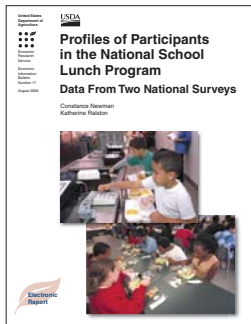


ERS Report Summary

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Profiles of Participants in the National School Lunch Program

Data From Two National Surveys

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In 2004, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) served an average of 29 million lunches daily, at a Federal cost of \$7.6 billion. Schools are reimbursed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) according to the number of each type of meal served. Schools provide three payment alternatives:

- Schools provide full-price meals to any students who wish to participate and pay full price.
- Schools provide reduced-price meals to students if their household income is less than or equal to 185 percent of the Federal poverty level.
- Schools provide free meals to students if their household income is less than or equal to 130 percent of poverty or if their household receives food stamps or assistance from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

What Is the Issue?

FNS administrative data do not include information on the demographic characteristics of school meal participants—information that could help program administrators more effectively target the program.

This study examines the demographic characteristics of students who are served by the NSLP. And it looks at whether nationally representative surveys that include NSLP data can adequately estimate participant characteristics.

The most recent FNS estimates of student characteristics were based on the School Nutrition and Dietary Assessment I (SNDA I) conducted in 1992. This study uses two more recent national surveys—the 2001 Panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and the 1999-2002 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES)—to present new estimates of NSLP participant characteristics.

What Did the Study Find?

We examined student participants' ethnicity, household composition, age groups, income-to-poverty groups, and household participation in other assistance programs.

- Both SIPP and NHANES suggest that free-lunch recipients are about evenly divided among White, African-American, and Hispanic participants. Within ethnic groups, Whites had the smallest share of students receiving free lunches, but they were just as likely as other groups to receive reduced-price meals.
- SIPP shows that two-thirds of participants from female-headed households received free lunches.

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- Both NHANES and SIPP show that participation within each lunch payment category (free, reduced-price, and paid) was higher for children ages 8-13.
- Almost one-half of NSLP participants lived in households with incomes of 0-185 percent of poverty compared with a little more than one-third of all students, according to SIPP.
- According to SIPP, almost all students in households participating in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) or TANF received free lunches. But almost two-thirds of households with students receiving a free lunch were not participating in either the FSP or TANF.

Estimates from NHANES and SIPP are generally similar to each other. Both provide estimates that are statistically close to FNS administrative data for overall participation in free, reduced-price, and full-price lunches. Therefore, we find that these two national surveys are useful sources of data for examining participant characteristics and NSLP effectiveness.

How Was the Study Conducted?

We estimated NSLP participant characteristics from SIPP using Federal fiscal year 2001 and NHANES using calendar years 1999-2002. We tested whether the FNS administrative data were within the 95-percent confidence intervals of estimates from each of the two surveys. We compared the results of the two surveys with each other. We also compared estimates from earlier rounds of SIPP and NHANES with estimates from the 1992 SNDA I.