

## VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provided approximately 130 million meals to children in 2001 through more than 4,000 local sponsors and more than 35,000 sites. The program almost always operates in conjunction with other activities. Therefore, in addition to providing meals, it helps to sustain summer programs that promote physical activity and foster children's social and educational development. The last major study described the 1986 SFSP (Ohls et al. 1988). Since then, the number of sponsors, number of sites, and average daily attendance have grown considerably. SFSP sites also are now more likely to serve breakfast as well as lunch, and to stay open for longer than 6 weeks.<sup>1</sup> As shown in Chapter I, however, SFSP participation (as measured by average daily attendance in July) has leveled off since 1994; in 2001, the number of children receiving SFSP meals in July was 14 percent of the number of children receiving free or reduced-price school meals during the school year.

This study has considered three research questions concerning the SFSP:

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?
2. ***What factors affect the participation of sponsors and children?*** What barriers to participation do program staff believe are the most important? What are program staff doing to expand participation? What is the level 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 standards for good nutrition? What factors are associated with more-nutritious meals and less waste?

This chapter considers, for each of the three research questions, key findings and issues for future research and policy development.

### A. PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

To safeguard program integrity and meal quality, SFSP regulations require careful documentation for sponsor applications and claims, extensive monitoring of site operations by state agencies and sponsors, and adherence to highly detailed operating procedures. However,

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<sup>1</sup>See Tables II.5 and II.9.

the state and sponsor staff interviewed for this study often perceived the detailed program rules and the complex reimbursement procedures as burdensome; some of these staff felt that the rules might discourage program growth.

## 1. Key Findings

- ***State administrators and some sponsors consider the application process for SFSP sponsorship to be demanding.*** Some state administrators (about 40 percent) reported that they did not have sufficient staff to process applications; more than 80 percent of state administrators reported that they often assisted sponsors with the process (as opposed to sometimes or rarely assisting sponsors). Sponsors who had suggestions for improving the application process (about 25 percent of all sponsors) most often suggested reducing the overall level of paperwork required; others suggested dropping specific requirements.<sup>2</sup> Forty-six percent of state administrators reported that, of all the topics covered in training and thereafter, new sponsors had the greatest difficulty with preparation of the budgets that are required as part of applications; 28 percent mentioned the application process overall as most difficult for sponsors.<sup>3</sup> Most state administrators felt that recent changes in application procedures had not helped.
- ***State administrators and sponsors reported undertaking monitoring activities that largely are consistent with the monitoring required by SFSP regulations.*** The state agencies reported reviewing more than 90 percent of new sponsors in 2001 (somewhat less than the required 100 percent), and about 60 percent of experienced sponsors (monitoring of at least one-third is required); they visited an average of 30 percent of the sites. More than 80 percent of sponsors reported that they monitored all sites at least twice, and nearly three-quarters reported that their visits always were unannounced.
- ***About 70 percent of sponsors expected that SFSP reimbursements would not cover all their costs.*** Most reported that reimbursements would cover at least 75 percent of their costs, however. Those who did not expect all costs to be covered most often expected to use their own funds to fill the gap; some expected to use funding from their parent organizations or other state or federal programs. About 75 percent of sponsors who had operated in previous years reported that they had instituted program changes in the past few years to control costs, such as reducing staff hours or meal costs.

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<sup>2</sup>Although only 25 percent of sponsors provided comments on the application process, the comments were in response to an open-ended question on a mail survey. Respondents to such questions tend to be those with a relatively high level of concern.

<sup>3</sup>As multiple responses were allowed, these groups may overlap (see Table III.15).

- ***Eighteen percent of sponsors (serving 30 percent of meals) obtained meals from a vendor.*** Although sponsors using vendors had some concerns about the quality of food the vendors provided and monitored them closely, about 80 percent were satisfied with the vendors' performance. About one-third of vended sponsors used School Food Authorities (SFAs) as their vendors.

## **2. Issues for the Future**

Many state administrators and sponsors suggested that changes in paperwork or other requirements and/or in the reimbursement process could improve the SFSP and help the program to attract sponsors.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, requirements for the SFSP have specific functions. (For example, requirements to specify serving times and the dates of field trips at each site, which are time- and paperwork-intensive for sponsor and state staff, are intended to ensure that state monitors know when to arrive and what to verify when visiting sites.) It may be possible to develop creative approaches to simplifying these procedures while maintaining their basic role in ensuring program integrity. In some instances, it may be worth reviewing whether the costs of the provisions outweigh their benefits. If detailed requirements are reduced, strong monitoring programs may increase in importance.

In recent years, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has introduced changes to simplify the application process and has reduced monitoring requirements. In 2001, the agency began experimenting with several approaches to simplifying the program. Specifically, the 14-state pilot project, discussed in detail in Chapter I, allows sponsors to combine administrative and operating costs, and to be reimbursed at the maximum rate. The "Seamless Summer" waivers allow SFAs to run open sites under National School Lunch Program (NSLP) rules, while receiving the lower NSLP free meal reimbursement rate. Studies of these initiatives will help to assess whether the approaches should be adopted more widely.

One possible way to further simplify the SFSP sponsor application process (and, possibly, other types of paperwork, such as claims) would be to make better use of technology. For example, some state agencies and sponsors suggested making more use of electronic application forms that could be updated easily from year to year, or as items change during the year. Improving technology requires an upfront investment of resources, but in the long term, it may make the program simpler to operate without reducing accountability.

Dropping the requirement to prepare detailed administrative and operating budgets, particularly in the context of the 14-state pilot project, in which sponsors are paid fixed rates per meal, would simplify the application process further. However, state agencies use review of sponsors' budgets to assess the administrative capacity of the sponsors. This year, USDA is

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<sup>4</sup>For example, in response to an open-ended question asking for comments about the program, 26 percent of state administrators commented in general terms that paperwork or requirements should be reduced; others suggested simplifying specific rules or procedures.

allowing school sponsors that are part of the 14-state pilot program to drop the budget from their applications.

Some states have adopted other approaches to help new or smaller organizations (particularly nonprofit organizations) feed children during the summer, while reducing their administrative responsibilities. For example, they may encourage these organizations to become sites for school sponsors in their areas (rather than serve as sponsors themselves), or, if local SFAs are not willing to become sponsors, encourage them to use SFAs as vendors.

## **B. PARTICIPATION**

Despite the efforts of USDA, state agencies, and advocates to expand SFSP participation, the program has not grown in recent years. This study sought to understand the factors affecting participation of sponsors and children.

### **1. Key Findings**

- ***All state agencies reported conducting outreach to attract new sponsors, and most sponsors (71 percent) reported making efforts to increase participation.*** Despite these efforts, about 40 percent of state agencies reported having inadequate staff time for outreach. However, state agencies worked closely with partner organizations, particularly nutrition or antihunger advocates, to recruit sponsors. Sponsors also worked extensively with partners.
- ***More state administrators (33 percent) mentioned one-on-one meetings than any other approach as the most successful approach for recruiting new sponsors.*** State administrators believed the complexities of administering the SFSP and sponsors' difficulty covering their costs are major reasons why recruiting is challenging; one-on-one meetings are useful in addressing these issues. Outreach to schools was the second most commonly mentioned successful approach (mentioned by 24 percent of state administrators).
- ***Staff at all levels most frequently cited lack of transportation as a barrier to children's participation.*** About one-third of programs offered transportation to at least some children.
- ***Sponsors generally were not interested in opening more sites, either because they felt their area was well-covered or because they were single-site programs; most site supervisors reported that they had the capacity to serve additional children at their sites.*** It is not possible to determine whether the excess capacity existed because sites were meeting demand, or because inadequate publicity or family barriers prevented some children from attending.

- *New sponsors were more likely than continuing sponsors to be private nonprofit organizations; about half of all new sponsors were school sponsors and one-third were nonprofit organizations.* New sponsors also were smaller than continuing sponsors.<sup>5</sup>
- *Sponsors that left the program were diverse, but they were more likely than continuing sponsors to be small, to be new, and to be private nonprofit sponsors.* Sponsors that left most often cited paperwork and inadequate reimbursements as reasons, with about 45 percent mentioning each reason. Forty percent found that demand was insufficient to sustain the program.

## 2. Issues for the Future

Free or reduced-price participation in the NSLP has been used as a benchmark for what SFSP participation should be. Under the current eligibility rules for the two programs, however, it is not reasonable to expect the SFSP to serve as many children as are served by the free and reduced-price components of the NSLP. In particular, the following differences between the SFSP and the NSLP affect children's participation: (1) the SFSP is available primarily in areas with high concentrations of low-income children, which qualify for open sites, whereas the NSLP is available in schools nationwide; (2) participation in programs associated with the SFSP is voluntary, whereas children generally must attend school and thus are on the site at which the NSLP is offered; and (3) schools must offer transportation to children who do not live within walking distance, whereas only one-third of SFSP sites offer transportation. The Economic Research Service (ERS) is building a Web site based on sponsor and site data collected during this study (described in Section B.3) that may help to determine a more realistic goal for SFSP participation levels by permitting an assessment of the number of children living in areas eligible for open sites.

Nonetheless, the Food and Nutrition Service has expressed its commitment to expanding the SFSP by recruiting more sponsors and sites and by expanding participation at existing sites. Because lack of staff or funding sometimes constrains SFSP outreach, some state administrators suggested awarding grants to states and/or sponsors targeted specifically to outreach activities or funding a national media campaign. These programs could then be evaluated in order to determine which approaches are most promising.

At the same time, the feedback received from state agencies and sponsors during this study suggests that outreach is not enough to recruit more new sponsors. Simplifying administrative rules also may be very important to achieving this goal. The recent initiatives to simplify the SFSP, discussed in Section A, also are intended to increase children's access to summer meals, and evaluations will consider the programs' effects on participation. Meals served in the "Seamless Summer" initiative are counted as NSLP meals, rather than as SFSP meals; thus, effects on the number of meals served by both programs during the summer must be assessed.

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<sup>5</sup>New sponsors are defined as sponsors that operated in 2001 but not in 2000. Some new sponsors may have participated before 2000.

In considering how to improve outreach activities, it is important to determine where to focus on recruiting new sponsors in uncovered areas, and where to focus when seeking to increase participation at sites operated by existing sponsors. Many state agencies already target outreach to school districts that would qualify for open sites, but that do not currently participate. As discussed in Section B.3, the Web site tools that ERS is developing will enable users to link site locations and participation data to census poverty data, thereby identifying areas eligible for open sites that lack sponsors or sites. The Web site also will enable users to assess whether areas served by current sponsors are well covered, and whether sponsors have failed to reach large proportions of children in their areas. This information can serve as feedback to sponsors on the success of their outreach efforts. As a way of removing some of the barriers to participation at current sites, some state administrators suggested providing targeted grants to sponsors, to help the sponsors offer transportation.

Finally, information from this study suggests that new sponsors are at higher risk of leaving the program than are more experienced ones. Thus, even though states already focus much of their training, technical assistance, and monitoring on new sponsors, it may be worthwhile to review these procedures.

### **3. Future Research**

As a follow-up to this study, ERS is developing an interactive Web site, which will allow states, sponsors, and advocacy groups to use geographic information systems (GIS) software and data to analyze SFSP accessibility and coverage. This user-friendly tool will be based in part on the 2001 SFSP Sponsor-Site Database prepared during this study.<sup>6</sup> In this database, addresses for all 2001 SFSP sponsors and sites have been coded with geographic information, such as latitude, longitude, and census tract number. The database will be linked to Census 2000 data on small geographic areas, and to school census data from the Common Core of school data. This information, combined with special GIS software, will allow SFSP sponsor and site addresses to be placed on maps, and to be linked to census data on their surrounding neighborhoods.

The goals for the Web site are to:

- Visually display SFSP sponsors and sites in geographic relation to concentrated areas of child poverty
- Provide information in tabular format to permit methodical examination of results
- Profile SFSP sites by detailing demographic characteristics of the census tract in which they are located

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<sup>6</sup>This database is discussed in detail in Appendix A and was the source for some of the tabulations in Chapter II.

Analysis using these tools could answer such key questions as:

- What proportion of local areas that are qualified to have an SFSP site do not have any sites?
- How many children from low-income families live in areas that are not eligible for SFSP sites?

States, sponsors, and advocacy groups could use this type of information to identify eligible areas and underserved areas. It also might be used to assess the effects of the current area-eligibility cutoff, and the possible implications of changes in the cutoff. If changing the cutoff is not of interest, the information could help to set a realistic target for the number of children that the program potentially could reach.

### C. MEAL SERVICE

SFSP sponsors have a responsibility to provide nutritious meals to low-income children during the summer. Overall, this study's findings suggest that sponsors serve a wide range of foods across sites in meals that, on average, meet current Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) standards for most nutrients. However, there is room for improvement in (1) nonschool sponsors' compliance with meal pattern requirements;<sup>7</sup> (2) meeting nutrition standards for health promotion and disease prevention (for example, by providing lower-saturated-fat and lower-sodium food options); and (3) reducing plate waste. The SFSP faces significant opportunities and challenges in helping sponsors and site staff to address these issues. Possible approaches include additional training, better guidance materials, and incorporation of additional nutrition education into staff training and guidance materials. The SFSP also offers an environment for providing nutrition education messages about healthy eating behaviors to participating children.

#### 1. Key Findings

- *On average, SFSP meals provided at least one-quarter of the RDAs for most key nutrients at breakfast, and at least one-third of the RDAs for energy and key nutrients at lunch and supper.*<sup>8</sup> Breakfasts fell slightly below the standard for energy, providing an average of 21 percent of the RDA.
- *On average, SFSP meals did not meet nutrition standards for the percentage of calories from total fat or from saturated fat, with the exception of total fat at breakfast.* Breakfast and lunch provided 27 percent and 30 percent of calories from

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<sup>7</sup>This study did not assess school sponsors' compliance with menu planning requirements. See Chapter V for further discussion of this issue.

<sup>8</sup>Key nutrients besides energy are vitamin A, vitamin C, iron, and calcium.

total fat, respectively; the standard is no more than 30 percent of calories from total fat. Breakfast provided 11 percent of calories from saturated fat, and lunch provided 12 percent; the standard is less than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat. The average fat content and the average saturated fat content of SFSP meals were similar to those reported for school breakfasts and school lunches in 1998-1999 in the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study II (Fox et al. 2001).

- ***A range of foods was observed across sites in SFSP meals, with a greater variety of menus observed at lunch than at breakfast.*** Breakfast typically consisted of milk, cereal, and 100-percent fruit juice; some breakfasts included a hot main entree, such as scrambled eggs or a breakfast sandwich. A typical SFSP lunch contained milk, a sandwich or mixed dish, a fruit or juice, and a vegetable. Fifty-four percent of lunches provided a cold main entree, 43 percent provided a hot entree, and 3 percent offered both options.
- ***Because nonschool sponsors must follow the SFSP meal pattern, whereas school sponsors may use other meal planning approaches, compliance with the SFSP meal pattern was assessed only for nonschool sponsors. Fifty-five percent of breakfasts and 71 percent of lunches served by nonschool sponsors met all the SFSP meal pattern requirements.*** Breakfasts sometimes did not contain all the components, and sometimes fell short of the required amounts (particularly for the fruit/vegetable component). At lunch, meals that fell short typically served all the components but did not meet the minimum serving size for some of them, particularly the meat/meat alternate component.
- ***Children wasted an average of about one-third of the calories and nutrients they were served.*** This amount varied across sites and by foods. About 11 percent of meals were eaten completely, with no plate waste. At more than two-thirds (68 percent) of the sites, site staff reported that the children's dislike of the food was the most common reason for waste. About 44 percent of sites provided a "share box" to encourage children to share unwanted food, and to reduce food waste.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Issues for the Future

The findings on the nutrient content of SFSP meals suggest meal pattern and menu planning issues for consideration. The findings on meal service may be useful in developing topics that sponsors might emphasize during training of site staff who prepare or handle meals, or that could be incorporated into menu planning materials for sponsors. These findings also suggest that nutrition education for sponsors' staff, site staff, and SFSP participants may be a useful strategy for improving menu planning, promoting healthy eating behaviors, and reducing plate waste.

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<sup>9</sup>Plate waste estimates do not include leftover meals that were not served or items left in the share box at the end of the meal service.



### **a. Meal Patterns and Menu Planning**

As noted, some meals served by nonschool sponsors did not meet meal pattern requirements, usually because the serving size of a component (most often, the meat or meat alternate component at lunch and the fruit/vegetable component at breakfast) fell short by a modest amount. Training site food-handling staff about the required serving sizes (particularly at self-preparation sites), and having sponsors work with vendors to ensure that the required serving sizes are served may improve this area. In some cases, meals did not meet the meal pattern requirements because commercial packaging of some foods dictated the serving size. For example, some brands of single-serve boxes of ready-to-eat cereals and juices were smaller than the required serving sizes. Additional guidelines and training could assist sponsors in purchasing and preparing foods to meet the minimum portion sizes in the context of such factors as commercial packaging.

On average, SFSP meals met standards for key nutrients but exceeded recommended levels of sodium, fat, and saturated fat. In the future, the SFSP will be challenged to continue to provide meals offering adequate energy and nutrients while striving to meet dietary guidelines for saturated fat, total fat, and sodium. The foods analysis and nutrient distributions may be useful to the program's future need to consider Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) while reviewing meal pattern requirements and while helping sponsors plan menus (Institute of Medicine 2000a).

Overweight and poor dietary habits among American children are issues of increasing policy concern (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000; and Food and Nutrition Service 2002g). To address these concerns and meet nutritional goals, SFSP sponsors and sites must take steps to (1) ensure that SFSP meals contain a variety of nutrient-dense foods, such as fruits, vegetables, whole-grain breads and cereals, and low-fat dairy products and meats; and (2) reduce the total fat, saturated fat, and sodium content of the meals. Additional nutrition education for sponsors and site staff may help them to plan menus that achieve these goals.

Although it was not possible to directly assess food variety within sites, the site supervisors' reports of children's least favorite foods and most favorite foods suggest that providing a variety of foods to children is important. Some site supervisors reported that they had little opportunity to request or change foods served at their sites, and little communication with sponsors about which foods would be served. Sponsors could be encouraged to develop a mechanism to obtain feedback and input from site staff (and from participating children) about children's foods preferences. A dialogue of this type could lead sponsors to serve meals that are more appealing to children, thereby reducing plate waste.

### **b. Meal Presentation**

The way that meals are served may influence children's food consumption. Observation showed that site staff used a variety of creative methods to serve meals, and to engage children in the meal service. For example, site staff took prepackaged bag meals apart to increase their appeal, gave children a choice of fresh fruits, encouraged children to take a second fruit or milk from the "share box," asked children to help distribute bag lunches or set the table, and served

meals “family style.” Children also need ample time to eat and finish meals, as suggested in one interviewer’s note: “The bus was leaving before the children finished lunch. More than one child was still eating as they raced to garbage cans and the bus.”

Because school meals and SFSP meals have similar requirements for nutrient content, materials from USDA’s School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children (SMI) may be applicable to the needs of the SFSP. The SMI provides schools with educational materials and technical assistance to assist food service personnel in preparing healthy, appealing meals for children (Food and Nutrition Service 2002g). Both SMI resources and SFSP Best Practices, promoted on the FNS Web site, may help state agencies train sponsors, and help sponsors train site staff, about ways to improve meal service and make healthy foods more appealing to children.

### **c. Reducing Plate Waste**

Efforts to reduce plate waste must take into consideration children’s food preferences while ensuring that the variety of appealing foods served meets nutrition standards. Improving meal planning and presentation, as discussed in the preceding sections, may help to achieve this goal. Another strategy that may be worthy of further study is offering more options at the meals (for example, choices of different types of milk, of fruits or vegetables, and of entrees); in some cases, however, offering more choices may be infeasible because of such factors as cost or storage constraints. Other strategies, such as nutrition education for children and increased use of share boxes, may also help.

Calcium is an important nutrient for growing children, as indicated by its inclusion in the U.S. Dietary Guidelines and as a key nutrient cited in school meal regulations. This study found that mean calcium levels in SFSP meals served were roughly equal to recommended standards for older children. On average, however, 38 percent of milk served at breakfast and 30 percent of milk served at lunch was wasted. This level of milk waste suggests that the mean amount of calcium from SFSP meals actually consumed may be below recommended levels. Some children may waste milk because they prefer white milk but are served only chocolate milk, or vice versa. Some children may waste milk because they are lactose intolerant or because of cultural preference, and some may choose another beverage (for example, fruit juice or a drink from another source) rather than drinking the milk served as a beverage, if these choices are available. However, not all sites offered a choice among types and flavors of milk. Providing a choice of low-fat white and chocolate milks and serving other foods containing calcium, such as calcium-fortified orange juice, low-fat yogurt, and low-fat cheese, are possible strategies to reduce milk waste and meet calcium recommendations.

Increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables is an important strategy in improving the nutritional quality of children’s diets. The composition of SFSP lunches in 2001 reflects an increased focus on meeting the fruit/vegetable component requirement by serving both fruits and vegetables—most SFSP lunches in 2001 included both fruits and vegetables, whereas most sites in 1986 served two fruits (Ohls et al. 1988). However, children wasted about half the vegetables and 40 percent of the fruits served at lunch, suggesting the importance of strategies to reduce fruit and vegetable waste. One site supervisor stated, “The kids were so small that it was hard to bite on a hard apple and a hard peach.” Preparing fruit differently for smaller children (for

example, paring and slicing the fruit) and purchasing ripe fruit are two strategies that may reduce this waste. Serving low-fat dressings or dips may encourage children to eat raw vegetables. Involving children in meal preparation more often may also encourage them to eat healthy foods.

Fewer than half the sites were observed to have share boxes to encourage children to share unwanted food. This finding suggests that more sponsors should be encouraged to provide their sites with share boxes, and to train site staff in the appropriate use of the share box. However, sponsors must offer share boxes in accordance with local health code requirements, which may require disposal of unclaimed share box items at the end of the meal.

### **3. Future Research**

The SFSP study provides a rich database for additional research on the content of SFSP meals and on factors that affect the extent of plate waste in the program. The study also points to other areas of research that were not feasible given the sample sizes of the subgroups, and to areas that the site observations did not cover in depth. For example, future research might explore the content of training offered to site staff in more detail and the relationship between sponsor and site staff training in nutrition, use of a share box, and plate waste. A more in-depth study of school-sponsored sites that did and did not use OVS might provide more insight into the effects of this approach on nutrients consumed and on the extent of plate waste.

Additional research could be conducted with the SFSP data to identify the major food sources of nutrients at breakfast, lunch, and supper. This research could suggest foods to serve in SFSP meals to meet nutrition standards that were not met in meals observed for this study. Additional food and nutrient analysis combined with analysis of children's food preferences and plate waste could help to explain the factors that affect plate waste. Related factors that were not included in this study, but that a focused study could address, are the effects on plate waste of whether competing foods and beverages are available on site, the time available for children to eat, and the time between serving snacks and serving meals.

