How Summer Feeding Programs
Bridge the Nutrition Gap



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### **INTRODUCTION**

Signed by President Harry S. Truman in 1946, the creation of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) marked a new chapter in child nutrition, extending and making permanent previous efforts to provide school lunches for children. The program was established as "a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children...." NSLP's creation reflected the deepening recognition of the significance of healthy foods for children's overall health and development. While NSLP was an important step forward, hunger remained a problem for children and families nationwide. A survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare between 1968 and 1970 found that out of 24,000 families, a significant portion were malnourished or at an increased risk of developing nutrition-related health difficulties." With hunger and malnutrition growing, the need for additional food assistance began to garner national attention. It became clear that—despite the success of the National School Lunch Program—hunger persisted through the school year and during school breaks.

Recognizing that there was more work to be done, in 1968, the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) was created as part of the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) larger three-year pilot program to address food insecurity, providing states with grant funding to serve meals to children when school was not in session.<sup>III</sup> The creation of SFSP and its targeted focus on the summer months marked a critical milestone in addressing the nation's malnutrition and hunger gap. Since then, Congress has since bolstered and expanded summer feeding and recently created new options for feeding children during the summer months. Most notably, the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (S-EBT) program is now a permanent avenue for bridging the gap during the summer months, providing essential support to children who rely on school meals during the academic year.<sup>IV</sup>



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### TACKLING FOOD INSECURITY: SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM AND SEAMLESS SUMMER OPTION

Children who rely on school meals during the academic year often face increased need and food hardship over the summer when school these meals are not available. Due to this reality, low-income children can often be at a higher risk of food insecurity and poor nutrition during the summer. Moreover, during the school year, school meal programs subsidize the nutrition budgets of many families and without this assistance, the financial burden of feeding children is larger during the summer compared to during the school year – limiting access to healthy food for kids.

During its first year as its own program, SFSP served meals to approximately 1.79 million children each day, and since then, the program has grown. In 2023, roughly 2.2 million children a day were served through SFSP—still a fraction of the nearly 28.6 million children that currently rely on the National School Lunch Program. Lower participation can be attributed to factors such as stigma, insufficient availability of meal sites, or a lack of familiarity with the program. Despite lower participation, SFSP is a critical summer program beyond food and nutritional support. SFSP provides federal dollars to schools and other local or nonprofit organizations that serve meals and snacks to children. Alongside meal services, these summer sites typically offer a range of enrichment activities and recreational programs. SFSP is administered by sponsor organizations that are trusted community partners, such as YMCAs and Boys and Girls Clubs, that manage the program at meal sites in "areas in which poor economic conditions exist." Additionally, meals must meet nutritional requirements, such as certain amounts of fruits, grains, vegetables, and milk served per meal.

In 2004, the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) program was authorized to provide a streamlined pathway for schools to provide meals to children during the summer months, where schools generally follow the same rules that they would follow for other school meal programs during the school year (NSLP and School Breakfast Program (SBP)).xiv SSO simplifies the process of providing meals into the summer, which makes it administratively easier and therefore more "seamless" for schools to continue to provide meals.xv



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### SUMMER MEALS HELP KEEP CHILDREN HEALTHY AND READY TO LEARN

Summer feeding programs keep children healthy and ready to learn—addressing the well-researched intersection between healthy eating and educational attainment. Children and adolescents experiencing hunger are more likely to encounter behavioral, emotional, and mental health challenges, as well as academic problems.\*\* Food insecure children are more likely to have behavior and attention challenges and tend to be more hyperactive, absent, and tardy compared to their food secure peers.\*\* Additionally, research has shown that food insecure children and adolescents have lower math scores and poorer grades than their food secure peers.\*\* In particular, low-income, food insecure children are more likely to repeat a grade, receive special education services, or undergo mental health counseling in comparison to low-income children who do not experience hunger, illustrating a strong relationship between hunger and learning.\*\*

Additionally, many students—particularly low-income students—do not always have access to engaging, educational, and social summer activities, such as camps, in the same capacity as their higher-income peers.\*\* Research highlights that low-income students are disproportionately affected by summer learning loss, also known as the summer slide, due to socioeconomic disparities and limited access to educational resources.\*\* This learning loss often manifests through gaps in academic achievement and persists with time.

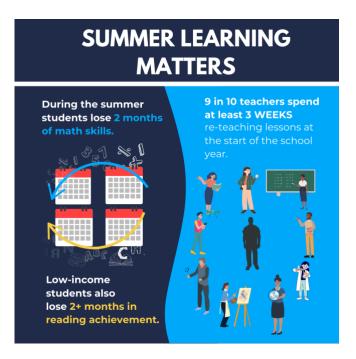
Through on-site consumption of meals, congregate feeding sites have the potential to improve achievement gains and mitigate the learning loss that disproportionately impacts low-income students.xxii In a study on summer learning programs for low-income youth that provided free meals, students with high attendance saw improvements in



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mathematics and language arts learning that persisted into the spring.xxiii Through summer meal sites, these programs provide a range of activities, from arts and sports to tutoring sessions, reinforcing academic development and addressing social and emotional needs of children.xxiiv Simply put, summer meals are more than a meal; summer meal sites meet a critical need for students by providing essential nourishment and engaging summer activities.

While summer meals programs have traditionally operated through congregate feeding sites, beginning summer 2024, Congress allowed for a limited non-congregate option in SFSP—allowing pathways for offsite consumption. Non-congregate meal services are now an option in rural areas with no congregate meal services. During the COVID-19 public health emergency, USDA provided temporary non-congregate feeding flexibilities allowing for meal pick-up options and grab-and-go meals for students.\*\* While non-congregate meal service can help fill a gap in certain areas, it does not include the enrichment or recreational opportunity for children that congregate meals often provide. Congregate feeding sites remain instrumental in addressing the summer slide by providing a place where children can learn, socialize, and stay engaged during the summer months.\*\*







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### **EXAMINING THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF SUMMER EBT INITIATIVES**

The Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (S-EBT) Program was launched by USDA in 2011 as a demonstration project, providing grocery benefits, also known as SUN Bucks, to low-income families with school-aged children when schools were closed for the summer.xxxiii S-EBT was created to complement existing summer nutrition programs, giving families an additional resource during the summer months. Using an Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card, families can purchase food at grocery stores at their convenience, ensuring flexibility in mealtimes and food preparation. This approach mirrors the model of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which has proven to be an instrumental EBT program to combat hunger and boost local economies.xxxiii Notably, the economic impact of EBT programs extends beyond the food assistance itself. For example, each dollar redeemed by households through SNAP effectively boosts the economy by approximately \$1.54.xxix

The S-EBT demonstration program was a success. During the summers of 2011-2014, the program provided a monthly benefit of \$30 or \$60 per child.\*\*\* When the demonstration ended, USDA conducted an extensive evaluation of the program, which revealed:

- Food insecurity among children was reduced by up to one-fifth.xxxi A \$60 benefit led to a 33 percent decrease in very low food security among children compared to receiving no assistance at all.xxxii
- The average household used approximately 79.6 percent of the benefits they received.xxxiii
- Any amount of benefit, whether \$30 or \$60 per month, resulted in improved nutritional outcomes for children compared to receiving no benefit at all.xxxiv

The success of the S-EBT demonstration project and the role Pandemic-EBT<sup>xxxv</sup> benefits played during the pandemic paved the way for a permanent EBT program with dedicated funding.



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### NEW SUMMER-EBT PROGRAM WILL FURTHER PREVENT SUMMER HUNGER

S-EBT benefits are intended to work in tandem with other nutrition assistance programs with the goal of ensuring eligible children have access year-round to critical nutrition. To date, 37 states and the District of Columbia, five territories, and two ITOs have signed up to offer S-EBT this year.xxxxiii

Not all states have agreed to participate, citing reasons ranging from administrative funding and lack of infrastructure to disagreements over eligibility criteria. Sadly, several states that have yet to opt into the program are doing so based on ideological objections. Some governors have equated the S-EBT program to the COVID-19 era Pandemic-EBT program despite the fact that S-EBT predated the COVID-19 public health emergency by nearly a decade.xxxix States including Florida and Oklahoma have either cited concerns over program duplication or have voiced support for their current approaches to child hunger, despite research demonstrating that S-EBT would benefit approximately 2.2 million children in Florida and over 400,000 children in Oklahoma.xi These decisions have sparked contentious debate about the implications for food insecure children. Public health and nutrition groups argue that opting out could deepen food insecurity among low-income households, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities; they argue that withholding benefits from eligible families limits available solutions to hunger.xli Despite existing nutrition programs, S-EBT is a critical addition for families and children who lack the financial resources to obtain healthy and nutritious meals. All in all, the program has the potential to deliver approximately \$3.5 billion in nutrition assistance to over 29 million eligible children—underscoring the importance of S-EBT for struggling families nationwide.xlii



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### CONCLUSION

While efforts to address child hunger span decades, the establishment of permanent programs and initiatives past and present demonstrates a steadfast commitment to ensuring eligible children receive balanced and nutritious meals. Summer nutrition programs play a crucial role in addressing the hunger challenges low-income children face, particularly during critical periods when they are out of school and lack access to nutritional meals. It is imperative to continue supporting summer nutrition programs as part of the nation's ongoing commitment to addressing child hunger.

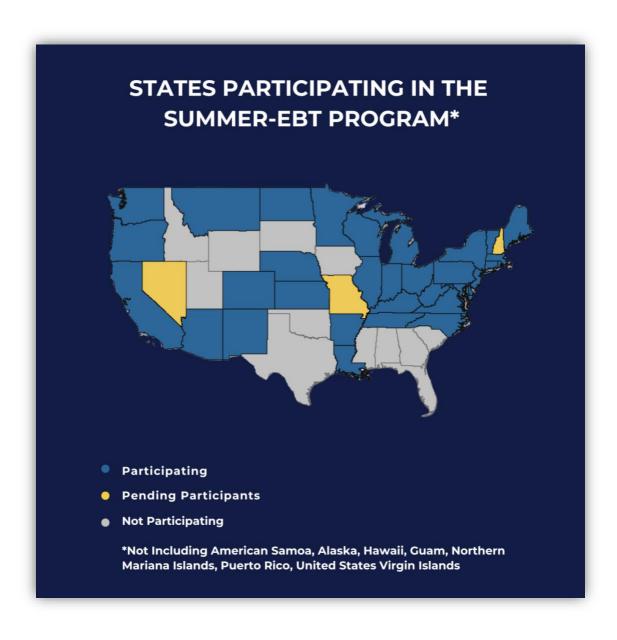
"There's no lunch at home during the summer. I wouldn't be having lunch if it wasn't here."

10-year-old Luis eats lunch at the Henry Hyde Resource Center in Addison, Illinois

Expanding access to summer nutrition programs is crucial to ensuring all eligible children can benefit. The integration of innovative delivery methods, such as mobile meal sites, along with the enhancement of meal nutritional quality, can significantly improve the quality and accessibility of nutritional initiatives. Again, continued investments in summer feeding sites are essential as they continue to meet a critical need through engaging summer enrichment activities and nourishing meals. Congress must continue to support and fund summer nutrition programs, enhancing the well-being of the nation's youth.



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STATE-BY-STATE NUMBERS OF CHILDREN POTENTIALLY ELIGIBLE FOR SUMMER-EBT*			
STATE OR	ELIGIBLE	STATE OR	ELIGIBLE
TERRITORY	CHILDREN	TERRITORY	CHILDREN
Alabama	545,000	Montana	68,000
Alaska	58,000	New Hampshire	39,000
American Samoa	14,000	Nebraska	175,000
Arizona	550,000	New Jersey	540,000
Arkansas	315,000	New Mexico	223,000
California	3,851,000	New York	2,027,000
Colorado	337,000	Nevada	352,000
Connecticut	273,000	North Carolina	968,000
Delaware	80,000	North Dakota	40,000
District of Columbia	80,000	Northern Marina Islands	11,000
Florida	2,158,000	Ohio	837,000
Georgia	1,156,000	Oklahoma	403,000
Guam	26,000	Oregon	294,000
Hawaii	100,000	Pennsylvania	1,166,000
Idaho	107,000	Puerto Rico	280,000
Illinois	1,145,000	Rhode Island	66,000
Indiana	669,000	South Carolina	543,000
lowa	240,000	South Dakota	57,000
Kansas	266,000	Tennessee	644,000
Kentucky	600,000	Texas	3,752,000
Louisiana	594,000	Utah	198,000
Maine	63,000	Vermont	35,000
Maryland	500,000	Virgin Islands	12,000
Massachusetts	515,000	Virginia	791,000
Michigan	836,000	Washington	507,000
Minnesota	412,000	West Virginia	202,000
Mississippi	324,000	Wisconsin	401,000
Missouri	429,000	Wyoming	32,000

Source: FRAC



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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 1751.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>iv</sup> Zoe Neuberger & Katie Bergh, *Permanent Summer Grocery Benefits Are a Big Win for Children in Low-Income Families, Despite Disappointing Tradeoffs*, Ctr on Budget & Policy Priorities (Dec. 20, 2022), <a href="https://www.cbpp.org/blog/permanent-summer-grocery-benefits-are-a-big-win-for-children-in-low-income-families-despite">https://www.cbpp.org/blog/permanent-summer-grocery-benefits-are-a-big-win-for-children-in-low-income-families-despite</a>.

<sup>∨</sup> Id.

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