


Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-530](#), a report to
Congressional Requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

More than 28 million children receive meals daily through the federal school meal programs. Providing meals that are safe is especially important because young children have a higher risk of complications from some foodborne illnesses. GAO examined (1) the frequency and causes of reported foodborne illness outbreaks associated with the federal school meal programs and (2) the practices that federal, state, and local governments as well as other food providers find useful for safeguarding meals.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Health and Human Services direct the Director of CDC to modify the Centers' foodborne outbreak reporting mechanism to add federal school meals as an outbreak category.

GAO also recommends that the Secretary of Agriculture direct (1) the Administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) to highlight its more stringent school-related procurement specifications on the agency's Web page and (2) the Administrators of AMS and the Food and Nutrition Service to further promote training and certification of key food service personnel and study the advantages and disadvantages of donating precooked or irradiated foods.

USDA and HHS agreed with this report's recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-530.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Lawrence J. Dyckman at (202) 512-3841 or dyckmanl@gao.gov.

SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS

Few Instances of Foodborne Outbreaks Reported, but Opportunities Exist to Enhance Outbreak Data and Food Safety Practices

What GAO Found

GAO found that 195, or about 3 percent, of the total of 7,390 foodborne outbreaks that were reported nationwide, between 1990 and 1999, occurred in schools. Specific national data on whether these outbreaks were related to the federal school meal programs do not exist; however, GAO's survey of state health officials provided information on 40 large outbreaks involving these programs. Nearly half of these large outbreaks resulted from improper food preparation and handling practices in school kitchens. Most commonly, foods involved in the outbreaks were contaminated with Norwalk-like viruses, which cause a mild gastrointestinal illness. However, data limitations make comprehensive assessment of the safety of school meal programs difficult. In particular, the reporting mechanism that states use to voluntarily report outbreaks to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) does not distinguish between outbreaks in schools involving the school meal programs and those involving food from other sources, such as brought from students' homes.

Federal, state, and local governments, as well as other food providers use a variety of practices to safeguard meals. Some of them may have national applicability to the federal school meal programs. For example, having key food service personnel trained and certified in food safety would address the improper food preparation and handling practices that caused most of the outbreaks reported in GAO's survey. Purchasing precooked or irradiated meat and poultry products could reduce the risk of foodborne illness in schools. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Agriculture requires that some of the commodities it donates to schools be purchased under more stringent safety standards than the agency's regulatory requirements for meat and poultry processors. Currently, these more stringent procurement requirements are not readily accessible for school districts' use. While the practicality of applying these food preparation/handling and purchasing practices to the nation's schools has not been assessed, several food safety experts believe that applying these practices in all schools would enhance the safety of federal school meals. Some of these practices would likely lead to increased food costs for schools.



Source: USDA.