

National School Lunch Program increases educational achievement

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A new article from the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* is the first to evaluate the long-term health and educational effects of participation in the National School Lunch Program. The study finds that the program leads to a significant increase in educational opportunity and attainment, but an insignificant increase in health levels from childhood to adulthood.

The Congress-led program, which first began in 1946 under President Harry S. Truman, built off the existing New Deal food subsidy programs, first started under Franklin D. Roosevelt. The program was largely inspired by the disqualification of sixteen percent of eligible soldiers from serving in World War II, due to malnutrition or underfeeding causes, and was originally perceived as a "measure of national security."

Dr. Peter Hinrichs, Assistant Professor of Public Policy at Georgetown University and author of the study, remarks, "My research found that the National School Lunch Program has not had a dramatic effect on health into adulthood, but it has had a significant effect on educational attainment. School feeding programs, and the National School Lunch Program in particular, have some effect on adult health, but do not necessarily improve every outcome we hoped they would improve." Federal spending on the program is now measured at over eight billion annually.

The study asserts that the low-cost, subsidized lunches offered to

children in the program may have encouraged children to attend school more than they would have, based on data on [educational attainment](#) from the U.S. Census.

However, based on data from the National Health Interview Survey, the study finds no lasting effect on adult health. The author speculates that food from the National School Lunch Program may have just replaced food that children were going to consume from other sources, or that perhaps the program improves health temporarily but that the effects fade away by adulthood. Hinrichs says, "The NSLP today is still broad in its reach, but it has some elements of being targeted toward poorer children. These include higher standards for eligibility and also special funding for poorer schools. Had these elements been in place at the inception of the program, the program may have had more of a detectable effect on health in its early years."

The results found in this new study has implications for developing countries that are considering introducing large scale school feeding programs similar to the National School Lunch Program and related programs, such as the School Breakfast Program.

More information: "The Effects of the National School Lunch Program on Education and Health." Peter Hinrichs. Journal of Policy Analysis and Management; Published Online: June 3, 2010 ([DOI: 10.1002/pam.20506](#)).

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