

National School Lunch Program Eligibility Verification

Timely communication with beneficiaries has mixed effects on response rates

Agency Objective Reduce the number of students who lose access to free and reduced-price lunches because they fail to complete the verification process.

Background The National School Lunch Program delivers free and reduced-price meals to more than 30 million students each day. In order to maintain program integrity, USDA requires that a portion of all household applications for NSLP benefits are checked, or verified, through a process that requires submission of additional details by the applicant. School districts notify by letter those households selected for verification. The number of households that successfully verify varies widely across the country, but on average 40% do not verify, many of them because they do not respond to initial letters requesting additional information. A 2004 USDA case study found that many of the households that failed to respond to LEA verification requests were, in fact, income eligible for the benefits that were awarded to them at the time their applications were processed.

Program Change In order to increase the rate of verification response among those households who are income eligible, the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and OES modified the existing verification letter and the timing of that letter. The verification letter itself was simplified and the letter was personalized to each household. The timing of the letters was also modified. Standard practice is to send verification letters out to households on or after October 1st each year, which is often more than a month after initial applications have been received and children have begun receiving free and reduced-price meals. The timing of the program was modified so that verification letters were sent out in weekly batches beginning as soon as applications were received for

the 2016 school year, so that (i) letter recipients would more readily associate the verification request with their recent application for NSLP and (ii) the more spread-out pace of verifications reduced administrative burden and allowed district staff to pursue each case.

Evaluation Methods Heartland School Solutions, the provider of NSLP management software to the school districts in the study and many school districts throughout the country, helped FNS and OES by designing custom software changes that allowed school districts to select applications for verification in more frequent batches. In four districts — Broward County, FL; Los Angeles Unified School District (USD), CA; San Diego USD, CA; and Prince George's County, MD — the verification sample was split in half, so that half of the sampled households were sent a letter soon after applying (rolling verification), while the other half — the "holdout group" — received their letter after October 1st (business-as-usual verification). In Orange County, FL, the entire verification sample was sent verification letters soon after applying and are not included in this evaluation. The four districts that compared rolling verification to business-as-usual verification sampling captured 3,391 applicants randomly selected for verification.

Results The response rates for rolling verification requests are compared to the rates for business-as-usual verification requests in Broward County, Los Angeles USD, San Diego USD and Prince George's County, controlling for the date that applications were submitted and the initial eligibility determination for each applicant (either free or reduced-price meals).

Overall response rates increased by an average of 2.5 percentage points ($p=0.11$, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.06])



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for applicants selected using rolling verification. When analyzing each district separately, response rates increased for applicants receiving verification soon after applying in three districts (Broward, San Diego, and Prince George's) but decreased in Los Angeles.

Rolling verification response rates were 7.4 percentage points higher in Broward County ($p=0.03$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.14]), 2.7 percentage points higher in San Diego USD ($p=0.72$, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.17]), and 4.4 percentage points higher in Prince George's County ($p=0.27$, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.12]). Response rates in Los Angeles USD were 3.9 percentage points lower among rolling verification recipients ($p=0.06$, 95% CI [-0.08, 0.0]). Effects of rolling verification could not be evaluated in Orange County because all applicants received requests shortly after submitting their applications.

Conclusion Introducing rolling verification had mixed results in encouraging verification responses among NSLP applicants. Observed differences in the response to changes in verification timing could be due to differences in the applicant pools across districts, although the factors that determine these differences are not known.

Effect of rolling verification sampling on applicant response rates, by school district

