

C15. GROUP 2—STUDY OVERVIEW

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About the Study

The School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study (SNMCS)

The School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study (SNMCS) will continue the long-standing commitment of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to make periodic assessments of school meal programs. This current assessment coincides with a period of considerable change for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). In recent years, schools participating in these programs implemented sweeping regulatory changes designed to increase children's access to healthy foods at school and to promote adoption of healthy eating and physical activity habits. While FNS has conducted multiple studies of school nutrition and meal costs to date, the SNMCS is the first such study after implementation of these major changes and the first to explore both nutrition and cost on a large national scale. This study will provide critical information of interest to USDA, the States, school food authorities (SFAs), and other program stakeholders that is not currently available.

FNS has contracted with Mathematica Policy Research and its research partners—Abt Associates, Agralytica, and Relyon Media—to conduct the SNMCS for SY 2014–2015. Participation by selected states, districts, and schools is required under Section 305 of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA).

The SNMCS will collect a broad range of data from nationally representative samples of public SFAs, schools, and students and their parents during SY 2014–2015. These data will provide Federal, State, and local policymakers with needed information about how Federally sponsored school meal programs are operating after implementation of the new meal pattern and nutrient requirements and other changes in regulations. Comparisons of results from the SNMCS with previous studies (the School Nutrition and Dietary Assessment [SNDA] and the School Lunch and Breakfast Cost [SLBC] studies) will provide information to assess the effects of the new nutrition standards on foodservice operations, the nutrient content of school meals offered and served, meal costs and revenues, and student participation and dietary intake.

Participating in the Study

Mathematica is selecting a nationally representative sample of about 500 school districts nationwide and 3 to 4 schools per district. Data collection activities will be limited to only those necessary for success of the study. Individual SFAs and schools may not participate in all study activities. During SY 2014–2015, your SFA and schools will be asked to:

Complete a Menu Survey. This survey will collect detailed information on the foods offered and served in reimbursable lunches, breakfasts, and afterschool snacks (if offered) during a target week.

SFA Director, Foodservice Manager, and Principal Surveys. SFA directors, foodservice managers, and principals will be asked to respond to questions that will provide information needed to characterize district policies, the school environment, and foodservice operations.

Competitive Foods Checklists. A member of the school staff will be asked to complete a simple set of forms detailing the availability to students of vending machine items and other sources of food such as school stores.



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Student and Parent Interviews. Professional data collectors will interview a small sample of students and their parents in each sampled school to obtain information on student characteristics, dietary intake, and participation and satisfaction with school meals. Students' height and weight will be measured as part of the interview. Data collection activities will differ for elementary school students and those in middle and high schools and have been designed to be age appropriate. Kindergarten and prekindergarten students will not be included in the study.

Cafeteria Observations. Data collectors will observe one lunch and one breakfast period in each sampled school to document characteristics of foodservice operations.

Protecting Privacy

All information gathered from school districts, schools, and households is for research purposes only and will be kept private to the full extent allowed by law. Responses will be grouped with those of other study participants, and no individual schools, districts, or students will be identified. We will inform selected parents of the study and of our privacy practices. Any selected parent or student can choose not to participate in the study. We are not conducting audits or monitoring visits. Participation in the study will not affect meal reimbursements to participating districts and schools or school meal program benefits to participating households.

Disseminating the Findings

A series of final reports on the research findings will be released no later than February 2017.

About the SNMCS Research Team

Mathematica, Abt Associates, Agralytica, and Relyon Media are among the nation's leading research organizations. Each firm has over 25 years of experience conducting research for government agencies and studying child nutrition programs.

For More Information

For more information about the study, please contact:

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