

National school lunch program aces safety test

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The National School Lunch Program's strict safety standards work, which is good news for millions of children who participate in the program daily, according to a new University of Connecticut study.

But, less stringent standards applied to the [beef](#) sold commercially means that school might be safest place to eat.

The study, led by researchers from UConn and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), found that the [food safety](#) standards for [ground beef](#) supplied to the [program](#) are highly effective in keeping harmful bacteria out of school lunches nationwide.

However, ground beef that fails National School Lunch Program inspection can be sold to other vendors and eventually make its way onto consumers' plates, says John Bovay, study co-author and assistant professor in UConn's Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics.

That may help explain related data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. While there were no indications of foodborne *Salmonella* or *E. coli* illnesses from [school lunches](#) between the years of 2005 and 2014, there were 21 reported outbreaks of *Salmonella* and 58 outbreaks of *E. coli* from commercially sold ground beef during the same time period.

Researchers examined the National School Lunch Program because of

its critical nature. "This program is very important for child nutrition policy and as an anti-poverty measure because it provides many children with healthy, safe food, on a regular basis," says Bovay.

Bovay and colleagues used a unique data set comprised of test results from mandatory food safety inspections for ground beef destined for the National School Lunch Program, and data from separate, random USDA inspections.

For a supplier to be able to sell ground beef to the National School Lunch program, says Bovay, the company must first meet a zero-tolerance policy for *Salmonella* and *E. coli* bacteria. Once a supplier is registered, it can bid for contracts. Additional testing is carried out for every 10,000-pound shipment from the supplier; companies that repeatedly fail to meet the standards can lose their right to bid on future contracts with the USDA.

With the implementation of the zero-tolerance standards for the [school](#) lunch program, the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service took food safety inspection many steps further than Food Safety and Inspection Service, which oversees testing and monitoring food safety in meat processing.

The companies that had contracts with the National School Lunch Program had better test outcomes on both tests of shipments to the National School Lunch Program and on random tests, says Bovay.

"Actively bidding plants with good histories had much better performance and around 99% of shipments destined for the National School Lunch Program were in fact *Salmonella* free," says Bovay. "It's clear the zero-tolerance standards are effective."

Active National School Lunch Program suppliers were also up to 31

percent more likely to continue supplying the program than other companies, suggesting that the stringent requirements of the program were attainable, he says.

As for the beef that eventually makes its way onto consumers' plates, Bovay says caution and good judgment should always be used when deciding what is safe to eat.

More information: *American Journal of Agricultural Economics* (2017). [DOI: 10.1093/ajae/aax088](https://doi.org/10.1093/ajae/aax088)

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