

USDA's Summer Meals during the COVID-19 pandemic: A mixed-methods examination of participants and non-participants in 2021

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ABSTRACT

Background The US Department of Agriculture's school meal programs have wide reach during the school year, but food insufficiency among households with children increases during summer months. The US Department of Agriculture summer meal programs are designed to fill this gap, yet participation has historically been low.

Objective To examine the facilitators and barriers to participation in a 2021 summer meal program while the COVID-19 pandemic regulation waivers were in place.

Design Cross-sectional mixed-methods survey research.

Participants/setting All parents/guardians of children enrolled in a school district in Connecticut were invited to participate in an online survey in December 2021. The respondents included summer meal participants (n = 622) and nonparticipants (n = 294).
Main outcome measures Survey respondents reported demographic variables, current food sufficiency, communication preferences, satisfaction with the program, reasons for using or not using the program, and whether they found the program helpful financially. The survey included three open-ended questions about barriers to participation.

Results Respondents who used the summer meal program indicated that the pandemic-related regulatory waivers were key to their decision to participate. Reported barriers included lack of awareness of the program, inability to travel to sites during the times they were open, lack of transportation, concerns about dietary restrictions, and lack of variety in the menu, and concerns about wasting food. Parents/guardians expressed strong preferences for receiving communication about summer meals directly from their child's school and being able to access meals outside of typical work hours.

Conclusions The pandemic waivers allowed sponsors to test different models of distribution. Parents/guardians responded positively to the opportunity to access grab-and-go meals, multiple meals at once, and meals without a child present. These findings can be used to inform potential policy changes to reduce barriers and increase participation.

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THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT FOOD INSECURITY RATES rise during the summer months in homes with school-aged children¹ and one contributor may be the lack of access to school meals. To help bridge this gap, federal summer food programs (ie, Seamless Summer Option and the Summer Food Service Program²) provide funding for meals when schools are closed. In eligible districts, summer meals are provided at no cost to all children aged 18 years and younger, regardless of household income.² Summer meal programs may be located in school buildings, or community settings such as parks or places of worship. Because the burden of cost and proof of income status is removed, high levels of participation might be expected; however, fewer than 4 million children received summer meals during 2019, compared with the more than 29 million students who received free and reduced-price lunches during the 2018-2019 school year.³ Therefore, it is crucial to

understand why parents/guardians do or do not utilize these programs to identify strategies to facilitate participation.

Before the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, several studies explored why families may not participate in the summer meal programs. Summer meal sponsors have reported that the greatest barrier to participation among families was lack of transportation,⁴ whereas families participating in a mobile summer meal program reported that barriers included conflicts with work schedules and concerns about being asked to provide proof of citizenship.⁵ In another study, parents reported three primary benefits of summer meals: reducing parental stress, fostering social support and connection, and supporting healthier eating habits.⁶ In the same study, the barriers parents reported were a lack of knowledge about the menu and a lack of culturally appropriate options. Prepandemic nationwide surveys conducted by nonprofit and government

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organizations highlight barriers including lack of awareness, logistical concerns (eg, locations of the sites and times the sites are open), and program rules that prevent parents/guardians from accessing meals when children are not present.⁷⁻⁹

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many school buildings were closed and the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) offered several important waivers to its regulations to facilitate continuing school meal programs.¹⁰ First, the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) policy mechanisms were leveraged to allow school districts with free/reduced rates lower than 50% to request permission from their state agencies to use the summer meal programs instead of the National School Lunch Program to serve meals at no cost to all children outside of the school cafeteria. Second, waivers allowed sponsors to serve grab-and-go meals, meals that did not fully meet the school meal pattern requirements, multiple meals at one time, and meals that could be picked up by parents/guardians when the child was not physically present.¹⁰ These regulatory changes continued through the subsequent summers and school years until they expired at the beginning of the 2022-23 school year.

Some studies have examined how school meal sponsors and community members responded to the challenge of providing and accessing meals during the school years influenced by the pandemic. For example, respondents in a qualitative study examining the distribution of school meals during 2020 reported that transportation difficulties, safety concerns, and a lack of fresh foods were barriers to program participation.¹¹ Food service directors distributing meals during spring 2020 underscored the need for clear communication to help parents/guardians overcome a lack of awareness of the program and increase their understanding of waiver-related program changes.¹² Because the federal summer meal programs were implemented during the school years of the pandemic, awareness of these programs during the summers of 2020 and 2021 likely increased.¹³ The changes in regulatory policies allowed unprecedented flexibility in the structure of the summer meal program. This provides a unique opportunity to understand how parents/guardians viewed and experienced these variations in the program.

The aim of the present study was to examine the reasons why parents/guardians reported that they did or did not participate in one district's large summer meal program in 2021. In addition, this study aimed to understand how parents/guardians responded to the increased flexibilities allowed by the COVID-19 pandemic regulatory waivers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Setting

Because lack of awareness of the summer meal programs was the most common barrier identified in previous literature,^{6,7,12,13} a district that has among the highest summer meal participation rates in the state (Bennett BL, Cohen, JF, Andreyeva T, Chafouleas S, Schwartz MB. Feeding Connecticut's children during the summer: an evaluation of outreach and suggestions for future innovation. 2022. Unpublished report) and engages in extensive outreach was purposively selected. The goal was to minimize the barrier of

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Research Question: Why did parents/guardians choose to participate in a US Department of Agriculture's summer meal program in 2021, and how did they respond to the increased flexibility in the program allowed by the COVID-19 pandemic regulatory waivers?

Key findings: Participants reported that several aspects of the pandemic waivers facilitated their participation. Specifically, they appreciated the grab-and-go meal option, the ability to receive multiple meals at once, and the ability to pick up meals without their child present. Although these factors increased access for many parents/guardians, concerns about food waste, limited hours outside of the typical workday, limited variety in the menu, and dietary restrictions were noted as ongoing barriers.

lack of awareness in order to identify other important barriers. The selected district is in an urban setting with a population of approximately 60,000 people.¹⁴ The median household income in the district is \$58,472 with an estimated 10.9% of its population in poverty.¹⁴ During 2019-2020, 76.5% of students qualified for free or reduced-price meals. The school district consists of 13 schools and alternative educational programs and provides education to approximately 8,600 students.¹⁵ The self-operated Food and Nutrition Services Program began serving universally free breakfasts and lunches in the 2018-2019 school year. The average participation rate for school lunches in the district before the pandemic was approximately 84%. In the current sample, 87.4% of the respondents endorsed using the National School Lunch Program during the school year, whereas 10.5% reported they do not use school meals during the regular school year. During spring 2021, the school district was operating in a hybrid format in which students were engaged in both in-person and remote learning.

The district food service also sponsors the summer meal program. In 2021, summer meals were served from June 14, 2021, to August 20, 2021. There were 22 locations, nine of which were open sites where anyone could access meals for children aged 18 years or younger. The open sites distributed grab-and-go meals 5 days a week between 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM. On Monday through Thursday, each child could have one breakfast and one lunch; on Friday, six meals were distributed (ie, three breakfasts and three lunches) to also cover the weekend days. The grab and go/noncongregate meal structure as well as multiple meal packs were allowed exclusively through the COVID-19 regulatory waivers. The open sites were located at schools, parks, a public library, and a community center.

Regulatory policies currently require that sponsors do not advertise their programs before site approval by the relevant state agencies.¹⁰ Once the district received their site approvals, they promoted the program by sending direct communication to parents/guardians via e-mail messages and messages on ParentSquare; posting regularly to their social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter); hosting the governor's press conference about summer meals at one of their sites; and placing ads in the local newspaper.

The summer meal program was easily recognizable to the community due to consistent branding on their wrapped vans, logo tents, and employee uniforms. The district also created special incentives to promote the program. For example, on a designated day, there was a golden ticket placed in one meal bag at each site and the person who found it won a children's bicycle and helmet.

This school district qualified to participate in the summer meal programs before the pandemic and as a result, had a similar number of meal sites in 2019 (23 sites) and 2021 (22 sites). Despite this consistency, when compared with July 2019, the total number of meals distributed increased by 528% in July 2020 and by 397% in July 2021.

Procedures

This study was approved by the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board (protocol X21-0116). Respondents completed the informed consent and a series of questionnaires via Qualtrics. Respondents were recruited by the school district's nutrition and food service department through a message sent to the entire parent/guardian population using ParentSquare during December 2021. A link to the survey was sent with the message: "We invite you to participate in this survey about your thoughts about summer meals. This survey is for all parents and guardians in [school district]—including those who did receive free meals for their children over the summer and those who did not receive free meals over the summer." A follow-up reminder message was sent 1 week later. The survey was provided in English. As an incentive, respondents had the option to enter their e-mail address into a raffle to win one of five \$100 Amazon gift cards.

Participants

In total, the survey link was clicked 1,298 times. Six individuals selected "I do not agree to participate" on the consent form and were excluded. Next, 237 respondents completed the consent form but did not complete the survey and were removed. Lastly, the remaining 1,055 responses were screened using IP addresses; duplicate responses were removed ($n = 139$). The final sample was 916 parents/guardians of children enrolled in the school district.

Measures

The initial survey questions were designed in consultation with the Connecticut State Department of Education and pilot tested during summer 2021 with respondents at 16 summer meal sites across the state. Questions were revised and added based on respondent feedback about program preferences and potential barriers. The revised survey was reviewed again by the Connecticut State Department of Education and the participating school district's food service director. The electronic version of the survey was tested by members of the research team to ensure appropriate length and flow.

The survey included demographic questions about the individual responding (ie, ethnicity, racial identity, number and age of the children, and level of education), parent/guardian use and perception of school meals during the academic school year, use of the 2021 summer meal program, and plans for future program use. Food sufficiency was assessed using

three questions from the larger US Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey.¹⁶ Because lack of awareness has been identified as a potential barrier,^{6,7,12,13} respondents were asked how they heard about the program and received updated information.

The last set of questions was different for participants and nonparticipants. The participant survey (Figure 1, available at www.jandonline.org) included questions about communication preferences (how they heard about the program and how they get updated information about it); what convinced them to try the program; the importance of certain features of the summer meal program (eg, a grab-and-go option is available), their level of satisfaction with different aspects of the current program (eg, menu options, pick up times), and whether or not they believed the program was helpful financially. This was followed by open-ended questions about barriers to using the program and suggestions about how to make it easier to use; and desired changes.

The nonparticipants (Figure 2, available at www.jandonline.org) were asked questions about why they did not use the program; their awareness of the program, and if so, how they learned about it, and the importance of specific features (eg, a grab-and-go option is available). This was followed by open-ended questions about barriers; suggestions about how to make it easier to use and desired changes.

Data Analysis

Analyses were conducted using SPSS version 27.¹⁷ Descriptive statistics were calculated for the demographic variables, and frequencies were calculated to assess communication preferences, important features of a summer meal program, motivation to try the program, reasons for not using the program, satisfaction with the program, and whether or not they believe the program was helpful financially. To compare summer meal program participants and nonparticipants on categorical variables (eg, ethnicity), chi-square analyses were used. Independent samples t-tests were used to compare groups on continuous variables (eg, number of children). Lastly, the quantitative and qualitative data were collected using a convergent parallel design.¹⁸ The qualitative responses to the open-ended questions were compiled and reviewed by two members of the research team. The team identified relevant themes for each question and created a codebook. All responses were double-coded, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached.

RESULTS

All respondents were from the same school district. Out of the total 916 respondents, 622 (67.9%) reported their family used the summer meal program in 2021 whereas 294 (32.1%) did not. On average, summer meal participants had more children than nonparticipants ($p < .001$), although the average age of their children was not significantly different ($p = .496$). Summer meal participants were significantly less likely to be White than nonparticipants ($p = .024$) and more likely to be Hispanic ($p < .001$). Summer meal participants reported lower levels of education ($p < .001$), were less likely to speak English at home ($p = .004$), and were more likely to participate in the school meal program during the school year ($p < .001$). Summer meal participants were also significantly more likely to report use of other government assistance

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programs ($p = .001$). Summer meal participants and non-participants reported similar rates of current food insufficiency ($p = .052$), including similar rates of current food insufficiency for children in the household ($p = .391$). See [Table 1](#) for full details.

Communication

Awareness. In the sample of nonparticipants, awareness of the program was still quite high, with 79.9% reporting that they knew about the existence of the summer meal program. However, more summer meal participants (90.8%) were specifically aware that the summer meal program is free and open to all families regardless of income.

Outreach Methods. In the combined sample, 47.8% reported they heard about the summer meal program from multiple sources. Most frequently, respondents reported hearing about the summer meal program from their school's website (32.2%), their school's social media accounts (22.7%), and from a friend/other parents or guardians (18.3%). [Table 2](#) presents all outreach methods in descending order of frequency. On social media, respondents reported hearing about the summer meal program most frequently on Facebook (20.9%) followed by Instagram (2.7%), Twitter (0.3%), TikTok (0.2%), and somewhere else on social media (7.2%).

Reasons for Participation

Program Use Plans. Only 50.6% of 2021 respondents reported that their household used summer meals before the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked whether or not their household plans to use summer meals next year, 80.2% of current participants said yes, whereas only 18.1% of non-participants said yes. Overall, both groups reported that lunch would be the most helpful meal followed by snacks, breakfast, and dinner.

Important Features. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of a range of features in their decision about future participation. The average rating for every item was in the "very important" or "somewhat important" range. The most important feature was "multiple meals are provided at one time" followed by 1) a grab-and-go option is available, 2) I can pick up meals when my child is not present, 3) meals besides lunch are offered, 4) the summer meal site is at my child's school, and 5) other activities are offered at the summer meal sites. [Table 3](#) presents each item in order from most highly rated to least highly rated.

Satisfaction. Overall, participants were satisfied with the current program. They were most satisfied with the ease of finding information about where to pick up the meals, the efficiency of picking up the meals, and the way the meals were packaged.

What Convinced You to Try the Program? Approximately 74% of summer meal participants endorsed multiple answers to the question, "What convinced you to try the summer meal program?" The top reasons were: 1) the meals are free, 2) the location is convenient, and 3) we liked the school meals during the school year. [Table 4](#) presents all reasons in descending order.

Influence of the Program. The majority of current summer meal participants strongly agreed (45.4%) or agreed (31.9%) with the statement, "The summer meal program helps me worry less about food running out before we have money to buy more." The remainder were undecided (10.5%), disagreed (9.1%), or strongly disagreed (3.1%). In addition, the majority of current summer meal participants strongly agreed (40.9%) or agreed (37.3%) with the statement "The summer meal program helps me worry less about our children eating nutritionally balanced meals." The remainder were undecided (12.4%), disagreed (7.6%), or strongly disagreed (1.8%).

Barriers to Participation

Of the summer meal nonparticipants, 42.2% endorsed multiple reasons for not using the summer meal program. They endorsed the following reasons for not participating: 1) we do not need the free meals, 2) I could not get to the program sites during the times they were open, and 3) I prefer to prepare my own meals. [Table 5](#) presents all reasons in order from most common reason to least common reason.

Open-Ended Feedback

Respondents were asked three open-ended questions designed to assess: barriers to participation in the summer meal program, what would make participation easier, and any other changes they would like to see to the program. Several barriers and desired changes to make it easier to participate reflected the quantitative responses. Themes included transportation, site location, the need for more information about the program, concerns about COVID-19 transmission at the site, and concerns about food quality and nutrition. New barriers also emerged, including times the sites are open, safety concerns about site locations, concerns about wasting food, and lack of menu variety. When asked about other desired changes, additional themes emerged, including onsite activities for kids, greater integration of the program with community businesses, and a meal delivery option. All themes and subthemes are outlined in [Table 6](#).

DISCUSSION

The present study examined parent/guardian perspectives on a summer meal program during the pandemic to evaluate responses to the waivers and guide strategies to increase participation. First, many respondents appreciated the USDA's COVID-19 waivers and rated the changes most likely to influence their future summer meal participation as providing multiple meals at once, a grab-and-go option, and the ability to pick up meals without their child present. In addition, respondents underscored the helpfulness of the waivers in their qualitative feedback. For example, the reason why respondents wanted to be able to take multiple meals home at once was to reduce the number of times they had to leave work to come to the site. Others explained that the ability to take meal bags to go allowed them to teach their children to cook at home. This enthusiasm for the COVID-19 regulatory waivers is similar to that expressed by food service directors in other studies; they reported the waivers increased their ability to be flexible and creative in the design of their meal programs^{12,13} and believed that the waivers helped increase overall participation.¹³

Table 1. Characteristics of summer meal participants and nonparticipants as reported in a survey conducted in one school district in Connecticut during 2021

Category	Summer meal participants (n = 622)	Summer meal nonparticipants (n = 294)	Statistical comparison between groups ^a
	←————— mean ± SD —————→		
No. of children in household	2.2 ± 1.2	1.8 ± 0.9	$t(731.4) = 6.1; p < .001$
Household child(ren) age (y)	9.7 ± 4.4	10.1 ± 4.8	$t(1315.5) = 0.7; p = .496$
	←————— n (%) —————→		
Parent/guardian race			$\chi^2(893) = 16.1; p = .024$
Asian/Asian American	12 (1.9)	1 (0.3)	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	5 (0.8)	3 (1)	
Black/African American	83 (13.3)	36 (12.2)	
Middle Eastern/North African	8 (1.3)	0 (0)	
Multiracial	31 (5)	12 (4.1)	
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0 (0)	2 (0.7)	
Other ^b	126 (20.3)	51 (17.3)	
White/European American	304 (48.9)	171 (58.2)	
Missing	53 (8.5)	18 (6.1)	
Ethnicity			$\chi^2(900) = 19.4; p < .001$
Hispanic	321 (51.6)	106 (36.1)	
Non-Hispanic	292 (46.9)	183 (62.2)	
Missing	9 (1.4)	5 (1.7)	
Education			$\chi^2(905) = 16.6; p < .001$
Less than high school or GED ^c	54 (8.7)	7 (2.4)	
Completed high school or GED	207 (33.3)	88 (29.9)	
Beyond high school	352 (56.6)	199 (67.7)	
Missing	9 (1.4)	0 (0)	
Language at home			$\chi^2(913) = 17.3; p = .004$
English	443 (71.2)	242 (82.3)	
Spanish	108 (17.4)	27 (9.2)	
Other ^b	12 (2.1)	4 (1.7)	
Multiple	58 (9.3)	19 (6.5)	
School meal use			$\chi^2(895) = 17.2; p < .001$
Yes	560 (90)	241 (82%)	
No	47 (7.6)	49 (16.7%)	
Missing	15 (2.4)	4 (1.4%)	
Program use			$\chi^2(904) = 25.5; p = .001$
SNAP ^d or food stamps	187 (30.1)	60 (20.4)	
P-EBT ^e	71 (11.4)	25 (8.5)	
WIC ^f	72 (11.6)	23 (7.8)	
Free or reduced priced school breakfast	230 (37)	85 (28.9)	
Food from food pantries	41 (6.6)	9 (3.1)	
None of the above	202 (32.5)	143 (48.6)	
Other	17 (2.7)	6 (2)	

(continued on next page)

Table 1. Characteristics of summer meal participants and nonparticipants as reported in a survey conducted in one school district in Connecticut during 2021 (*continued*)

Category	Summer meal participants (n = 622)	Summer meal nonparticipants (n = 294)	Statistical comparison between groups ^a
Don't know or prefer not to answer	28 (4.5)	15 (5.1)	
Multiple	162 (26)	58 (19.7)	
Missing	7 (1.1)	3 (1)	
Food sufficiency^g			χ^2 (907) = 7.7; p = .052
Marginal food sufficiency	247 (39.7)	96 (32.7)	
Food insufficiency	55 (8.8)	25 (8.5)	
Childhood food insufficiency^h	135 (21.7)	47 (16)	χ^2 (417) = 1.9; p = .391

^a p values were based on a χ^2 test for categorical variables such as race; or in the only case of a continuous variable (ie, number of children in the household), the p value was from independent samples t-tests where summer meal program participants and nonparticipants were compared as separate groups.

^b"Other" was provided as a response option for participants.

^cGED = General Education Development test. Individuals in the United States with a GED have passed these tests, indicating they have a high school level of education.

^dSNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. SNAP is a federally funded program in the United States that provides food benefits to low-income families.

^eP-EBT = Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer. P-EBT is a federally funded food purchase subsidy provided for American families already participating in SNAP that began during the pandemic.

^fWIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. WIC provides food, information, and health care referrals for low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age 5 years.

^gIndividuals meeting criteria for marginal food sufficiency have endorsed having "enough food, but not always the kinds of foods we wanted to eat" in response to the question: "In the last 7 days, which of these statements best describes the food eating in your household?" Individuals meeting criteria for food insufficiency endorsed either "sometimes not enough to eat" or "often not enough to eat" in response.

^hHouseholds meeting criteria for childhood food insufficiency endorsed "sometimes true" or "often true" in response to the question, "In the last 7 days, how often was the following statement true for the children living in your household who are under 18 years old: The children were not eating enough because we just couldn't afford enough food."

These findings have several implications for national policymakers and regulators. First, the long-term status of these regulatory waivers remains in flux moving forward. Nearly all of the waivers were rescinded before the start of the 2023 summer,¹⁹ raising the concern that there will be a significant drop in participation. Second, the long-term status of other pandemic-related safety net programs, like the Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) program

are similarly in flux. The P-EBT program is a food purchase subsidy provided for families already participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program that began during the pandemic. Only a limited number of families qualify for P-EBT, whereas the summer meal programs are free for all children aged 18 years and younger, suggesting the need for both programs to reach all families at risk of food insufficiency. These key differences were highlighted

Table 2. Responses to the survey question, "How did you hear about the summer meal program?"^a Respondents were parents/guardians (n = 916) who participated in a study to examine facilitators and barriers to participation in the US Department of Agriculture summer meal program in one Connecticut school district during 2021

Outreach method	n (%)
Their school's website	295 (32.2)
Their school's social media accounts	208 (22.7)
A friend/other parents	168 (18.3)
A flyer in the community	116 (12.7)
The Connecticut Summer Meal website	90 (9.8)
Other social media accounts	89 (9.7)
A billboard	63 (6.9)
A bus ad	21 (2.3)
On the radio	13 (1.4)

^aRespondents were asked to select all relevant options.

Table 3. Responses to the survey question, "How important are the following features of the summer meal program to you?"^a Respondents were parents/guardians (n = 916) who participated in a study to examine facilitators and barriers to participation in the US Department of Agriculture summer meal program in one Connecticut school district during 2021

Item	Mean \pm SD
Multiple meals are provided at one time	1.4 \pm 0.8
A grab-and-go option is available	1.5 \pm 0.8
I can pick up meals when my child is not present	1.5 \pm 1.0
Meals besides lunch are offered	1.6 \pm 0.9
The summer meals site is at my child's school	1.9 \pm 1.2
Other activities are offered at the summer meal sites	2.2 \pm 1.3

^aScale: 1 = very important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = undecided, 4 = not very important, and 5 = not important at all.

Table 4. Responses to the survey question, “What convinced you to try the summer meal program?”^a as part of a study to examine facilitators and barriers to participation in the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) summer meal program in one Connecticut school district during 2021. Respondents were parents/guardians who participated in the USDA summer meal program (n = 622)

Item	n (%)
The meals are free	383 (61.6)
The location is convenient	342 (55)
We liked the school meals during the school year	253 (40.7)
Picking up summer meals is easier than other meal options (compared with preparing meals or purchasing somewhere else)	201 (32.3)
We liked the summer meals before this year	173 (27.8)
The hours work for me	157 (25.2)
I knew that they would have the types of foods my family likes to eat	155 (24.9)
The menu looked good	147 (23.6)
Someone I trusted recommended it to me	73 (11.7)
Information about summer meals was available in my language	65 (10.5)
I knew that there would be options that accommodate our family’s dietary restrictions (eg, kosher, halal, vegetarian, or vegan)	51 (8.2)
Other ^b	29 (4.7)

^aRespondents were asked to select all relevant options.

^bOther was a provided response option.

in a recent economic analysis, which concluded, “...both the P-EBT and grab-and-go school meal programs supported youths’ access to food in complementary ways when US schools were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic...”²⁰ Collectively, these findings suggest federal officials should consider permanent regulatory changes to the summer meal programs to expand participation and improve access to food in the summer.

Results of the present study also suggest that there are nonparticipants who could benefit from summer meal programs given the similarity in rates of household food insufficiency between participating and nonparticipating parents/guardians. A more detailed analysis of nonparticipating parents/guardians revealed that the top barriers were the limited times that the program was open, a lack of awareness of the program, and concerns about COVID-19 transmission at the meal site. Because nonparticipants were significantly less likely to be aware that the program was free and open to everyone regardless of family income, there is a need for an educational campaign to help parents/guardians understand the availability and regulations of the summer meal

Table 5. Responses to the survey question, “Why did you did not participate in the summer meal program?”^a as part of a study to examine facilitators and barriers to participation in the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) summer meal program in one Connecticut school district during 2021. Respondents were parents/guardians (n = 294) who did not participate in the USDA summer meal program

Item	n (%)
We do not need the free meals	117 (39.8)
I could not get to the program sites during the times they were open	66 (22.4)
I prefer to prepare my own meals	49 (16.7)
I did not think they would have the types of foods my family likes to eat	43 (14.6)
I was not aware that the summer meal program was happening	41 (13.9)
I am concerned about coronavirus disease 2019 transmission at the meal site	40 (13.6)
I don’t think the meals will taste good	36 (12.2)
Other ^b	31 (10.5)
We do not like the school meals during the school year	30 (10.2)
I don’t think the meals are nutritious	26 (8.8)
I did not see any information about where and when to get the meals	20 (6.8)
The location where meals were given out was not convenient for me	16 (5.4)
I do not have reliable transportation to get to the site	14 (4.8)
I am not comfortable sending my children to the site	14 (4.8)
I did not think there would be options that accommodate my family’s dietary needs (eg, kosher, halal, vegetarian, or vegan)	9 (3.1)

^aRespondents were asked to select all relevant options.

^bOther was a provided response option.

programs. The finding that most respondents reported hearing about the summer meal programs from their own school’s website and social media pages suggests that these are trusted sources of program-related communication and the funding available for promoting summer meals should be invested in digital marketing campaigns. Future research should investigate the most effective way to deliver this information.

Findings of the present study underscore that while the flexibilities permitted by the COVID-19 waivers were helpful, there may be additional changes needed in regulatory structure to make it easier to participate. In open-ended feedback, both current participants and nonparticipants cited a broad list of barriers to participation, including dietary restrictions due to allergies, culture, or religion; lack of

Table 6. Themes from responses to open-ended survey questions about barriers to participating in the US Department of Agriculture summer meal program as part of a study to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021 (n = 916)

Question 1. What are some of the barriers that prevent you from getting meals from the summer meal program?

(eg, transportation, location, and types of meals served)

Theme	Subthemes and example quote(s)
Transportation limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lack of car^a</i>: "Lack of transportation to and from meal pickup sites" [Participant #418] • <i>Too hot to walk</i>: "Sometimes it's too hot and don't want to walk to the park" [Participant #456]
The times the sites are open	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The hours are during the workday</i>: "It's during my work hours so most of the time I couldn't pick up unless I had a day off" [Participant #192] • <i>The hours don't align with parents' lunch breaks</i>: "The times are hard for parents who work during the day. I had to rush on my lunch break to get the meals" [Participant #221] • <i>The hours are too short of a window</i>: "Short time frame for pick up" [Participant #46]; "Hours are short and during the workday." [Participant #324]
Location concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Too far to walk</i>: "The locations were across town from where I live and not offered at my son's school this past summer." [Participant #837] • <i>Not safe to send kids to alone</i>: "I work during the day and the meal site is too far for my kid to walk" [Participant #819] • <i>Too far away</i>: "If the locations changes to across town we cannot drive that far." [Participant #394]
Lack of information about the program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Not aware of the program</i>: "Wasn't aware of said program." [Participant #701] • <i>Could not find the location</i>: "Couldn't find a location." [Participant #843]
Belief that other people need it more	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Struggling but think other people needed it more" [Participant #769] and, "If we have enough food I won't pick up cuz there are others that need it more." [Participant #575]
Concerns about wasting food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Children don't like all of the food included</i>: "Kids don't like all they get from the summer meal and I don't like to be wasteful." [Participant #672] and, "Didn't want my children to be wasteful if they did not like the meals." [Participant #829] • <i>Children have dietary restrictions</i>: "I have a picky eater with allergies, and I would hate wasting food that someone else can use." [Participant #658]
Concerns about coronavirus disease 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I don't want them eating there around other people that I have no clue where they have been, both children have underlying medical." [Participant #778]
Concerns about food quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Concerns about the taste of food</i>: "The foods are not the greatest...many items do not taste good at all." [Participant #260] • <i>Concerns about nutritional value</i>: "School food is not nutritional." [Participant #654] and, "Types of meal... I think that it is not healthy." [Participant #880] and, "Better-quality items. The (food) cost roughly 90 cents but the district receives roughly \$4 per meal. Less generic crap please" [Participant #70] • <i>Children are picky eaters</i>: "My children are very picky and it's difficult to find food options they would appreciate." [Participant #827] • <i>Desire for more fresh food/less frozen food</i>: "...my daughter likes the idea of getting them as we do to change it up, but it's the same stuff and all prepackaged, processed food. Nothing fresh and good for them." [Participant #785]

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Table 6. Themes from responses to open-ended survey questions about barriers to participating in the US Department of Agriculture summer meal program as part of a study to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021 (n = 916) (continued)

Concerns about food content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lack of variety:</i> “Types of meals, it was pretty much a rotation of the same stuff over and over again. The times were difficult” [Participant #366] and, “I don’t know about the summer meal program all I can go by is the breakfasts sent home everyday which we do appreciate but more of a variety. Because our daughters aren’t old enough to understand and complain that they are sick of the same thing every day and some of which they don’t like. It’s hard to get them to eat their school breakfast most mornings and sometimes they won’t at all.” [Participant #778] • <i>Insufficient quantity:</i> “The quantity of food barely fed a 7-year-old, don’t know how it fed a teenager.” [Participant #304] • <i>Sometimes the sites run out of food:</i> “Sometimes the availability of these meals. If I arrive within the last 10 minutes, there is sometimes nothing to pick up and I would need to go to the morning designated site the next day.” [Participant #582] • <i>Children have dietary restrictions (Allergies, religious beliefs, dairy free, vegetarian, vegan, celiac disease, halal, or kosher):</i> “I have two children who are lactose intolerant and during school they have that option to get their milk but over the summer they don’t” [Participant #35] and, “If it has anything with beef we don’t accept due to religious beliefs.” [Participant #572]
Other logistical concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Long lines at sites:</i> “Lines too long.” [Participant #346] • <i>Having to bring their children with them to the site to pick up meals:</i> “That I’d have to lug both kids. One has severe special needs and it would be an issue” [Participant #628] • <i>Having to go daily is inconvenient:</i> “Sometimes it is a lot to have to go every day.” [Participant #598]
Question 2. What would make it easier for you to get meals from the summer meal program? (eg, transportation, location, and types of meals served)	
Theme and subthemes	Example quote
Site location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Closer to home:</i> “Located at the closest school to my house so I can walk there.” [Participant #98] and, “Their school is right up the road. It should be looked into how many walkers there are and then put a site somewhere else as well. I don’t have my children taking public transportation now so I wouldn’t do that for this.” [Participant #778] • <i>More locations:</i> “Offering them in more locations.” [Participant #837] and, “Offered at all schools.” [Participant #46]
Different transportation options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Buses for people with no transportation:</i> “Busses for people with no transportation [to be transported to the meal sites].” [Participant #417] • <i>Delivery options:</i> “Maybe delivery for the week for those with no car.” [Participant #91] • <i>Mobile food truck:</i> “Mobile food truck to different locations for people who do not have reliable transportation.” [Participant #708] • <i>Send food home with children from school-sponsored camps/programs:</i> “They were easier when they were sent home with the child” [Participant #208]
Expanded hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “... not mid-day during working hours.” [Participant #207] and, “Evening pick up hours for working parents would be very helpful.” [Participant #710] and, “Available 1 day on weekend.” [Participant #676] and, “pick-up early morning or late afternoon...” [Participant #421]

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Table 6. Themes from responses to open-ended survey questions about barriers to participating in the US Department of Agriculture summer meal program as part of a study to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021 (n = 916) (continued)

Avoid requiring daily pick-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Ability to pick up multiple meals at once:</i> "Easier to pick up all meals at once and after work which is 3 pm." [Participant #228] and, "Lump sums instead of daily like they do at the end of the summer for the last 12 days" [Participant #410] • <i>Give out a week's worth of meals at once:</i> "One day pick up for the whole week." [Participant #406] • <i>Give out 3 to 4 days' worth of food at a time:</i> "It would be nice to pick up twice a week for 3 to 4 days at a time" [Participant #193]
Post more information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "It would be nice if its get published" [Participant #1] and, "If I know where to go I'll go get them" [Participant #843] and, "Give information in school or social media so that way I know where and when go" [Participant #756]
Provide more options to avoid food waste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Provide the menus in advance:</i> "It could be nice if we know what the meals is before we picked it up because is not every meal my child eats" [Participant #357] • <i>Give options where people can build a bag of food so they don't have to take what their children don't like/cannot eat:</i> "I would suggest a "gift card" for meals, so that families can choose food options their children would eat." [Participant #827] • <i>Provide the ability to order select items in advance:</i> "Instead of giving all foods let us order what we need so as not to waste" [Participant #380]
Other logistical solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A drive-thru program:</i> "A drive-thru program" [Participant #220] • <i>Someone to help carry the bags to the car:</i> "Someone to help carrying the bags to the car" [Participant #371]
More helpful staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Kinder, nicer, and less judgmental staff giving out the meals" [Participant #120]

Question 3. Are there any other changes you would like to see in the summer meal program?

Theme	Subthemes and example quote(s)
Different types of food served	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>More fruits and vegetables:</i> "More variety and fruits and vegetables" [Participant #702] and, "Fresh food like fresh fruit and veggies instead of fruit cups." [Participant #708] • <i>More salads:</i> "Better food more salad options" [Participant #850] • <i>Options to accommodate dietary restrictions: vegetarian, dairy free, gluten free, peanut-free, Halal meat:</i> "Provide vegetarian options. My family is entirely vegetarian, and I expressed this to the manager on site. She said that she could not accommodate a vegetarian diet. I would only pick up meals when there was a vegetarian option....which was not frequent enough." [Participant #254] and, "More options available for children with allergies and different varieties" [Participant #69] • <i>Distribute ready-to-cook meals:</i> "...if they are dinners I wouldn't mind a box of pasta and I could cook it myself. Sometimes the reheating of the chicken was hard." [Participant #58] and, "During the school year, we were given a bag of bread, cheese, and ham. We could prepare our own sandwiches. I think that was a better idea than a burrito" [Participant #875] • <i>Give options for snacks:</i> "More snacks and better options" [Participant #536]

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Table 6. Themes from responses to open-ended survey questions about barriers to participating in the US Department of Agriculture summer meal program as part of a study to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021 (n = 916) (continued)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Better-tasting food:</i> "...Food often bland in taste." [Participant #74] and, "A better variety, flavor" [Participant #807] and, "better-tasting food" [Participant #528] • <i>Milk: almond or oat milk instead of cow's milk; no shelf-stable milk:</i> "Get rid of the new milk being provided. It's terrible! Go back to the original milk cartons." [Participant #78] and, "Change cow milk to almond milk or oat milk, healthier one." [Participant #387] • <i>More nutritious foods:</i> "More nutritious and fresh food/fruit/veg" [Participant #883] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Less carbs: "Healthier, less sugars and refined carbs" [Participant #237] o Less sugars: "Better options everything is sugar and salt" [Participant #482] • <i>Farm-fresh foods:</i> "Healthier better quality farm foods" [Participant #306] and "Options local organic" [Participant #697] • <i>Fresher food:</i> "Fresh not poor quality prepackaged JUNK food. Salads and higher quality fruit." [Participant #308] and "Fresh foods, not highly processed foods." [Participant #554] and "...less packaged and more fresh" [Participant #785] • <i>Less frozen food:</i> "Fresher meals not frozen, pizza was an over supplied meal" [Participant #304] & "more variety, meals that don't require freezing/refrigeration..." [Participant #765] • <i>Specific foods requested/liked: spaghetti, chicken nuggets, waffles, bananas, brown rice, beans, tacos, poptarts, cereal bars, pizza:</i> "Including crustables more often (peanut butter and jelly) sandwiches" [Participant #116] and "Cold cut sandwiches were nice a few summers ago. My son really enjoyed that." [Participant #521] • <i>Specific foods to eliminate: shelf-stable milk, raisins:</i> "No more raisins or graham crackers. We get them every day now and a lot get thrown away which is wasteful. Getting these foods most of the time is redundant and unappealing" [Participant #346] • <i>More Hispanic foods:</i> "More Hispanic foods" [Participant #509] 	<p>Additional activities on site for the kids</p>	<p>"Education while children have to sit there to eat to food they should be educated. With someone story time or books. Games. Activities. Keep kids having and going that way they will want to come back" [Participant #523] and, "Maybe offer other services during meal pick up times, such as have library bookmobile, or health checks, etc." [Participant #765]</p>
<p>Give excess/leftover meals to the homeless or senior citizens</p>	<p>"All excess meals should go to the homeless or anyone who is hungry." [Participant #532]</p>	
<p>Support for local businesses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Include food from local businesses:</i> "farm-fresh foods, include food from local businesses" [Participant #308] • <i>Gift out gift cards to local businesses instead:</i> "Give out gift cards for food especially for locations that could help serve local businesses" [Participant #260] 	
<p>Changes to meal bags</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Include better cooking/heating instructions:</i> "Directions on how to heat the frozen meals sometimes were not provided" [Participant #394] • <i>Better packaging/less plastic waste:</i> "Less plastic in the packaging! Don't need so many plastic bags" [Participant #560] • <i>Meal bags that include a recipe and the ingredients:</i> "Perhaps more meal kits to prep food rather than the packaged foods." [Participant #364] and, "Would love to see a make a meal bag that includes a recipe and the ingredients." [Participant #499] 	

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Table 6. Themes from responses to open-ended survey questions about barriers to participating in the US Department of Agriculture summer meal program as part of a study to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021 (n = 916) (*continued*)

Provide more options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Let parents pick out of the available options: "I think allowing a parent to go through and take what they know their child will eat would help. This may allow others to take more if they need it. I have one child who does not like cheese. When the meals are packed in a bag, some may be wasted."</i> [Participant #303] • <i>Give the option of healthy or nonhealthy meal kit: "Option to pick healthy and nonhealthy"</i> [Participant #510]
Kindness from staff giving out meals	"Some children may want more we should never deny them in saying no you just had a lunch or breakfast, you don't know others' living situation. So just be mindful..." [Participant #179]
Helpfulness from staff	"... too much strain to carry" [Participant #371]
Address concerns about people taking advantage of the program	"Only families in need should receive the food. Residents who did not have school-aged children get the meals. They take advantage of the system. Students should be required to show their school ID before they receive the meal." [Participant #434]
More accessibility	"Accessible to parking and seating" [Participant #196]

^aSubthemes are represented in italic type.

variety in the menu; and concerns about wasting food if their child did not like what was served. In addition, respondents provided some specific feedback on changing the hours of operation to be outside of typical work hours (ie, 9 AM to 5 PM) and providing transportation for children to the sites. Requests for flexibility or autonomy were also common. For example, parents/guardians concerned about wasting food due to their child's picky eating habits asked for the ability to pick out of a handful of options. These findings suggest that to increase participation, program sponsors might consider looking into the feasibility of making changes that do not need government regulatory approval, including adjusting the location and operation hours of sites and providing menu options that accommodate dietary restrictions. Other requested changes, like access to meals outside of regular work hours, will require regulatory changes; the current regulations concerning the allowable times for each meal served may restrict flexibility in the hours of operation. In the future, sponsors should consider conducting a survey to assess parent/guardian preferences before program implementation to maximize their chances of increasing participation.

There were several limitations to the present study. First, all the respondents in this study were from one school district, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Of note, the featured school district was in an urban area so the findings of the present study may not generalize to districts in more suburban or rural areas. For example, previous research has shown that summer meal programs may be less available in rural areas,²¹ suggesting access to programs might be a more relevant barrier. Future research should examine similar questions in school districts of different sizes and demographic profiles. In addition, it is not known if the families participating in the summer meal programs in 2021 are the same as those who were participating before the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent regulatory waivers. Future research should consider exploring whether the waivers were effective for attracting new families to participate in the program. Lastly, based on the anonymous nature of this study, the qualitative results were provided without participant demographics as contextual information to ground the quotations. Future research should consider examining how individual participant characteristics influence their feedback or experience with the program.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, this study adds to the limited research about factors that may contribute to participation in the summer meal programs from the perspectives of current participants and nonparticipants. Findings of the present study highlighted the role the regulatory flexibilities permitted by the COVID-19 waivers played in parent/guardian participation. In addition, the findings underscore that although parents/guardians currently participating are satisfied with the current program, more can be done to reduce the barriers to participation. Participants and nonparticipants requested more convenient ways to participate, including receiving communication directly from their child's school; asking for sites to be open outside of typical work hours; and maximizing the input they have over menu options,

including being able to pick their child's meal from limited options. The gap in participation between the National School Lunch Program and the summer meal programs demonstrates the clear need for improved access to nutritious food during the summer months. To decrease food insufficiency over the summer, regulatory bodies should consider looking directly to households with children to learn how to increase access and decrease barriers to participation.

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STATEMENT OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

B. L. Bennett, S. L. McKee, K. Burkholder, S. M. Chafouleas, and M. B. Schwartz designed the study upon which this study is based; B. L. Bennett was responsible for and oversaw data collection; B. L. Bennett and K. Burkholder conducted the analyses; B. L. Bennett wrote the first draft with contributions from S. L. McKee and M. B. Schwartz. All authors reviewed, revised, and edited subsequent drafts of the manuscript.

[Information sheet will be displayed on the first page, with text, "If you would like to participate in this survey, click "I agree" to begin or "I do not agree" to exit."]
<p>1. Did your children receive free meals this summer (2021) from the [school district] summer meal program?</p> <p>a. Yes, we received free meals in the summer of 2021.</p> <p>b. No, we did not receive any free meals in the summer of 2021.</p>
[Survey for families who say they used the summer meal program in 2021]
Information about your child/children
<p>2. How many children [ages 0-18] are in your family?</p>
<p>3. How old are your children who are enrolled in this district?</p>
<p>4. Do your children typically eat school meals during the school year?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p>
Experience with summer meals
<p>5. How did you hear about the summer meals program this summer? You can choose all of the answers that are true for you.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> My child received free meals as part of a summer program or camp.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I heard from a friend/other parents</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I heard on radio</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I saw it on my school's website</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I saw it on the Connecticut Summer Meal website</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I saw it on my school's social media</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I saw it on other social media accounts (not connected to my school)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Facebook <input type="radio"/> Twitter <input type="radio"/> Instagram <input type="radio"/> Somewhere else on social media: _____ <p><input type="radio"/> I saw flyer in community (eg, church, community center, library) about summer meals</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I saw a billboard about summer meals</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Saw a sign on bus about summer meals</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I have used the summer meals program before</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Other: _____</p>
<p>6. How did you get updated information about when and where to get meals and what is on the weekly menu?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> My school's website</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Email from school</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Heard from a friend/other parents</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Community organization (church, community center, library)</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Used the summer meal program before</p>
<i>(continued on next page)</i>

Figure 1. US Department of Agriculture summer meal program survey of participating families to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o My school's social media <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facebook • Twitter • Tik Tok • Instagram • Somewhere else on social media: _____ o Other: _____
<p>7. Did your household use summer meals before the COVID-19 Pandemic (ie, 2019 or before)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Yes o No o Not sure
<p>8. Does your household plan to use summer meals next year (ie, summer 2022)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Yes o No o Not sure
<p>9. What meals would be most helpful for the summer meals program to provide? (Check all that apply)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Breakfast o Lunch o Dinner/Supper o Snack
<p>10. What convinced you to try the summer meal program? (Check all that apply)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o We liked the school meals during the school year o We liked the summer meals before this year o Information about summer meals was available in my language o I knew that they would have the types of foods my family likes to eat o I knew that there would be options that accommodate our family's dietary restrictions (eg, kosher, halal, vegetarian, vegan) o The hours work for me o The location is convenient o Picking up summer meals is easier than other meal options (compared to preparing meals or purchasing somewhere else) o The menu looked good (nutritious, tasty) o The meals are free o Someone I trusted recommended it to me o Other: _____
<p>How important are the following features of the summer meal program to you?</p>
<p>[5 point Likert scale for each item: Very important/Somewhat important/Undecided/Not very important/Not important at all]</p>
<p>11. A grab-and-go option is available</p>
<p><i>(continued on next page)</i></p>

Figure 1. (continued) US Department of Agriculture summer meal program survey of participating families to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021

12. I can pick up meals when my child is not present
13. Multiple meals are provided at one time
14. Meals besides lunch are offered
15. Other activities are offered at the summer meals sites
16. The summer meal site is at my child's school
For the following items, rate the extent to which you agree [5 point Likert scale for each item: Strongly agree/Agree/Undecided (neither agree nor disagree)/Disagree/Strongly disagree]
17. Overall, I am satisfied with the meals my child receives from the summer meal program
18. I am satisfied with the nutritional quality (healthiness) of the meals
19. I am satisfied with the variety of the meals
20. My children like the taste of the meals
21. These meals fit with my child's dietary restrictions/preferences (eg, halal, kosher, vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, options are available)
22. These meals fit with my child's food allergies (eg, wheat, dairy)
23. These meals provide food from my culture
24. There is enough food provided
25. I like the way the meals are packaged
26. The available days of the week make it easy for me to get meals
27. The available times for pick up make it easy for me to get meals
<i>(continued on next page)</i>

Figure 1. (continued) US Department of Agriculture summer meal program survey of participating families to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021

28. The time it takes to pick up the meals is quick
29. It is easy for me to find out when and where to get the meals
30. It is easy for me to find out the menu each day
31. Getting enough food can be a problem for some people. In the last 7 days, which of these statements best describes the food eaten in your household? <input type="radio"/> Enough of the kinds of food we wanted to eat <input type="radio"/> Enough, but not always the kinds of food we wanted to eat <input type="radio"/> Sometimes not enough to eat <input type="radio"/> Often not enough to eat
32. In the last 7 days, how often was the following statement true for the children living in your household who are under 18 years old. "The children were not eating enough because we just couldn't afford enough food." <input type="radio"/> Often true <input type="radio"/> Sometimes true <input type="radio"/> Never true
33. Why did you not have enough to eat (or not what you wanted to eat)? Select all that apply. <input type="radio"/> Couldn't afford to buy more food <input type="radio"/> Couldn't get to store to buy food (eg, didn't have transportation, have mobility or health limitations that prevent you from getting out) <input type="radio"/> Couldn't go to store due to safety concerns <input type="radio"/> None of the above
For the following items, rate the extent to which you agree [5 point Likert scale for each item: Strongly agree/Agree/Undecided (neither agree nor disagree)/Disagree/Strongly disagree]
34. The summer meal program helps me worry less about our food running out before we have money to buy more
35. The summer meal program helps me worry less about my children eating nutritionally balanced meals
Open-Ended Questions
36. What are some of the barriers that prevent you from getting meals from the summer meal program? (eg, transportation, location, types of meals served)
37. What would make it easier for you to get meals from the summer meal program? (eg, transportation, location, types of meals served)
<i>(continued on next page)</i>

Figure 1. (continued) US Department of Agriculture summer meal program survey of participating families to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021

38. Are there any other changes you would like to see in the summer meal program?
Demographics
39. Please tell us your ethnicity <input type="radio"/> Hispanic <input type="radio"/> Non-Hispanic
40. Please tell us your race <input type="radio"/> White or European American <input type="radio"/> Black or African American <input type="radio"/> Asian or Asian American <input type="radio"/> American Indian or Alaskan Native <input type="radio"/> Middle Eastern or North African <input type="radio"/> Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander <input type="radio"/> Other: _____
41. What is the primary language spoken in your home? <input type="radio"/> English <input type="radio"/> Spanish or Spanish Creole <input type="radio"/> Portuguese <input type="radio"/> Polish <input type="radio"/> Chinese (include Mandarin and Cantonese) <input type="radio"/> Other: _____
42. What is the highest grade of education you have completed? <input type="radio"/> Less than high school or less than high school equivalent (General Educational Development [GED]) <input type="radio"/> Completed high school or high school equivalent (GED) <input type="radio"/> Beyond high school (college, community college)
43. Are you or anyone in your household currently receiving any of the following? You can select all that apply. <input type="radio"/> Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or food stamps <input type="radio"/> Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) (additional money on EBT or a new EBT card) <input type="radio"/> WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) <input type="radio"/> Free or reduced-price school lunch or breakfast (during the school year) <input type="radio"/> Food from food pantries <input type="radio"/> None of the above <input type="radio"/> Other (please specify): _____ <input type="radio"/> Don't know or prefer not to answer
44. The summer meal program is free and open to all families , even those who do not get free or reduced-price meals during the school year. Were you aware of this? <input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No

Figure 1. (continued) US Department of Agriculture summer meal program survey of participating families to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021

[Information sheet will be displayed on the first page, with text, "If you would like to participate in this survey, click "I agree" to begin or "I do not agree" to exit."]
<p>1. Did your children receive free meals this summer (2021) from the [school district] summer meal program?</p> <p>a. Yes, we received free meals in the summer of 2021.</p> <p>b. No, we did not receive any free meals in the summer of 2021.</p>
[survey for families that say they did NOT use the summer meals program in 2021]
Information about your child/children
<p>2. How many children [ages 0-18] are in your family?</p>
<p>3. How old are your children who are enrolled in this district?</p>
<p>4. Do your children typically eat school meals during the school year?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No</p>
Experience with summer meals
<p>5. Why did you not use the summer meal program this past summer? You can choose all of the answers that are true for you.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> We do not need the free meals.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I was not aware that the summer meal program was happening</p> <p><input type="radio"/> We do not like the school meals during the school year</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I did not see any information about where and when to get the meals.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I did not think they would have the types of foods my family likes to eat.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I did not think there would be options that accommodate my family's dietary needs (eg, kosher, halal, vegetarian, vegan)</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I don't think the meals are nutritious.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I don't think the meals will taste good.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I could not get to the program sites during the times they were open.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> The location where meals were given out was not convenient for me.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I do not have reliable transportation to get to the site</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I am not comfortable sending my children to the site</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I prefer to prepare my own meals.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> I am concerned about coronavirus disease 2019 transmission at the meal site</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Other: _____</p>
<p>6. Did you hear about the summer meals program this summer? (check all that apply)</p> <p><input type="radio"/> No, I did not hear about it</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Yes [If yes, how did you hear about it:]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> I heard from my child's school <input type="checkbox"/> I heard from a friend/other parents <input type="checkbox"/> I heard on radio
<i>(continued on next page)</i>

Figure 2. US Department of Agriculture summer meal program nonparticipating family survey to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I saw it on my school's website • I saw it on the Connecticut Summer Meals website • I saw it on my school's social media • I saw it on other social media accounts (not connected to my school) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facebook • Twitter • Instagram • Somewhere else on social media: _____ • I saw flyer in community (eg, church, community center, library) about summer meals • I saw a billboard about summer meals • Saw a sign on bus about summer meals • I have used the summer meals program before • Other: _____
<p>7. Does your household plan to use summer meals next year (ie, summer 2022)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Yes o No o Not sure
<p>8. What meals would be most helpful for the summer meals program to provide? (Check all that apply)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Breakfast o Lunch o Dinner/Supper o Snack
<p>When you are deciding whether or not to use the summer meal program in the future, how important are each of these things? [5 point Likert scale for each item: Very important/Somewhat important/Undecided/Not very important/Not important at all]</p>
<p>9. A grab-and-go option is available</p>
<p>10. I can pick up meals when my child is not present</p>
<p>11. Multiple meals are provided at one time</p>
<p>12. Meals besides lunch are offered</p>
<p>13. Other activities are offered at the summer meals sites</p>
<p>14. The summer meal site is at my child's school</p>
<p>15. Getting enough food can be a problem for some people. In the last 7 days, which of these statements best describes the food eaten in your household?</p>
<p><i>(continued on next page)</i></p>

Figure 2. (continued) US Department of Agriculture summer meal program nonparticipating family survey to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Enough of the kinds of food we wanted to eat <input type="radio"/> Enough, but not always the kinds of food we wanted to eat <input type="radio"/> Sometimes not enough to eat <input type="radio"/> Often not enough to eat
<p>16. In the last 7 days, how often was the following statement true for the children living in your household who are under 18 years old. "The children were not eating enough because we just couldn't afford enough food."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Often true <input type="radio"/> Sometimes true <input type="radio"/> Never true
<p>17. Why did you not have enough to eat (or not what you wanted to eat)? Select all that apply.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Couldn't afford to buy more food <input type="radio"/> Couldn't get to store to buy food (eg, didn't have transportation, have mobility or health limitations that prevent you from getting out) <input type="radio"/> Couldn't go to store due to safety concerns <input type="radio"/> None of the above
Open-Ended Questions
<p>18. What are some of the barriers that prevent you from getting meals from the summer meal program? (eg, transportation, location, types of meals served)</p>
<p>19. What would make it easier for you to get meals from the summer meal program? (eg, transportation, location, types of meals served)</p>
<p>20. Are there any other changes you would like to see in the summer meal program?</p>
Demographics
<p>21. Please tell us your ethnicity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Hispanic <input type="radio"/> Non-Hispanic
<p>22. Please tell us your race</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> White or European American <input type="radio"/> Black or African American <input type="radio"/> Asian or Asian American <input type="radio"/> American Indian or Alaskan Native <input type="radio"/> Middle Eastern or North African <input type="radio"/> Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander <input type="radio"/> Other: _____
<i>(continued on next page)</i>

Figure 2. (continued) US Department of Agriculture summer meal program nonparticipating family survey to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021

<p>23. What is the primary language spoken in your home?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> English<input type="radio"/> Spanish or Spanish Creole<input type="radio"/> Portuguese<input type="radio"/> Polish<input type="radio"/> Chinese (include Mandarin and Cantonese)<input type="radio"/> Other: _____
<p>24. What is the highest grade of education you have completed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> Less than high school or less than high school equivalent (General Educational Development [GED])<input type="radio"/> Completed high school or high school equivalent (GED)<input type="radio"/> Beyond high school (college, community college)<input type="radio"/> Prefer not to answer
<p>25. Are you or anyone in your household currently receiving any of the following? You can select all that apply.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or food stamps<input type="radio"/> Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) (additional money on EBT or a new EBT card)<input type="radio"/> WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children)<input type="radio"/> Free or reduced-price school lunch or breakfast (during the school year)<input type="radio"/> Food from food pantries<input type="radio"/> None of the above<input type="radio"/> Other (please specify): _____<input type="radio"/> Don't know or prefer not to answer
<p>26. The summer meal program is free and open to all families, even those who do not get free or reduced-price meals during the school year. Were you aware of this?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> Yes<input type="radio"/> No

Figure 2. (continued) US Department of Agriculture summer meal program nonparticipating family survey to examine facilitators and barriers to program participation in one Connecticut school district during 2021