

Help Them Eat at Home

*Why the Federal Summer Meals Program for Kids has
Chronically Low Participation and
What Can Be Done about It*

A report for policymakers, anti-hunger advocates and
administrators of the Summer Food Service Program

April 2014



The San Diego Hunger Coalition is a nonprofit organization that works on state and federal legislation and participates in numerous local coalitions aimed at developing effective solutions to hunger, including lifting people out of poverty, improving access to SNAP/CalFresh, improving school meal programs and developing a sustainable food system that can provide nutritious food to everyone. Our vision is of a day when no San Diegan goes hungry; it is our mission to see the most fundamental need of food fulfilled. By educating and advocating about this issue on the local, state and national level, we can help defeat unnecessary suffering.

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Dear colleagues:

We are pleased to share the enclosed report titled *Help Them Eat at Home: Why the Federal Summer Meals Program for Kids has Chronically Low Participation and What Can Be Done about It*. The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) has been designed to fill a very important community need—food access for low-income children when school is out—but has historically struggled with low participation. This report explains the persistent summer meals gap and explains how it can be closed. It represents the findings of an evaluation undertaken by the San Diego Hunger Coalition with funding from The California Endowment, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger and private donations.

The information presented in this report is intended to assist policymakers, anti-hunger advocates and administrators of the Summer Food Service Program to create a more nuanced understanding of the program's challenges and the ways it can better meet the needs of low-income families. It does this by analyzing interviews with San Diego parents with children participating in summer meals programs, data from the California Department of Education and San Diego school districts, the findings of national research from Share Our Strength and evaluations of USDA demonstration projects. The main goal of our report is to explain why one project—the Summer EBT option—was so dramatically effective at increasing participation.

The Summer EBT option, tested by the USDA in two Native American nations and eight states across the country, allowed parents to meet the food needs of their children in a way that was convenient and effective. Instead of requiring parents to find their way to a site each day for a meal, it gave parents an EBT card with some of the funds that would have been spent on food that their children would have received at a summer meals site. This approach reduced food insecurity among children—and parents could (and did) purchase more produce. This demonstrates that for communities with barriers to the traditional summer meals program, the Summer EBT option is a vital strategy to effectively reduce hunger for children when school is out.

In response to a devastating drought, the USDA recently announced it will be expanding 600 summer meal sites in California's Central Valley, which has many scattered farming communities. The Summer EBT option should be prioritized and rapidly rolled out in this high-need rural area that has many obstacles to children accessing meal sites. Lessons learned through a summer EBT initiative in the Central Valley could be quickly transferred to expanding the summer safety net to other places, like San Diego County, where transportation and other barriers limit food access for many families.

We strongly urge policymakers, administrators and anti-hunger advocates to begin expanding Summer EBT options. Ending child hunger is within our grasp. Summer EBT is an important piece of the solution.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jennifer Tracy".

Jennifer Tracy
Executive Director

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Executive Summary

Federal school nutrition programs have done much to stabilize the diets of low-income American children during the school day by providing free or low-cost breakfasts, lunches and snacks. These programs are a critical resource for many children. In the 1970s, Congress created the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) to extend this food assistance to the times when school is not in session. Any child may go to sites throughout the community and receive free meals on summer weekdays without questions or paperwork. Despite sustained effort to increase participation over the last several decades, this program continues to reach only a fraction of the children reached by the school food programs it is intended to supplement.

Researchers have identified a host of barriers to participation, and federally funded pilot and demonstration projects have experimented with different ways of addressing them. The problems identified include: unfamiliarity with sites or even the existence of the program, limited numbers of sites (especially in rural areas), the inability to get to sites, a lack of activities for the children at the sites, limited hours for meal service, a lack of interest and so forth. Efforts to address these problems have included advertising, incentives for community groups to increase the number of sites or to stay open longer, transportation assistance, backpack programs with food for the weekend, etc. These efforts to increase participation in the SFSP can be categorized as *promotional strategies* to increase awareness of summer meals and modest program *restructuring* to knock down individual barriers.

This report argues that these efforts to increase participation have failed to make several key distinctions that have significant implications for the program's ability to reach more children. *Strong sites*, like schools and camps, already have half- or full-day programming, and the SFSP funds their meals in a fashion quite similar to free school meals. *Weak sites* are centered on the summer meals program, sometimes with activities of limited duration to encourage participation. This is a distinction about how families relate to the sites: strong sites that take care of children for many hours during the workday particularly appeal to working parents. Weak sites largely require a stay-at-home parent to escort the children. Participants at weak sites can be divided into *daily participants*, who tend to have fewer resources, and *occasional participants*, who cannot consistently fit the program into their schedule (e.g., the cost of gas or bus fare undercuts the value of the meal unless the family was going the same direction for another reason). Most campaigns to improve sites tacitly focus on encouraging households to become daily participants at weak sites. While there is potential for new weak sites to have solid participation, most likely in high-density, walkable residential areas with many stay-at-home parents, weak sites are not a realistic strategy for closing the summer meal gap, as is implicitly advocated in most efforts to improve participation.

Weak sites have numerous structural problems. They expect parents to take their children to a site to watch them eat without eating themselves. The rule limiting sites to areas of concentrated poverty mean that there are no sites near many of the kids receiving free or reduced-price meals during the

Key Concepts

Strong sites have ongoing programming for much of the traditional work/school day, and the USDA funds meals in a fashion similar to how it handles school meals.

Weak sites first and foremost serve meals to kids. Strong sites allow parents to leave their kids and go to work. Weak sites do not have the infrastructure to take care of children in the same way. Weak sites have numerous structural problems.

Daily participants at weak sites often have limited resources. They often walked to weak sites. The mothers typically had three or more children, sometimes with neighbor kids in tow, and strongly identified with the role of being a full-time parent.

Occasional participants used weak sites one to three times a week when it could be fit into their schedule, often meaning that families went to sites when they already planned to be out, thus lowering the impact of time and gas cost constraints. Frequently, the family only had one younger child.

Most efforts to promote the program tacitly encourage families to become daily participants at weak sites.

school year. It's impractical to bring kids to a site once for breakfast and then again for lunch. Transportation poses a number of barriers, such as the cost of gas making the program inefficient for small families and the nationwide decline of children walking alone. A significant number of strong sites that are in theory open to the wider community face substantial barriers to being welcoming to kids not already in their day programming.

Using as evidence the experience of San Diego, California as well as the findings of Share Our Strength and the USDA, we argue that specific barriers to participation at weak sites should not be seen as individual issues that can be fixed in isolation. The individual barriers should be seen as pointing to a deeper issue, namely that weak sites, while working to meet a real need that must be addressed, are based on a charity model of food distribution, which requires families to deviate substantially from norms of food preparation and eating in order to participate. The sociologist Janet Poppendieck has identified problems with charity food distribution, including inconvenience, insufficiency and impracticality.

Together, these discourage participation at weak sites. The strength of the regular school meal program is that it provides one or two meals to children every day while they're already at school. It's logical. It's convenient. In contrast, weak sites of the SFSP program demand much more of families. They must:

- Have ready access to a nearby site (or if not, transportation).
- Have an adult available to escort the children to a site who is willing to watch someone else eat a meal without eating themselves.
- At a time of someone else's choosing.
- Up to twice a day.
- Without anyone being too sick to leave the house or being contagious.
- Without the weather being unbearably hot or stormy.
- Without any concerns about food allergies or sensitivities.
- Without any concern whether the children like the food or are picky eaters (but assuming that the children want to go).

- For every summer weekday that school is not in session.
- For potentially twelve years.

This is asking too much of families, and seen in this light, the low participation numbers make sense. Promoting weak sites, however, is not the only way of reaching more children.

One federal demonstration program had substantially greater reach than other efforts. It simply put money on EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer) cards for the summer and allowed households to purchase food for children to be eaten at home. This addressed virtually every barrier to participation in the program ever studied. Further, compared to the control group, those who received the summer EBT cards ate modestly more servings per day of fruits, vegetables and whole grains and drank fewer servings of sugar-sweetened beverages. **The summer EBT is a far more promising long-term solution to expanding the reach of the summer meals program and improving food security among low-income families and should be supported to the greatest extent feasible.**

In the meantime, however, local advocates for summer meals have opportunities to increase the number of children helped by the current program. They could form new alliances with other advocates for children’s welfare to help promote the creation of additional strong sites and to increase the capacity of existing ones. (The programming at these sites, in many cases, suffered cuts during the Great Recession, especially school summer session, and should be restored.) To cut through the white noise of modern information overload that makes it difficult to hear messages about the availability of weak sites, advocates could work to make their promotional efforts follow a word-of-mouth model from parent to parent. They could also more aggressively frame the program as an extension of school. The quality of sites and could be improved when and where resources are available.

Recommendations

Congress should expand the Summer EBT for Children (SEBTC) nationwide as soon as practical. For the last two years, the federal government has had a demonstration project that puts money on an electronic benefits transfer card for children who receive free or reduced-price meals during the school year to help pay for their lunches and breakfasts while school is out during the summer. The results show that this is a powerful tool for combating summer food insecurity. This should be continued and expanded: it has the potential to reach vast numbers of low-income children not currently served by the program.

School districts, local nonprofits and summer meals advocates should expand the number of strong sites in each community. School districts and nonprofits that have the capacity to create longer programming for kids can improve the food security of local children. Local and state advocates should help them by building wider alliances to expand and create half-day and day-long programming that includes free meals.

School districts should continue to reinvest in summer session. Summer session of school represents one of the best places for kids of limited means during the summer. School districts were forced to retrench on summer session during the Great Recession but are now seeing improved budget pictures, particularly in California with the Local Control Funding Formula. Rebuilding the summer enrichment portion of the school experience could benefit many students.

Summer meal sites and sponsors as well as advocates should, when talking to families, frame the program as a continuation of school and not as a separate program. The program's congregate meals are outside of most families' experiences—except at school. Promoters of the program could take advantage of the program's connection to the school year to make the program feel like an extension of the familiar.

Summer meal sites and sponsors as well as advocates should encourage the spreading of information about the program through word-of-mouth. Parents at weak sites usually give site-specific explanations about how they found out about the program, like seeing a sign when they were visiting a site for another reason or someone from a site literally walking up to them and telling them about it. Impersonal campaigns to educate families about the program appear to be of limited effectiveness, at least as currently done. Parent-to-parent and teacher-to-parent contact could increase the 'hand selling' of the program without requiring an inordinate amount of additional resources.

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Acknowledgments

While the actual text of this report was primarily the work of one person (Parke Troutman), many people were involved in its creation and we would like to thank them. Numerous site operators and families good-naturedly responded to our questions. Almost every school district in San Diego County that had summer session in 2012 or 2013 gave us some information on their enrollments and program. Sponsors provided quantitative data. San Diego County Summer Meals Task Force partners, especially the San Diego Unified School District, did all of the above, from tolerating our presence to providing a spreadsheet of daily meal counts for all their sites, which allowed us to see on a mass scale some of the rhythms of the program. The California Department of Education likewise gave us key data. Share Our Strength (SOS) also led us to more data that allowed us to do a much more fine-grained interpretation of their research than the crosstabs posted on their website allowed.

California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA), a long-time advocate for and monitor of the summer meals program, was a sounding board throughout this project. They helped us provided feedback on a draft version of the report and helped us find state data.

Likewise, Sue Carter Kahl and several other reviewers provided feedback on issues large and small.

Several interns worked on this report. Loveleen Sandhu did an initial analysis of sites for the years 2011 and 2012 and participated in several site visits during the first exploratory summer of research.

Desirae Stephens did many of the interviews with families, both at sites and in the community, considerably expanding the reach of our qualitative research. She has a knack for getting strangers to open up. She also played the bulldog on getting information from distracted sponsors, particularly school districts where everyone, it seemed, was taking their summer vacations.

Cheyenne Concepcion originally came onboard to do another project for the hunger coalition but ended up doing our summer meals GIS mapping (and had no idea what she was getting herself into). She gracefully bore the brunt of our frustrations with poor data. She worked on far more maps than made it into the report. One of her more interesting maps that could not make it here didn't have data challenges but was simply too dynamic to include, what we called 'the living clock' map: an animated map that showed when sites were open over the summer as a video clip.

In 2012, the San Diego County Summer Meals Task Force began to consider evaluating its efforts, leading ultimately to this report. The task force, whose membership has shifted over time, has included San Diego Unified School District, the Network for a Healthy California, 2-1-1 San Diego, Feeding America San Diego, the San Diego Hunger Coalition, the Jacobs and Cushman San Diego Food Bank, the Community Health Improvement Partners among others, including a number of sponsor organizations.

Funding was provided by the California Endowment (TCE), MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger and private donations. The recommendations of the report, however, should not be construed as those of any specific funder.

More broadly, because this report attempts to reconceptualize the low participation that has dogged the summer meals program for decades, it offers a novel interpretation of the program and represents the views of the San Diego Hunger Coalition and not necessarily the views of the many people who helped us write it.

When asked why kids might not come [to the site], she [the grandmother] implied that it took patience because it took the kids an hour to eat. When prompted if it took them that long to eat at home, she said no because the amount of food they got at the church for lunch was as much as they had to eat for the entire day at home.

Field notes from 2012

Introduction

Hunger makes a mockery of the ideals upon which this nation was founded. Talk of freedom and liberty mean little to people unable to feed themselves. This is particularly a travesty when hunger stalks children, whose vulnerability belies any rationalization. It is ironic, then, that hunger among children is often more severe than for the population at large. Reworking Feeding America's 2011 (most recent) data of the approximately 459,000 food insecure persons in San Diego County shows that the food insecurity rate for adults in the region is 12.7 percent but 22.5 percent for children.¹

The federal government, in the pragmatic bipartisan atmosphere following the Second World War, set in place a system of programs to combat child hunger and malnutrition. The backbone—and in many ways the most successful—program is the National School Lunch program (NSLP), which was signed into law in 1946. Since then additional programs have worked to eliminate child hunger throughout the day (the National School Breakfast program for mornings, an afternoon snack component to the National School Lunch program) and throughout the times when school is not in session with the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP).

Of all of these programs, the Summer Food Service Program deserves special attention because of two unusual qualities. The first is its structure. All of these programs are *congregate* meal programs, meaning the children eat together at a site away from home. For many of the children who participate in the summer meals program, this makes sense because they are already on the premises of the site, often a school during its summer session. These children and their parents have likely never heard of the SFSP. All they know is that the meals accompany the programming, just as they would be during the school year. The summer meals program, however, is not just a funding mechanism for places like summer school and camps. It also serves other sites in the community such as parks or libraries. Any child (eighteen or under) can show up at a site and receive a free meal—no questions asked, no proof of income required. They must, however, eat the meal on-site. Having kids come to a site specifically to eat is unusual: it is a congregate meal program when the kids don't have a reason to congregate. This is in sharp contrast to most other government food assistance programs for the general populace in which people are given either food or money for it and allowed to cook for themselves in the privacy of their own homes.

If the particular structure is the first unusual quality of the program, the second is that the program has poor participation. While there are regional pockets of low participation in other programs, like low-income Californians' use of CalFresh (SNAP/food stamps), government food assistance programs are generally successful insofar as they are funded. The summer meals program is different. It doesn't reach most of the children it is intended to help. The audience is children eligible for free and reduced price

meals (FRPM) during the school year—when those kids are home for the summer (or on other breaks from school). According to calculations from the annual *School's Out... Who Ate?*, produced by California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA), in 2012, 83 percent of California's 2.5 million FRPM school children were not served by the program, which is slightly better than the 85.7 percent of kids nationwide reported by the Food Research Action Council (FRAC).² This is significant and potentially understates the scope of the problem.*

Nationwide, participation in the summer meals program has been growing since its 1982 trough.³ If the rate is measured in terms of peak July participation, this is a growth rate of approximately 1.8 percent through 2012. From 1980 to 2010, the population of children under eighteen in the United States grew at a rate of 0.54 percent. If those rates continue into the future, the summer meals program will feed the FRPM student population by the year 2197 (with half of the growth after 2150).[†]

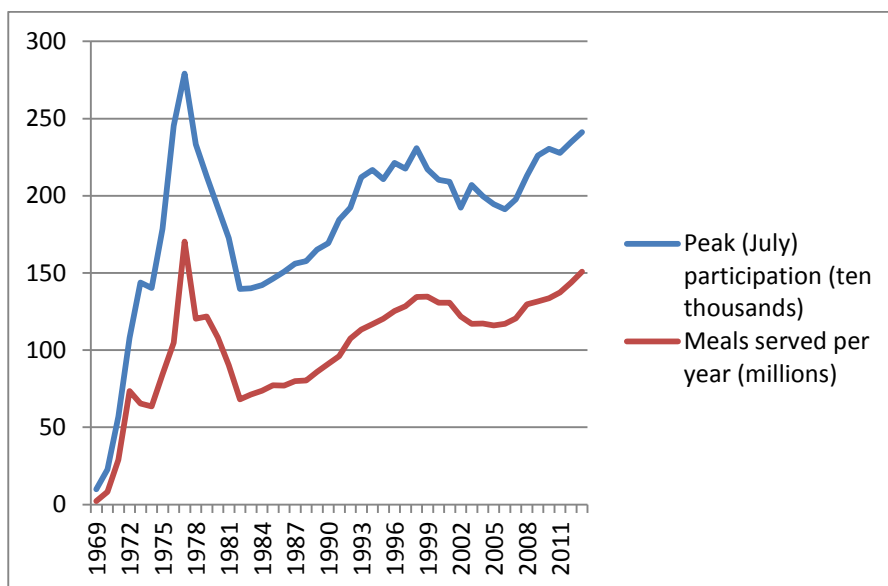


Figure 1 Summer Meals Participation, 1969–2013 (FNS data)⁴

The program began as a three-year pilot program in 1968.⁵ In 1975 it was split into separate childcare and summer meals legislation. Since then, the summer meals program has led a seesaw existence, as energy devoted to the program alternates between efforts to make the rules stricter out of a fear that the program is being abused and attempts to increase the low enrollments. Although it has been modified since, the last major piece of the program fell into place in the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 when the Seamless Summer Feeding Option became a permanent part of the law. Its current cost is a little less than \$400 million annually, which is roughly two percent a year of total federal reimbursements for school meals.

* It's been observed, both in national discussions of the program and locally in San Diego, that participation is lower at the end of summer. This is difficult to document precisely as kids go back to school on different days. July figures are used because that's the one month that almost all kids can be expected to be out of school.

† For the calculations of this paragraph, 1982 is used as the base year because peak attendance was plummeting in 1980 and 1981, which give calculations a misleading low growth rate for the program as the conditions of the first two years of that decade no longer apply.

The basic structure of the program is that USDA sets the rules and provides money, but the administration is largely left to the states, which interact with *sponsors*, who do the paperwork and oversee *sites* where the food is actually eaten. Sponsors can be government agencies, schools, religious organizations or nonprofits and can have multiple sites, including ones that they themselves run. The sponsor in San Diego County with the most sites is the San Diego Unified School District. San Diego Unified also acts as a *vendor*—that is, it provides foods to sites that don't cook it themselves.

Families can only get free summer meals if they know where there are sites they can visit. Advertising sites is not only done by individual sites and sponsors. Coalitions aiming to raise awareness of the availability of free meals can emerge outside the formal program. The approach of the San Diego County Summer Meals Task Force is typical. Schools and nonprofits aligned with the task force have used robo-calls and fliers sent home from school, radio ads, mention in elected officials' newsletters, op-eds, a 2-1-1 website, a workshop encouraging organizations to become sites and sponsors, among other tools to generate awareness and enthusiasm for the program.

Efforts to increase participation in the program have largely taken the path of increasing the number of weak sites and awareness of them. The argument here is that this approach, while it has its uses, cannot reach a substantial number of kids. To explain why requires explaining the limitation of the current model. This is not to diminish the accomplishments of the program as it exists—it *is* feeding kids—nor is such criticism pessimistic. We have a way forward: the USDA has recently conducted a highly successful demonstration project along the lines of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Measured expansion of this demonstration can rapidly close the summer meal gap while allowing its fine-tuning.

Research on the Views of Parents

The low participation in the summer meals program has been a source of consternation for decades to people concerned about the health and well-being of children. To improve participation, the federal government and nonprofits have conducted research to identify problems and experiment with possible solutions. This research is underfunded. Studies unfortunately are often done too cheaply, leading to less robust conclusions than the gravity of the topic warrants. Nonetheless, a number of insights can be gleaned from the work done to date.

What's generally considered the holy grail of research on the summer meals program is the perspectives of parents who do *not* use the program. The organization that has most aggressively committed themselves to this quest is the national anti-hunger organization Share Our Strength (SOS). It has engaged parents for the last several years to identify what they perceive to be the barriers to their kids getting meals through the program.

In 2012, SOS conducted a series of focus groups in Colorado, Arkansas and Maryland. They summarized their findings by saying that there was little knowledge about the program among parents, but when told about it, they were interested, though the ones most in need weren't necessarily the most interested. More specifically, SOS reached the following conclusions about barriers to participation and ways to overcome them:

- ‘Work schedules, distance to program sites, and lack of transportation are major barriers to participation. Parents suggest programs open early, close late (at the end of the work day), and provide free transportation. A few also suggest operating mobile meals programs.
- ‘Many say they would only travel 5, maybe 10, miles to program sites (but most say < 5). Some would travel farther—up to 20 miles—for programs that offer activities as well.
- ‘Parents need to know that programs are safe—they are run by credentialed staff who sufficiently supervise the comings and goings of the kids that use them and are located in trusted community spaces, like churches or schools.
- ‘Parents want age-appropriate activities for kids and worry about sites which allow older and younger children to participate in activities together.
- ‘Parents are particularly interested in seeing governmental partners for summer meals programs such as school districts or state departments of education.’ Parents are also open to nonprofits with high brand visibility to be possible trusted partners—organizations like the YMCA and United Way.
- Parents recognize that distinct strategies must be developed to make the program appealing to teenagers.⁶

In 2013, SOS followed up their focus group research with a survey that is quite significant in that it represents what is likely the most thorough investigation to date of parents who might be interested in the program (defined as living at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level). As such, it has no parallel.

Its findings, however, should be treated with caution. The methodology for selecting parents to speak to was not up to the academic gold standard of a simple random sample. The researchers approximated this as best they could. What they did was twofold. First, they purchased a list of 300 randomized phone numbers and contacted them. Second, they bought access to a panel of people willing to fill out surveys and tried to balance respondents by region, race and income until they hit exactly 900 responses. This *may* have created a sample that closely resembles the underlying population, but unlike with a simple random sample, we have no way of knowing for sure, meaning that we cannot estimate the accuracy of the results. They should be understood as suggestive. If we want more robust research, it will take a stronger commitment from foundations or the federal government.

Furthermore, a more subtle concern with the asking of survey questions applies strongly to summer meals research. Public opinion surveys are often interpreted naively.⁷ That is, researchers assume that responses are all of equal weight, as is done with electoral voting. Asking people about why they don’t do something or under what conditions they *might* do something, however, leads to difficulties interpreting results because people without relevant experience are essentially guessing about their behavioral—but surveys rarely attempt to take this into account. Because it is trying to get at why people don’t use a specific

program, this is quite possibly issue with the Share Our Strength survey, though we do not have a clear way of telling.*

Nonetheless, we can still find much useful in the Share Our Strength survey. One part of the survey asked people about ten possible barriers to participation.† The most obvious barrier to participation is that families are unaware of the existence of the program—with only 40 percent aware of locations for summer meal sites. Of the people who completed the survey, only 28 percent of those who knew of the locations of summer meals participated. This is discouraging, but it has a silver lining: if the survey is in fact representative of low-income parents, it suggests that if all low-income families knew about the program, participation could potentially be doubled.⁸

Lack of awareness is the most obvious barrier to future participation in the program, but the SOS report explores nine more barriers, eight of which were indicated by at least a quarter of the participants. Far and away the biggest additional concern parents expressed was concern about the unfamiliarity of the organization running a site, a repeat of something that SOS saw the previous year in their focus groups. Sixty-nine percent of their respondents agreed with the statement, ‘I won’t send my children to a site if I am unfamiliar with the organization and/or its staff.’ This is not surprising considering the emphasis on risk-avoidance in raising children that has become pervasive since the 1980s.

The other concerns can be organized into three areas. The first deals with logistics (with the percentage of parents saying this was an issue in parentheses afterward):

- ‘I do not have transportation for my children’ (34 percent).
- ‘Going to a free summer meals site is too difficult to arrange’ (28 percent).
- ‘Free summer meals are not offered at a convenient *place*’ (45 percent).
- ‘Free summer meals are not offered at a convenient *time*’ (31 percent).
- ‘Free summer meals do not let us eat as a family’ (26 percent).

This first cluster deals with the immediate challenges of a congregate meal program, particularly transportation. Most attempts to improve participation deal with these issues, so these questions are quite important. Seven percent of respondents responded to all four of the first four (transportation, difficult to arrange, inconvenient times, inconvenient places) and 58 percent indicated at least one of these. While again this is not necessarily representative, this reinforces the intuitions of those who see logistical issues as a key barrier to increasing participation in the program.

* It is worth noting here that the federal nature of the summer meals program is rarely stressed to families by sites. Its significance often has to be inferred from the presence of USDA logos. This further complicates interpreting responses from parents because their sense of the program is so different from that of researchers.

† For six of the ten questions in the survey about possible barriers to participation, the percentage of respondents who said they didn’t know or who didn’t answer was in double digits. This is high. Per Pierre Bourdieu’s observation that a lack of response is in fact saying something meaningful, this high non-response rate suggests that the people answering the questions had not thought about the issue previously.

The second area of concern about the program was disinterest in it:

- ‘My children do not need free summer meals’ (39 percent).
- ‘My children are not interested’ (34 percent).
- ‘I am not interested’ (28 percent).

A total of 43 percent of respondents identified at least one of these as a barrier to participation for them.

* This points to two interrelated issues: (a) not seeing hunger as a personal problem and (b) a lack of interest in the program.

Anti-hunger advocates measure hunger in terms of ‘food insecurity’, which is assessed with a battery of retrospective questions. Rates of food insecurity, then, are essentially a bureaucratic inference. This is not the same thing as someone saying to themselves, ‘We have a problem. My family doesn’t have enough food.’ According to the survey’s inferences about food security, 25 percent of those food insecure and 22 percent very insecure said that their children did not need the summer meals program (as opposed to 46 percent deemed food secure). The gaps between self-perception and official measures of free and reduced-price meals and food insecurity raise an enormous number of questions well beyond the scope of this study, such as the extent to which people think not in terms of hunger but price elasticity (that is, they don’t perceive hunger as a problem but perhaps fatalistically adjust the quality of the food they purchase to the amount of money they have).

One possible response to the survey question about possible barriers stands alone:

- ‘I have participated in the past and have been unsatisfied’ (12 percent).

In seeming reinforcement of this statistic, the report notes that 93 percent of parents would recommend the site they used *the previous summer* to others. Together, these two statistics appear quite positive, but it’s not quite that simple. The 12 percent unsatisfied rate might seem low—except that the 110 parents who agreed with this statement is almost as large a group as the 153 who said that their kids used the program the previous year.[†] What to make of this is absolutely key to our understanding of the summer meals program.

The most logical way to interpret the people agreeing with the statement ‘I have participated in the program and have been unsatisfied’ is that it represents a ‘burn-through rate’: it could represent the percentage of the lower-income families that have tried the program and didn’t like it. It seems reasonable to conclude that most of such families won’t be back again.

We can try to calculate what this burn-through rate looks like. If we assume that the 11 who used the program the previous year and wouldn’t recommend it were included in the 110 unsatisfied parents, then we could estimate that a minimum total of 252 parents—out of the 900 surveyed—had ever used the program. That is, we could add together the number of people who said that they were satisfied last year

* Of the respondents, 19 percent said that both they and their children were not interested, meaning that 9 percent indicated that they themselves were not interested (but did not say that their children were also uninterested) and 15 percent said that their children were not interested (without attributing a disinterest to themselves as well).

[†] The flow of the questions suggests that those who were unsatisfied stopped using the program, but that might not necessarily be the case.

and the number of people saying that they were unsatisfied in the past. Admittedly, that doesn't give us a total of how many people ever used the program. There could be families that used the program before the previous year and stopped for reasons other than a lack of satisfaction. (Their local site might have closed down, for instance, or they might have moved to someplace that doesn't have any convenient sites—or they might have even just forgotten about using the program.) We can estimate their numbers, however, by taking advantage of the question about whether they were aware of local sites. That question allows us to bracket a range of past attendees by first running calculations assuming that all the families that were aware of the program used it in the past at one extreme and on the other, that all the families that stopped using the program did so because they were unsatisfied. This suggests a cumulative 'burn-through' rate for everyone who has ever tried the program to be between 30.8 percent and 43.6 percent (though this could exaggerate because families tend to cycle out of poverty). With again the caveat that this sample might not be representative, if this is remotely accurate, it suggests some very real limits to the program as conceived.

But the survey response of 'I have used the program in the past and have been unsatisfied' is more ambiguous than it might initially appear. A certain percentage of respondents could have been tripped up by navigating what amounted to a triple negative: they had to answer 'yes' to a question about 'preventing' something because of 'unsatisfaction'. Furthermore, there is also a chance that some respondents might have treated the question as a hypothetical. And finally, as one of the people who worked on the survey pointed out to us, the question about whether a respondent was aware of summer meal sites was the first about the program. The question for which being unsatisfied with the program was a possible answer was seven questions later, giving people more time to recall memories about how they fed their kids over past summers. This raises the possibility that the total number of people who have used the program in the past could be higher than the responses suggest. Regardless, the issue of burn-through deserves much more attention.

In addition to this closed question which asked people to identify barriers to participation, the SOS survey also asked people who said that they were *not* interested in the program an open-ended question about why not. SOS categorized the responses as such:

- 'Not interested/necessary' (23 percent).
- 'Prefer child to eat at home' (14 percent).
- 'Anti-government sentiment' (12 percent).
- 'Good for others but not for us' (10 percent).
- 'Location/transportation concerns' (10 percent).
- 'Busy/away' (10 percent).
- 'Child too young/old' (5 percent).
- 'Food concerns (e.g., picky eater, allergies, etc.)' (7 percent).

The first thing to note is that people who say that they are not interested in the program report few concerns about transportation and site location. This suggests that those concerns are in fact barriers to people who say that they *are* interested in the program (because the overall sample reported much higher levels of concern than those saying they were uninterested in the program). The other responses take

different angles, but largely amount to one point about families uninterested in the program: they don't feel it fits into their lives, though not necessarily because of a lack of need.

In short, the SOS survey provides highly suggestive evidence that the logistical issues are a significant set of barriers to increasing participation by the intended audience of children but also that disinterest is a sizeable and poorly understood reason why the participation rate is low, as is the possibility that a number of people have used the program and found it wanting.

Attempts to improve participation in the program

Attempts to combat summer hunger through the federal summer meals program largely fall into two categories, the *promotional strategy* and modest *program restructuring*. The promotional strategy attempts to maximize participation within the existing parameters of the program. It is predicated on the assumption that if people were aware of sites and if there were sites close enough nearby, people would partake of the program. It is the main approach taken by nonprofits and state and local governments. Program restructuring changes the rules of the program, which is the purview of the federal government.

One of the most aggressive supporters of the promotional strategy is the same organization most committed to doing summer meals research, Share Our Strength. In 2012, SOS put substantial money into four states: Arkansas, Colorado, Maryland and North Carolina. The money largely went to small grants to sites and sponsors and recruitment efforts.

The findings on Colorado are the least extensive, to the point where it's not completely clear what was done to upgrade the program beyond grants from SOS. FRAC data indicates a participation rate in 2009 of 6.9 percent, suggesting plenty of room for improvement.⁹ In fact, the research found that the program served substantially more meals in 2012 compared to 2009—with slightly less than a third of the growth attributable to the worsening economy (according to calculations from FRAC data)—but that the rate of growth had slowed for three successive years and was hitting a plateau, though the final year still had a credible growth rate of 11.5 percent. The report made the following conclusions:

- 'Onsite supplemental programming is a major driver in Summer Food Program participation.'
- 'Successful outreach strategies for the future are local and tailored.'
- 'Less low hanging fruit in expanding the impact of the program.'
- 'The Colorado Summer Food Program, as a whole, is experiencing growing pains.'¹⁰

The report's recommendations are fairly typical of promotional strategy approaches, calling for increased collaboration, more sites, etc. The one interesting point is that it suggests limiting broad marketing efforts and instead focusing on specific, community-tailored ones.

The Arkansas efforts are much more detailed in both the efforts to increase participation and to evaluate those efforts. The Arkansas report leaves the reader with a sense of urgency, of quickly investing as much money as possible toward increasing sites—and that the results were respectable if one accepts that the initial goals were perhaps a little too optimistic. The campaign helped recruit 91 sites (goal: 150), the impact of which was lessened by at least 44 sites from the previous year no longer being open. Statewide, meals

increased 547,745 (including snacks), with SOS-recruited sites accounting for 370,624. Unfortunately, the report doesn't take on the ambitious task of attempting to calculate how many meals it would take to completely cover the summer meal gap, but FRAC calculated that participation in the program rose from 13.6 percent in 2011 to 15.7 percent during the 2012 expansion.¹¹ The Arkansas report's recommendations are modest, focusing on commonsensical ways to increase sites and participation, like prioritizing sites likely to feed the most number of kids.¹²

North Carolina's campaign also reported success. It took several approaches. Like Arkansas, SOS distributed mini-grants to new sites. They also received a federal waiver to allow schools to get the higher SFSP reimbursement of the Seamless Summer Food Option (SSFO) rate without having to go through all the SFSP paperwork.* According to the report, this was deemed successful enough that most of the conditions of the waiver became national rules for 2013. Unfortunately, the report does not give enough details to specify how much of the 158 percent increase in meals served was directly attributed to the waiver (a reasonable question to ask as only 11 out of the approximately 220 school districts in the state participated.) The report, however, noted that overall the 'the effort was intense' to get new schools onboard.¹³

Maryland's efforts were the least ambitious and the least successful:

There is some evidence that the Baltimore city-focused outreach did play a positive role in promoting the utilization of free summer meals, but it is far from definitive. For example, while the number of free summer meals served in Maryland went down 3% statewide, it only went down 0.2% among the seven summer meal sponsors primarily based in Baltimore city.¹⁴

The report also notes that the number of kids eligible for free and reduced price meals increased by 4 percent from 2010 even as the number of meals served was going down. The report also notes that there were 10 days in 2011 and 13 in 2012 in which sites might have been closed due to high temperatures ('code red'). They also reported that a number of sites were unaware that they had to provide meals to kids not participating in their program or stated that they did not have the capacity to feed them.

The one innovation of the Maryland effort was door-to-door canvassing. The results were disappointing. Eighty percent of the identified doors to knock on—and the method for identifying them was switched because the initial software was so inaccurate—had no answer. The report suggests that canvassing might reach more families if it were not done during the weekday but 'on weekends or evenings (if it is safe to do so).'¹⁵ This prompts the questions: if no one is home during the day, then what are the odds that someone's available to take children to a summer meal site? If no one is willing to answer the door, then what are the odds that the people inside feel safe enough to visit a (potentially unfamiliar) site for free food? In our San Diego research, people from several sites reported finding out about the program from a site director approaching them in the neighborhood and telling them about it, so this approach may have

* The Seamless Summer Food Option is basically a streamlined billing process that schools can use during the summer, with less paperwork and generally higher reimbursements, especially for commodities. Since families do not directly experience the difference, this report does not focus on it.

more potential than the Maryland experience suggests, which could itself be interpreted positively if seen as the first effort at the beginning of a trial-and-error process.

The experiences of these states all suggest that existing summer meals programs may be expanded through promotional strategies if vigorous effort is exerted and if new sites and sponsors receive at least a modicum of financial assistance. The work of SOS, however, raises doubts about the sustainability of the expansion of state-level summer meals programs and on the ability of the program in its current form to meet all unmet summer food needs. The federal government, on the other hand, is in a position to modify with the rules to create a more optimal structure for the summer meals program.

The USDA has had several waves of responses to summer meals.¹⁶ The initial programming in the 1970s saw rapid growth. If the statistics of the time are accurate, then the program still reaches fewer children now than it did in 1976, its second year as a permanent program. After the initial spike in meals served, however, participation experienced a sharp decline. During that decline, the GAO reported on extensive waste, fraud and mismanagement (making it a question of how much of the 1976 zenith was a layer of ‘phantom meals’ as they were called). In response, the 1980s was a period of concern about eliminating fraud in the program, which led to the federal government discontinuing eligibility for many categories of private sponsors.¹⁷ The USDA began allowing these nonprofit sponsors to return in 1990.

Since then, the federal government has periodically allocated moneys for experiments to increase participation. One such study was the Pennsylvania Rural Area Eligibility Program during the summers of 2005 and 2006. It tweaked eligibility requirements. Specifically, it targeted the regulation that unless it was at a setting like a camp, a site must be in an area where at least 50 percent of the children came from families with incomes at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty line. This pilot program reduced the 50 percent requirement down to 40 percent. This led to a modest (15 percent) increase in the number of rural sites. How this actually affected participation by children, however, is not clear because the otherwise rigorous methodology apparently did not measure meals served, but only changes in the number of sponsors and sites.* The USDA report on the study makes numerous interesting secondary observations about this program, such as that in rural areas, children largely come from within a mile of sites and ‘[t]ypically... walk, ride bikes, or receive rides’. The report also notes that there’s significant churning of rural sponsors and raises some additional concerns like ‘low reimbursements... and too many reporting requirements...’ (The USDA has been working to streamline the program for sites and sponsors.)

Since the Pennsylvania study, Congress has authorized a series of demonstration projects—an \$85 million allocation in the 2010 Agriculture Appropriations Act—that together are known as the Summer Meals for Children Program. The first part was dubbed the Enhanced Summer Food Service Program (eSFSP) and

* Participation is usually measured as average daily attendance (ADA) for the month of July, which is then compared to the ADA for March or for the entire previous year. While the ADA counts may seem clear cut, they hide some ambiguity: do they represent one kid participating every day in the month of July, two different kids each attending for half the month, or four kids each attending for the equivalent of a week? This is not an idle question because it means we don’t know whether a large number of kids use the program when they’re able to or whether a smaller number are consistently receiving assistance. The more the former is true, the less effective strategies based on increasing awareness of site locations is likely to be.

contained four initiatives. The results of the first phase eSFSP projects were published in 2011; the second phase results became available in the fall of 2012.

The report released in 2011 focused on a pair of demonstrations completed the previous year, the first of which was in Arkansas. The Arkansas experiment took a two-pronged approach. First, it added a \$.50 per meal bonus to sites that served meals at least 40 days over the summer.* Second, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds were used to subsidize transportation to sites at the rate of each sponsor getting \$30 a day per each day that each of their sites was opened. These two incentives together led to considerable increases: meals ‘increased 40.6 percent... compared to 4.9 percent in similar States (other high-need, low-participation States) over the same time period’, average daily attendance ‘in July increased by 35.3 percent from 2009 to 2010, compared to just 9.6 percent in similar States...’, the ‘number of sponsors almost tripled...’ (though, interestingly, sites only increased 48.5 percent) and participating sites were open a median of 45 days over the summer.¹⁸ This report, however, is frustrating in two senses. The first: the research’s two-pronged approach prevents pinpointing the individual impacts of the increased reimbursement versus the subsidized transportation (a point the report recognizes). The second frustration: while this improvement represented a 22 percent increase in children served, this was only an increase from 8.9 percent of the kids eligible being served to 10.9 percent. That is, almost 90 percent of the kids remained unreached by the program.

At the same time the Arkansas study was being conducted, another was being done next door in Mississippi. It gave up to \$5,000 per sponsor per site for enrichment or recreational activities for the summer. It demonstrated little to no increase in participation. This finding contradicts a widely held belief about the program, namely that one of the best ways to increase participation is to add programming. The report only lists the types of programming that could be offered, which makes it hard to draw conclusions, but this result is consistent with our findings.

The second phase of the research used a backpack program and a rural meal delivery program. Only the first year’s results have been published to date. The second year’s data promises to be more comprehensive, most importantly by having reliable cost analysis. But what we know so far is promising. The rural delivery program took meals to children hard to reach by congregate meals sites. As a result, the program was measured not by increased participation per se but against possible declines in attendance at the closest congregate meal sites. Researchers found no such overall pattern of draining participation, providing reassurance about a key potential conceptual flaw in delivery programs, meaning that the deciding factor in whether to pursue them will likely be cost.

* The report does not appear to indicate what the median length of time the sites were open before the incentives were put in place. In San Diego in 2013, the approximately 207 sites in the county planned on being open a median of 44 days. Almost fifteen percent of the sites, however, reported their intention of being open less than a month, suggesting that a map of San Diego County site locations that does not take into account the number of days sites are open could overlook holes in coverage. Our initial attempts to study this suggests that it would be very time-intensive to study holes in coverage because it requires knowing why sites open and close when they do. The Vista sites, for instance, disappear in mid-August, but their closure for the year is timed around the relatively early start date for the local schools.

The results of the meal backpack program research were encouraging overall and worth quoting at length:

The results suggest that the backpacks, accompanied by promotional efforts to inform families about them, were highly successful in attracting new children to the SFSP. In each State, there were substantial increases in total meals served and ADA [average daily attendance] at the demonstration sites compared with much smaller changes, if any, at the comparison sites. For example, the July ADA increases at the demonstration sites were 148 percent in Arizona, 68 percent in Kansas, and 34 percent in Ohio, versus 9 percent, -3 percent, and -9 percent in the comparison sites respectively...The demonstration operated in a limited number of areas in each State and was not expected to have statewide effects.¹⁹

This again sounds promising, but the three states with backpack program sites had participation rates ranging from 4.2 percent to 8.0 percent in 2011, meaning that they would have to double or triple to even reach double digits.

The federal government conducted one further phase of research to increase participation, namely the summer EBT program. It was so profoundly innovative and its results so promising that it no longer resembled the traditional summer meals program at all. It will be discussed later.

What's missing from the literature:

Strong versus weak sites, daily versus occasional participants

Much could be said about the summer meal literature and demonstration and pilot projects. A key point, however, is that they leave implied two key distinctions: one between different kinds of sites and another between the types of families served.

Sites can roughly be divided into two kinds. The first could be called *strong sites*. These sites have ongoing programming for much of the traditional work/school day and the USDA funds meals in a fashion similar to how it handles school meals. Strong sites include school summer sessions, of course, but also Boys and Girls Clubs, summer camps, some military housing sites and some recreation centers. What makes sites strong is not their current average daily attendance numbers but their potential for growth. At such a site, each child that is fed is fed consistently in a way that does not place burdens on parents that make it difficult to go to a site each day. With occasional exceptions, every child who participates in the full or half-day programming at the site should have their nutritional needs met.

Weak sites, however, are sites that first and foremost serve meals to kids. These tend to be park and recreation locations, halls of worship and libraries, though these sites can act as strong sites, such when a church hosts a bible camp. Weak sites do not have pre-existing half or full-day programming that allow parents to leave their children for an extended period of time, but sometimes strive to create programming, often of shorter duration, to encourage kids to come. Programming is often seen as a way to raise the appeal of the sites for families or to help them by providing other services. The weakness of these sites, as will be seen, is that they put substantial demands on families that make it challenging for them to use the sites consistently, if at all. This profoundly limits the growth potential of such sites.

The dividing line between strong and weak sites is not the existence of programming per se but what

Strong sites have ongoing programming for much of the traditional work/school day, and the USDA funds meals in a fashion similar to how it handles school meals.

Weak sites first and foremost serve meals to kids. Strong sites allow parents to leave their kids and go to work. Weak sites do not have the infrastructure to take care of children in the same way.

that programming means for the kinds of families they can serve. Parents can entrust their children to strong sites for sustained lengths of time. Weak sites do not have the infrastructure to take care of children in the same way. To put it practically, strong sites allow parents to leave their kids and go to work.

The distinction between types of sites, however, is not always clear-cut. For instance, one site in City Heights had all the characteristics of a weak site, except that a nonprofit summer childcare program from across the street brought its twenty kids over every day for lunch. Likewise, adding programming to a weak site can blur the lines as the site starts to take on characteristics of a strong site, like when a library allows an unattended child to participate in a program for an hour or two. But for the most part, the distinction holds.

The distinction between strong and weak sites allows us to do something important: match family types with different formats of summer programming. Strong sites appeal to parents in households in which there is no one to supervise the children during the workday. Weak sites are implicitly understood to require a full-time parent to escort the children.* Strong sites may be used by any household, though

* See the below table of national data for the work status of parents. The data is only a rough sketch because it includes parents of all incomes. Further, the Census Bureau considers one parent, usually the mother, to be the 'designated parent', which can lead to a distorted picture if there are two parents in a household who both contribute substantially to childcare. With these caveats in mind, it is worth noting that the Bureau concluded that in 2009 the designated parent:

	All children	Under 6 years	6 to 11 years	12 to 17 years
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some full-time parents may want to have their kids at home, either as a personal preference or because the programming at the only nearby strong sites are too expensive with multiple children. Such parents may very much appreciate weak sites. Likewise, teenagers, who are more mobile than small children, could in theory use weak sites, but in our San Diego experience, unaccompanied teenagers were a rarity.

To understand the limitations of weak sites, however, it is useful to describe the kinds of parents who utilize them. (We had very limited contact with parents at strong sites, as they were not there during the day. For their children, the serving of the meals was similar to those at school.) Although the adults that accompanied children to sites varied—a grandmother with three grandkids, a man whose wife was active-duty Navy, a babysitter and her charges—parents at weak sites roughly fell into two ideal types.

The first could be described as *daily participants* of the program. These families were, in San Diego, primarily Latino, and many appeared to be visibly struggling (e.g., the clothes they wore, the air of fatigue that surrounded them, the way they described the occupation or lack thereof of the husband).^{*} At some sites, a good number of these families walked. The mothers typically had three or more children, sometimes with neighbor kids in tow, and strongly identified with the role of being a full-time parent. These larger families were just about the only ones that had older children. (Teenagers were almost completely absent from any site we visited.) It was hard to get a clear sense of what these families did for lunch when not at the summer meal site, as many of them seemed to ‘make do’ with whatever was in the house. These families were more likely to bend their schedules to the constraints of the program.

The second kind of family that used weak sites visited them one to three times per week (with perhaps more decline over the summer than daily participants). These could be called *occasional participants*. The program was used when it could be fit into their schedule, often meaning that families went to sites when they already planned to be out and about, thus lowering the impact of time and gas cost constraints. Frequently, there was only one younger child in the family. In our San Diego experience, the families themselves were much more racially and ethnically diverse than the daily participants. Some of these

..Worked full-time last month	31,648	42.8%	9,336	36.8%	10,306	42.4%	12,005	49.5%
..Worked part-time last month	14,140	19.1%	4,779	18.8%	4,756	19.6%	4,605	19.0%
..Did not work last month	28,124	38.1%	11,262	44.4%	9,222	38.0%	7,639	31.5%
Total children, 2009	73,909							

Table 1 Employment status of parents, in thousands, 2009, (Census data) Source: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/children/data/sipp/well2009/tables.html>.

^{*} San Diego County’s demographics are quite different from the United States as a whole, as seen in the below table of 2010 census data. The data isn’t completely comparable, as Hispanic is exhaustive for the San Diego data but not the national data. Nonetheless, data is suggestive:

Total	Non-Hispanic white	Hispanic	Black	Asian and Pacific Islander	Native American
County	48.5%	32.0%	4.7%	11.0%	0.5%
National percentage	63.7%	16.3%	12.6%	5.0%	0.9%

Compare: <http://profilewarehouse.sandag.org/profiles/cen10/reg999cen10.pdf> to <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf>.

mothers (and again they were almost entirely mothers) expressed the same kind of identification with their full-time parenting role as daily participants but not all did. These mothers expressed pride in their cooking for their families but saw the summer meals program not only as a way to save money but as a break from having to relentlessly prepare meal after meal day after day. They tended to be more prevalent at sites that had to be driven to. These mothers were more likely to express views consistent with the middle-class 'hyper-vigilant model of parenting' of recent decades (i.e., maximally stimulate children through activities and minimally expose them to risk).²⁰ In short, while we did not ask about family income, occasional participants, on average, were a gradation or two higher in the socioeconomic scale than daily participants, or at least had some resources left from better times (a family car, for instance). This is not to say that these families were not struggling: it was clear that these families saw the summer meals program as one of many strategies necessary to try to help them keep their heads above water.

The San Diego experience

Daily participants often walked to weak sites. The mothers typically had three or more children, sometimes with neighbor kids in tow, and strongly identified with the role of being a full-time parent. These larger families were just about the only ones that had older children with them.

Occasional participants used weak sites one to three times a week when it could be fit into their schedule, often meaning that families went to sites when they already planned to be out and about, thus lowering the impact of time and gas cost constraints. Frequently, there was only one younger child in the family. They tended to be more prevalent at sites that had to be driven to.

To explore the potential of the summer meals program, we studied its implementation across San Diego County, an area of approximately 4,200 square miles and 3.2 million people. Despite its unusually mild weather and disproportionately Latino population, San Diego is in many ways typical of American regions, particularly in the Sunbelt. Studying San Diego, however, does not produce an exactly representative sample of the American population. Rather, the credibility of our findings, which are by no means the final word, comes from with how our results relate to past research on the program: our approach explains disparate past conclusions in a straightforward fashion, provides a better vocabulary for discussing what others have also witnessed and offers a new frame for understanding why the program has grown so slowly despite the effort put into it. Our confidence in our findings is increased by their consistency with the success of the summer EBT demonstration (to be discussed later).

Our approach used both qualitative and quantitative methods. After engaging in exploratory research in 2012, during the summer of 2013, we interviewed as widely as we could, ultimately listening to over fifty

parents at urban and suburban sites while the children ate.* Because of privacy restrictions on student data, we had no way of developing a simple random sample. (No national research on summer meals has met this standard.) Rather we visited a variety of sites to sample the spectrum of possibilities. The rule of thumb in academic research is to continue interviews until they become repetitive. For us, patterns emerged fairly quickly, and late interviews did not substantially differ from early ones. While we did have set questions (e.g., questions about family structure, distance of the site from home, transportation), the aim of our interviews was to have free-flowing conversations that captured the story of each family and its relationship to the site. We attempted a number of ways to quantitatively capture or disconfirm what we were seeing. Quantitative data quality, however, was a recurrent problem, and we did not include some analyses because we felt that the data was not sufficiently reliable to justify conclusions.†

Our original goal was to understand the views of families that did *not* participate in the program. We discovered, however, two things. First, talking to random low-income families that did not participate in the program tended to lead to indistinct answers as we were largely asking about hypotheticals. Second, the families that used the sites were in fact a very important subset of the people who did *not* use the program, as many of them went to sites sporadically, something that the literature did not prepare us for.

State data shows that in October 2012 there were 494,143 K–12 students in schools in San Diego County.²¹ Almost exactly half were FRPM kids: 246,452 or 49.9 percent.‡ In the broadest sense, then, the goal of the summer meals program is to feed roughly a quarter of a million kids in San Diego County each weekday through the summer for both breakfast and lunch. The reality falls well short of that. The next section of the report will discuss why that is so, despite the best efforts of many, many people.

It should first be noted, however, that reaching a quarter of a million kids is not even necessarily considered the baseline to be used for comparisons. The annual CFP report *School's Out...Who Ate?* uses as its baseline the average daily lunch participation for March and April before the summer—that is, the number of kids who typically ate school meals, not the number of kids eligible. So for the latest report (analyzing data for the summer of 2012), they used as a baseline 165,969 children, approximately 80,000 fewer kids than the quarter of a million cited above. The philosophical differences over which baseline is appropriate doesn't really matter because the actual attendance in the program is so low relative to either, but it is worth noting that there is another policy issue in the gap between the numbers: almost a third of the kids eligible for free and reduced price meals do not eat them on any given day.²²

San Diego County had over 200 summer meal sites in 2013. Approximately half were schools with another dozen being Boys & Girls Club sites. There were other strong sites as well, such as like some military youth

* To increase candor, we did not record interviews. The vast majority of interviews were conducted in English, with the remainder in Spanish.

† All the numbers about San Diego should be seen as slightly imprecise (with several percentage points of error) because of ambiguous data points (e.g., questions about whether, for instance, to include a site that planned on being open only four days for the entire summer).

‡ Note that a small portion wouldn't be eligible for the summer meals program because they were nineteen or older. As a practical matter, however, we doubt that a nineteen-year old would be 'carded' at a site.

programming. Some weak sites likewise served substantial numbers of children. All of these sites provided daily meals to children that followed federal nutrition guidelines, creating important nutritional stability for the kids that were served. Furthermore, San Diego has built up an infrastructure for its summer meals programming to the extent that the challenges it has faced cannot be attributed to local operational shortcomings but rather to the nature of the federal program itself.

The question, then, is why this program, nationwide, is resistant to expansion. We respectfully submit that while the program might see some growth if more families knew about it or if its rules were refined, the program has profound structural limitations that mean that most ways people currently envision expanding the program face diminishing returns (though this varies by an area's demographics and geography).

Weak sites: the fundamental problem with the summer meals program

To understand why the summer meals program is resistant to expansion requires thinking about each type of site separately. There's no secret to strong sites: strong sites can be expanded insofar as there are the resources to fund summer sessions of school, Boys and Girls Clubs, camps and the like. That is, it's mainly a question of funding. Increasing these sites is a serious commitment to our children and, even though the rewards of such an investment are handsome—meals served is almost a side effect—it would take considerable political will to fund them as they deserve to be.

Weak sites are a much more complicated issue. Indeed, much of the rest of report explains why their opportunities for expansion are in fact weak. Which, of course, raises the question: why devote so much time to them? The answer is simple: most efforts to improve participation rely heavily on them. The approaches taken by both private and government sources—nonprofit promotional strategies and refinements by the federal government—implicitly focus on increasing the number and desirability of weak sites in hopes of making families daily participants at them.

Both private and government sources—nonprofit promotional strategies and refinements by the federal government—implicitly focus on increasing the number and desirability of weak sites in hopes of making families daily participants at them.

Weak sites can have advantages. They require less infrastructure than strong sites, and some well-positioned weak sites have good attendance, and there are potentially more such sites. But that the weak site model is limited should be immediately apparent. Most obviously, if weak sites effectively require an adult to escort kids, then they offer little to families in which all the adults work during the day.

As our review of the literature and demonstration and pilot projects show, people point to numerous limitations of the program (limitations that in many cases really just apply to weak sites). These limitations should not be seen as distinct problems with distinct causes. Rather, they point to a fundamental problem with weak sites: they are based on the *charity model of food distribution*.

This model of reducing hunger depends on the distribution of free food. It is elaborated upon in Janet Poppendieck's (1999) critique of the rise of food banks. She identified what she called the “seven deadly *in's*” of free food distribution:²³

- Inefficiency—charities develop elaborate systems of food distribution that recreate, without price signals, the existing system of food distribution: grocery stores.
- Insufficiency—the food is not enough to curtail the feeling of hunger.
- Nutritionally Inadequate—the food is not enough to provide for the needs for the health of the body.
- Indignity—the pride of recipients is not always respected and they are expected to be grateful when they may have legitimate reasons to not be.
- Instability—the gifts do not provide a steady supply of food.
- Inappropriateness—the food does not necessarily match recipients’ food culture or situation in life (e.g., food that needs to be prepared only helps those with access to a kitchen).
- Inaccessibility—it is difficult to get to the food. The food is available at limited times and places that are at a distance from where recipients live or do not fit their work schedules.

The telling question for determining whether an approach is a charity model of food assistance is: how substantially do people have to deviate from norms about eating in order to get food (in this case, to replace school meals)? By putting money on an EBT card, the SNAP program, for instance, allows for a very similar experience to any other family grocery shopping with a debit card. School meals, when done in such a way as to eliminate stigma, such as universal meals under Provision 2 or the Community Eligibility Provision, likewise provide an opportunity to eat that does not force people to follow a separate track as all the kids at a school are treated the same. In fact, Provision 2 is essentially the model followed by strong sites. Weak sites, in contrast, are open to criticisms of charity food distributions. Not all apply, to be sure—the food served, for example, must follow nutritional guidelines—but the overall critique about significant work being put into getting limited amounts of food to a limited number of families goes far to explain the low participation in the summer meals program. While individual barriers to participation, then, can be mitigated, they should not be seen as problems that can be solved in isolation but as symptoms. It is to these that we now turn.

The structural problems with the summer meals program’s weak sites

The federal government has numerous regulations that give shape to the summer meals program, such as the rules that specify what kinds of foods are to be served. The USDA has been working to reduce the regulations that complicate the process of being a site or sponsor, but there are some rules that cannot

easily be streamlined without fundamentally changing the program. As a result, some issues inhere in the program.

Waste

As even the shortest stint working in the restaurant industry quickly teaches, a challenge facing any food site that relies on an unknown number of people showing up to eat is estimating the amount of food necessary, as erring too much on either side has negative consequences. On one occasion, we saw families turned away when a site ran out of food. (We do not know whether they ever came back.) This is relatively rare. Much more frequent is for sites to have a buffer of extra meals. Any congregate meal program is—or should—have this built into its daily operation. Of all the issues with the weak sites, this is probably the least concern as it is very much a known unknown with very clear trade-offs when making decisions.

Sites can and do take steps to address this. Although entrées rarely can be saved for future meals, some meal components, like unopened milk cartons, salads in individual containers and fruit can be displayed again until taken (or until they go bad). Sites can also adjust their meal orders based on trends. For strong sites, which have fairly predictable attendance, reasonably precise estimates of how many meals are necessary is relatively straightforward, especially once staff have a sense of how popular particular meals are. For weak sites, however, attendance can be variable, doubly so at the end of summer. As a result, it's not unusual for sites to have 20 percent more meals prepared than served, and for barbeques to have even higher rates, leading to wasted entrées.

The eating rules

A pair of rules causes irritation and friction between site personnel and families using weak sites (but not barbeque events or strong sites). These rules prohibit (a) adults from eating any of the food and (b) most food from being taken off-site. While it is easy to imagine what might have prompted these concerns—worries that people other than the intended recipients would benefit from the program, perhaps leading to the program metamorphosing into something else—some parents we spoke to criticized or, more often, simply ignored these rules, particularly the rules against sharing food (as we saw parents finishing what the child did not eat).

Nationwide, some weak sites allow adults accompanying children to purchase a meal or have private donors cover the costs of those meals, but in our observations (at nine sites), we unfortunately never saw either. Parents objected to the no-sharing rule for a number of reasons, but two in particular stand out: first, it ignored the role of modeling and imitation in teaching children to eat, and second, it was in fact modeling the wasting of food. No one we spoke to explicitly mentioned a criticism raised in the Share Our Strength research, namely that parents prefer to eat together as a family.*

The rule prohibiting children from taking food from a site was less widely criticized, but the opposition was more intense. One mom in particular was frustrated by what she saw as the sheer pointlessness of the rule, challenging staff to justify it and then complaining about it to us. (It was her first experience with the program. Again, we don't know whether she ever came back.) More common was distracted grumbling about the waste of the

* A variation of this was suggested by an ally in another context: charity food programs that visibly make the children the conduit for food for the family undermine the authority of the parents. We had no way of measuring this.

program, especially from parents whose kids had reached the point where they wanted to go but had not finished all the food before them.

Site staff and parents seemed equally unaware of what is known as the ‘traveling apple’ rule.²⁴ This allows a child to take from a site a ‘fruit or vegetable component’ of a meal (which has been expanded to include a ‘grain component’ for the summer of 2014). Trainings for staff should cover this and signage mentioning the prohibition on removing food from the site should be clarified. It should be noted, however, that the scenario we most frequently observed was a kid wanting to leave with a half-eaten entrée.

The concentrated poverty rules

As previously mentioned in reference to the Pennsylvania study, the sites have to be located in areas of concentrated poverty. Specifically, the Code of Federal Regulations describes ‘Areas in which poor economic conditions exist’ as:

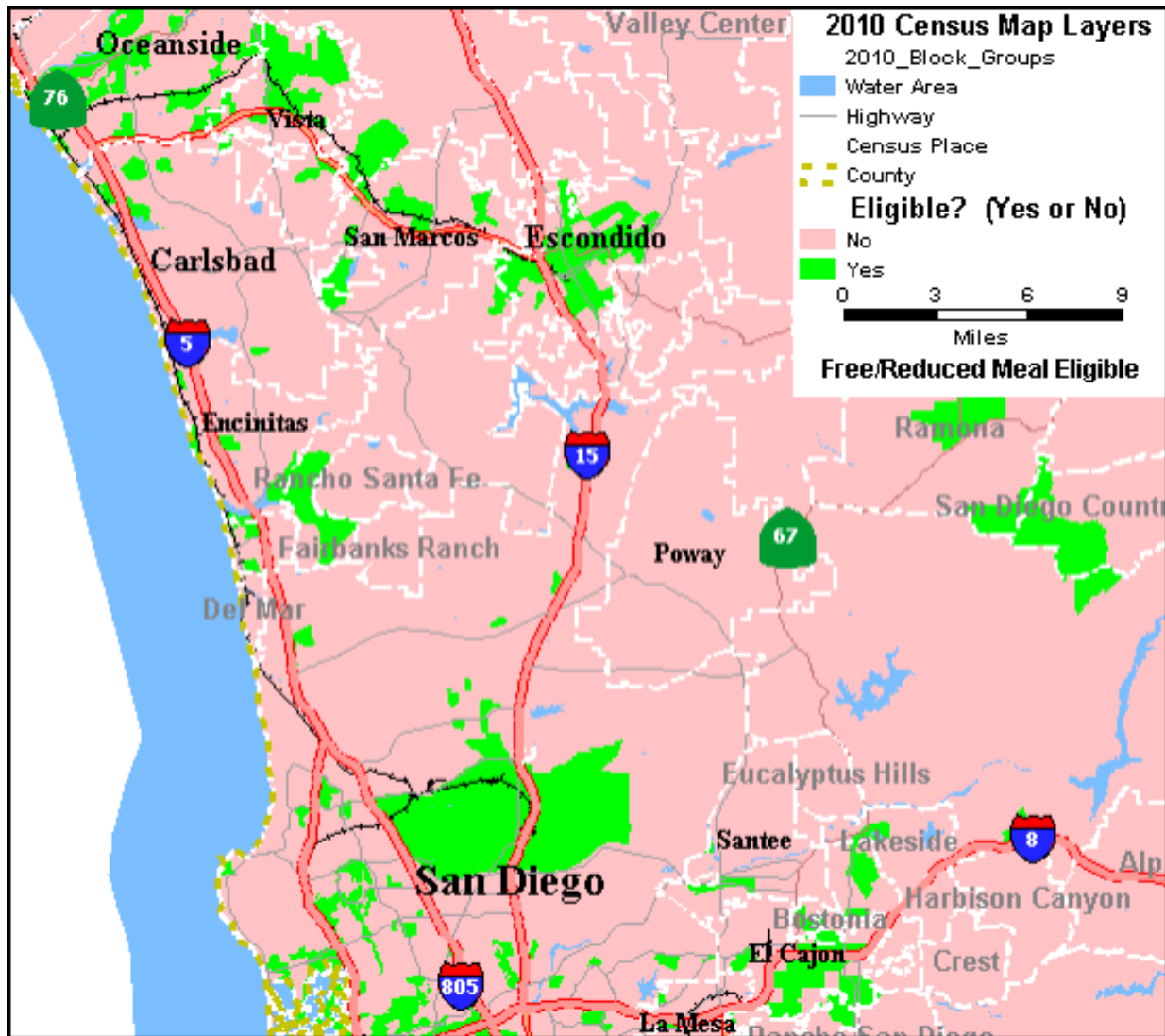
- (a) The attendance area of a school in which at least 50 percent of the enrolled children have been determined eligible for free or reduced-price school meals under the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program;
- (b) A geographic area where, based on the most recent census data available or information provided from a department of welfare or zoning commission, at least 50 percent of the children residing in that area are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals under the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program;
- (c) A geographic area where a site demonstrates, based on other approved sources, that at least 50 percent of the children enrolled at the site are eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program; or
- (d) A closed enrolled site.* (CFR § 225.2)

By focusing on children living in concentrated poverty, this definition of the intended program population leaves out kids living in what could be called ‘dispersed poverty’. This cannot be measured precisely without tremendous amounts of work, but the number of kids who are technically in need but fall outside the scope of the program can be estimated several ways. One is to map areas of eligibility based on census block groups. A website assisted by the Food Research Action Council enables such mapping, as is demonstrated by the map on the next page.

This map for North County, for instance, shows essentially two bands of eligibility, the first a swath running North County from Oceanside inland to Escondido and then second centered on the City of San Diego. This leaves much of North County ineligible for the program because they are too wealthy. They are not uniformly so:

* This last option allows sites focused on low-income children to be outside of their neighborhoods, like at a rural retreat.

pockets of eligibility can be found along Interstate Five around Encinitas. There are, however, no summer meal sites in them.



Map 1 Areas of eligibility in northern San Diego County based on census data²⁵

This simply shows area. The extent of the excluding effect of the concentrated poverty rules can also be approximated by calculating the numbers of kids eligible for free and reduced-price meals in schools where less than half of the kids are so eligible. Based on October 2012 data, in San Diego County, there were approximately 68,780 children in such schools, which is **over one-fourth of the FRPM kids in the region.***

This should be seen as the maximum possible number of kids excluded by the concentrated poverty rules. It does not take into account several key points that reduce the number of kids so excluded. As shown with the above map, the eligibility for a site can be established by census data (and closed sites need not worry

* The figure is 27.9 percent. The April 2014 version of this report misreported this as 50,000 kids or 33.2 percent.

about their immediate area's economic condition). The 68,780 figure based on schools' service areas likewise cannot account for families' transportation options. An unknown number of families might be able to get to sites further away (perhaps just across an arbitrary line). Similarly, the pervasiveness of charter and magnet schools means that where a kid attends school doesn't necessarily indicate where they live, leading to an unknown number of kids attending schools with low FRPM-eligible rates may live in areas where there are in fact convenient summer meal sites.

These caveats aside, the 68,780 figure does give a sense of the underlying appeal of the Pennsylvania pilot project to drop the FRPM eligibility requirement from 50 percent down to 40 percent: in San Diego County, doing this would cut the number of kids attending school in ineligible areas almost in half: 46 percent of the kids currently out of the program's ken would have the potential of being closer to sites (31,423 children to be precise). It should be noted, however, that actually reaching those kids could be even more challenging than the ones who are in areas where sites are currently allowed: the transportation issues could be larger, outreach could be tougher and stigma could be more of an issue. (Or it may be easier if they in fact represent inclusionary housing projects that concentrate the lower-income households in an area in one place.)

In short, the dispersion of poverty makes it hard for the summer meals program to reach all families. We can only estimate how many kids are effectively excluded, but it means that as structured, the program will miss a portion of low-income families. The congregate-meal setting requirement creates many additional barriers to participation.

Transportation

As discussed earlier, transportation is often identified as one of the main barriers to participation in the summer meals program, especially in rural areas. Indeed, rural children are hard to reach. Estimating from 2012 attendance, in San Diego County, approximately 14,000 kids live in rural communities that cover an area bigger than the state of Delaware and have less than half a dozen sites to serve them lunch.²⁶ It should be noted, however, that transportation is a concern that should be more associated with weak sites. The prospect of a half-day or full-day of childcare makes transportation less of a trade-off, assuming that a family has any real transportation options at all. (If, say, a single parent leaves early for work before any strong sites open, then those sites might be of no help.)

The transportation issue actually looks different depending on how kids get around. Intuitively, it seems that driving is the most popular option. With congregate-meal settings, driving is only logical under certain circumstances, as the following graph comparing meal costs and gas costs helps demonstrate.

The graph on the opposite page estimates how much money a family would save by driving their kids to a summer meals site. It makes a number of assumptions: it assumes that the meal is worth to the family the federal reimbursement rate (\$3.47 for rural and self-prep sites for 2013), that gasoline costs \$3.75 a gallon, the family vehicle makes 25 miles to the gallon, the value of the vehicle is not diminished by

travel to summer meal sites (that is, no wear and tear on the vehicle itself, no risk of an accident) and the time of the parent driving has no value.²⁷

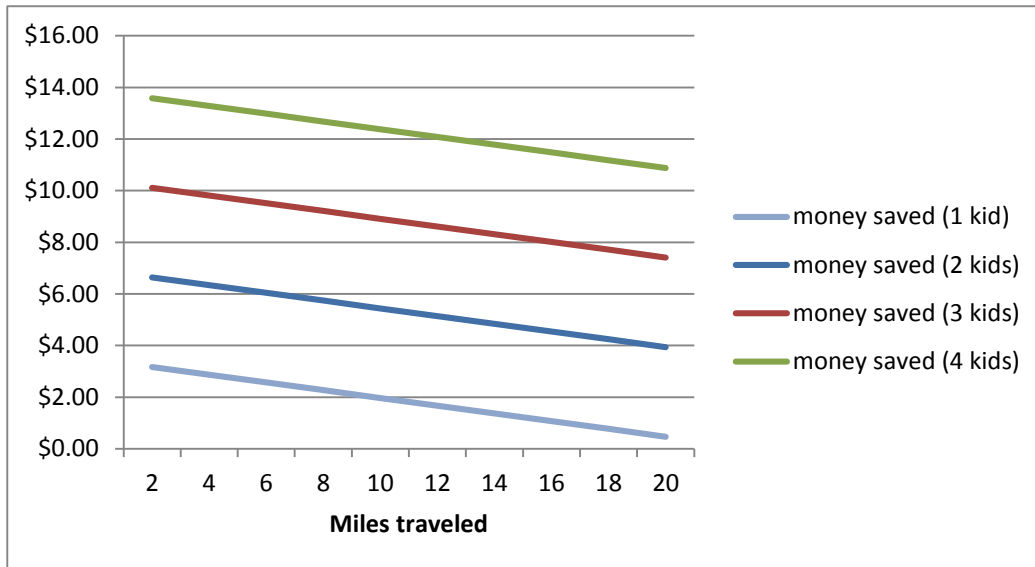


Figure 2 Money saved per mile traveled round trip, with trip cost based on gasoline costing \$3.75 and 25 mpg fuel efficiency

This graph does not calculate all relevant variables in attempting to calculate the economic rationality of the decision whether to obtain meals from summer meal sites, but it does demonstrate several points. First, for families that drive, the appeal of the program in a strictly monetary sense is primarily determined by the number of kids in a household. In a household with only one child, it does not make sense to drive very far just to get a summer meal, which explains why so many of the parents at weak sites did not attend every day but only on days when they could engage in what transportation planners call ‘trip joining’.

With public transportation, family members must buy monthly passes for it to make sense to get food at these sites: the price of two one-way tickets—\$5 or the price of a day pass on the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System—is more than the value of a meal. Taking a bus to a summer meal site without a monthly pass only works economically if the family is engaged in trip joining. If family members are already going to have monthly bus passes, then the program makes much more financial sense because transportation is essentially free save for the time expenditures (which are likely to be significant). For San Diego, an adult pass is currently \$72 a month; a youth pass, \$36.

The other option is walking. We had no way of developing rigorous statistics on this, but for some sites in denser neighborhoods, walking was a popular option, with many interviewees simply pointing to their homes when asked how far away they lived. Indeed, the most effective weak sites we observed were a in high-density neighborhoods with a lot of full-time parents, like a pair of parks, less than half a mile away from each other, both almost entirely surrounded by housing, and serving on average 340+ and 230+ meals a day respectively. It would, however, take an

extraordinary number of sites to ensure walking access to a high proportion of the families who are intended to benefit from the program. But there is another issue with walking that is not explicitly mentioned in discussions of summer meals.

Discussions of the problems with summer meals often ignore a key change in American culture since the program was created, namely the profound loss of freedom of movement for kids since the 1970s that came to national attention when Richard Louv's *The Last Child in the Woods* became a bestseller in 2005. Historically, children had great flexibility to roam their neighborhoods on foot or with a bike.²⁸ This has been largely curtailed, with the top two reasons most frequently given are, first, the suburban development patterns that make walking unpleasant and spread everything out to the point where cars are required for most trips and, second, the rise in fear of strangers. McDonald (2011) et al. documents a drop from 47.7 percent of children K–8 walking to school in 1969 down to 12.7 percent in 2009.²⁹ The implication for summer meals programs is obvious: if kids do not walk to school, they're not going to walk to summer meal sites either. This suggests that the logistics of the summer meals program are much more burdensome for families than when the program was first conceived four decades ago. *

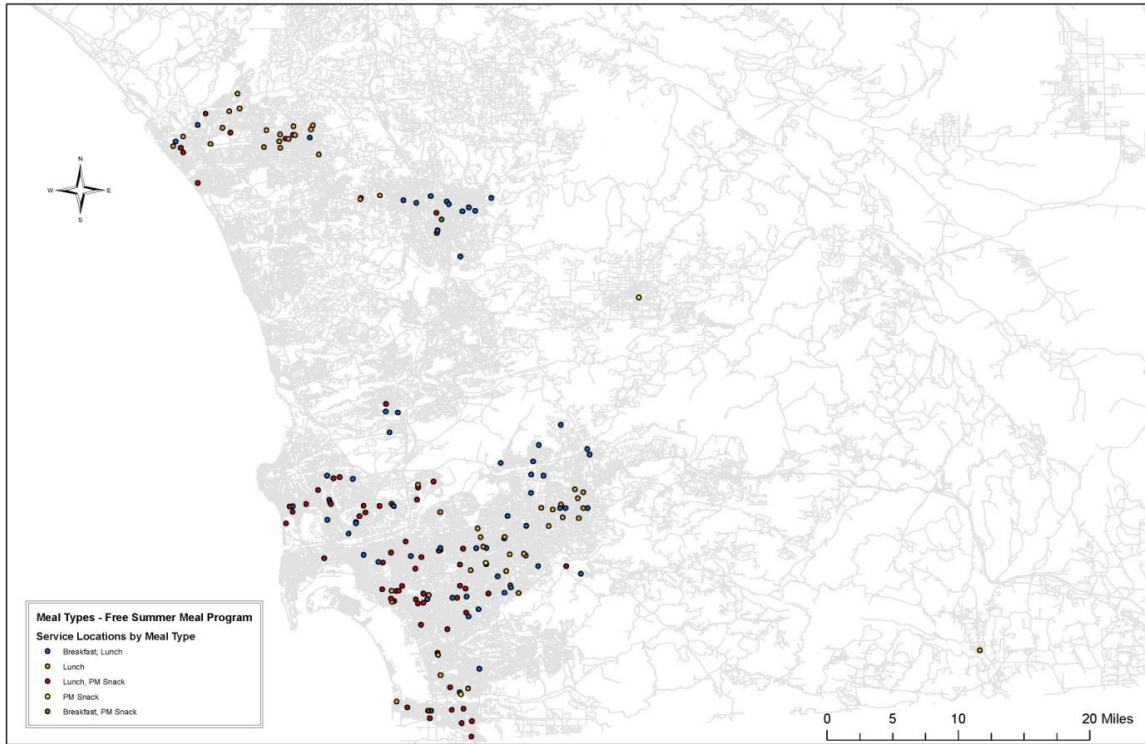
Undergirding all these transportation issues is the issue of time. Realistically, unless a site is within a few minutes' walk of where the children spend the day, a family can realistically expect to spend at least forty minutes per meal from the time they walk out the door until the time they return (12 minutes travel each way, 16 minutes at the site). Unless a family has more than one child, if travel time is included, this program places less value on the parent's time than minimum wage.

Breakfast

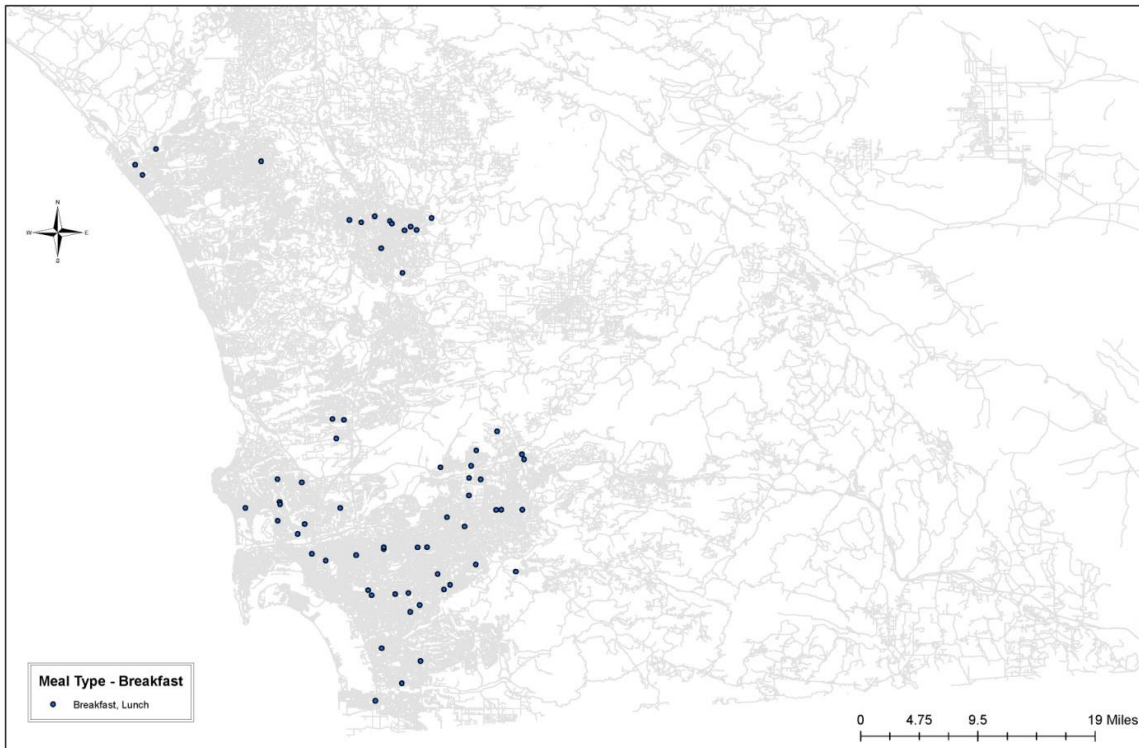
Summer meals sites in theory attempt to replace breakfast and lunch. As a practical matter, however, in San Diego, which has a fairly robust system of sites, roughly only a third of sites that serve lunch also serve breakfast.[†] Compare the following two maps, which show first all meal sites (minus about a dozen questionable data points) and then only the ones serving breakfast.

* This might be mainly a suburban and urban issue. Recall that the Pennsylvania Rural Area Eligibility pilot project discussed earlier said that rural kids and '[t]ypically. . . walk, ride bikes, or receive rides' to sites. Our personal experience suggests that rural areas feel safer from risks like kidnapping but the safety of walking and biking depends a great deal on the kinds of roads in the rural areas. A rarely used road can be quite safe. A state highway with narrow shoulders is another matter entirely.

[†] Specifically, 69 sites (66 sites mapped) served breakfast out of a total of 207 sites (190 sites mapped excluding four sites that serve only snacks or one serving breakfast and snacks as well as a dozen non-breakfast other sites), which is exactly 33.33 percent.



Map 2 Summer meal sites, San Diego County, 2013, by meals served



Map 3 Summer breakfast sites, San Diego County, 2013 (all but one, which is missing, also served lunch)

In broad brush strokes, the breakfast sites are reasonably well distributed. If someone has access to a car, unless they live in the middle of one of the areas excluded under the concentrated poverty rules discussed in the last section, they might still get their kids to a site that is fairly close by, and in some areas, especially Escondido (North County inland), they have almost as much access for breakfast as for lunch. In area others, however, breakfast sites are much fewer, like Vista (the middle of the northern band of sites), or disappear entirely, like parts of South Bay or the rural eastern two-thirds of the county.

Weak sites, however, face another problem. For strong sites, there are no inherent problems in serving two meals to the children (though particular sites might have logistical issues and the programming of some might not start until later in the morning). Weak sites in which children are brought primarily to the site to eat a meal face a serious barrier: parents in effect would have to bring their children to a site twice a day. This is not realistic for most families, especially in the face of any transportation barriers.

The open sites that are not open

Another structural limitation of the summer meals program is the expectation or belief that strong sites are or should be open to the public. Many of these sites are technically open to the public but in reality are not. That is, unless formally designated as ‘closed’, strong sites are expected to double as weak sites and they do not do this well.* This is especially true of schools. With so much concern about child abduction, molestation and mass shootings, American schools are very inward turned institutions, ringed in fences to create tight control over access. This is not welcoming of outsiders. One school we visited had no signage and ultimately required signing in at the principal’s office and maneuvering through much of the school to get to the cafeteria. There, a worker said that the preceding year they had a big sign outside to let the community know about the program, but so few outsiders came that they didn’t repeat it.† Not just schools but many other strong sites have an even more basic problem: depending on the layout of the eating area, there might not be any real way to segregate (or blend) program participants with outside families. Not having a separate area can create confusion for staff and families alike, to say nothing of the stigma of those there just to eat essentially having to render their impoverishment visible to an audience.

California Food Policy Advocates attributes much of the decline of the summer meals program to cutbacks in summer school sessions made in response to the Great Recession and recommend restoring funding to summer sessions. We heartily agree that such funding should be restored. We are, however, circumspect

* This obviously is a description of the San Diego experience, but recall that the Maryland Share Our Strength study talked about sites not knowing that they had to do this or denying that they had the capacity.

† A calculation attempted for this report was comparing enrollment at Seamless Summer summer school sites in 2012 with meal counts on the assumption that any meal count above 100 percent indicated that kids not attending school received meals. We calculated that for the county, meal counts averaged 81.6 percent of enrollment, suggesting that the school sites were doing a decent job of feeding their own kids but not many non-students. This would have supported our observations, but the response by the California Department of Education to a subsequent query has led us to believe that sponsors might be conceptualizing enrollment differently, undercutting the validity of the calculation.

about how significantly schools, minus a commitment to reconceptualize the school year, can feed low-income children over summer because kids may not have positive images of summer school.

It is important to recognize that summer session for school tends to serve two distinct subpopulations of students, and with properly designed programs, serves them well.³⁰ The smaller population could be called ‘the ambitious’. They are trying to improve their college prospects by fulfilling requirements over the summer to free themselves up for more challenging classes during the school year. The opportunities for students wanting to do this, however, have declined in recent years as local school districts have triaged their summer sessions to those most in need.* These are generally considered to be the ones who struggle to conform to the expectations of school districts—what are frequently called ‘special needs’ or ‘special education’ students. These students are at risk of being held back because of low grades or because of their lack of conformity with expectations of behavior. (At one summer school site we asked to visit, we were told to wait several weeks: the site combined students from three different schools and the administrator we spoke with was concerned about conflicts between different factions of students.) The association of summer school with stigmatized groups does not make summer school an appealing lunch destination for the larger population of kids. This needs to be changed.

While they always face competing needs, school districts have begun to reinvest in summer sessions and should do as much as their resources allow—with an eye toward burnishing its image as well. As districts do this, they should actively involve families as much as possible, not only because such involvement improves academic outcomes for children but also as a way to combat the reputation of the current summer school.³¹

Other barriers to participation at weak sites

In our interviews, parents raised a number of other concerns. They are not built into the nature of sites. Rather, they are risks built into having a decentralized program that requires the creation and maintenance of sites across every region of the country (just as the sheer number of staff involved means that statistically there will be places struggling with high turnover).

Daily and occasional participants perceived and responded to these potential barriers differently. The daily participants expressed few criticisms. Occasional participants were more likely to criticize the program. This difference came out in a number of ways. For instance, by participating in the program, both parents and children essentially lost control over the conditions under which they ate. They did not control what or when they ate and parents were essentially relegated to the position of being a spectator of their children’s meal. Daily participants took this more fatalistically. Occasional participants pointed to this as a problem.

* We attempted to call all the school districts using the summer meals program over the summer of 2013. In many cases, we had trouble tracking down anyone to talk to over the summer and getting enrollment data from the ones that we spoke to. All the districts that we did speak to, however, said that their summer sessions were limited to special needs/special education students. San Diego Unified, for instance, had in its summer sessions 755 students in the first and third grades, 259 students in eighth grade and 4,259 high school students, or 8.14 percent of its FRPM students.

In interviews, some parents raised issues about the food, with criticisms being more intense the closer the parents were to the middle class. A small number of our unrepresentative sample described the food as healthy or as better than what they had at home (as they could not afford vegetables). Lower middle-class parents, however, were more likely to say that the food offered was unhealthy or greasy, with a subset of full-time moms saying things like they would not serve such food (e.g., pizza, hamburgers) at home or that they wished that the milk be replaced by apple juice. These mothers were more likely to see that bringing their child to a site and having them eat food that they perceived as less healthy was something that they had to rationalize to us.

We wish we explored this further, as parents seem to have been conflating two issues, namely, on one hand, the fresh-from-the-oven appeal of something they prepared themselves versus the realities of catered food and, on the other hand, the nutritional value of the food. That is, because many sites relied on an off-site food preparation,* the food was seen as having lower nutritional value.† Something most parents had no way of knowing, however, is that the meals served through the federal program have to follow federal nutrition guidelines, so a summer meal hamburger is not strictly comparable to the seeming equivalent at a fast food joint.‡

A rare item, however, was thought of as ‘too healthy’. (Most of this criticism was directed at the little salads San Diego Unified offered, which were repeatedly criticized for being not what kids liked.) Portion sizes received little comment, though that’s probably because the kids were relatively uniform in age (less than ten years old). That the kids were picky was sometimes mentioned with frustration. Concerns about the food being culturally inappropriate were relatively rare, perhaps out of an expectation that the food served be ‘typical American’ food since the sites were open to the public. (One of the few criticisms of the food being alien: an Asian immigrant mom once asked us whether Americans ate their fruit cold and thought it strange that the site she visited always pulled fruit out of the refrigerator and immediately served it.)

The timing of meals did not receive much attention, though some families conceptualized lunches in ways that probably would surprise policymakers. A small subset of parents interpreted the meals as a ‘hold me over’ or a snack. As our notes described one mother, she ‘sees breakfast and dinner as the core meals (when her husband is home). Doesn’t really care what her daughter eats for lunch as long as she stays calm afterward. One less meal to cook.’ One grandparent said that the noon-hour timing of the meal (and

* A major exception to off-site cooking was the barbeques, where parents could often also take home packages of fresh fruits and vegetables (donated by food banks).

† One site we visited in 2012 had a fully operational cafeteria and the most visibly appealing food. Ironically, its food also received some of the most intense criticism for its nutritional value as the families were some of the most middle class we talked to.

‡ The 2010 Child Nutrition Act revamped the meal pattern guidelines for the first time in a generation, putting pressure on schools to up the nutritional value of their meals. In part in response to changes in the law but also just in response to greater awareness, school districts now are working to make their meals healthier (without necessarily applying the label ‘healthy’, which can stigmatize food as bland tasting). They are also working to make healthier items, like salads, more appealing by increasing the quality of ingredients (e.g., farm to school), building school gardens and expanding nutritional education.

the portions, which were small for her older children) made the program a perfectly timed snack to keep the kids from getting too hungry before their two o'clock lunch.

Since most of our interviews were with families using weak sites, by default they were the people who could in fact attend at times the meals were offered. It is important to recognize that summer meal sites in San Diego operate with narrow windows, usually an hour. With young children especially (doubly so if walking is involved), this can prove to be a difficult target to hit on a regular basis and simply might not fit into family routines very well, if, say, the family eats a late breakfast and the only nearby site has lunch from eleven to noon.

Sites dealt with timing issues differently. At one extreme, a site wanted everyone out of the room at the end of the hour and cut off food service about ten minutes before the end. In the middle were sites that were loose about closing time, basically waiting until there was a lull before closing shop. (Most meals tend to get served at the beginning of the hour). At the other extreme was—we were told about such but did not personally witness it—at least one site that essentially remained passively open until the meals were gone. This last approach has its obvious appeal, but logistical and staffing issues might not make it feasible everywhere and it can create confusion if people are some days able to get a meal late but not others.

What all of this means for parents and policymakers

The summer meals program is quite demanding on sites and sponsors. Both devote considerable resources, especially labor (both paid and volunteer). A 2011 survey of local sponsors by the San Diego Hunger Coalition found that almost two-thirds of the respondents (9 out of 14 answering) said that the reimbursement from the federal government did not cover their costs.³² Dollar amounts, however, do not give a sense of how much of themselves staff give.*

The current model, which relies heavily on weak sites to expand, also demands too much of policymakers, public and private. They have created a range of pilot and demonstration projects, streamlined rules where they could, funded research—all in hopes of reducing barriers to participation. Their evidence comes back to them that the problems in each state are different and that any of a number of solutions creates a bump that improves participation without fundamentally closing the summer meal gap. We submit that the individual problems they've found in different parts of the country are surface-level phenomena: when trying to explain the summer meals program, people in each region point to the most obvious difficulties before them and see those as the major causes, but even if those were cured, the low participation is not altered appreciably.

The underlying problem is that the weak site model of summer meals expects families to deviate in inconvenient and impractical ways from norms of consumption of food. The strength of the regular school meal program is that it provides one or two meals to children every day while they're at school. It's logical. It's convenient. In contrast, weak sites of the summer meals program demand much more of families. They must:

* Staff at weak sites are also less likely to be tasked solely with the role of feeding kids.

- Have ready access to a nearby site (or if not, transportation).
- Have an adult available to escort the children to a site who is willing to watch someone else eat a meal without eating themselves.
- At a time of someone else's choosing.
- Up to twice a day.
- Without anyone being too sick to leave the house or being contagious.
- Without the weather being unbearably hot or stormy.*
- Without any concerns about food allergies or sensitivities.
- Without any concern either whether the children like the food or are picky eaters (but assuming that they want to go).
- For every summer weekday that school is not in session.
- For potentially twelve years.

This demands too much of parents. To express this in terms of song lyrics, if the ideal community is one in which 'Nobody crowds you and nobody goes it alone', then the weak site model crowds families too much to accomplish its aims.³³

Trying to address all the individual barriers families might face in bringing their kids to summer meal sites creates a more and more convoluted program as each barrier is knocked away. Transportation can be provided, activities could be added, people who could be hired to watch over the kids while they're at a site, hours could be added, food choices could be expanded, etc. The more baroque the program becomes, the more it resembles a faux-school. At some point, it'll become simpler and more effective to either (a) make school year round or (b) help the kids eat at home.

Help them eat at home

It's well known that the summer meals program reaches only a fraction of the kids it is intended to serve. The program basically works for the children who come into contact with it, particularly at strong sites, but it has resisted expansion, suggesting that the current model only works for so many families, even with the modifications in its demonstrations and pilot projects. But the USDA has been trying one other approach that shows an efficient way to reach many, many more kids. It is radically different from the other demonstrations, or indeed, from what many people would consider to be the summer meals program itself. To wit, in 2011 and 2012, at about a dozen sites in nine states and two Indian nations, families were given electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards with money to pay for the meals that they would otherwise have gotten for free or for a reduced price during the school year. Kids did not have to go to a particular site day after day. Their families could prepare meals for them at home.

* This is much less of a concern in San Diego compared to the rest of the country because our weather is so mild. It makes much more of a challenge at outdoor sites elsewhere or where bad weather can discourage walking. The USDA has been exploring the impact of waiving the congregate requirement on days of excessive heat through a demonstration project.

This addresses virtually every concern raised in this report about the current configuration of the program and its potential for expansion. It eliminates so much that acts as drags on the expansion of the program: the need to blanket communities with sites but then only being able to reach areas of concentrated poverty, the massive efforts necessary to inform parents about the purpose and location of sites, the challenges of families getting to them (particularly in rural areas) and at the right time, the awkwardness of parents watching their children eat without eating themselves, etc. In short, while it does not solve every problem faced by low-income families over the summer, instead of forcing those families outside of mainstream norms of eating, SEBTC empowers parents to provide for their children. Furthermore, because the program does not need a fine-grained presence on the ground across communities, once established, it should not cost more per child than the current approach, perhaps even less, as the SEBTC per day gave a family half as much as the combined breakfast and lunch reimbursement given to a summer meals site.*

The Summer EBT for Children option addresses virtually every concern raised in this report about the program and, once established, should not cost more per child than the current approach.

The designers of the program deliberately implemented the program differently across sites to give themselves variation to study. The first of two main variations is whether sites required active or passive consent. This led to considerable difference in participation. The sites that required explicit permission to include them in the study had participation rates of 23 to 57 percent. Participation rates at the sites that gave the card to a family unless they said they didn't want one were over 90 percent. The second major variation was whether benefits would follow a WIC or SNAP model and whether the sites required active or passive consent.† Further, these sites were chosen to create a range of different demographic and geographic conditions and were not a sample representative of the nation as a whole. For these reasons, there were significant differences in outcomes.

Overall, however, across sites, including sites that had low participation because of how the EBT cards were distributed, the prevalence of 'very low food security'—a scandalous level of food insecurity that is much

* The USDA report does not spell out how much money kids got per weekday but says it was 'an approximately \$60 value per month', which would be about \$2.60 per weekday (executive summary, p. 1). The combined 2013 summer meals reimbursement at a non-rural site in the continental United States for breakfast (\$1.9425) and lunch (\$3.4125) was \$5.55. The reimbursement for a snack was \$0.80. The 2013 rates can be found at: <https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2013/02/04/2013-02231/summer-food-service-program-2013-reimbursement-rates#t-1>

† SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) allows people to buy any food (but not alcohol or tobacco). WIC (the supplemental nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children) gives mothers and pregnant women a card or coupon for purchasing select foods considered to be of high nutritional value. SNAP is sometimes criticized for allowing people to purchase unhealthy foods. The limitations on what can and cannot be purchased with WIC can be a headache and lead to checkout line embarrassment if the wrong item or wrong quantity is purchased. The study actually had two models of SNAP, one that put it directly on the family's card and another that gave them a separate one.

worse than ‘low food security’—dropped from 9.5 percent among those in the control group who do not receive the benefits to 6.4 percent for those who did, a finding statistically significant at the $p < 0.0001$ level, meaning that the odds that the conclusions were the result of chance were practically nil. Further, those who received the summer EBT (SEBT) ate modestly more servings per day of fruits, vegetables and whole grains and drank fewer servings of sugar-sweetened beverages, with the WIC sites showing slightly better results, save for whole grains, where the difference was much larger: SNAP sites saw an increase of 0.2 servings per day and WIC sites showing 0.89 servings per day.³⁴ (This came at the cost of lower participation.*)

All of this—the reduced rates of very low food security, the healthier consumption patterns and the higher participation—all strongly point to the Summer EBT for Children (SEBTC) program as a potential game-changer for the experience of summer for American kids. It deserves our strongest support.

Making this program a reality for kids from San Diego to Alaska to Maine to Florida will not be easy. Anti-hunger advocates—be they in Congress, religious organizations or nonprofits—should press for this strategically. How precisely this should be done will require many candid discussions and is beyond the scope of this report, but we must build upon the momentum from the federal EBT demonstrations. There is at present no other viable long-term solution being seriously considered for reaching these kids.

In the meantime...

A summer EBT program is not something that will appear overnight. While we wait for political progress—while we tread water watching for the opportunity to break for shore—a number of things can be done to improve the existing program. We should recognize that none of these is a magic bullet and that with each, we have to ask ourselves whether the results will justify the effort expended.

First, we should strengthen strong sites, especially schools. As California Food Policy Advocates has argued for several years, we need to rebuild summer school, a rebuilding, we should add, that includes increasing its appeal to kids. Such an expansion of school is likely the most efficient way to reach as many kids as possible. Given improving budget pictures for schools in many states, including, in California, the new local Control Funding Formula, there may be opportunities to expand summer enrichment programs.³⁵ It should be recognized, however, that school boards have to make difficult decisions balancing a variety of needs, of which summer is only one.

Likewise, anything else that could be done to strengthen non-school strong sites or to support the creation of new ones should be encouraged. In the research for this report, we have not explored what it would take to support non-school strong sites, but it deserves further study. Creating new strong sites—that is, the creation of programming with a purpose, to which food is attached—is likely to be more successful than trying to add programming to a food site. If this is done, however, it must be done with recognition

* Broadly speaking: ‘The three SNAP or SNAP-hybrid sites had the highest mean redemption rates among participating households (93% to 98%). The two WIC-model States had substantially lower mean redemption rates (71% in Michigan and 85% in Texas).’ (ibid., p. 13)

that only a fraction of the resources devoted to these strong sites will in fact be going toward stabilizing children's diets over the summer.

If members of local task forces believe this is where they should concentrate their energies, they should explore the possibilities of creating—and then subsuming their work into—broader summer opportunities task forces that focus on expanding programming for low-income children when school is out. This would likely be a matter primarily of finding funding for programs to create more slots for children or to lower the cost for parents. If a task force wishes to consider this, it should explore the following questions:

- Do low-income parents feel the need for more programming?
- What are the funding sources and organizations that we could partner with?
- What are the policy opportunities for increasing funding or developing new programming?

Additional programming opportunities for kids would likely especially help working parents. It would be less helpful for those working class mothers for whom it is a point of pride and a great source of meaning in their lives to be full-time parents. Although it would not have anywhere near the impact of summer EBT, these moms would potentially be helped by strengthening weak sites or creating new ones. This is most likely low-hanging fruit in high density, walkable neighborhoods with a high portion of stay-at-home parents.

As experience across the nation suggest, improving participation at weak sites will not be easy.* In addition to all the barriers families face in trying to fit visits to these sites into their lives, the program faces a challenge: we live in an age of information overload, which requires tuning out many of the efforts to grab attention. It's easy to make the decision to ignore messages about the summer meals program: the logic of the program is likely to strike someone unfamiliar with it as odd—most people haven't encountered a program like it before—and the unusual qualities make it easy to dismiss as something that takes more mental energy to figure out than it's worth. The charity model likewise might set people on guard because, after all, there's no such thing as a free lunch. (There must be a catch.) Attempts to encourage families must begin with recognition that simply getting their attention is in itself going to be a feat given that many of them don't want to be engaged by strangers and think of such efforts as just more advertising that they have to decipher.

The San Diego County Summer Meals Task Force has, for the last two years, taken a two-step promotional approach, namely to alert families to the existence of free meals and then trying to steer parents to the 2-1-1 San Diego website so they could find nearby sites. For 2013, the 2-1-1 San Diego website had 504 unique visitors, which, if we assume that each visitor represents a family successfully connected to a site on a daily basis and that the number of meals served for the year was similar to 2012 (2013 data is not yet available), then this represents roughly one percent of the kids who eat meals at the site, which creates a

* The best indoor sites tended to be of newer construction, but overall, the most appealing weak sites were parks with shade. These had a picnic quality to them. San Diego is one of the few places in the country where pleasant weather is all but guaranteed virtually every day of the summer and we should take advantage of it.

trajectory of growth likely to be less than the replacement rate for children who grow up and no longer are within the ken of the program.*

This is consistent with the Share Our Strength Colorado report, as are our suggestions: use less mass media techniques and instead personalize the program.† We could work harder on getting trusted sources to tell parents about it. In addition to community specific leaders that will vary from community to community—perhaps a community organizer in one neighborhood, a charismatic minister in another—probably the most widely trusted sources of information are schools and the parents of classmates and friends. Schools blast information about summer meals out to their student populations in a variety of ways, like robo-calls, notes home to parents and the like. More could be done to ‘hand sell’ the program to individual kids and parents—for instance, mention to students in nutrition classes, to parents at parent-teacher conferences or other times when teachers or staff interact with parents—and certainly much more could be done to encourage parents to talk to other parents. San Diego Unified uses an advertising model of outreach. It is beyond the scope of this report to describe, but their approach could be extended. There is an entire field of research devoted to consumer psychology. One of the things studied is the conditions under which word of mouth communication about products takes off. Such research could inform deliberate efforts to encourage parents to talk about the program.

Likewise, to make the message of summer meals better register with parents and kids, more could be done to make summer meals be seen as an extension of what they’re already familiar with, namely school meals. That is, summer meals could be more strongly pitched as ‘getting during the summer the meals you’d normally get at school’, something that could be especially compelling coming from the schools themselves. This is not necessarily a message that will appeal to everyone, but this is a message that could potentially resonate with kids who already get free or reduced price meals at school. It’s potentially something that they’re less likely to dismiss as part of the great white noise of our overstimulating modern life. Further, stressing summer meals as part of the school cycle could be folded into messaging about being prepared, physically and mentally, to return to school in the fall ready to continue learning, which is already a goal for many school districts.

Expanding weak sites will, of course, only work insofar as summer meals are a positive experience for families. That takes money. Assuming adequately trained staff, meal quality—both in terms of taste and presentation—is largely a function of the money spent. Likewise, the physical condition of sites depends on maintenance and the timely replacement of exhausted materials. In many communities, there has been a long term trend toward underfunding public resources. Realistically, it is unlikely that significant moneys can be found just for summer meals when so many other community needs remain unmet. Coalitions must be built to address the issue of underfunding on a wider scale.

* The argument could be made, however, that the participation of 2–1–1 San Diego, Radio Latina, public comments by elected officials and all the other forms of outreach of the promotional strategy help legitimate the program in the eyes of families even if the actual number of people who can be pinpointed as being influenced by them seems to be low.

† In a USDA webinar entitled ‘Keeping Schools Involved With Summer Meals’ (April 3, 2014), the director of the McAllen Independent School District’s food service program reported success using t-shirts and yard signs to generate interest, as well as coordinating activities at school, like athletic practices, to work well with meals. The recording can be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBccton6gOdrMM068BgMhIBuk-XI2AhFq>.

We have before us great tasks. On one hand, federal law needs to be reformed, no mean feat in the best of times, which the present surely is not. We need to connect our work to the work of others who strive to provide for children's other needs during the summer. We must work together to expand opportunities for kids to attend summer programming and to strengthen weak sites. None of this will be easy. But we must all apply our talents as we have them to ensure that summer for children is not an expanse of boredom interrupted by, at best, the mechanical eating of junk food—but instead be a pleasurable experience that turns into fond memories.

FINIS

Notes

¹ See: <http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-studies/map-the-meal-gap.aspx>.

² The figure is from page two of the CFPA report. The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) releases annual reports on summer meals. The latest can be found at: http://frac.org/pdf/2013_summer_nutrition_report.pdf. See p. 15.

³ Data on participation in federal child nutrition programs can be found at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/cnpmain.htm>. Also of interest is *The Changing Child Population of the United States: Analysis of Data from the 2010 Census* (p. 4): <http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Initiatives/KIDS%20COUNT/T/TheChangingChildPopulationoftheUnitedStates/AECFChangingChildPopulationv8web.pdf> and the slightly dated (2008) Economic Research Service report *The National School Lunch Program: Background, Trends, and Issues*: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err61.aspx#.Uw4qniWVLPQ>.

⁴ See: http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/SFSP_excel-data.xls. The fiscal year 2013 data is subject to revision.

⁵ See: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/program-history>.

⁶ See: http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/resources/Share%20Our%20Strength%20Summer%20Meals%20Focus%20Groups_FINAL_042012%20%282%29.pdf.

⁷ This critique of surveys is based upon Pierre Bourdieu's (1972) essay 'Public Opinion Does Not Exist', which can be accessed at: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/73104573/Public-Opinion-Does-Not-Exist-Pierre-Bourdieu-1972>.

⁸ Page 9 of Share Our Strength. *Summer Meals Survey*. March 2013. <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/resources/SOS%20-%20Summer%20Meals%20Survey%20Report%20FINAL2.pdf> The crosstabs can be found at: <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/resources/Summer%20Meals%20Crosstabs%20-%20National.pdf>.

⁹ The FRAC reports referenced here are: http://frac.org/pdf/summer_report_2010.pdf and http://frac.org/pdf/2013_summer_nutrition_report.pdf.

¹⁰ See Share our Strength, Center for Best Practices. 2013. *Colorado No Kid Hungry Summer Meals Evaluation* (especially p. 4). Available at: <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/summer-meals/share-our-strength-summer-perspective>.

¹¹ The FRAC reports referenced here are: http://frac.org/pdf/2012_summer_nutrition_report.pdf and http://frac.org/pdf/2013_summer_nutrition_report.pdf.

¹² The Arkansas report can be found at: http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/download/file/fid/586_

¹³ See No Kid Hungry, Center for Best Practice. 2013. *North Carolina Summer Meals Waiver Case Study*. Available at: <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org>.

¹⁴ Page i. The report can be found at: <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/resources/Maryland%20Summer%20Meals%20Evaluation.pdf>

¹⁵ Page 14.

¹⁶ An overview of the different waves can be found on pp. 25–26 of Food Nutrition Service. 2012. *Evaluation of the Impact of Enhancement Demonstrations on Participation in the SFSP: FY 2011*, which can be accessed at: http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/eSFSP_FY2011_0.pdf.

USDA reports can be confusing to keep track of and the URLs sometimes change. The best to find them is to use the main portal instead of individual links, which are nonetheless given. The portal can be found at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/report-finder>.

¹⁷ Figure 1 visually demonstrates the fluctuations in participation. See also Gordon, Anne, and Ronette Briefel. 2003. *Feeding Low-Income Children When School Is Out—The Summer Food Service Program*. Washington, DC: Economic Research Service: www.mathematica-mpr.com/PDFs/feedinglow.pdf.

¹⁸ See pp. ii-iii of Food Nutrition Service. *Evaluation of the Impact of Incentives Demonstrations on Participation in the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP): FY 2010, Arkansas and Mississippi*. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/evaluation-impact-incentives-demonstrations-participation-summer-food-service-programs-sfsp-fy-2010>.

¹⁹ See p. iv of Food Nutrition Service. *Evaluation of the Impact of Enhancement Demonstrations on Participation in the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP): FY 2011*. November 2013. http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/eSFSP_FY2011_0.pdf.

²⁰ On the rise of hyper-vigilance among middle-class parents, see: Nelson, Margaret K. 2010. 'Op-ed: Helicopter Moms, Heading for a Crash.' *Washington Post*. July 4. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/02/AR2010070202445.html>. See also Senior, Jennifer. 2014. *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*. New York: HarperCollins. Senior refers to 'hyperparenting' and focuses on the emotional costs to parents much more than on the risk aversion.

²¹ The data file can be found at: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/documents/frpm1213.xls>.

²² See Sharp, Matthew and Tia Shimada. 2013. *School's Out. . . Who Ate? A Report on Summer Nutrition in California*. Los Angeles and Oakland: California Food Policy Advocates.

²³ Poppendieck, Janet. 1999. *Sweet Charity: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*. New York: Penguin Books.

²⁴ This rule changed in 2012. The exact language is at: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/sf/mbusdasfsp032012.asp>.

²⁵ This map was generated using a tool developed by the Food Research Action Council: <http://www.fairdata2000.com/SummerFood/>.

²⁶ The school districts counted include: Alpine Union Elementary, Bonsall Union Elementary, Borrego Springs Unified, Dehesa Elementary, Fallbrook Union Elementary, Fallbrook Union High, Jamul-Dulzura Union Elementary, Julian Union Elementary, Julian Union High, Lakeside Union Elementary, Mountain Empire Unified, Ramona City Unified, San Pasqual Union Elementary, Vallecitos Elementary (excluding online), Valley Center-Pauma Unified and Warner Unified.

²⁷ \$3.75 was the West Coast average recorded for July 1, 2013 by the US Energy Information Administration. <http://www.eia.gov/petroleum/gasdiesel/> The US Department of Energy's median highway fuel efficiency for 2006 was 25 mpg (see <http://www.fueleconomy.gov/feg/download.shtml>). Using 25 mpg might be optimistic because families in need of the program drive older cars and have below-average access to hybrids.

²⁸ Louv, Richard. 2005. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books.

²⁹ McDonald, Noreen C., Brown, Austin L., Marchetti, Lauren M., and Margo S. Pedroso. U.S. School Travel, 2009: An assessment of Trends. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 41(2): 146–151.

³⁰ Borman, Geoffrey D. 2003. 'The Effects of Summer School: Questions Answered, Questions Raised'. *Monographs of the Society for the Research in Child Development* 65(1): 119–127.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Kordela, Kenneth, John Lucero Criswell, and Maureen Polimadei. 2011. *San Diego County Lunch Program Diagnostic*. San Diego: The San Diego Hunger Coalition. Reimbursements in California have improved slightly since the 2011 report. The Consumer Price Index increased approximately 4 percent from 2011 to 2013. Reimbursements, with some variability between meal type, increased about 5 percent. State reimbursement rates can be found at: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/nu/rs/index.asp>.

³³ Bruce Springsteen's 'The Long Walk Home' from the 2007 album *Magic*.

³⁴ pp. 115 and 123 of Food Nutrition Service. *Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Evaluation Findings for the Full Implementation Year*. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/SEBTC2012.pdf>.

³⁵ See figure 3 of Leachman, Michael and Chris Mai. 2013. 'Most states funding schools less than before the Great Recession', September 12. <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=4011>. Approximately a third of the states have cut their per-student funding from fiscal years 2013 to 2014 or let inflation eat into them.

The San Diego Hunger Coalition is a nonprofit organization that works on state and federal legislation and participates in numerous local coalitions aimed at developing effective solutions to hunger, including lifting people out of poverty, improving access to SNAP/CalFresh, improving school meal programs and developing a sustainable food system that can provide nutritious food to everyone. Our vision is of a day when no San Diegan goes hungry; it is our mission to see the most fundamental need of food fulfilled. By educating and advocating about this issue on the local, state and national level, we can help defeat unnecessary suffering.

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