



Using American Community Survey Data to Expand Access to the School Meals Programs

Allen Schirm, Nancy Kirkendall, Panel on Estimating Children Eligible for School Nutrition Programs Using the American Community Survey, Committee on National Statistics, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council

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The National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, administered by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), are key components of the nation's food security safety net, providing free or low-cost meals to millions of schoolchildren each day. To qualify their children each year for free or reduced-price meals, many families must submit applications that school officials distribute and review. To reduce this burden on families and schools and to encourage more children to partake of nutritious meals, USDA regulations allow school districts to operate their meals programs under special provisions that eliminate the application process and other administrative procedures in exchange for providing free meals to all students enrolled in one or more school in a district.

FNS asked the National Academies' Committee on National Statistics and Food and Nutrition Board to convene a panel of experts to investigate the technical and operational feasibility of using data from the continuous American Community Survey (ACS) to estimate students eligible for free and reduced-price meals for schools and school districts. The ACS eligibility estimates would be used to develop "claiming percentages" that, if sufficiently accurate, would determine the USDA reimbursements to districts for schools that provided free meals to all students under a new special provision that eliminated the ongoing base-year requirements of current provisions.

Using American Community Survey Data to Expand Access to the School Meals Program was conducted in two phases. It first issued an interim report (National Research Council, 2010), describing its planned approach for assessing the utility of ACS-based estimates for a special provision to expand access to free school meals. This report is the final phase which presents the panel's findings and recommendations.

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