Understanding the Relationship between the School Breakfast Program and Food Insecurity

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Project Summary

The main objectives of our project, which is entitled “Understanding the Relationship between the School Breakfast Program and Food Insecurity,” will be to produce new causal evidence of the importance of the School Breakfast Program (SBP) in reducing food insecurity in school-aged children. We also examine whether this program may reduce food insecurity in young siblings of these children and whether it cushions the impacts of high food prices on food insecurity in families. The analysis window is 1999-2010, which allows an examination of the importance of the SBP in the context of the large increases in hunger due to the Great Recession.

Our project has several key policy implications. First, this study can help policy makers decide whether expanding the SBP may be an important tool in the battle against rising food insecurity. Second, this study will examine whether the SBP has effects in reducing food insecurity in families and siblings of the children using the program, which may be helpful in understanding the complementary benefits of the many interacting food programs (e.g. WIC) aimed at children at risk of experiencing hunger. Third, our project will help policymakers understand how the SBP interfaces with the local food environment though our examination of local food prices effects. That is, does the SBP provide extra benefits in areas with high food prices?

In order to evaluate these various impacts of the SBP, we will use several statistical methodologies aimed at detecting causal relationships. Because there are no random controlled trial evaluations of the SBP, we need to select research designs that are able to compare similar children who differ only because of their access to school breakfasts. Our first approach to this
question, a difference-in-difference strategy, compares the changes in child food insecurity associated with changes in state policies that mandate the provision of breakfast at school. Since some states require more schools to provide breakfasts than other states, we utilize these policy differences across states to examine associated differences in food insecurity among children across states due to the policy. Our second methodology, a regression discontinuity strategy, leverages the specific school poverty thresholds that states decide requires the provision of school breakfasts. For example, Ohio requires all K-8 schools with poverty rates greater than 33% to offer the SBP. This means that a student attending a school with a 32% poverty rate has a much lower chance of having access to breakfast at school than a student attending a school with a 34% poverty rate. Because these schools are otherwise similar, except for providing breakfast, we can attribute differences in food insecurity among these students attending similar schools to the School Breakfast Program. The use of multiple empirical strategies will allow our project to be more certain in establishing cause-and-effect relationships.