



The Importance of Summer EBT: Why States Must Operate Summer EBT and Summer Nutrition Programs

Summer can be the hungriest time of year for families with school-age children. When the school year ends, millions of children from households with low incomes lose access to the school meals they rely on. The [Summer Nutrition Programs](#), also called summer meals, were designed to replace school meals lost during summer vacation. Because of that, these programs play a major role in reducing childhood hunger during the summer, and often provide meals along with important educational and enrichment programming. Despite these benefits, summer meals reach only a fraction of the children who rely on free and reduced-price school meals during the school year. Summer EBT, which offers benefits to families to purchase food at retail locations, bridges that gap. Summer Nutrition Programs combined with Summer EBT is an effective recipe to meet children's nutritional needs during the summer.

For Summer Nutrition Programs, local governments, school districts, and private nonprofits can sponsor summer meal sites, which may be located at schools, parks, recreation centers, housing complexes, Indian reservations, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, houses of worship, camps, summer school, and other places where children congregate. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in July 2019, just one child for every seven (2.8 million) who participated in free or reduced-price school lunch during the school year in the U.S. received a summer lunch. During the pandemic, nationwide child nutrition waivers issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture allowed meals to be served in every community and provided significant flexibilities such as “grab and go” meals and parent/guardian pickups. With those broad waivers, about one in three children (5.6 million) who received free and reduced-price school lunch were served summer meals in July 2021. Those waivers ended in September 2022.

Barriers limit access to summer meals. While the Summer Nutrition Programs are critical to connecting children to meals and opportunities to keep learning during the summer months, the program does not reach all of the millions of children who need to be fed. Low participation rates can be linked to program scheduling and other limitations during the summer. Transportation, too few sites, and the small number of summer programs that offer no or low-cost summer programming all limit access to summer meals. Many summer meals sites also close weeks before schools start, with most states having a decrease in participation the month before school reopens. [Rural communities](#) often face these logistical challenges, in addition to a general lack of community resources. Households in rural areas are more likely to experience food insecurity than households in metropolitan areas. Summer EBT can help to expand access to meals for families during the summer in both urban and rural communities.

Summer EBT provides all eligible families nutrition resources to keep hunger at bay during summer vacation. It gives all children certified for free or reduced-price school meals nutrition resources without the barriers families face in accessing summer meals. Families can buy food at grocery stores using Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards, and at times that work for them. Summer EBT was first piloted in 2011, and in 2021, summer benefits were added to the Pandemic EBT Program, which had been created by Congress in 2020 to address meals lost because of school closures and other pandemic disruptions. This gave all states the opportunity to provide EBT benefits during the summer. The demonstration projects decreased food insecurity overall by 8 percentage points and decreased very low food security by 33 percent during the

summer of 2011 and 2012. They also increased the number of fruits and vegetables as well as whole grains purchased by households who received the benefit.

Summer EBT is an important community economic driver. The program provides benefits using the same model as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Every dollar spent on SNAP generates between \$1.50 and \$1.80 in local economic activity during an economic downturn.¹ Over 29 million children are eligible for the Summer EBT benefit, which would result in approximately \$3.5 billion in nutrition benefits for the nation's struggling families, and at the lowest level, \$5.25 billion in local economic activity each summer.

Families need support from both programs. Summer EBT's \$40 per month per child works out to be about \$1.33 per child per day, not enough to cover the cost of a full day worth of meals that every child needs. The Summer Nutrition Programs serve a maximum of two meals each day at most sites, which is less than the school breakfast, lunch, and afterschool supper that children are eligible for during the school year. However, most summer meal sites also provide educational, enrichment, and/or recreational activities.

The Summer Nutrition Programs and Summer EBT are complementary programs. They work together to decrease summer hunger, and eligible families are encouraged to take advantage of both programs. By fully implementing both programs, states can help children have a productive and hunger-free summer, and to return to the classroom in the fall ready to learn.

¹ Canning, Patrick, and Brian Stacy, United States Department of Agriculture (2019). *The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Economy: New Estimates of the SNAP Multiplier* (at Table 1, page 7). Available at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=93528>. Accessed on March 6, 2023.