

Background

The Analysis of the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Food Needs of Non-participating Children was designed to determine why children who attended elementary school during the 2003-2004 school year and were eligible for free or reduced-price meals did not participate in SFSP. For the purposes of this report, children who are eligible for free or reduced-priced meals will be referred to as "SFSP-eligible children." The target sample for this study was a nonprobability sample of 200 households with elementary school-aged, SFSP-eligible children. Results of the survey cannot be generalized nationwide due to the limited sample size and the restricting of sampling to households in areas of Miami, FL; Kansas City, MO; Oakland, CA; and Salisbury, MD. Eighty-three percent of the households included non-participating SFSP-eligible children while 17 percent included participating SFSP-eligible children.

Findings

The research questions addressed by the study and the findings are:

1. Are households of qualifying children who do not participate in the SFSP aware of the SFSP? If yes, what are the reasons for non-participation?

More than half of the parents or guardians whose children were non-participating but SFSP eligible during the previous school year were not aware of SFSP sites in their areas. Among the 55 parents or guardians who were aware of sites but did not send their children, 23 (42%) had chosen a different summer program. The others gave various reasons why the SFSP program they knew about did not meet their needs.

2. Are qualifying children who do not participate in SFSP food insecure or hungry? Is this different from the situation when the regular school year is not in session?

Households with non-participating SFSP-eligible children that did not know about a local SFSP site were more likely than others to be classified as moderately or severely hungry, according to a Food Security Index developed from the USDA Guide to Measuring Household Food Security. Most parents or guardians were about evenly divided between their belief that their children ate more healthy and balanced food in the summer vs. the regular school year. However, a small percent believed that their children ate better in the summer. They did not feel, however, that they had access to more food or to more of any specific type of food during the school year in contrast to summer.

3. Are the perceptions and attitudes about the eating patterns of SFSP-eligible children different for households with non-participating children compared to families with children participating in SFSP?

Parents or guardians with participating SFSP-eligible children relied heavily on the program to provide breakfast (79%) or lunch (91%) for their children. Parents of non-participating SFSP-eligible children thought it was important for a summer program to provide breakfast and lunch for their children. Virtually all of the respondents who did not know about a SFSP site thought that it was important for a program to provide both breakfast and lunch; most of those familiar with a site, although their children did not participate, did also. When parents were asked what they could do to improve their children's eating arrangements and the kinds of food they eat during the summer months, most

demonstrated an awareness of food choices that are considered to be healthy and claimed that, if they could, they would provide healthier food - "rich in vitamins," "more fruit and vegetables," "baked foods instead of fried," or "less fast food or junk food."

4. What are the feeding arrangements for SFSP-eligible children if, or when, they are not participating in SFSP?

Most parents, when queried in person, thought that their children were fed properly even after the program was over for the summer, and were satisfied with the feeding arrangements for their children even when the program was not in session. During the in-person interview, 18 of the 19 respondents with participating SFSP-eligible children indicated that they had no problem feeding their children when the program was not in session.

5. What are the child care arrangements for SFSP-eligible children if, or when, they are not participating in SFSP?

Over half of mothers took care of their children themselves when or if they were not

participating in the SFSP. Other caretakers included day care centers, summer schools, camps, and individuals known to the family. About 20 percent of respondents indicated that there were periods of time during the day when no one was available to watch the child, and most thought this was a problem.

Summary

The SFSP clearly is important to households with SFSP-eligible children who participate in the program. Most of these households rely on the program to provide breakfast and lunch for their children. Virtually all households with non-participating SFSP-eligible children would like their children to have access to a summer program that provides breakfast and lunch. More information about the SFSP sites, perhaps presented through the schools, might be a reasonable approach for raising rates of participation. States should also be encouraged to solicit the participation of all qualified summer food providers for children into the Summer Food Program, as either sponsors or operators of summer sites under a SFSP sponsor.

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