

Improved federal school lunch guidelines lead students to better health, study finds

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Credit: Georgia State University

Federal school lunch guidelines enacted in 2012 are doing what they were designed to do: improving nutrition for school-age children and reducing childhood obesity, [according to a study](#) recently published in the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*.

Researchers combined lunch sales data collected at the register with data on student absences to show how the nutritional content of National School Lunch Program (NSLP) entrées chosen by students varied across different socioeconomic and demographic groups and how the choices affected their health. Economists Tom Mroz at Georgia State University, Jaclyn Kropp at the University of Florida, Janet Peckham at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and sociologist Ellen Granberg and nutritionist Vivian Haley-Zitlin at Clemson University worked with a county school food services director on the project.

"The students more likely to participate in free and reduced-price lunch programs are among the same populations most likely to suffer from obesity and related health risks," said lead author Peckham. "Our goal was to identify any systematic differences in their lunch choices versus those paying the full price to see how well the school lunch program was meeting its goals of providing food assistance to undernourished children and combating the rising rates of childhood obesity."

Nearly 32 million students are served more than five billion lunches in a school day. More than two-thirds of these lunches are free- and reduced-price lunches that follow school lunch program guidelines. Federal school lunch program nutrition standards require greater availability of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and fat-free or low-fat milk as well as a reduction in saturated fats and sodium.

Under the new guidelines, the total calories of the students' lunch choices decreased 4 percent. Calories from fat decreased 18 percent and those from sodium decreased 8 percent.

The research also showed responses to the mandated changes in the nutritional content of school lunch offerings varied by socio-economic and demographic groups, said Mroz, a professor in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State. Students who received free

and reduced-price lunches were more likely to choose entrées with a higher fat content and less likely to select entrées with higher sodium content. Students paying full price were more likely to reject entrées high in fat and choose those higher in sodium. They were also more responsive to increases in protein and more frequently replaced their cafeteria choices with lunches from home.

The research has policy implications, according to Mroz. Although the students receiving free and reduced-price lunches preferred less healthy options, the calories in those options have been reduced. These students are expected to continue to participate in school lunch programs, making the NSLP guidelines effective at improving childhood nutrition and reducing [childhood obesity](#).

Provided by Georgia State University

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