

Poverty in the Richest Nation in the World: What's the Real Story?

McDonald's may claim that they've served more than 99 billion 100% all-beef patties, but that figure is dwarfed by the number of meals that the National School Lunch Program has served—more than 187 billion!



You don't see signs outside schools advertising this fact, so here's a quick tutorial on how the program works: "Any child at a participating school (RBHS included) may purchase a meal through the National School Lunch Program.

- Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals (through June 30, 2007 the eligible income is \$26,000 for a family of four).
- Those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals, for which students can be charged no more than 40 cents (through June 30, 2007 the eligible income is between \$26,000 and \$37,000).
- In Fiscal Year 2005, more than 29.6 million children each day got their lunch through the National School Lunch Program."¹

Seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it? Now consider this...

"The current system of [poverty] measurement is out-dated and seriously underestimates the count of the number of poor people in this country. If the government were to acknowledge the true extent of poverty, it would need to dedicate a greater share of its resources to pay the costs of programs to help the poor. It is unfortunately cheaper to use an outdated system of measurement so that fewer people will be in poverty by government standards"²

Is our government really underestimating the number of poor people in our country?

If the numbers were "more accurate" would we really determine that national budgets would need to shift to address this problem?

How can we calculate poverty "more accurately"?

Whose job is it to fill in the gaps caused by poverty?

How might students in our school benefit from a new system of poverty calculation, reporting, and tracking?

These questions and more underlie an investigation into poverty in the richest nation in the world. If our GDP, \$12.4 trillion in 2005, is the largest of all independent countries in the world, then why are almost 18% of children born into poverty? If the argument above is true, then the 18% figure may be 20%, 25%, or even more. If that is true, then maybe 35 million, 40 million, or even 50 million children should qualify for the National School Lunch Program.

¹"National School Lunch Program." United States Department of Agriculture: Food and Nutrition Service. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/lunch/AboutLunch/NSLPFactSheet.pdf>

² Willis, Jessie. "How We Measure Poverty." Oregon Center for Public Policy. <http://www.ocpp.org/poverty/how.htm>

A couple more statistics to throw at you...

According to the Department of Health and Human Services national poverty guidelines, a family of four in the contiguous 48 states that makes less than **\$20,650** may qualify for federal assistance programs, such as the National School Lunch Program.

According to the Office of Management and Budget, the average poverty threshold for a family of four is **\$19,307** (for 2005).

Does either of these numbers truly tell us who in our country is unable to make ends meet?

Your job is to attempt to solve a problem that professionally trained economists and regular Americans can't solve because they don't spend 180 days a year in our school building...

How should we fix the school lunch problem?

- **Who should qualify? Why?**
- **What should the new program offer?**
- **Why should the NSLP exist? Or shouldn't it?**

Each section should be explained in two good paragraphs and each section is worth 15 points, for a total of 45 points. Groups can earn up to five additional points for effective teamwork.