

Background

This report summarizes the results of the school year (SY) 2008-2009 application verification process for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP). Each year, Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) review a sample of applications that they approved for free or reduced-price school meal benefits at the start of the school year.

Households do not provide documentation of income or participation in means-tested public assistance programs at the time they submit applications for school meal benefits. However, if selected for verification, households must submit such documentation to maintain their free or reduced-price certifications.

Households whose benefits are to be reduced or terminated as a result of the verification process are given an opportunity to appeal. In addition, households may reapply for benefits at any time.

Verification Summary Report Data

Verification Summary Reports are compiled by the States and submitted annually to FNS. Each report summarizes the verification results for the sample of approved applications selected by an LEA for review.

NSLP rules provide for three verification sampling methods. The standard method requires LEAs to select the lesser of 3 percent or 3,000 approved applications. LEAs using the standard method must select first from the pool of error-prone applications (those with reported incomes near program eligibility thresholds). LEAs with low or improved verification nonresponse rates may use one of two alternate sampling methods. The alternate random option allows for the selection of 3 percent or 3,000 applications drawn at random from the full population of approved applications. The alternate focused method allows for the selection

of fewer applications, but requires that they be drawn from the error-prone applications.

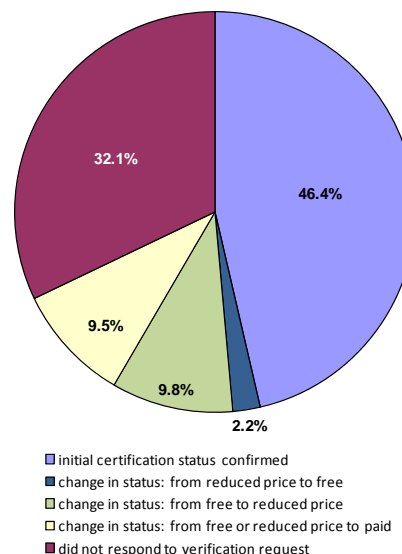
Summary of Findings

SY 2008-2009 verification outcomes:

LEAs selected nearly 279,000 SY 2008-2009 household applications for review.

- LEAs confirmed the initial free or reduced-price certifications of 46 percent of sampled applications.
- LEAs determined that the initial certifications for 22 percent of sampled applications were not supported by documentation submitted by households.
- The initial free or reduced-price certifications for 32 percent of sampled applications were withdrawn because households failed to respond to LEA requests for documentation.

**Figure 1
Verification Outcomes, SY 2008-2009
278,978 applications selected for review**

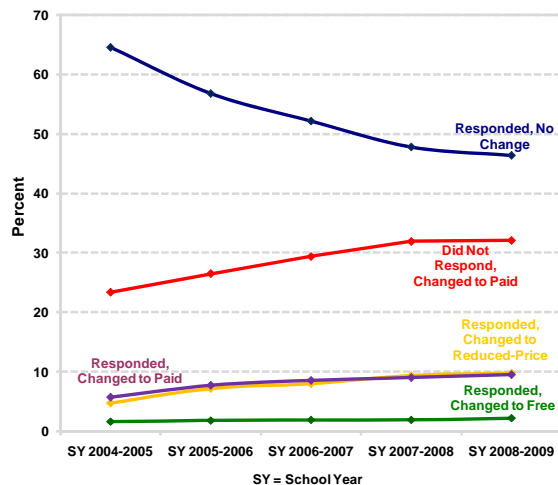


Trends in verification outcomes:

The States first began submitting results of LEA verification efforts to FNS in SY 2004-2005. Figure 2 highlights a few key trends over the past 5 years.

- The share of sampled applications whose initial certifications were confirmed through verification declined modestly in SY 2008-2009 to 46 percent, from 48 percent in SY 2007-2008. This follows a 17 percentage point decline over the three previous school years.
- The rate of household nonresponse to LEA requests for documentation increased from 23 percent in SY 2004-2005 to 32 percent in SY 2007-2008. The nonresponse rate held steady at 32 percent in SY 2008-2009.

Figure 2
Change in Verification Outcomes
SY 2004-2005 to SY 2008-2009



One development that has contributed to these trends is the change in program rules, mandated by the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 that requires most LEAs to select their verification samples from the

subpopulation of error-prone applications, rather than from the general population of approved applications.

Another is the growing use of direct certification of children that receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamp Program) benefits. Under the 2004 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, LEAs were required to establish systems to approve SNAP participant children for free school meals without applications. All LEAs were subject to the mandate by SY 2008-2009.

The share of children approved for free school meals by direct certification grew to 36 percent in SY 2008-2009 from 34 percent the previous year. The share of children approved for free meals through the traditional application process dropped from 60 percent to 57 percent. (The remaining 7 percent are children in non-base-year Provision 2 and Provision 3 schools who were determined income eligible or categorically eligible for free meals in the schools' most recent base years.)

Because directly certified applicants are not subject to verification, LEAs are able to concentrate their efforts on applicants whose eligibility for free or reduced-price meals is less certain. By removing categorically eligible applicants from the verification pool, direct certification increases the pool's concentration of error prone applicants.

As LEAs and State education agencies continue to improve the effectiveness of their direct certification systems, the pool of applicants subject to verification will get smaller. Those who remain will tend to have higher incomes than directly certified SNAP participants or may be less able or less willing to provide documentation in response to LEA verification requests.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research and Analysis. *Analysis of Verification Summary Data, School Year 2008-2009*. Dennis Ranalli, Edward Harper, and Jay Hirschman, Alexandria, VA, March 2011.

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