

Bridging the Summer Meals Gap

Increasing access to fresh and nutritious foods during the summer can strengthen national security



Acknowledgements

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Mission: Readiness

Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble

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Only 1 in 7 children participating in the school lunch program has access to summer meals

For many children, summer provides a break from the regular routine of the school year. However, for kids who depend on school meals, losing access to these meals during the summer months can lead to a lack of proper nutrition and food insecurity. For this reason, summer meals are a vital way to bridge the gap in consistent food access faced by kids who are food insecure when school is out.

In order to support children and families who depend on school meals, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) funds federal summer nutrition programs, administered by designated agencies in each state. Most programs serve meals using the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). All children 18 years old and under who visit an approved SFSP site can receive meals that meet federal nutrition standards.¹ SFSP provides federal funding

to schools and nonprofits to ensure children who live in low-income areas receive fresh and nutritious foods during school holidays, weekends, after school, and during the summer. Recently, these programs have proven vital in providing meals to children whose schools have closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Summer meals and COVID-19

Summer meals help children maintain consistent access to fresh and nutritious foods between school years. With schools and summer meal sites closed due to the pandemic, Congress passed legislation acknowledging that for many children, school and summer meals are their only healthy, balanced, and nutritious meal of the day. Funding has been allocated so that schools and summer meal sites can continue serving healthy meals.

However, the disruption to daily life caused by the pandemic has also illuminated some of the shortcomings of the existing summer meal program. Many summer meal programs operate in congregate meal sites, which can reduce access for children without transportation to these sites. Current social distancing guidelines are likely to extend into summer, potentially reducing or eliminating the availability of congregate meal sites. An additional challenge in providing consistent access to fresh and nutritious foods for children during the pandemic is the fact that the usual supply of food available to schools has been interrupted. Substituting foods and ensuring meals remain balanced may not be possible without the meal preparation knowledge of school food-service staff. Finally, a lack of meals provided through these federal programs is impacting family finances at a time when budgets may already be stretched thin, further limiting access to fresh and nutritious foods.

In light of these issues, there are ways to ensure that children are still able to access the nutrition they need, both during the pandemic and once schools reopen. These include increasing the available training and funding for meal preparers so that meals can be adapted to utilize available foods (instead of relaxing nutrition standards), and increasing funding and options for summer food delivery. Additionally, the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) provides additional funding for families to purchase food during the summer.²

Summer meals can help prevent food insecurity

As of 2017, 17 percent of children in the United States experienced food insecurity,

which the USDA defines as a reduction in the quality, variety, or desirability of diet, or a disruption in eating patterns and reduced food intake due to a household lack of resources, financial or otherwise, necessary to obtain adequate food.³ Estimates show that in the wake of the pandemic, this number could rise as high as 25 percent, due to increased unemployment and poverty levels.⁴ Children who live in food-insecure households can experience malnutrition, may be more at risk for obesity, and are also at higher risk for chronic illness, asthma, and iron-deficiency anemia.⁵

In addition to the physical problems that food insecurity can help create, a lack of adequate, healthy food can have other impacts. Food insecurity can lead to cognitive issues such as decreased memory, decreased problem solving and reasoning skills, and decreased ability to understand concepts.⁶ Poor nutrition caused by food insecurity can lead to lower overall academic performance.⁷ Food-insecure children are also at a higher risk of developmental problems than their food-secure peers.⁸

Programs like SFSP can help address food insecurity, and weight gain that can occur during the summer, by providing nutritious meals and physical activity for children throughout the summer.⁹

Summer meals can help improve nutrition and strengthen national security

A 2016 report from the U.S. Department of Defense's Joint Advertising Market Research and Studies program found that 71 percent of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 would not meet the military's core eligibility requirements.¹⁰ Obesity is one of the largest medical disqualifiers. Current

obesity rates prevent otherwise-eligible young people who are interested in serving in the armed forces from qualifying.

Between 1999 and 2016, the United States experienced significant increases in obesity for both children and adults.¹¹ In 2018, 42.4 percent of adults were obese; in 2016, nearly 19 percent of youth ages 2-19 were obese.¹² These rates are concerning from a public health standpoint, but they are also a national security issue. The health problems caused by obesity in young people can impact their future ability to serve in the armed forces. Mission: Readiness members have been actively promoting the importance of summer nutrition for nearly a decade. These retired military leaders know that improving access to fresh and nutritious foods during the summer can reduce obesity and improve children's health, which can strengthen national security by ensuring the military has a healthy pool of recruits.¹³

SFSP can help prevent obesity by providing children from low-income families with healthy food, as well as recreation and education programs, during the summer. This multi-faceted approach provides nutritious meals, thereby combating food insecurity, as well as educational programming to help combat weight gain.

However, only a small percentage of children eligible to receive summer meals participate in SFSP. Nationally, for every seven children who participated in free and reduced-price lunch during the 2017-2018 school year, only one child participated in SFSP. Between July 2017 and July 2018, national participation in SFSP decreased by nearly six percent, marking the third year in

“ We must ensure that children have access to fresh and nutritious foods throughout the school year and summer. Without proper nutrition, our young people will not be prepared to succeed.”



Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Edward Tonini
U.S. Air Force

a row of declining participation rates.¹⁴ Factors such as fewer program sites and reduced community eligibility for SFSP have led to these decreases.¹⁵ These numbers illustrate the inconsistent food access that school lunch program participants may experience; a large majority of kids who have access to healthy, nutritious food during the school year may lose that access during the summer.¹⁶ For this reason, food insecurity rates increase during the summer months. Studies have shown that increased availability of summer meals helps to reduce food insecurity.¹⁷

Addressing these decreases in participation is important to ensure that children are able to get the nutrition they need during the summer, and the rest of the year.¹⁸

Increasing the reach of SFSP could contribute to a reduction in food insecurity. Innovative mobile food dissemination sites, assistance in addressing the financial strain on low income families over the summer, and developing private and community food delivery options should be explored.¹⁹ Such programs are currently filling the nutrition gap left by closed schools during the COVID-19 pandemic; lessons learned from this innovative response can be applied to future SFSP implementation.

The impact of SFSP throughout the United States

In 2018, an evaluation was conducted of park and recreation agencies in rural and urban communities throughout the United States that served meals through the USDA's child nutrition programs. In rural communities, the most effective programs offered structured programming that incorporated various activities, including

nutrition education and physical activity. Successful programs also partnered with community organizations, such as schools, youth sports programs and libraries to ensure children throughout the community were able to access summer meals. Programs that offered mobile feeding sites and additional drop-in meal sites were also effective in the communities evaluated.²⁰

Individual states have also found various ways to serve more children during the summer months. In Kentucky, for example, children who experience food insecurity are most vulnerable during the summer. Over 500,000 Kentucky children receive free lunch during the school year; however, just one in every 12 children who participates in NSLP has access to summer meals.²¹ In order to meet this need, Kentucky has over 2,700 sites statewide that provide meals each year through SFSP. This concerted effort to open SFSP sites in areas of need can result in more eligible sites, and increased participation.

Conclusion

Ensuring that all children have consistent access to fresh and nutritious food year-round is critical for kids to grow up to be healthy and prepared for any career they choose, including the military. Increasing funding for school and summer meal programs, adapting meals to incorporate available foods while maintaining nutritional standards, and providing additional options for food delivery are all vital in supporting children's access to healthy food whenever schools are not open. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has proven these programs' necessity in ensuring children have the nutrition they need.

Endnotes

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