

Issue At A Glance:

Summer Food Insecurity Among US Children

This brief examines the rise in food insecurity among school-aged children during the summer months that results in health and educational consequences, current programs aimed at closing the summer nutrition gap, and barriers to accessing these programs.

Introduction

Food insecurity is defined as limited or uncertain access to adequate food due to economic or social conditions.¹ In the US, a significant proportion of children and their families face the challenge of meeting their nutritional needs. In fact, in 2023, 17.9% of U.S. households with children were food insecure.²

For many low-income families with school-aged children, the summer months present a particular challenge. When school ends for the summer, many children lose access to the free or reduced-price meals provided through programs such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).³

These seasonal gaps are associated with poorer diet quality, including reduced intake of fruits, vegetables, and dairy, and increased consumption of sugary drinks.⁴ This shift contributes to higher risks of obesity and chronic disease.⁵ In addition to physical health effects, summer food insecurity is linked to anxiety, behavioral issues, and the "summer slide" in academic performance, especially among lower-income students.⁶

Timeline of U.S. Summer Nutrition Policies

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| 1946 | National School Lunch Act (NSLA) |
| 1968 | Amendment to the NSLA to pilot the Special Food Service Program for Children |
| 1975 | Establishment of the Summer Food Service Program |
| 2010 | Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act |
| 2011 | Establishment of the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer Program |
| 2024 | Launch of the Summer Nutrition (SUN) Programs |

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Existing Summer Meal Programs

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) are federally funded initiatives designed to provide free meals to children during school breaks. SFSP is available to community organizations serving children in low-income areas, while SSO allows schools already participating in school-year meal programs to continue service through the summer using existing infrastructure.⁷ Together, they help bridge the nutrition gap for millions of children when school is not in session.

To complement meal site programs, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched the permanent Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (Summer EBT) program in 2024. Also known as SUN Bucks, this initiative provides eligible families with \$120 per child in grocery benefits to help cover food costs during the summer months. The program aims to further reduce food insecurity among children, particularly in areas where summer meal sites are unavailable.⁸

In addition, new strategies are being tested to reach more children, including mobile meal programs that deliver food directly to neighborhoods and community-based distribution at locations such as libraries, churches, and housing complexes. These models help reduce transportation barriers and provide more flexible access to nutritious meals outside of traditional summer camps or school-based sites.⁹ During the COVID-19 pandemic, waivers temporarily allowed grab-and-go meals, bulk distribution, and parent pickup without the child present. While these flexibilities are being phased out, they revealed strong parent preferences for more convenient and accessible meal options.¹⁰

Finding Local Summer Meal Sites

Families in Loma Linda and places throughout San Bernardino County can locate free summer meal sites using online tools provided by the state and federal government. The California Department of Education maintains a searchable list of 2025 summer meal sites by county, which is available [here](#). The USDA also offers the SUN Meals Site Finder, where parents can search by address to find nearby locations, operating hours, and contact information.

2025 Summer Meals Site Finder



Barriers to Access

Despite the existence of federally funded programs such as SFSP and SSO, participation remains low. Several persistent barriers limit access for the families most in need.

Geographic and Transportation Barriers

Families living in rural or suburban areas often face structural obstacles to accessing summer meal sites. A study in California found that while nearly all urban schools had a summer meal site within 10 miles, only 68.1% of rural schools had one within that distance.¹¹

Transportation limitations, such as lack of access to a vehicle, the high cost of fuel, or work schedules that prevent parents from driving children, further exacerbate this issue.⁶ In some cases, even families with vehicles may find that the cost for gas or time needed for driving makes daily meal pickup unsustainable.¹²

Additionally, eligibility rules requiring that sites be located in areas where at least 50% of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals limit geographic flexibility.⁶ This creates access gaps in economically mixed communities, where children in need may not live in designated areas but still lack adequate nutrition during summer months.⁹

Lack of Awareness

Limited awareness remains one of the most cited reasons for non-participation. Surveys of food-insecure families have found that nearly

half did not know summer meals were available in their area.¹² Others were unaware that these meals are free and open to all children, regardless of income. Additionally, a lack of clear, accessible information about program logistics, such as site locations, hours, and meal types, can deter families from participating even when they are aware the program exists.¹⁰

Administrative Burdens

Administrative hurdles affect both program operators and participating families. Sponsors report excessive paperwork, staffing shortages, and logistical complexity as primary challenges. Non-school organizations, in particular, may struggle with menu planning, compliance, and working with state agencies, since these tasks aren't typically part of their operations during the year like they are for schools.⁶ Sponsors must currently apply for and operate two separate programs, during the summer and school year, despite often serving the same children, creating duplicative paperwork.¹³ For families, while most SFSP sites are "open," meaning no enrollment is required, "closed" sites still demand eligibility verification, which can discourage participation, especially among families concerned about documentation or stigma.⁶ Even without formal paperwork, logistical demands, such as long wait times and limited hours, pose a significant barrier.¹⁰

Conclusion

Summer nutrition programs like the SFSP and SSO are essential in safeguarding the health and well-being of children during school breaks. Yet, persistent barriers continue to limit participation, especially for the most vulnerable families. To make meaningful progress, efforts must focus on both increasing resources and expanding community-based access.

First, increased and sustained funding is critical to help sponsoring organizations address staffing shortages, extend service hours, and implement flexible models such as mobile meal delivery and multi-day pick-up.^{10,11,13} Second, partnerships with local governments, nonprofit organizations, libraries, and faith-based groups can help expand program availability beyond traditional school campuses and into neighborhoods where transportation barriers are most acute. These collaborations also provide opportunities to pair summer meals with other child-focused programming, such as literacy events, recreational activities, or wellness education, hopefully increasing both participation and community impact.⁹ With the right support, summer nutrition programs can reach more children and become a cornerstone of health equity during out-of-school months.

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Did you know?

Only about **15%** of eligible children receive food through the summer meal programs.¹³



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