

**REGIONAL OFFICE REVIEW OF APPLICATIONS (RORA)
FOR SCHOOL MEALS - 2014 SUMMARY**

Abstract

This is the 10th 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) 2013/14, about 97 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 higher than the 96-percent accuracy rate found in the previous school year.

Background

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) provide over 7 billion meals each school year including more than 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. Annually since 2005, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has reported on 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 2,777 applications obtained from 56 LEAs nationwide, weighted to national estimates.

This summary highlights just a small portion of the overall findings from the full report, available on the FNS Web site.

Research Questions

The key research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

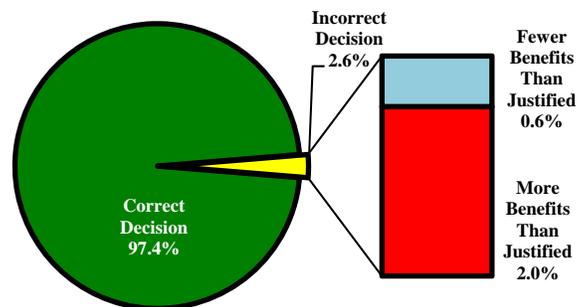
- (1) Based on the information provided on applications, did the LEAs accurately determine household size and gross monthly income? What types of administrative errors were made?
- (2) Based on the information provided on applications, did the LEAs make the correct meal price status determination during 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 97.4 percent of students applying for meal benefits.** Of those incorrectly certified, slightly more than three quarters (77 percent) were certified for more benefits than were justified based on the documentation available while just under a quarter (23 percent) of the students certified in error were certified for a lesser benefit level than was justified.

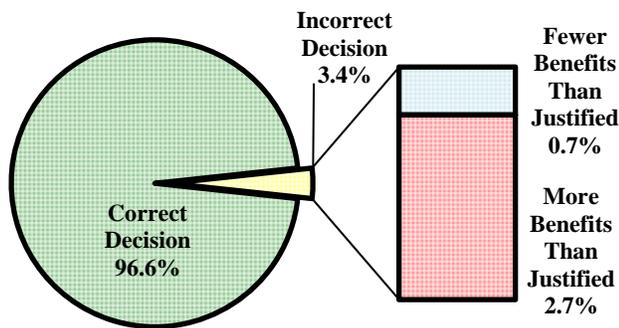
Figure 1: Accuracy of LEA Eligibility Certification Determinations Among Approved and Denied Applicants, School Year 2013/14



- **Among categorically eligible applications, the prevalence of certification error during processing was lower than the overall error rate, at just 0.9 percent.**
- **Among income-based applications, LEAs made more errors in determining gross monthly income than in determining household size.** In school year 2013/14, household income and household size were accurately calculated for 97.2 and 97.3 percent of the applications, respectively.
- **Accuracy of meal benefit issuance status was similar to the accuracy of eligibility**

determination. Meal benefit issuance status was correct for 96.6 percent of the students.

Figure 2: Accuracy of Benefit Status Determinations Among Approved and Denied Applicants, School Year 2013/14



- The percentage of students incorrectly approved or denied for NSLP free or reduced-price meal benefits during SY 2013/14 decreased slightly from the prior year but was similar to the rates observed during SY 2004/05 through SY 2012/13. This decrease in error resulted from decreases in both the percentage of students who were over- and under-certified (See Table 1).

Overall Conclusions

In SY 2013/14, 97 percent of the students who applied for benefits were certified correctly. Nearly 77 percent of students who were assigned the wrong status were approved for more benefits than they were entitled to. More errors continue to be made processing income-based applications. On income-

based applications, more errors are associated with the determination of a household’s gross income than household size.

The percentage of applications with certification error was comparable to the previous years (2004-2013) among all applications approved or denied. The 2.6-percent certification error rate for SY 2013/14 was lower than the previous school year, but fell within the range of 2.0 to 3.9 percent found during the previous 9-year span.

The Food and Nutrition Service continues 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 2014 report and other recent studies examining the accuracy of NSLP application processing and certification error are available online: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ops/research-and-analysis>.

For more information on the Federal policy for determining and verifying eligibility, see the following guidance material available online: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/guidance-and-resources>

Table 1: Comparison of Certification and Benefit Status Determinations

	School Year									
	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Certification Status										
Determination										
Correct Determination	96.5	97.0	96.1	96.1	98.0	97.7	96.3	97.1	96.4	97.4
Incorrect Determination	3.5	3.0	3.9	3.9	2.0	2.3	3.7	2.9	3.6	2.6
More Benefits	2.9	2.5	3.0	3.2	1.3	1.5	2.8	2.1	2.6	2.0
Fewer Benefits	0.6	0.5	0.9	0.7	0.7	0.9	0.9	0.8	1.0	0.6
Benefit Status										
Determination										
Correct Determination	95.7	96.2	95.8	95.4	97.0	97.0	95.5	96.5	96.2	96.6
Incorrect Determination	4.3	3.8	4.2	4.6	3.0	3.0	4.6	3.5	3.8	3.4
More Benefits	3.4	2.8	3.3	3.5	1.9	1.5	3.3	2.6	2.8	2.7
Fewer Benefits	0.9	1.0	0.9	1.1	1.1	1.5	1.2	0.9	1.0	0.7