



Ken Hammond, USDA

National School Lunch Program Fills Food Assistance Gaps

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) serves 29 million lunches daily, and nearly half of those are served free to low-income students. ERS researchers found that two-thirds of students receiving free lunches were in households that did not participate in the Food Stamp Program or in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), even though their income levels were sufficiently low to qualify for benefits.

The National School Lunch Program makes free lunches available to children in households with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty line—\$26,000 for a family of four in 2006. The program does not have some of the restrictions that may discourage participation in the Food Stamp Program and TANF, such as asset limits and proof of income. Schools also encourage families to apply for NSLP certification by sending home application forms with students. Schools have an incentive to increase participation because higher participation helps the school cafeteria cover fixed costs.

Researchers also found that participation in the NSLP, for free meals as well as reduced- and full-price meals, is lower among high school students than among children ages 8-13. This finding

is partly related to younger students' being more likely to have lower household incomes and thus more likely to qualify for free and reduced-price meals. Researchers found that 34 percent of students ages 8-13 came from families below 130 percent of the poverty line

while only 30 percent of students ages 15-18 did.

A focus group study also found lower participation among older students to be linked to greater concerns about stigma, both over being poor enough to receive a free meal and over the perception of school meals as "uncool," compared with food from the a la carte line or off campus.

Greater use of electronic payment methods to prevent free meal recipients from being identified by their peers has increased participation, as have changes in menu and meal presentation, such as the introduction of salad bars and improved cooking techniques. Ψ

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This finding is drawn from . . .

Profiles of Participants in the National School Lunch Program: Data From Two National Surveys, by Constance Newman and Katherine Ralston, EIB-17, USDA, Economic Research Service, August 2006, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib17/