



Revision of Categorical Eligibility in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Jennifer Elaine Gaddis, University of Wisconsin, Madison

This proposed legislation stands to negatively affect the “near poor” the most. The near poor include the children of families whose households earn gross incomes between 185 percent and 200 percent of the poverty line who would no longer be automatically eligible for any food assistance at school. Paying \$2-3 per school lunch is out of reach for many of these families, which means their children will opt out of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and join the roughly 20 million children who currently opt out of the program. Likewise, while children in poorer households with gross incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty line will remain eligible for reduced-price lunches, even the relatively low cost (40 cents per lunch) can push school meals out of reach for some low-income families, especially those with multiple school-aged children.

Notably, these children are disproportionately the targets of “lunch shaming” since their caretakers often face precarious economic situations that result in “lunch debt” as their monthly finances change. In order to maximize the public value of the NSLP as a tool for promoting public health, academic achievement, and local food and farm economies (through farm-to-school programs), we need to create policies that bring more children into the cafeteria instead of driving them away simply because their parents cannot afford to pay.