Summer Meals for NYC Students: Understanding the Perspectives and Experiences of Families

Technical Appendix

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Summer Meals for NYC Students: Technical Appendix

Our study was guided by the following questions, which we answered through focus groups with parents from high-poverty schools:

1.) What are low-income families’ food needs during the summer?
2.) What reasons might families have for not participating in the summer meals program? Are there ways that vulnerable populations—such as recently arrived immigrant families—might face unique barriers to access?
3.) How can the summer meals programs better serve families?
4.) What are some ways that outreach to families about summer meals programs might be improved?

School Focus Group Sample

For the focus groups, we aimed to recruit low-income parents from a variety of neighborhoods with relatively high rates of food insecurity. We used data from our archive to generate a list of 105 elementary schools in low-income neighborhoods and with high rates of poverty among the student population. We limited the recruitment list to schools that:

- Were in a census tract in the top quintile of the neighborhood disadvantage index;¹
- Were in a census tract that had an above-average proportion of families in poverty for disadvantaged census tracts (i.e., over 34 percent); and
- Had more than 80 percent of students eligible for free and reduced priced lunch.

Table A1 below shows how the elementary schools in the focus group sample compared to those in the recruitment sample and to all of the other elementary schools in the City. There was a higher proportion of schools in the Bronx in our focus group and recruitment sample, compared to elementary schools citywide, and lower proportions of schools in Queens and Staten Island (none of the focus group schools were in Queens or Staten Island). In addition, a higher proportion of the focus group schools had one or two summer meal sites in their census tract in 2019, when compared to both the other schools in the recruitment sample and to all of the other elementary schools. Across all three group of schools, there were, on average, comparable numbers of summer meal sites in the school’s Community District.

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¹ The Neighborhood Disadvantage Index indicates which census tracts are in the top quintile of disadvantage measured by the proportions of (1) non-White residents, (2) families under the federal poverty line, (3) unemployed residents, (4) female-headed households, (5) residents receiving public assistance, and (6) residents under the age of 18.
Table A1: Geographic Characteristics of Focus Groups Schools, Schools in Recruitment Sample, and Elementary Schools Citywide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Borough (%)</th>
<th>Focus Group Schools</th>
<th>Other Schools in Recruitment Sample</th>
<th>All Other Elementary Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>53.6</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>33.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manhattan</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queens</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staten Island</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| No sites in census tract\(^a\) (%) | 25.0 | 46.4 | 68.7 |
| One site in census tract (%) | 62.5 | 45.4 | 25.4 |
| Two or more sites in census tract (%) | 12.5 | 8.2  | 5.9  |

| Number of sites in Community District\(^b\) | 10.1 | 11.3 | 10.4 |

Sample size 8 97 614

Source: Research Alliance calculations based on 2019 summer meals site location data obtained from the NYC DOE website.

Notes: Elementary schools are those that exclusively serve students in kindergarten through fifth grade. We used QGIS to map the locations of the schools and nearby summer meals sites.

\(^a\) A census tract is roughly equivalent to a neighborhood, as estimated by the US Census Borough.

\(^b\) New York City has 59 Community Districts, which are governed by community boards. They usually include a couple of neighborhoods.

Table A2 on the next page shows how the focus group school sample compares to the schools in the recruitment sample and to all other elementary schools in terms of student demographics. On average, schools in the focus group and recruitment samples had higher proportions of Latino students and lower proportions of White and Asian students. Schools in the focus group and recruitment samples also had higher proportions of students who are English Language Learners and who qualified for free and reduced priced lunch. Focus group and recruitment sample schools also had a higher prevalence of poverty in their census tract.
Table A2: Demographic Characteristics of Focus Groups Schools, Schools in Recruitment Sample, and Elementary Schools Citywide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Focus Group Schools</th>
<th>Other Schools in Recruitment Sample</th>
<th>All Other Elementary Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language learner (%)</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free or reduced-price lunch (%)</td>
<td>92.7</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty in census tract (%)</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample size</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>614</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Research Alliance calculations based on data obtained from the NYC Department of Education.
Notes: Elementary schools are those that exclusively serve students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

* Refers to the proportion of households living below the federal poverty line in the school census tract.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Our focus groups were guided by a semi-structured protocol (see pages 5-7) that we developed in light of the study’s research questions. The semi-structured interview guide allowed us flexibility to ask probing questions to illicit more elaboration from parents, and to pursue any unanticipated lines of inquiry. We conducted focus groups in English and in Spanish.

We analyzed the focus group data through coding of the interview transcripts. Using our research questions, and reflecting on a first reading of the transcripts, we constructed our codebook (see page 8), which we amended after coding the first couple of transcripts that captured some of the variation across our focus group sample (e.g., transcripts from schools that varied in terms of location and the characteristics of the parents in the focus groups). After the codebook was finalized, one researcher coded all of the transcripts using Deedose. The researcher reviewed a few de-identified coded transcripts with an outside partner from Share Our Strength to assess the credibility of the coding scheme.

After coding, we condensed the data by summarizing the transcript text corresponding to each code for each focus group in a spreadsheet. This allowed us to more easily visualize patterns in the data, make comparisons across focus group schools with different characteristics (i.e., neighborhood,
parent racial and ethnic background, and number of nearby summer meals sites). It also allowed us assess the extent to which our conclusions were supported throughout all of our transcript data, and to identify any cases that deviated from these conclusions.

After reviewing the data summaries, we developed a cohesive set of thematic findings that connected the research questions to the patterns and evidence present in the data. Throughout both the interviewing process and in analyzing the data, we strove to be aware of our own positionality as researchers and its potential influence on how we made sense of the data.

**Additional Data Sources**

In addition to the focus group data, we drew on data from our archive of administrative records from the NYC Department of Education (NYCDOE), as well as information from several publicly available databases focused on community health indicators, as described below. We used these data to produce the map, graph, and tables in the brief.

**Summer Meals Site Data**

We took the publicly available list from the NYCDOE of 2019 summer meal sites (N=1,313) and coded each site that was open to the public as one of four categories—school sites, library sites, park or pool sites, and other sites. We then used QGIS to geocode the site addresses and merged that data with QGIS shapefiles to determine which census tract and community district (CD) each site was located in.

We then summed up how many of the different kinds of public sites were in each census tract and CD. We merged that data with the dataset of elementary schools we used to create our recruitment sample. This allowed us to determine how many of each kind of public summer site meal site was located in the focus group schools’ census tract and CD.

**Community District Health Indicators**

We drew on data from Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap project (2019) via DATA2GOHEALTH.NYC (2018), to determine rates food insecurity, collected at PUMA (Public Use Microdata Areas) levels. PUMAs roughly correspond to Community Districts (CDs), and the data set included a crosswalk to map PUMAs onto CDs. We divided the 52 CDs into three categories based on food insecurity rates—low (6-12%), moderate (12.1-18%), and high (18.1-33%).

We also draw on data from the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene’s Community Health Profiles (2018), which include measures of neighborhood health at the CD level, compiled from various local agencies and research centers. We reported on some of these indicators (e.g., bodega-to-super market ratio, the proportion of households using SNAP) by CD food insecurity category, and for the CDs that each focus group school was located in.
Parent Focus Group Protocol

Statement to Subjects

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools at New York University is conducting a study focusing on family participation in free summer meals programs. We are interested in learning more about what families’ food needs are during the summer, what challenges families might have in accessing summer meals programs, any recommendations families have about how to improve outreach about the programs, and how the programs more generally might be improved.

As part of this study, we are conducting focus groups with parents to learn more about their perspectives on the summer meals programs. The focus group will take approximately 60 minutes and be audio recorded. The Research Alliance will use the information participants provide for research purposes only. We will keep all of your identities confidential, and we will not attribute any comments to any specific individuals. We also ask that everyone who is a part of this focus group keep everything that is said private to preserve everyone’s confidentiality.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may request at any time to stop participating. You may also request at any time that we not include anything that you say during the focus group in the study.

Does anyone have any questions?

Introduction

Without saying your name, can everyone introduce themselves by saying what grade(s) your child(ren) are in, and whether they eat free meals here at school during the school year?

Now, going around the room, can everyone describe where their children spent most of their time during the past summer? Could you also say whether you would have preferred your child to spend their time somewhere else, and why?

- Probe if they were in NYC or not

General Use of Programs

Now we’re going to start talking about summer meals. Can everyone describe where their child(ren) usually ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner over this past summer?

- For each parent, probe around whether any of the meals their children ate were free, and how often during the week they ate free meals.
- For those whose children did receive free meals—probe around where their children ate their free meals, and if their child was a part of a summer program that provided free meals.
For those who of you who did not use the free meals programs this summer, what were your main reasons for not using free meals programs?

- Probe around whether it was related to issues of not having enough information, access/convenience or lack of programming for children at the sites.
- Probe around whether their children participated in free meals programs in the past, but did not this summer.

**Family Nutritional Needs**

[Say that now anyone can chime in without taking turns.] In general, how would you say your family’s food needs over the summer compare to during the school year? Is it more challenging to feed your family, or about the same?

For those that did receive any free meals, how helpful would you say the program was in meeting your family’s food needs? Why?

Were there any other reasons that your children attended summer programs/went to sites providing free summer meals other than just the meals they provided? If so, what were they?

What, if any, are some ways that the programs might have been more helpful in meeting your family’s food needs over the summer?

**Information about Programs**

How did you get information about free summer meals programs?

- Probe about what their primary source of information was—their child(ren)’s school, the Summer Meals website, the mobile app, or word of mouth from other parents.
- Probe around how they found out about the meal menus.
- Probe around how they got any updates about changes in meal delivery—e.g., if a site changed hours of mealtimes, or if meal menus changed.
- Probe around whether information about the meals was provided in languages other than English.

For those of you who did use the summer meals programs, what sources of information did you rely on the most? Why?

What, if any, are some ways that the programs could be better about getting information to parents?

- For any parents who did not participate because they did not have enough information, probe about how it would have been best for them to get information.
Show the parents the sample Share Our Strength Flyer—pass it around] Some of you might have seen flyers like this one that advertised summer meals sites. We want to hear your reactions to this flyer. Do you think it is a helpful way to get information out to families? Why or why not?

**Access**

How convenient was it for your child(ren) to receive meals from the summer meals program sites?

- *Probe about travel time to the sites, the time slots that meals were served.*

What, if any, are some ways that it could have been more convenient for your child(ren) to receive meals from the sites?

- *For any parents that did not participate because it was inconvenient, probe around how the programs could have been more convenient for them to access (e.g., if they could take the meals home).*

Given the current political environment, some people worry that people who are undocumented might be afraid to use programs like the ones that provide free meals. Have you heard anything like this from people you know or people in your community, and if so, can you talk about what they’ve said?

**Meal Delivery**

In general, what was your (or your child(ren)’s) experience like in actually receiving the meals at the program sites?

- *Probe around what their interactions with program staff were like, whether their children liked the food, if their children enjoyed the other enrichment activities that might have been provided at the meal site.*

Did you run into any challenges or difficulties when you and/or your child(ren) went to the sites to receive meals? If so, what were they?

In a perfect world, how would you say that the free summer meals programs should work?

What are some suggestions you would have for improving the programs?

**Closing**

Is there anything else that I should have asked you about, or anything else that you would like to add about the summer meals programs?
## Codebook for Qualitative Analysis

### Summer Meals Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Related to whether families got any information about summer meals, and if so, what those sources of information were. Could also relate to which sources of information families would trust the most or be the most likely to hear from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>Related to how and why summer meals programs are beneficial to meet families’ needs (e.g. nutritional, budgeting, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td>Related to whether and why the summer meals programs were convenient for families to access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred Location</td>
<td>Related to where the families preferred to go to receive summer meals and why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Quality</td>
<td>Related to the quality of the food in the summer meals programs. Do the children like the food? How healthy is the food? Is the food fresh?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Related to feelings that interacting with the programs brought up for families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subcodes:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fear - whether parents (especially undocumented parents) might not go to meal programs because they fear interacting with government programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shame – whether there were feelings of shame associated with using the programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulations</td>
<td>Related to how parents discussed the program regulations and rules (e.g., only children 18 and younger could be served a meal and how extra food had to be thrown out and not given to other hungry people)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Experience</td>
<td>Related to the experience of actually being served the meals at the summer meal sites. Were staff welcoming?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions</td>
<td>Related to suggestions parents have to improve the program, or how the programs might work in an ideal world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>