

GAO
Accountability·Integrity·Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-09-814](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2008, the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program provided meals to 30.9 million and 10.5 million children, respectively. Recently, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued the first estimate of improper payments due to meal counting and claiming errors in these programs, which was approximately \$860 million (8.6 percent of federal program reimbursements) in school year 2005-2006. These errors include: (1) cashier errors, such as those made in determining if a meal meets the federal menu planning and nutrition requirements (meal counting), and (2) aggregation errors made when officials count and total meals for federal reimbursement (meal claiming). GAO was asked to review (1) actions taken by states and school food authorities (SFA) to identify and address meal counting and claiming errors; and (2) actions taken by USDA to help states and SFAs identify and address meal counting and claiming errors. GAO's steps included analyzing data on state administrative reviews of SFAs; surveying all states; conducting site visits; and interviewing federal, state, and SFA officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Agriculture modify the requirements for state and SFA reviews and improve federal guidance and data collection. USDA agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-09-814](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Kay Brown at (202) 512-7215 or brownke@gao.gov.

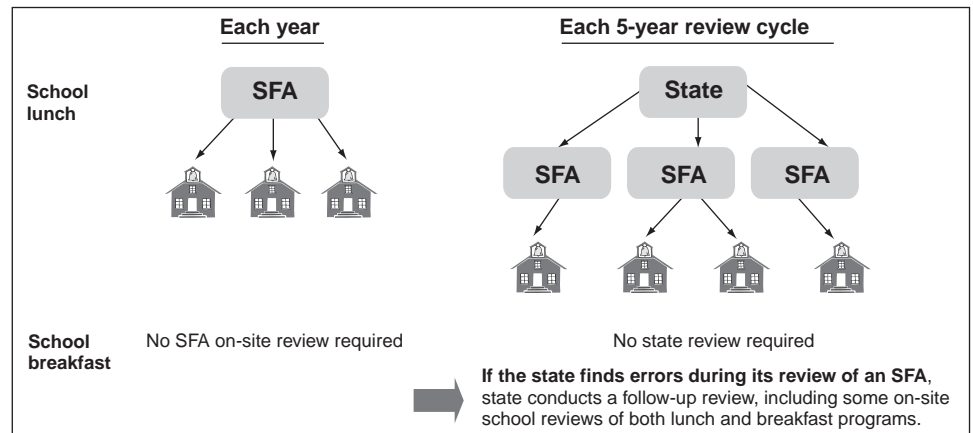
SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

Improved Reviews, Federal Guidance, and Data Collection Needed to Address Counting and Claiming Errors

What GAO Found

Although states and SFAs conduct program integrity reviews of the school meal programs, gaps in federal requirements for these reviews limit their effectiveness at identifying meal counting and claiming errors. States and SFAs are generally not required to review the School Breakfast Program, and 21 states reported through GAO's survey that they do not review the breakfast program. However, USDA estimates that the percentage of meal counting and claiming errors is higher in the breakfast program than the lunch program. Further, some states reported that SFA reviews of the meal programs are ineffective at identifying and reducing errors, which may be due, in part, to the self-assessment design of these reviews. When state and SFA reviews identify errors, meal counting and claiming errors persist. For example, in several SFAs that GAO visited, the same errors were identified during consecutive reviews. States and SFAs identified multiple factors that hinder efforts to address these errors, such as staff turnover, inadequate training, and school policies that complicate meal service.

Federally Required Reviews of Counting and Claiming in Meal Programs



Sources: GAO, Art Explosion (images).

USDA has taken some actions to improve state reviews of SFAs, but it has not directly focused on oversight of meal counting and claiming. USDA recently provided new review forms and nationwide training to strengthen state reviews and also simplified the application process for state grants to conduct additional reviews of SFAs. However, USDA has not targeted its oversight efforts to identify or address meal counting and claiming errors. For example, USDA regional offices' reviews of state administration of the school meal programs do not focus on these errors, and some regional officials could not provide information on the extent of these errors in the states they oversee. USDA also has not updated its meal counting and claiming manual since it was first issued in 1991. Further, while USDA collects annual data on findings from state reviews of SFAs, the agency has not used these data for oversight purposes or to assess risks associated with meal counting and claiming errors.