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Summer Food for Children: An Overview of Federal Aid

Introduction

Since the late 1960s, the federal government has provided assistance for summer meals served to children through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), which provides funding for meals served by nonprofit organizations, school districts, and public agencies to children during the summer. The Seamless Summer Option (SSO), which was authorized in 2004, allows school districts to operate a modified version of the school meals programs (the National School Lunch Program [NSLP] and School Breakfast Program [SBP]) into the summer.

Traditionally, summer meals have been consumed by children on-site with other participants (referred to as *congregate feeding*). Starting in summer 2023, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328) enabled off-site consumption for children living in rural areas. It also authorized a permanent, nationwide Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (Summer EBT) Program for Children starting in summer 2024 to provide eligible households with benefits over the summer that can be redeemed for groceries. Summer EBT previously operated as a demonstration project.

The summer meal and Summer EBT programs are administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).

Summer Meal Programs

The summer meal programs (SFSP and SSO) are authorized under Section 13 of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act. They provide federal reimbursement for meals served by participating institutions to children during summer vacation periods in May through September (except for schools with continuous calendars). They may also operate during unanticipated school closures between October and April. Federal funding is provided to state agencies, which oversee and distribute reimbursements to eligible institutions.

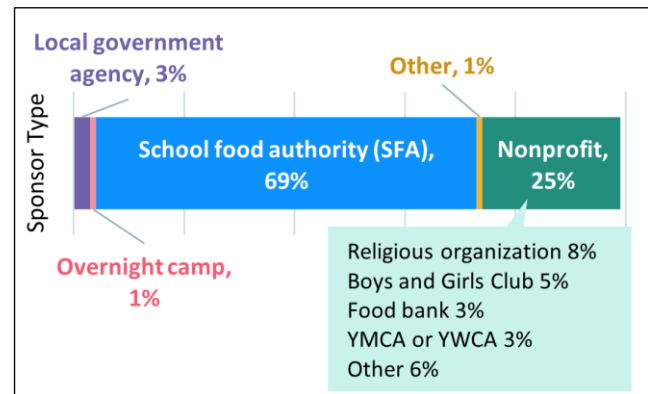
Eligible Institutions

In SFSP, eligible institutions (*sponsors*) are nonprofit organizations, school food authorities, and government agencies (including tribal governments) that provide a year-round service to the community.

In SSO, school food authorities (typically food service departments of school districts) that participate in NSLP and SBP during the school year are the only type of eligible sponsor. School food authorities have the option to participate in SFSP or SSO (or neither). School food authorities may find SSO easier to administer, but they receive larger reimbursements under SFSP. A USDA study found that three-quarters of sponsors chose to operate SFSP in summer 2018, many preferring its nutrition standards and higher reimbursement rates.

In both programs, sponsors operate meal sites at various locations, including schools, recreation centers, and parks. As a result of P.L. 117-328, starting in summer 2023 sponsors are allowed to provide meals for off-site consumption (e.g., pick-up and delivery) to children living in rural areas without access to congregate meal sites. Other sponsors must serve meals on-site unless they obtain permission from the state agency to serve meals off-site (e.g., during extreme weather conditions).

Figure 1. Summer Meal Sponsors by Type, 2018



Source: USDA-FNS, *Summer Meals Study: Volume 2*, p. 3-4.

Notes: Includes SFSP and SSO sponsors.

Eligible Sites

Sponsors may only operate SFSP/SSO when certain eligibility criteria are met. These criteria for the most common types of meal sites—open sites and closed enrolled sites—are as follows:

- **Open sites** (open to any child in the community on a first-come, first-serve basis) must be located in an area in which at least 50% of children qualify for free or reduced-price (F/RP) school meals (*area eligibility*). They serve free meals to all children and receive reimbursement for all meals served.
- **Closed enrolled sites** (open only to enrolled children) must establish, using area eligibility data or individual eligibility information for enrolled children, that at least 50% of children qualify for F/RP school meals. They serve free meals to all enrolled children and receive reimbursement for all meals served.

In contrast, any public or nonprofit *camp* (a residential or day camp that provides organized programs for enrolled children) may operate SFSP. However, camps are only required to serve free meals to children who qualify for F/RP meals, and they receive reimbursement only for such meals.

Reimbursement

Both SFSP and SSO provide cash reimbursements for up to two meals (or one meal and one snack) per child daily, with exceptions for camps and sites serving migrant children, which may serve up to three meals (or two meals and one snack) per child daily. Sponsors may use reimbursements for allowable operational and administrative expenses.

To receive reimbursement, SFSP meals must meet SFSP nutritional requirements and SSO meals must meet NSLP/SBP nutritional requirements.

Summer EBT

Summer EBT provides electronic benefits that can be redeemed for groceries to households with eligible children over the summer months. Summer EBT operated as a demonstration project from summers 2011-2023 in selected states and tribal organizations, and was permanently authorized by P.L. 117-328, which allows for nationwide operation of the program beginning in summer 2024. Many states and territories had already offered a similar benefit to households with children under the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, which ended after summer 2023.

Under current law, all states and territories, and some Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) have the option to operate Summer EBT. Eligible households in participating jurisdictions receive a \$40 per child, per month grocery benefit (adjusted annually for inflation) that they can redeem at Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)-authorized retailers. Children who receive F/RP meals during the school year are automatically enrolled in the program (though families may opt out). States participating in the program must also establish an application process, using the same eligibility criteria as F/RP school meals, for other children.

There are separate program options for ITOs participating in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) (some of whom previously operated the Summer EBT demonstration through WIC); territories that do not operate SNAP (American Samoa, Puerto Rico, and the Northern Mariana Islands); and children who attend year-round schools.

Summer EBT benefits are fully federally funded; however, grantees must cover half of the administrative costs. As of June 2025, participating jurisdictions in 2025 are 37 states, the District of Columbia, five territories, and five Indian tribal organizations.

Summer Meal Demonstrations

The 2010 agriculture appropriations act (P.L. 111-80, §749(g)) authorized demonstration projects to test alternatives to traditional summer feeding methods. Using this authority and subsequent funding provided in appropriations acts, USDA carried out several demonstration projects, including Summer EBT.

Another demonstration project, *Summer Meals-to-You*, mailed weekly meal boxes to children in rural communities. Households were eligible to receive the boxes if they attended a participating school district and had a child who qualified for F/RP school meals. USDA awarded funding to Baylor University's Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty

to administer the program, which operated in three states between summers 2019-2022.

Funding

Funding for SFSP and SSO is open-ended, appropriated mandatory funding. Funding is provided as reimbursements that are calculated based on the number of meals served. Statute includes a per-meal reimbursement rate that is adjusted annually for inflation (up to \$4.69 per lunch in SSO and up to \$5.40 per lunch in SFSP as of June 2025 in the contiguous states). A smaller amount of appropriated mandatory funding is provided for USDA-purchased foods and administrative costs. In FY2024, preliminary spending on SFSP was \$695.7 million. SSO data are not available.

Like SFSP and SSO, Summer EBT is open-ended, mandatory funding that requires an annual appropriation. In FY2024, preliminary federal spending on Summer EBT was approximately \$2.67 billion (including \$2.56 billion in benefit costs and \$105 million in administrative costs).

Recent Developments

Summer Meal Programs During COVID-19

In summers 2020-2022, USDA used pandemic authorities to allow SFSP and SSO operators to operate meal sites outside of low-income areas and receive reimbursement for all meals served. USDA provided increased reimbursement rates, waived certain nutritional requirements, and allowed parent pickup of meals, among other changes. In addition, USDA enabled school districts to operate SFSP in school year 2020-2021 and SSO in school years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 in place of the school meals programs with similar flexibilities. For more information, see CRS Report R46681, *USDA Nutrition Assistance Programs: Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

Federal Studies and Rulemaking

USDA published a *Summer Meals Study* in 2021. Among other findings, it found that the majority of children in low-income households had access to a summer meals site nearby; however, many did not participate due to a lack of awareness. Prior to that, in 2018, GAO published a study of SFSP that found challenges with awareness of meal sites, availability in rural areas, and state and local capacity to operate the program.

In 2022, FNS finalized a rule (87 *Federal Register* 57304) that altered certain requirements in SFSP; for example, allowing closed sites to use area data to establish eligibility for SFSP like open sites. Other recent rules pertained to program integrity (88 *Federal Register* 57792 and 89 *Federal Register* 13150 [proposed]) and implementing new non-congregate feeding and Summer EBT policies (88 *Federal Register* 90230).

More Information

Further information on the summer meal programs can be found in CRS Report R46234, *School Meals and Other Child Nutrition Programs: Background and Funding*.

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