

USDA Summer Meals Study 2018 (Summary Report)

Background

The USDA Summer Meals Study provides a comprehensive, nationally representative assessment of the two summer meal programs operated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA): the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option (SSO).¹ It is the first national study to simultaneously examine the facilitators and barriers to program participation among participating and nonparticipating families, sponsors, and sites. This study examines the characteristics of participating and nonparticipating children, including sociodemographic characteristics, household food security status, reasons for participation or nonparticipation, and satisfaction with the meals served to children in the summer of 2018. The USDA Summer Meals Study also describes the operational aspects of the programs at summer meal sites, the characteristics of their food service environments, the nutritional quality of the meals served to children through the SFSP and SSO, and the challenges that program operators reported facing while serving meals to program participants.

The report is composed of six volumes. Volume 1 discusses characteristics of participants and nonparticipants and their households; Volume 2 examines sites' operational characteristics; Volume 3 focuses on sites' food service environments; Volume 4 assesses the content and nutritional quality of summer menus; Volume 5 details the study methodology; and Volume 6 contains all the study instruments.

Key Findings

- The summer meal programs have a broad geographic reach. Nearly 80 percent of children in low-income households live within 1 mile of an urban site or within 10 miles of a rural site.
- Overall, 45 percent of households with children living near a summer meal site are food insecure, which is higher than the 14 percent of households with children who are food insecure nationally.
- Lack of awareness of the programs is the most frequent reason for nonparticipation.
- Most summer meal sites are open to all children who want to attend, are located in urban areas, and are operated in school settings.
- Nine out of ten sites serve fresh fruits and/or vegetables twice a week or more.

Methods

The USDA Summer Meals Study is a nationally representative study of summer meal programs sites and programs participants and nonparticipants. Data collection took place between June and November 2018.

This study implemented a multi-stage sampling procedure, first sampling States, then sampling sites within the States, then using sampled sites (including SNAP rolls) to build sample frames for participants and nonparticipants.

The USDA Summer Meals Study collected data from program sponsors and sites and from participant and nonparticipant children and their caregivers. Data

collection from sponsors and sites included a survey of sponsors, a survey of sites, a survey of primary menu planners, weekly summer menus for meals and snacks provided by summer meal programs sites, and in-depth interviews with program site staff and current and former program sponsor staff. Data collection for children and caregivers included a survey of caregivers of program participants and nonparticipants; surveys of participant children and participant and nonparticipant teens; and in-depth interviews with participant and nonparticipant caregivers. Volume 5 provides additional detail on the study methodology.

¹ Only School Food Authorities (SFAs) are allowed to participate in the SSO; it follows the NSLP and SBP meal patterns. SFSP is open to a wide variety of entities and follows simpler meal patterns than the NSLP or SBP meal patterns.

Findings

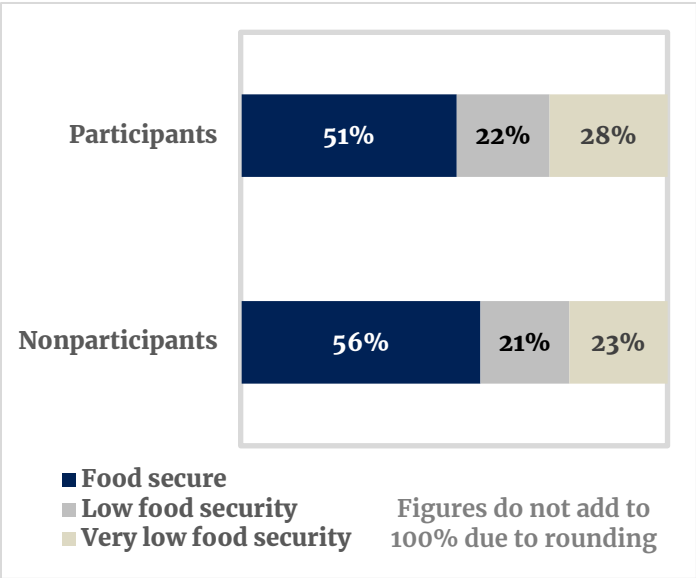
Volume 1: Participant and Nonparticipant Characteristics

The summer meal programs have a broad geographic reach. Nearly 80 percent of children in low-income households live within 1 mile of an urban summer meal program site or within 10 miles of a rural site.

Although the majority of children living in low-income households live near a summer meal program site, most do not participate. Eighty-three percent of caregivers with children ages 5 through 18 living near a summer meal site report that they do not receive free meals from the site closest to their home. Most caregivers, however, report that their children receive free or reduced-price lunches at school during the school year (78 percent of participant and 85 percent of nonparticipant caregivers).

Overall, 45 percent of households with children living near a summer meal site are food insecure, which is higher than the 14 percent of households with children who are food insecure nationally. Household food insecurity is statistically significantly higher for summer meal programs participants (49 percent) than for nonparticipants (44 percent). Eighty-two percent of participating households have incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level.

Figure 1: Participant and nonparticipant household food security in Summer 2018



Lack of awareness about the summer program located near their home is the most frequent reason both nonparticipant teens and nonparticipant caregivers give as to why they or their children do not participate in the program. Seventy-three percent of nonparticipant teens and 46 percent of nonparticipant caregivers indicate that they did not know about the program site closest to their home.

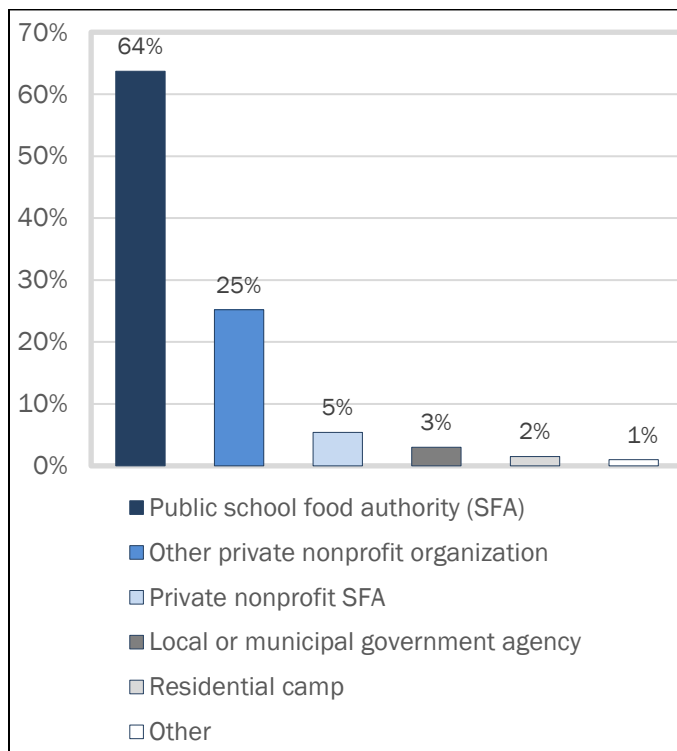
Nonparticipants are interested in the summer meal program, as 88 percent of nonparticipants either say they would send their child to the program at the site next summer (58 percent) or say that they might send their child to the site (30 percent). Nonparticipant caregivers report that mail (66 percent), email/texts (52 percent), and flyers/posters at school (39 percent) are the best ways to inform them about the program. In addition to free meals, providing games and activities (38 percent) and free transportation (28 percent) are the primary features that would make it more likely for nonparticipants to attend.

Child and teen participants are racially and ethnically diverse. Thirty percent of children and 38 percent of teens participating in the summer meal programs identify as non-Hispanic Black or African American; 28 percent of child and 33 percent of teen participants identify as non-Hispanic White; and 12 percent of child and 7 percent of teen participants identify as non-Hispanic of other or multiple race. Thirty percent of child and 22 percent of teen participants identify as Hispanic of any race.

Participant satisfaction with the summer meal programs is very high. Overall, 90 percent of participant caregivers are satisfied or very satisfied with the program. Only 2 percent are dissatisfied. All participant caregivers say they are either very likely (80 percent) or somewhat likely (20 percent) to recommend the program to others.

Volume 2: Sponsor and Site Operational Characteristics
Three-fourths of program sponsors operate the SFSP and not the SSO, and about three-fourths of sites (74 percent) follow the SFSP meal pattern. The most frequent reasons for participating in SFSP instead of SSO are that sponsors prefer the SFSP meal patterns (53 percent of SFSP sites) and due to higher SFSP reimbursement rates (36 percent).

Figure 2: Summer meal programs sponsor types



Summer meal programs sites are most often open to all children who want to attend and are located in urban areas. About 8 in 10 sites (83 percent) are open sites, compared with 17 percent of sites that are closed sites. Sites that restrict attendance to enrolled children and/or teens most often describe those who may enroll in their program as children only of a certain age group (38 percent of sites that require enrollment). Four out of every five sites are urban (83 percent), and 17 percent of sites are located in rural areas.

Schools are the most frequent setting across all sites (48 percent of all sites) and for sites with an SFA sponsor (65 percent). Sites with non-SFA sponsors have more diversity in settings and are most frequently set in recreation or community centers (23 percent of sites with a non-SFA sponsor) or religious organizations (17 percent).

Children who receive meals from summer meal programs sites are mostly of elementary school age. On average, sites serve 55 percent of their meals to elementary school

age children, 21 percent of meals to middle school age children, 14 percent to high school age children, and 10 percent to preschoolers.

Access to meal sites is a considerable challenge to children's participation. Most sites (89 percent) report that transportation is needed for children to get to and from the site, but just 30 percent of sites provide transportation.

Relaxing the congregate feeding requirement was the most frequently mentioned suggestion from sponsors and sites to increase participation of children in the summer meal programs. Sponsors and sites noted that the congregate feeding requirement was challenging for sites with transportation or safety issues or with bad weather.

Volume 3: Food Service Characteristics

Nearly three out of four sites (74 percent) follow the SFSP meal pattern; 24 percent follow the school meal programs' meal patterns; and 2 percent follow the Child and Adult Care Food Program meal pattern. Among SFSP sites that are sponsored by SFAs, only 17 percent choose to follow school meal programs' meal patterns. Those that do say that they do so because the school menus provide a good variety (72 percent), there is no need to retrain staff (66 percent), and it is cost effective (61 percent).

Sponsors play a significant role in planning summer menus. For 67 percent of sites, sponsors are responsible for all aspects of menu planning, and for 24 percent of sites, sponsors review the menus prepared by sites and/or vendors or provide guidance materials.

Two-thirds of sites offer two meal/snack services. About half (54 percent) of sites offer breakfast and lunch; 21 percent of sites offer lunch only; 10 percent offer lunch and a snack; and 5 percent offer breakfast, lunch, and a snack. Five percent offer a supper.

Most sites (82 percent) serve meals indoors. Ten percent serve outdoors, and 8 percent serve indoors and outdoors.

Most sites (89 percent) serve fresh fruits and/or vegetables twice a week or more. Two-thirds (65 percent) of sites serve fresh fruits or vegetables almost every day.

Eighty-five percent of sites have special accommodations in place for children with food allergies or special dietary needs. Most sites (80 percent) determine accommodations on a case-by-case basis.

Eighty-five percent of primary menu planners experience challenges planning or preparing meals, particularly food costs rising faster than reimbursement rates. The most common challenges are food costs (72 percent), children's food preferences (68 percent), and insufficient staff time

(58 percent). SFSP sites were more likely to cite food costs as a challenge (74 percent) than SSO sites (57 percent). Several sponsors and sites noted that the statutory meal reimbursement rates have not risen sufficiently to match the increased cost of purchasing, preparing, and transporting the meals.

Implementing the program improvements most often suggested by program operators would require changes to the statute governing the summer meal programs. Program improvement suggested include increasing the meal reimbursement rates; relaxing the congregate feeding requirement; giving free meals to parents as well as to children; and increasing the number of reimbursable meals that sites can serve per day.

Volume 4: Nutritional Quality of Meals Offered at Summer Meals Program Sites

Most meals and snacks served by sites comply with the daily meal pattern requirements for food components, though somewhat less often with the required quantities. Nearly all sites (98 percent) offer foods in all of the required food components at lunch daily, and about 71 percent of sites also provide the required quantities of those components. All sites (100 percent) offer the three required food components at breakfast daily, and 84 percent of sites provide the required quantities of those components. Nearly all sites (98 percent) offer snacks that include two food components daily, as required; however, only about 12 percent of sites offer them in the required quantities.

Meals generally meet recommended dietary guidelines based on the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and *Dietary Reference Intakes* but exceed sodium targets. On average, lunches provide 30 percent of the recommended daily calorie needs of children ages 9–13 years (659 calories); at least two-thirds of recommended daily amounts of protein, vitamin A, and vitamin C; and half the recommended daily amounts of calcium and iron. Breakfasts provide 20 percent of recommended daily calorie needs (433 calories), and snacks provide 11 percent (242 calories).

For More Information:

Vericker, T., Rothstein, M., Zimmerman, T., Gabay, M., et al. (2021). *USDA Summer Meals Study*. Prepared by Westat, Contract No. AG-3198-K-16-0033. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Grant Lovellette. Available online at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research-analysis>.