

CHILD NUTRITION POLICY BRIEF

Food Research and Action Center

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Meeting The Child Nutrition Challenges Facing Rural Areas

The child nutrition programs are an important support for rural communities, which have higher rates of food insecurity and poverty than metropolitan areas. Yet, these programs are reaching only a fraction of eligible rural children in part due to the unique challenges that rural areas face in making sure that children can participate in the nutrition programs. A number of steps should be taken in child nutrition reauthorization to alleviate these barriers.

THE EXTENT OF RURAL POVERTY AND HUNGER

- Rural poverty stood at 14.2 percent in 2001, a higher poverty rate, than in metropolitan areas where it was 11.1 percent.
- According to the United States Department of Agriculture, 12.7 percent of rural individuals were food insecure in 2001, meaning that “they were not consistently and dependably able to get enough food for an active and healthy life.” During that same year, 18.6 percent of rural children lived in food insecure households compared to 17.3 percent in metropolitan areas.

RURAL COMMUNITIES’ NEED FOR THE CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

- Because of the high rates of rural poverty and food insecurity, the child nutrition programs should be at least as available in rural areas to combat childhood hunger and help families with tight food budgets as they are elsewhere. Unfortunately, they are underutilized in rural areas.
- The low participation in the child nutrition programs in rural areas often goes hand in hand with the limited availability of child care and of afterschool and summer programs. Rural schools are less likely to offer out-of-school time programs, and there are fewer non-profits to provide them. In addition, rural areas rarely have community centers or other safe places where children and youth can go when they are not in school. Federal child nutrition funds provide a key support with which to strengthen out-of-school time programs, but where such programs are less available, it is crucial to find more effective ways to get the nutrition to children.
- The School Breakfast Program is an important educational support, and the long bus or car rides that many rural students take each morning make breakfast even more important in rural schools. Children often are not hungry when they first wake up, but they are by the time they complete a long ride. Even if they eat something before leaving home, it may not sustain them until lunch.

RURAL BARRIERS THAT AFFECT THE CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

- Transportation is the most basic challenge for rural communities. It is especially difficult in rural communities to get children to and from programs or child care. Public transportation is rarely available and about half of poor rural adults do not own a car.
- Rural schools draw children from a large geographic area. It is not uncommon for students to ride the school bus for one to two hours each way.

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- Eligibility for some federal nutrition programs depends on more than 50 percent of students in a school being eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Because of the large catchment areas of rural schools, even communities with considerable poverty have trouble meeting this test.
- Since rural schools and programs usually serve fewer children than urban ones, they are less likely to develop the same economies of scale that decrease nutrition costs.

HOW TO IMPROVE THE CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS FOR RURAL AREAS

The child nutrition program reauthorization in 2003 will provide a tremendous opportunity to make some simple changes that could have a dramatic effect on rural participation.

Decrease the area eligibility threshold from 50 percent to 40 percent

- The Summer Food Service Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the National School Lunch Program snack program all allow programs to qualify by being located in an area where 50 percent or more of the children in the school serving the area are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Rural schools have difficulty meeting the 50 percent requirement, because they draw students from long distances, which increases their economic diversity.
- The Summer Food Service Program's original area eligibility threshold was 33 percent; and last year, Congress lowered the threshold for school-wide Title 1 to 40 percent.

Offer transportation, start-up and expansion grants in underserved areas

- Grants for underserved areas, which are disproportionately rural areas, would have a dramatic impact on participation. They could provide funds for outreach, funds to develop the infrastructure necessary to run the program, and funds for extra transportation costs, including starting and expanding mobile summer food sites that bring the food to children in remote areas – a strategy that has had considerable success in Pennsylvania and South Carolina.
- The reimbursement for sponsors serving family child care homes in rural areas should be supplemented to allow for the additional transportation resources rural areas demand.

Make the child nutrition programs easier to operate

- Any steps to streamline the child nutrition programs, while still maintaining their federal framework and current availability, will make it easier for all communities to participate, but will be particularly helpful to rural schools and non-profits.