

Kindergartner Zerick Brooks enjoys a snack at an after-school program in an impoverished Virginia neighborhood. Each snack costs the program \$1.35; the government reimbursement rate is 60 cents.



Feeding the Children

A cluster of federal and private programs tries to fill an obscured need

BY CAROL GUENSBURG

Sitting down to an assortment of child nutrition and hunger reports can produce a gnawing anxiety – even off deadline. The federal, state and private programs responding to families' needs form a complicated patchwork, and earnest charities may be inept at explaining their funding sources, let alone their client base. Hunger in the United States is also subtle, absent images of children with distended bellies and matchstick limbs.

Yet participation in most of the federal child nutrition programs – overseen by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) – has been edging up since 1999, coinciding with population growth and the recent recession. In 2002, an estimated 13 million children lived in households experiencing food insecurity, meaning they were so poor that they sometimes had trouble putting enough food on the table, noted the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS) annual report on food security. Millions more live in households where lack of money may compromise their diets and healthy development.

Telling their stories is a challenge for journalists, but now is a good time to try. Congress is scheduled to reauthorize federal child nutrition programs including National School Lunch, School Breakfast, Summer Food Service, Special Milk and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). Left over from 2003's legislative tasks, the multi-year reauthorization probably will be considered this year – although maybe not until after November's elections.

Distinct from the well-known food stamp and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), some child nutrition programs are easily overlooked by reporters.

And by potential beneficiaries. Mary Ellen Warren says she'd never heard of CACFP until she was licensed in Maryland as a home care provider 13 years ago. But the low-visibility program makes a difference in the caliber of food she serves to eight young charges in her Hagerstown home. With monthly cash reimbursements of slightly more than \$300, she can afford to buy things the children like, such as chicken, hot dogs, broccoli, apples, frozen waffles and 1 percent milk. "They don't go home complaining," she said.

Using a sliding scale, CACFP subsidizes meals and snacks in licensed family childcare homes, childcare and

"You need to feed the stomach before you can feed the mind," said Susie Abramson, who runs a Virginia nonprofit offering snacks and homework help to 25 to 30 elementary-age students each weekday.

Head Start centers, after-school sites, homeless shelters and group homes. More than half of licensed childcare homes and about a third of centers use the program.

Experts recognize that with most nutrition programs, participation falls short of eligibility. Take food stamps, the acknowledged cornerstone of federal anti-hunger efforts. In 2002, the government spent \$20.6 billion aiding 19 million beneficiaries, half of them children. Yet FNS concedes enrollment represents, at best, only 62 percent of those eligible.

Especially since the 2001 arrival of Undersecretary Eric M. Bost, FNS has pressed states and local agencies to promote access to all its nutrition programs. It's giving special attention to food stamps, offering \$6 million in new competitive grants to bolster public awareness and to simplify applications. At least \$1 million of this has

been earmarked for partnerships between states and nonprofits, including faith-based agencies.

Under Bost, "there has been a high importance put on working with advocates ... to maximize the resources that we have," said FNS spokeswoman Jean Daniel. It collaborated with the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), America's Second Harvest and other advocates to develop an online pre-screening tool for potential food stamp recipients and to alert them of eligibility in child nutrition programs.

The agency has given outreach grants to several food banks affiliated with Second Harvest, the nation's largest private charitable anti-hunger network. Emissaries in Atlanta, Los Angeles and Fort Wayne, Ind. – armed with benefits calculators – have fanned out to social services agencies, soup kitchens and food pantries "to show people how much they could get" in

food stamps, said Douglas O'Brien, Second Harvest's public policy director.

Some promptly sign up for the entitlement, he said. "A substantial portion of the people who fill out applications ... don't submit the paperwork because it competes with work or their education schedules," he added. Or, they're wary of government involvement, as is sometimes the case with recent immigrants.

This so-called "red-tape divide" affects other nutrition programs, too. To slice through it, the Child Nutrition Forum – an ad hoc collection of 46 interest groups, including FRAC, Second Harvest, the American School Food Service Association, Child Welfare League, National Education Association and the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association – has called for broader eligibility guidelines to serve more low-income children. It also seeks reduced paperwork and streamlined accounting requirements to ease the burden on sponsors and participants.

Meanwhile, people in need turn to community food assistance programs, such as those operated by United Way and Lutheran Social Services. A 2001 study for Second Harvest estimated 26 million people sought emergency supplies the previous year; the Economic Research Service reported that roughly 3 million households visited food pantries in 2002. Households with children were twice as likely as those without to face uncertain food supplies. About half of low-income parents reported food hardship in 2002, according to an Urban Institute report.

The Salvation Army's national social services secretary said that "demand for food increased 6 percent last year." The evangelical ministry served 61 million meals to more than 10 million people, often with government support, Col. Paul Bollwahn said. "We have a variety of partnership programs with USDA, [including] after-school, weekend and summer programs that are feeding children." But, he added, the safety net "has got some rips in it."

"I'm hearing from all the emergency pantries in Catholic Charities [USA]," echoed Sharon Daly, a lobbyist for that organization's domestic program. "People who used to be donors and

The Politics of Hunger

The Bush administration's proposed 2005 budget recommends \$12 billion for child nutrition programs, which exclude food stamps and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program or WIC. That's a slight increase from the current year's projected spending of \$11.7 billion, but much less than advocates had sought.

"We're very disappointed," said Lynn Parker, director of child nutrition programs and nutrition policy for the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC).

FRAC and other advocates have been pressing the White House and Congress for at least another \$2 billion over five years to expand access. Their hopes had been buoyed last fall "when Karl Rove had requested information from three or four of us independently, so it looked like they might be addressing child hunger," said J. Larry Brown, who directs Brandeis University's Center on Hunger and Poverty. "But that's clearly not reflected in the budget."

Then again, with falling tax revenues and a war to finance, these are austere times. "We're glad the programs are not cut," Parker acknowledged.

The budget now lies in the hands of congressional appropriations committees, with guidance from the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee, and the House Education and the Workforce Committee.

– Carol Guensburg

volunteers in the soup kitchens and pantries now are coming for help. ... The majority of our clients who come for these services are families with children. And the majority are working.”

Catholic Charities also runs programs that distribute government-subsidized food.

Public-private collaboration is critical in most of the nutrition programs, including two lesser used or lesser known ones with good story potential: the Summer Food Service Program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

Summer Food: On an average school day in 2003, the National School Lunch Program served 28 million meals, 16 million of them to children in households qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches. But little more than 3 million of those low-income children – one in five – ate summer meals at community and recreation centers, some schools, and nonprofits such as Boys and Girls Clubs or faith-based programs.

Improving that ratio is a top priority for FNS and others involved in anti-hunger efforts. The first step? Make summer food programs more palatable to operate.

Sponsors – and thus sites – are sparse due to “unfamiliarity with the program, burdensome paperwork and limited resources,” said Second Harvest’s O’Brien. Only 27 of its 216 affiliated food banks currently sponsor summer programs, even though many of them report seeing more children in summer.

Cost is another deterrent. Losses ran to \$68,000 last summer for the Capital Area Food Bank, a Second Harvest affiliate that sponsored 64 summer food programs in the District of Columbia, northern Virginia and neighboring Montgomery and Prince George’s counties in Maryland. “Like most sponsors, we spent more than we were reimbursed,” said Susan Kincaid, director of child and nutrition programs. “Summer food involves a huge mountain of paperwork.”

The outlook is more promising in 13 states experimenting with stream-

Story ideas

- **Look at the kinds of food** available through the subsidized programs or from community food pantries. How closely do available choices meet children’s needs and desires? For instance, food stamps and CACFP allow considerable latitude, but WIC is more restrictive, said Craig Gundersen, a former ERS economist who now teaches at Iowa State University. O’Brien at Second Harvest said 30 percent of the support for its 216 food banks comes in the form of government commodities, including canned vegetables, canned salmon, frozen meat, cranberries and “a huge glut of powdered milk.” Such commodities constitute 10 percent of the federal government’s contributions to school lunches.
- **Examine how working parents feed their kids.** How much time is available to buy and prepare food, much less supervise homework or do other chores? What, asked Lynn Parker of FRAC, are the implications in terms of cost and food quality? Mark Nord, a sociologist with ERS, said the “relatively low prevalence of hunger among children” points to sacrifice on the part of adults, especially single mothers.
- **Consider the quality of food children eat outside the home.** Children increasingly eat their meals away from home. Schools often face challenges in cost management, staff training and kitchen equipment.
- **Evaluate the school lunch and snack subsidies** for children whose family incomes exceed 185 percent of the poverty level, said Melissa Pardue, a fellow at the Heritage Foundation. Schools receive a 21-cent federal reimbursement for lunch and 5 cents for snacks for each child in that category, even for those in prosperous households. “Those funds could be reallocated to poor children,” she said.
- **Examine the feeding options,** or lack thereof, for residents of suburban and rural areas. These have less than ideal transportation options, said O’Brien, which makes them more costly and difficult to serve.
- **Explore efforts to streamline benefits enrollment.** For instance, RealBenefits software provides a kind of one-stop-shopping for social services clients in Illinois. A client sits down for a single interview, in which a social worker gathers information about family composition, income and expenses. “The software program applies eligibility rules for multiple programs and, at the end, will produce a completed application for each program,” explained Michael A. O’Connor, a consultant to Community Catalyst, the Boston nonprofit that developed the software. All that’s needed for filing is the client’s signature. The printout also lists what specific documents – birth certificates, payroll receipts, etc. – are required when applying for each program. Other places that use the software include Boston, Springfield, Mass., and Dade County, Fla. See www.realbenefits.org.
- **Find out what, if any, provisions are available during emergency school closings.** For instance, Michelle Yoffee-Beard, writing Jan. 29 in the *Frederick* (Md.) *News-Post*, focused on the uncertainty of low-income children meals on snow days.

About one in five Americans participates in a food assistance program each year, according to ERS' 2004 report, "The Food Assistance Landscape." The five programs below account for 94 percent of government food expenditures.

FEDERAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE AT-A-GLANCE

Program		FY 2002	FY 2003	Change
Food Stamp Program	Average monthly participation (millions)	19.1	21.3	11.4%
	Average benefit per person (dollars/month)	79.68	83.91	5.3%
	Total annual expenditures (\$ billions)	20.7	23.7	14.8%
WIC	Average monthly participation (millions)	7.5	7.6	1.9%
	Total annual expenditures (\$ billions)	4.3	4.5	4.0%
National School Lunch Program	Average daily participation (millions)	28.0	28.3	1.0%
	Total annual expenditures (\$ billions)	6.9	7.2	4.4%
School Breakfast Program	Average daily participation (millions)	8.1	8.4	3.4%
	Total annual expenditures (\$ billions)	1.6	1.6	4.8%
Child and Adult Care Food Program	Meals served in:			
	• child care centers (millions)	984	1,022	3.9%
	• family day care homes (millions)	708	694	-1.7%
	• adult day care centers (millions)	45	48	8.0%
	Total annual expenditures (\$ billions)	1.9	1.9	3.8%
Total program expenditures	Total expenditures (\$ billions)	38.0	41.6	9.4%

lined accounting and paperwork via the so-called Lugar pilot. Named for the Indiana senator who sponsored the legislation, it also ensures the maximum reimbursement rate for sponsors. It was first used in 2001. In that first summer, 40 new sponsors joined the existing 644 in serving meals, and another 16,000 children came on board, for a total of 191,000. Participation elsewhere declined by 3 percent, with 63,000 fewer children served in 2001.

Meanwhile, Second Harvest is pressing for more private sponsors for summer feeding sites, because, as O'Brien explained, "Asking cash-strapped municipalities and state governments won't work."

Second Harvest also has prepared a tool kit on how to run effective summer food sites. It's recruiting among its 1,000-plus Kids Cafés, which partner with existing programs – at schools, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, community and recreation centers, etc. – to provide healthy foods in supervised settings. Second Harvest is trying to determine the number of Kids Cafés operating as summer food sites.

The food bank network also is considering a nationwide rollout of a program called Food for Kids. An initiative of the Washington, D.C., Capital Area Food Bank, it started in 2002 as a supplement to the summer food program. Each Friday, it doles out roughly 1,000 small bags of groceries at 24 after-school programs, mostly Kids Cafés, to tide children and their families over the weekend. The contents one recent week included peanut butter, canned peaches, a box of Nutri-Grain cereal bars, a bottle of strawberry-banana juice and a package of anise toast.

"They usually have all kinds of good canned foods and graham crackers," said 8-year-old Debra Hisey, as she eyed a bag at the Family Resource Learning Center, a Kids Café site in an Alexandria, Va., public housing project. Her 13-year-old brother usually collects one, too.

"Them bags come in handy when the food's getting low," their mother, Ann Hisey, said in a follow-up phone conversation. She works part time for

the city's recreation department and collects \$235 a month in food stamps.

Food for Kids is supported by private donations. Second Harvest's O'Brien said that would be the likely source for any nationwide effort, suggesting additional support might be possible from the federal Emergency Food Assistance Program.

Search summer feeding programs by state or ZIP code at ERS' online database: www.ers.usda.gov/data/sfsp. Data is from 2001.

CACFP: The entitlement program gives subsidies for meals and snacks served in licensed family or group day-care homes, homeless shelters or nonresidential child centers, including Head Start sites and after-school programs. Rates vary according to the family income of each child or, in the case of home providers, whether they operate in a low-income area or are classified as low-income themselves.

Warren, the provider in Hagerstown, Md., lives in a district where at least half the school-age children qualify for free or reduced lunch. Tier I homes like hers get a cash subsidy of \$1.83 per lunch or 54 cents per snack served; those in higher income areas (Tier II) get \$1.10 and 15 cents respectively. The subsidy means the difference between, say, generic chicken nuggets or name-brand ones where "you actually see meat in them," she explained. It ensures more fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy and protein. Because the youngsters like the food, "I don't see much waste."

CACFP is "one of the few federal benefits that go to childcare, and it's associated with better childcare overall," said Lynn Parker, FRAC's director of child nutrition programs and policy. Providers get nutrition training, keep records of what they serve, and submit to several unannounced visits each year by monitors.

FRAC urges after-school enrichment programs to explore eligibility, Parker said, because the federal reimbursements free up money for other things like counselors, heat, cleaning, basketballs and art supplies.

At Alexandria's Family Resource Learning Center, Director Susie

Abramson sees 25 to 30 elementary-school students each weekday. She and a volunteer engage them with puzzles and games or supervise homework. But “you need to feed the stomach before you can feed the mind,” she said.

So, one January afternoon, 11-year-old Jakeya Anderson helped set out a buffet of fruit parfait yogurt, red Delicious apples, popcorn and fruit juice. She confided that her favorite food there is Sloppy Joe; she likes to help with the cooking. After snacks, Jakeya said, “I get help with my homework and projects.”

Because this Kids Café site lies in an impoverished neighborhood, the sponsoring Capital Area Food Bank receives the highest of three center reimbursement rates: 60 cents a snack. Kincaid estimated the food bank’s food, delivery and administrative costs at \$1.35 per snack.

CACFP touches more children and families than journalists might realize.

My own two sons took part in the program as toddlers in a day-care home run by “Nana,” a retired nurse who also watched over two grandchildren. Each year, I signed a county form confirming the boys’ time in care and our family’s income. And throughout each year, Nana treated the children to a procession of soups, fruits, hot cereals and eggs, homemade cookies. Occasionally, she recruited them to help make meat-and-potato pasties, preparing extras as a bonus for weary parents. I found it comforting to know the boys were well fed away from home.

At the time, I was the *Milwaukee Journal’s* food editor.

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Up to 30 children, such as second-grader Ayanna Mason, attend the Family Resource Center’s afterschool program.

Resources

Economic Research Service of the USDA provides analyses of nutrition programs and more. For the 18-question food security module used in the Census Bureau’s December Current Population Survey, see page 3 of “Household Food Security in the United States, 2002,” www.ers.usda.gov/publications/fanrr35. Press Secretary Alisa Harrison can be reached at 202-720-4623.

Food & Nutrition Service, USDA, offers detailed backgrounders on child nutrition programs. Call the public affairs office at 703-305-2286 or see www.fns.usda.gov.

U.S. Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee oversees federal anti-hunger programs. <http://agriculture.senate.gov/nutri/nutri.htm>

U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce deals with school food. <http://edworkforce.house.gov>

American School Food Service Association, based in Alexandria, Va., bills itself as “the voice of child nutrition.” www.asfsa.org

America’s Second Harvest is the nation’s largest private hunger-relief organization, with a network of 216 affiliated food banks serving 50,000 local agencies. It oversees more than 1,000 Kids Cafes. 800-771-2303 or www.secondharvest.org

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities concentrates on fiscal policies and programs affecting low-income people. Policy analyst Zoe Neuberger handles child nutrition. 202-408-1080 or www.cbpp.org

Center on Hunger and Poverty, Brandeis University. Directed by J. Larry Brown, its Food Security Institute is a clearinghouse for hunger and food insecurity studies. 781-736-8885 or www.centeronhunger.org

Food Research and Action Center is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan research and public policy center. Call Ellen Vollinger at 202-986-2200 or see www.frac.org. Its Building Blocks page lists key state contacts for using federal child nutrition programs for after-school and summer programs. www.frac.org/html/building_blocks/afterschoolcontacts.html

World Hunger Year, a New York-based nonprofit, identifies model anti-hunger programs around the country. It also runs a journalism awards contest. 212-629-8850 or www.worldhungeryear.org