

CHAPTER 1

Coverage of School Meal Programs

Focal points (survey respondents) reported detailed information about each large-scale school meal program that had been operating in the country in the most recently completed school year.⁴ In total, the 85 countries that are the primary focus of this report shared information on 160 school meal programs. Sixty-one percent of countries had one program, 24% had two programs, 11% had three programs, and 5% had four school meal programs on which to report. The average number of programs was greatest in Sub-Saharan Africa and the South Asia, East Asia & Pacific region, with an average of 1.8 and 1.7 programs, respectively.

Across these 85 countries with large-scale programs, an estimated 297.3 million children of all ages received food through school meal programs (Table A1 in Annex A).^{5,6} In absolute terms, the five countries with the greatest number of student beneficiaries include Egypt (with 11,201,245 children), the United States (with 30,000,000 children), China (with 38,190,000 children), Brazil (with 41,846,552 children), and India (with 90,414,536 children).



⁴ A large-scale school feeding program may take the form of a program that is managed and/or administered by the national government; a large program that is managed and/or administered by regional or local governments, or by a non-governmental entity in coordination with the national government; or any large program that does not involve the government but reaches a substantial proportion of students in the country or covers a substantial geography.

⁵ Discussion of the number of students receiving food excludes Vietnam, for which we did not receive student numbers.

⁶ Information on the number of student beneficiaries for five additional countries captured via desk review is provided in Table A2. For most desk review countries, insufficient data were found on student numbers.



Across 85 countries with large-scale programs, an estimated 297.3 million children of all ages received food through school meal programs.

The Global Survey of School Meal Programs © captured each country's coverage rate, defined here as the share of children of primary and secondary school age that received food through school meal programs. Across the 103 countries that submitted a survey response (including 18 countries with no large-scale school feeding activities), the average coverage rate in the most recently completed school year was 24%.^{7,8}

The average coverage rates disaggregated by income groups are presented in Figure 3, showing that coverage increases incrementally with rising levels of wealth. Thus, the average was 17% across low income countries and 37% in high income countries. This pattern is similar when the aggregate coverage rates are calculated with consideration of the number of children in each country (i.e., the population sizes), with the aggregated coverage rates being 15%, 22%, 28%, and 57% in low, lower middle, upper middle, and high income countries, respectively.⁹ As expected, the level of moderate or severe food insecurity in the population is inversely correlated with income, such that low income countries have an average of 31% food insecurity, while this is 2% in high income countries.¹⁰ Bundy et al. (2009) also note that national coverage of school feeding programs tends to be lowest precisely where the needs are greatest. Across regions, the average coverage rate was lowest in the South Asia, East Asia & Pacific region (at 16%) and in the Middle East & North Africa region (at 18%). However, when the numbers of children are aggregated across countries within each region, Sub-Saharan Africa is seen to have the lowest coverage rate (at 19%), followed by the South Asia, East Asia & Pacific region (at 20%) and the Middle East & North Africa region (at 31%).

Program coverage tended to be lowest where needs were greatest.

Average coverage across low income countries

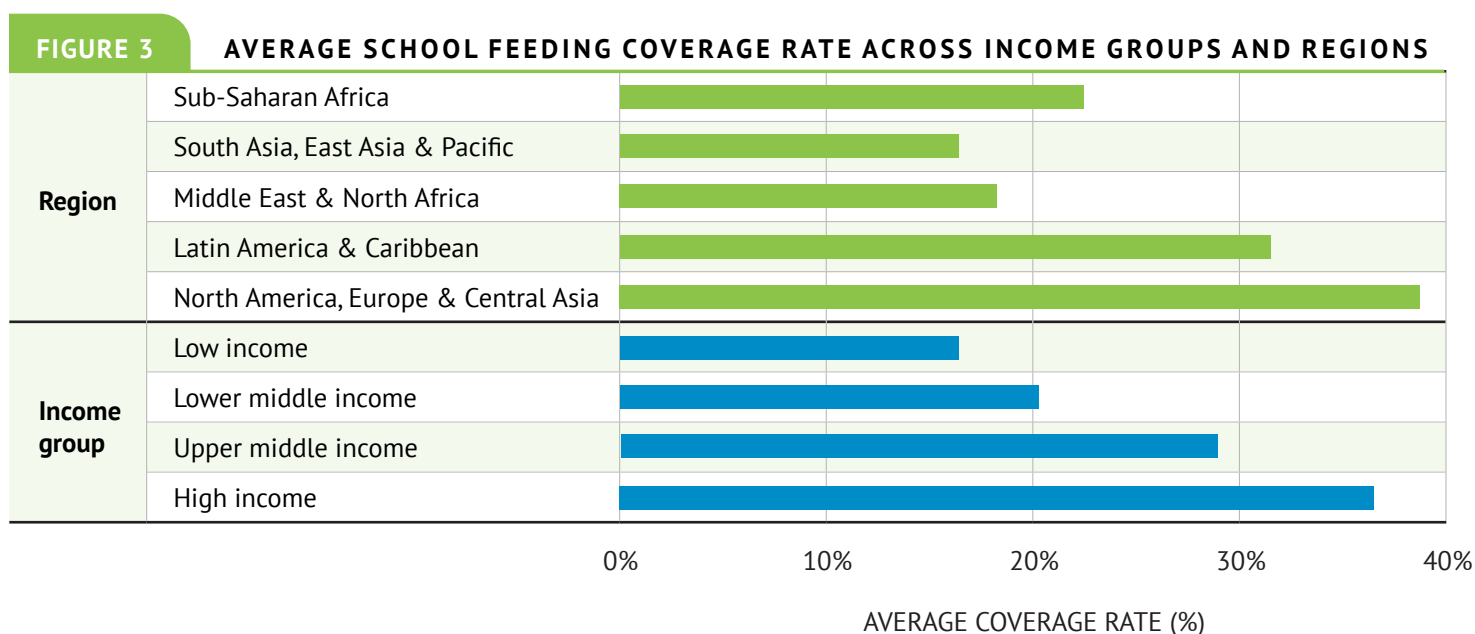
17%

Average coverage across high income countries

37%

While most countries did not target secondary school students, all countries with school feeding programs provided food to those in primary school. Across countries, the average coverage rate specifically for primary school-age children was 34.5% (or 35% when accounting for differences in population size).¹¹ When focusing only on enrolled primary school students (i.e., excluding out-of-school children from the denominator), the average country-level coverage rate for primary school students was 39%. Fourteen countries reached at least 95% of their enrolled primary school students, including Botswana, Burkina Faso, Czech Republic, eSwatini, Finland, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Mongolia, Nauru, Palau, Panama, Sao Tome and Principe, and Sierra Leone. Five countries (Czech Republic, eSwatini, Finland, Nauru, and Palau) reported reaching at least 95% of enrolled secondary school students.¹²

The positive correlation between income level and coverage rate is evident for both primary and secondary school-age children. However, it is stronger for coverage of secondary school-age children, with a particularly low coverage rate in low income and lower income countries (Figure 4). Additional information on the school levels targeted will be provided in **Chapter 2: Characteristics of Beneficiaries**.



Note: Average values in this figure are not weighted by population size. These calculations are inclusive of countries with no large-scale school meal programs (N = 103).

⁷ Discussion of the coverage rate for primary and secondary school-age children excludes Guinea-Bissau and Libya (for which denominators could not be found) and Vietnam (which lacks a numerator).

⁸ Inclusive of five additional desk review countries, this average rate was 25%.

⁹ As a simple example, if country A has a population of 100 children and a coverage rate of 30%, and country B has a population of 1,000 children and a coverage rate of 10%, the cross-country average coverage rate would be 20%. However, when we aggregate the numbers across these two countries, 120 out of 1,100 children receive food. Thus, the aggregated or weighted coverage rate would be 12%.

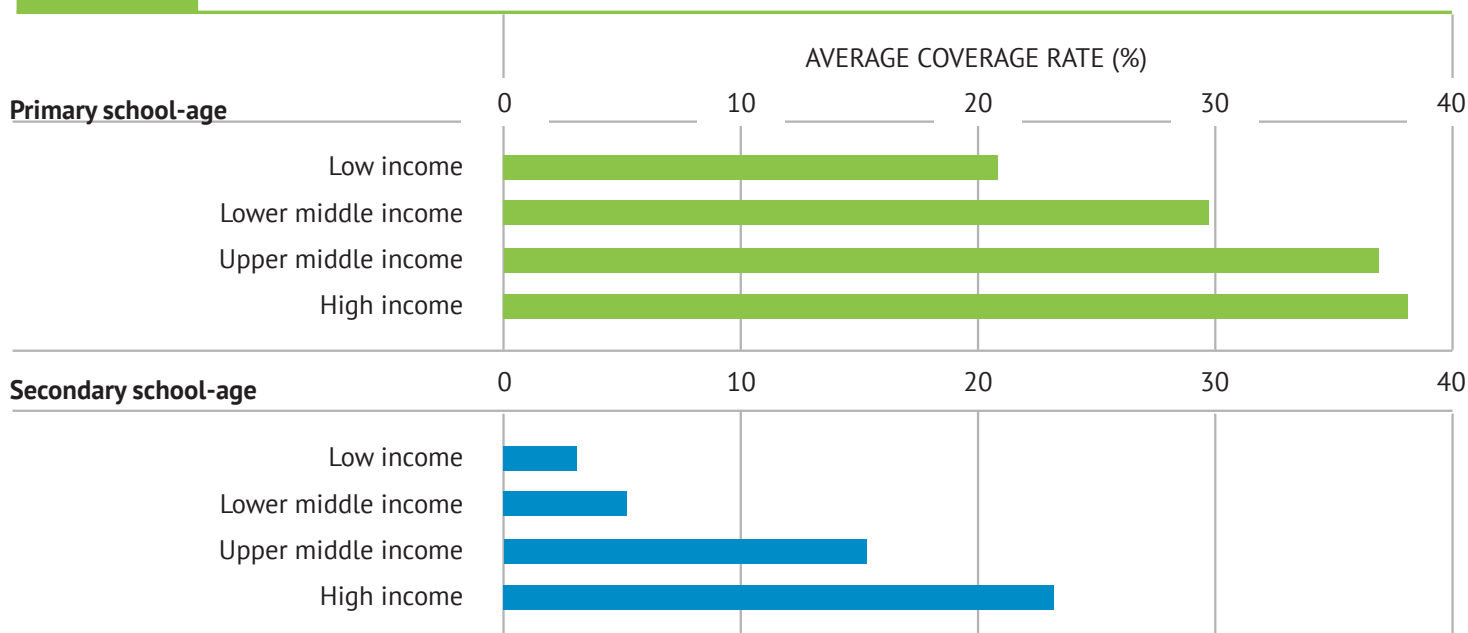
¹⁰ Information on recent levels of food insecurity is obtained from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO 2020). The values reflect the year 2017 or the most recent year with information available in a given country. Information could be found for 57 of the countries covered in this report.

¹¹ This calculation excludes Benin, Cambodia, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, the United States and Zimbabwe, for which we received total numbers fed but not age-disaggregated estimates.

¹² Some additional countries that could not provide age-disaggregated numbers may have also reached near-universal coverage for either primary- or secondary school-age children.

FIGURE 4

AVERAGE SCHOOL FEEDING COVERAGE RATE ACROSS INCOME GROUPS, DISAGGREGATED BY AGE



A majority (70%) of the countries with school feeding programs reported stable numbers or growth in the number of primary and secondary students receiving food in the most recently completed school year, compared to one year earlier (Figure 5).¹³ Forty-nine countries exhibited steady numbers, with changes ranging from -10% to +10%, while 28 countries exhibited rapid growth (>10%) in their program size. For example, Ethiopia and Malawi saw their school meal programs grow by 43% between the 2016/17 and 2017/18 school years, and eight countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East & North Africa region had growth rates over 100%.¹⁴ However, these countries had relatively small programs, such that a small increase in absolute numbers translated into a sizable growth rate. Four countries seem to have experienced a considerable decline (of more than 10%) in the number of students receiving food, including Chad, Cameroon, Mali, and Niger. It is noteworthy that these West African countries had recently experienced instability and conflict, leading to population displacement and the disruption of school feeding operations.

Interestingly, there is a positive correlation between the school feeding coverage rate and the estimated number of years that school feeding has been implemented in the country (as loosely gauged based on the year of commencement of the oldest school feeding program that was still operating at the time of the survey) (Figure 6). Specifically, another year of operation is associated with an additional 0.27% of the school-age population receiving food through schools (P-value = 0.02). The average start year was 1996 in low income countries and 1977 in high income countries.

FIGURE 5

HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OVER PREVIOUS YEAR OF NUMBER OF CHILDREN RECEIVING FOOD

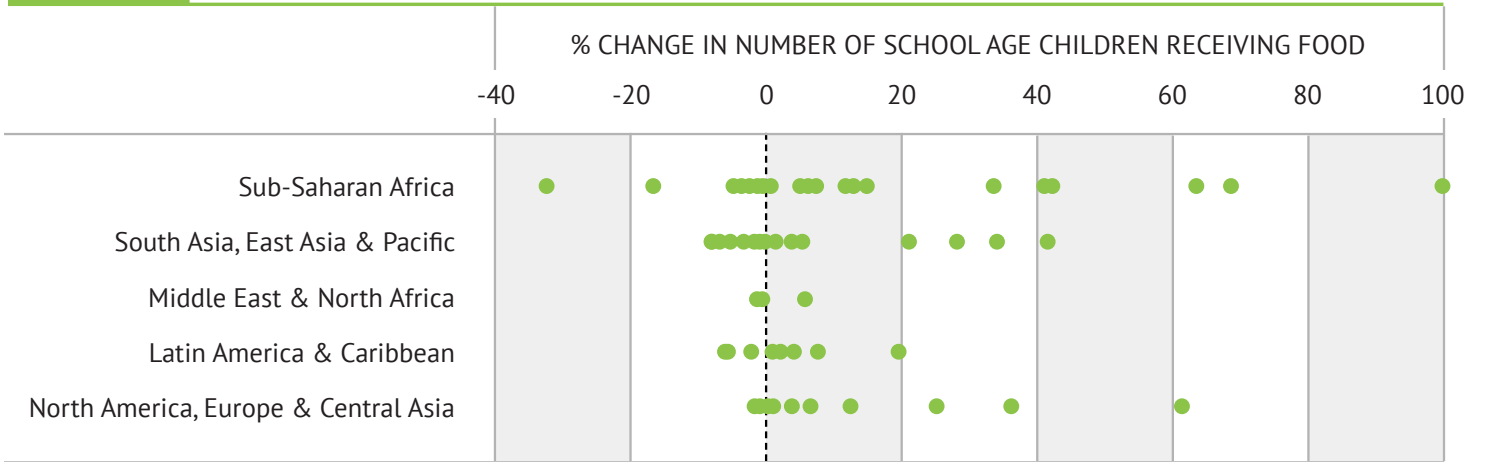
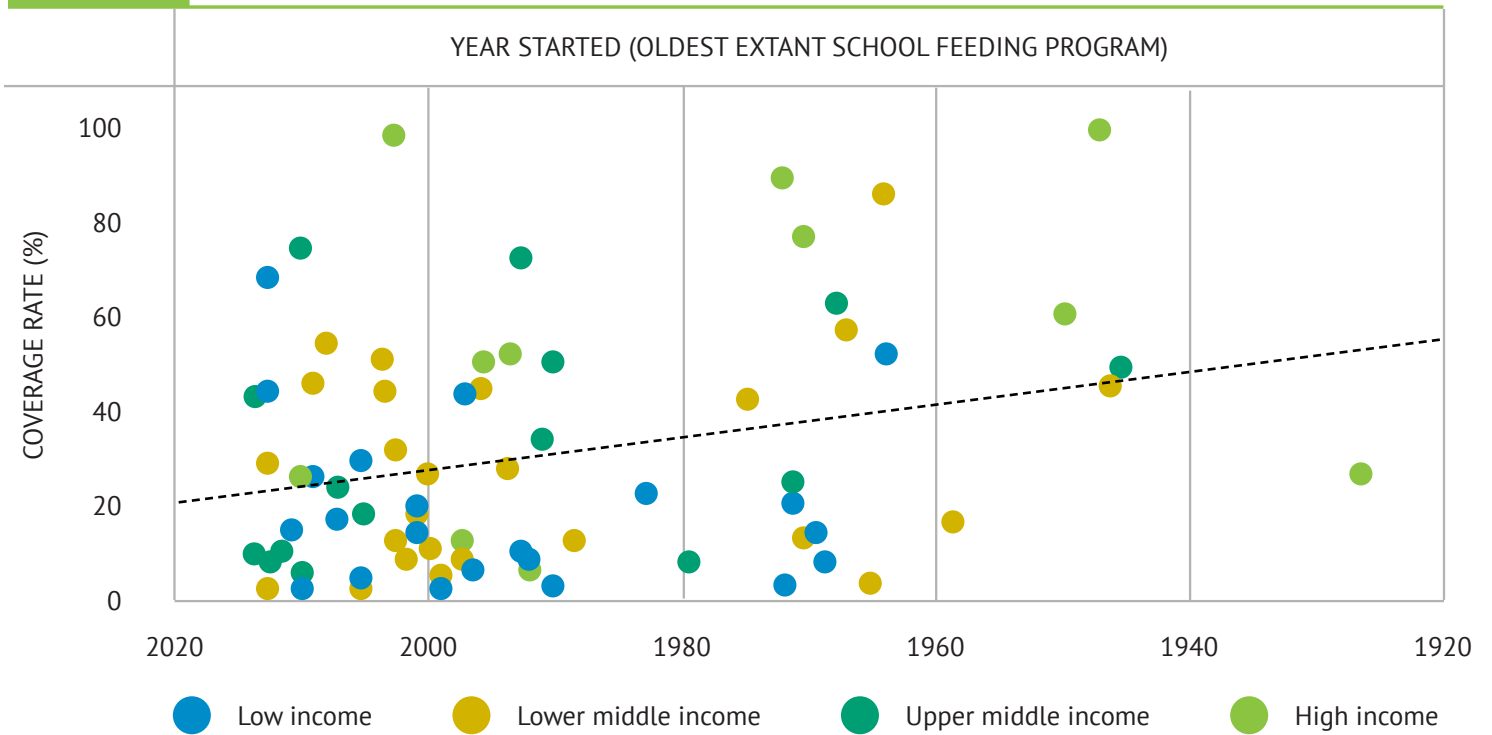


FIGURE 6

HISTORY OF SCHOOL FEEDING ACTIVITIES AND CURRENT NATIONAL COVERAGE RATES



¹³ This discussion of trajectories in student numbers excludes Kyrgyzstan, Nauru, Syria, and Vietnam, for which we do not have student numbers from the previous year.

¹⁴ The National Home-Grown School Feeding Program (NHGSFP) in Nigeria grew by 35% between 2017/18 and 2018/19. However, it expanded at an even faster pace over a slightly longer time horizon. While school feeding was found in just a few states before 2016, the program grew to cover nearly 10 million children by 2018/19.