



Feeding Low-Income Children When School Is Out: The Summer Food Service Program

Food Assistance Research Brief

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Issue: How well are the millions of children who receive free or reduced-price lunches on a typical school day through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) served during the summer? The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), the major Federal resource available to provide children from low-income families with nutritious meals when school is not in session, served 2.1 million children in 2001, compared with the 15.5 million children who received NSLP meals in 2001. Growing interest in improving SFSP operations and expanding participation led the U.S. Department of Agriculture to commission the first comprehensive examination of the program since 1986. This issues brief reports findings from the study.

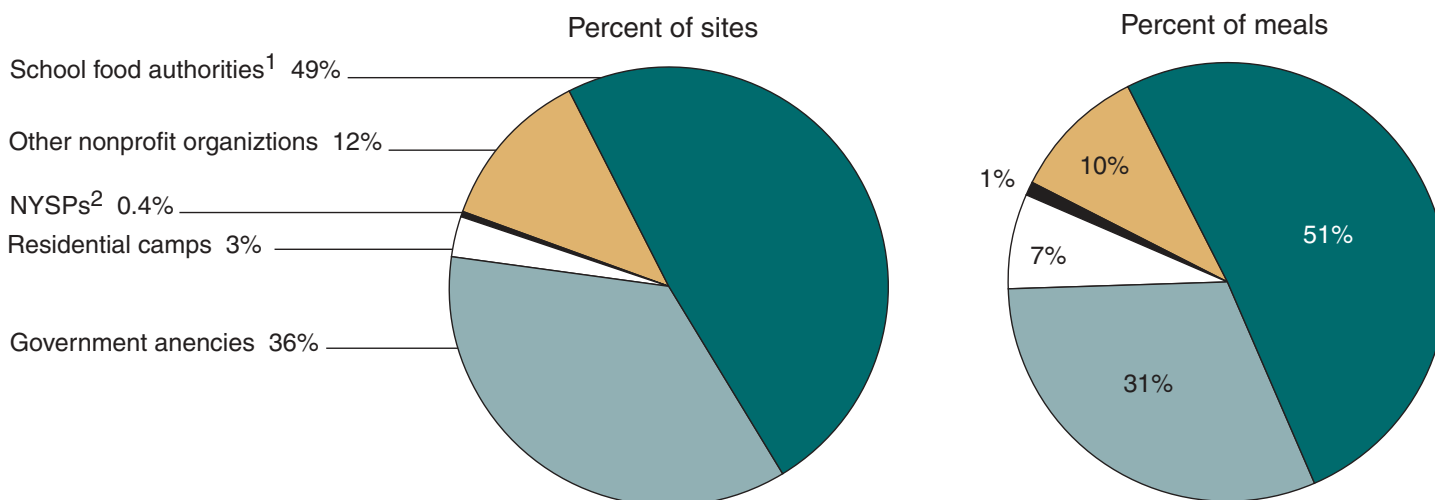
Background: USDA provides Federal funds to States to operate the SFSP and States distribute the funds to local sponsors. Sponsors include public and private schools,

local government agencies, residential summer camps, and other private nonprofit organizations. Most SFSP sites are in low-income neighborhoods and are open to all children.

Findings: In the summer of 2001, more than 4,000 local agencies provided SFSP meals at more than 35,000 feeding sites. Nearly all sites also offered other activities. On average, SFSP sites were open for slightly longer than 7 weeks. Almost all sites were open for at least 5 days per week.

SFSP sponsors are extremely diverse in the nature of their organizations, the size of their programs, and the way they prepare and serve meals. School food authorities comprised roughly half of all sponsors in 2001. They also ran half of all sites and served half of all meals (fig. 1). Half of all sponsors ran only one site, together serving 11 per-

Figure 1. School sponsors ran half of all SFSP sites and served half of all meals



¹School food authorities are the governing bodies of schools or school districts that operate the NSLP.

²National Youth Sports Programs are federally funded sports camps for low-income children run by colleges of universities.

Source: Gordon et al., 2002.

cent of all meals. By contrast, 1 percent of sponsors operated more than 100 sites, but these sponsors served 35 percent of all meals. Most sponsors (63 percent) prepared meals themselves, most frequently at the serving site. Nearly half of all sites served breakfast in addition to lunch.

On average, SFSP meals provided at least one-quarter of the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) for key nutrients at breakfast. Breakfasts fell slightly below the standard for energy, and exceeded the guidelines for saturated fat. SFSP lunches provided at least one-third of the RDA for energy and other key nutrients but exceeded the guidelines for total fat and saturated fat. Children wasted an average of about one-third of the calories and nutrients they were served at both breakfast and lunch.

Almost all State agencies worked with outside organizations on outreach for the program. More than half of all sponsors reported they were not interested in expanding the number of sites or the duration of their operations, at the same time that site supervisors typically reported that they had the capacity to serve additional children. Site supervisors cited a range of barriers that might explain why children do not attend, with lack of transportation and publicity about the program topping the list.

Summary: The study findings suggest two key SFSP challenges—(1) how to simplify the required paperwork and the reimbursement structure without compromising program quality and integrity; and (2) where to target SFSP expansion efforts.

Program regulations require careful documentation for sponsor applications and claims, and extensive monitoring of site operations by State agencies and sponsors. However, many State and sponsor staff perceived the detailed program rules and complex reimbursement procedures as burdensome, and some believed that they could discourage program growth. In 2001, USDA began experi-

menting with several approaches to simplifying the reimbursement process. A 14-State pilot project—targeted to States with low SFSP participation rates—allows sponsors to combine administrative and operating costs and to be reimbursed at a fixed reimbursement rate per meal, with less paperwork. A second initiative, the “Seamless Summer” waiver, allows schools to run community-based summer feeding programs under the NSLP and to receive the NSLP free rate (slightly lower than the SFSP rate) for all meals served. Without the waiver, schools have to follow SFSP rules if they serve children during the summer in community-based programs.

In an effort to target potential SFSP expansion efforts, USDA has developed an interactive website, which combines data on 2001 sponsors and sites, Census 2000 data on small geographic areas, and school census data. Using geographic information software, State and local users can produce maps to identify unmet needs and potential new site locations. The map is available at: www.ers.usda.gov/data/SFSP.

The website visually displays SFSP sponsors and sites in geographic relation to concentrated areas of child poverty and provides data in tabular form to permit methodical examination of results.

The website allows users to infer at a glance whether program sites are located in the areas of highest need, and whether some qualified areas have been overlooked. It also allows for in-depth analysis of program coverage using the underlying data from the three databases.

Information Source:

Gordon, Anne, Ronette Briefel, Karen Needels, Nancy Wemmerus, Teresa Zavitsky, Randy Rosso, Tania Tasse, Laura Kalb, Anne Peterson, and Darryl Creel. *Feeding Low-Income Children When School Is Out: The Summer Food Service Program: Final Report*. E-FAN-03-001. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2003. Available at: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan03001>.

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