

FNS RESEARCH CORNER SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

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The FNS Research Corner provides a continuing series to summarize recently completed and current research conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in the area of child nutrition. For further information, contact the Office of Policy Support (OPS) at (703) 305-2117. Links to published studies and reports as well as descriptions of ongoing studies conducted by OPS are available from the FNS web site at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ops/research-and-analysis>.

NOTE: Timelines for FNS data collection and publication may be subject to change as a result of closures and other changing circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

RECENTLY COMPLETED RESEARCH

USDA FOODS IN SCHOOLS¹

USDA Foods data collected via the Web-Based Supply Chain Management (WBSCM) system and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Order Receipt System (FFAVORS) were used to conduct analyses on food purchases and spending at the national and state levels. The analyses were summarized in four infographics, which display national data for school year 2017-2018 and include information on USDA Foods direct delivery, USDA Foods bulk for processing, and the USDA Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. (Published 12/26/2019)

CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAM OPERATIONS STUDY II, SCHOOL YEAR 2015-2016

The Child Nutrition Program Operations Study II (CN-OPS II) is a multiyear study designed to provide FNS with information on current State Agency (SA) and School Food Authority (SFA) policies, practices, and needs related to school nutrition service operations, financial management, meal counting, training and professional standards, food service equipment, and technology. Results are used to inform Child Nutrition program management and policy development. (Published 12/18/2019)

Key findings include:

Revenues and Expenditures

- About two-thirds of SFAs reported having enough revenue to break even financially or build a surplus in SY 2014-2015. Breaking even was defined as having revenues that were within 5 percentage points (95 to 105 percent) of total expenses. Forty-one percent of SFAs were in the break-even range, while 24 percent of SFAs reported revenues

¹ The infographics are available at this link: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/usda-fis/usda-foods-toolkit-child-nutrition-programs>

greater than 105 percent of expenditures and 35 percent reported revenues less than 95 percent of expenditures.

- Three quarters of the SFAs with unpaid meals were able to recover some or all of the outstanding amounts. The median amount owed to SFAs in SY 2014-2015 was \$1,086. Approximately 26 percent of SFAs recovered the full amount owed, while 26 percent recovered between 50 and 99 percent of the amount owed.
- Almost all (99 percent) SFAs served a child a meal when the child was not certified to receive a free meal and could not pay for a meal. Among SFAs that track unpaid meal charges, 95 percent sent bills to parents to collect money owed. More than half (55 percent) provided students with alternate meals until the debt was paid.
- While SFAs used a variety of methods to count and track meals served in cafeteria and non-cafeteria settings, four out of five SFAs used personal identification numbers (PINs). In cafeteria settings, most SFAs (79 percent) reported using PINs to track the number of F/RP meals served to students; rosters or cashier lists (55 percent) and coded identification (ID) cards (34 percent) were also common.

Training and Professional Standards

- Every SA reported providing training and technical assistance (TA) to SFAs in SY 2015-2016. All SAs reported providing training in administrative practices, such as application, certification, verification, meal counting, and meal claiming procedures.
- More than three-quarters of SAs (78 percent) reported providing training on the efficient and effective use of USDA Foods.
- Only 41 percent of new directors of small SFAs met the new hiring standards in SY 2015-2016. In mid and large size SFAs, 76 percent and 95 percent of new directors met the hiring standards, respectively.
- Among SFAs that tracked continuing education and training activities among school nutrition personnel, approximately 92 percent of SFA managers, 89 percent of school nutrition program staff (working 20 or more hours per week), and 87 percent of part-time nutrition program staff (working less than 20 hours per week) were expected to meet the minimum training and continuing education standards by the end of the 2015-2016 school year.

Food Service Equipment

- Three out of five SFAs reported having food service equipment that needed replacement in SY 2015-2016. Among SFAs with equipment replacement needs, the equipment most frequently reported as needing replacement included refrigerators or freezers (62 percent), serving equipment (51 percent), and ovens, skillets, or broilers (50 percent).
- Ten percent of SFAs received National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Equipment Assistance Grants in SY 2014-2015. Among SFAs that received a grant, half had used or were planning to use the funds to purchase ovens, skillets, or broilers

EVALUATION OF THE DIRECT CERTIFICATION WITH MEDICAID FOR FREE AND REDUCED-PRICE MEALS DEMONSTRATION – YEAR 1

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service administers the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP), which provide cash reimbursements to School Food Authorities to provide meals at low or no cost to children in school. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 required FNS to conduct a demonstration of

directly certifying students for free school meals based on income eligibility identified through Medicaid data. Unlike other direct certification methods with programs that confer categorical eligibility for free school meals (e.g., with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) administrative data), Medicaid participation does not confer categorical eligibility. Rather, income data from the State Medicaid agency must be matched to student records to determine eligibility. (Published 8/30/2019)

Evaluation of five demonstrations in school years (SY) 2012-13 and six demonstrations in 2013-14 found that Direct Certification with Medicaid (DCM) modestly increased the percentage of students who received meals for free, while reducing administrative burden associated with certifying students who would otherwise have been certified by application.

In SY 2016-17, FNS awarded new demonstrations to seven States to evaluate the use of Medicaid data to directly certify students for both free and reduced-price meals. States included participants in the original DCM demonstration (California, Florida, and Massachusetts) as well as four new States to DCM: Nebraska, Utah, Virginia, and West Virginia. Implementation was statewide except in California, in which 14 SFAs participated. FNS evaluated these new demonstrations to assess: (1) processes and resources used, and challenges encountered, in conducting data matches; (2) impacts on rates of student certification and participation in NSLP and SBP; and (3) costs associated with the demonstration.

Key findings include:

- DCM resulted in an incremental increase in the number and percentage of students certified for free and reduced-price meals, but effects varied across States. The percentage of students certified for free meals based on Medicaid data ranged from 2.1 percent to 8.8 percent in States new to the demonstration; the percentage certified for reduced-price meals by DCM ranged from 0.2 percent to 4.1 percent.
- Changes in certification rates had mixed, limited effects on participation rates and federal reimbursement rates. The demonstration did lead to an increase in the percentage of meals served at the free rate but not the overall participation rate, and had a corresponding effect on reimbursements, suggesting that the demonstration corrected undercertification error by moving students who already participated in school meals programs to the appropriate higher reimbursement category (i.e. paid to free or reduced-price; reduced-price to paid).
- Implementation was generally successful, but implementation timelines were longer than expected as States overcame the complexities of conducting data matches.
- State administrative costs were modest, with the majority associated with startup costs. Ongoing costs were negligible in most States.

EVALUATION OF THE SCHOOL MEAL DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

This study describes and evaluates the methodologies and processes used by schools, School Food Authorities and State Agencies to collect and report data on three Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) forms used for the Federal school meal programs: the *Report of School Program Operations* (FNS-10), the *SFA Verification Collection Report* (FNS-742), and the *State Agency Direct Certification Rate Data Element Report* (FNS-834). In addition to describing the processes, the study identifies potential sources of error when completing the three forms and provides useful practices and recommendations for improving data collection processes. (Published 8/7/2019)

Key findings include:

Report of School Program Operations (FNS-10)

- The vast majority of SFAs (34 of 39) receive lunchtime meal counts from their schools via a shared data system after the meal counts are entered at the point of sale.
- The State-level review involves examining the results of the automated edit checks.
- School food managers cited mistakes by individuals and software failures as the most common sources of reporting error. The school food managers indicated that the errors by individuals are relatively rare in frequency

SFA Verification Collection Report (FNS-742)

- The majority of SFAs track and store household applications, verification information, and direct certification data electronically.
- All sampled SFAs submit FNS-742 data by manual entry through the online State portal. States then upload FNS-742 files to the Food Program Reporting System (FPRS).
- Almost half of SFAs (17 of 39) reported timing and delays as the top sources of error. The most frequently mentioned source of confusion that contributes to errors is having two different time periods for capturing data reported on the FNS-742.
- All four State-level respondents and over one-quarter of SFA directors (11 of 39) felt that most mistakes can be attributed to human error, such as data entry errors when SFAs are submitting FNS-742 data to the State or the State is submitting data to FNS via FPRS.
- Both State-level respondents and SFA directors point to specific confusing data elements and/or reporting instructions for the FNS-742 as the root source of some errors.

State Agency Direct Certification Rate Data Element Report (FNS-834)

- Overall, State-level respondents say the FNS-834 is straightforward and easy to produce.
- States mention some challenges to identifying all children in eligible households. This includes identifying children in SNAP households that do not attend NSLP schools or are homeschooled and would not be on school enrollment lists.

CHILD NUTRITION REPORTING BURDEN ANALYSIS

The Child Nutrition Reporting Burden Analysis Study was commissioned by FNS in response to a legislative requirement of House Report 114-531. The study examined challenges faced by State Agencies and School Food Authorities related to child nutrition (CN) program administrative and reporting requirements and identified those that contribute most to their workload. The overarching objective of the study was to develop a set of considerations for FNS for reducing SA and SFA administrative and reporting burden related to school meals programs. (Published 7/2/2019)

Key findings include:

- Improving consistency and streamlining the programs is an important priority and could cut across many areas, including eligibility requirements and determination, program guidance, administrative reviews, and consolidating information requests among Management Evaluations and Financial Management Reviews.
- Work group participants expressed strong preference for receiving notice of policy changes at least several months before the start of the school year in which a change is to

take effect. There was unanimous agreement that midyear implementation should always be avoided.

- SFA work group participants suggested that FNS could provide additional support to SAs through training and technical assistance to improve consistent implementation of program policies, regulations, and procedures.
- SA work group participants would like to work more closely with FNS in a more team-oriented atmosphere. SAs also hoped that Regional Office reviews and evaluations could be viewed as a continuous improvement process rather than focusing on negative findings.
- SA survey responses provided evidence that greater collaboration between FNS program and financial management offices offers potential for reducing administrative burden for SAs.

SUCCESSFUL APPROACHES TO REDUCE SODIUM IN SCHOOL MEALS

In January 2012, consistent with requirements set forth in the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (NSLA), the USDA published a final rule, Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs (77 FR 4088), that updated the meal patterns and nutrition standards for the NSLP and SBP to reflect the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. One provision of the updated standards required the gradual reduction in sodium content of the average weekly school meals offered in the NSLP and SBP by meeting progressively lower sodium targets over 10 years. Sodium Target 1 went into effect in school year (SY) 2014-2015. The study was in the field from January 2016 to June 2017, just before Target 2 was scheduled to take effect in SY 2017-2018. In November 2017, after data collection ended, the USDA published an interim final rule, Child Nutrition Programs: Flexibilities for Milk, Whole Grains, and Sodium Requirements (82 FR 56703), that retained Target 1 as the regulatory limit through SY 2018-2019.

This study provides information about: (1) the market availability of foods that meet the sodium standards for school meal programs set by regulation in 2012; (2) the strategies most often used by schools that have met the sodium targets; and (3) the technical assistance needs of schools and districts working to develop lower sodium menus. (Published 6/27/2019)

Key findings include:

- A large variety of products that meet current sodium standards are available for use in school meals. Food industry representatives reported that they were able to provide lower sodium items to help SFAs meet Target 1 because they had adequate lead time for research and development and minimal reformulation of products was required. However, many suggested that it would be challenging to achieve sodium levels beyond Target 2.
- SFAs that had met or were close to meeting Target 2 employed multiple strategies. Nearly half of the SFAs in the study reported using a combination of three primary strategies to reduce sodium in school meals: maximizing participation in USDA Foods and USDA Department of Defense (DoD) Fresh procurement programs; effective menu planning; and changing food preparation methods.
- Taste testing was the most commonly used approach for gaining student acceptance of lower sodium items.

- SFAs perceived high school students as less receptive to lower sodium alternatives due to established taste preferences and easy access to off-campus food; they reported fewer barriers to student acceptance among elementary school students.
- Small, rural SFAs reported fewer resources available for purchasing and preparing lower sodium foods, while large, urban SFAs were able to procure more low-sodium items at a lower cost and reported having access to a larger number of suppliers, which enabled them to use more effective menu planning strategies.
- Barriers to successful implementation of sodium reduction strategies included staffing, storage, and other resource constraints.
- Additional communication and guidance to support implementation of the sodium standards were the most frequently requested technical assistance resources.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED THROUGH GRANT ACTIVITIES

RURAL CHILD POVERTY NUTRITION CENTER

This USDA-FNS grant established the Rural Child Poverty Nutrition Center (RCPNC or The Center) at the University of Kentucky in April 2015. The objective of the Center was to reduce child food insecurity by improving program coordination among USDA-FNS Child Nutrition Programs and other nutrition assistance programs. The Center formed strategic partnerships to support and increase coordination among food assistance programs particularly through sharing of content area expertise, technology, training, and outreach. Through 2019, the Center managed a set of sub-grantees who used community participatory approaches to increase participation in persistently poor rural counties in 15 states. These programs were evaluated as they were implemented, and a summary report was shared with FNS in March 2019. Different strategies were tried across the projects, but overall, the Center learned many lessons from the efforts.

The goals of raising participation rates in food assistance programs and reducing food insecurity proved difficult to measure and to separate from national trends, mostly because of sampling issues, but they found some modest positive effects on program participation and early year reduction in food insecurity. The qualitative evaluation found generally that the participants benefited from gaining “stronger relationships with local agencies and organizations, better sharing of resources to strengthen programs, an improved understanding of community perceptions of programs, and increases in program participation.” They learned a lot about the strategies they used, such as how to build strong community coalitions, and they found schools and churches to be very helpful in supporting their goals, providing meeting space and links to the community. They also found that more resources would be needed to fully help build skill levels for community organizing and communications efforts.

SCHOOL WELLNESS POLICY COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT

The purpose of this cooperative agreement was to support several studies that examine State law and school district wellness policy implementation, as well as related laws and policies on schools and students nationwide. Many groups collaborated on a large set of related studies. In one study released in January 2019, Child Trends partnered with researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago and EMT Associates to examine how state laws in September 2017 align with a model of healthy schools which is measured as an index of a wide ranges of wellness policies from counseling and social services, health education, physical education and more. They find that while ten states have broad coverage, others tend to focus on one domain or another. And the different domains of wellness policy are not usually well integrated even in states where

there is broad coverage. Other key activities of the cooperative agreement include examining the impact of state laws on school and classroom practices using CDC's School Health Policies and Practices Study (SHPPS), conducting focus groups with key stakeholders (including district officials, school administrators, food service managers, parents/PTA, students, community members, and athletics/booster groups), and developing a wide range of tailored end products for dissemination across stakeholder groups, policy researchers, and the scientific community. Products of the research conducted under this cooperative agreement are available at <https://www.ihrp.uic.edu/content/research-products-national-wellness-policy-study>.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS RESEARCH

EXPECTED IN 2020

ASSESSING THE CHILD NUTRITION STATE ADMINISTRATIVE EXPENSE (SAE) FORMULA

The Child Nutrition programs have changed substantially since the SAE formula was last revised in the 1990s. This project assesses the effectiveness of the current formula used for State administrative expense fund allocations and develops and tests a range of possible alternative algorithms to improve the formula. Data collection was completed in the summer of 2018.

ASSESSMENT OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW PROCESS

The current Administrative Review (AR) process was implemented in school year (SY) 2013-2014. Regulations at 7 CFR 210.18(b) define the AR as a comprehensive off-site and on-site evaluation of all SFAs participating in the programs that must be conducted at least once during a three-year review cycle. This study assesses the extent to which these reviews effectively identify risk areas and noncompliance with program requirements. Findings will help to ensure that State Agencies are able to provide meaningful technical assistance and require appropriate corrective action for noncompliance. The study also examines the management of review and oversight resources. Where weaknesses in process or outcomes are found, the project seeks to identify more effective methods already in use in Government and/or industry for application in school meals. Data collection was completed in summer 2018.

CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAM OPERATIONS STUDY II, SCHOOL YEARS 2016-17 AND 2017-18

As noted above, the Child Nutrition Program Operations Study II is a multiyear study designed to provide FNS with information on current State Agency and School Food Authority policies, practices, and needs. This includes a range of descriptive information from the State and school district levels, as well as data on special topics of current interest, such as the level of State and local subsidies beyond Federal reimbursements, nutrition education and promotion in schools, policies regarding unpaid meal balances, professional standards and training requirements, and practices related to local food purchasing. Research briefs for school years 2016-17 and 2017-18 are expected to be published in 2020.

COMMUNITY ELIGIBILITY PROVISION CHARACTERISTICS STUDY

With the expansion of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) nationwide in SY 2014-2015, FNS is in need of updated information on the characteristics of participating and eligible non-participating CEP schools and school districts. This study examines operational issues and perceived incentives and barriers for adopting CEP as well as the impacts on lunch and breakfast participation and per meal revenues. Using data collected in SY 2016-2017, the study will update the information obtained in the implementation component of the earlier Community Eligibility

Provision Evaluation of the early implementers of CEP (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/community-eligibility-provision-evaluation>).

EVALUATION OF CHILD NUTRITION SPECIAL GRANTS: ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEWS AND TRAINING (ART) GRANTS

This study will provide FNS with formative research for the Administrative Review and Training (ART) Grant to examine the implementation of interventions and the process that follows to meet intended grant outcomes. This study will help FNS understand any effects of the ART grant interventions on administrative processes, examine long-term sustainability of grant-funded activities, and describe challenges to ART grant implementation and sustainability. Data collection was completed in SY 2018-19.

EVALUATION OF CHILD NUTRITION SPECIAL GRANTS: FISCAL YEAR (FY) 2016 TEAM NUTRITION TRAINING GRANTS

This study examines the Team Nutrition Training Grant (TNTG) program in order to describe the activities of grantees, their implementation strategies, and the characteristics of sites and participants for FY16 grantees. The Team Nutrition Training Grants provide states with support for nutrition education, training, and technical assistance activities to support implementation of USDA nutrition standards for meals and snacks offered through the Child Nutrition Programs [National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)]. With insights gleaned through technical assistance provided to the grantee cohort, the study results will inform guidance for strengthening evaluation practices among future grantees.

EVALUATION OF THE DIRECT CERTIFICATION WITH MEDICAID (DC-M) DEMONSTRATIONS FOR FREE AND REDUCED PRICE MEALS, YEAR 2

Under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, Congress mandated that FNS conduct a demonstration that directly certifies students for free school meals based on income eligibility identified through Medicaid data. Under the administrative pilot authority in Section 18(c) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (NSLA), FNS began conducting new demonstrations in SY 2016-17 to directly certify students for both free and reduced price meals using Medicaid data in the NSLP and SBP. FNS awarded demonstrations to a second cohort of eight states for SY 2017-2018. The second year of the evaluation study for this cohort is underway and examines the impact of the demonstration on certification and participation in NSLP and SBP as well as the costs and savings to the federal government, States, and local agencies in federal reimbursements and administrative costs. It also examines challenges to implementation and how each state conducted their data matches.

STUDY OF NON-RESPONSE TO SCHOOL MEALS INCOME VERIFICATION

The objectives of the study are to evaluate the accuracy of the school meals benefit determination process, compare the results to findings from a similar FNS study conducted in 2004, and discuss policy implications of the findings. As part of the evaluation, the study also examines the current methodologies and processes used by local education agencies (LEAs) to conduct the school meals verification process. Data collection for this study ended in June 2019, and the final report is expected to be published in late 2020.

STUDY OF SCHOOL FOOD AUTHORITY PROCUREMENT PRACTICES

This study examines the decision-making process of School Food Authorities (SFAs) regarding school food procurement practices in SY 2017-2018. By surveying and interviewing a nationally-representative sample of SFAs, this study elaborates on previous studies that

concentrate on a single food-service program or focus on a single procurement program (such as USDA Foods or USDA Department of Defense Fresh). The study examines overall procurement practices at the SFA level, including the use of food service management companies (FSMCs), cooperative purchasing entities, small and micro-purchases, recordkeeping, and local purchases. While there have been many studies that examine individual components of school food procurement practices, there has yet to be a study that describes school food procurement on the whole. The results of this study will assist FNS in improving the technical assistance provided to SFAs as they procure goods, namely foods, in the future.

THIRD ACCESS, PARTICIPATION, ELIGIBILITY AND CERTIFICATION STUDY (APEC-III)

The Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act (IPERA) requires Federal agencies to report annually on the extent of erroneous payments in their programs, including *overpayments* (payments that were made improperly or exceeded the proper level) and *underpayments* (payments that were denied improperly or were lower than the proper level). This series is conducted at approximately five-year intervals to provide a baseline of calculated error in the School Meals programs.

The objective of the third study in this series is to calculate updated, nationally-representative estimates of annual erroneous payments in the school meals programs by replicating the "APEC methodology" (which was implemented in APEC-I and APEC-II) using data collected in SY 2017-18. The estimates will measure error in the certification, meal claiming and aggregation processes. In addition, the study includes: (1) robust, statistically reliable national estimates of the annual amount of erroneous payments in NSLP and SBP among sub-groups, such as student, school, and SFA type; (2) a sub-study on the differences in error rates among SFAs using different program integrity implementation strategies; (3) qualitative analyses examining the reasons for erroneous payments; and (4) model-based State-level point estimates for the 48 continental States and the District of Columbia.

EXPECTED IN 2021

EVALUATION OF THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW PROCESS

The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) included several provisions to help increase effectiveness and integrity in Child Nutrition programs. As part of an effort to decrease certification error during the eligibility determination process, Section 304 of the HHFKA requires certain local educational authorities to conduct a second, independent review of applications for free and reduced price meal benefits before eligibility determinations are made. FNS published a final rule establishing the requirements related to the provision, which became effective in SY 2014-2015. This evaluation assesses the process and effectiveness of this requirement and will help to determine if changes in the process are necessary. Data collection is currently underway.

FARM TO SCHOOL CENSUS AND COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

This study examines the multiple facets of farm to school, including the USDA Farm to School Grant Program and farm to school efforts across the country. This study includes a review of published research on farm to school since the passage of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010; a review of the USDA Farm to School Grant Program (FY 2013-2017); and the 2019 Farm to School Census of public, charter, and private School Food Authorities that participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in all States and territories. A comprehensive report on the 2019 Farm to School Census (SY 2018-2019), analyzed alongside the data from 2013 and 2015, will be published in 2021. The results of this study will improve the methods and tools used

by FNS to describe the impact and benefits of formal and informal farm to school activities administered by grantees, schools, SFAs, and other stakeholders.

EXPECTED IN 2022

EVALUATION OF THE DIRECT CERTIFICATION WITH MEDICAID (DC-M) DEMONSTRATIONS FOR FREE AND REDUCED PRICE MEALS, YEAR 3

As noted above, FNS began conducting new demonstrations in SY 2016-17 to directly certify students for both free and reduced price meals using Medicaid data in the NSLP and SBP. FNS awarded demonstrations to a second cohort of eight states for SY 2017-2018. The third year of the evaluation study is collection data in 2019-20 and will examine the impact of the demonstrations when all fifteen states are conducting matches from the first day of the school year.

SCHOOL NUTRITION AND MEAL COST STUDY-II (SNMCS-II)

Given FNS's commitment to periodically review the school meal programs and provide critical information to policymakers and other stakeholders, SNMCS-II will build on the results of SNMCS-I. It will provide a comprehensive picture of the school meal programs in SY 2019-2020 and will provide critical information about the nutritional quality, cost, and acceptability of school meals. The integrated structure of SNMCS-II will further the precedent set by SNMCS-I and support analysis of the relationships among key domains including the relationship between the nutritional quality and cost of school meals. This study will also assess the need for meal reimbursement adjustments for five outlying areas (Alaska, Guam, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands). Estimates of the costs to produce school lunches and breakfasts in these outlying areas will be compared to those costs in the contiguous 48 States.

EXPECTED IN 2023

CHILD NUTRITION OPERATIONS STUDY-III (CN-OPS-III)

FNS conducts an annual study to collect and analyze data on select operational aspects of the Child Nutrition programs. This includes a wide range of descriptive information from the State and school district levels, as well as data on special topics of current interest, such as the level of State and local subsidies beyond Federal reimbursements, nutrition education and promotion in schools, policies regarding unpaid meal balances, professional standards and training requirements, and compliance with the Buy American provision. Results are used to inform Child Nutrition Programs management and policy development. Data collection is expected to occur in school years 2020-21 and 2021-22.

EVALUATION OF THE TEAM NUTRITION E-STAR TRAINING PROGRAM

This evaluation will examine the implementation and effectiveness of the Team Nutrition Enhanced Strategies, Training, Action Plans, and Resources (E-STAR) Training Grant program. E-STAR, a school food service curriculum developed by the Institute of Child Nutrition, will be implemented starting in SY 2020-21 by Michigan Department of Education (MDE), the State agency that received the FY 2019 Team Nutrition E-STAR Training Grant.

SCHOOL FOOD PURCHASE STUDY IV

This project will collect data on the foods purchased for school meals, including the source and cost of all foods procured. Data collection is expected to take place in SY 2020-21. This will be the first School Food Purchase Study conducted since implementation of the new standards for school meals and Smart Snacks.

CHILD AND ADULT CARE FOOD PROGRAM RESEARCH

EXPECTED IN 2020

CACFP MEAL CLAIMS FEASIBILITY

The aim of this IPERA compliance reporting feasibility study is to develop a reliable method of assessment of erroneous meal claims in CACFP-Family Day Care Homes (FDCHs), test the method on a sample of FDCHs for the purpose of estimating the rate of improper payments and determine if the methodology can produce annual national estimates of improper payments. Specifically, the study focuses on accurately estimating meals that are claimed but not served. Previous efforts to develop a reliable method for validating meal reimbursement vs. meals served to children at FDCHs produced unreliable results. The study tested the use of smartphones to collect meal claims data from FDCH providers and parents of children who are enrolled at the day care homes. This information along with meal claims data submitted by the FDCHs for reimbursement were used to estimate and validate improper payments. The study will use the findings to determine the feasibility of using this data collection method to produce a national estimate of improper payments associated with meal claiming error at CACFP FDCHs.

ERRONEOUS PAYMENTS IN CHILDCARE CENTERS (EPICCS)

In an audit of USDA programs to assess their compliance with the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act of 2010 (IPERA), the USDA Office of the Inspector General found that FNS was not reporting estimates of the total payment errors in the CACFP. This was because FNS did not have methods for estimating meal counting errors in participating family daycare homes or any type of payment errors in participating child care centers. Building upon the methods developed for schools in the Access, Participation, Eligibility, and Certification (APEC) studies, this study has three important goals: (1) provide FNS with a reliable measure to estimate erroneous payments in the child care center component of the CACFP, (2) develop reliable estimation models that FNS can use to update erroneous payment estimates annually, and (3) prepare a white paper on methodologies to compute state-level estimates of erroneous payments. Data collection was completed in 2020.

EXPECTED IN 2021

STUDY OF NUTRITION AND ACTIVITY IN CHILD CARE SETTINGS (SNACS)

The Study on Nutrition and Activity in Child Care Settings (SNACS) is a congressionally mandated study that: 1) assesses nutrition and wellness policies/practices and meal quality for infants and children in CACFP child care settings; 2) describes food and nutrient intakes of infants and children in CACFP child care centers and outside of child care; 3) determines the meal costs and revenues in CACFP child care centers; and, 4) describes and assesses plate waste in CACFP child care centers. Data were collected in early 2017.

EXPECTED IN 2024

CHILD AND ADULT CARE FOOD PROGRAM OPERATIONS STUDY (CACFP-OPS)

This project will conduct a study of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) to collect and analyze data on select operational aspects of the program, including factors affecting family day care home participation in CACFP.

SECOND STUDY OF NUTRITION AND WELLNESS QUALITY IN CHILD CARE SETTINGS (SNACS-II)

The second Study on Nutrition and Wellness Quality in Child Care Settings (SNACS-II) will assess the same issues examined in the first study (SNACS). It will also provide information on any changes since the first study and information on how well child care providers are following meal pattern guidelines which were updated in October 2017. Data collection is expected to occur in school year 2022-23.

SUMMER MEAL PROGRAMS RESEARCH

EXPECTED IN 2020

SUMMER ELECTRONIC BENEFIT TRANSFER (EBT) EVALUATION, 2015-2018

The Summer EBT for Children demonstrations were authorized and funded by Congress in 2010 as a complement to traditional summer meal programs. Summer EBT provides nutritional assistance to low-income children through EBT technology used for SNAP and WIC during the summer months. A rigorous evaluation of the original cohort of grantees showed that Summer EBT substantially reduced food insecurity among children and increased the consumption of healthy foods. In 2015, eleven grantees received funding under the demonstration, including nine from the previous cohort. This study examines how Summer EBT projects were implemented and administered during the summers of 2015 through 2018. The evaluation also analyzes grantee administrative costs and describes benefit use during the same time period including participation and redemption patterns across a number of household and program characteristics.

SUMMER MEAL PROGRAM PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS AND MEAL ANALYSIS OF QUALITY (SUMMER MEALS STUDY)

The Summer Meals Study will provide a comprehensive, up-to-date understanding of sponsor, site, and child-level participation in the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO). This is the first national study to simultaneously examine program characteristics in relation to participation and satisfaction with the programs among households. Specifically, the study will examine children's and their caregivers' satisfaction with the program, ways in which FNS could better accommodate their needs, and reasons why families living in eligible areas are not participating in the Summer Meal Programs. The study will also describe sponsors' and sites' meal service characteristics, the nutritional quality of the meals offered and activities the sites provide in an effort to determine how these factors influence children's participation and satisfaction with the program. In addition, the study will investigate the barriers and facilitators to preparing and serving summer meals, and identify reasons former sponsors are no longer participating in the Summer Meal Programs. Data collection was conducted in 2018.

EXPECTED IN 2021

SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM (SFSP) INTEGRITY STUDY

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides payments for nutritious meals served to children at approved sites that meet eligibility requirements during extended periods of school closures. State Agencies are a critical link in achieving program integrity by ensuring compliance with program regulations, providing training, and conducting oversight reviews of sponsors and sites. This national study will examine how various State Agencies successfully administer and provide effective Program oversight. The study will consider Program characteristics, location –

such as differences in rural and urban areas, and best practices and challenges associated with each model. It will also focus on identifying potential barriers to ensuring the integrity and effective management of Program operations. The survey will provide additional insight into nationwide integrity challenges existing in the SFSP. The study results will help FNS identify what resources, training, or technical assistance may be necessary to provide State Agencies in their effective administration and monitoring of the SFSP. Data collection is expected to be conducted in summer 2020, but may be delayed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

EXPECTED IN 2023

SUMMER ELECTRONIC BENEFIT TRANSFER (EBT) EVALUATION, 2019-2022

As noted above, the Summer EBT for Children demonstrations were authorized and funded by Congress in 2010 as a complement to traditional summer meal programs. Summer EBT provides nutritional assistance to low-income children through EBT technology used for SNAP and WIC during the summer months. Through a competitive solicitation, USDA selected four Summer EBT projects in 2019. Of those selected, two had experience implementing Summer EBT and two were new to the demonstration project. This study will build off previous iterations of the Summer EBT Evaluation to examine its impacts on food insecurity and consumption of healthy food among the 2019 cohort of grantees.