

Abstract

This is the sixth 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). About 98 percent of students submitting applications for meal benefits in School Year (SY) 2009/10 were certified for the correct level of meal benefits, based on information in the application files. This was comparable to school year 2008/09.

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 sixth 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 almost 2,800 applications obtained from 56 LEAs nationwide, weighted to national estimates.

Research Questions

The key research questions addressed in this study are:

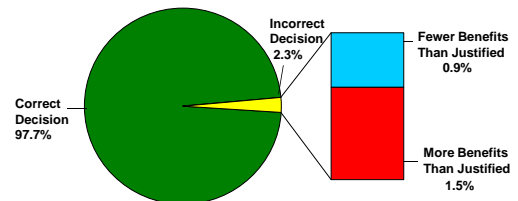
- (1) Based on the information provided on applications, did the LEAs accurately determine household size and gross monthly income? What types of administrative errors were made?
- (2) Based on the information provided on applications, did the LEAs make the correct meal price status determination during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

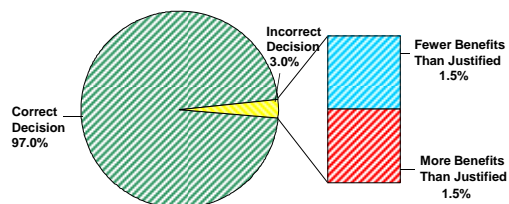
- **More administrative errors are made processing income-based applications than categorically eligible applications.** In SY 2009/10, household size and household income were accurately calculated on 98 and 96 percent of the applications, respectively. Errors in household size determination were random, while LEAs tended to undercount gross household income when errors occurred.
- **LEA eligibility determinations were incorrect for 2.3 percent of students applying for meal benefits.** About two-thirds (63 percent) were certified for more benefits than were justified based on the documentation available while roughly one-third (37 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 2009/10



- **Accuracy of meal benefit issuance status was similar to the accuracy of eligibility determination.** Meal benefit issuance status was correct for 97 percent of the students.

Figure 2: Accuracy of Benefit Status Determinations Among Approved and Denied Applicants School Year 2009/10



- In SY 2009/10, the percentage of students incorrectly approved or denied for NSLP free or reduced-price meal benefits was similar to the prior year and significantly less than the 3 to 4 percent observed during SY 2004/05 through SY 2007/08. This drop in certification error resulted from a significant drop 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 2009/10

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

Overall Conclusions

Certification error due to administrative error remained at about 2 percent in school year 2009/10. Over 60 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 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.

FNS will continue to conduct annual reviews of a statistical sample of LEA application eligibility determinations to measure changes in administrative error rates.

For More Information

The full RORA 2010 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: www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Guidance/eligibility_guidance.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: Patricia Churchill (Northeast), Rosemary Figueroa (Mid-Atlantic), Rick Hargreaves (Southeast), Tara Gleason (Midwest), Susana Calderon (Mountain Plains), Jo Ann Slack (Southwest), and Angie Fitzgerald (Western). The study and report have benefited from the insights of Margaret Applebaum of FNS' Child Nutrition Division.

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