determinations
SY 2004/05 - SY 2012/13**

	School Year								
	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Certification Status Determination									
Correct Determination	96.5%	97.0%	96.1%	96.1%	98.0%	97.7%	96.3%	97.1%	96.4%
Incorrect Determination	3.5%	3.0%	3.9%	3.9%	2.0%	2.3%	3.7%	2.9%	3.6%
More Benefits	2.9%	2.5%	3.0%	3.2%	1.3%	1.5%	2.8%	2.1%	2.6%
Fewer Benefits	0.6%	0.5%	0.9%	0.7%	0.7%	0.9%	0.9%	0.8%	1.0%
Benefit Status Determination									
Correct Determination	95.7%	96.2%	95.8%	95.4%	97.0%	97.0%	95.5%	96.5%	96.2%
Incorrect Determination	4.3%	3.8%	4.2%	4.6%	3.0%	3.0%	4.5%	3.5%	3.8%
More Benefits	3.4%	2.8%	3.3%	3.5%	1.9%	1.5%	3.3%	2.6%	2.8%
Fewer Benefits	0.9%	1.0%	0.9%	1.1%	1.1%	1.5%	1.2%	0.9%	1.0%

applications, with more than twice as many errors associated with the determination of a household's gross income.

The percentage of applications with certification or benefit issuance error among all applications approved or denied was comparable to previous years (2004-2012). The 3.8-percent benefit issuance error rate for SY 2012/13 was higher than for the previous school year, although the change was not statistically significant. Over the 9-year period between 2004/05 and 2012/13, benefit issuance error ranged between 3.0 and 4.6 percent.

The Food and Nutrition Service has continued to be proactive in efforts to improve program integrity without compromising access to low-income families. Technical assistance and training materials have been provided to State and local partners to reduce administrative errors and improve program integrity.

For More Information

The entire RORA 2013 report and other recent studies examining the accuracy of NSLP application processing and certification error are available online: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ops/research-and-analysis>.

For more information on the Federal policy for determining and verifying eligibility, see the following guidance material available online: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/guidance-and-resources>