

FNS RESEARCH CORNER

Please note that this study was published before the implementation of Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which went into effect during the 2012-13 school year, and its provision for Smart Snacks Nutrition Standards for Competitive Food in Schools, implemented during the 2014-15 school year. As such, certain research may not be relevant today.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

The FNS Research Corner provides a continuing series of summaries of recently completed and current research conducted by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in the area of child nutrition. For further information, contact the Office of Research and Analysis (ORA) at (703) 305-2117. Links to published studies and reports as well as descriptions of ongoing studies conducted by ORA are available from the FNS Internet web site at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/>.

RECENTLY COMPLETED RESEARCH

Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program -- State Progress in

Implementation: This report responds to a requirement of Public Law 110-246 to assess the effectiveness of State and local efforts to conduct direct certification of children for free school meals. Under direct certification, children are determined eligible for free meals without the need for household applications by using data from other means-tested programs. The 2004 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act requires local educational agencies (LEAs) to establish, by School Year (SY) 2008-09, a system of direct certification of children from households that receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP - formally Food Stamp Program) benefits. The mandate is phased in over three years; the largest LEAs were required to establish direct certification systems for SY 2006/07. This report provides an interim assessment of the States' progress during SY 2007/08 prior to full implementation of the direct certification mandate.

As of SY 2007/08, 67 percent of LEAs operated a direct certification system. Virtually all of the LEAs that had not yet established direct certification systems were small LEAs not required to launch such systems until SY 2008/09. The percentage of SNAP participant children directly certified for free school meals varied greatly by State. Across all States, the 2007/08 median direct certification rate of SNAP-participant children was 69 percent. States with the highest direct certification rate reached nearly all SNAP participant children. This number is expected to increase sharply in SY 2008/09 when all LEAs become subject to the statutory mandate.

States that have already established direct certification systems are working to expand their systems and improve their efficiency through the development of more effective computer matching programs and an investment in training. Among the practices that States identified as particularly effective are the use of State-level rather than district-level matching, the use of multiple student identifiers in matching programs, algorithms that allow for variations in student names, and use of current SNAP or TANF data bases.

Dietary Quality of American School-Age Children by School Lunch Participation Status—Data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey:

This report uses data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES 1999–2004) to provide a comprehensive picture of the diets of American school-age children (ages 5 to 18). The report examines the nutrient intakes, food choices, and diet quality of children on days when school was in session. Results for

children who participated in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) are compared with results for children who did not participate in the NSLP. These comparisons are made in two income groups—low-income children, whose household income was at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level (these children were eligible to receive NSLP meals free or at a reduced price), and higher-income children whose household income exceeded this cut-off (these children could participate in the NSLP, but had to pay full price for their meal).

While the primary conclusion from this study was that the diets of most school-aged children in the United States are generally nutritious, there were some concerns about the usual nutrient intakes of both NSLP participants and nonparticipants. The issues of greatest concern are related to excessive consumption of discretionary calories from solid fats and added sugars, excessive intakes of saturated fat and sodium and inadequate consumption of specific types of foods that are nutrient dense and high in fiber (whole fruits, dark green and deep yellow vegetables, legumes, and whole grains).

Roughly 18 percent of school-age children were overweight and another 15 percent were at risk of becoming overweight. Overall, there were no significant differences between NSLP participants and non-participants in the proportions of children in each BMI-for-age category. This was true for both low-income children and higher-income children and for most age and gender subgroups.

Accuracy of SFA Processing of School Lunch Applications – Regional Office Review of Applications (RORA) 2007

This is the third in a series of annual reports that assess administrative error associated with the approval of applications for free and reduced-price school meals by local educational agencies (LEAs). It does not examine the accuracy of household reporting of information on the applications or errors made in counting and claiming.

School districts were stratified into 28 strata defined by seven FNS regions and four size categories within each region. A total of 2,776 applications from SY 2006/07 were selected for review. The LEA's determination of household size, total gross income, and certification status (free, reduced-price, paid) that the LEA assigned to the selected student was recorded. FNS Headquarter staff reviewed each application and made an independent assessment of household size, total gross monthly income, and certification status, based on the information on the applications. SFA determinations were compared with FNS' independent assessments.

The percent of all students with administrative errors in the processing of their application for meal benefits has remained relatively stable over the 3-year period with administrative errors ranging between 3 and 4 percent. In SY 2006/07 LEA eligibility determinations were incorrect for 3.9 percent of students approved or denied based on information on the application. Of these students approved incorrectly, more than three-fourths (78%) were certified for more benefits than were justified based on the documentation available. Roughly 30 percent were certified free when the documentation or lack thereof indicated they should have been in paid status.

More errors continue to be made on applications approved based on income and household size, with many associated with the determination of a household's gross income.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

The following section provides a brief description of some on-going FNS research and the current status of these studies:

School Nutrition Dietary Assessment IV (SNDA-IV): The School Nutrition Dietary Assessment is conducted every five years, and enables FNS to measure the nutritional content and quality of meals served in the school meals programs. This is the fourth study in this series. Findings will address the foods and nutrients in meals offered and served (selected) but it will not examine the foods and nutrients consumed. The study will also provide updated information on the school nutrition environment. Data will be collected during SY 2009/10 with a final report anticipated in 2011.

School Food Purchase Study III: The 2008 Farm Bill requires the Secretary to carry out a nationally representative survey of the foods purchased by school food authorities participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Similar to the previous two school food purchase studies, it will provide national estimates of the type, volume, and dollar value of food acquired by public school districts participating in NSLP. It will provide insight into the importance of USDA commodity donations as a primary source of certain food items. Shifts in the type and mix of foods acquired compared to the previous school food purchase study (SY 1996/97) will be examined. The study will

also examine school district food purchase practices and their relationship to food costs. Data will be collected during the SY 2009/10 with a final report anticipated in 2011.

Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) Evaluation: The 2008 Farm Bill also provides for expansion of the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and requires an evaluation including a determination as to whether children (a) experienced, as a result of participating in the program, increased consumption of fruits and vegetables and (b) made other dietary changes, such as decreased consumption of less nutritious foods. The study will also include a process evaluation that examines how school districts are implementing the FFVP. Data collection will occur in SY 2009/10 and SY 2010/11. A final report to Congress is due no later than September 2011.

Using the American Community Survey for NSLP Claiming Rates: There is significant interest in alternative methods of developing claiming rates for reimbursement in the NSLP and SBP that are less burdensome to school districts than the customary method of applications. FNS will commission the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) of the National Academies to examine the potential strengths and limitations of using data from the American Community Survey (ACS) or other data sources to establish small area estimates (school district/school) of the percentage of households with school-aged children below the eligibility thresholds for free and reduced-price meals. Case studies will be conducted with 6 medium/large school districts. This is a 3-year project.

High Risk Indicators of Certification Error in the NSLP: Given the results of the recent study examining erroneous payments in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs (APEC Study), there is significant interest in identifying characteristics of school districts that have a higher probability of making certification errors. Exploration of various data sets including APEC, Regional Office Review of Applications (RORA), and the Verification Summary Report data will be used to develop high risk indicators of certification error. A final report is anticipated in late 2010.

Evaluation of Direct Verification: Currently local education agencies must pull a sample of household applications for free or reduced price meals, contact the households, and verify the facts of the application. This process (known as household verification) is burdensome on both schools and households. Often, households do not respond. When this happens, the child and the school lose the free or reduced price subsidies even though the household could be eligible. Direct verification, in which National School Lunch Program applications are computer-matched to other means-tested programs, has the potential to avoid this cycle, increasing household access to school meals and reducing burden on parents and schools. Five States (Indiana, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington) participated in this pilot study during SY 2006/07 and two additional States (Georgia and Wisconsin) volunteered to participate in SY 2007/08. These States implemented various methods to utilize Medicaid data to directly verify eligibility for free and/or reduced price meals. The Evaluation of Direct Verification is working with these States to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of direct verification with Medicaid data, examine the challenges for implementation, and document the lessons learned. The second year report is expected in the spring of 2009.