



SUMMER MEALS BARRIER ANALYSIS

HUNGER FREE NYC

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The findings of this report, including policy recommendations, are the views of Hunger Free NYC and Hunger Free America alone, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the volunteers, funders, and partners for this report.

ABOUT HUNGER FREE NYC

Hunger Free NYC is division of Hunger Free America, formerly known as the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. Hunger Free America is a national nonprofit group building a nonpartisan, grassroots movement to enact the policies and programs needed to end domestic hunger and ensure that all Americans have sufficient access to nutritious food.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report seeks to answer a basic question: Why do so many low-income children who receive free or reduced price lunch during the school year fail to receive free summer meals? While this study analyzed barriers to participation New York City, its findings have significant implications for summer meals programs sites in urban areas nationwide.

WHY DO SO MANY LOW-INCOME CHILDREN WHO RECEIVE FREE OR REDUCED PRICE LUNCH DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR FAIL TO RECEIVE FREE SUMMER MEALS?

Three out of four New York City public school students are eligible for free or reduced price school meals. One in five New York City children live in food insecure households, meaning that they have limited or uncertain access to food.¹ Yet during the summer of 2014, only a quarter (26 percent) of the children who depend on free or reduced-price lunch during the school year also ate lunch through the summer meals program, a federally-funded program delivered primarily by the New York City Department of Education (DOE) SchoolFood.²

In order to determine what barriers are keeping New Yorkers from participating in the summer meals program, Hunger Free NYC interviewed 150 parents and caregivers living in low-income neighborhoods in all five boroughs of the city whose children participate in the school lunch program during the academic year. Their responses were analyzed based on whether their children participate in the summer meals frequently (three or more times per week), infrequently (two or less times per week), or never. Their answers indicated the following:

- ★ Convenience is a key factor in determining whether parents and caregivers do or do not take their children to summer meals sites.
- ★ Families that frequently attend summer meals sites are most likely to say that they attend for both the free meals and the youth activities and opportunity for their children to socialize provided by the site.
- ★ Half of families who do not participate in the summer meals program do not know where sites are located or other key information about the program.
- ★ When asked how they first learned about the program, summer meals participants cite community outreach (such as that conducted by Hunger Free NYC) most often, followed by advertising and word of mouth.
- ★ Issues with program regulations or the food itself are not top reasons for lack of participation, but they are still cited as barriers.
- ★ Overall, low-income communities have a very favorable view of the summer meals program.



Based on the results of the Barrier Analysis, Hunger Free NYC makes the following recommendations to increase participation in the summer meals program.

For city agencies, sites and sponsors, and advocates in New York City and other municipalities:

- ★ **Ensure that parents and caregivers receive the information they need about summer meals.** City agencies, summer meals sites and sponsors, and partner organizations should invest in community-based outreach methods, such as sending letters from school or distributing flyers via community organizations.
 - ★ **Make summer meals more convenient for families.** Summer meals sponsors should strategically increase the number of sites in underserved areas and expand hours and days of service.
 - ★ **Pair nutritious meals with more youth activities and programming.** Sites with programming are more appealing and convenient for families. Sponsors should work to increase the number of sites that provide enrichment in addition to food.
- ★ **Work to improve program regulations and food appeal.** Increasing the variety of food offered, including meals for children with dietary restrictions, may help increase participation, as would offering meals to parents.

For state and federal policymakers:

- ★ **Increase reimbursements and grant sponsors the flexibility needed to serve summer meals to more children.** We call on Congress and the President to pass a federal Child Nutrition Reauthorization that increases reimbursement rates for summer meals, expands area eligibility for open sites, increases the number of meals a sponsor may serve, and enables children to eat food away from summer meals sites.
- ★ **Acknowledge the barriers to summer meals that the program does not currently address.** The traditional congregate feeding model is inconvenient and unrealistic for many families. Congress and the President should expand the successful program that places more food benefits dollars on the electronic cards of low-income families in the summer to enable them to obtain more food for their children.

INTRODUCTION

One in five children in New York City live in homes that are food insecure³ – meaning that they have limited or uncertain access to food – and three out of four NYC schoolchildren are eligible for free or reduced price school meals. During the school year, these children depend on school breakfast and lunch to provide the nutrition they need to learn and grow up healthy.

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP, also referred to as “summer meals”) is a federal child nutrition program meant to help fill this gap when school is out during the summer months, offering children 18 and younger with free breakfast and lunch. NYC Department of Education SchoolFood operates a robust summer meals program, distributing over eight million meals each summer at several hundred sites across the city. In addition to serving kids participating in summer school or day camps, meals are available at open sites such as parks, pools, New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) sites, libraries, schools, and mobile food trucks.

Most locations are open for breakfast and lunch, Monday through Friday, and some are open on weekends as well. These sites operate in low-income areas where at least half of the children come from families with incomes at or below 185 percent of the Federal poverty level, making them eligible for free and reduced-price school meals. Meals are served free to any child, and there is no application or identification required, but meals must be eaten on site.

BACKGROUND

A national survey found that of families who participate in the free and reduced-price lunch program, more than half (54 percent) find it harder to make ends meet during the summer when kids are not receiving school meals, and 43 percent sometimes find themselves without enough food during the summer months. A majority of low-income families (62 percent) spend more on food in June, July, and August, citing an average increase of \$316 per month.⁴

Despite this, summer meals participation remains low. Nationally, only 16.2 percent of students who received free or reduced price school lunch during the previous school year ate summer meals in July 2014. New York State fares better, with one-third of children who receive free or reduced-price meals during the school year also participating in summer meals.⁵ In New York City, just over a quarter (26 percent) of the children who depend on free or reduced-price lunch during the school year eat lunch through the summer meals program.⁶ During the school year, SchoolFood serves 850,000 meals a day, but in the summer, this dips to an average of roughly 169,000 per weekday.

The bottom line problem is that unlike school lunch programs that have built in participants on site because children are required to be at school, summer meals participation depends upon whether or not children and teenagers actually go to summer meals sites. District of Columbia, the top performing state in the nation, serves summer meals to just three out of five (59 percent) free and reduced-price school lunch participants, and the second-best performing state, New Mexico, serves only three out of eight participants (37 percent).⁷

In addition to this major challenge, a variety of other reasons contribute to the underutilization of the program, both in NYC and across the country:

- ★ The problem most commonly cited and addressed by government agencies and anti-hunger organizations is lack of knowledge – some families might not know that summer meals are available to them or where sites are located.
- ★ Number and location of summer meals sites – over 1,800 NYC public schools serve meals during the year, but only about 1,100 sites served summer meals in 2015. Only about 400 of these were open sites advertised to the public.
- ★ Other complaints related to program operation, such as food quality, lack of air conditioning, limited hours of service, and issues with summer meals staff.
- ★ Lack of substantive programming – “strong sites” provide significant day-long programming in conjunction with summer meals and function similarly to school meal programs. Examples include summer schools or day camps. These sites see higher participation. “Weak sites” that provide meals without the incentive of programming are more challenging for families to use and present more barriers to participation.⁸
- ★ Structural issues with the summer meals program, which are largely due to federal child nutrition legislation and regulation. Adults must escort children to sites and supervise them, which makes it difficult for working families to participate. Meals are only provided to children, so adults accompanying children to sites are not able to eat summer meals with their children. Meals must be eaten on site and cannot be taken away to be eaten later.

During the summer, Hunger Free NYC works to increase awareness of and access to summer meals in New York City, collaborating with partner agencies and organizations such as Share Our Strength, the Department of Education, the Department of Parks and Recreation, the Mayor’s Office, New York City Council, the Dairy Council, and others. Most of these groups focus on citywide advertising and media coverage to promote the program.

Hunger Free NYC has developed a complementary grassroots approach to increase participation in summer meals. Leveraging a team of AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associates, generally college or graduate students, we conduct place-based summer meals community outreach campaigns in target neighborhoods where the need for summer meals is high but the program remains underutilized. We distribute summer meals outreach materials through street outreach, tabling at community events, and by partnering with community organizations. Hunger Free NYC also recruits and manages hundreds of summer meals outreach volunteers who canvass neighborhoods to promote summer meals.

OBJECTIVES

Although the number of meals served in New York City continues to increase every year, it is not clear what efforts are effective in driving summer meals participation. Despite Hunger Free NYC’s community-based work, plus SchoolFood’s million dollar public transit advertising campaign and the launch of a new mobile app to help families find summer meal sites, total meals served only increased by 0.2 percent (18,000 meals) between 2014 and 2015.⁹ Research is a necessity in further developing an impactful approach.

Barrier Analysis¹⁰ is a formative research method, commonly used in community health, to determine behavioral determinants associated with a particular behavior – in this case, participation in the summer meals program. By comparing survey responses of people whose children participate in summer meals (known as “Doers”) and those whose children do not (“Non-Doers”) for statistically significant differences, we are able to better determine possible barriers or enablers to participation, and then develop more effective programs and interventions to increase participation in summer meals. Feed the Children developed and conducted the first summer meals barrier analysis study in Oklahoma City in 2014,¹¹ which provided the inspiration and framework for this study in New York City.

DATA COLLECTION

Hunger Free NYC staff, AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associates, and college and graduate school volunteers recruited and interviewed the majority of respondents in July and August 2015. Respondents were approached and solicited on the street or at community organizations. Those who were eligible per the criteria below and agreed to be interviewed were informed how the information would be used, that participation was voluntary and responses confidential, and that they would receive a round trip MetroCard (worth \$5.50); respondents were required to sign an informed consent form before proceeding with the interview. Interviewers conducted the surveys orally and recorded answers by hand. Responses were coded and manually inputted into SurveyMonkey for tabulation and analysis.

Respondents met the following criteria:

- ★ Above the age of 17
- ★ New York City resident
- ★ Parent or caregiver of a child or children between the ages of five and twelve¹²
- ★ Child/children are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch

Based on their participation in the summer meals program, respondents were grouped as follows:

- ★ **“Frequent Doers,”** whose children go to a place to get free summer meals three times (meals) per week or more often,
- ★ **“Infrequent Doers,”** whose children go to a place to get free summer meals two times (meals) per week or less often, and
- ★ **“Non-Doers,”** whose children do not go to a place to get free summer meals.

In other words, we tried to determine the difference between families who participated in the summer meals program frequently, sometimes, or never. The “Infrequent Doer” category was created to capture and test any potential differences between those whose children participate on a more sporadic basis and those whose children either regularly participate or never participate in the summer meals program.

SAMPLE SIZE

Surveyors collected a sample size of 150 responses: 68 Frequent Doers, 31 Infrequent Doers, and 51 Non-Doers. The sample represents people living in all five boroughs: 61 Brooklyn residents, 32 Bronx residents, 34 Manhattan residents, 15 Queens residents, and 8 Staten Island residents. Surveyors interviewed 124 women and 26 men, including 102 parents (83 mothers and 9 fathers), 31 grandparents (28 grandmothers and 3 grandfathers), 9 other family members such as aunts or uncles (6 women and 3 men), 4 teachers/camp counselors, 3 caregivers, 2 legal guardians, and 2 older brothers.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Barrier analysis surveys ask questions related to behavioral determinants: the reason why a person does or does not do something – in this case, having their child go to a summer meals site to get free summer meals. The questions are designed to determine what personal or environmental factors can prevent someone from taking a specific action and they can also help identify what methods may be effective in promoting that that action. Many outreach campaigns or education programs are conducted based on the assumption that knowledge alone is enough to help people do something, but in some cases, people know what they should do, but still choose not to do it or are unable to do it due to external factors. For example, a parent may want to take their child to a summer meals site, but if they have to work or if there are no convenient sites in their neighborhood, having more information will not empower them to surmount these barriers.

The four most common and powerful influencers of behavior change, particularly for health and nutrition behaviors, include the following:

- ★ Perceived self-efficacy – an individual’s belief that he or she can do a particular behavior given their current knowledge, skills, and abilities.
- ★ Perceived advantages – the positive things a person thinks will happen as a result of performing a behavior.
- ★ Perceived disadvantages – the negative things a person thinks will happen as a result of performing a behavior.
- ★ Perceived social norms – the perception that people important to an individual think he or she should do the behavior.

Our study incorporated the above four determinants and three others:¹³

- ★ Perceived access – the degree of availability of the needed services or programs needed to adopt a behavior.
- ★ Perceived susceptibility – an individual’s perception of how vulnerable they feel to a problem.
- ★ Policy – laws or regulations that affect behaviors and access to services or programs.

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

PERCEIVED ABILITY TO KNOW ABOUT – AND GET KIDS TO – SUMMER MEALS SITES

With your present knowledge, money, skills, and transportation options, do you think that you could have your child regularly go to some place where they can get free summer breakfasts or lunches if you wanted to do so?

Frequent Doers were the most likely to respond yes to this question (96 percent), followed by Infrequent Doers (84 percent) and then Non-Doers (57 percent). The differences between all three groups are statistically significant. Non-Doers were also four times more likely (18 percent) to answer no to this question than Frequent Doers (4 percent).

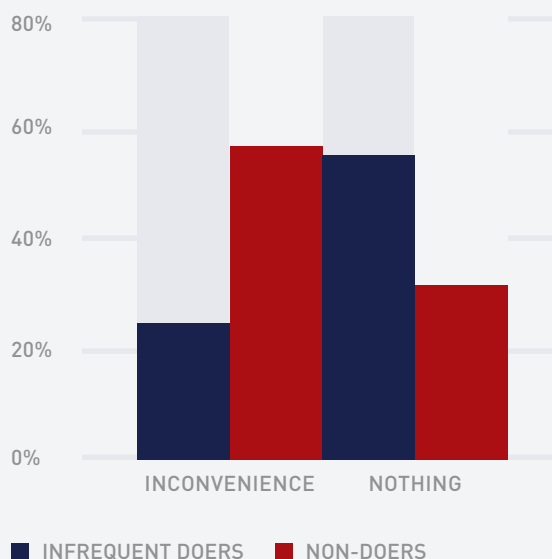
What makes it or would make it easier for you to have your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?

Frequent Doers were much more likely (19 percent) than Non-Doers (2 percent) to cite the fact that summer meals are free as a factor that makes it easier to participate in the program. Non-Doers were much more likely (22 percent) than Frequent Doers or Infrequent Doers (3 percent for each) to say that more advertising or information about summer meals would make it easier for them to have their children go get summer meals. This would support the expansion of summer meals outreach programs, especially those that emphasize that the meals are free.

What makes it or would make it harder for you to have your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?

Non-Doers were twice as likely (58 percent) as Frequent Doers (29 percent) to cite inconvenience (in terms of location, transportation, personal schedules, or weather) as a factor that makes it harder to have their children get free summer meals. Infrequent Doers were more likely (23 percent) than Frequent Doers (5 percent) to cite structural issues (short amount of time to eat, only one meal per child, not allowed to take meals home, no meals for adults) as barriers to participation, and Frequent Doers were twice as likely (59 percent) to respond that “nothing makes it harder” for them to have their children eat summer meals than Non-Doers (31 percent). Inconvenience could indicate a variety of barriers to participation. Additional research into what could make summer meals more convenient for Non-Doers may help improve the program and drive participation.

WHAT MAKES IT OR WOULD MAKE IT HARDER FOR YOU TO HAVE YOUR CHILD GO TO A PLACE WHERE THEY CAN GET FREE SUMMER MEALS?



PERCEIVED ADVANTAGES

What are/would be the advantages of having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?

Infrequent Doers alone (60 percent) and Frequent and Infrequent Doers combined (53 percent) were more likely than Non-Doers (32 percent) to cite convenience factors (such as location, speed, or not having to cook) as advantages of the summer meals program. Other advantages, such as healthy food, free meals, and activities or socializing with friends were cited at similar rates for all three groups. Additional research should be conducted on specific convenience factors, and those considered more advantageous by Frequent and Infrequent Doers can be enhanced in program delivery and communicated in advertisements and outreach.

PERCEIVED DISADVANTAGES

What are/would be the disadvantages of having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?

There were no statistically significant differences in answers to this question. Sixty-three percent of respondents answered that there are no disadvantages to their children getting free summer meals, and the most common disadvantages cited had to do with site location or the food itself.

SOCIAL FORCES AND STIGMA

Do/would most of the people that you know approve of you having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?

Eighty-five percent of respondents answered yes to this question and only five percent answered no. There was no statistical significance between groups for yes or no responses to this question.

Who are all the people that approve/would approve of you having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?

Again, the differences in answers between groups for this question are not statistically significant. The most cited groups of people who approve include family, friends, and neighbors.

Who are all the people that disapprove/would disapprove of you having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?

The only statistically significant response to this question is that Non-Doers were more likely (6 percent and just 3 responses) than Frequent doers (zero percent) to list people who are better off economically as potentially disapproving of use of the summer meals program. It is clear that the summer meals program enjoys approval and support by many New Yorkers, however, those responsible for summer meals operations and promotion ought to be aware that stigma may discourage people from participating in summer meals and reduce and prevent stigma when possible.

PHYSICAL ACCESS

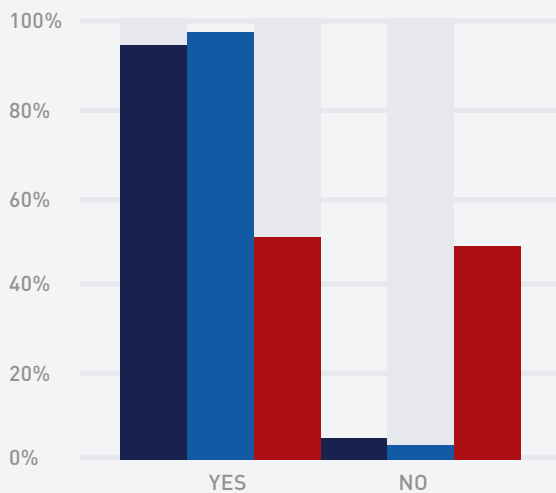
In terms of transportation, how difficult is it/would it be for you to get your child to a place where they can get free summer meals?

Non-Doers were less likely (61 percent) than Frequent Doers (82 percent) or Infrequent Doers (83 percent) to say that it is/would be “not difficult at all” to get their child to a summer meals site. Non-Doers were more likely (16 percent) than Frequent Doers (1 percent) or Infrequent Doers (zero percent) to say that they did not know how difficult it would be to get to a summer meals site.

Do you know the location of one or more places near you where children can get free summer meals?

Frequent Doers (94 percent) and Infrequent Doers (97 percent) were twice as likely than Non-Doers (49 percent) to know where summer meal sites are located.

DO YOU KNOW THE LOCATION OF ONE OR MORE PLACES NEAR YOU WHERE CHILDREN CAN GET FREE SUMMER MEALS?



■ FREQUENT DOERS ■ INFREQUENT DOERS ■ NON-DOERS

Do you think the places where children can get free summer meals are close enough to where you live?

Frequent Doers (93 percent) and Infrequent Doers (87 percent) were more likely than Non-Doers (61 percent) to think that summer meal sites are located close enough to their homes. Twenty-seven percent of Non-Doers answered that they did not know whether meal sites were close enough to where they live. Again, the difference in knowledge of summer meal locations appears to be a significant barrier to participation and supports the need for more promotion of the program, specifically where sites are located and when they are open.

WORRIES ABOUT CHILD HUNGER

How likely do you think it is that your child will not get enough to eat in a given week?

There was no significant difference in how the three different groups reported their child’s risk of not having enough food to eat. Overall, 65 percent said that it was “not likely at all,” 21 percent answered “somewhat likely,” and 10 percent answered “very likely.”

POLICY

Is there anything that is being done in your neighborhood or across New York City that makes it easier for you to have your child regularly go to a site to get free summer meals?

There was no significant difference in how the three different groups answered this question. Overall, however, half or respondents answered “no” or “don’t know,” which may indicate that more outreach from city agencies or elected officials would be welcome.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

We also included several survey questions outside of the Barrier Analysis method.

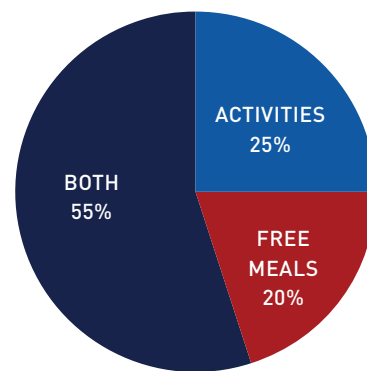
Answered by Frequent Doers and Infrequent Doers: How did you first find out about free summer meals and where to get them?

Forty-three percent first learned about summer meals from organizations and institutions in their committee: school, summer programs, daycare, or church. This supports Hunger Free NYC’s grassroots community outreach approach for promoting summer meals. Twenty-nine percent learned about summer meals from media or advertising: posters in schools or the community, advertisements on the MTA, or television. This is an area where efforts could also be enhanced. Twenty-four percent learned via work of mouth, and 14 percent knew about summer meals because they had previously participated in the program. Eleven percent used the internet or called 311 to find sites.

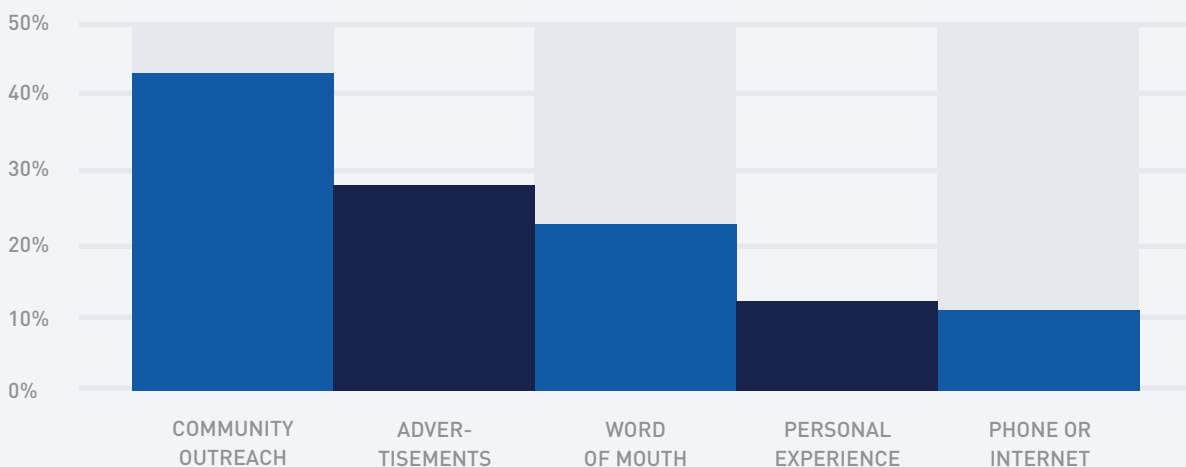
Answered by Frequent Doers: What is the top reason why you take your child where they can get free meals: for the activities, the free meals, or the activities and the food equally?

A majority (55 percent) of Frequent Doers participate because of the activities and food equally, 25 percent for the activities alone, and 19 percent for the food alone.

WHAT IS THE TOP REASON WHY YOU TAKE YOUR CHILD TO A PLACE WHERE THEY CAN GET FREE SUMMER MEALS?



HOW DID YOU FIRST FIND OUT ABOUT FREE SUMMER MEALS AND WHERE TO GET THEM?



Answered by Frequent Doers and Infrequent Doers: What are the main reasons that you send your child to a site with summer meals?

When asked this open-ended question, 44 percent of respondents cited the free meal, 40 percent cited the convenience of the program, 36 percent cited the social benefits, and 28 percent cited nutrition. Clearly, Frequent Doers and Infrequent Doers participate in summer meals for a wide variety of reasons. City agencies and advocates can work to enhance and promote these benefits in order to increase participation.

Answered by Infrequent Doers: What are the main reasons why you do not take your child to a place where they can get free meals more often?

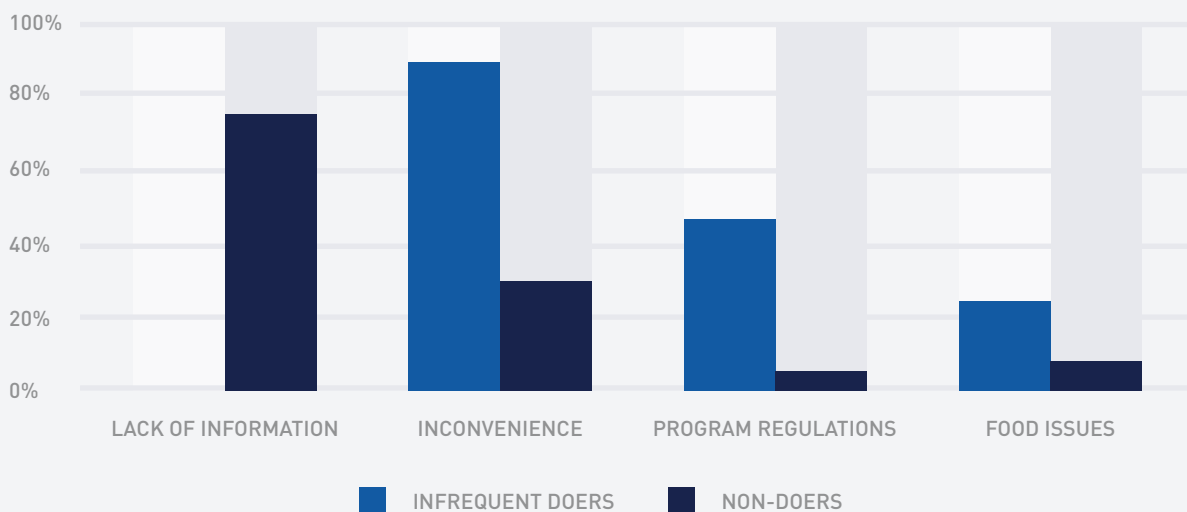
When asked this multiple choice question, 84 percent of Infrequent Doers cited inconvenience (distance or weather), 44 percent cited program regulations (cannot leave with meals, adults cannot receive meals), 24 percent cited issues

with the food (kids do not like it, not healthy, runs out), and only one respondent (4 percent) mentioned safety concerns as the reasons why they do not participate more.

Answered by Non-Doers: What are the main reasons why you do not take your child to a place where they can get free meals?

Sixty-eight percent of Non-Doers cited lack of information about site location or eligibility, 30 percent cited inconvenience in terms of location or schedule. Fourteen percent cited issues with the food (kids do not like it, not healthy, runs out), 13 percent cited program regulations (cannot leave with meals, adults cannot receive meals), 6 percent said they did not need the food, 4 percent cited safety concerns, and 4 percent cited stigma. Again, lack of information is cited as the top reason for non-participation, supporting the need for robust, comprehensive summer meals outreach, including specific information about site locations and times.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN REASONS WHY YOU DO NOT TAKE YOUR CHILD TO A PLACE WHERE THEY CAN GET FREE MEALS [MORE OFTEN]?



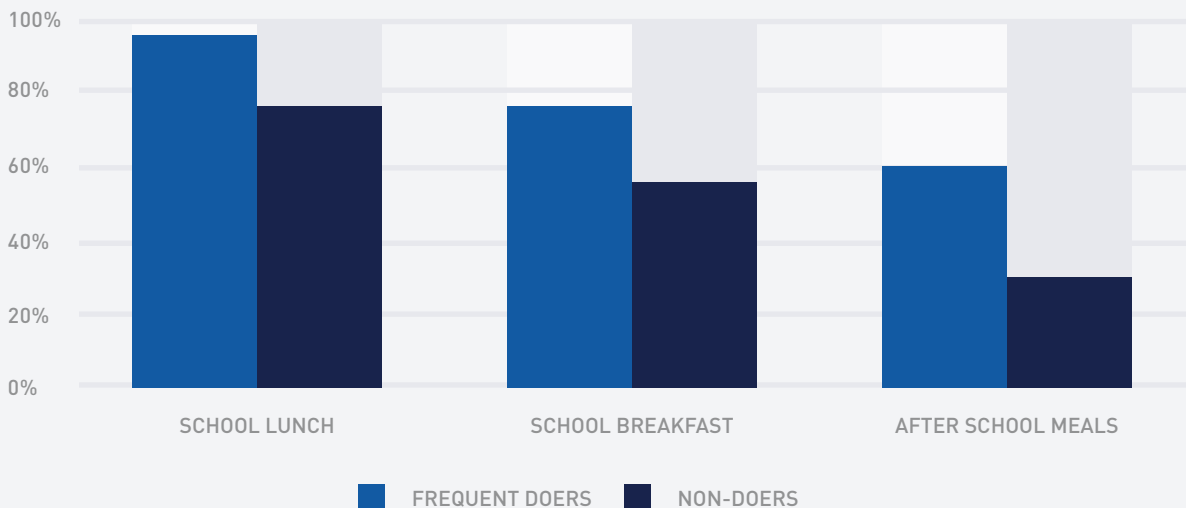
PARTICIPATION IN OTHER FOOD & NUTRITION PROGRAMS

We also surveyed respondents on their participation in SNAP, WIC, school lunch, school breakfast, afterschool meals, and early childhood meals and found statistically significant differences between Frequent Doers and Non-Doers in school lunch, school breakfast, and afterschool meals

participation. Frequent Doers are more likely to also participate in these other child nutrition programs than Non-Doers. This does not imply causation, but it is an interesting relationship that could be further explored.

	SCHOOL LUNCH	SCHOOL BREAKFAST	AFTERSCHOOL MEALS
FREQUENT DOERS	96%	78%	60%
NON-DOERS	78%	58%	32%

PARTICIPATION IN OTHER CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS BY SUMMER MEALS FREQUENT PARTICIPANTS VERSUS NON-PARTICIPANTS



LIMITATIONS

Surveyors did not receive formal training in Barrier Analysis. Though they were trained on how to interview respondents and fill out the questionnaire, they had less supervision and practice than would have been ideal, and as a result, data collection may not have been uniform from one surveyor to another. The addition of a third “Infrequent Doer” category seems to have yielded a number of statistically significant and interesting results, but is atypical for the Barrier Analysis method.

New York City is home to 8.7 million residents, including a million public school students, spread across five boroughs. Because sampling for the survey was convenient, voluntary, and not probability-based, it does not represent a random sample. This is a function of survey design, as barrier analysis is meant to be a rapid assessment tool and not a method for comprehensive evaluation. Though surveys were collected in approximately eight different neighborhoods, most of these areas were readily accessible by public transit and may not be representative of the entire city. Likewise, surveyors conducted interviews in English, with a handful of surveys translated into and conducted in Spanish, meaning that non-English speakers and immigrant communities were likely underrepresented.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the Barrier Analysis, Hunger Free NYC recommends the following actions for city agencies, sites and sponsors, and advocates in New York City and other municipalities:

ENSURE THAT PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS RECEIVE THE INFORMATION THEY NEED ABOUT SUMMER MEALS.

Responses to multiple questions indicate a continued need for outreach to provide Non-Doers with specific information about summer meals locations, eligibility, and how to make use of the program. As Doers most frequently cited community-based outreach as the way they first learned about summer meals, this may be one of the more effective ways to get the word out. Outreach methods that rely on parents and caregivers to reach out for more specific information (by calling 311, for example) present more barriers to participation than outreach methods that initially provide information on local summer meals sites (such as a letter sent home from school, neighborhood-specific outreach materials, or signs posted outside of summer meals sites).

Hunger Free NYC annually conducts place-based summer meals community outreach campaigns in target low-income neighborhoods where there is a need for the program but it remains underutilized. A team of AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associates creates neighborhood-specific outreach materials that feature listings for open summer meals sites, including meals served, hours of operation, and a map of locations. Hunger Free NYC staff and Summer Associates distribute outreach materials through partnering with community organizations (such as WIC clinics, food pantries, and religious organizations), attending community events (including block parties, health fairs, and free cultural events) and leveraging traditional and social media. Hunger Free NYC also recruits and manages hundreds of strategic volunteers to conduct street outreach, whether in small groups or large days of service. These activities have contributed to significant gains in participation and summer meals served in target neighborhoods.

MAKE SUMMER MEALS MORE CONVENIENT FOR FAMILIES.

Convenience and inconvenience – which could mean location of summer meals sites, hours of operation, weather conditions, transportation, or a number of other factors – play large roles in promoting and preventing participation, respectively. When deciding whether or not to attend a summer meals program, families do a mental calculus, weighing the benefits against the barriers to participation: Is it possible for me to take my child to a summer meals site? Is it worth it?

Sponsors should work to expand the availability of summer meals by increasing the number of sites in areas that underserved, expanding days and hours of service. This topic is one for much deeper exploration and continued research, as shaping the summer meals program towards maximal

convenience for the community will likely help Non-Doers and Infrequent-Doers to participate and participate more frequently.

PAIR NUTRITIOUS MEALS WITH ACTIVITIES & PROGRAMMING.

Eighty percent of Frequent Doers cited enrichment activities and programming as one of the main reasons why they take their child to summer meals sites. It is clear that the community sees the summer meals program as more than a source of free food.

A 2014 report from the San Diego Hunger Coalition identifies many of the structural issues that serve as barriers to higher participation in SFSP. It differentiates between two categories of summer meals sites: ¹⁴



STRONG SITES

- ★ INCLUDE ONGOING PROGRAMMING DURING THE DAY, SUCH AS SUMMER SCHOOL, CAMP, OR ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES; MEALS ARE SECONDARY
- ★ ALLOWS PARENTS TO LEAVE THEIR CHILDREN AND GO TO WORK
- ★ OPERATE SIMILARLY TO HOW SCHOOLS OPERATE BREAKFAST OR LUNCH
- ★ FAMILIAR AND CONVENIENT
- ★ TEND TO BE CONSISTENTLY AND HIGHLY UTILIZED

WEAK SITES

- ★ PRIMARY PURPOSE IS PROVIDING MEALS
- ★ LACK THE INFRASTRUCTURE OR PROGRAMMING THAT STRONG SITES HAVE
- ★ OPERATE ON A CHARITY MODEL
- ★ PUT THE BURDEN ON FAMILIES TO DIVERGE FROM THEIR NORMAL SCHEDULE, LOCATION, AND EATING HABITS
- ★ PARTICIPATION IS SPORADIC

The report challenges the assumption that improved outreach, creative workarounds to individual barriers, and opening more “weak sites” will increase participation in summer meals. Failing to distinguish between “strong sites” and “weak sites” obscures which approaches actually work. Sites should be categorized as strong or weak for the purposes of evaluation. Sponsors and advocates should focus on expanding the number of strong sites, such as summer schools, camps, and other enrichment activities that have the dual purpose of keeping children healthy and fed and their minds active so they are ready for the school year.

Though the open sites at parks, pools, beaches, and libraries in New York City would be classified as “weak sites” per the criteria above, it is likely that the unstructured opportunities for learning and play at these sites provide a great draw than sites that only provide food. This is an opportunity for further research, and pending results, and possibly strategy for increasing participation. Last summer, Hunger Free NYC’s team of Summer Associates also found that many summer camps are unaware that they could provide their campers with meals through the Summer Food Service program, so this is another potential strategy for increasing participation.

WORK TO IMPROVE PROGRAM REGULATIONS & FOOD APPEAL.

Though they did not rank as high as lack of information or inconvenience as reasons for non-participation or less frequent participation in summer meals, program regulations (congregate feeding requirement, meals only provided for children) and food issues (appeal, variety, dietary restrictions) still present opportunities for improvement. In other cases, some summer meals sponsors, including Hunger Free Colorado, have used pri-

vate donations to provide a meal for parents who accompany children to feeding sites, which further incentivizes participation. New York City also provides Kosher-certified summer meals in select neighborhoods via mobile food trucks during one week of the summer, but is only able to do so with additional private funds to cover the higher food costs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE & FEDERAL POLICYMAKERS:

INCREASE REIMBURSEMENTS AND GRANT SPONSORS THE FLEXIBILITY NEEDED TO SERVE SUMMER MEALS TO MORE CHILDREN.

The greatest challenge to expansion and improvement of the Summer Food Service Program is funding. Sponsors (rural or self-prep) are reimbursed only \$3.65 per lunch and \$2.08 per breakfast served. Not all of this money is spent on food. Sponsors must also pay for labor, administrative costs, utilities, supplies, transportation, and other expenses, and if USDA reimbursements are not sufficient, they must find additional funds elsewhere. Some State or local governments do provide a small, additional reimbursement (usually just a few cents per meal), which is helpful but does not bridge the gap in resources necessary to turn “weak” sites to “strong” sites with summer enrichment programming. New York City does benefit from a certain economy of scale, but additional reimbursement funds would allow the financial flexibility to create more sites, thereby decreasing barriers and increasing summer meals participation.

Federal and state policymakers should allow reimbursement for a third meal or snack will bolster these “strong sites” that keep children engaged all day. Likewise, Congress can encourage more sponsor organizations to serve children meals year-round by allowing them to fill out one set of paperwork for both SFSP and CACFP.

In addition to expanding hours of operation, increasing the number of sites so they are closer to where people live would make the program more convenient. If Congress were to change the area eligibility for open summer feeding sites from 50 percent to 40 percent - which is consistent with other federally funded summer programs - it would help establish more sites in areas where poverty exists but is less concentrated.¹⁵

Another promising way to make summer meals more convenient in urban, suburban, and rural areas is through program flexibility and transportation grants that fund food trucks or other mobile units. New York City’s mobile food trucks are wildly successful because they bring summer meals to places where children are located and also provide expanded hours and weekend hours of operation. Congress could also authorize flexibility to the congregate feeding rule, which would allow kids to take meals (or leftover meal components) with them to be eaten at their convenience.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE BARRIERS TO SUMMER MEALS THAT THE PROGRAM DOES NOT ADDRESS.

Nationally, four out of five low-income children spend the summer at home. Eighty-six percent of low-income children eat lunch at home most days; most do not attend programs that can serve federally reimbursed summer meals.¹⁶ Summer meals are a vital component of summer enrichment programs, but because most children

do not attend these programs, other techniques must be used in order to reach them.

Congress should expand Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (SEBTC) nationwide. The program was originally conceived of as an alternative to SFSP in rural areas where transportation challenges discourage participation. But because SFSP participation rates are low across the country, it makes sense to implement SEBTC in both urban and non-urban areas, which are both hard hit by child hunger.

SEBTC demonstration projects were successfully implemented in 14 rural and urban sites¹⁷ serving a total of over 67,000 eligible children. Families received \$60 per month per child during the summer months. Nine out of ten households issued benefits utilized them, and sites that used a SNAP or SNAP-hybrid (as opposed to WIC) model had mean redemption rates among participants ranging from 91 percent to 98 percent. This stands in sharp contrast to the 16 percent participation rate for SFSP. Most notable however, is that in SEBTC reduced very low food security among children during the summer of 2012 by 3.1 percentage points, from 9.5 percent of children in the control group, which did not receive SEBTC, to 6.4 percent of children in the treatment group, which did receive the benefit. SEBTC eliminated very low food security for one-third of the children (33 percent) who would otherwise have experienced it. Children in participating households also ate more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and drank fewer sugar-sweetened beverages.¹⁸

Summer meals (with or without congregate feeding requirements) and SEBTC are complimentary programs and should not be considered mutually exclusive. Summer meals are important in supporting summer enrichment programming and ensuring that red tape does not prevent children

from having enough healthy food to eat during the summer. SEBTC acknowledges that SFSP is not realistically accessible for all low-income families and fills this important gap during the summer months.

QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Formative research and program planning, implementation, and evaluation are iterative processes. With the summer meals program, every year presents opportunity for improvement. There are many questions to explore in future research and evaluation:

- ★ What messages and forms of outreach are most effective? Do different populations respond better to different messages and media?
- ★ What makes a summer meals site convenient or inconvenient? Will increasing the number of sites or expanding of hours of operation result in increased participation?
- ★ What types of sites or programming best encourage summer meals participation?
- ★ What barriers to participation are we not addressing? Who are we underserving?

- ★ What is the relationship between summer meals participation and food insecurity?
- ★ What is the nature of the correlation between summer meals participation and participation in other child nutrition programs?

CONCLUSION

The summer meals program enjoys a good reputation in NYC. The majority of survey respondents indicated that their family, friends, and community approve of the program, and expressed to the surveyors that it is a “good program” or a “great program” and that SchoolFood and other advocates should “keep up the good work.”

Despite this, lagging summer meals participation and the results of this barrier analysis indicate that there is still a great deal of progress to be made. Summer hunger and the “summer slide” have major educational and health impacts on low-income children. Summer meals programs, especially when paired with enrichment programming, present an opportunity to address these challenges when school is out.

REFERENCES

1. "Working But Hungry" (New York: New York City Coalition Against Hunger, 2015) available at: <http://nyccah.org/hungersurvey>
2. This rough calculation is based on the average number of SFSP lunches served on weekdays in July 2014 (146,212) divided by average daily participation on the school lunch program during the 2013-2014 school year (560,412), with data provided by SchoolFood and FRAC.
3. "Working But Hungry" (New York: New York City Coalition Against Hunger, 2015) available at: <http://nyccah.org/hungersurvey>
4. "Share Our Strength Summer Meals Survey" (Washington: Share Our Strength and APCO Insight, 2013) available at: <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/summer-meals/summer-meals-survey-findings>.
5. Food Research and Action Center, "Hunger Doesn't Take A Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report 2015" (Washington: Food Research Action Center, 2015), available at http://frac.org/pdf/2015_summer_nutrition_report.pdf.
6. This rough calculation is based on the average number of SFSP lunches served on weekdays in July 2014 (146,212) divided by average daily participation on the school lunch program during the 2013-2014 school year (560,412), with data provided by SchoolFood and FRAC.
7. Food Research and Action Center, "Hunger Doesn't Take A Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report 2015" (Washington: Food Research Action Center, 2015), available at http://frac.org/pdf/2015_summer_nutrition_report.pdf.
8. Parke Troutman, "Help Them Eat at Home: Why the Federal Summer Meals Program for Kids has Chronically Low Participation and What Can Be Done about It" (San Diego: San Diego Hunger Coalition, 2014), available at http://www.sandiegohungercoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/2013_report_final-for-print_.pdf.
9. The necessity to move some of the summer meals trucks to less trafficked locations in order to meet congregate feeding requirements posed significant challenge to increasing the number of meals served in 2015.

10. Bonnie Kittle, “A Practical Guide to Conducting a Barrier Analysis” (New York: Helen Keller International, 2013), available at: <http://www.coregroup.org/resources/404-a-practical-guide-to-conducting-a-barrier-analysis>.
11. “Oklahoma City Summer Food and Education Program Barrier Analysis Survey Results” (Oklahoma City: Feed the Children, 2014). More information available at: <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/resources/NKH%20RSCH%20Slides%20for%20Presentation%20full%20pdf.pdf>.
12. Though all children 18 and under are eligible for free summer meals, this study focuses on children ages 5 to 12, as teenagers are more likely to make their own decisions regarding food, and an alternative survey would be more appropriate.
13. Additional behavioral determinants were considered but not included in order to keep the survey at a reasonable length.
14. Parke Troutman, “Help Them Eat at Home: Why the Federal Summer Meals Program for Kids has Chronically Low Participation and What Can Be Done about It” (San Diego: San Diego Hunger Coalition, 2014), available at http://www.sandiegohungercoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/2013_report_final-for-print_.pdf.
15. Prior to 1981, 33 percent was the limit for area eligibility for summer meals. Once the limit was increased to 50 percent, the number of sites dropped from 20,600 in 1981 to 14,400 in 1982 and July participation dropped by nearly 330,000 children. It took a decade for the number of sites, peak participation, and meals served to rebound to previous rates.
16. “Share Our Strength Summer Meals Survey” (Washington: Share Our Strength and APCO Insight, 2013) available at: <http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/summer-meals/summer-meals-survey-findings>.
17. Cherokee Nation, Chickasaw Nation, Connecticut (two sites), Delaware, Michigan (two sites), Missouri (two sites), Nevada, Oregon (two sites), Texas, and Washington.
18. “Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Evaluation Findings for the Full Implementation Year” (Washington: Food and Nutrition Service Office of Policy Support, 2013), available at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/SEBTC2012.pdf>.

APPENDIX I: SUMMER MEALS PARTICIPATION BARRIER ANALYSIS SURVEY PROCEDURE

Explain to a potential survey participant who you are and what you are doing using the language in the informed consent form. Ask if they are willing to take several minutes of their time to answer an 18-question survey in exchange for a free roundtrip MetroCard. Mention that you are not trying to sell anything or to get them to do anything other than give us some information to help improve local programs for children.

If they agree to be considered for an interview now, tell them that you need to ask them a few questions to see if they meet the criteria for the people you need to interview, and continue with the screening questions below:

1. **Do you currently live in New York City?** If yes, continue to question 2. If no, they are not eligible.
2. **Are you a parent or caregiver for any children ages 5-12?** If yes, continue to question 3. If no, they are not eligible.
3. **Did any of these children receive free or reduced-price school lunch during the last school year?** If yes, continue to question 4. If no, they are not eligible.
4. **Do any of these children go to places they get free summer meals at least once a month?** If yes, the respondent is considered a Doer and is eligible to complete the survey, continue to question 5. If no, the respondent is considered a Non-Doer and is also eligible to complete the survey. Continue to the survey. (Keep in mind that we are looking to survey 75 Doers and 75 Non-Doers, so at some point, we may only be looking for one group.)

If they are not eligible to complete the survey, politely inform them of this and thank them for their time.

If they are eligible to complete the survey, read the informed consent form on the separate page. Only proceed with the survey if the parent/caregiver signs the informed consent form.

Proceed with the survey questions below.

APPENDIX II: INFORMED CONSENT PROCEDURE

Hi, my name is [insert name here], and I am working with the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. We are conducting a survey about free summer meals for children and we would very much appreciate your participation. The results will help the New York City Coalition Against Hunger and their partner organizations improve the free summer meals program and make sure more kids have access to free, healthy food over the summer.

You will not be charged any money, asked to donate any money, or asked to buy anything associated with this survey. The survey will take about 15 minutes to complete. If you complete the survey, you will receive a free roundtrip MetroCard. If any of the questions happen to make you uncomfortable, you can choose to skip a question.

Voluntary Participation: Answering these questions is completely voluntary. You may stop at any time for whatever reason. If you decide not to answer the questions, you will not receive the MetroCard.

Confidentiality: The records of this survey will be kept private. Whatever information you provide will be kept strictly confidential and will not be shown to other people outside of our research team.

Contact: If you have questions about this survey, you may contact Christine Binder at 646-553-1547 or cbinder@nyccah.org.

At this time, do you want to ask me anything about the survey?

APPENDIX III: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in this survey. The surveyor has answered any questions that I have at this time. I understand that I may stop answering questions at any time and no services—other than the MetroCard—will be withheld from me now or in the future.

_____ Respondent's Name	_____ Surveyor's Name
_____ Respondent's Signature	_____ Surveyor's Signature
_____ Date	_____ Date

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Christine Binder, MPH
Director of Child Nutrition Policy and Programs
New York City Coalition Against Hunger
50 Broad Street, Suite 1520
New York, NY 10004
646-553-1547
cbinder@nyccah.org

RECEIPT OF METROCARD [*Circle one.*]

I have received a Metrocard.

I have declined a Metrocard.

Respondent's Signature

APPENDIX IV: SUMMER MEALS PARTICIPATION BARRIER ANALYSIS SURVEY

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Surveyor's Name: _____

Survey No.: ____/____ [Your initials/##]

Date: ____/____/____

Location of survey: _____

Borough in which respondent lives: _____

Gender of respondent: Male or Female

Relationship to child: _____

Summer meals participation: Doer or Non-Doer

For Doers:

How often do your children go to a place to get free summer meals?

A. Three times (meals) per week or more often

B. Two times (meals) per week or less often

[Refer back to this answer for Question 13]

READ THIS BEHAVIOR EXPLANATION:

In the following questions, I am going to be talking about "having your child go to a place to get free summer meals."

SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. **Doers and Non-Doers:** With your present knowledge, money, skills, and transportation options, do you think that you could have your child regularly go to some place where they can get free summer breakfasts or lunches if you wanted to do so?
 - A. Yes
 - B. Possibly
 - C. No
 - D. Don't know / won't say

- 2a. **Doers:** What are the advantages of having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?

- 2b. **Non-Doers:** What would be the advantages of having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?
[Write all responses below. Probe with "What else?" each time.]

- 3a. **Doers:** What are the disadvantages of having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?

- 3b. **Non-Doers:** What would be the disadvantages of having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?
[Write all responses below. Probe with "What else?"]

- 4a. **Doers:** What makes it easier for you to have your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?

- 4b. **Non-Doers:** What would make it easier for you to have your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?
[Write all responses below. Probe with "What else?"]

- 5a. **Doers:** What makes it difficult for you to have your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?

- 5b. **Non-Doers:** What would make it difficult for you to have your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?
[Write all responses below. Probe with "What else?"]

- 6a. **Doers:** Do most of the people that you know approve of you having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?
- 6b. **Non-Doers:** Would most of the people that you know approve of you having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?
A. Yes
B. Possibly
C. No
D. Don't know / won't say
- 7a. **Doers:** Who are all the people that approve of you having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?
- 7b. **Non-Doers:** Who are all the people that would approve of you having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?
[Write all responses below. Probe with "Who else? each time.]
- 8a. **Doers:** Who are all the people that disapprove of you having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?
- 8b. **Non-Doers:** Who are all the people that would disapprove of you having your child go to a place where they can get free summer meals?
[Write all responses below. Probe with "Who else?" each time.]
- 9a. **Doers:** In terms of transportation, how difficult is it for you to get your child to a place where they can get free summer meals?
- 9b. **Non-Doers:** In terms of transportation, how difficult would it be for you to get your child to a place where they can get free summer meals?
A. Very difficult
B. Somewhat difficult
C. Not difficult at all
D. Don't know / won't say
10. **Doers and Non-Doers:** How likely do you think it is that your child will not get enough to eat in a given week?
A. Very likely
B. Somewhat likely
C. Not likely at all
D. Don't know / won't say

11. **Doers and Non-Doers:** Do you know the location of one or more places near you where children can get free summer meals?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Don't know / won't say
12. **Doers and Non-Doers:** Do you think the places where children can get free summer meals are close enough to where you live?
- A. Yes
 - B. No
 - C. Don't know / won't say
- 13a. **Doers** (*three times/meals per week or more often*): What is the top reason why you take your child to a place where they can get free meals?
- A. To go to a pool, park, library, or some other activity, program, or place where my child has something to do
 - B. To get free meals
 - C. The activities and the food equally
 - D. Neither / other [Specify]
- 13b. **Doers** (*two times/meals per week or less often*): What are the main reasons why you do not take your child to a place where they can get free meals more often?
- [Check all that apply.]
- A. The weather is bad some days
 - B. My child doesn't feel like going some days
 - C. I don't feel like taking them some days
 - D. The locations are too far away
 - E. Sometimes they run out of food
 - F. The food isn't that tasty
 - G. The food isn't that healthy
 - H. Only children (no adults) are allowed to eat the meals
 - I. We're not allowed to take the meal with us
 - J. Other [Specify]

- 13c. **Non-Doers:** What are the main reasons you don't take kids to sites they can get free summer meals?
[Check all that apply.]
- A. I don't know where sites are or what times they are open
 - B. I don't think my child is eligible
 - C. I don't want people to think that my child needs this program
 - D. My child doesn't want to go
 - E. I don't want to go
 - F. The locations are too far away
 - G. Sometimes they run out of food
 - H. The food isn't that tasty
 - I. The food isn't that healthy
 - J. Only children (no adults) are allowed to eat the meals
 - K. We're not allowed to take the meal with us
 - L. Other *[Specify]*
14. **Doers and Non-Doers:** Is there anything that is being done in your neighborhood or across New York City that makes it easier for you to have your child regularly go to a site to get free summer meals?
- A. Yes *[Specify]*
 - B. No
 - C. Don't know / won't say
- 15a. **Doers and Non-Doers:** Are you pregnant or do you have children under the age of five?
- A. Yes *[Continue to 15b.]*
 - B. No *[Continue to 16.]*
- 15b. Do you participate in the Women's Infants and Children (WIC) program?
- A. Yes *[Continue to 16.]*
 - B. No *[Continue to 15c.]*
- 15c. Why don't you participate in WIC? *[Check all that apply.]*
- A. I don't think our family is eligible
 - B. there are no clinics that are convenient for me in terms of location and/or opening times
 - C. It is a hassle to go to so many other appointments
 - D. I don't like the limited foods you can get with WIC
 - E. Other *[Specify]*

16. **Doers and Non-Doers:** Now I want to ask about your household's current participation in other food and nutrition programs. I will read a list of programs, and for each one, tell me whether you or any of your children participate or not. Remember, everything you tell me is confidential. *[Check all that apply.]*
- A. SNAP, also known as "food stamps"
 - B. School Lunch
 - C. School Breakfast
 - D. Meals at preschool or daycare
 - E. Afterschool Snacks or Meals
 - F. Other [Specify]
 - G. Don't know / won't say
17. **Doers:** How did you first find out about free summer meals and where to get them?
[Write all responses below. Probe with "What else?" each time.]
18. **Doers:** What are the reasons main reasons that you send your child a site with summer meals?
[Write all responses below. Probe with "What else?" each time.]
19. **Doers and Non-Doers:** Do you have any other comments or questions about free summer meals?
[Write all responses below or on the back of this page.]