

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-369](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The SFSP, a federal nutrition assistance program, is intended to provide food to children in low-income areas during periods when area schools are closed for vacation. In the last decade, federal expenditures for SFSP have increased as the program has expanded, according to USDA data. GAO was asked to review the SFSP.

This report examines (1) what is known about SFSP participation, (2) other programs that help feed low-income children over the summer, and (3) challenges, if any, in providing summer meals to children and the extent to which USDA provides assistance to address these challenges. GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and guidance; analyzed USDA's SFSP data for fiscal years 2007 through 2016; surveyed state agencies responsible for administering the SFSP in 50 states and the District of Columbia; visited a nongeneralizable group of 3 states and 30 meal sites, selected based on Census data on child poverty rates and urban and rural locations; analyzed meal site data from the 3 states; and interviewed USDA, state and national organization officials, and SFSP providers, including sponsors and site operators.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that USDA improve estimates of children's participation in SFSP and communicate the circumstances it considers when granting flexibilities to ensure safe meal delivery. USDA generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-18-369](#). For more information, contact Kathryn A. Larin at (202) 512-7215 or larink@gao.gov.

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SUMMER MEALS

Actions Needed to Improve Participation Estimates and Address Program Challenges

What GAO Found

Nationwide, the total number of meals served to children in low-income areas through the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) increased from 113 to 149 million (about 32 percent) from fiscal year 2007 through 2016. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) directs states to use the number of meals served, along with other data, to estimate the number of children participating in the SFSP. However, participation estimates have been calculated inconsistently from state to state and year to year. In 2017, USDA took steps to improve the consistency of participation estimates, noting they are critical for informing program implementation and strategic planning. However, GAO determined that the method USDA directs states to use will continue to provide unreliable estimates of participation, hindering USDA's ability to use them for these purposes.

Children eating breakfast and playing ball at summer meal sites



Source: GAO. | GAO-18-369

Other federal and nonfederal programs help feed low-income children over the summer to some extent, according to states GAO surveyed and SFSP providers and others GAO interviewed. For example, in July 2016, USDA data indicate about 26 million meals were served through a separate federal program that allows school meal providers to serve summer meals. Some children also received summer meals through nonfederal programs operated by faith-based organizations and foodbanks, though GAO's state survey and interviews with providers and national organizations indicate the reach of such efforts is limited.

States and SFSP providers reported challenges with meal sites, participation, and program administration; USDA has taken steps to address these areas. Specifically, in GAO's survey, a majority of states reported challenges with availability and awareness of meal sites, as well as limited program participation and administrative capacity. National, state, and local officials have taken steps to address these issues, such as increasing outreach and offering activities to attract participation. In addition, 17 states in GAO's survey and providers in the states GAO visited reported a challenge with ensuring meal sites are in safe locations. To address this safety issue, USDA has granted some states and sponsors flexibility from the requirement that children consume meals on-site. However, USDA has not broadly communicated the circumstances it considers when granting this flexibility. Further, some states and sponsors that have requested this flexibility reported difficulty obtaining data to show these circumstances exist, hampering their ability to ensure safe meal delivery.