

Only One in Seven Eligible Kids Get Free Lunch in the Summer. What's Going Wrong?

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Food insecurity increases in the summer, but providers who want to get free meals to kids say they're restricted by an onerous and outdated program.

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Publish date:

Jul 3, 2019



Children eat breakfast at the start of a day camp program at Casa Juan Diego St. Pius V Youth Center on June 24th, 2009, in Chicago. The center provides free breakfast and lunch to about 90 children a day.

(Photo: Scott Olson/Getty Images)

It's lunchtime at a new affordable housing complex in Goleta, a city in California's central coast. Kids trickle into the community center in trios or pairs—some with parents, others with siblings. On the last Friday in June, the center resembles a school cafeteria turned

summer camp: Two volunteers, both parents who live in the nearby apartments, hand out meals from giant coolers. Kids wrestle outside on the astroturf, next to a pastel-colored playground. Inside, a first-grader alternates between taking bites of biscuit and putting the finishing touches on a *Finding Dory*-themed coloring page.

This is where many of the neighborhood's low-income children come to bridge the gap between June and August, when they can no longer get free breakfast and lunch at school. In Santa Barbara County, one in every four kids are food insecure—and research shows they're more likely to go hungry in the summer, meaning they're also at higher risk of resultant harmful health conditions and losing educational progress made during the school year.

The federal program intended to address this problem, the Summer Food Service Program, reimburses food banks, school districts, and other non-profit sponsors for the cost of each meal. Anyone under 18 is eligible to attend a site, which are located in areas where half the kids are low-income. Kids do not need to provide any form of identification to get a meal.

In Goleta, the Santa Barbara Unified School District sets the menu and cooks the food, which the Santa Barbara Food Bank then delivers to 17 sites across the county in sturdy, plastic restaurant take-out boxes. The children in the program have to eat it all at the site, per a United States Department of Agriculture requirement.

Nine-year-old Esmeralda Lopez is just happy today that there's no chicken, which she eats too much of at school. "This is better," she says, picking at her pasta salad with a plastic fork. Esmeralda and her sister Ruby come to the picnic in the park every day, every week of their summer: Their mother is one of the volunteers, and it's only a short walk from their apartment.

But not all kids who need food in the summer can find a meal so close to home. Participation in the program declined for the third year in a row last year. Nationally, the summer program's rates of participation are dismal compared to the National School Lunch Program, which serves many of the same kids during the school year. According to estimates from the non-profit Food Research & Action Center, only 14 percent of kids who get free and reduced lunch also get summer meals, leaving some 26 million more hungry.

The reasons for this gap are complex and vary across the country, but providers have been complaining of a few major barriers within the program for years. Kids often lack transportation to and from a meal site, and the program only reimburses food banks for the cost of the meal, not transportation; some non-profits can't front the cost of the meals or handle the applications to get their sites approved; and parents' meals aren't subsidized by the USDA, meaning they have to sit and watch while their kids eat—or they don't come at all.

Last year, a U.S. Government Accountability Office [report](#) found that the program was in serious need of overhaul. Seventeen states and providers reported a challenge "ensuring meal sites were in safe locations," and others noted the large administrative burden associated with sponsoring a site: Sites that offer free food during the school year must re-apply in the summer, a requirement that excludes some would-be sponsors. GAO officials recommended that the USDA clarify its exemptions to the on-site rule and streamline administrative requirements across multiple child nutrition programs.

But little has been done about it, according to [Kathryn Larin](#), director of the GAO's workforce and income security team. "To date, [the] USDA has not taken action to address those recommendations, so to the extent that we identified areas where we believe [the Food and Nutrition Service, which administers the program] could make improvements, we believe those areas should still be addressed," Larin wrote in an email.

For the groups sponsoring these lunches—typically food banks and school districts—the current requirements make it harder to start new sites, and harder to get kids there. "It's tough: It's one meal, you sit there for the whole meal, the child can't take any food away, and the parents can't eat," says [Anahid Brakke](#), executive director of the non-profit research group San Diego Hunger Coalition. "We need to deal with the limitations and restrictions of the program."

Many food banks, school districts, and non-profits across the country launched their summer meal programs in early June with the goal of reaching kids where they are. In New Orleans, Second Harvest Food Bank serves breakfast and lunch every day at summer camps, churches, and libraries across the city, where kids are already congregating. Second Harvest's summer program manager, [Tanya O'Reilly](#), says the smaller sites average about 50 kids, but she'd like to serve more. "Some of these kids are so young," she says. "It's not like we're going to put a five-year-old on the bus to get to site."

At the Greater Chicago Food Depository, staff has tried to get around this problem with their lunch bus program, which operates three routes in the city and suburbs, delivering about 2,700 meals a week—although kids still have to eat at the bus' five stops. Thousands more are served at parks and libraries.

[Stephanie Bray](#), president and chief executive officer of United Way California Capital Region, says she'd like to buy food trucks or provide transit passes to kids in the Sacramento area. "No matter how many sites you put in the community, there may still be an access issue, especially in parts of our region, where there aren't bus routes," she says. "If we could figure out how to remove that barrier, it would make a huge difference."

Sacramento's United Way has also started serving meals to parents subsidized through a non-federal grant, in hopes that parents will be more motivated to bring their children if they can eat too.

But there's only so much non-profits can do without policy changes. Lawmakers have proposed several solutions to get at the access issue: A new bill introduced by Senators Kirsten Gillibrand (D–New York) and Lisa Murkowski (R–Alaska) would provide grant funding for vehicles to reach kids in rural areas, make more neighborhoods eligible for the program by dropping the requirement that 50 percent of area children be low-income to 40 percent, and allow agencies to provide three meals a day instead of two. Another recent proposal in the House of Representatives would expand the summer Electronic Benefit Transfer program, which gives families money for groceries, and which many hunger advocates have praised as a way to feed families that can't get to a site.

"If kids can be at summer sites that are providing much-needed child care, that's the best opportunity, but in places where there are fewer summer food sites, the model that give families a summer EBT card, which allows them to purchase food during the summer months ... is a really important strategy," says Crystal FitzSimons, policy analyst for Food Research & Action Center. "Evaluations were done on that approach and found that it did reduce food insecurity among families with children. That really isn't a surprise."

Still, providers aren't optimistic about the House bill's chances under an administration that's already restricted access and eligibility to public benefit programs that administer EBT. President Donald Trump's immigration policies have affected participation too: The San Diego Hunger Coalition recorded a drop in participation in 2017, which the group's child nutrition director, Paloma Perez Bertrand, believes could be tied to the proposed public charge rule that discourages adults seeking green cards from using public benefits. Around 28 percent of children in California have at least one non-citizen parent, who will likely experience chilling effects from the rule, even if they're not directly affected. "People are afraid to go to a public space," Perez Bertrand says. "We promote that there's no registration needed for these meals, but it's an issue of trust. ... Families don't want to risk it."

But at the housing complex in Goleta, property manager Sonia Esquivel says the lunch program has been a success in its first year at this site. Parents are interested; kids are too. "I think it's a good idea to give kids food, and it's healthy," says Layla, 14. Layla and her brother usually eat their mom's food—pozole or beans with rice and chicken—for lunch, but they decided this meal was worth the walk. "I'd eat anything," Axel says, laughing.