Standard Operating Procedure: Use of an Alternate Verification Sample Size

Annually, Local Education Agencies (LEAs) must verify eligibility of students from a sample of household applications approved for free and reduced price benefits for that school year.   The sample pool is the total number of approved applications on file as of October 1 of the current school year, including both paper and electronic applications. Once the sample pool is determined, the LEA calculates the sample size, or the number of applications that must be verified. When calculating the sample size, all fractions or decimals must be rounded up to the nearest whole number. At least one application must be verified per school year.

As seen in the table below, there are three sample sizes established for verification activities. **The standard sample size must be used by an LEA unless the LEA qualifies to use an alternate sample size, and notifies the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) of their intent to use an alternate verification sample size prior to October 1st annually.**

Available Sample Sizes	
Standard Sample Size [7 CFR 245.6a(c)(3)]	
Standard	Sample size equals the lesser of: • Three percent of all applications approved by the LEA for the school year, as of October 1 of the school year, selected from error prone applications; or • 3,000 error prone applications approved by the LEA for the school year, as of October 1 of the school year.
Alternate Sample Sizes Available to Qualified LEAs [7 CFR 245.6a(c)(4)]	
Alternate One	Sample size equals the lesser of: • Three percent of all applications approved by the LEA for the school year, as of October 1 of the school year, selected at random; or • 3,000 applications approved by the LEA for the school year, as of October 1 of the school year, selected at random.
Alternate Two	Sample size equals the lesser of the sum of either: • 1,000 of all applications approved by the LEA, as of October 1 of the school year, selected from error prone applications; or • One percent of all applications approved by the LEA, as of October 1 of the school year, selected from error prone applications. PLUS the lesser of: • 500 applications approved by the LEA, as of October 1 of the school year, which provide case numbers in lieu of income information; or • One-half of one percent (.05 percent) of applications approved by the LEA, as of October 1, of the school year that provide case numbers in lieu of income information.

The standard sample size requires LEAs to select applications for verification from error prone applications. Error prone applications are those in which the household income is within $100 per month of the income eligibility guidelines.

Annually, the LEA is responsible for determining if it is eligible to use an alternate sample size. If eligible, the LEA must declare its intent to use one of the alternate sample sizes via an email notification to their Program Specialist prior to October 1st.

Qualifying to Use an Alternate Sample Size

There are two ways an LEA may annually qualify to use an alternate sample size based on lowered non-response rates.

1. Lowered Non-Response Rate: An LEA may use an alternate sample size when its non-response rate for the preceding school year was less than 20 percent.
2. Improved Non-Response Rate: An LEA with more than 20,000 children approved by application as eligible, as of October 1 of the school year, may use an alternate sample size for any school year when its non-response rate for the preceding school year was at least 10 percent below the non-response rate for the second preceding school year.

For additional information on verification and sample sizes, reference the USDA Eligibility Manual for School Meals, Section 6: Verification.

Key Verification Terms:

- Error Prone: Applications on which families earn an amount of income that is close to eligibility income limits (within $100 per month); those applications that must be included and considered first in the verification process when using a standard sample pool.
- Random Sampling: A sampling process where each application has an equal chance of being selected. A statistically valid random sample is not required. The LEA must determine a selection interval by dividing the number of applications by the required sample size.
- Sampling Pool: The total number of applications approved as of October 1st each year.
- Sample Size: The number of applications subject to verification. The minimum and maximum sample size is three percent of the total or 3,000 applications, whichever is less.