

Child Nutrition: School Meals

Definition

Children receiving free or reduced-price meals is the number and percent of children eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals.

Data in context

Children need proper nutrition for healthy development and success in school. Undernourished children have poorer health and miss more school than well-nourished children. Students who eat breakfast have much higher reading and math scores, attend school more regularly, and are more attentive with fewer behavioral problems.¹ Access to school meal programs can encourage healthy eating habits, which begin in childhood.

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP), a federal meal program, operates in more than 101,000 schools (public and private, nonprofit) and residential child care programs.² In FFY 2007, the program provided nutritionally-balanced, low-cost or free lunches to more than 30.5 million children each school day.³

During the summer, NSLP and the Summer Food Service Program provide meals to children at eligible sites where 50 percent of the children participating are determined eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Once the site is eligible, the children can eat for free. While the participation rates have increased for the school-year program, only one in five eligible children participated in the summer nutrition programs during July 2007.⁴

A national survey of NSLP programs from 2000 to 2004 found that lunches consumed by NSLP participants, regardless of income level, were more nutrient dense than lunches consumed by non-participating children. School lunch participants had higher intakes of milk, meat, and beans. Low-income



children participating also had higher scores for fruit consumption.⁵

Schools that choose to take part in the lunch program receive cash subsidies and donated commodities from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for each meal they serve. To participate, schools must serve meals that meet federal nutritional requirements and offer free or reduced-price meals to eligible children. Since 1998, the program has included reimbursement for snacks served to children in after-school educational and enrichment programs for children through 18 years of age.

In Kentucky, any child at a participating school may purchase a meal through the program. Children

are eligible to receive free meals if their families have incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level. Children qualify for reduced-price meals, capped at 40 cents per meal, if their families have incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level. All school meals, including full-priced meals, are subsidized to some extent. Local schools set their own prices for paid meals, but they must operate their meal services as nonprofit programs.⁶

All of Kentucky's 175 school districts participate in the school meals program. For the 2008 school year, 53 percent of Kentucky children in public schools qualified to receive free or reduced-price meals, up from 48 percent in school year 2000.

In nearly three of four counties in Kentucky, half of all students qualify to receive free or reduced-price meals. The greatest increases in the percent of qualifying students occurred in Barren, Crittenden, Owen, and Shelby Counties.

Data Source: Kentucky Department of Education, Division of Nutrition and Health Services.

- 1 Food Research and Action Center (2007). *School Breakfast Scorecard 2007*. Available at <http://www.frac.org>. Accessed August 2008.
- 2 USDA Food and Nutrition Service, National School Lunch Program (2008). *Fact Sheet*. Available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov>. Accessed August 2008.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Food Research and Action Center (2008). *Hunger Doesn't Take A Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report 2008*. Available at <http://www.frac.org>. Accessed August 2008.
- 5 Cole, N., and Fox, M. (2008). *Diet Quality of American School-Age Children by School Lunch Participation Status: Data From The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey*. USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov>. Accessed August 2008.
- 6 Ibid.

Children attending public schools eligible for free or reduced-price meals (number and percent of enrolled students)

| | 1999-2000 | | 2007-2008 | |
|--------------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| Kentucky | 307,674 | 48 | 355,992 | 53 |
| Adair | 1,547 | 61 | 1,522 | 59 |
| Allen | 1,275 | 42 | 1,665 | 53 |
| Anderson | 955 | 28 | 1,416 | 34 |
| Ballard | 661 | 43 | 800 | 52 |
| Barren | 2,811 | 40 | 3,973 | 54 |
| Bath | 1,205 | 65 | 1,273 | 67 |
| Bell | 4,310 | 75 | 4,276 | 77 |
| Boone | 2,537 | 19 | 4,940 | 25 |
| Bourbon | 1,534 | 41 | 1,922 | 51 |
| Boyd | 3,548 | 45 | 3,997 | 54 |
| Boyle | 1,587 | 35 | 2,040 | 44 |
| Bracken | 615 | 41 | 776 | 51 |
| Breathitt | 2,277 | 77 | 2,082 | 75 |
| Breckinridge | 1,803 | 55 | 2,036 | 64 |
| Bullitt | 3,523 | 32 | 5,185 | 41 |
| Butler | 1,317 | 58 | 1,137 | 56 |
| Caldwell | 1,000 | 47 | 1,089 | 56 |
| Calloway | 1,897 | 41 | 2,227 | 46 |
| Campbell | 4,560 | 37 | 4,997 | 43 |
| Carlisle | 445 | 49 | 428 | 50 |
| Carroll | 934 | 48 | 994 | 50 |
| Carter | 2,987 | 61 | 3,148 | 61 |
| Casey | 1,518 | 62 | 1,681 | 66 |
| Christian | 5,785 | 63 | 7,645 | 65 |
| Clark | 2,080 | 40 | 2,705 | 47 |
| Clay | 3,222 | 75 | 2,511 | 68 |
| Clinton | 1,114 | 69 | 1,191 | 71 |
| Crittenden | 595 | 41 | 737 | 54 |
| Cumberland | 794 | 66 | 719 | 68 |
| Daviess | 5,718 | 40 | 7,650 | 49 |
| Edmonson | 915 | 47 | 1,197 | 56 |
| Elliott | 884 | 72 | 814 | 71 |
| Estill | 1,450 | 52 | 1,628 | 63 |
| Fayette | 12,020 | 37 | 14,722 | 42 |
| Fleming | 1,327 | 54 | 1,411 | 59 |
| Floyd | 5,181 | 70 | 4,730 | 74 |
| Franklin | 2,390 | 35 | 3,249 | 47 |
| Fulton | 1,022 | 71 | 924 | 77 |
| Gallatin | 776 | 53 | 983 | 60 |
| Garrard | 1,088 | 46 | 1,452 | 53 |

| | 1999-2000 | | 2007-2008 | |
|------------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| Grant | 1,659 | 39 | 2,486 | 50 |
| Graves | 2,638 | 44 | 3,728 | 56 |
| Grayson | 1,816 | 45 | 2,381 | 56 |
| Green | 914 | 54 | 1,005 | 60 |
| Greenup | 2,529 | 40 | 2,942 | 47 |
| Hancock | 518 | 33 | 700 | 43 |
| Hardin | 6,475 | 43 | 7,593 | 46 |
| Harlan | 4,851 | 75 | 4,034 | 74 |
| Harrison | 1,315 | 41 | 1,704 | 51 |
| Hart | 1,332 | 56 | 1,529 | 62 |
| Henderson | 2,784 | 38 | 3,284 | 47 |
| Henry | 1,233 | 45 | 1,489 | 50 |
| Hickman | 493 | 57 | 465 | 57 |
| Hopkins | 3,667 | 45 | 4,451 | 51 |
| Jackson | 2,004 | 84 | 1,915 | 80 |
| Jefferson | 47,557 | 49 | 56,458 | 58 |
| Jessamine | 2,569 | 40 | 3,764 | 45 |
| Johnson | 3,107 | 67 | 2,824 | 62 |
| Kenton | 7,720 | 36 | 9,393 | 44 |
| Knott | 2,235 | 71 | 1,788 | 73 |
| Knox | 4,355 | 76 | 4,282 | 77 |
| LaRue | 1,104 | 47 | 1,239 | 52 |
| Laurel | 4,843 | 53 | 5,893 | 60 |
| Lawrence | 2,070 | 71 | 1,608 | 63 |
| Lee | 1,039 | 77 | 836 | 77 |
| Leslie | 1,691 | 73 | 1,301 | 70 |
| Letcher | 2,943 | 67 | 2,650 | 68 |
| Lewis | 1,576 | 63 | 1,708 | 67 |
| Lincoln | 2,276 | 50 | 2,698 | 56 |
| Livingston | 641 | 42 | 637 | 47 |
| Logan | 2,027 | 43 | 2,532 | 52 |
| Lyon | 340 | 33 | 421 | 43 |
| McCracken | 4,196 | 44 | 5,414 | 49 |
| McCreary | 2,009 | 77 | 1,873 | 81 |
| McLean | 1,703 | 56 | 1,665 | 53 |
| Madison | 3,430 | 45 | 3,786 | 49 |
| Magoffin | 1,176 | 44 | 1,454 | 54 |
| Marion | 2,165 | 32 | 3,144 | 44 |
| Marshall | 2,221 | 66 | 2,291 | 73 |
| Martin | 2,853 | 82 | 2,694 | 83 |
| Mason | 738 | 45 | 940 | 56 |

| | 1999-2000 | | 2007-2008 | |
|------------|-----------|---------|-----------|---------|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| Meade | 2,018 | 47 | 2,410 | 48 |
| Menifee | 683 | 61 | 725 | 67 |
| Mercer | 1,153 | 31 | 1,587 | 42 |
| Metcalfe | 1,022 | 63 | 1,199 | 67 |
| Monroe | 1,311 | 60 | 1,384 | 64 |
| Montgomery | 2,102 | 52 | 2,495 | 54 |
| Morgan | 1,582 | 69 | 1,381 | 66 |
| Muhlenberg | 2,413 | 45 | 2,815 | 53 |
| Nelson | 2,604 | 41 | 3,492 | 46 |
| Nicholas | 611 | 53 | 688 | 58 |
| Ohio | 1,911 | 48 | 2,500 | 57 |
| Oldham | 1,170 | 14 | 1,952 | 16 |
| Owen | 774 | 40 | 1,094 | 55 |
| Owsley | 934 | 89 | 867 | 93 |
| Pendleton | 1,273 | 43 | 1,403 | 50 |
| Perry | 3,853 | 63 | 3,553 | 68 |
| Pike | 7,403 | 61 | 6,979 | 63 |
| Powell | 1,486 | 56 | 1,637 | 66 |
| Pulaski | 5,973 | 61 | 6,073 | 60 |
| Robertson | 195 | 51 | 408 | 54 |
| Rockcastle | 1,857 | 61 | 1,958 | 65 |
| Rowan | 1,625 | 52 | 1,810 | 55 |
| Russell | 1,652 | 59 | 1,943 | 66 |
| Scott | 1,673 | 30 | 2,665 | 34 |
| Shelby | 1,568 | 31 | 2,750 | 45 |
| Simpson | 1,063 | 36 | 1,431 | 47 |
| Spencer | 889 | 42 | 835 | 32 |
| Taylor | 1,820 | 46 | 2,082 | 53 |
| Todd | 1,021 | 49 | 1,274 | 57 |
| Trigg | 919 | 45 | 1,026 | 50 |
| Trimble | 664 | 44 | 854 | 51 |
| Union | 1,098 | 43 | 1,272 | 53 |
| Warren | 5,867 | 42 | 7,915 | 46 |
| Washington | 810 | 44 | 963 | 56 |
| Wayne | 2,739 | 76 | 2,709 | 72 |
| Webster | 1,092 | 44 | 1,160 | 51 |
| Whitley | 5,024 | 63 | 5,648 | 66 |
| Wolfe | 1,107 | 82 | 1,073 | 83 |
| Woodford | 696 | 18 | 1,111 | 27 |