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Feeding Hungry Children

The Administration, under pressure from critics of the Federal school lunch program, acknowledges that 1.9-million needy children are still not being fed. No deluge of official statements about progress made and targets met can disguise the national disgrace involved in having so many youngsters go hungry.

The Department of Agriculture, administrator of the program, finds statistical comfort in noting that President Nixon's promise to have 6.6 million children on the school lunch roster by Thanksgiving 1970 was fulfilled, with only two months' delay. What causes the present gap, the department explains, is that the definition of poverty has changed and the number of needy children now turns out to be 9.3 million, not 6.6 million.

Such statistics do not make unfed children any less hungry. It is appalling to find Agriculture Department spokesmen estimating that it may take three years before the rest of the poverty-level children can be included in the program. By then the damage caused by nutritional deficiencies may be beyond repair.

Particularly puzzling is the department's claim that lack of food service equipment in many schools remains a major obstacle. In 1969 the Administration announced, with much fanfare, that revised regulations would speed airline-style lunches to children in unequipped schools.

All the unanswered questions and statistical alibis give credence to complaints that budget-cutting is the real cause of the delays. In two successive years the Administration has cut Congressional authorizations for food-service facilities in half, and further cuts are said to be contemplated in the amount of money to be made available for lunches in the new school year. In addition, rigid matching requirements appear to have hurt the program in precisely those states where poverty is the most serious problem.

Hearings before the Senate's Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, scheduled for this week by Chairman George McGovern, should aim at putting an end to the battle of statistics. There is a simple yardstick: The program is inadequate if one child goes hungry.