

## 2023 Survey of Rural Families and Summer Meal Service



Team: Research & Policy, Share Our Strength-No Kid Hungry  
Project Officer: Anthony Panzera  
Contracted Researcher: FM3 Research

# **INTRODUCTION**

Although guidance from USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has already stipulated that non-congregate meal service sites are only allowed to operate in rural areas if there is not already site access to a congregate setting<sup>1</sup>, FNS provided limited guidance on how this newly permanent summer meal service option should be implemented in 2023. While features like location, transportation, and safety are important practical considerations for State agencies and families, Share Our Strength No Kid Hungry (SOS-NKH) undertook research to understand what characteristics families consider when determining whether a meal site is accessible to them, using an online survey administered to a representative sample of rural families with children.

# **METHODS**

SOS-NKH partnered with FM3 Research to conduct a survey among rural families regarding access to summer meals in 2023. A dual-mode survey method was selected that used an address-based sampling approach and an opt-in online panel (provided by Research America). The survey instrument was available via phone and online and respondents were contacted by phone call, email, and text message.

To construct the address-based portion of the sample, addresses were randomly selected from a list of all residential addresses in designated rural areas. Addresses were then matched in the sample against public and commercial databases to acquire residents' email and telephone contact information. Respondents drawn from the opt-in panel portion of the survey have previously agreed to participate in surveys for a small amount of compensation. Respondents were screened to ensure they meet the criteria to participate in the survey.

Adult respondents were included if they reported having children who were younger than 19 years of age. Households were considered to be in rural areas if the reported zip code was covered by an area designated by USDA as rural, according to RUCA categories 4 through 10.<sup>2</sup> In addition, families with total self-reported household income less than \$93,500 were included. We selected an upper income limit (185% of the Federal Poverty Level) to ensure that survey respondents' household sizes, children's ages, and total household income likely qualified them for summer meal services. Quotas were set to ensure the demographic and geographic representativeness of the sample. From July 8-August 9, 2023, FM3 completed 600 online and telephone interviews.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.fns.usda.gov/sfsp/implementation-guidance-summer-2023-non-congregate-meal-service-rural-areas>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-commuting-area-codes/>

## FINDINGS<sup>3</sup>

600 low-income parents in rural areas across the U.S. completed the survey. Parents find it harder to afford food in the summer and a majority said it was important to have access to both take-home meals and congregate meals for their children. Key findings include:

- **Many rural, low-income families reported facing hunger.** More than four in five (82%) have worried about running out of money before they can buy more in the past year (Figure 1). Furthermore, nearly three-quarters (72%) have run out of food and 41% said their children often or sometimes did not eat enough.
- **Lower-income households were more likely to “often” experience hunger.** Among parents with household incomes less than \$27,000 (including those with no income), 47% were worried they would run out of food (compared to 39% of parents overall), 34% did not have enough food to last before their next paycheck (compared to 29% overall), and 20% had children who did not eat enough (compared to 16% overall). African American parents were also more likely to say that their children were not eating enough in the last year (24%) compared to parents overall (16%).
- **Eighty-two percent of parents reported spending more on groceries in the summer (Figure 2).** Fifty-six percent of parents said they spend up to \$200 more per month on groceries during the summer. Regression analysis finds that holding income and household size constant, families experience a \$168 increase in their monthly grocery bill in the summer.

Parents with children ages 5-10 were most likely to report increased spending during the summer in comparison to all other parents. Additionally, those with more children were more likely to spend more on groceries in the summer. As shown in Figure 3, 41% of parents with four or more kids spend at least \$300 more in summer compared to just 15% of parents overall.

**Figure 1: Access to Food Within the Past 12 Months**

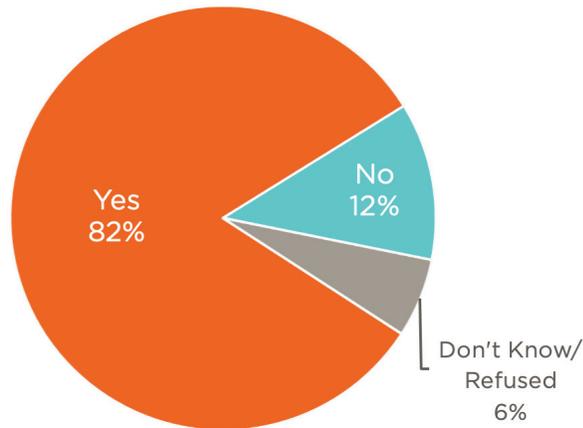
*Is this statement often true, sometimes true, or never true for your household?*

Within the past 12 months...	Often/ Sometimes True	Never True	Don't Know
... we were worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.	82%	16%	2%
... the food we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more.	72%	26%	2%
...the children were not eating enough because we just couldn't afford enough food.	41%	56%	3%

<sup>3</sup> Due to rounding, not all totals will sum to 100%.

### Figure 2: Grocery Spending in Summer

Does your family spend more on groceries when your child is out of school in the summer?



### Figure 3: Difference in Grocery Spending by Number of Children

How much does your family spend on groceries each month? How much would you estimate that your family spends on groceries each month during the summer when your child is out of school?

Difference in Grocery Spending	Parents Overall	Number of Children			
		One	Two	Three	Four or More
+\$0-\$100	31%	35%	30%	36%	11%
+\$101-\$200	30%	33%	29%	29%	23%
+\$201-\$300	11%	8%	15%	8%	13%
+\$301 or more	15%	9%	15%	13%	41%

- **Broad majorities of parents report increased spending during the summer (Figure 4).** Seventy-three percent of parents say it is harder to make ends meet during summer and 61% say they sometimes do not have enough money in the summer. While parents across demographic and geographic lines had similar experiences in summer, with those living in the Northeast most likely to say that they find themselves without enough money for food during the summer (73% compared to 61% of parents overall).

### Figure 4: Summer Impact on Families' Finances

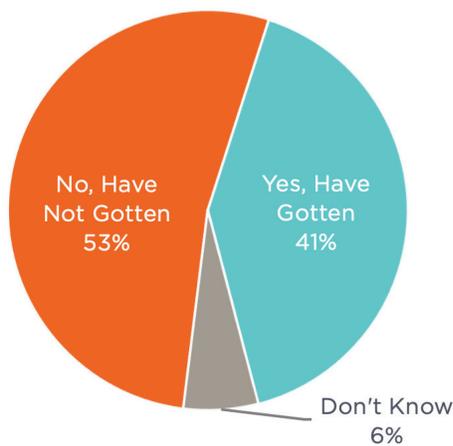
Here are a few ways that some parents have said summer impacts their families. Please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the following statements.

Statement	Total Agree	Total Disagree
It is harder to make ends meet during the summer than during the school year.	73%	26%
We sometimes find ourselves without enough money for food during the summer.	61%	36%

- **Two in five families have experiences with getting meals during the summer from a school, community organization, or other provider.** As shown in Figure 5, 41% said their children have gotten meals during the summer. Of those who have gotten summer meals, 62% have done so at least a few times a week.
- **Children with access most of the time to transportation (whether by car, biking, or public transit) are more likely to have gotten summer meals than those who only have such access some of the time or rarely.** Forty-five percent of children with car access all or most of the time have gotten meals compared to those with car access some of the time (34%) or rarely (30%). The same is true for bike access (48% with access most of the time versus 29% with access sometimes and 34% with rare access) and public transit access (48% with access most of the time versus 43% with access sometimes and 38% with rare access).

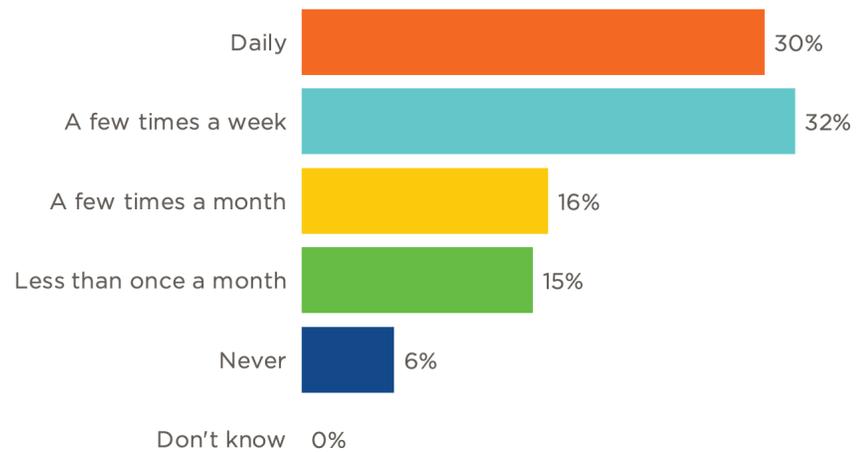
**Figure 5: Getting School Meals During Summer**

*Has your child ever gotten a meal at a site run by a school or another provider, like a community organization, during summer breaks?*



*How often does your child typically eat meals from school or a community organization during summer breaks?*

*(Asked of Those Whose Children Have Gotten Summer Meals, n=248)*



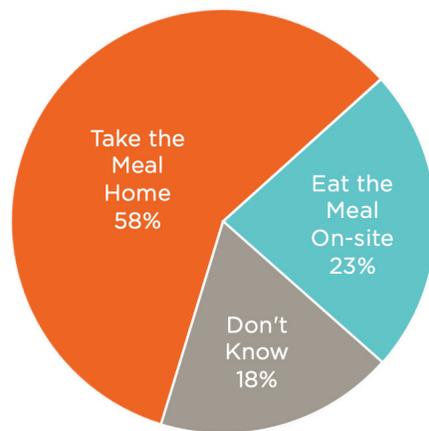
Parents whose children have gotten summer meals are also disproportionately:

- Parents with 4 or more children (61%);
- School workers (55%);
- College-educated (53%);
- Have a household size of 6 or more (51%);
- Have children ages 5-10 (48%);
- Employed full-time (46%);
- Have a household income below \$27,000 (46%);
- Single parents (46%); and
- Have a household income of more than \$55,000 (46%).

- **When asked to choose between taking meals home or eating them in a congregate setting, parents preferred the ability to take meals home.** Fifty-eight percent indicated they'd prefer to take meals home while 23% said they'd prefer their child eat meals on-site (Figure 6). This greater preference for taking meals home cuts across age groups, regions, and groups with different transportation access. Those who prefer that their child take meals home said that their child felt more comfortable, that it was more convenient, and that they could have a choice to save the food for later. Those who favored on-site meals said the food is healthy and fresh when eaten on-site.

**Figure 6: Preference for Accessing Free Meals**

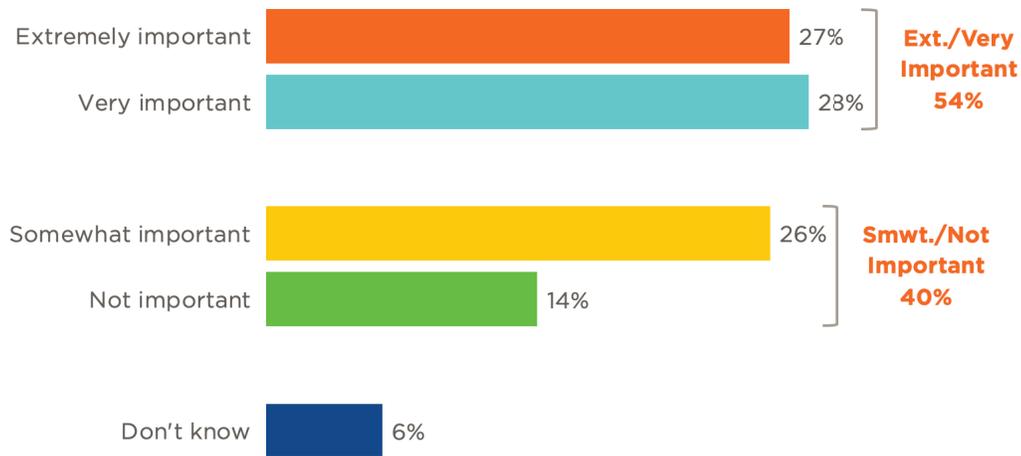
*In general, when accessing free meals during summer, do you prefer that your child be able to pick and take a meal home or eat the meal on-site?*



- **A majority agreed that it is very important to have both options.** Fifty-four percent indicated that it is extremely or very important to have access to both options (Figure 7). Parents who had often experienced difficulties with or worried about affording food in the last 12 months were more likely than parents without those experiences to say that having both options is important. Fifty-nine percent of parents who worried about food running out said it was extremely or very important compared to parents overall (54%). Sixty-two percent of parents who ran out of food and 64% of parents whose children were not eating enough said the same (Figure 8).

### Figure 7: Importance of Having Both Take Home and On-Site Summer Meals

How important is it to you to have the option to have your child be able to both take home free meals during the summer and be able to eat them on-site?



### Figure 8: Importance of Having Both Take Home and On-Site Summer Meals by Parents' Food Access

Access to Food in the Last 12 months (Often/Sometimes True)	Extremely/Very Important
Worried About Food Not Lasting	59%
Food Did Not Last	62%
Children Were Not Eating Enough	64%

- More than seven in ten respondents said they'd be likely to pick up meals to take home for their kids. Nearly two-thirds would likely participate in congregate meals if they were available. Parents of children ages 5-10 were most likely to participate in take-home meals (84%). Those with reliable access to cars (78% take home; 68% on-site), bikes (80% take home; 73% on-site) and public transit (77% take home; 75% on-site) were more likely to participate in both types of meals relative to parents overall (72% take home; 65% on-site).

### Figure 9: Likelihood of Participating in Summer Meals

Likelihood	Take Home Meals	On-Site Meals
Total Likely	72%	65%
Total Unlikely	23%	25%

- **Knowing that summer meals include food their children like and that the area is safe were the biggest motivators for going to non-congregate meal locations.** As shown in Figure 10, at least half say they are “much more likely” to obtain meals from programs or locations with those aspects. Being able to pick up multiple meals, having meals delivered, knowing they meet nutrition standards, and having a website with detailed information was also a motivator for more than seven in ten parents. Their child being able to get to a meal site alone was the least important factor (43% more likely).

**Figure 10: Important Factors for Take-Home Meal Pickup Sites**

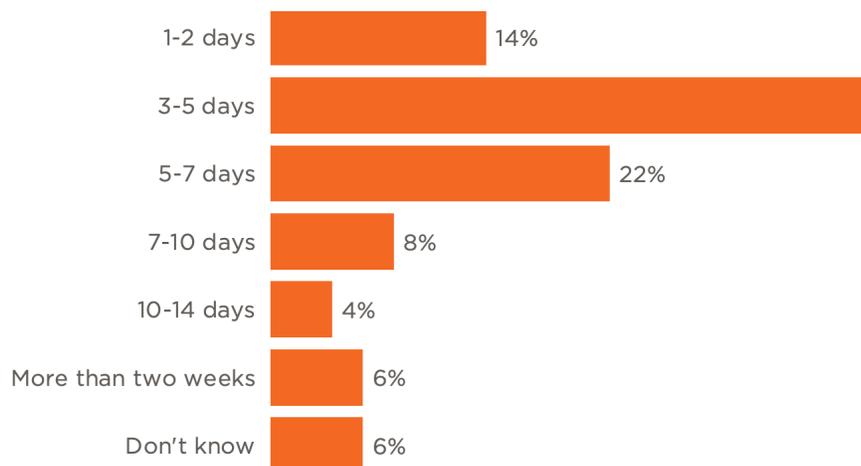
*Here is a list of attributes of a school or community organization where families take home free meals for their kids during the summer. Please indicate if this attribute would make you much more likely or somewhat more likely to get these free meals.*

Attribute	Much More Likely	Total More Likely
Knowing that the meals include food your children will like and eat	50%	<b>77%</b>
The area is safe	53%	<b>76%</b>
They provide multiple meals for the day, like breakfast and lunch, that your child can take home in a single pickup	43%	<b>73%</b>
Having meals delivered to your home	48%	<b>71%</b>
Knowing that meals have to meet specific standards to ensure children are eating healthy, nutritious meals	43%	<b>71%</b>
Having a website with detailed information about the program available	40%	<b>71%</b>
Your child can pick up food for their siblings even if they are not present	48%	<b>70%</b>
They provide meals for multiple days that your child can take home in a single pickup	45%	<b>70%</b>
Being able to pick up meals at your convenience on your child's behalf without your child present	43%	<b>70%</b>
Being able to schedule meal pickups	40%	<b>70%</b>
They provide food in bulk to take home, like milk and loaves of bread instead of preassembled meals	41%	<b>68%</b>
The location is within biking or walking distance of your home	39%	<b>65%</b>
Knowing that most other families at your school were also using the program	34%	<b>63%</b>
There are other activities and childcare available at the site	30%	<b>60%</b>
The location is accessible to public transportation	34%	<b>59%</b>

- **A plurality preferred being able to pick up between 3-5 days' worth of meals (Figure 11).** This preference is true for majorities of parents across all demographics. Parents of color are more likely than white parents to prefer picking up more than a week's worth of food at a time (27% compared to 12%, respectively).

### Figure 11: Preferred Quantity of Food for Pickup

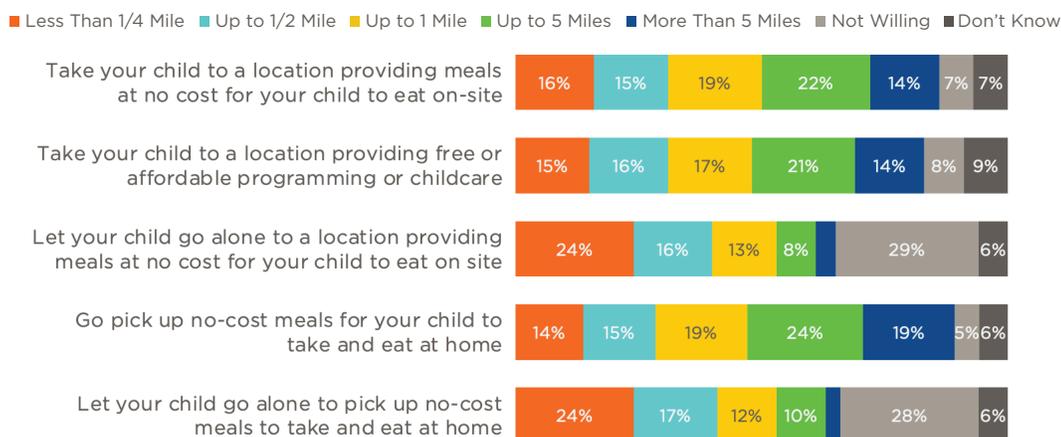
If a site were to provide prepared meals to take home, how many days' worth of meals would you like to be able to pick at once?



- Parents were more willing to travel further distances to take their child to pick up meals, eat on-site, or for childcare than they were to let their child travel alone to get meals. As shown in Figure 12, more than one-quarter were unwilling to let their child go alone to get meals. Willingness to travel was comparable when it came to taking children to get congregate meals, to pick meals up, or for childcare programming.

### Figure 12: Willingness to Travel

Here is a list of activities you or your child may travel for. Please indicate how far you would be willing to travel for each.



Many rural, low-income families experience hunger and worry about running out of food. These difficult experiences are heightened during the summer when children are not in school and their grocery costs increase. The option to either access take-home meals or consume offered meals in congregate settings is highly important to parents as they consider summer meals access.

For picking up take-home meals, parents prefer programs that are in safe areas, that offer foods that they know their children will like and eat, and that provide multiple meals in a single pick-up. Minimizing logistical challenges through providing clear information on a website, meal delivery, scheduling pickups, and being able to pick up meals for siblings or when a child is not present generally motivate participation according to parents. While proximity to transit or the ability for a child to get to the location on their own were not top-ranking motivators, those whose children have reliable access to transportation tended to report a higher likelihood of participation in summer meal programs in general.

Broad majorities of respondents expressed likelihood of taking advantage of both congregate and non-congregate options if they knew they were available in their community. This sentiment is more strongly held by those who have experienced challenges in accessing and affording food in the past year.