


These slides were prepared by Tim Morgan and Anore Horton of Hunger Free Vermont, using data provided by Vermont's Joint Fiscal Office, Agency of Education, and Department of Vermont Health Access, and by the U.S. Census.

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Children are at risk of food insecurity and hunger when they live in households that don't make enough income to meet basic needs, unless their basic needs are met through other means.



One way to look at the relationship between eligibility for school meals and families who can't afford to pay for school meals is by comparing the JFO's basic needs budget calculations to the federal income cutoffs for free and reduced price school meals:

The income eligibility threshold for Free & Reduced Price Meals is ***less than half*** the income needed to meet basic needs in Vermont, according to JFO. (These are the Vermont Joint Fiscal Office's most recent basic needs budget calculations for families living in more urban areas of VT.)

	<u>JFO basic needs budget</u>	<u>USDA cut-off for free or reduced-price school meals</u>	<u>% of JFO Basic Needs Threshold</u>
<u>2 parent, 2 child household</u>	\$108,030	\$51,338	47.5%
<u>1 parent, 2 child household</u>	\$95,512	\$42,606	44.6%



What is the relationship between eligibility for school meals and families who can't afford to pay for school meals?

One way to answer this question is to use VT Medicaid data, since Medicaid is a program designed for low-income children and adults. The Medicaid income threshold for children in VT is 317% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), and 68,000 children in Vermont are enrolled in Medicaid, according to the Department of Vermont Health Access (DVHA).

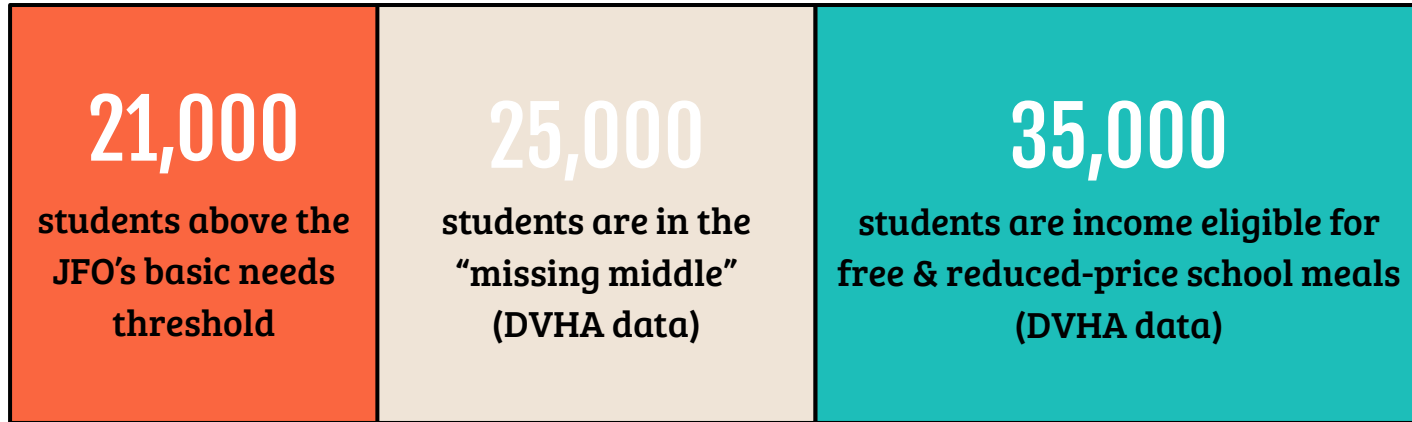
DVHA's Medicaid Direct Certification estimate tells us that more than **25,000** **students** are living in the income gap between eligibility for Medicaid (317% FPL) and the upper income limit for Free and Reduced Price School Meals eligibility (185% FPL).

(And, JFO's basic needs budget shows that the income needed to afford basic needs is even higher than eligibility for Medicaid for many families.)

Students in the Eligibility Gap

25,000

“The Missing Middle”



In 2019, there were 81,000 students enrolled in VT public schools (VT-AOE data)

75%

Of all public school students in Vermont are living in households whose income is below the JFO's basic needs threshold. (2019 data)

“The Missing Middle”

This is another way to understand how many students in Vermont are in the “missing middle.” This is data from the American Communities Survey of the U.S. Dept. of the Census. These income brackets do not match up to the Medicaid or Free and Reduced Price School Meals income cutoffs, but they do show how many students live in lower-income households, compared to the number of students living in higher-income households.

Vermont School Age Children by Household Income Group		
Household Income Bracket	Number of School Age Children	Percentage of School Age Children
\$0-\$50,000	24,415	27.4%
\$50,000-\$100,000	28,772	32.2%
\$100,000-\$150,000	20,654	23.1%
\$150,000-\$200,000	6,351	7.1%
\$200,000-\$250,000	3,901	4.4%
\$250,000-\$300,000	1,286	1.4%
\$300,000+	3,873	4.3%
Total	89,252	100%

*Data from 2021 Vermont ACS 5-Year Estimates

Using VT-AOE data, we can see how stigma depresses participation by low-income students eligible for free and reduced-price school meals when school meals are not universal by looking at participation data from 2019, the last year in which most public schools in Vermont were not providing universal meals:

81,000

students were attending public schools with school meal programs in Vermont in 2019

35,000

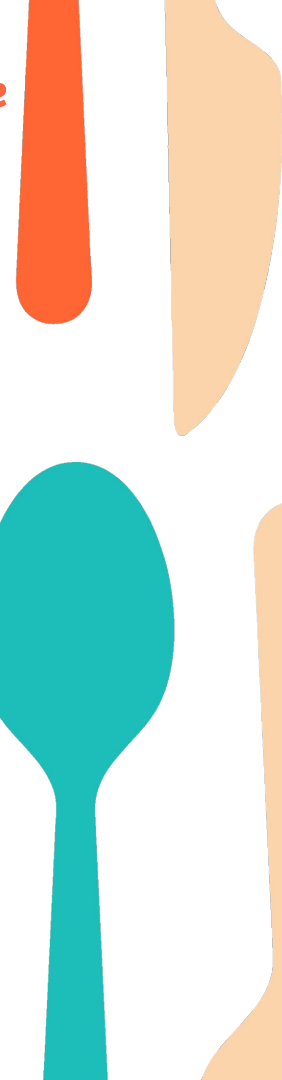
students were eligible for free and reduced-price school meals, based on DVHA data

31,000

students were enrolled in free and reduced-price school meals - meaning that 4,000 eligible students were never signed up for the free school meals they needed because their families did not fill out school meal applications, or filled them out incorrectly (11% of all low income public school students)

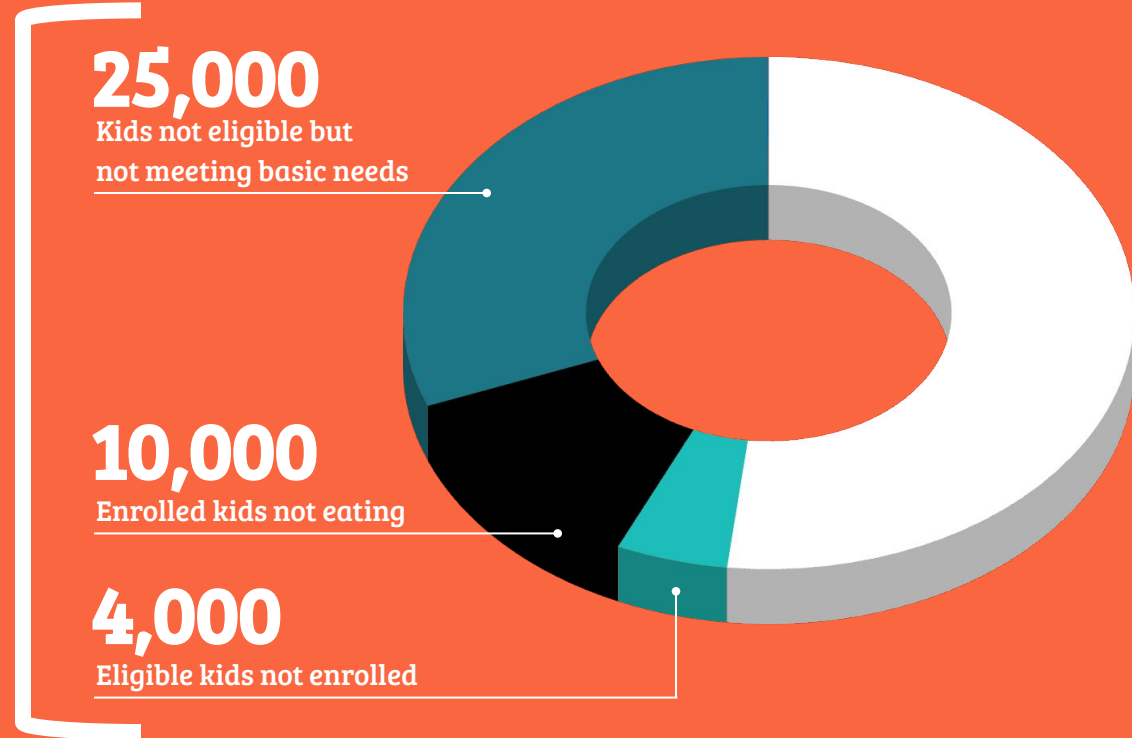
21,000

students enrolled in free and reduced-price school meals actually ate on an average day - meaning that 10,000 students signed up for free school meals chose not to take those meals on any given day in VT public schools (32% of all low income public school students)



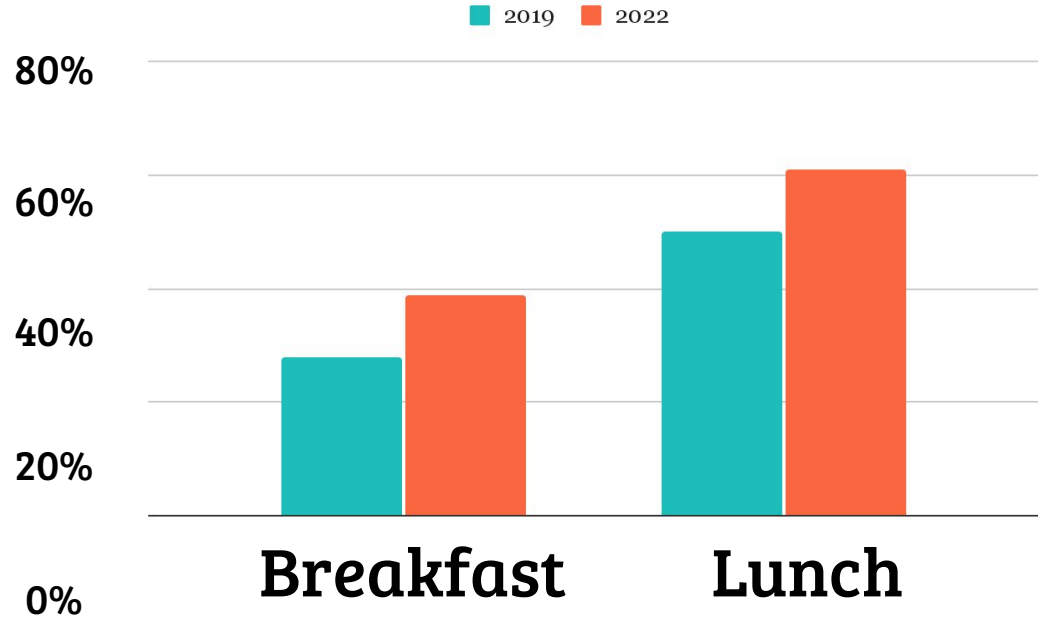
This means about half of all students in Vermont could have been experiencing hunger at school before Universal School Meals...

48%
of all
Vermont
Students



School Meal Participation

2019 vs. 2022



This data from the Vermont Agency of Education shows the increase in overall school meal program participation statewide with universal school meals.



But, school meal participation doesn't really work like that. Students in all income categories do not participate in school meal programs at the same rates, even when school meals are universal:

2022 Participation Rates by Category			
	Paid	Free and Reduced-Price	Difference
Breakfast	34%	46%	12%
Lunch	57%	63%	6%

**Data from November 2022*

This data from the Vermont Agency of Education shows that low-income students are participating at significantly higher rates than students who are not income-eligible for free or reduced price school meals, even though meals are universally free - and keep in mind that a large percentage of students in the “paid” category are in the “missing middle.”

A vertical arrangement of white silhouettes for a spoon, a knife, and a fork on the left side of the slide. The spoon is at the top, the knife is in the middle, and the fork is at the bottom.

Only Universal School Meals can:

- Reach all food insecure students
- take cash registers out of the cafeteria
- eliminate stigma for low income students
- eliminate unpaid meal debt
- reduce paperwork & costs