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UNIVERSITY OF  
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Center for Research in Nutrition & Health Disparities

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## **Summer Feeding Program Utilization in the Midlands of South Carolina**

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***Executive Summary: The Summer Food Service Program aims to ensure children still receive nutritious meals when school is not in session. Free meals are provided to children under the age of 18 at designated sites in communities. In surveying 538 caregivers in the Midlands region of South Carolina, we found that the Summer Food Service Program is underutilized among households experiencing food insecurity and hunger. In order to increase utilization, increased awareness of the existence of the program and site locations, as well as more sites within walking distance to where children live are needed.***

***Close to 1 million children in the United States experienced child hunger and 8.3 million children experienced food insecurity in 2012.<sup>1</sup> Even mild forms of food insecurity are found to be associated with poor health and developmental outcomes in children, such as increased risk of depression and iron-deficiency anemia.<sup>2,3</sup> The U.S. has 15 federal nutrition assistance programs, administered by the Food and Nutrition Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, aimed at ending hunger and obesity. The Summer Food Service Program is one of these programs.***

***To ensure children are able to access nutritious meals when school is not in session, the Summer Food Service Program funds free meals for children under the age of 18 in low income concentrated areas.*** The program aims to compensate for the absence of the National School Lunch Program (also known as free or reduced school lunch), which provides low income children with meals during the school year. Entities sponsor sites within communities where children can come to receive meals and/or snacks during week days. Sites can be found at schools, churches, parks and recreation centers, and community centers. Families do not have to apply in order for their child to participate, and sponsors are reimbursed for the cost of the meals provided by sites.

***Only 1 in 7 children who eat a school lunch participate in the Summer Food Service Program.<sup>4</sup> Lack of transportation and not wanting to leave home have been found to be barriers to child participation. Extensive paperwork, lack of staff to prepare meals, and inability to sustain sites have been found to be barriers to potential sponsor participation.<sup>5,6</sup>***

## Findings from the Midlands Family Study\*

Results from the Midlands Family Study provide further insights into summer feeding program participation.<sup>7</sup> A total of 538 caregivers within an 8 county region in South Carolina were asked about their child(ren)'s participation in a summer feeding program within the previous year. Out of these caregivers, only 139 caregivers said their child had participated; participation rates varied slightly by food security status (see Table 1).

Table 1: Percent of households participating in a Summer Feeding Program by Food Security Status			
Overall	Secure	Insecure	VLFS
	N = 156	N = 205	N = 177
n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
139 (26)	31 (20)	58 (29)	50 (28)

Caregivers were asked further questions based on whether they said their child had or had not participated.

### **Of the caregivers who said yes to their child participating in a summer feeding program...**

- ⇒ 48% of their children had participated for 1 to 2 summers.
- ⇒ 42% found out about the program through family or friends, and most everyone else found out about the program through a school or community event.
- ⇒ About 1/2 lived within a mile of the site and their child got to the site by walking.
- ⇒ 76% of the sites utilized were located at apartment complexes or community centers.

### **Of the caregivers who said no to their child participating in a summer feeding program...**

- ⇒ 56% had never heard of the program.
- ⇒ 25% did not know of a site located close by to them.

## What Do These Findings Tell Us?

These findings show that only about 1 in 4 children who experienced hunger in the past year had participated in a summer feeding program. The primary reasons all caregivers gave for lack of participation were not knowing that the program existed or not being aware of where a site was located close to them. Therefore, more children might utilize summer feeding programs if more outreach was provided to families about the existence of the program and site locations.

Out of the children who had participated in a summer feeding program within the past year, most sites were located within a mile of their place of residence and children got to the site by walking. Therefore, more children might utilize summer feeding programs if they could get to a site without needing to rely on someone to drive them.

## Recommendations

State agencies overseeing summer feeding programs should:

- ⇒ clearly publicize site locations, and dates and times of operation.
- ⇒ collaborate with community groups and institutions (e.g., free resource information hotlines, public libraries, churches, YMCAs, food pantries) to provide program information to families.
- ⇒ finalize summer feeding site lists before the end of the school year, so families can be provided with program information through schools.
- ⇒ explore the use of mobile apps (e.g., Range) for promoting site locations to families.
- ⇒ ensure more sites are established within walking distance to concentrations of low income children.
- ⇒ explore mobile meal delivery options or providing transportation to in rural communities.
- ⇒ avoid requiring any paperwork above and beyond that required by the USDA.

### **\*What is the Midlands Family Study?**

The Midlands Family Study asked, “How can households and communities protect children against very low food security?” The study surveyed 538 caregivers from food secure, food insecure, and households reporting child hunger within the Midlands region of South Carolina from March 2012 to May 2013. Caregivers were asked questions about the life events they had experienced within the past three years, the meanings they assigned to these events, and their ability to balance their capabilities (e.g., support from family and friends, income) and demands (e.g., bills, lack of transportation). This project was supported with a grant from the University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research through funding by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, contract number AG-3198-B-10-0028. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are solely those of the authors and should not be construed as representing the opinions or policies of the UKCPR or any agency of the Federal Government.

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