

II. BACKGROUND

Many of the NSLP/SBP data are already collected by local school districts and reported to their state Departments of Education, where they are aggregated to produce the federally mandated monthly and annual *Reports of School Program Operations* for each state. Because the use of Netscape and Explorer browsers is so widespread among organizations today, and most computer programs developed to collect information are supported by these browsers, the Internet represents an ideal medium for providing nearly universal access to the resulting program data from almost any geographic location. This initiative would permit dissemination of the collected data in a variety of formats, including tables, articles, and reports.

Over the years, a number of national databases have been developed to track participation in food assistance programs (e.g., the WIC program participant characteristics database). These national databases rely on state program administrators to collect data from local programs delivering services and to aggregate the information into a format prescribed by USDA. In general, these national databases tend to focus on client and program participation issues, benefit distribution, and client demographics. However, state and local food assistance programs often provide far more details in their data than ever are reported at the national level. For example, data regarding the number of school meals served in the NSLP and SBP are collected first *for individual schools*, then reported to school districts, passed on to state agencies as district-wide aggregates, and finally aggregated into a single state total reported to the Food and Nutrition Service. By the time the information is collected and aggregated at the federal level, it is impossible to compare demographics or participation rates between school districts within a state, let alone among school districts of similar size located in different states. As discussed earlier, there is also potentially some important program descriptive and cost information collected locally but never aggregated or reviewed at either the state or federal level.

Part of this initiative includes an exploration of data currently available from existing databases and whether that data might be useful to include in the proposed database. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics maintains a comprehensive national statistical database [i.e., the Common Core of Data (CCD)] of all public elementary and secondary schools containing data on school lunch participation rates, demographics, school type and geographic location. By consolidating the data that are already collected by school districts into a single, accessible database, researchers would be able to both conduct analyses of those district-level data and potentially combine these data with existing databases, such as the CCD, to conduct trend analysis related to school district demographics.

Having better access to state and local data is important if research is to be expanded beyond simple information about program participation. Issues related to the effectiveness of program services can only be examined if more and better data are available. The problem of limited access to local data was cited by the report of the Advisory Panel on the Research Uses of Administrative Data, which noted that "program

administrators and policymakers will need reliable state and local data if, among other things, they are to summarize program operations; determine who is being served by which programs; who is being underserved; who is not being served; and how services can best be targeted to those in greatest need..." (Hotz, et al., 1998). In addition, the Panel noted that national survey research could not adequately monitor the diverse local programs currently being funded by state and local governments. To better understand the dynamics of food assistance programs at the local level, as well as to better understand how well clients are being served, better access to local data seems critical.