



Family Spirit FOOD Project

Finding Opportunities and Options for Distribution of Nourishing Food for Tribal Communities

Research Brief
January 2025



Key Findings from a 2024 Survey of Native American Caregivers: Experiences with Food Access and the Summer Meals Program



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INDIGENOUS HEALTH



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Introduction

Food insecurity, the limited and uncertain availability of healthy food, disproportionately affects Native American households in the United States (US). Native Americans are twice as likely as non-Native populations to be food insecure.¹ The 2023 rate of food insecurity among all US households was 13.5%.² However, studies with specific Tribal communities have found rates of food insecurity as high as 58%-92% in some regions.³⁻⁵ These disparities are rooted in a history of colonization and loss of lands that disrupted traditional healthy lifestyles and food systems⁶⁻⁷ compounded by a current paucity of grocery stores on reservation lands along with ubiquitous fast food chains and convenience stores.⁸⁻¹⁰ A USDA report found that only 25.6% of the population in Tribal communities resided 1 mile or less from a supermarket, compared with 58.8% of the US population.¹¹



Food insecurity is a known factor in contributing to chronic disease risk, including obesity and diabetes. Related to their food insecurity, Native Americans bear an inequitable burden of obesity and diet-related chronic diseases compared with other ethnicities in the US. Native American adolescents are 30% more likely than non-Hispanic white adolescents to be obese. Native American adults are 50% more likely to be obese than non-Hispanic whites.¹² Native Americans are 2 times more likely to have diabetes than white Americans.¹³

The primary federal food distribution programs designed to increase food security among eligible households include: Summer Meals Program; School Breakfast and School Lunch Program; Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR, also known as commodity foods); and Food Banks or Food Pantries. However, these programs are not currently accessed to their full potential. Only one out of seven children nationally who receive free or reduced price meals during the school year continues to receive meals during the summer months through the Summer Meals Program.¹⁴ Recent federal expansions of the Summer Meals Program permanently authorized a non-congregate (meal provided to take home) summer meals option for rural communities without congregate service. This, along with the USDA's expanded definition of "rural" communities, means Summer Meals service now has the potential to reach far more children in rural areas than previously allowed.¹⁵ There is an urgent need to better understand facilitators and barriers to accessing federal food distribution programs, given the recent non-congregate opportunities. This is especially relevant in Tribal communities where there are unique challenges and opportunities with food distribution and food access often related to the rural setting of these communities. While national surveys have been done to understand attitudes and behaviors around the Summer Meals Program and other federal food distribution programs,¹⁶⁻¹⁹ none to date has focused on Native American populations.

In 2024 the Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health, with funding from Share Our Strength's No Kid Hungry Campaign, administered a national survey among Native American caregivers of children 0-5 years of age to understand awareness, attitudes, facilitators, and barriers to access of federal food distribution programs. The pre-school children's age group was selected for two main reasons: 1) there are concerns that this age group is particularly underserved by feeding programs administered through schools or that require transportation to access foods; and 2) ages 0-5 is the most critical developmental period in human life when foundational physical health is established. The survey focused specifically on the federal Summer Meals Program. Recruitment for this national survey began through the Center's [Family Spirit Program](#), an evidence-based early childhood home-visiting program with a network of national Indigenous partners who serve Native American families. The survey was administered as part of the Family Spirit Program's FOOD Project: *Finding Opportunities and Options for Distribution of Nourishing Food for Tribal Communities*.

Survey Methods

The Family Spirit FOOD (*Finding Opportunities and Options for Distribution of Nourishing Food for Tribal Communities*) Survey was distributed via a web-based Qualtrics platform. Inclusion criteria for respondents included:

- 18 years of age or older
- Caregiver with a child age 0-5
- Native American (self-reported)
- One respondent per household

Each respondent provided e-consent and received a \$40 electronic gift card upon completion of the survey.

The survey was administered during the following three time periods between February 2024 – July 2024:

- **Phase 1 - February 8-13, 2024:** Recruitment of respondents occurred via listservs and social media. The survey was closed after six days due to a high number of invalid or fraudulent responses.
- **Phase 2 – March 19-20, 2024:** Following data cleaning to identify and retain the valid responses from Phase 1, the survey was re-opened for invited respondents who had expressed interest but did not complete the survey during the Phase 1 period.
- **Phase 3: July 15-26, 2024:** The survey was re-opened for respondents from invited Family Spirit affiliate communities who were not yet represented in the reported Tribal affiliations of the survey responses.

The final dataset includes 128 respondents with 67 reported Tribal affiliations across 105 reported zip codes. According to the FNS rural designation map,²⁰ 54% of the reported zip codes are Rural (n=69); and 46% are Non-Rural (N=59). The 128 responses were confirmed to be valid based on a series of data cleaning rules determined by the study team to omit invalid or fraudulent responses.

128
Survey
Responses



67
Tribal affiliations
across
105
zip codes
(**54 % rural**)

Key Findings



The following key findings summarize survey responses from 128 Native American caregivers of children 0-5 years old. Respondents were affiliated with 67 Tribal Nations from 105 zip codes across the United States.

Demographics of Surveyed Households

Household members:

Average age of adult respondent: **34.9**

(range: 24-64)

Average number of adults at home: **2.2**

(range: 1-4)

Average number of children at home: **2.1**

(range: 1-6)

Average number of children age 0-5 = 1.5

Average number of children age 6-17 = 1.7

Household income:

*No income	2%
*\$36,500 and under	20%
\$36,501 - \$55,500	28%
\$55,501 - \$74,500	20%
\$74,501 - \$93,500	17%
More than \$93,500	8%

*Shaded boxes include income levels below 185% of the 2024 federal poverty line for a family of 4

- **Transportation to store or other community resources:**
 - **64%** have access to reliable transportation. Of those, **27%** use another form of transportation as well (most often walking/biking or public transit).
 - For **47%** of respondents, the nearest grocery store is more than a 15 minute drive away.
- **Where do children spend their time in the summer:**
 - The majority of children (**76%**) spend their time at home during the summer.

Household Food Security

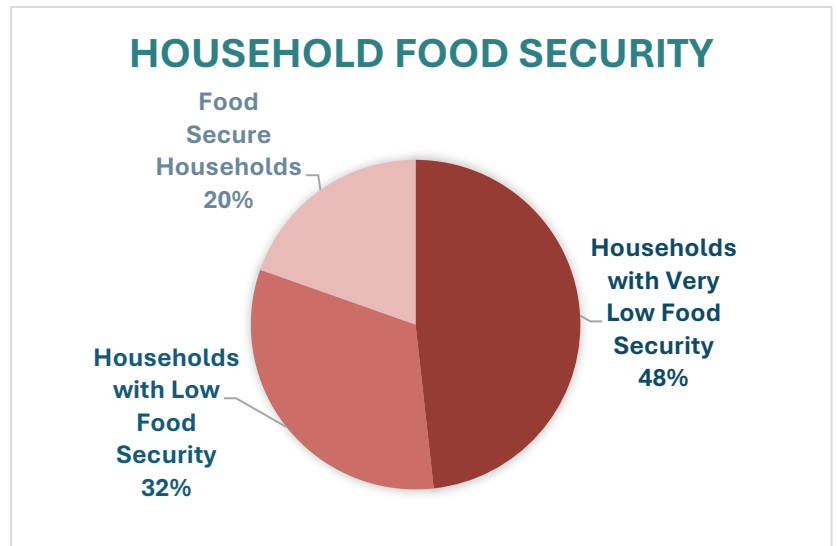


80% of Native American caregivers surveyed experienced food insecurity in the past year. This reflects households with **very low food security (48%)** and households with **low food security (32%)**.

For comparison, **17.9%** of all U.S. households with children experienced food insecurity at some time during 2023 (USDA).²

63% of surveyed caregivers said they ate less than they felt they should in the last 12 months.

49% said they were hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food in the last 12 months.



Summer Meals Program Access

Among the 128 respondents, **78%** of caregivers were aware of the federal **Summer Meals Program** and **62%** accessed summer meals for their child(ren) in 2023. This included both congregate and rural non-congregate Summer Meals Programs. Of those who accessed summer meals, one meal per week was the most common frequency of access.

Among those who accessed the Summer Meals Program, the top two reported **benefits** were:

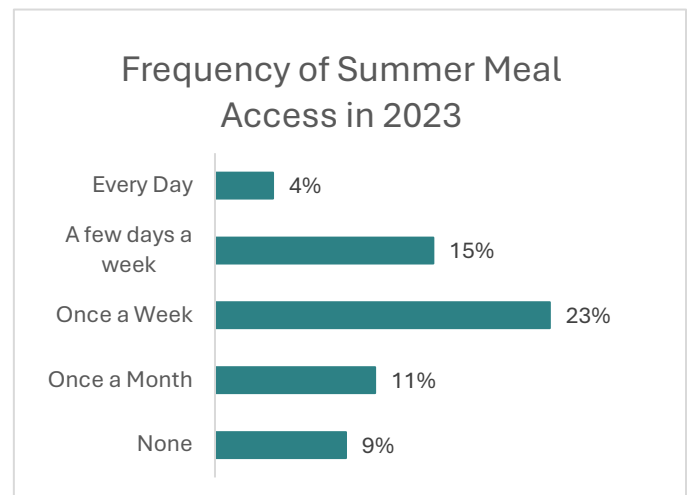
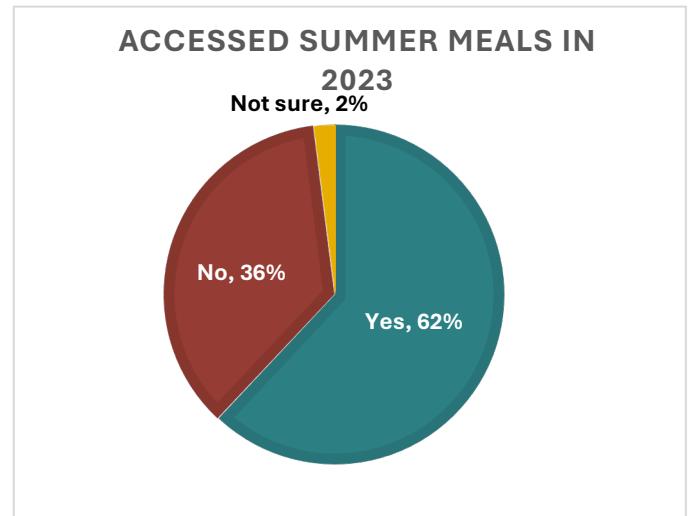
- Saves us money
- Helps me be less stressed about feeding my child(ren) during the summer

Among those who did not access the Summer Meals Program, the top two reasons the program was **not accessed** were:

- Don't know about the program
- Don't know where to access the program

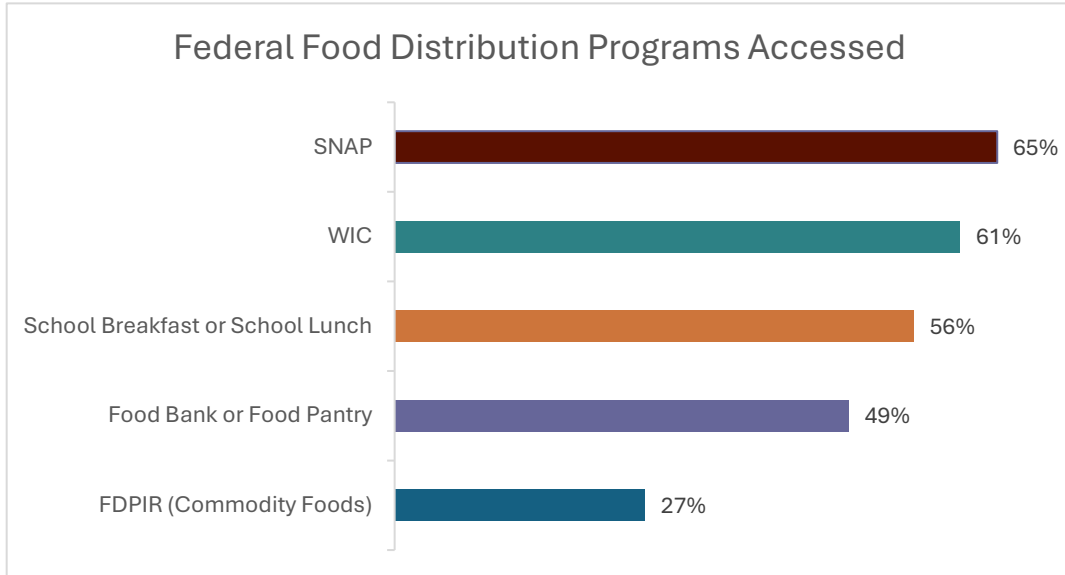
The top two **ways that caregivers find out about** Summer Meals Program were:

- Word of mouth
- Communication from the local school



Other Federal Food Distribution Program Access

Among the 128 respondents, **other federal food distribution programs** were accessed as follows:

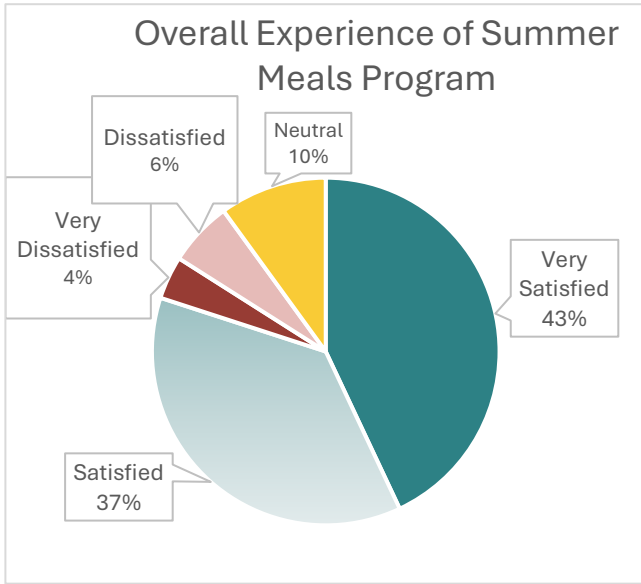


Among those who know where the federal food distribution programs are located in their community, the top two **ways they found about where they are served** include:

- Word of mouth
- Social media



Summer Meals Program Experience



Among the 62% of respondents who accessed the Summer Meals Program in 2023:

80% of families were either satisfied or very satisfied with the overall experience of the Summer Meals Program.

81% of families recommended the program to other families in summer 2023.

77% of families say the meals are served in an accessible location.

When accessing the meals, the majority of families (**66%**) prefer to take the meal home (non-congregate option), while **32%** prefer to eat the meal on site (congregate option).

70% of families reported the option to take the meals home (non-congregate option) was available to them and **67%** reported they chose the option to pick up meals to take home from the Summer Meals Program site.

Potential Challenges with Summer Meals Program

Please tell us about your experience with how Summer Meals are served. For each statement mark: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable

Statement	Strongly Agree or Agree	Strongly Disagree or Disagree
It is a pleasant and welcoming experience	78%	6%
The rules and regulations are challenging	52%	32%
The staff treat my child(ren) and me kindly	77%	9%
I feel comfortable accessing summer meals	73%	13%

Satisfaction with Summer Meals

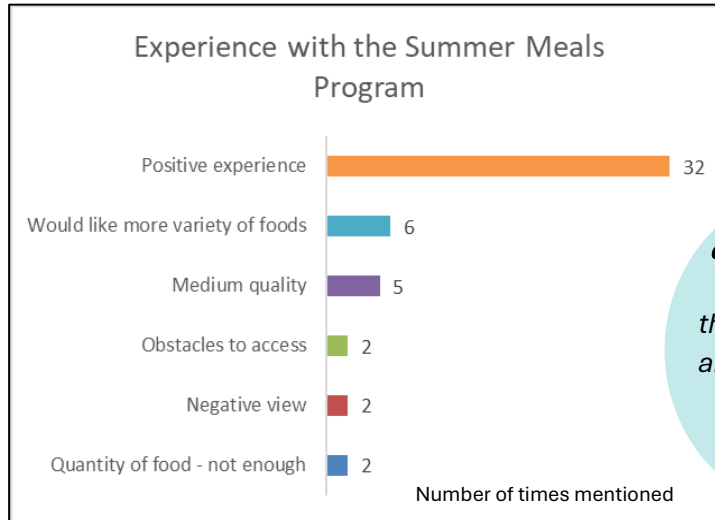
What is your view of the food served in the Summer Meals Program? For each statement mark: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable

Statement	Strongly Agree or Agree	Strongly Disagree or Disagree
The food looks good	75%	6%
The food tastes good	75%	9%
There is a good variety of food	65%	11%
My children like to eat the food served	72%	10%
The food served is healthy and nourishing for my children	68%	8%
The right amount of food is served for my children	72%	13%
The food served is similar to what we eat at home	59%	13%

What Are Families Saying about the Summer Meals Program?

The survey asked respondents to “*please tell us more about your experience with the Summer Meals Program.*”

Qualitative data was coded into the following themes:



“*A lot of the time the food helps a lot and I really support and enjoy the program*”

Key themes include **positive experiences** including **appreciation for the Summer Meals Program**.

The majority of open-ended survey responses describe a gratefulness for the service it provides to the community.

Additional themes include:

- Food quality was described as medium or “basic” and several families expressed a desire for a wider variety of foods, including less processed foods and more Traditional foods.
- Obstacles to accessing the program included working full time schedules and not being available to bring their children during the meal operation times.

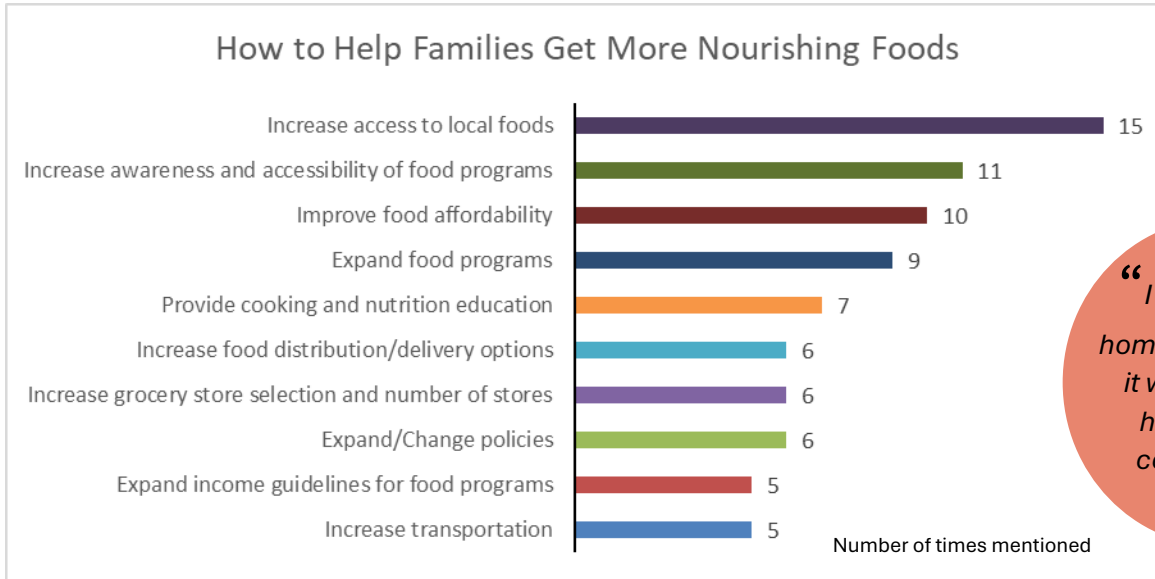
“*I really commend the Summer Meals Program, their staff and everyone behind the scenes supporting and sustaining this program. Even though the quality of foods being served here are not 5 star restaurants rated meals, they still tried their best in making sure that the food is up to standard.*”

“*We had mostly warm meals which was good and we had a variety of food during the week. Now and then we had some cold food like sandwiches and they were still good. We also had some sort of vegetable and/or fruit at each meal. It’s been a couple years since we’ve had it in our community.*”

Families' Vision for Food Access in Their Communities

The survey asked respondents, “What other comments do you have about how to help families get more nourishing food in your community?”

Qualitative data was coded into the following themes:



“ I really like the home delivery idea; it would be very helpful in the community.”

- **Key themes** include **increasing access to local foods including farmers’ markets, gardening, and culturally appropriate foods.**

“ We need more education on growing our own food. I also believe our community needs to invest in raising our own meat as well!”

“ Income limits for programs make it difficult to access resources. Just because someone works doesn’t mean they have unlimited access to resources. I made alright money but half my pay check goes to my mortgage/utility bill. I make too much money for WIC/SNAP/Commods.”

Quantitative Data: *What would help families get more nourishing food in your community? (response options from 1-5: not helpful – very helpful)*

Response	Helpful or Very Helpful
Food delivery to homes	87.5%
More gardening and farming options	78%
Public transportation to food resources	70.3%
More stores or markets to buy quality food	76.6%
Better quality of food at grocery stores	77%
More options for culturally traditional food	75%
More food and nutrition programs available	77%
Better advertisement of currently available food and nutrition programs	76%
More usage of currently available food and nutrition programs	73%

Conclusions and Recommendations

Urgent Call to Address Food Insecurity

Food insecurity is extremely high among the surveyed 128 Native American caregivers representing 67 Tribal affiliations across 105 US zip codes. Our data suggests 80% of surveyed Native American caregivers are unable to consistently access adequate food for all family members to lead an active, healthy lifestyle due to limited money or other resources. The high cost of food, limited access to grocery stores, and federal food program income requirements are some of the barriers to food security voiced by survey respondents. **Suggested solutions from survey respondents include: food delivery to homes; more opportunities for gardening and farming; increased access to local and traditional foods.** These results demonstrate the **urgent need for community-based, culturally resonant innovations for food distribution for Native American families**, in addition to the food distribution programs already offered.

Support for Summer Meals Program

The survey results indicate a **clear need for the Summer Meals Program to continue to operate and expand to serve the specific needs of Native American communities.** Our survey results show that the Summer Meals Program is viewed favorably and is an important source of food distribution during the summer months. Caregivers also noted the **importance of the non-congregate option** of being able to pick up take-home meals from the Summer Meals Program. **While those who used the Summer Meals Program were largely satisfied, more than one-third of families represented in the survey are not accessing the Summer Meals Program despite widespread food insecurity.** Thus, more work is needed to connect these families to these services or create alternative pathways, such as food delivery through available home-visiting services to families with children 0-5 years old. In addition, important ideas were raised to expand the Summer Meals Program experience to include traditional foods and supplement with local gardens and farmers' markets.

Future Research Directions

Future research is needed on **other federal food distribution programs** to better understand the unique opportunities and challenges with those programs for Native American families. More work is needed to understand how to reach families who are not accessing the Summer Meals and other food access programs. This could include exploring the **home delivery option for rural, non-congregate Summer Meals distribution** for rural Tribal communities. Another resource to explore is the **Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer Program (Summer EBT)**, the federal nutrition program made permanent beginning in summer 2024. Due to timing of this FOOD project survey, the Summer EBT was not part of survey content.

Another important step for this research is to **document the voices of program administrators and community-based Summer Meals Program** workers in Tribal communities to learn from their experiences. Further, more research is needed to **routinely measure and better understand food security and nutrition security** in Native American communities, and disseminate findings to **inform innovative, community-driven food distribution solutions** for Native American families. Finally, alternative programs that **build local communities' capacity to cultivate and access traditional foods is vital to Indigenous Peoples' reclaiming nutrition and food sovereignty.**

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