

The Impact of COVID-19 on Summer Food Service Program Participation

Masoomeh Hajizadeh Oghaz, MS, CPH; Megan S. Kelley, PhD, CHES

Department of Nutrition and Health Sciences, College of Education and Human Sciences, University of Nebraska-Lincoln



Introduction

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a federal food/nutrition assistance program designed to ensure that children have sufficient and nutritious food during summer breaks from school. However, based on a USDA 2016 report (1) with just 0.4-0.6% of children participating, Nebraska has one of the lowest SFSP participation rates in the nation. This study is the first one of its kind conducted in state of Nebraska comparing the barriers of SFSP participation in pre- versus first year of COVID-19.

Research Question

This qualitative collective case study explores barriers to participation in the Summer Food Service Program as observed by SFSP experts in pre-COVID era (2019) and in the first year of COVID-19 (2020) in the state of Nebraska.

Methods

In this study, we conducted eight structured zoom interviews with three SFSP state agencies (2 rural, and 1 urban), and five SFSP sponsors (3 rural, and 2 urban) in the state of Nebraska who have worked in SFSP in summers of 2019 and 2020. Two project team researchers (MH, FR) independently coded interview transcripts following a qualitative thematic analysis and used Taguette software to sort and organize the themes.

Findings

Pre-COVID Barriers to SFSP Participation



Insufficient transportation to meal sites



Stigma around receiving free food



Negative child perceptions of SFSP



Food preferences that were incompatible with program offerings

Pandemic Barriers to SFSP Participation



Lack of transportation to get food to children



Meal preparation and storage problems



Face covering requirements

Most interviewees mentioned that COVID-19 adjustments of SFSP made it easier for children and their parents to participate. Specifically, the removal of requirements for children to be physically present at meal sites led to increased participation in the program.



Application to Practice and/or Policy

Based on the Bronfenbrenner - social ecological model, the areas of SFSP that could benefit most from the improvements include:

- Providing participating children in SFSP multiple meal distribution options (meal sites and delivery options) during summer (organizational level)
- Offering fun activities in meal sites (organizational level)
- Providing participating kids in SFSP and their parents with both meal distribution options:
 - a) Meal sites and delivery options - during summer (Policy level) and
 - b) Parents bringing children to meal sites with free food (Policy level).

References

1. Participation in USDA's Summer Food Service Program varies across States [Internet]. Available from: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=89523>