

Household Application Collection

A research brief about school year 2022–2023



Key Takeaways

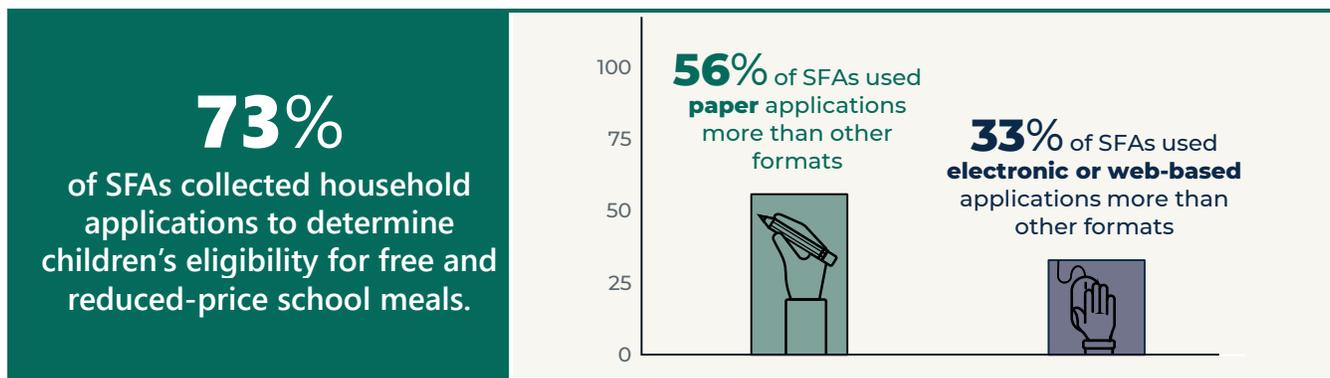
- Three-quarters of school food authorities (SFAs) collected household applications to determine children’s eligibility for free and reduced-price school meals.
- About half of SFAs used paper applications more than other formats, and one-third of SFAs used electronic or web-based applications more than other formats.
- SFAs in States with universal free school meal policies were less likely to collect household applications than SFAs in States without such policies.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program to provide nutritious school meals to children. State agencies administer these programs in each State and Territory through agreements with local school food authorities (SFAs). In school year (SY) 2022–2023, nearly 50 million children were enrolled in the public and nonprofit schools and residential child care institutions that ran the school meal programs (FNS 2023a).¹

Children from low-income households are eligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals. SFAs determine children’s eligibility in a few ways:

- **Income eligibility:** Children living in households with incomes at or below 130 percent of the Federal poverty level are eligible for free school meals, and children living in households with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the Federal poverty level are eligible for reduced-price school meals ([42 USC § 1758\[b\]\[1\]\[A\]](#)).² Households can apply for school meal benefits by providing information about household size and income. SFAs use the information to determine if children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals ([7 CFR § 245.6](#)).³ **In SY 2022–2023, 7 percent of the 50 million children enrolled in institutions with school meal programs were eligible for free or reduced-price school meals based on household income information provided on applications** (FNS 2023a).¹ In addition, most States participate in a demonstration project that allows SFAs to directly certify children for both free and reduced-price meals using household income data from Medicaid State agencies ([FNS 2025](#)).⁴
- **Categorical eligibility:** Children who are in foster care or are homeless, runaway, or migrant are categorically eligible for free school meals. Children are also categorically eligible for free school meals if they participate in Head Start or their household takes part in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Some children who are categorically eligible are identified using official records from programs such as SNAP (direct certification), and others are identified from information their households provide on applications for school meal benefits ([7 CFR § 245.6](#)).³ **In SY 2022–2023, 16 percent of the 50 million children enrolled in institutions with school meal programs were categorically eligible for free school meals** (FNS 2023a).¹

- Community eligibility:** The community eligibility provision (CEP) allows schools in low-income areas to serve free meals to all students without collecting household applications ([7 CFR § 245.9](#)).⁵ These schools are identified through administrative data. **In SY 2022–2023, 40 percent of the 50 million children enrolled in institutions with school meal programs were eligible for free meals through CEP** (FNS 2023a).¹ Another 1 percent of these children were eligible for free school meals because their schools elected other provisions ([FNS 2023b](#)).⁶



We asked a nationally representative sample of 1,100 SFAs about their use of household applications. In SY 2022–2023, 73 percent of SFAs collected household applications to determine if children were eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

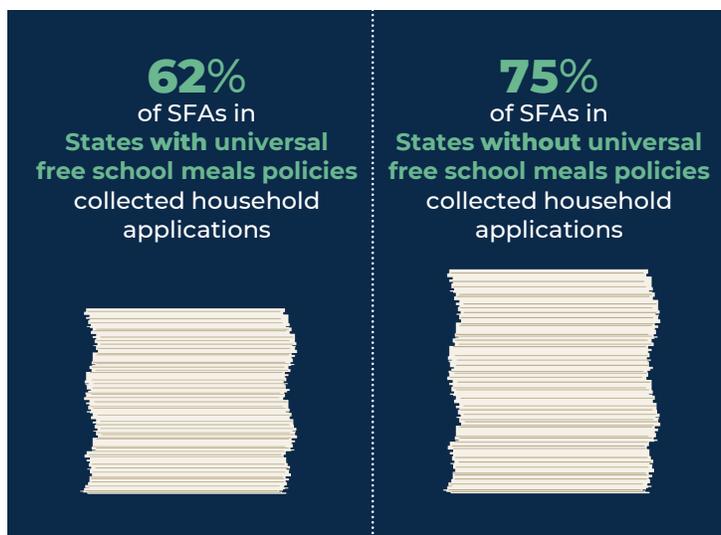
SFAs may use electronic or web-based applications in addition to paper applications. About half of SFAs that collected household applications in SY 2022–2023 used electronic or web-based applications, but only one-third of SFAs used them more than other formats. About half of SFAs used paper applications more than other formats. Almost all SFAs manually reviewed and entered information from paper applications into their data systems instead of using a computer-readable scan.

USDA provides application examples online to help SFAs develop their household applications ([FNS 2024a](#)).⁷ Most SFAs that collected household applications in SY 2022–2023 based their application on the USDA online application.

How States with universal free school meals collect household applications

In SY 2022–2023, five States offered universal free school meals: California, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont. Children in these States received free meals regardless of household income because State funds subsidized the meals ([Toossi 2024](#)).⁸

Three of the five States with universal free school meals policies—California, Massachusetts, and Vermont—required all schools eligible for CEP to participate, eliminating the need for applications in many SFAs. Thus, SFAs in States that offered universal free school meals were significantly less likely to collect household applications than SFAs in States without such policies.



USDA subsidizes all meals served in the school meal programs through per-meal reimbursements. The reimbursements for free and reduced-price meals are much larger than the reimbursements for full-price meals (FNS 2024b).⁹ If SFAs haven't determined that children are eligible for free or reduced-price meals, they receive the smaller reimbursement for paid meals and States must make up for the lost revenue. But, households don't have much incentive to complete household applications when their children receive free meals regardless. Indeed, all five States that offered universal free school meals experienced challenges with families not completing applications.



About the data reported here

This study was sponsored by USDA FNS. The information reported in this brief was collected from two sources: (1) an online survey of all 56 State agencies that oversaw the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), or Seamless Summer Option during SY 2022–2023 and (2) an online survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,100 SFAs that participated in NSLP or SBP during SY 2022–2023. The data tables are available in Supplement B.2, and include some data broken down by SFA characteristic (size, poverty level, and urbanicity).

Suggested citation

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Disclaimer

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References

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- ² School Lunch Programs, Program requirements. 42 USC § 1758(b)(1)(A). Updated 2024. <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=granuleid:USC-prelim-title42-section1758&num=0&edition=prelim>.
- ³ Child Nutrition Programs, Application, eligibility, and certification of children for free and reduced-price meals and free milk. 7 CFR § 245.6. Updated 2024. <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-II/subchapter-A/part-245/section-245.6>.
- ⁴ FNS. "National School Lunch and School Breakfast Program Demonstration Projects to Evaluate Direct Certification with Medicaid." 2025. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/direct-certification-medicaid-demonstration-project>.
- ⁵ Child Nutrition Programs, Special assistance certification and reimbursement alternatives. 7 CFR § 245.9. Updated 2024. <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-II/subchapter-A/part-245/section-245.9>.
- ⁶ FNS. "Provisions 1, 2, and 3." 2023b. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/provisions-1-2-and-3>.
- ⁷ FNS. "School Meals Model Application." 2024a. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/schoolmeals/model-application>.
- ⁸ Toossi, S. "The Effect of Universal Free School Meals on Children's Food Hardship." *Food Policy*, vol. 124, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2024.102606>.
- ⁹ FNS. "NSLP, SMP, SBP—National Average Payments/Maximum Reimbursement Rates." 2024b. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/fr-071024>.