

Child Nutrition



CHN ISSUE BRIEF

Good nutrition is a critical part of a child’s intellectual, emotional, and physical development. Unfortunately, too many children in the United States go without an adequate amount of nutritious food. Currently 13 million children – 18 percent of all children – suffer from food insecurity, defined as “limited or uncertain access to enough nutritious food.” Children in food insecure households are more likely to have illnesses requiring hospitalization and much more likely to be reported in fair or poor health. They are also more likely to have vitamin and mineral deficiencies, cognitive development deficits, emotional and behavioral problems (including trouble relating to peers), and symptoms of depression.¹ America’s Second Harvest – the largest national network of food banks, kitchens, and pantries – reported serving over 9 million children in 2001; one out of every four people in line at a soup kitchen is a child.²

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) addresses childhood hunger through several child nutrition programs, including the National School Lunch Program, Special Milk Program, School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, Summer Food Service Program, and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The child nutrition programs provide reimbursement for school meals and nutrition assistance for day care, after-school care, and summer programs, while WIC aims to improve the health of women and their young children by providing supplemental food, nutrition and breastfeeding education, and access to health services. These programs serve 49 million children per year in the United States and have helped alleviate the problem of childhood hunger; however there is still more work to be done.³

NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

Created in 1946, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) serves more than 27 million children each school day in more than 97,000 schools and residential child care institutions.⁴ Through the school lunch program, the government reimburses schools for the free and provides funds to serve eligible children nutritious free or reduced-price lunches and after-school snacks. Of the 4.7 million school meals served monthly, about half are free and nearly 10 percent are reduced-price meals served to children who otherwise would not have been able to afford lunch.⁵ A child’s eligibility for free or low-cost meals is determined according to household income; children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals, while those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals. In the 2004-05 school year, a family of three with an annual income of \$20,371 a year was at 130 percent of the federal poverty level; an annual income of \$28,990 was at 185 percent of the federal poverty level.⁶

In the 2004-05 school year participating schools received \$2.24 for every free lunch served and \$1.84 for every reduced price lunch served. For every additional full-price lunch bought by students, the government gives schools 21 cents. These funds help ensure eligible children pay nothing for lunch and reduced price students pay no more than 40 cents. Schools that served more than 60 percent of their meals free or at a reduced price in the preceding year qualify for an extra 2-cent reimbursement for every lunch served. In addition, for the 2004-05 school year, schools are guaranteed access to commodity foods provided by the USDA, which are valued at 17.25 cents for every lunch served during the school year.⁷

Similar to the school lunch program, the Special Milk Program is a supplementary child nutrition program run through USDA Food and Nutrition Service, which reimburses schools and child care institutions not participating in other Federal Child Nutrition Programs for the milk they serve.

SCHOOL BREAKFAST PROGRAM

Recent studies have shown that eating a healthy breakfast is essential to a child's ability to concentrate, behave, and learn. While hungry children are more likely to be hyperactive, absent, and tardy,⁸ children who eat breakfast at the start of the school day show a general increase in math and reading scores.⁹

In response to findings concerning the relationship between childhood hunger and learning, Congress permanently established the School Breakfast Program (SBP) in 1975. Today, the school breakfast program serves more than 8.8 million low-income children in more than 76,000 schools and institutions nationwide.¹⁰ Like the school lunch program, the school breakfast program determines eligibility based on household income and schools are reimbursed according to the number of low-income children served.

For the 2004-05 school year, schools were reimbursed \$1.23 per free breakfast served, 93 cents per reduced-price breakfast served, and 23 cents per full-price breakfast served. Schools serving at least 40 percent of their breakfasts free or at a reduced price may qualify for additional "severe need" reimbursements of 23 cents per free or reduced price breakfast served. For fiscal year 2003, Congress appropriated \$1.7 billion for federal reimbursements for the School Breakfast Program¹¹

SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM

While low-income children have access to healthy meals during the school year through schools, summer is a difficult time for many families to provide their children with adequate nutrition. Through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), school districts, non-profit organizations, tribes and public agencies can serve free nutritious meals to students when school is out for extended periods of time. In addition, the Seamless Summer Food Waiver allows schools to operate summer meals as a continuation of the school lunch program, decreasing the paperwork associated with running two separate programs.¹²

Unlike school lunch and breakfast, summer food can be served outside of school settings. An “open” site can serve free meals to any child 18 and younger in areas where at least 50 percent of the children qualify for free or reduced-price meals during the school year. These sites often serve meals from local schools, parks, Boys and Girls Clubs, and other local agencies. “Enrolled” sites may serve free meals to all children in an activity program in which 50 percent of the participants are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Campsites serving 3 meals per day under this program may only serve free meals to children who are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals.

Some advocates want to make organizations already receiving federal funds for low-income children automatically eligible for the summer food program. Advocates also endorse lowering the open site eligibility threshold from 50 percent to 40 percent, extending current waivers and pilot programs to all states and sponsors, and streamlining the application process for sponsors.

While 16 million children receive free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program during the school year, the Summer Food Service Program currently serves only 3.2 million children, leaving 80 percent of eligible children without access to quality meals during the summer months.¹³

CHILD AND ADULT CARE FOOD PROGRAM

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) provides federal reimbursements for meals and snacks in licensed public and nonprofit child care centers, programs providing before- and after-school child care, and family and group child care homes for preschoolers. CACFP serves eligible children in day care homes or centers (age 12 and younger), homeless shelters (age 12 and younger), in after-school care (age 18 and younger), migrant children (age 15 and younger), and children with disabilities (all ages). CACFP funds also serve adults who are functionally impaired and residents of day adult day care centers age 60 and older. In total, CACFP subsidizes healthy meals for 2.9 million children and adults annually.¹⁴

The program uses two different reimbursement rate structures for family child care providers and child care centers. Both offer higher reimbursement rates for low-income children.

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION PROGRAM FOR WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN (WIC)

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) aims to improve the health of women and their young children by offering supplemental nutritious foods, education about nutrition and breastfeeding, and referrals to other health, welfare, and social services. Since the program targets pregnant women and children during times of critical growth and development, access to WIC services boosts cognitive development and leads to improved birth and diet-related outcomes. The program currently serves over 7.6 million women and children, including 1.9 million infants.¹⁵

WIC Income Eligibility Guidelines (July 1, 2004-June 30, 2005)

Family of 1	\$ 17,224 or below
Family of 2	\$23,107
Family of 3	\$28,990
Family of 4	\$34,873
Family of 5	\$40,756
Family of 6	\$46,639
Family of 7	\$52,522
Family of 8	\$58,405
For each add'l family member, add	+ \$5,883

Unlike other child nutrition programs, WIC is not an entitlement program, so Congress does not reimburse states according to the number of people eligible for WIC services. Instead, states receive a flat sum of money to operate WIC on a local level. Therefore WIC cannot guarantee service for everyone who is eligible. In addition, confusion about program eligibility state funding constraints, and infrastructure limitations restrict the number of people WIC reaches. In fiscal year 2004, Congress provided \$4.9 billion for the WIC programs.¹⁶

Established by Congress in 1992, the Farmer's Market Nutrition Program provides \$10 to \$20 in coupons that WIC mothers can use to buy fresh produce at local farmer's markets. States have the option to augment the value of these coupons. For fiscal year 2004, Congress appropriated just over \$22.8 million for the Farmer's Market Nutrition Program.¹⁷

CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAM REAUTHORIZED IN 108TH CONGRESS

On June 30, 2004 President Bush signed into law The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act (Public Law 108-255).

The law extends the child nutrition programs until fiscal year 2009, making alterations to allow more low-income children access to nutritional resources. The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act simplifies the application process for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Pending Congressional funding, up to five states will be authorized to raise their income threshold for free-lunch eligibility under the school lunch program from 130 percent of the poverty level to 185 percent.

The law allows more children to benefit from the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) by making the Seamless Summer Waiver permanent. Additionally, the Lugar pilot, which has increased participation in the summer food program by 13.1 percent in pilot states, will be expanded to six more states.¹⁸

Migrant children will now be automatically eligible for free lunch under the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). The new law also raises the CACFP cut-off age for homeless children from 12 to 18 and allows for-profits to serve meals under this program.

The Fruit and Vegetable pilot program, which has led to improved student eating habits in the pilot states, will be made permanent and expanded to three additional states. The program will receive \$9 million of funding beginning Oct 1, 2004.¹⁹

– Updated September 2004

¹ Children’s Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Program, *The Safety Net in Action: Protecting the Health and Nutrition of Young America’s Children*, July 2004. p. 3

² America’s Second Harvest, “Hunger in America 2001: Childhood Hunger,” 2001.
http://www.secondharvest.org/site_content.asp?s=81

³ United States Department of Agriculture, *Annual Summary of Food and Nutrition Programs*, July 2004.
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/annual.htm>

⁴ United States Department of Agriculture, *National School Lunch Program – Fact Sheet*, August 2003.
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/lunch/AboutLunch/NSLPFactSheet.htm>

⁵ United States Department of Agriculture, *National School Lunch Program – Monthly Data*, May 2004.
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/slmonthly.htm>

⁶ United States Department of Agriculture, *Income Eligibility Guidelines – July 2004-June 2005*.
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Governance/notices/iegs/IEGs04-05.pdf>

⁷ Food Research & Action Center, *Child Nutrition Fact Sheet – National School Lunch Program*, 2004.
<http://www.frac.org/pdf/cnnsfp.pdf>

⁸ Murphy JM, Wehler CA, Pagano ME, Little M, Leinman RF, Jellinek MS. “Relationship Between Hunger and Psychosocial Functioning in Low-Income American Children.” *Journal of American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 1998; 37: 163-170.

⁹ “School Breakfast Programs Energizing the Classroom,” Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, Roseville, MN, 1998.

¹⁰ United States Department of Agriculture, *School Breakfast Program – Children Participating*, May 2004.
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/sbcurren.htm>

¹¹ Food Research & Action Center, *Federal Food Programs – School Breakfast Program*, April 2004.
http://www.frac.org/html/federal_food_programs/programs/sbp.html. *Federal Register*, Vol. 68, No. 135, July 15, 2004. pp. 42415-17.

¹² Food Research & Action Center, “It’s Now Easier For Schools To Feed Hungry Children When School Is Out,” 2004. http://www.frac.org/html/federal_food_programs/programs/seamlesswaiver.html

¹³ Food Research & Action Center, “Shortfalls in Federal Summer Meals Programs Leave Millions Hungry When School is Out,” 7/22/04. http://www.frac.org/html/news/Press_07.22.04.html

¹⁴ United States Department of Agriculture, *Child and Adult Care Food Program*, July 2004.
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/ccsummar.htm>

¹⁵ United States Department of Agriculture, *WIC Program – Total Participation*, July 2004.
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/wifypart.htm> and http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/WIC_Monthly.htm

¹⁶ United States Department of Agriculture, *WIC Program – Summary of FY2004 Grants*, July 2004.
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/fundingandprogramdata/grants2004.htm>

¹⁷ United States Department of Agriculture, *Farmer’s Market Nutrition Program*, July 2004.
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/WICFMNPFactSheet.pdf>

¹⁸ Food Research and Action Center, “Simplified Summer Food Program Makes Summer Food Participation Easier In 19 States And Puerto Rico,” August 2004. http://www.frac.org/html/news/sfsp_pilots.html

¹⁹ United States Department of Agriculture, “USDA Awards \$9 Million To Promote Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Consumption in School,” July 29, 2004. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cga/PressReleases/2004/PR-0312.htm>