

Abstract

This is the seventh 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) 2010/11, 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 98-percent accuracy rate found in the 2 previous school years.

Background

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) provide over 7 billion meals each school year with over 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. This is the seventh in a series of annual reports that examines 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.

Research Questions

The key research questions addressed in this study are:

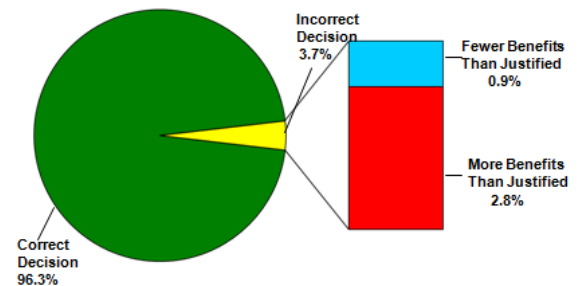
- (1) Based on the information provided on applications, did the LEAs accurately determine household size and gross monthly income? What types of administrative errors were made?
- (2) Based on the information provided on applications, did the LEAs make the correct meal price status determination during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

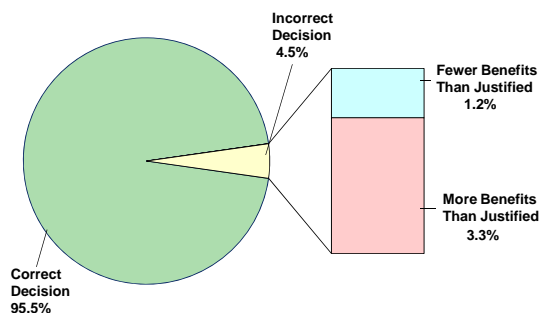
- **LEA eligibility determinations were correct for 96.3 percent of students applying for meal benefits.** Of those incorrectly certified, about three-quarters (76 percent) were certified for more benefits than were justified based on the documentation available while roughly one-quarter (24 percent) 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 2010/11



- **Income-based applications are more prone to administrative errors than categorically eligible applications.** Errors in household size determination were random, while LEAs tended to undercount gross household income when errors occurred.
- **Accuracy of meal benefit issuance status was similar to the accuracy of eligibility determination.** Meal benefit issuance status was correct for 96 percent of the students.

Figure 2: Accuracy of Benefit Status Determinations Among Approved and Denied Applicants, School Year 2010/11



- **The percentage of students incorrectly approved or denied for NSLP free or reduced-price meal benefits during SY 2010/11 increased slightly from the prior 2 years but was similar to the 3 to 4 percent observed during SY 2004/05 through SY 2007/08.** This increase in certification error resulted from an increase in the percentage of students who were over-certified. The percentage of students who were under-certified remained relatively stable.

Table 1: Comparison of Certification and Benefit Status Determinations SY 2004/05 - SY 2010/11

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

Overall Conclusions

In SY 2010/11, 96 percent of the students were certified correctly. Over 75 percent of those students incorrectly certified were certified for more benefits than they were entitled. More errors continue to be made processing income-based applications, with many of these errors associated with the determination of a household's gross income.

The percentage of applications with certification error was comparable to the previous years (2004-2010) among all application approved or denied. The 3.7-percent certification error rate for school year 2010/11 fell within the range of 2.0 to 3.9 percent found during the previous 6-year span.

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) 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 2011 report and other recent studies examining the accuracy of NSLP application processing and certification error are available online at: www.fns.usda.gov/ora.

For more information on the Federal policy for determining and verifying eligibility, see the following guidance material available online at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Guidance/EliMan.pdf>

Acknowledgements: The Office of Research and Analysis wishes to thank many individuals who contributed to the study and this report. Regional Office staffs were instrumental in the collection of the data under the oversight of the regional office liaisons: Matthew Chotkowski (Northeast), Rosemary Figueroa (Mid-Atlantic), Rick Hargreaves (Southeast), Tiffany Carrington (Midwest), Penny Burke (Mountain Plains), Teresa Cornett (Southwest), and Ashley Ryckman (Western). The study and report have benefited from the insights of Margaret Applebaum of FNS' Child Nutrition Division.

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