

**REGIONAL OFFICE REVIEW OF APPLICATIONS (RORA)
FOR SCHOOL MEALS - 2015 SUMMARY**

Abstract

This is the 11th 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. In School Year (SY) 2014/15, about 98.1 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 significantly higher than the 97.4-percent accuracy rate found in the previous school year.

Background

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) provide over 7.3 billion meals each school year, including more than 5.5 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 2,801 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 Food and Nutrition Service (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

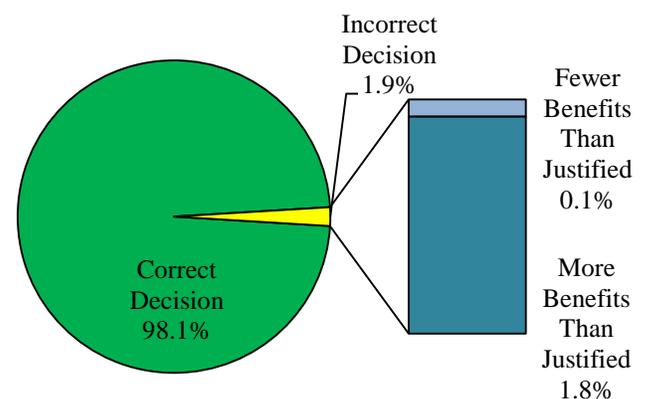
price status determination during certification? What types of administrative errors were made?

- (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 98.1 percent of students applying for meal benefits.** Of those incorrectly certified, almost 93 percent were certified for more benefits than were justified based on the documentation available (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Accuracy of LEA Eligibility Certification Determinations Among Approved and Denied Applicants School Year 2014/15

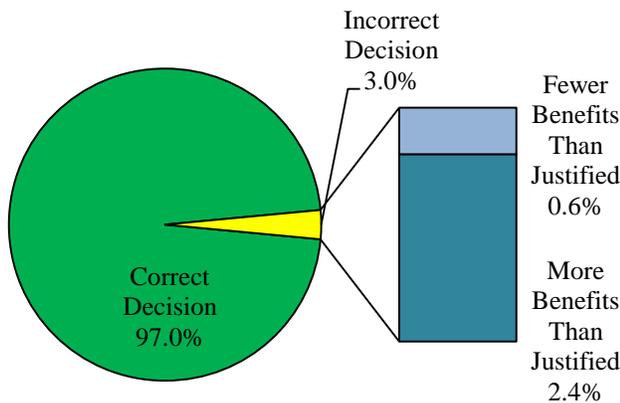


- **Of applications reviewed, the categorically eligible prevalence of certification error during processing (0.6 percent) was less than income-based applications.**
- **Among income-based applications reviewed, LEAs made more errors in determining gross income than in determining household size.** In SY 2014/15, household size and household

income were accurately calculated for 97.6 and 96.7 percent of the applications, respectively.

- **Of income-based applications reviewed, the accuracy of meal benefit issuance status and the accuracy of certification determination were similar at 97.0 percent and 97.9 percent, respectively** (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Accuracy of Benefit Status Determinations Among Approved and Denied Applicants School Year 2014/15



- **The percentage of students incorrectly approved or denied for free or reduced-price meal benefits during SY 2014/15 was the lowest compared to all the rates observed during SY 2004/05 through SY 2013/14.** This decrease in error resulted from decreases in both the percentage of students who were over- and under-certified.

Overall Conclusions

In SY 2014/15, about 98.1 percent of students submitting applications for meal benefits were certified for the correct level of meal benefits. Certification error (1.9 percent) was lower than previous years (2004-2014) among all applications approved or denied. Of the 1.9 percent incorrectly determined eligible for their meal status, 0.14 percent were certified for fewer benefits than eligible and 1.78 percent were certified for more benefits than eligible. 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.

FNS 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 2015 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>