

# Rethinking Summer Food: A New Vision to Reduce Summer Hunger



The beginning of summer vacation signals the end of school breakfasts and lunches for the millions of low-income children and their families who rely on them to keep hunger at bay during the school year. The Summer Nutrition Programs were designed to fill this void by providing federal funding to serve nutritious meals and snacks to children throughout the summer. These programs have struggled to meet the need, serving just one child summer lunch for every seven low-income children who participated in school lunch during the regular school year. They are important programs, but their reach is falling far too short of meeting the need.



The structure has many strengths:

The Summer Nutrition Programs provide meals at sites located in low-income communities or at sites that serve primarily low-income children. The programs are entitlements, meaning that there is not a cap on the number of children who are served or the amount of funding that a state can draw down to provide summer meals that help minimize summer hunger. Schools, local government agencies, and private nonprofit organizations can apply to operate (sponsor) the programs. They must follow the program's rules and can provide meals at sites that meet the eligibility requirements.

There is no requirement that a site provide summer programming. Yet, the strongest summer meal sites offer educational, enrichment, recreational, and physical activities that keep children safe, learning, engaged, and active while providing crucial child care for working families. Sites can be schools, recreation centers, Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs, churches, parks, libraries, or any other location at which children congregate during the summer.

The low participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs is driven in significant part by the lack of affordable summer programming available to low-income families. Summer programs provide the platforms on which to build summer meals programs, but there is far too little federal investment in supporting the actual summer programs. State and local public funding for summer programs varies significantly and often fluctuates from year to year depending on state and local budgets. These shortfalls are a real problem for children's well-being: combining summer meals and summer programs gives children what they need during the summer to return to school in the fall healthy and ready to learn, with minimal summer learning loss.

Supporting summer programming better is a key strategy to increase summer meals participation. There are other important ways to get summer meals to children. Congress should address limitations within the Summer Nutrition Programs and the common barriers to participation. For example, too many communities with significant numbers of low-income children are not eligible to participate; families often face transportation barriers; and too much paperwork and complex program rules deter eligible sponsors from operating the program. Additionally, the programs only support serving a maximum of two meals (except in the case of camps and sites serving migrant children), which is not enough for summer programs that are operating the full day, often in order to provide adequate child care to working families.

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Increasing participation in summer meals in a meaningful way will require a real commitment and significant investment to reduce summer hunger. Current spending on summer meals is approximately \$883 million per year,<sup>1</sup> and it serves just a small portion of the need. It also will require real investments in the summer programs that provide the platform for serving summer meals. And to address summer hunger fully, a large-scale investment in the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (Summer EBT) program, which provides a card with electronic benefits to purchase food during the summer months to low-income families, is needed. In fiscal year (FY) 2019, \$36.8 million was spent on this excellent program; only 300,000 children were served.

This report provides a snapshot of current participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs and explores in greater depth the strategies required to increase participation in these programs. The data referenced come from FRAC's annual [Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation](#) reports.

## The Summer Nutrition Programs

The primary federal Summer Nutrition Programs are (1) the Summer Food Service Program and (2) the School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program through the "Seamless Summer Option." They provide funding to serve meals and snacks to children at sites where at least 50 percent of the children in the geographic area are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals; at sites where at least 50 percent of the children participating in the program are individually determined eligible for free or reduced-price school meals; and at sites that serve primarily migrant children. Once a site is determined eligible, all children there can eat for free.

Summer camps also can participate, but they are only reimbursed for the meals served to children who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

The School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program also reimburse schools for providing meals to children who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals and are attending summer school.

Public and private nonprofit schools, local government agencies (e.g., a housing agency, a parks and recreation department), National Youth Sports Programs, and private nonprofit organizations can participate in the Summer Food Service Program and each can operate one or more sites. Only schools are eligible to operate the School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program, but once they are participating, schools can provide meals and snacks at both non-school and school sites over the summer.

Most sites can provide a maximum of two meals per day — breakfast and lunch, breakfast and dinner, or a meal and a snack — but not lunch and dinner, and not two meals and a snack. Sites that serve primarily migrant children and summer camps can, however, provide three meals.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture provides the funding for these programs through a state agency in each state, usually the state department of education.

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<sup>1</sup> This includes the fiscal year 2019 cost of the Summer Food Service Program and the July 2018 cost of the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program.

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## Participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs

In July of 2018, 2.9 million children ate lunch and 1.5 million ate breakfast on an average weekday through the Summer Nutrition Programs. This is a substantial number of children but only a small fraction of the 20 million low-income children who ate school lunch and 12.5 million low-income children who ate school breakfast during the 2017–2018 school year and means that only one child ate a summer lunch for every seven low-income children who participated in free or reduced-price school lunch during the school year.

Participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs is too low nationally and in every state, but the reach varies significantly across the country. Four states — Maine, New Mexico, New York, and Vermont — and the District of Columbia did considerably better. They served at least one child for every four low-income children who participated in school lunch in the regular school year. Oklahoma, the state with the weakest participation, served only 1 in 20.

The low participation means that states are missing out on significant federal funding available through state entitlements to reduce childhood hunger and support summer programs. Thirteen states — Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas — could be drawing down more than \$10 million dollars in added summer nutrition funding if they better reached the need.

The Summer Nutrition Programs always have struggled to meet the need. Participation has hovered between 2.7 and 3.2 million children for the last 10 years, regardless of the number of children in need. During the Great Recession, for example, the Summer Nutrition Programs not only failed to expand to meet the greater need, but actually served fewer children as state and local budgets were squeezed, resulting in cuts to funding for summer programming and summer school.

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## Investing in Summer Programs to Increase Sites Where Children Can Be Fed

Structured summer enrichment and educational activities provide an important foundation on which strong summer meals programs can be built. Combined, the meals keep hunger at bay, and the programs keep children safe, learning, and active while their parents work, allowing children to return to school healthy and ready to learn.

The problem is, however, that federal, state, and local funding do not come close to meeting the need for summer programs. To close successfully the summer nutrition gap, there must be enough summer programs available, and families cannot be priced out of participating in these programs. Increased investments in summer programs for low-income children at federal, state, and local levels would ensure children have access to the learning opportunities and meals they need to succeed.

The [21st Century Community Learning Centers](#)<sup>2</sup> program, the largest federal funding source for summer and afterschool programming, demonstrates the positive impact that federal funding can have on students' academic achievement when supporting these programs. Despite proposals by the current administration to eliminate funding for the program completely in FY 2018 and FY 2019, Congress recently approved \$1.22 billion in funding for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program for FY 2019 — \$10 million above the previous year. In FY 2019, 1.7 million children are benefiting from the program. However, millions more remain unserved, and the program remains vulnerable to future funding cuts. With the clear evidence of the detrimental impact that summer learning loss has on students — and ultimately on the future workforce

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<sup>2</sup> Afterschool Alliance. (2019). *21st Century Community Learning Centers. Inspiring Learning. Supporting Families. Earning Results.* Available at: [http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/documents/21stCCLCOverview\\_JUNE\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/documents/21stCCLCOverview_JUNE_FINAL.pdf). Accessed on May 31, 2019.

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— Congress should continue investing more resources in the 21st Century Community Learning Centers as well as other summer enrichment opportunities, not cut them.

In addition to federal investments, more efforts to establish robust and stable summer funding opportunities on a state level are needed. A number of states, including [Massachusetts](#) and [California](#), have prioritized summer learning by allocating funding to support such programs, and many states are moving in the right direction. For example, Nevada recently passed [legislation](#) that would designate certain tax revenue to support summer learning programs in low-income areas. New Mexico and Wyoming have allocated state funding to extend the school year and provide summer programming for students at risk of failing academically. More information about state-level opportunities for increasing access to summer learning and enrichment activities are available at the National Summer Learning Association’s [Funding Resource Guide](#).

The most successful summer meal programs are those that offer educational or enrichment activities *and* meals. Investing in summer programming pays off — for children, their families, and communities.

## Summer Learning Loss

Summer learning loss, or “summer slide,” refers to the loss of academic knowledge over summer vacation. It affects all children. However, many of the children who face a nutrition gap when the school year ends also are affected disproportionately by summer learning loss. The income level of a family, along with the availability of summer programming, can determine how great the impact is.<sup>3</sup> Summer learning loss hits low-income children harder than their high-income peers. Quality summer programs can help reduce summer learning loss, but are either non-existent or unaffordable in many communities and for many low-income families. This means such children return to school in the fall academically behind their high-income peers, and struggle to catch up before classes even begin.

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## Opportunities to Increase Participation in Summer Meals

The current Summer Nutrition Programs provide an important framework upon which to build more access to nutritious summer meals. As entitlements, they provide a reimbursement for each meal served in an eligible setting and can create an incentive for sponsors to serve additional children and provide the maximum number of meals available (breakfast and lunch) throughout the summer at most sites.

Since the Summer Food Service Program was created, many of the legislative changes made in the decades since have decreased access and reduced participation. Now is the time for thoughtful investments in order to ensure more children in struggling families and struggling areas have access to the summer meals they need. Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) legislation, currently being considered by Congress, provides an important opportunity to accomplish this and should be written in a way that strengthens, not weakens, the programs’ current structure. Several key proposals would eliminate barriers to participation and make it easier for summer nutrition programs to operate:

**Improve the area eligibility test by lowering it from 50 to 40 percent.** Most summer sites qualify by demonstrating that they are located in a low-income area, in which at least 50 percent of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. This keeps many communities where poverty is less concentrated, such as rural and suburban

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<sup>3</sup>Alexander, K. L., Entwistle, D. R., & Olson, L. S. (2007). Summer learning and its implications: Insights from the Beginning School Study. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 114, 11–32.

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areas, from participating. [Lowering the eligibility threshold from 50 to 40 percent would improve access in every state](#). It also would align summer meals eligibility with various federal education funding sources for summer programs, such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program.

**Streamline the Summer Food Service Program and Afterschool Meal Program.** Many community-based organizations and local government agencies operating the Summer Food Service Program also serve meals to the same children during the school year using the Afterschool Meal Program through the Child and Adult Care Food Program. This means sponsors must apply for and operate two distinct programs — the Summer Food Service Program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program — meant to serve the same children but with different eligibility criteria and program requirements in order to provide meals 365 days a year. Allowing Summer Food Service Program sponsors to operate the program year-round would eliminate duplicative and burdensome paperwork and improve sponsors' ability to serve the children in their community better.

**Allow sites to serve three meals per day instead of two.** Most summer meal sites are allowed to serve only two meals; the exceptions are camps and sites serving migrant children, which can serve three meals. Many low-income children spend all day at summer programs where summer meals are being served, such as parks, YMCAs, recreation centers, and sites run by faith-based institutions. Allowing summer sites to provide three meals a day would better support working parents and ensure children have more consistent access to the nutrition they need to stay engaged and healthy.

**Provide funding for transportation.** Transportation is one of the biggest barriers to participation in summer meals. If the cost of getting to and from a site is too high, many families will not be able to attend. Providing funding for transportation grants would help support innovative approaches and mobile meal trucks that will increase low-income children's access to summer meals, particularly in rural and other under-served areas.

**Increase the reimbursement.** Many Summer Food Service Program sponsors report that they lose money when operating the program. This is particularly true for rural sponsors, which often have increased transportation and food costs. Increasing the per meal reimbursement rate would attract more sponsors to the program and help reduce the number of sponsors that drop out of the program because their organization can no longer absorb the costs of operating the program that are above what the reimbursement provides.

**Mandate school district participation.** One of the biggest challenges to expanding the Summer Nutrition Programs is that there is no entity given by federal law the ongoing responsibility for ensuring that children have access to summer meals. Requiring school districts with one or more schools that meet the eligibility criteria for the Summer Nutrition Programs to provide meals would significantly expand access to summer meals. Texas, Florida, and some other states already have taken this important step, by statewide legislation, and federal policy should follow their lead.

## Investments in Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children: An Important Strategy to Meet the Nutrition Gap

The Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (SEBTC) program offers an exciting, relatively new opportunity to reduce summer hunger by providing additional resources to purchase food during the summer months for families whose children are certified to receive free or reduced-price school meals during the school year.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture first began SEBTC in 2011, providing the families of 12,500 low-income children a debit card with a fixed dollar amount to purchase groceries during the summer months. In 2018, SEBTC<sup>4</sup> grew to serve 300,000 children across eight states and two Indian Tribal Organizations. SEBTC was funded at \$28 million in the FY 2019 Appropriations bill.

A 2016 report<sup>5</sup> assessed the two different levels of monthly summer benefits (\$30 and \$60) as well as the different distribution models: benefits tied to specific food items, similar to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), versus a specific monetary value available for food purchases, similar to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The evaluation found that participation in SEBTC led to several positive results:

- **Reduced food insecurity.** By providing low-income households with a \$30 or \$60 per month per child benefit, the most severe type of food insecurity (*very low food security*) was reduced by one-third, and food insecurity was reduced by one-fifth.
- **Improved nutrition.** Both the \$30 and \$60 monthly benefit levels led to an improvement in children's summertime nutritional intake, but children in households that received the \$60 benefit ate slightly more nutritious foods (fruits, vegetables, and whole grains) than those in the \$30 group.
- **High rates of participation.** More than 75 percent of households in the program redeemed some or all of their benefits. While both models were efficient at reaching families, those who participated in the project modeled after SNAP redeemed benefits at higher rates than those who were in the project that was based on the WIC model (95 percent versus 83 percent). This is likely due to the more limited availability of WIC retailers and the simplicity of redeeming the benefit through SNAP.

Rethinking Summer Food requires further and more significant investment in SEBTC. The expansion should expand under the SNAP model, except for states that already have operated under the WIC and tribal nations (which administer WIC, but not SNAP).

Whenever possible, children need both food and academic and enrichment activities provided at summer sites in order to return to school at the end of the summer ready to learn. However, SEBTC offers a way to ensure that children and their families have enough resources to support a healthy diet at home. SEBTC can be an additional summer nutritional support for all families with children who are certified to receive free or reduced-price school meals. As SEBTC is phased in, communities with limited access to summer meal sites can be prioritized.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> SEBTC participation is not included in this report's analysis of participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs.

<sup>5</sup> Abt Associates Inc. (2016). *Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Summary Report*. Available at: <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/sebtcfinalreport.pdf>. Accessed on June 3, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Nord, M. & Romig, K. (2006). Hunger in the summer: seasonal food insecurity and the National School Lunch and Summer Food Service programs. *Journal of Children and Poverty*, 12(2), 141–158.

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## Strategies for Rural Areas

[The need for assuring children in rural communities get nutritious summer meals is significant.](#) Households in rural areas are more likely to be food insecure than in metropolitan areas, and children living in rural areas have 26 percent greater odds of being overweight or obese compared to urban children. A recent report from the Afterschool Alliance found that only 28 percent of rural children participated in a summer program (which provides the platform for summer meals), even though nearly half of rural parents would like their children to participate in a program.<sup>7</sup> The report cites the lack of available and affordable programming options as the main contributor to this lack of participation.

Participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs tends to be lower in rural areas because many of the barriers that limit participation in all communities are amplified in rural areas. There are fewer summer programs, activities, and locations where children congregate. It also can be more difficult to qualify sites to participate in the Summer Nutrition Programs under the area eligibility test because poverty is often less concentrated in rural areas. Families also face more pronounced transportation barriers because of longer distances and the scarcity of public transportation.

Many of the strategies detailed above — such as lowering the area eligibility threshold from 50 to 40 percent and increasing funding for programs — would have a particularly large impact on rural children’s access to summer meals. Lowering the eligibility threshold would result in more communities becoming eligible, and families would not need to travel as far to reach a summer meal site. Additionally, allocating more funding for transportation grants and providing funding for programming would allow program sponsors the opportunity to provide transportation to and from sites that provide the summer enrichment.

Summer EBT also is a particularly important strategy for rural areas. It provides families additional resources to purchase the food needed to overcome the loss of school breakfast and lunch, a loss that creates additional food costs during summer vacation. It also allows families to incorporate the use of the Summer EBT card into their already planned trips to get food for the household, helping to alleviate transportation needs.

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## Conclusion

For too many children, summer vacation is not filled with the nutrition and enrichment activities needed to ensure they thrive over the summer and return to school in the fall ready to learn. The Summer Nutrition Programs — which are designed to fill the nutrition and opportunity gap for low-income families — are failing to serve too many children who need nutritious summer meals.

The program has been serving around 3 million children in recent years. This means that it is reaching only one low-income child for every seven who participates in free and reduced-price lunch during the regular school year.

Serving only 1 in 7 children who need summer meals is not enough. Now is the time to make thoughtful, strategic investments in the Summer Nutrition Programs, such as increasing funding for summer learning programs, expanding Summer EBT, and making key improvements to the current structure of the Summer Nutrition Programs. These efforts combined will result in more children in every state becoming healthier, more productive, and better able to live up to their full potential because hunger will not be holding them back.

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<sup>7</sup> Afterschool Alliance. (2016). *America After 3PM Special Report: The Growing Importance of Afterschool in Rural Communities*. Available at: [http://afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/Afterschool\\_in\\_Rural\\_Communities.pdf](http://afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/Afterschool_in_Rural_Communities.pdf). Accessed on May 22, 2019.