

## Lack of transportation hampers hungry children from getting free summer meals, study finds

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Lack of transportation is a hurdle for many families in Texas whose children could benefit from free summer meals from a federally funded program administered by Texas Department of Agriculture, according to a study by Texas Hunger Initiative at Baylor University.

"This is important work," said Kathy Krey, research director of Texas Hunger Initiative (THI). "For years, we've heard from those who work with the summer meals program that transportation is a barrier. But this is the first published study looking at the Summer Meals program that corroborates this anecdotal evidence: transportation is a problem."

Partnering with local public transportation and communities in innovative and alternative ways to provide awareness of and access to the meals sites might increase participation, researchers suggested in the study, published in the *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Information Policy for Children at Risk*.

"That could range from putting advertisements on buses about site locations to distributing maps that people can pick up to find meals sites," Krey said. "Some cities have experimented with using church vans to get kids to meal sites."

THI partners with the Texas Department of Agriculture and Texas Department of Transportation Rural Transit to assist underserved areas

where transportation is a common barrier to summer meals participation. This past year, THI met with local transit authorities to identify transportation barriers, identify assets and develop next steps. An example is in Lubbock, Texas, where a collaboration between the local Head Start and Spartan Transportation enabled car rides for children to summer meals sites.

Hunger is a major problem in Texas, where 17.2 percent of households are "food insecure," compared with 14 percent nationally. Food-insecure households have difficulty at some time during the year providing enough food for all their members due to a lack of resources.

While participation is high in the United States Department of Agriculture's school-year programs such as the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program, "we see the Summer Meals Program as an underutilized resource," Krey said.

The State of Texas requires school districts with 50 percent or more students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals to offer the summer meals program for at least 30 days. If a school does not continue to operate that program after those 30 days, other groups often step in to fill the gap, Krey said. Organizations often need neighborhood locations and volunteers, as well as to create spaces that are attractive—perhaps offering recreation opportunities—and comfortable in varying weather conditions.

For the study, researchers merged administrative program data, including total meals and reimbursement dollars, with Census-tract level demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Tracts vary in physical area and generally have a population size between 1,200 and 8,000 people, with an optimum size of 4,000 people.

The study found that:

- Urban areas have the most summer meal sites, but they also have the most unmet need.
- Availability of transportation in a Census tract strongly influences the meal site coverage and site density in both urban and rural areas.
- Urban tracts—with more people who carpool, use public transportation or walk to work—are more likely to have access to a federally funded summer meals site.
- Rural tracts with higher numbers of households who walk and take [public transport](#) are more likely to have sites than rural areas that relied more on cars.
- In the suburbs, where more households use cars, people are less likely to have access to a summer meals site.
- In rural and suburban areas, households with an unemployed primary wage earner are more likely to live in tracts without access to a site. But in urban areas, tracts with more jobless people are more likely to have summer meal sites.
- Tracts with public housing units were more likely to have a summer meals site in suburban and rural areas, so those may be key areas for outreach for the summer meals program.

"Even if you have access to transportation, there can be safety concerns," Krey said. "In an urban area, if you have a site across an interstate from you, the parents may not want a child to walk for safety reasons. In urban areas, you're likely to have a site closer to you, but it may be harder to get to for other reasons. Those are things you have to look at."

For those who are some distance from a site, "we've had some parents who said it would cost them more money to go to a meal site for healthy meals than to go to the corner for chips and soda," Krey said.

Making people aware of the sites is another issue, she said—which is why collaboration with public transportation to advertise could be

helpful.

Cultural barriers—such as language differences or distrust of government programs—also play roles in whether children attend the summer sites, the study found. Some families may be reluctant because they fear a stigma for participating.

"While [urban areas](#) certainly have the largest number of tracts with sites, they also have the greatest need," Krey said. "This isn't surprising, as urban poverty is generally more visible, and residents may have increased access to government programs."

Provided by Baylor University

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