

I. INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is to provide nutritious meals to children in low-income areas when school is not in session. The program is intended to fill a gap in services for low-income, school-age children, who receive free or reduced-price school meals during the school year through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). However, the SFSP always has served far fewer children than are reached by free or reduced-price NSLP lunches during the school year.

Because the SFSP, which had expenditures of \$272 million in fiscal year (FY) 2001, is one of the smaller child nutrition programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), it has not been studied extensively. However, growing interest in improving program operations and expanding participation has led USDA to commission a new study of the SFSP, known as the SFSP Implementation Study. This report presents the results of the SFSP Implementation Study, a descriptive study of the operations of the SFSP at the state and local levels. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR), under contract to the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS), has collected nationally representative data to describe how the program works and how SFSP staff feel it could be improved.

To help the reader understand the program and the issues considered in the study, this chapter first provides background information on the SFSP. It then describes the research questions, the study design, and the data sources used in the rest of the report.

A. THE SFSP

This section describes the SFSP and its history. It also provides a brief overview of trends in participation since the 1970s.

1. What Is the SFSP?

The SFSP was created to provide nutritious meals for children from low-income families, particularly those who live in low-income neighborhoods, when school is not in session. The program operates in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. The USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) provides federal funds to operate the SFSP, and states distribute the funds to local program sponsors, which are the organizations that carry out the day-to-day operations of the SFSP. Meals often are provided in conjunction with educational and/or recreational activities, such as summer school, sports, arts and crafts activities, and camp.

a. Eligibility of Sponsors, Sites, and Children

Sponsor Eligibility. Organizations eligible to sponsor the SFSP are public or private nonprofit School Food Authorities (SFAs—governing bodies of schools or school districts that offer the NSLP); public or private nonprofit residential summer camps; local, municipal, county,

or state government units; public or private colleges or universities that participate in the National Youth Sports Program (NYSP)¹; and other private nonprofit organizations. Private nonprofit sponsors include youth organizations (such as branches of the YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs), religious organizations, social service agencies, and other community groups.

Site Eligibility. Each sponsor operates one or more SFSP sites that serve meals to children. These sites may be school cafeterias, parks, recreation centers, playgrounds, and other locations. Two main types of sites operate under the SFSP: (1) “open” sites, and (2) “enrolled” sites. Less common types of sites are “camp” sites and NYSP sites.

An open site must be located in a neighborhood in which at least 50 percent of the children live in households that have incomes at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Meals served at open sites must be provided to children at no charge.² Sponsors must use NSLP records from a local school (showing the percentage of children certified for free or reduced-price school lunches) or census block group records of household income to document the eligibility of open sites for the SFSP.³

At enrolled sites, at least 50 percent of the children who are enrolled at the site must live in households that are at or below 185 percent of poverty. However, sponsors are reimbursed for meals served to *all* children who are enrolled. To demonstrate their eligibility as enrolled sites, sponsors must collect either enrollment forms documenting the family income of participating children or NSLP records from local schools documenting the enrolled children’s eligibility for free or reduced-price meals.

Residential summer camps may qualify as SFSP sites. Unlike enrolled sites, however, residential camps are reimbursed only for meals served to children from households with incomes at or below 185 percent of poverty, and they are not subject to the requirement that at least 50 percent of enrolled children be low-income. Documentation required to show children’s eligibility is the same as for enrolled sites.

¹The NYSP is a federally funded program that provides organized instruction in athletics to low-income children.

²A “restricted open” site is a new subcategory of open site. Attendance at a restricted open site initially is open to the broad community but is later limited by the sponsor for security, safety, or control reasons. For example, space limitations might require that a restricted open site serve only the first 100 children who arrive each day. Children must be served on a first-come, first-served basis at all open sites.

³According to current federal policy, sponsors should use NSLP records, if possible. As with the SFSP, eligibility for the NSLP is based on household income at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Therefore, an open site can demonstrate SFSP eligibility if 50 percent of the children in the attendance area are eligible to receive free or reduced-price NSLP meals, and, as discussed in the text above, an enrolled site can demonstrate its eligibility for the program if 50 percent of the children attending the program are eligible for NSLP meals.

NYSP sites serve children enrolled in National Youth Sports Programs. An NYSP site may qualify for the program (1) as an enrolled site, (2) by showing that attending children live in areas that would qualify for open sites, or (3) by providing written documentation that it meets U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) income eligibility guidelines for the NYSP.⁴

Children's Eligibility. Children through age 18 are eligible to receive SFSP meals.⁵ Individuals older than age 18 may receive these meals if they have physical or mental disabilities and if they participate in special school programs for students with disabilities.

b. Administrative Structure

The SFSP operates on three administrative levels: (1) the federal FNS, (2) state agencies, and (3) local sponsors. Each level has unique roles and responsibilities.

FNS. The FNS develops SFSP regulations and procedures and distributes program funds through its seven regional offices. Regional FNS offices fund state SFSP programs on the basis of annual state plans describing the size and scope of SFSP operations, provide technical assistance to states and sponsors, and monitor state programs.

State Agencies. In most states, a state government agency—usually the state education agency that administers the school meals programs—administers the SFSP. State agencies are responsible for recruiting sponsors, approving sponsors' applications, providing training and technical assistance to sponsors and sites, monitoring compliance with program rules and regulations, and handling claims for reimbursement. Many of these activities are seasonal, as the SFSP operates primarily during the summer.⁶ Many state agency staff who work on SFSP work on other nutrition programs in the nonsummer months.

When a state government has not assumed responsibility for administering the program, FNS regional offices manage the program and perform all the functions that state agencies would perform. In 2001, FNS regional offices administered the program only in Michigan and Virginia and for nonprofit and camp sponsors in New York.

⁴DHHS is the primary grantor for the NYSP. To qualify for participation in the NYSP under DHHS rules, at least 90 percent of enrolled children must be at or below the federal poverty level.

⁵A state agency must approve a sponsor's request to serve infants. If infants are served, the sponsor must use the Child and Adult Care Food Program's (CACFP's) meal requirements for infants.

⁶Some SFSP programs operate on a year-round basis. For example, schools using a year-round schedule may use the SFSP to feed children who are off-track (that is, who are on a scheduled school break) throughout the year.

Sponsors. Program sponsors operate the SFSP at the local level and have direct responsibility for either purchasing or preparing meals and for monitoring program operations and food safety and quality. Sponsors must publicize their program; select meal sites; hire and train staff; arrange for the preparation or delivery of meals that meet the SFSP's standards; monitor meal attendance levels; and maintain records and complete paperwork on costs, attendance, food served, and related matters. Under federal regulations, state agencies are required to make training available to sponsors, and to ensure that sponsors receive the training they need.

Sponsors must submit SFSP applications to the state agency annually. After an application has been approved, the sponsor enters into an agreement with the state to provide services. States monitor sponsors' compliance with program rules; serious violations may result in a sponsor's termination or in the denial of its application for the next program year. States may also disallow meals for reimbursement purposes if the meals are not served according to program rules.

Sponsors must train site supervisors on SFSP rules before their sites open. Site staff must serve meals to children in a way that meets program requirements; supervise the children while they eat; and accurately record the number of meals prepared or delivered, the number served to children as firsts and as seconds, and the number served to program staff. They also must follow appropriate procedures related to food safety and to storage or disposal of leftovers. (Meal pattern requirements, which are intended to ensure that SFSP meals provide good nutrition, are discussed in detail in Chapter V.)

c. Funding

The SFSP is funded through the USDA budget. Total federal expenditures on the program were \$272 million in FY 2001 (Food and Nutrition Service 2002a).⁷ The federal government funds state agencies for their costs of administering the program and also funds sponsor reimbursements. States are not required to match federal SFSP funds.

State agencies receive SFSP state administrative funds (SAFs) to cover their administrative costs. The SAF amount is calculated on the basis of the total amount of program funds—sponsors' operating, sponsors' administrative, and health inspection funds—properly payable to a state for the SFSP in the preceding fiscal year (7CFR 225.5[a][1]). A state receives administrative funding equal to (1) 20 percent of the first \$50,000 in program funds, (2) 10 percent of the next \$100,000, (3) 5 percent of the next \$250,000, and (4) 2.5 percent of any additional dollars in program funds that it received during the previous fiscal year. FNS may

⁷Total federal expenditures include cash payments for meals served, sponsors' administrative costs, the states' administrative expenses, health inspection costs, and entitlement and bonus commodity costs.

adjust the level of state administrative funding based on changes in program size since the previous year.⁸

Most sponsors are eligible to be reimbursed for the costs of serving up to two meals or snacks per child per day at their sites; sites that are residential camps or sites serving migrant children may receive reimbursement for up to three meals or snacks per child per day. Sponsor reimbursements cover two types of costs: (1) operational costs, including those associated with the purchase, preparation, and delivery or service of meals; and (2) administrative costs, including office expenses, administrative staff's salaries, program management costs, and insurance. The amount of reimbursement that sponsors receive is the lesser of (1) actual net documented costs, or (2) the number of reimbursable meals served multiplied by the corresponding per meal reimbursement rates for operating and administrative costs. In addition, administrative cost reimbursements may not exceed the amount specified in the budget approved by the state agency. States may provide advance funding to sponsors to help cover costs until their reimbursement claims are paid, but these advances are deducted from later reimbursements.

The SFSP operating reimbursement rate in 2001 was \$2.23 per lunch or supper meal; breakfast and snacks were reimbursed at lower rates (Table I.1).⁹ Sponsors' maximum per-meal reimbursement rates for administrative costs vary according to their location and/or method of meal preparation (Table I.1). SFSP meals may be prepared by the sponsor or delivered by a vendor; administrative reimbursements are lower for meals purchased from a vendor and served at urban sites. For example, the 2001 SFSP administrative reimbursement rate for a lunch or supper was \$0.2325 per meal for rural sites and for urban self-preparation sites and was \$0.1925 per meal for urban vended sites.

SFSP per-meal reimbursement rates (for administrative and operating costs combined) are higher than NSLP and SBP per-meal reimbursement rates for students who qualify for free meals (which include both operating costs and administrative costs in a single rate). The size of the difference depends on whether the SFSP sponsor receives the higher or lower administrative cost reimbursement rate, and whether the NSLP or SBP rates are those for an SFA in a highly disadvantaged area. For lunch, the maximum 2001 SFSP combined reimbursement rate per meal (\$2.4625) was about 17 percent higher than the NSLP reimbursement rate for free lunches for

⁸As discussed in detail in Chapter III, states commonly supplement these funds with State Administrative Expense (SAE) funds, a pool of federal funds that is used for state agency administrative costs incurred in connection with other child nutrition programs, including the NSLP, SBP, Special Milk Program, and CACFP. These funds can be transferred to cover SFSP administrative costs that are not covered by SAF.

⁹Alaska's and Hawaii's rates are higher than those of the other states and territories.

TABLE I.1

SFSP MAXIMUM PER-MEAL REIMBURSEMENT RATES FOR ALL STATES
EXCEPT ALASKA AND HAWAII, 2001
(Dollars)

Meal	Operating Rate	Administrative Rates	
		Self-Preparation or Rural Sites	Other Sites
Breakfast	1.28	0.1275	0.1000
Lunch and Supper	2.23	0.2325	0.1925
Snack	0.52	0.0625	0.0500

SOURCE: Food and Nutrition Service (2002b).

NOTE: Rates effective January 1, 2001, through December 31, 2001.

school year 2001-2002 in heavily low-income areas (\$2.11).¹⁰ The higher reimbursement rates for the SFSP are one of several factors that affect whether SFAs decide to operate the SFSP or the NSLP during the summer.¹¹ In the case of other types of sponsors, the higher rates reflect the fact that these sponsors are likely to have higher costs than are SFAs, especially if they do not provide food service year-round.

2. History of the Program

The SFSP began in 1968 as a pilot program aimed at providing meals to low-income children during the summer. It was authorized as a permanent program in 1975. Over time, changes in policy goals and concerns have led to revisions in the eligibility criteria for sponsors and sites, administrative rules and regulations, and levels of reimbursement. Participation has fluctuated accordingly.

a. Late 1970s: Problems Led to Contraction

When it was authorized, the SFSP provided funding to open sites located in areas in which at least one-third of children came from households with an income at or below 185 percent of the poverty level. Subsequently, fraud and abuses in program administration occurring during the mid-to-late 1970s were described in a series of findings by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) and in the media (U.S. General Accounting Office 1977 and 1978). Some program operators were prosecuted. In addition to outright fraud, there were reports of high levels of food waste, poor-quality food, and failure to meet meal pattern guidelines. Most abuses involved large nonprofit sponsors. During the late 1970s, in response to concerns about fraud and abuse, administrative oversight of sponsors increased, sponsorship by nonprofit organizations was limited, and registration requirements for food service management companies were introduced (Food and Nutrition Service 2002c). The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 went further by prohibiting private nonprofit groups (except private schools and residential camps) from serving as sponsors. In addition, for budgetary reasons, the Act

¹⁰The NSLP rate used applies to areas in which 60 percent or more of meals are served free or at a reduced-price. The maximum SFSP breakfast reimbursement is about 3 percent higher than the maximum SBP reimbursements for “severe needs” districts (\$1.4075 for SFSP rural sponsors and self-preparation sponsors versus \$1.37 for SBP severe needs districts). NSLP and SBP rates are from the *Federal Register* (2001). All rates discussed are for the contiguous United States.

¹¹Under current rules, SFAs may operate the NSLP during the summer for children in educational programs. They are reimbursed for these meals at the free, reduced, or paid rates, according to the children’s income levels. If they choose to participate in the SFSP instead, they must open their sites to all children and are subject to additional paperwork requirements, but they can then receive the higher reimbursement rate. The “Seamless Summer Initiative” (discussed in Section I.2.d of this chapter) is testing changes in these rules.

restricted eligible areas for open sites to those in which at least 50 percent of children came from households at or below 185 percent of the poverty level.

These changes led to a decline in participation in the SFSP (Figure I.1). In 1976, before the changes went into effect, average daily attendance in July (the estimate of program participation used by FNS) was more than 3 million—the highest level of SFSP participation ever reported. By 1982, participation had dropped to fewer than 1.5 million children.

b. Late 1980s and Early 1990s: Renewed Interest in Expansion

Starting in the late 1980s, USDA worked with Congress and advocacy groups to reverse the decline in SFSP participation. At around the same time, FNS undertook a national evaluation of the SFSP (Ohls et al. 1988). The evaluation suggested that the program was operating without major problems. FNS increased outreach and technical assistance to potential sponsors and collaboration with nutrition advocates. In addition, a major nutrition policy advocacy group, the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), undertook a campaign to expand the SFSP in 1991 that has continued to the present. FRAC has published an annual report on SFSP participation since 1993, titled “Hunger Doesn’t Take a Vacation” (Food Research and Action Center 2002).

Several pieces of legislation were passed to address the reduction in participation. In 1989, private nonprofit sponsors were allowed back into the program, subject to provisions for expanded state agency training and monitoring and with restrictions on their operations. A major objective of this action was to increase program coverage (Decker et al. 1993). Two studies conducted by MPR at this time found that the reentry of private nonprofit sponsors contributed significantly to an increase in the number of sponsors and sites between 1989 and 1991, as well as to an increase in program attendance and in the number of SFSP meals served (Decker et al. 1990; and Decker et al. 1993).

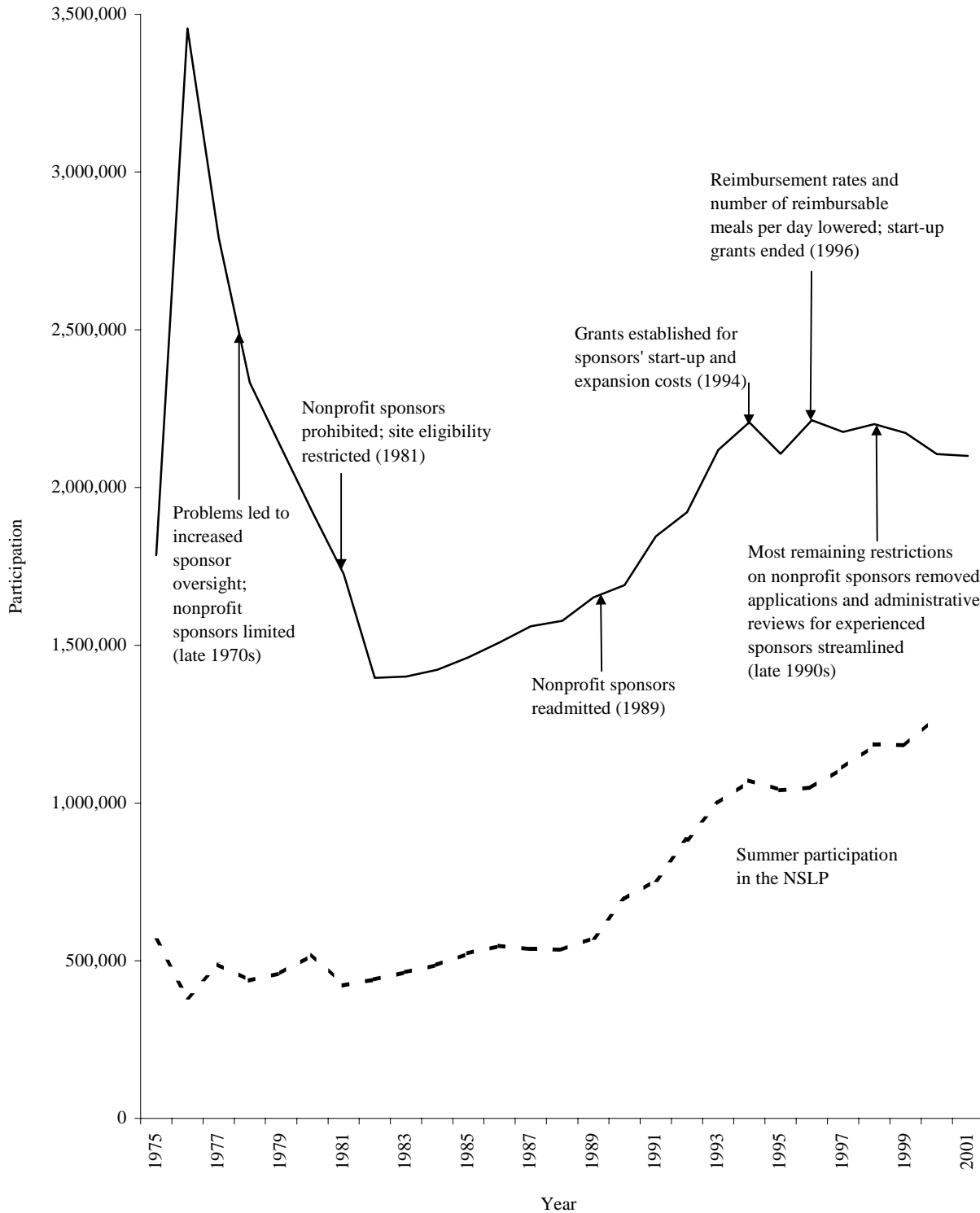
In 1994, special grants were established for sponsors’ start-up and expansion costs, which provided funds in addition to meal reimbursements. Some of the restrictions on private nonprofit sponsors were relaxed as well. For example, nonprofit sponsors operating in areas formerly served by school or government sites no longer were subject to a 1-year waiting period.

c. The Late 1990s: Reimbursement Cuts and Streamlined Administration

In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) mandated major changes to many social welfare programs, including cutbacks in the Food Stamp Program and in several child nutrition programs, one of which was the SFSP. PRWORA removed expansion of the SFSP as a stated program goal, reduced reimbursement rates and the number of reimbursable meals allowed per day, and eliminated start-up and expansion grants for sponsors. In a GAO study conducted shortly after the changes took effect, some sponsors reported that they had substituted less expensive foods for those previously served, reduced staff wages, and reduced the number of sites they operated (U.S. General Accounting Office 1998). The study also reported that, overall, the reductions in reimbursements had little effect on the number and characteristics of sponsors participating in the program or on the number of

FIGURE I.1

SFSP PARTICIPATION AND PROGRAM MILESTONES



SOURCE: SFSP participation (Food and Nutrition Service 2002a); NSLP July participation is from unpublished data provided by the FNS Child Nutrition Division, May 7, 2002.

participants. However, the GAO study examined the SFSP only during the first year after the changes took effect.

During the late 1990s, most of the remaining restrictions on private nonprofit sponsors were removed.¹² Changes were made to streamline application procedures for sponsors that successfully had participated in the SFSP during the prior year. Other changes focused state monitoring requirements on new sponsors, large sponsors, sponsors that had operational problems, and sponsors experiencing frequent staff turnover. The federal requirement for registering food service management companies was removed, thereby giving states discretion as to whether they continue this practice (Food and Nutrition Service 1998).

d. Recent Federal and State Initiatives

Currently, states and FNS have renewed their focus on how to increase the availability of summer meals to children in low-income areas (Food and Nutrition Service 2002d). Both FNS and the states are experimenting with new approaches to expanding the program.

At the federal level, two initiatives began in summer 2001: (1) a pilot project, mandated by Congress, to simplify reimbursement rates in certain states; and (2) the Seamless Summer Feeding Waivers, an initiative designed to encourage school districts to serve more meals during the summer. In late 2000, Congress mandated a 3-year pilot project as part of the Richard B. Russell School Lunch Act (Public Law 106-554). The “14-state” pilot project, which began in summer 2001 (as this study went into the field), applies to sponsors in 13 states and Puerto Rico, jurisdictions which have low SFSP participation levels. One of the goals of the pilot is to test an approach to reducing paperwork for sponsors (Food and Nutrition Service 2002f). The pilot provides the maximum reimbursement rate to sponsors in these jurisdictions. It also removes the division between administrative and operating cost reimbursements; sponsors receive one reimbursement to cover all of their expenses, whether administrative or operating. Sponsors no longer have to track administrative and operating costs separately, or to report costs to the state agency. They earn “meals times rates,” which makes it easier for them to estimate the amount of funding they will receive. The pilot applies to most sponsors; however, it excludes private nonprofit sponsors that are not schools or residential camps.

Another federal initiative—the Seamless Summer Food Waiver—seeks to encourage more school districts to serve more meals to children in low-income areas during the summer. Under this waiver, school districts use NSLP meal service and claims procedures to provide summer meal service to children aged 18 or younger at sites that meet SFSP criteria. School districts operating these waiver sites are subject to the less complicated administrative requirements of the NSLP. All meals served at the waiver sites are claimed as NSLP meals and are reimbursed at the NSLP free rate, including the allowance for commodities. Sponsors do not receive a separate

¹²Nonprofit SFSP sponsors continue to be limited to operating no more than 25 sites. However, the National School Lunch Act provides authority for FNS to approve waivers from this limit.

administrative reimbursement for these meals. The seamless summer initiative began in 2001 with initial waivers granted to five school districts (two in California and three in Florida). Starting in 2002, school districts nationwide may request a waiver through their state education agency to operate a seamless summer feeding program through summer 2004 (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2002a).

Several states have implemented laws to require school districts in low-income areas to operate the SFSP; because these initiatives are relatively recent, however, little information is available on how they are working. Texas state law requires public school districts in which at least 60 percent of children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals to sponsor the SFSP or to arrange for a sponsor in their enrollment areas. There is no minimum, however, on the number of days or the number of sites at which the program must operate. Furthermore, school districts may receive a waiver exempting them from this responsibility if they can demonstrate that the costs of running the program will exceed available funds, that renovations or construction in the district prevent them from operating the program, or that other extenuating circumstances exist. Texas also provides funds for outreach and for supplemental meal reimbursements. Missouri also has a mandate to operate the SFSP in high poverty areas of the state (Food Research and Action Center 2002).

Six states in addition to Texas provided state funding for the SFSP in 2001 (Food Research and Action Center 2002).¹³ Some states provided supplemental reimbursements for all sponsors, some provided start-up and expansion grants, and some provided funding for outreach.

3. Participation and Participation Rates

At the time of its authorization as a permanent program in 1975, the SFSP served almost 1.8 million children per day during the peak summer month of July (Figure I.1).¹⁴ In 1976, before the tightening of program regulations and of restrictions on nonprofit sponsors, participation rose to almost 3.5 million. By 1982, it had fallen below 1.5 million. Starting in 1983, participation rose slowly but steadily, reaching 2 million children in 1993. Since then, despite declining slightly since 1999, participation has been relatively stable, hovering between 2.1 and 2.2 million children.

¹³The states are California, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Vermont, and Washington.

¹⁴FNS measures participation as average daily attendance reported by sponsors operating in July, the peak month for SFSP participation. State agencies collect these data and report them to FNS. Because the program does not track individual children who participate, it is not possible to determine the number of children who ever receive meals during the summer.

Like the SFSP, the NSLP provides meals to children during the summer.¹⁵ NSLP participants are children attending summer school and on-track students at year-round schools. In line with national trends toward year-round schooling and increased requirements for summer school participation, summer participation in the NSLP has more than doubled during the past decade (see Figure I.1). Recently, NSLP participation rose from 1.06 to 1.14 million between July 1999 and July 2000, more than offsetting a small decrease in the number of children fed through the SFSP. Thus, recent decreases in SFSP participation do not necessarily reflect fewer children receiving summer meals through federal nutrition programs overall. Rather, they may reflect a redistribution in the number of children accessing specific meal programs.¹⁶

The difference between the number of children who participate in the SFSP and the number who participate in the free or reduced-price component of the NSLP *during the school year* always has been large. For example, in 1999, an average of 15 million children from low-income households received free or reduced-price NSLP lunches each month during the school year, whereas only 2.2 million received meals through the SFSP in July (Figure I.2). The ratio of SFSP participants to free or reduced-price NSLP participants, converted to a percentage, can be interpreted as an approximate participation rate in the SFSP among low-income children. This percentage was relatively stable between 1989 and 1996, varying only from 14.5 percent to 15.8 percent (Figure I.3). It has been declining slightly but continually since then. In 2000, the participation rate was less than 14 percent for the first time since 1989. These recent decreases reflect both the slight decline in SFSP participation and an increase in school-year participation in the NSLP by low-income children.

B. STUDY OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

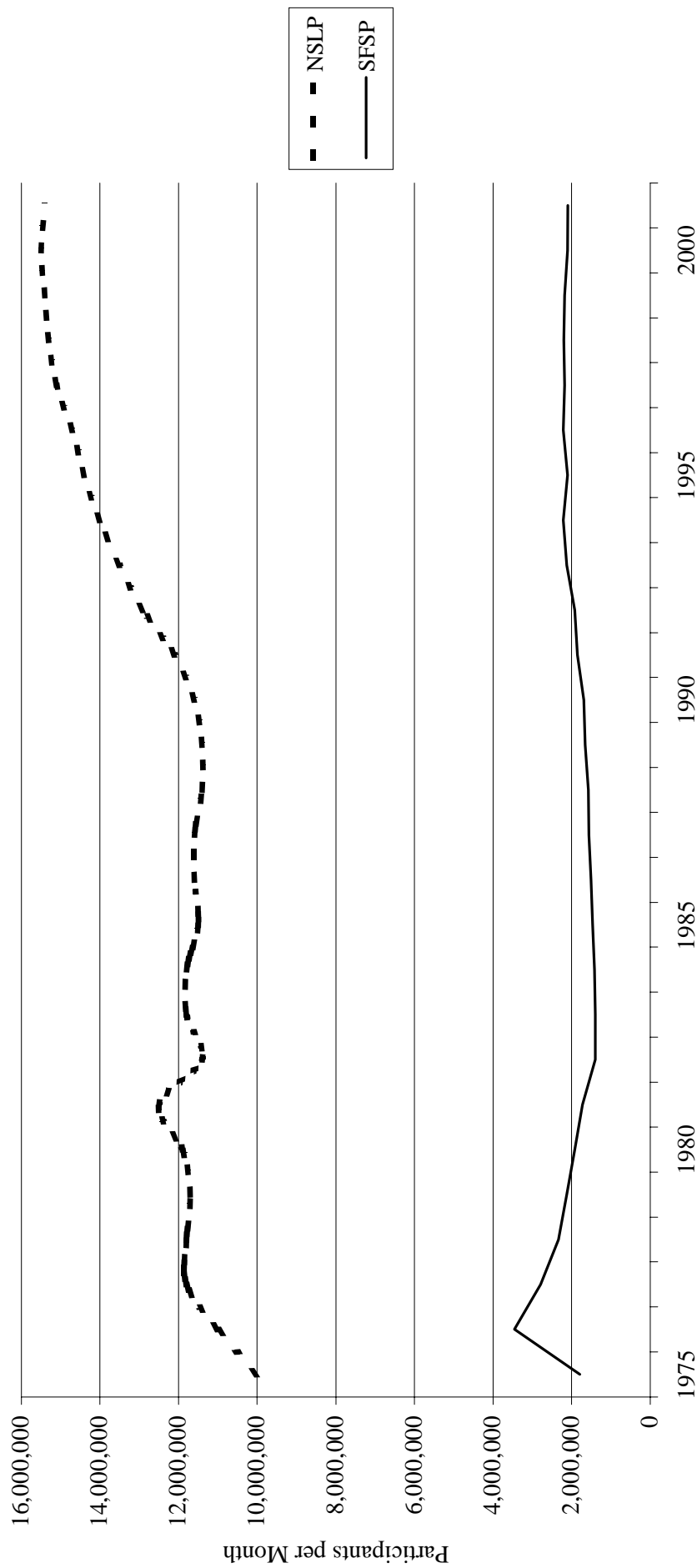
The main objective of this study is to describe the operations of the SFSP at the state, sponsor, and site levels, using nationally representative data. The specific research questions include:

1. *How does the SFSP operate at the state, sponsor, and site levels?* Is the program operating as intended by current policy and regulations? What areas do staff believe are in need of improvement?

¹⁵The CACFP is another year-round nutrition program that serves meals to children in the summer. Average daily participation in the CACFP was approximately 2.65 million in 2001 (including children and adults served in day care homes and in child care centers). According to data provided by the FNS Child Nutrition Division, participation levels in the summer are similar to those throughout the rest of the year, suggesting that the CACFP does not generally serve the school-aged children served by the NSLP during the school year.

¹⁶As the Seamless Summer Food Waivers are implemented more widely, this redistribution may increase, which implies that it will be increasingly important to examine NSLP and SFSP participation jointly.

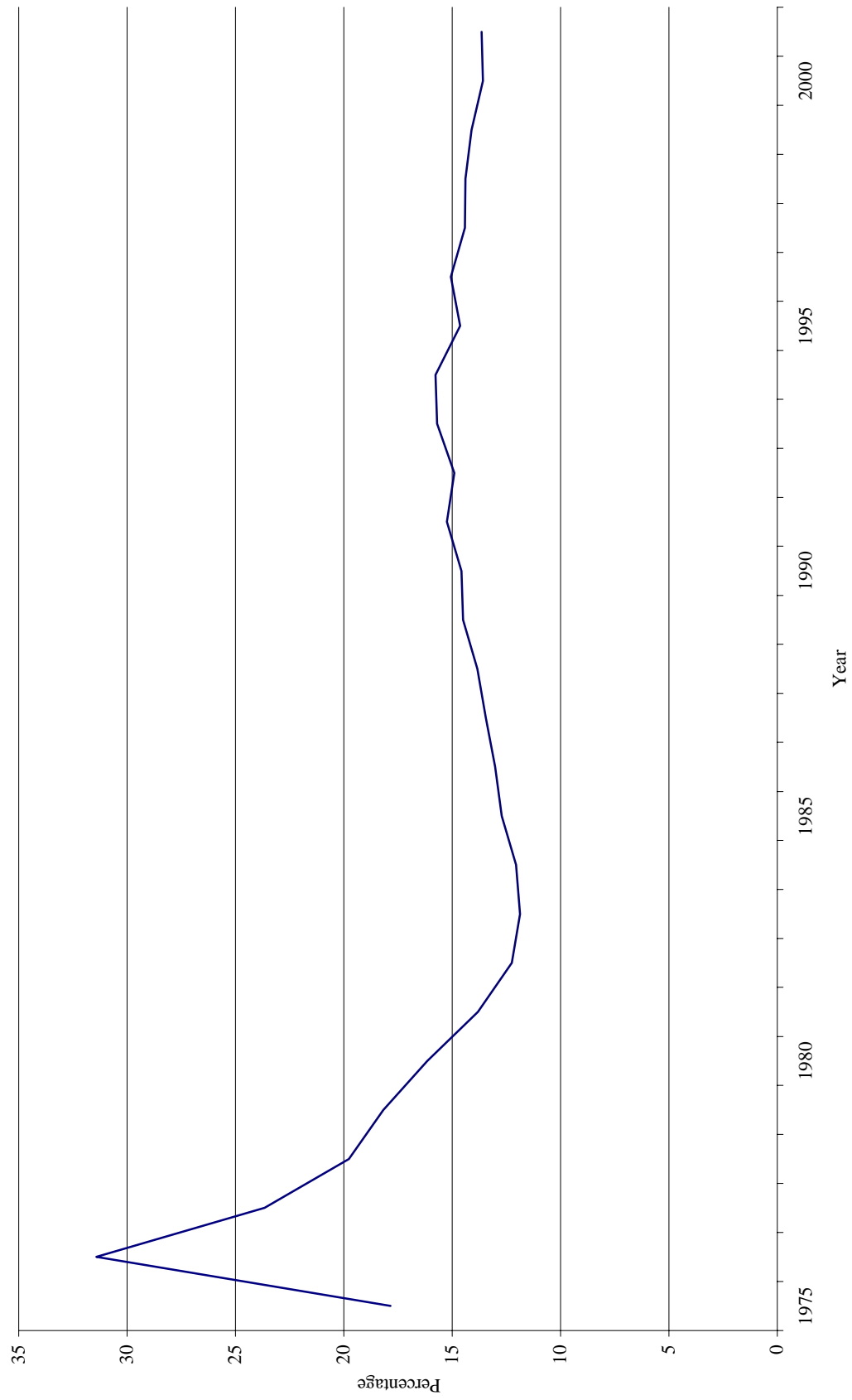
FIGURE I.2
 SFSP PARTICIPATION AND NSLP FREE OR REDUCED-PRICE
 PARTICIPATION, 1975 THROUGH 2001



SOURCE: SFSP program data (Food and Nutrition Service 2002a); NSLP program data (Food and Nutrition Service 2002e).

NOTE: Data reflect 9-month averages for free or reduced-price participation in the NSLP (summer months are excluded) and July participation in the SFSP. Data for 2001 are preliminary.

FIGURE I.3
 SFSP PARTICIPATION RATE
 (Number of SFSP Participants as a Percentage of Free or Reduced-Price NSLP Participants)



SOURCE: SFSP program data (Food and Nutrition Service 2002a); NSLP program data (Food and Nutrition Service 2002e).

NOTES: Data reflect July participation in the SFSP divided by 9-month averages for free or reduced-price participation in the NSLP (summer months are excluded). Data for 2001 are preliminary.

2. *What factors affect participation by sponsors and children?* What do program staff see as the most important barriers to participation? What efforts are they making to expand participation? What are the levels of entry and exit of program sponsors? Why do some sponsors leave the program, and how do their characteristics compare with those of sponsors overall?
3. *What is the nutritional quality of meals served, and what is the extent of plate waste?* How are SFSP meals prepared and served? What are the foods served and portion sizes? How does the nutritional content of SFSP meals compare with relevant nutrition standards? What factors are associated with more nutritious meals and less waste?

C. STUDY DESIGN AND DATA SOURCES

This section provides an overview of the design of the SFSP Implementation Study, the data sources used, and the methods used to collect the data. Appendix A and Appendix B discuss, respectively, data collection in detail and the sample design and weights used in the study.

1. Study Design

ERS worked with MPR to design this study under a previous contract (Briefel et al. 2000). Key requirements of the design included nationally representative data on sponsors, former sponsors, and sites and the ability to link sponsor and site data. The final study design included the following components:

- Telephone interviews with all SFSP state administrators
- A mixed-mode mail/telephone survey of a national sample of sponsors
- A telephone survey of former sponsors, defined as organizations that sponsored the SFSP in 2000 but not in 2001
- Visits by interviewer-observers to a national sample of program sites sponsored by the programs in the sponsor sample, which included in-person interviews with site supervisors, structured observations of program operations, and coding of a random sample of meals served and plate waste

The design for this study was influenced heavily by the last comprehensive national evaluation of the SFSP (also conducted by MPR), which collected data in 1986 (Ohls et al. 1988). The study by Ohls et al. collected data at the state, sponsor, and site levels and demonstrated that on-site observers could collect data on the content of meals served and plate waste. Whenever appropriate, the results of the current study are compared with the 1986 data.

In designing the current study, ERS asked MPR to consider the feasibility of studying factors associated with participation. The designs developed included (1) geocoding of the locations of SFSP sponsors and sites and geographic analysis of the characteristics of areas

served and not served, and (2) a survey of families in areas served by SFSP sites that would include both participants and nonparticipants (Gordon et al. 2000). ERS decided not to pursue the participant-nonparticipant survey because of concerns about feasibility. ERS is planning a future study that will include the geographic analysis of data on sponsor and site addresses in relation to census poverty data, which will allow USDA to assess how well the SFSP is reaching areas in which low-income children live.

2. Data Collection

Data collection for this study took place during the spring, summer, and fall of 2001. The data collection for the study consisted of four surveys—a state administrator survey, a sponsor survey, a former sponsor survey, and a site supervisor survey—plus in-person observations of operations at a national sample of sites and a large effort to compile administrative data.

Developing the sample frames for the study was a major undertaking. State SFSP agencies provided lists of year 2000 sponsors in spring 2001 and subsequently provided lists of new 2001 sponsors and lists of sponsors that had left the program. These lists comprised the sample frames from which the samples of sponsors and of former sponsors were selected. After sponsors were selected for the sample, they were contacted and asked to provide lists of their sites; the lists became the sample frame for selecting the sample of sites to visit. The level of cooperation received at all levels was very high.

Table I.2 describes the four surveys and the site observations. The table shows their mode of data collection, sample sizes, and response rates. To reduce respondent burden, all four surveys asked some questions about administrators' problems or challenges as open-ended questions. However, because respondents generally mention only a few issues in response to open-ended questions—most often, the ones about which they feel strongly—responses to such questions likely provide lower bounds on the numbers of administrators who believe particular challenges or problems are important. Throughout this report, tables indicate when data reflect responses to open-ended questions.

During the fall and winter of 2001, SFSP state agencies also provided MPR with detailed lists of all their 2001 SFSP sponsors and lists of each sponsor's sites. These lists included addresses of sponsors and sites that have been geocoded for future analysis, as well as descriptions of basic program characteristics.¹⁷ The data collected on sponsors included the type of sponsor (school, government, residential camp, NYSP, other nonprofit), dates of operation, types of meals served, whether the sponsor was new to the program, and meal counts for each meal. The data collected on sites included dates of operation, types of meals served, an estimate of average daily attendance for each meal, and an indicator of whether the site was open or enrolled. These data, which represent a census of the SFSP as of summer 2001, have been compiled into a linked database, the "SFSP 2001 Sponsor-Site Database."

¹⁷Decision Demographics, Inc., under subcontract to MPR, geocoded the addresses in the database.

TABLE I.2
DATA COLLECTION FOR THE SFSP IMPLEMENTATION STUDY

Survey	Mode of Data Collection	Sample Size	Response Rate (Percentage)
State Administrator Census	Telephone interview	54 ^a	100
Sponsor Survey	Mail survey with telephone followup	126	96
Former Sponsor Survey ^b	Telephone interview	131	89
Site Supervisor Survey and Site Observations	In-person interview and structured observations of site operations, participant characteristics, content of meals served, and plate waste	162	95

NOTE: See Appendix A for additional details on data collection.

^aThere are 54 state agencies to represent all 50 states, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands, and the District of Columbia. The program in New York state is partly run by the State Department of Education and partly run by the FNS regional office, so both agencies were included in the survey.

^bFormer sponsors are defined as agencies that were SFSP sponsors in 2000 but not in 2001.

D. PLAN OF THE REPORT

Chapter II describes the SFSP at the state, sponsor, and site levels and its participants, based on data from the Sponsor-Site Database and the various surveys. It also considers how the characteristics of the program have changed since 1986, when data for the previous study were collected.

Each of the next three chapters addresses one of the three research questions in turn. Chapter III describes how the program was administered at the state, sponsor, and site levels, as well as areas of program operations that staff believed could be improved. Chapter IV discusses participation and outreach, including staffs' views on barriers to participation, the extent of outreach efforts, and the reasons why sponsors left the program. Chapter V describes the meals served in the SFSP, their nutrient content, and the extent of plate waste. Finally, Chapter VI summarizes the findings and considers issues for the future.