



## Many Eligible Children Don't Participate in School Nutrition Programs

### Reauthorization Offers Opportunities to Improve

Jessica A. Carson

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which authorizes funding for federal nutrition programs (including the National School Lunch Program; the School Breakfast Program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; the Summer Food Service Program; and the Child and Adult Care Food Program), is set to expire on September 30, 2015.<sup>1</sup> The reauthorization process allows Congress the opportunity to evaluate, alter, and allocate funding for these programs, giving rise to opportunities for expanding participation and improving program quality. This brief uses data from the 2013 Current Population Survey's Food Security Supplement to document levels of participation in two of the largest programs authorized by this act—the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program—by region and place type (rural, suburban, and city), to identify areas where expanding participation may be especially important.

**The data presented here suggest that moderate shares of eligible households use the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs, and additional children could be benefiting both nutritionally and academically from participation.**

#### Many of the Eligible Do Not Participate

Children living in households with incomes below 185 percent of the federal income poverty guidelines (below \$44,097 for a family of four in 2013) are eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals at school.<sup>2</sup> Overall, 63.5 percent of income-eligible households with school-age children (age 5 to 17) participate in the National

#### KEY FINDINGS



Only 64 percent of eligible households participate in the National School Lunch Program; 52 percent participate in the School Breakfast Program.



Fifty-nine percent of eligible suburban households and 63 percent of rural households participate in the National School Lunch Program, compared with more than 70 percent of eligible city households.



Southern households are more likely to participate in the School Breakfast Program than households in the Northeast or Midwest; there are no regional differences in National School Lunch Program participation.

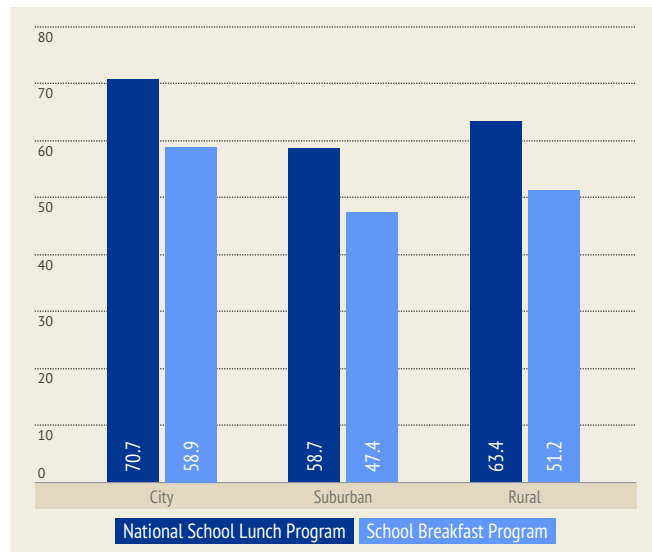
School Lunch Program, and 52.0 percent participate in the School Breakfast Program. Figure 1 shows participation in these two programs by place type, demonstrating considerably higher rates of participation in each program in cities than in rural or suburban areas.<sup>3</sup>

Regionally, rates of participation in the lunch program are similar across the Northeast, Midwest, South, and West. By contrast, participation in the breakfast program is slightly higher in the South than in the Northeast or Midwest, though similar to rates in the West (not shown).

#### Policy Implications

Research suggests that children who receive free or reduced-price meals at school are more likely to have their nutritional needs met than those who do not participate,<sup>4</sup> and that kids who are well nourished have

**FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF INCOME-ELIGIBLE HOUSEHOLDS WITH SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAMS**



**Note:** Differences in participation between cities and other places are statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). **Source:** Food Security Supplement, Current Population Survey, 2013.

better school attendance and show improved attention spans and behavior in the classroom.<sup>5</sup> The data presented here suggest that moderate shares of eligible households use these programs, and additional children could be benefiting both nutritionally and academically from participation. The share of eligible households participating in the lunch program is close to three in five, and the share receiving school breakfast is only one in two.<sup>6</sup> Further, among households reporting lunch program participation, just 82 percent also reported breakfast participation, even though the programs have the same eligibility requirements.

**Legislators with rural constituents may want to consider ways to redress low participation in their communities by supporting policies that expand enrollment.**

Enrollment in these programs may be moderate for several reasons: for example, there may be stigma associated with eating school meals, or food meeting required nutritional standards may not appeal to children. The breakfast program may have especially low enrollment because students with long commutes

or later-arriving buses might not arrive early enough to eat breakfast before the school day begins.<sup>7</sup> Programs that serve breakfast after all buses arrive, allow “grab and go” breakfasts, or that deliver breakfast to students’ first class of the day may offer alternatives to traditional breakfast service and increase participation.<sup>8</sup>

As Congress evaluates the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, proposals suggesting ways to expand participation and improve program quality have surfaced, including expanding access to the School Breakfast Program specifically<sup>9</sup> and offering more nutritious meals in child care and after-school programs.<sup>10</sup> This brief indicates that participation is moderate among eligible households, with room to increase participation among those in need. In particular, legislators with rural constituents may want to consider ways to redress low participation in their communities by supporting policies that expand enrollment.

## Data

This analysis is based on the 2013 Food Security Supplement (that is, “the December supplement”) of the Current Population Survey (CPS), collected by the U.S. Census Bureau for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. All food-related data are collected at the household level.

### Box 1: Definition of City, Suburban, and Rural

Definitions of rural and urban vary among researchers and the sources of data they use. Data for this brief come from the Current Population Survey, which indicates whether households are located in a core-based statistical area (CBSA), defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as a county, counties, or county-equivalent(s) associated with one or more urbanized area(s) or urban cluster(s) (that is, a “core”) of at least 10,000 people, plus adjacent counties that have a high degree of economic and social integration with that core. In this brief, rural refers to areas outside of CBSAs. Households within CBSAs are disaggregated further to indicate whether the household falls within the principal city of a CBSA (“city”) or outside the principal city, but still within the CBSA (“suburban”). Note that 15 percent of the households in this brief are located in CBSAs but principal city status cannot be identified; these households are included in the total, but excluded from the breakdowns by rural, suburban, and city status.

## Endnotes

1. Food Research and Action Center, “Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization,” FRAC Legislative Action Center, accessed April 13, 2015 (<http://frac.org/leg-act-center/cnr-priorities/>).
2. “Child Nutrition Programs; Income Eligibility Guidelines SY 2013–2014 (March 29, 2013 Correction),” *Federal Register* 78, no. 61, accessed April 13, 2015 (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/income-eligibility-guidelines>). This measure of income eligibility includes households eligible for free meals (households with incomes below 130 percent of the poverty threshold) and reduced-price meals (households with income between 130 and 185 percent of the threshold.) In this brief, the term “income eligible” describes these households, though it should be noted that other program requirements may limit participation among otherwise eligible households or expand eligibility in other cases. Thus, this measure should be viewed as an approximation of eligibility.
3. It is worth noting, however, that similar shares of rural and city households with children are eligible to participate (42–43 percent), with smaller shares eligible in suburban places (28 percent).
4. See the review in “Promising Practices for Ensuring Access to School Meals for Limited English Proficient Families” ([http://frac.org/pdf/school\\_meal\\_access\\_limited\\_english\\_proficient\\_families.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/school_meal_access_limited_english_proficient_families.pdf)), and Heather Hartline-Grafton, “FRAC: Breakfast for Health,” Food Research and Action Center Brief, Spring 2014.
5. Madeline Levin and Jessie Hewins, “Universal Free School Meals: Ensuring That All Children Are Able to Learn,” *Clearinghouse Review: Journal of Poverty Law and Policy* 47 (2014): 11–12. See also Madeline Levin, “FRAC: Breakfast for Learning,” Food Research and Action Center Brief, Spring 2014.
6. For comparison, the Food Research and Action Center estimates that three in four eligible people participate in SNAP; Food Research and Action Center, “SNAP Participation Increases in December 2012,” *FRAC Reports and Resources*, accessed April 13, 2014 (<http://frac.org/reports-and-resources/snapfood-stamp-monthly-participation-data/2012-snap-data/>).
7. For more on school meal participation in general, see Jacob Leos-Urbel et al., “Not Just for Poor Kids: The Impact of Universal Free School Breakfast on Meal Participation and Student Outcomes,” *Economics of Education Review* 36 (2013): 88–107. In terms of higher lunch program participation compared with breakfast, there are a variety of reasons that lunch participants might not participate in breakfast (for example, breakfast may be served too early or conflict with children’s transportation to school), although it is not possible to identify those reasons with these data. For more discussion, see Food Research and Action Center, “School Breakfast: Reaching More Children,

Making Breakfast Better,” *Child Nutrition Reauthorization Issue Brief*, No. 1, 2014 ([http://frac.org/pdf/brief\\_breakfast\\_cnr\\_2015.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/brief_breakfast_cnr_2015.pdf)). It should also be noted that the December CPS supplement only asks respondents about breakfast participation if they first indicate that someone in the household participates in the lunch program. Therefore, it is possible that additional households receive breakfast but are not identified because they do not also receive lunch.

8. Food Research and Action Center, “School Breakfast: Making It Work in Large School Districts,” 2015 ([http://frac.org/pdf/School\\_Breakfast\\_Large\\_School\\_Districts\\_SY2013\\_2014.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/School_Breakfast_Large_School_Districts_SY2013_2014.pdf)).
9. Food Research and Action Center, “School Breakfast: Reaching More Children, Making Breakfast Better,” *Child Nutrition Reauthorization Issue Brief*, No. 1, 2014 ([http://frac.org/pdf/brief\\_breakfast\\_cnr\\_2015.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/brief_breakfast_cnr_2015.pdf)).
10. See, for example, Food Research and Action Center, “New CACFP Nutrition Rule: Fruits and Vegetables” ([http://frac.org/pdf/cacfp\\_fruits\\_and\\_vegetables\\_fact\\_sheet\\_proposed\\_rule.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/cacfp_fruits_and_vegetables_fact_sheet_proposed_rule.pdf)), and Food Research and Action Center, “New CACFP Nutrition Rule: Healthier Beverages in Child Care and Afterschool Programs” ([http://frac.org/pdf/cacfp\\_beverages\\_fact\\_sheet\\_proposed\\_rule.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/cacfp_beverages_fact_sheet_proposed_rule.pdf)).

## About the Author

Jessica Carson is a vulnerable families research scientist at the Carsey School of Public Policy ([jessica.carson@unh.edu](mailto:jessica.carson@unh.edu)).

## Acknowledgments

The author thanks Michael Ettlinger, Beth Mattingly, Curt Grimm, Michele Dillon, Amy Sterndale, Bianca Nicolosi, and Laurel Lloyd at the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire for their thoughtful suggestions, and Patrick Watson for his editorial assistance. Special thanks to Jennifer Clayton and Paul Anskat for assistance preparing the data.



**University of New Hampshire**  
Carsey School of Public Policy

The Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire is a nationally acclaimed resource for research, leadership development, and engaged scholarship relevant to public policy. We address the most pressing challenges of the twenty-first century, striving for innovative, responsive, and equitable solutions at all levels of government and in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors.

This work was supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and anonymous donors.

Huddleston Hall • 73 Main Street • Durham, NH 03824  
(603) 862-2821

TTY USERS: DIAL 7-1-1 OR 1-800-735-2964 (RELAY N.H.)

[carsey.unh.edu](http://carsey.unh.edu)