



FACT SHEET: SUMMER MEALS

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Summer is a time for connection, exploration, and fun! Summer meal programs make sure children and teens have the nutrition they need to do just that. Free summer meals, funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), are available to children and teens ages 18 and under at thousands of summer meals sites across the country.

Most program providers serve summer meals using the [Summer Food Service Program](#) (SFSP) - available to schools and qualifying non-profit organizations. However, schools also can choose to serve summer meals through the [National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option](#) (SSO). To the children and families that participate, the program looks and operates the same regardless of if the provider uses SFSP or SSO.

- Meals are served at sites registered with the USDA and are at safe places, such as schools, churches, parks, and community centers. Meals served must also follow USDA nutrition guidelines.
- Meals are free to all children and teens ages 18 and under.
 - At open or drop-in meal sites, families do not need to apply to the program or show proof of income to participate.
 - At closed-enrolled sites, meals are available for free but prior sign-up is required.
- Open sites are located in areas where 50% or more of children in the area are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.
- Many sites offer fun learning and recreational activities as well as free meals.
- At most sites, meals are served and eaten on site, known as the congregate meal service requirement.
- Programs operating in eligible rural areas without access to a congregate site may be able to offer meals to-go via non-congregate meal service models like grab and go, pick-up, drive-thru, and home delivery.

OPPORTUNITY FOR GROWTH

For many children and teens, summertime means food, friends and fun. For families who count on school breakfast and lunch, however, the summer months can be stressful as family food budgets are stretched even further.

The summer meals program has a lot of opportunity to grow:

- Of the more than 18 million students who ate free or reduced-price school lunches in 2022-2023, just over 2.8 million children were served summer meals in 2023. That means 8 out of 10 young people were missing out.¹
- Among families not participating, 46 percent of caregivers and 73 percent of teens were not aware of their nearby meal sites. 88 percent would be interested in having kids get summer meals, depending on what is offered.²
- 80 percent of participants were very likely to recommend the summer meal programs to others and 20 percent were somewhat likely to recommend it.²
- Studies show that kids are at a higher risk for both hunger and obesity during the summer months.^{3,4}

WAYS YOU CAN TAKE ACTION

Summer meals programs across the country provide children and teens with free, nutritious meals so that they can continue to learn and grow during the summer. You can help. To help more children and teens access summer meals, you can:

- **Get social.** Share information about free summer meals on social media (e.g, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter).
- **Advocate.** Become an advocate for the summer meals program by writing a letter to the editor highlighting the importance of the program and available sites in your community.
- **Volunteer.** Visit www.nokidhungry.org/help or www.nokidhungry.org/ayuda to find a local summer meals provider near you. Contact them to learn more about how you can help by volunteering during a meal service.
- **Spread the Word.** Promote the No Kid Hungry mapping tool and phone hotlines to help children, teens, and families locate summer meals sites in your community, and download flyers to promote summer meals with No Kid Hungry's [Summer Meals Outreach Toolkit](#). Share flyers with local businesses and religious institutions, and ask local news media to highlight the program and nearby sites in your area.
- **Support us.** [Make a donation](#) to help support the No Kid Hungry campaign.

You can learn more about summer meals programs on the No Kid Hungry Center for Best Practices website at bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/programs/summer-meals.

MESSAGING TO FAMILIES

There are many ways to help spread the word about summer meals in your community.

- **Summer Meal Site Finder.** Find free summer meals and other sources of no cost food and groceries like Summer EBT a.k.a Sunbucks at NoKidHungry.org/help (English) or NoKidHungry.org/ayuda (Spanish).
- **Call.** Families can call 1-866-3-HUNGRY (English) or 1-877-8-HAMBRE (Spanish) to find free summer meals nearby.
- **Post** to social media using ready-made posts, graphics, flyers, and more from No Kid Hungry's [Summer Meals Outreach Toolkit](#).

¹ Boone, K., FitzSimons, C. [Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report 2024](#). Food Research & Action Center.

² Vericker, T., Rothstein, M., Gabay, M., Lee, H., et al. (2021). [USDA Summer Meals Study](#). Prepared by Westat, Contract No. AG-3198-K-16-0033. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Grant Lovellette

³ Huang, J., Barnidge, E., & Kim, Y. (2015). [Children Receiving Free or Reduced Price School Lunch Have Higher Food Insecurity Rates in Summer](#). The Journal of Nutrition, 145(9), 2161–2168.

⁴ Tanskey, L. A., Goldberg, J., Chui, K., Must, A., & Satchek, J. (2018). [The State of the Summer: a Review of Child Summer Weight Gain and Efforts to Prevent It](#). Current obesity reports, 7(2), 112–121.

