

Summer Food Service Program

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provides funds to eligible organizations to serve nutritious meals and snacks, free of charge, to children at approved feeding sites. The program operates mainly during the summer when schools are not in session and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) are not available. Organizations eligible to sponsor feeding sites include public or private nonprofit schools; local government agencies; nonprofit community organizations, such as YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, churches, National Youth Sports Programs (NYSP), and residential camps.¹²² Because the SFSP is an entitlement program, no eligible sponsor may be denied funding.

Research on the SFSP has been entirely descriptive in nature. Much of it has focused on describing program operations and characteristics of sponsoring organizations. Two national studies of the program (Gordon and Briefel, 2003; Ohls et al., 1988) assessed the nutrient content of meals served in the SFSP but did not examine the contribution of SFSP meals to students' daily nutrient intakes or make any comparison to nutrient intakes of nonparticipants.

Program Overview

The SFSP was created to ensure that low-income children would have access to nutritionally balanced meals when school is not in session. The program was created in 1968 as a 3-year pilot project and was permanently authorized as an entitlement program in FY 1975.

In most States, the SFSP is administered by State education agencies, the entities that oversee the NSLP and SBP. Locally, the SFSP is operated by approved sponsoring organizations, which include school districts, State or local government agencies, churches, private nonprofit residential camps, and community organizations. Sponsors provide free meals at one or more feeding sites.

Feeding sites may be either "open sites," "enrolled sites," or camps (U.S. Department of Agriculture

(USDA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), 2002a). Open sites are those located in areas where at least 50 percent of the children are from households with incomes at or below 185 percent of poverty (making them eligible for free or reduced-price meals in the NSLP or SBP). Open sites are required to be open to provide food to all children in the neighborhood, regardless of their enrollment in site-sponsored activities. Enrolled sites are those in which 50 percent of the children enrolled in a program or activity offered at the site are eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals, based on individual applications. Camp sites are residential summer camps. Camp sites receive reimbursement only for meals served to children whose documented household income makes them eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

Children up to age 18 or older, if they participate in a program for mentally or physically handicapped individuals, are eligible to receive meals. Lunch is, by far, the most frequently served meal in the SFSP. However, sponsors may also offer breakfast, supper, and/or snacks. Most children receive one or two meals per day. Residential camps and sites that serve migrant children may serve (and be reimbursed for) up to three meals. To receive Federal reimbursement, SFSP sites must serve meals and snacks that meet defined meal patterns, similar to those used in the NSLP (see chapter 5) and the SBP (see chapter 6).

Sponsors receive two types of reimbursement for each meal served, and reimbursement rates vary by type of meal. The largest reimbursement is for operating or foodservice costs (\$2.35 per lunch or supper served in the summer of 2003). Sponsors also receive an additional per meal reimbursement to cover administrative costs (\$0.2475 per lunch or supper in self-preparation or rural sites and \$0.2050 per lunch or supper in all other sites). Funds received through these two reimbursement streams are not fungible and sponsors must monitor their costs very closely to ensure that reimbursements fully cover their costs (USDA/FNS, 2002b).

In FY 2002, the SFSP operated in approximately 30,000 feeding sites nationwide and served about 122 million meals (USDA/FNS, 2003). During peak operation in July 2002, the program served

¹²²NYSPs are Federally funded sports camps for low-income children. Programs are administered by colleges and universities.

approximately 1.9 million children per day.¹²³ The total FY 2002 Federal cost for the SFSP was \$263 million.

Program History

During its first year of operation (FY 1975), the SFSP served meals to an average of 1.79 million children each day. Over the next 2 years, the program grew to serve more than 2.8 million children per day. Program growth was sharply curtailed in 1981, however, when the 1981 Omnibus Reconciliation Act (OBRA) eliminated private nonprofit sponsors other than schools and residential camps. This action was taken because a 1977 report issued by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) described extensive program abuses by these sponsors (Ohls et al., 1988). In addition, the OBRA legislation restricted use of foodservice management companies and other vendors, expanded program monitoring and administration, and tightened eligibility requirements. Prior to OBRA, the criteria used to define area eligibility for feeding sites were 30 percent of children from low-income households. OBRA increased this threshold to the 50-percent standard that is currently in use.

After implementation of the OBRA reforms, SFSP participation decreased substantially. In 1985, the program served 1.5 million children per day, roughly half as many as had been served in 1977. The precipitous decrease in participation led to renewed concerns, particularly among child welfare advocacy groups, that low-income children were going without needed nourishment during the summer. Advocates concerned about rural hunger raised concerns that rural areas had particularly low participation rates and greater barriers to participation by sponsor organizations (Shotland and Loonin, 1988).

In the mid- to late 1980s, several pieces of legislation were passed with the aim of increasing children's access to and participation in the SFSP. In 1989, the OBRA restriction on private nonprofit organizations was reversed and these organizations were again eligible to serve as program sponsors. This change resulted in an increase in the number of feeding sites available and, consequently, the number of children served. Between 1989—when the change went into effect—and 1993, the number of children served by the SFSP increased by about

30 percent (Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), 1993).¹²⁴

The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) included many amendments to SFSP operations. Although most amendments were designed to increase the efficiency of program administration, PRWORA also included language that removed program expansion as a stated goal, reduced per meal cash subsidies by roughly 10 percent, and eliminated the subsidy for a fourth meal that had previously been provided to some sponsors. The GAO studied the effects of these changes and reported no deleterious effect on the number of participating sponsors and children (Robinson, 1998). State-level administrators did report, however, that the program may have been affected in other ways—for example, a reduction in the number of feeding sites, meaning children may have had to travel further to get to a site, and/or in the number of food items provided to participating children (Robinson, 1998).

In the years since PRWORA, concerns about the number of low-income children who go without Federal meal benefits during the summer have continued to escalate. In describing the problem, Under Secretary of Agriculture Eric M. Bost pointed out that the 2 million SFSP meals served per day in FY 2000 represented only about 12 percent of the free and reduced-price meals served each day during the regular school year through the NSLP (Bost, 2000). Bost deemed this level of SFSP participation, which reached “only a fraction of eligible children,” to be “unreasonably low.”¹²⁵

In keeping with this overarching concern, the most recent legislative changes in the SFSP have focused on increasing program penetration by attracting more program sponsors, particularly school districts. In 2000, USDA implemented several changes designed to eliminate and streamline paperwork requirements for sponsors. In addition, in late 2000, P.L. 106-554 (The Consolidated Appropriations Act) authorized a special

¹²³An additional 1.6 million children per day received summer meals through the NSLP as part of summer school programs or year-round schools (based on reported NSLP participation for July 2002 (USDA/FNS, 2003)).

¹²⁴The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) studied private, nonprofit sponsors after this change was implemented and concluded that the change was successful in leading to an overall increase in program participation as well as to increased coverage of rural areas. The study also found that private, nonprofit sponsors administered the program as effectively as public sponsors (Decker et al., 1990).

¹²⁵There are several reasons that SFSP participation is lower than NSLP participation. One is that open SFSP sites must be located in low-income neighborhoods, whereas the NSLP is available everywhere. Another is that attendance at SFSP sites is voluntary, while children must attend school during the year (Gordon and Briefel, 2003). In addition, systems that transport students to schools during the normal school year are generally not operational during the summer.

pilot project to increase the number of children participating in the SFSP in Puerto Rico and 13 States with low SFSP participation rates (Garnett, 2001; FRAC, 2001).¹²⁶ The pilot project was initially authorized to operate from FY 2001 through FY 2003 and was extended by Congress through March 31, 2004. It simplified recordkeeping and reporting requirements and provided sites with the maximum per-meal reimbursement for both operating (foodservice) and administrative cost reimbursements. Moreover, pilot sites were allowed to use funds from each reimbursement stream to cover excess costs associated with the other reimbursement stream. (As described previously, under current program regulations, reimbursements for operating and administrative costs are strictly separate.)

Analysis by FRAC (FRAC, 2003) and USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (Singh and Endahl, 2004) indicates that States participating in the pilot successfully increased SFSP participation. Singh and Endahl found that, in all 14 States combined, the number of SFSP sponsors increased by 18 percent between July 2000 and July 2003, and average daily participation increased by 43 percent. Impacts varied substantially across States, however, and based on July 2003 data, many pilot States continued to have low SFSP participation relative to other States. Evaluation of the pilot impacts was complicated by other SFSP initiatives (described below) that were implemented during the same period.

Before the start of SFSP activities for summer 2002, USDA implemented several regulatory changes designed to facilitate program participation at the sponsor level, thereby increasing the number of children reached through the SFSP. The most significant change was the nationwide implementation of "seamless summer waivers" for school districts that operate the NSLP (USDA/FNS, 2002c). The waivers, which will run through FY 2004, allow school districts to offer the SFSP without having to deal with previously required paperwork and administrative requirements. School districts operate the SFSP in essentially the same manner as they operate the NSLP. All meals served at waiver sites are claimed as NSLP meals and are reimbursed at the NSLP free meal rate, which is slightly lower than the SFSP rate. However, program administrators do not have to deal with the administrative burden associated with operating two different programs. To receive a waiver,

school districts must be approved by their State agencies and must qualify as either an open site or an enrolled site under SFSP regulations (see previous discussion).

Tasse and Ohls (2003) studied early reaction to and effects of seamless waivers. They reported that about 540 school districts, or about 14 percent of all SFSP sponsors, operated the program with a seamless waiver in summer 2002. Although school district response to the waiver was generally positive, early evidence indicated that the waiver had a limited impact on the number of children receiving summer meals. In summer 2002, only about 21 percent of the sponsors using the waiver were new to the SFSP, and not all of these new sponsors entered the program because of the waiver. Moreover, average daily participation rates were substantially lower for new sponsors than for seamless waiver sponsors as a whole (531 children per day vs. 972 children per day). Tasse and Ohls (2003) estimated that on a typical day in summer 2002, about 50,000 children received meals who would not have done so without the seamless waiver. A decision about the ultimate success of the waiver will require information about impacts during summer 2003 and summer 2004.

Other actions taken by USDA to increase SFSP sponsorship include providing State agencies with the flexibility to approve deviations in the length of time between meal services and/or the duration of meal service, when existing requirements pose a barrier to participation, and to consider closed, enrolled sites that provide services exclusively to the "Upward Bound" program as categorically eligible for the SFSP. (Income-eligibility thresholds used for "Upward Bound" are identical to those used in the SFSP.) Finally, USDA developed a Web-based geographic information tool to help State agencies and other interested organizations identify areas that are underserved by the SFSP (Gordon and Briefel, 2003).¹²⁷

Research Review

Research on the SFSP has focused on issues related to program participation and operations rather than on impacts. The most recent study of the SFSP, which was based on data collected in summer 2001, was completed in 2003 (Gordon and Briefel, 2003). The objectives of the study were to provide information about the characteristics of the SFSP and its operations at the State, sponsor, and site levels, to assess factors that affect participation of both sponsors and children, and to assess

¹²⁶The 13 States are Alaska, Arkansas, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Texas, and Wyoming.

¹²⁷Available at www.ers.usda.gov/data/SFSP/.

nutritional quality and plate waste of SFSP meals. The study did not look at the contribution of SFSP meals to children's overall nutrient intake, or make any comparisons to eligible, nonparticipating children.

Data were collected from all SFSP State administrators as well as from nationally representative samples of sponsors and sites; 162 feeding sites were visited in person. In addition to in-person interviews, site visits included structured observations of site characteristics and operations, the types and amounts of food served on 5 or 10 randomly selected plates, and the types and amounts of food wasted on 10 randomly selected plates. Lunch was always observed. If breakfast or supper were offered, one of these meals was observed as well (snacks were not observed).

The study found that school districts made up 48 percent of all SFSP sponsors in summer 2001 and served 51 percent of all SFSP meals. School districts were found to be well-suited to serve as SFSP sponsors because they have experience preparing and serving meals to children and have available buildings and staff.

Of all SFSP sponsors, 14 percent were government agencies, generally municipal recreation or social service departments. Although fewer in number, overall, government agencies were the largest sponsors, operating 36 percent of all feeding sites and serving 31 percent of all SFSP meals in summer 2001. Government agencies frequently used vendors to provide meals because they lacked the facilities and/or expertise to prepare meals themselves.

More than 8 out of 10 (83 percent) SFSP feeding sites were open sites, 14 percent were enrolled sites, and 3 percent were residential camps. All sites served lunch, 49 percent also served breakfast, 19 percent served a snack, and only 5 percent served supper. Almost all sites (93 percent) offered some type of activities for children, including educational activities, supervised free play, organized games or sports, arts and crafts, field trips, and swimming.

More than half (58 percent) of all SFSP participants in summer 2001 were elementary school children, 20 percent were middle school age, 17 percent were preschool age, and 5 percent were high school age. Children were racially and ethnically diverse: 39 percent were African American, 29 percent were non-Hispanic White, 27 percent were Hispanic, and 5 percent were Asian, American Indian, or members of another racial/ethnic group.

SFSP sites served meals to children in a variety of settings. Most (76 percent) served meals indoors, and most (70 percent) used a serving line or food pickup line. Nutrient analysis of randomly observed plates indicated that SFSP breakfasts, as served, provided more than one-quarter of the 1989 Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA) for protein, vitamin A, iron, calcium, and vitamin C and about 21 percent of the Recommended Energy Allowance (REA). SFSP lunches provided, on average, more than one-third of the RDA for these key nutrients, as well as approximately one-third of the REA.

SFSP breakfasts exceeded the *Dietary Guidelines* recommendation for saturated fat content and SFSP lunches exceeded *Dietary Guidelines* recommendations for both total fat and saturated fat. Study authors reported that, overall, nutrient profiles of SFSP breakfasts and lunches were similar to those reported for breakfasts served in the SBP and lunches served in the NSLP (as reported in the second School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study, Fox et al., 2001).

Observations of plate waste indicated that children wasted about one-third of the calories and nutrients served at both breakfast and lunch.¹²⁸ Waste varied across sites and for different foods. Vitamin A at lunch was found to have the highest level of waste (53 percent) because of a high rate of waste for vegetables. Findings from the plate waste analysis were similar to those reported in the previous national study of the SFSP (Ohls et al., 1988), as well as in a study of plate waste in the NSLP (Reger et al., 1996).

Other Studies of the SFSP

Other SFSP studies have been undertaken mainly by advocacy organizations. FRAC publishes annual status reports that consolidate data on SFSP program participation by State. The reports also highlight best practices, summarize new regulations, and provide other information of use to current and prospective sponsor organizations. The 11th report in the series was published in June 2003 and summarizes data for summer 2002 (FRAC, 2003).

In 1995, the FRAC report also included results of a survey of 5,282 heads of households designed "to provide reliable information on the extent of childhood hunger in

¹²⁹An earlier version of the same survey was completed by Wehler et al. (1991).

¹³⁰A two-stage probability sample design was used to select census block groups. All households were enumerated and screened to determine income and presence of children under the age of 12.

the U.S.” (FRAC, 1995).¹²⁹ The survey, the Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project (CCHIP), documented food insufficiency among low-income families with children, examined families’ attempts to cope with food insufficiency and hunger, and described consequences of hunger for children. The survey also examined the role FANPs play in helping low-income households deal with food insufficiency and hunger. Low-income households with at least one child under the age of 12 were randomly sampled in 11 different geographic locations nationwide.¹³⁰ Interviews were conducted face-to-face with the person responsible for care and feeding of the children.

A major finding of the study was that 71 percent of low-income families with at least one child under the age of 12 had never heard of the SFSP. The authors argued that low participation in the SFSP was probably due to lack of awareness among target families. In addition, participation in the SFSP and in other child-oriented FANPs was found to vary by food security

status. About 15 percent of “hungry” families participated in the SFSP compared with 10 percent of “at risk” families and 9 percent of “not hungry” families.

Summary

The impact of the SFSP on participants’ nutrition and health status has not been studied. Ongoing efforts to expand SFSP availability are continuing and, at least in the short term, research related to the SFSP is likely to focus on the effectiveness of these initiatives.

The recent descriptive study of the SFSP provides a solid understanding of the operations and characteristics of the SFSP at the State, sponsor, and site levels (Gordon and Briefel, 2003). The next step in evaluating the SFSP is to examine how eligible children who do not participate in the SFSP fare during the summer. USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service is currently undertaking a qualitative study to examine this issue.

Ultimately, an impact study must include detailed assessment of both SFSP participants and nonparticipants. Such a study will face several implementation challenges, including the short timeframe during which the SFSP operates (6-8 weeks), as well as analytical challenges related to selection bias. However, questions about the nutrition and health impacts of the SFSP can be addressed only with a study that looks at both participants and income-eligible nonparticipants.

¹²⁸ Estimates of plate waste included only foods that were served to or selected by children but not eaten (that is, some portion of the food remained on the plate after children were through with their meal). Estimates did not include food that might have been left in or taken from “share boxes,” designated places where children could leave food they did not want to eat or take food left by other children. Share boxes were available at 44 percent of sites.

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