

2024

National Summer EBT Family Survey



Overview

In 2024, No Kid Hungry commissioned a national survey to understand family experiences with Summer EBT (S-EBT) during its first year of implementation. Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) fielded a survey of more than one-thousand low-income parents and caregivers in areas with Summer EBT. The survey explored family experiences with food security and summer food costs, participation in and awareness of S-EBT, opinions of program operations and communications, and future preferences.

Summer EBT, also known as SUNBucks, is a grocery benefit for eligible low-income families with children. Most states, territories, and tribes opted to offer Summer EBT in its first year. The federally-funded benefit can be loaded onto existing EBT (e.g. SNAP EBT) cards or new EBT cards, depending on the state, territory, or tribe. Families with eligible school-aged children receive \$120 per child (\$177 per child in some areas) to buy groceries during the summer. Families in tribal areas received EBT benefits similar to WIC.

Between November to December 2024, FM3 completed 1,201 online and telephone surveys with parents and caregivers in states, territories, and tribal nations offering S-EBT. The survey was limited to households with income below 185% of the Federal Poverty Level. Survey responses were obtained through a mix of an opt-in online panel, address-based sample, and No Kid Hungry partner organizations. The survey was conducted in English and Spanish. Respondents heard appropriate terminology and question wording (ie: S-EBT/ SunBucks) throughout the survey, based on their location. Quotas were set to ensure the demographic and geographic representativeness of the sample. Due to rounding, not all totals will sum to 100%.

This research brief describes the key findings of the research and is divided into the following sections. In each section, we note key demographic distinctions.

1. Food Access and Security
2. Experiences Using S-EBT
3. Experiences Applying for S-EBT
4. S-EBT Communications
5. Program Preferences for Future Summers



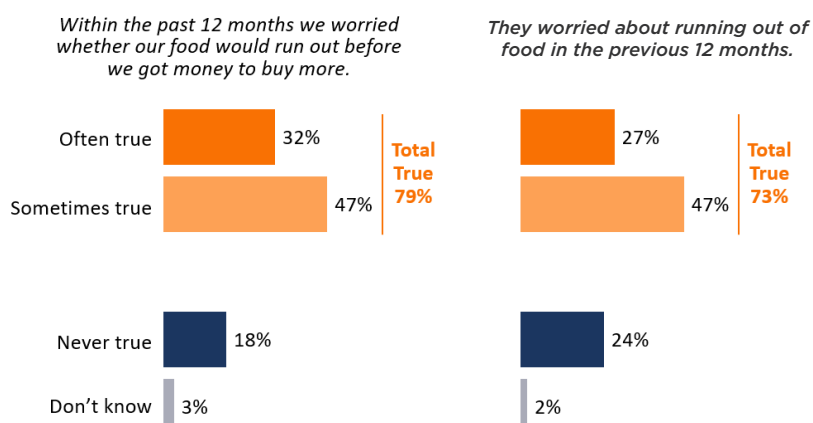
1. Food Access and Security

Four in five parents worried about running out of food before they had money to buy more, and over seven in ten parents ran out of food at some point in the year. As shown in Figure 1, 79% of parents said they often or sometimes worried that their food would run out before they had money to buy more in the last year. Nearly three-quarters (73%) said that their food supply often or sometimes did not last, and they were unable to buy more.

Majorities of parents across demographic groups experienced food insecurity. Single parents and those who provided kinship care were more vulnerable than other groups:

- Single parents were notably more likely than non-single parents to experience challenges affording food; 86% of single parents worried about running out of food compared to 73% of non-single parents, and 79% of single parents ran out of food compared to 68% of non-single parents.
- Parents who provided kinship care were also more likely to have this experience; 91% said they worried about running out of food and 87% said that they did.
- 91% who participated in summer meals and S-EBT said they worried about running out of food and 86% said they had done so.

Figure 1: Experiences With Food Insecurity

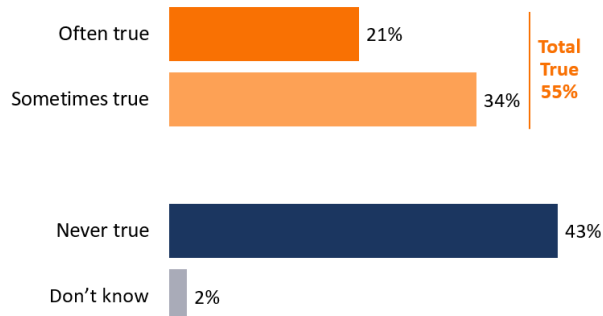


More than half said their children were not eating enough because they could not afford enough food. As shown in Figure 2 on the next page, 55% of parents said their children often or sometimes did not have enough food to eat due to costs.

- Parents and guardians providing kinship care were especially likely to say their children were not eating enough (75%), as were immigrant parents (67%), those living in the Western United States (65%), Asian American/Pacific Islander parents (64%), and those living in small towns (64%).
- Pointing to how much families need S-EBT and Summer Meals, 80% of families that received both S-EBT and Summer Meals said their children did not get enough to eat, in the past 12 months. As did 68% of families that participated in S-EBT.
- Single parents were more likely to say that this often or sometimes happened (62%) compared to non-single parents (49%).

Figure 2: Food Insecurity Among Children

Please consider the following statement about the children living in your household who are under 18 years old: "Within the last 12 months the children were not eating enough because we just couldn't afford enough food."



Three quarters said that the increase in spending on meals in the summer causes financial strain.

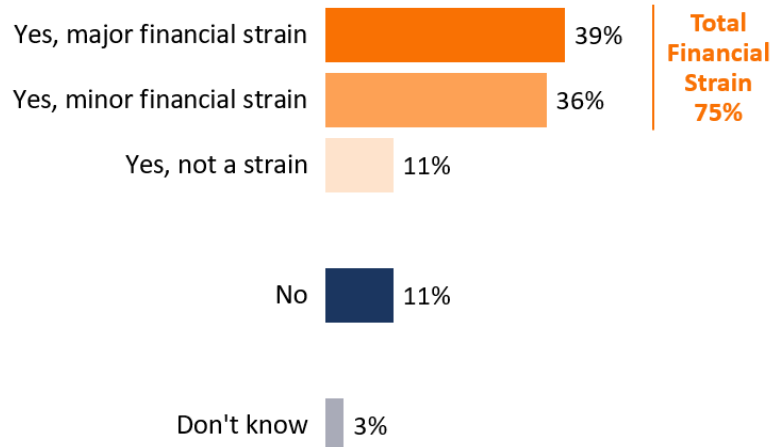
As shown in Figure 3 on the next page, 86% of parents reported spending more on food in the summer when their kids are out of school. As to whether this caused burden, seventy-five percent of parents overall experienced financial strain in the summer as a result of increased grocery spending and 39% said it was a major strain.

Parents across demographic groups experienced increased strain, particularly:

- Single parents (81%) and those who provide kinship care (87%) were especially likely to experience financial strain.
- Once again illustrating the need for the program, parents who received S-EBT (83%) and those who received both S-EBT and summer meals (88%) were more likely to report financial strain than parents who did not receive it (67%).

Figure 3: Financial Strain during Summer Months

Does your family spend more on groceries when your child is on break for the summer, compared to the school year? If yes, has that been a major financial strain, a minor financial strain, or not a financial strain?





2. Experiences Using S-EBT

Sixty-two percent of parents said their families received S-EBT, when provided a description of the program. Initially, only 29% said they received S-EBT, but this number rose to 62% when respondents were given a brief explanation of the program (shown below in Figure 4), describing the amount provided, how it was administered, and the dates it was available. The gap in reported participation when context is not provided suggests that parents may not be fully familiar with the program name and may have even confused S-EBT with other benefits. Parents living in states and territories who issued S-EBT on new cards rather than adding benefits to existing cards were slightly more likely to say they participated initially (34% compared to 26%), which may suggest that issuing benefit on a new card may serve to distinguish this program more.

Figure 4: S-EBT Participation

Summer EBT/SUNBucks is a grocery benefit available across most of the US. Families with eligible school-aged children can get (\$120/\$177) per child to buy groceries during the summer. Families who got a benefit through a tribe received EBT benefits similar to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children WIC. In (state/tribal nation/territory) S-EBT/ SUNBucks benefits were issued as early as (month of first issuance) and most were issued by (last day to apply). In (state/tribal nation/territory) households received the S-EBT/SUNBucks benefits on (how benefits issued). Did your family receive this benefit for this summer?

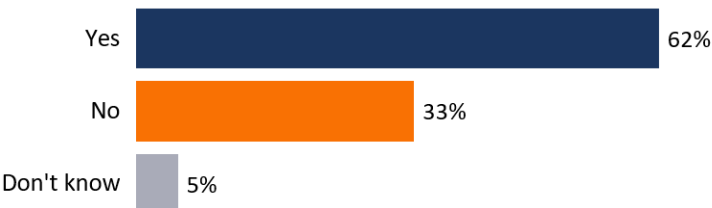


Figure 5 below provides S-EBT participation among key demographics. Some key demographic distinctions include:

- Single parents (69%) were more likely than non-single parents (57%) to receive S-EBT, and kinship guardians (82%) were more likely to than parents overall.
- BIPOC parents overall (65%) were more likely to receive S-EBT than white parents (52%).
- Parents in the Western US (69%) were more likely than parents in other parts of the country (between 56% and 61%) to have received S-EBT.
- Parents who participate in other programs like summer meals, school meals, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) were more likely to have received S-EBT

Figure 5: S-EBT Participation by Key Demographics

	Demographic	Receive Benefit	Did Not Receive Benefit
Gender	Men	61%	35%
	Women	63%	31%
Single Parent Status	Single Parent/Guardian	69%	29%
	Not Single Parent/Guardian	57%	37%
Custody Type	Kinship or grandparent care	82%	16%
	Split Custody	51%	45%
	Sole custody by one parent/guardian	63%	34%
Ethnicity	White Parents	52%	42%
	Latino Parents	69%	25%
	African American Parents	63%	34%
	Asian/Pacific Islander Parents	57%	33%
	Native American Parents	68%	30%
	All BIPOC Parents	65%	30%
Household Income	<\$28,000	60%	30%
	\$28,000-\$38,000	71%	26%
	\$38,000-\$48,000	65%	33%
	\$48,000-\$58,000	60%	35%
	\$58,000-\$68,000	54%	43%
	\$68,000+	44%	50%
Area	Rural	56%	40%
	Small Town	66%	25%
	Suburban	64%	31%
	Urban	62%	35%
Region	Northeast	61%	33%
	Midwest	56%	37%
	South	59%	37%
	West	69%	27%
Foreign Born	Foreign Born	64%	35%
	US Born	62%	32%
Program Participation	Summer Meals	86%	11%
	School Meals	73%	24%
	SNAP	76%	20%
	TANF	85%	10%

The vast majority of parents said that having additional summer grocery funds helps them.

Seventy-nine percent of S-EBT recipients said the additional funds allowed them to purchase more food and 87% of parents overall said it would be helpful to receive additional funds each summer.

All major demographic and geographic groups rated S-EBT as helpful, though the intensity of agreement varied for a few populations.

- Parents born in the United States were more like to say it is “very helpful” (60%) than immigrant parents (43%).
- Rural (62%) and urban parents (59%) were slightly more likely than suburban(54%) and small town (51%) parents to say it was “very helpful.”
- Asian American/Pacific Islander parents saw it as helpful overall (72%) but only one-third said it was “very helpful.”

Summer meals in combination with S-EBT helps parents get the food they need.

More than four in five (84%) parents believed that summer meals combined with S-EBT help kids get enough to eat during the summer and provide families with flexible ways of getting food. These views are found among all major demographic and geographic subgroups, including families that received both summer meals and S-EBT.

Figure 6: Impact of S-EBT and Summer Meals

Here are a few ways that some parents have said receiving both summer meals and S-EBT/SUNBucks impacts their children. Please indicate if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements.

Description	Total Agree	Total Disagree
“Summer meals combined with S-EBT/ SUNBucks helps kids get enough to eat during the summer.”	84%	10%
“Summer meals combined with S-EBT/ SUNBucks provides families with many flexible ways to get food for kids.”	84%	9%

Families were most likely to use Summer EBT to buy more fresh produce, proteins, snacks, and stock up on pantry staples. Majorities of families said they bought fresh produce (56%), as well as meat, fish, eggs, and other proteins (54%) for their kids. Additionally, 44% bought snacks for their kids and 40% stocked up on pantry staples like pasta, rice and canned food. Parents who did not participate in S-EBT indicated they would be likely to use funds similarly.

Figure 7: S-EBT Purchases

With an additional (\$120/\$177) in your grocery budget, did you...
(Asked of S-EBT Recipients)

S-EBT Purchase	Percentage of Parents
Buy more fresh produce for kids	56%
Buy meat, fish, eggs, and other proteins for kids	54%
Buy snacks for kids	44%
Stock up on pantry staples like pasta, rice, and canned food	40%
Buy healthier versions of the same foods your kids currently consume	29%
Buy a wider variety of food for kids	29%
Use money saved on food to pay for a basic necessity, like rent or utilities	20%
Shop at local sources (like locally owned stores or farmers' markets)	17%
Spend less time searching for coupons and deals, or less time driving to less convenient grocery stores for deals	14%
Shop online for groceries	9%
Buy food to supplement benefits from other programs like summer meals	8%
Something else	1%
None of these	3%

Families overwhelmingly agreed that S-EBT is convenient, helps stretch food dollars, and helps kids get enough to eat. As shown in Figure 8 below, approximately four in five parents said each of the descriptions fit S-EBT “very” or “somewhat well.” These views are held consistently across all major demographic and geographic subgroups.

Figure 8: Descriptions of S-EBT

Here are some descriptions of the (\$120/\$177) S-EBT/SUNBucks benefit.
Please indicate if this describes the program very well, somewhat well, not too well, or not at all well.

Description	Total Well	Total Not Well
S-EBT/SUNBucks is convenient to use	79%	11%
S-EBT/SUNBucks helps families stretch their food budgets	79%	13%
S-EBT/SUNBucks helps children get enough to eat in the summer	79%	13%

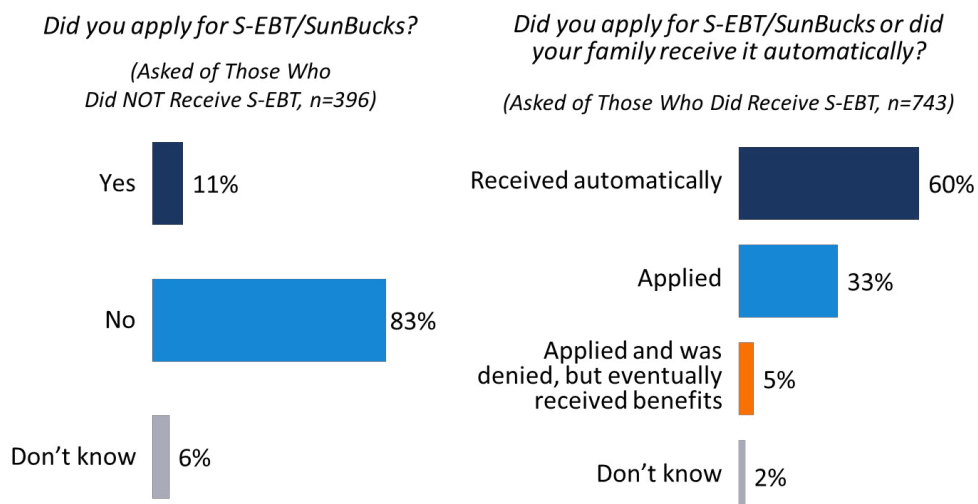


3. Applying for S-EBT

Among survey respondents who received Summer EBT, three in five reported receiving it automatically and one-third applied for it. Of those who received S-EBT, 5% said they initially applied and were denied but eventually received S-EBT automatically.

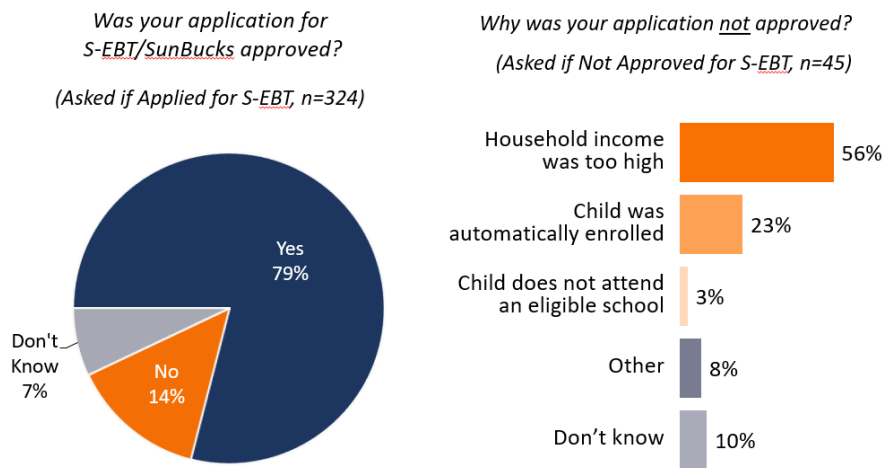
- White parents/caregivers (74%) were more likely to have received it automatically, compared to parents/ caregivers of color (56%).
- Rural families were also more likely to have been automatically enrolled (72%) compared to families overall.
- Of families who did not receive S-EBT, only one in ten said they applied (11%).
- Of families who did not receive S-EBT, 12% were “very familiar” with it and 49% were familiar overall. Families who didn’t participate from the Northeast (54%) and Midwest (51%) were slightly more likely than those in the South (46%) and West (44%) to be familiar with the program.

Figure 9: S-EBT Enrollment Process



Ineligible household income was the most common reason that parents who applied for S-EBT did not receive it. Among parents who applied for S-EBT, 79% were approved and 14% were not approved. As shown in Figure 10, the most common reason for rejected application was income eligibility (56%). The second most common reason for a rejected application (for nearly one-quarter) was the child was already automatically enrolled.

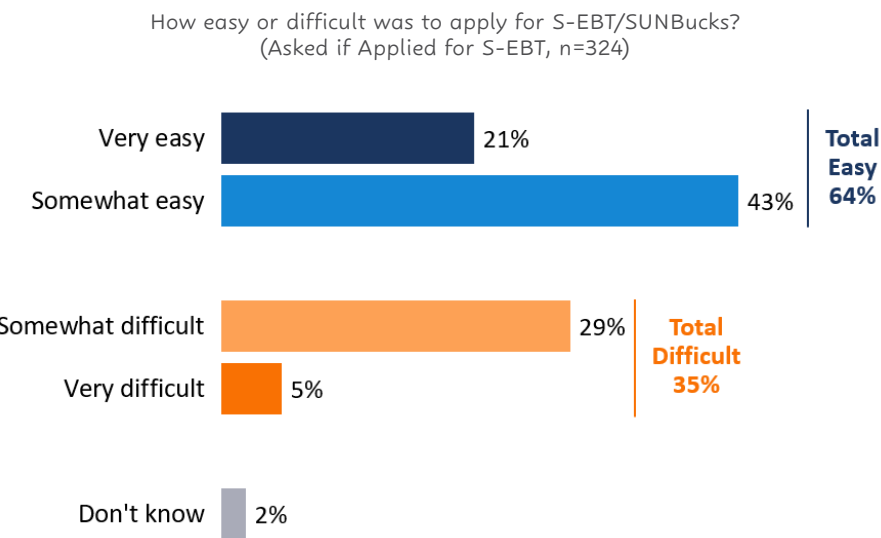
Figure 10: S-EBT Application Approval



Nearly two-thirds agreed that applying for S-EBT was easy, although only one in five said it was “very easy.” As shown in Figure 11, a majority (64%) of parents said it was easy to apply for S-EBT and more than one-third felt that it was difficult.

- Parents who were most likely to say it was difficult were those who: live in a suburban area, have children under age 5, are in their thirties, or are a kinship caretaker.
- Roughly three in five in all regions of the country said it was easy to apply, but only 12% in the West found it to be very easy, compared to approximately one-quarter in other areas who said it was very easy.

Figure 11: Ease of Applying for S-EBT

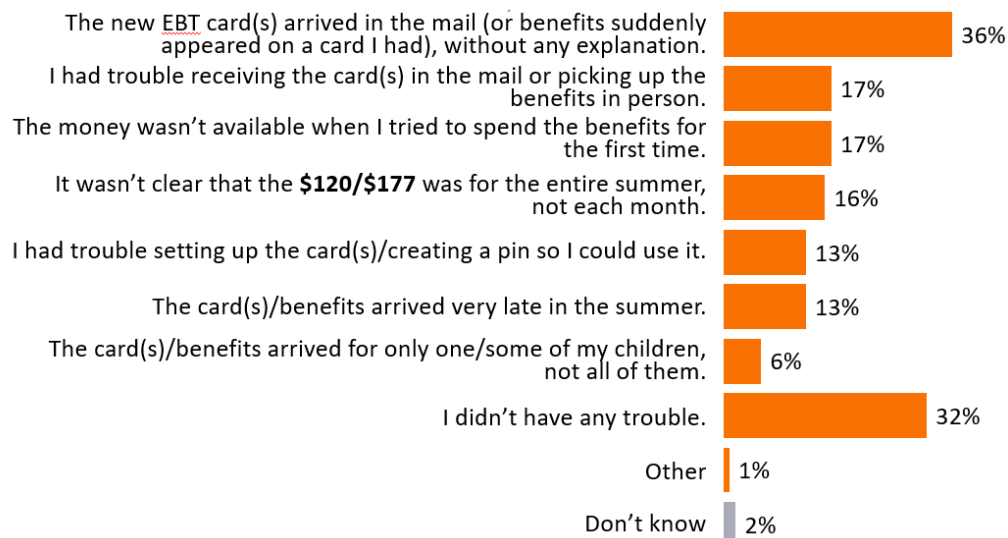


Nearly seven in ten S-EBT participants encountered difficulties and confusion with receiving their S-EBT benefits. The most common challenge experienced was receiving S-EBT benefits in the mail without any explanation; this happened at similar rates for families automatically enrolled and families who applied. This challenge was slightly more prevalent among families living in state or territories that only issued new S-EBT cards (40%), compared to areas that issued benefits both on new and existing cards (35%).

- Rural parents were most likely to report not having trouble (53%) receiving their benefits compared to parents in other areas.
- US-born parents were more likely to report not having any trouble receiving and using benefits (34%) than immigrant parents (18%).
- Non-single parents were more likely to report not having any trouble getting benefits, compared to single parents (26%).
- Across all regions of the country, the lack of information when the card arrived was the biggest problem. Regional differences were modest; parents in the West were less likely to have had trouble setting up their card, but more likely to say they had trouble receiving the cards (24%) and slightly more likely to say that the money wasn't available (22%). In contrast, those in the Northeast, Midwest, and South were more likely than those in the West to say that it wasn't clear that the money was for the entire summer.

Figure 12: Difficulties Receiving S-EBT Benefits

Was anything difficult or confusing with receiving your S-EBT/SUNBucks benefits?
(Multiple Responses Accepted; Asked of Those Who Did Receive S-EBT, n=743)





4. S-EBT Communications

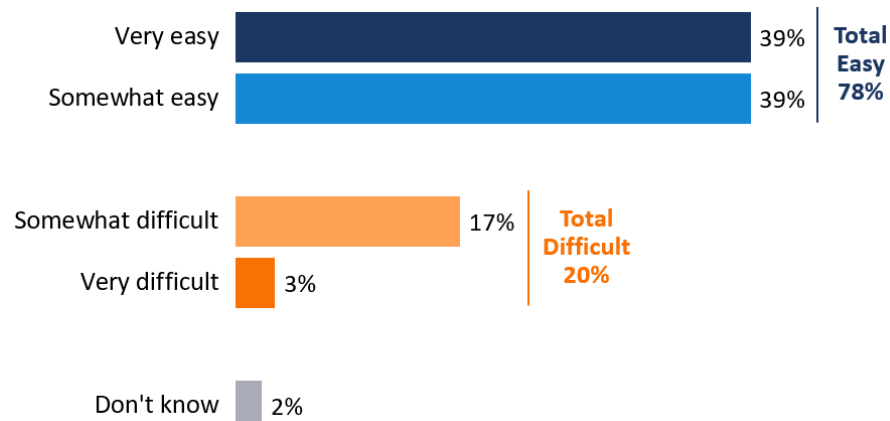
Families participating in S-EBT widely felt that it was easy to get the information they needed about the program. Seventy-eight percent of parents said it was easy to find information about getting and using S-EBT.

Some demographic groups reported higher rates of difficulty in getting information about S-EBT:

- The majority of immigrant parents said it was easy to obtain information, although US-born parents were twice as likely to say it was “very easy” (42% compared to 21% among immigrant parents)
- 58% of Native American parents said it was easy to get information, compared to 78% of parents overall. Third-nine percent of Native American parents said it was difficult to get information.
- Suburban parents tended to have a harder time getting information than those in other regions, although two-thirds said it was easy overall.

Figure 13: Ease of Obtaining S-EBT Information

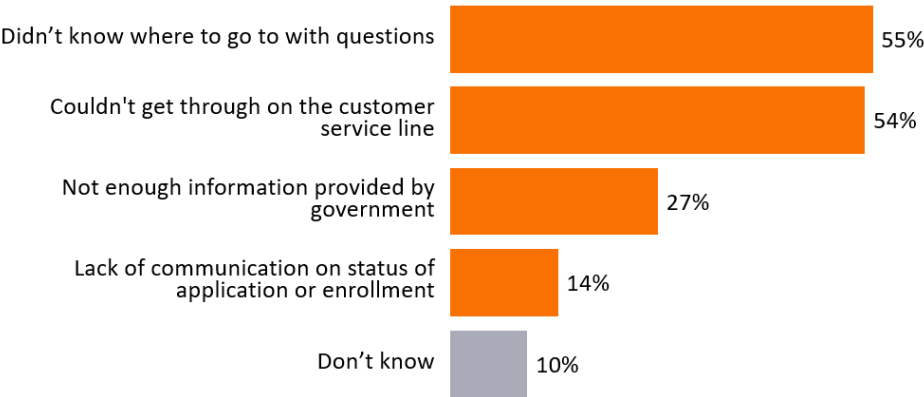
How easy or difficult was it to get information you needed about getting and using your S-EBT/SUNBucks benefit? (Asked of Those Who Did Receive S-EBT, n=743)



Parents who found it difficult to obtain information about S-EBT said they didn't know where to go with questions and couldn't get through to customer service. As shown in **Figure 14** on the next page, 55% said they didn't know where to go for questions and 54% said they couldn't get through on the customer service line. Slightly more than one-quarter (27%) said there was not enough information provided by the government and 14% said there was a lack of communication on their application and enrollment status.

Figure 14: Difficulties Obtaining S-EBT Information

What was difficult about getting information you needed to get and use your S-EBT/SUNBucks benefits?
(Multiple Responses Accepted; Asked if Difficult to Get Information, n=147)



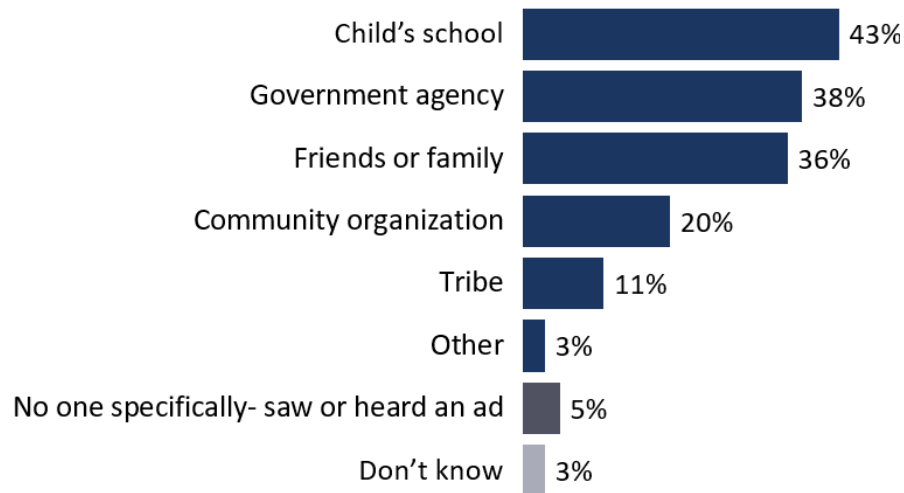
Schools, government agencies, and family and friends were the most common ways parents first heard about S-EBT. Forty-three percent of parents heard about S-EBT through their children's schools, making it an effective messenger for the program. Additionally, 38% learned about it through a government agency and 36% heard about it through friends or family.

Additional demographic distinctions included:

- Immigrant parents were more likely to have heard about S-EBT through a community organization (38%) than US-born parents (16%), and they were much less likely to have heard about it through a government agency (24%) than US-born parents (40%).
- Kinship care parents (54%) relied on government agencies more than parents overall.
- Single parents and kinship care parents were slightly more likely than others to rely on schools (46% and 48%).
- Asian American and Pacific Islander parents, as well as Native American parents, were more likely than other parents to have heard about S-EBT through schools.
- Nearly half of Native American parents heard about S-EBT through a tribe or community organization.

Figure 15: S-EBT Messengers

What are all the ways you heard about S-EBT/SUNBucks, including people you know and organizations? (Multiple Responses Accepted; Asked if Familiar with S-EBT, n=937)



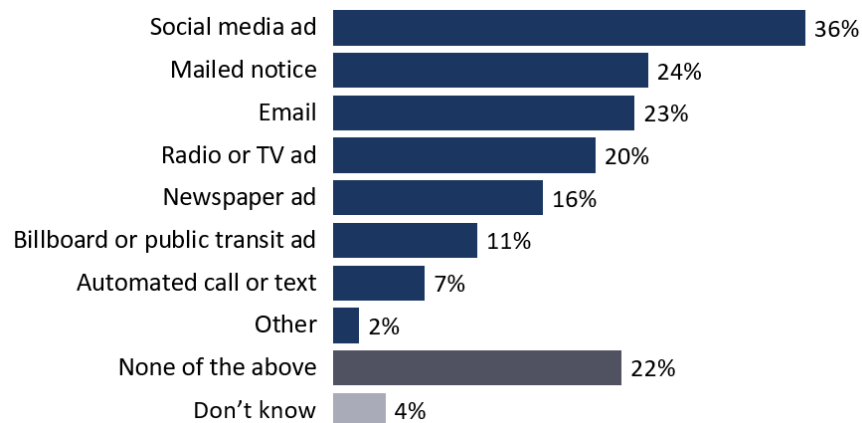
Parents most often heard about S-EBT through social media, physical mail, and email.

More than a third of parents heard about S-EBT through social media (36%), while nearly a quarter heard about it through mail notice (24%) and email (23%).

- Parents in rural areas were more likely to say they had not received any ads or notices (33%).
- Immigrant parents and kinship custody parents were especially likely to have seen information on social media (52% and 51%, respectively).

Figure 16: S-EBT Information Sources

Did you see any ads or receive notices about Summer EBT, or S-EBT/SUNBucks? (Multiple Responses Accepted; Asked if Familiar with S-EBT, n=937)

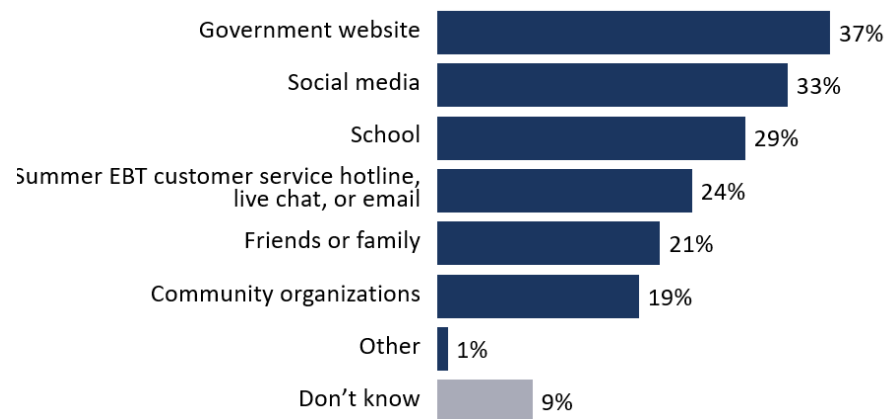


Parents said government websites, social media, and schools were the most helpful resources for applying for and using S-EBT. Nearly two in five parents who were familiar with S-EBT used a government website to get information on applying for and using S-EBT (37%); one-third said social media was helpful, 29% relied on schools.

- Immigrant parents were more likely than others to say social media (46%) and community organizations were helpful (33%).
- Kinship custody parents were more likely to say government websites are helpful (49%).

Figure 17: Information Resources for Getting and Using S-EBT

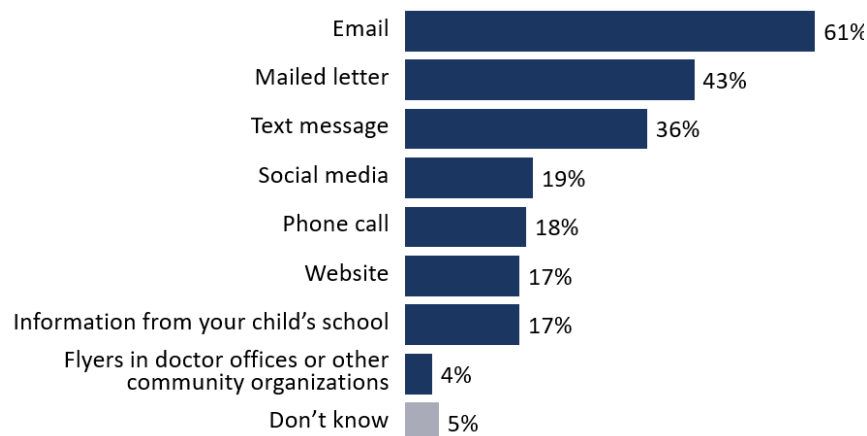
Were any of these sources helpful in getting information on how to get and use S-EBT/SUNBucks benefits? (Multiple Responses Accepted; Asked if Familiar with S-EBT, n=937)



Parents most wanted to hear about S-EBT via email, mail, and text message. Three in five parents (61%) said email was their preferred way of receiving information about S-EBT, while 43% preferred mailed letters and 36% favored text messages. The rank order of these preferences was consistent across all major demographic and geographic groups.

Figure 18: Preferred Communication Methods

If you are interested in getting S-EBT/SUNBucks for next summer, how would you want to receive information about the program? (Multiple Responses Accepted)





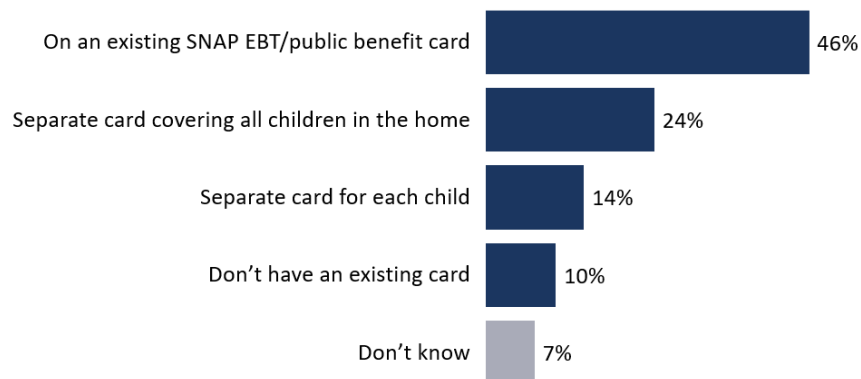
5. Program Preferences for Future Summers

Parents (including S-EBT participants and non-participants) largely would prefer to **receive S-EBT benefits on existing benefits cards in the future**. As shown in Figure 19 below, 46% of parents overall (including current S-EBT participants and non-participants) would prefer that S-EBT be issued to existing cards when available. SNAP or TANF participants would especially prefer (61%) to use existing EBT cards for S-EBT.

For the 38% who would prefer S-EBT to be distributed on a separate new card, 24% would want one new card that covers all children whereas 14% would want separate new cards for each child.

Figure 19: Preferences for Receiving S-EBT Benefits

Given the choice, would you rather your S-EBT/SUNBucks benefits be added to an existing SNAP EBT/public benefit card or receive a separate S-EBT/SUNBucks card(s)?

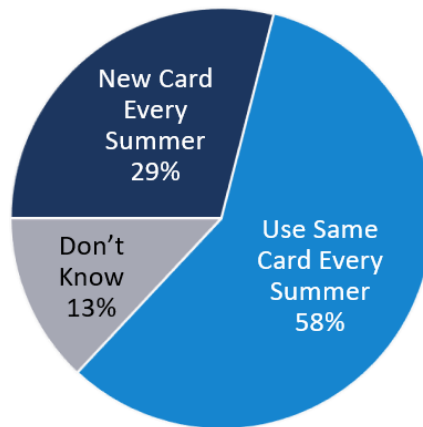


A majority of parents (including S-EBT participants and non-participants) would prefer to use the same S-EBT card every summer rather than get a new one each summer. Specifically, fifty-eight percent of parents would prefer to use the same card every summer compared to just 29% who want a new card each summer.

- 60% of families currently participating in S-EBT would prefer to use the same card every summer.
- 62% of families currently participating in SNAP or TANF and were likely to already have an EBT card would prefer to use the same card every summer.

Figure 20: Preferences for S-EBT Cards in Future Summers

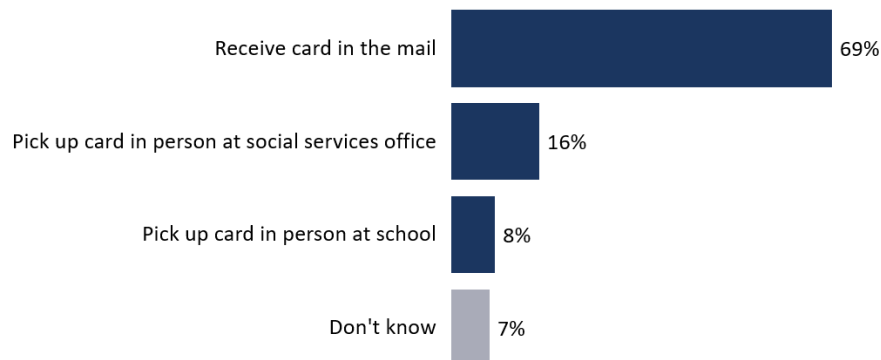
In general, would you prefer to continue getting a new S-EBT/SUNBucks card(s) every summer or to use the same S-EBT/SUNBucks card(s) each summer?



Parents vastly preferred that new S-EBT cards be distributed by mail over other forms of distribution. Seven in ten (69%) parents preferred to receive their S-EBT cards in the mail, while 16% preferred to pick it up from a social service office and 8% preferred to pick it up at their child's school. Parents across demographic groups ranked these preferences similarly.

Figure 21: Preferences for Distributing S-EBT Cards

If your state were to issue entirely new S-EBT/SUNBucks cards, what would be the most convenient way to receive it?





6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The large majority of parents experienced food insecurity and worried about affording food, including a majority who said their children are not getting enough to eat at least some of the time. During the summer, the expense of groceries create additional financial strain for a large proportion of families. These impacts were felt particularly intensely among single parents and those who provide kinship custody.

Three in five families living in participating states, territories, or tribes reported that they received S-EBT. Families that received the benefit in 2024 relied on a wide number of sources of information, ranging from government and school websites to social media, word of mouth and community organizations.

The benefit was widely seen by families as helpful. Participating families indicate that the benefit allowed them to purchase more produce and proteins for kids, and non-participating families would similarly like to use S-EBT to purchase more fruits, vegetables, and proteins.

In the future, parents favor receiving benefits on existing EBT cards and using that same card every summer. They would like to receive future information via mail, email, and text message.

At the same time, the survey findings showed some areas of potential improvement. For example, many families that don't participate are unfamiliar with the program. One-third of families who applied experienced challenges doing so. One in five who received the benefit had trouble getting and using it. Reported challenges including confusion about what the benefits were for, setup issues, inability to access funds, delays in receiving the card, and confusion about the amount of the benefit. When experiencing difficulties using their benefit, parents didn't know where to go with questions and had difficulties getting through to customer service lines.

Potential recommendations to address these concerns include:

1. Continue to raise awareness of the program to support participation for all eligible families.
2. Provide clear communications on the amount, duration, and use of the benefit so that parents understand what it is and what to do once they receive it.
3. Make it clear where to go with questions before and during application processes in addition to after the benefit is received.
4. Ensure families can get through to state customer service lines and receive timely responses.
5. Provide an option to receive the benefit on an existing EBT card.
6. Make S-EBT knowledge accessible and available through varied channels like schools and tribes, and particularly through community organizations when aiming to reach immigrant parents.
7. Communicate with families in multiple ways and through preferred modes, particularly via email, mail, and text message.
8. Make clear to families whether they will need to apply for the program or versus being automatically enrolled.