

**Analyzing the Summertime Hunger Paradox:
How We Can Improve the USDA's Summer Meals Program
for U.S. Children from Low-Income Households**

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To Eli: thank you for your guiding light – your memory will be eternal.
Sic transit gloria mundi.

Abstract

This study examines regular access to healthy food in summertime as a social determinant of health affecting children in the United States. Through a close study of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Summer Meals Program (aka the Summer Food Service Program), we will see evidence that it has been, to some extent, successful in its dual purpose: to mitigate rising rates of obesity and food insecurity for children in the U.S. This study points to evidence of the program's success for children in low-income households in the United States, especially those in urban areas as compared to rural areas. Delving into an assessment of the Summer Meals Program, the study incorporates the author's empirical research as a volunteer Program participant into a critical analysis.

The literature shows that rates of childhood obesity and food insecurity both rise during the summertime months for children of low-income backgrounds, and that increased mealtime structure and access to free or reduced-cost, nutritious meals are effective in alleviating both problems. The USDA's Summer Meals Program works to provide a free meal service aimed at addressing these issues, but it does not go far enough. This study finds that the Summer Meals Program would benefit significantly if parental example were incorporated into the program, and if the Program became more accessible to rural families. This policy change proposal matters because most food justice advocacy groups argue for blanket measures in which the government increases funding in hopes of increasing overall participation rates. While increased government funding is a component of improvement, simply increasing program funding will most likely not translate to increasing program effectiveness. Instead, this study finds that there is a hole in the literature regarding efficacy of the actual structure of the program. Public health experts have demonstrated that mealtime structure properly demonstrated by parents helps kids to learn positive eating and dietary behaviors from an early age. Additionally, the study finds that there is a major problem with accessibility of the program for children in rural areas, creating an unfair disadvantage for a population that has statistically high rates of food insecurity and poverty in the U.S.

The Summer Meals Program as it currently stands is missing basic components of parental engagement and needs to have better accessibility for all recipient demographics, leading this study to propose that the USDA should implement a two-prong policy change. This study finds that the first major change to the program should be to allow up to one (1) parent per child to eat with their child for up to one (1) meal for free per day. The second change is modeled after the proposed Summer Meals Act of 2014, which is to enable the Secretary of Agriculture to authorize grants for the creation of mobile meal trucks that will allow more children and parents in remote areas access to the Program. This recommendation differs from the mobile meal truck idea in the Act through its recommendation of, in addition to the trucks, providing portable picnic tables and/or blankets to create space around the trucks that will encourage parents to eat with their children.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Orientation took place inside the Alameda County Community Food Bank, which is a massive warehouse-style building. It resembled the Death Star from *Star Wars* and was located down the street from the Oakland International Airport. On a warm Thursday afternoon in early June 2014, I went to volunteer at the “Death Star” on my day off from my summer internship at a Bay Area food justice coalition, the Community Food and Justice Coalition. Two weeks earlier, I had been campaigning to state assemblypersons in Sacramento on Hunger Action Day. It was there I learned from some Alameda Food Bank advocates about their partnership with Oakland public libraries as feeding sites for the federal Summer Meals Program for children. While my internship with the CFJC had begun my exposure to the food justice movement, I became curious about getting involved in the food bank’s partnership with the USDA; it seemed like a unique juxtaposition between in-kind food assistance and government nutrition policy through a federal program. It also sounded like a great opportunity to get my hands dirty.

My volunteer training proceeded exactly as I had anticipated. An energetic young woman two years my senior explained to the dozen or so of us how to take the temperatures of the food, how to handle and distribute the food according to safety protocol, how to find our green apron uniforms, and how to fill out the health inspector’s official form for each and every shift. Every instruction was clear, functional, even bordering on mundane, and I was content to end the training at that point and return to the oasis of my air-conditioned car. That is when the orientation leader dropped the bomb on us: “But above all, the most important instruction each of you *must* follow: *never, ever let the parents eat the food.*”

An uncomfortable silence fell across the room of volunteers, and I could sense that we were all beginning to internalize the same moral dilemma. There was something deeply troubling

in the idea of deciding who got to eat lunch and who did not – almost as if we were pitting children against their own parents. One middle-aged woman dared to vocalize the questions we were all wondering, inquiring why it mattered if hungry parents ate some of the food or finished their kid’s meal, and asking how we could enforce the disturbing stipulation. The orientation leader adopted an apologetic tone with her explanation, responding that if the City of Oakland and the USDA heard we fed the adults, and the meal numbers did not match up, the program would get shut down. She also explained that the health inspector could drop by unannounced, and that one slip-up could be the end of the Oakland program altogether. In an attempt to mitigate the ramifications of our new orders, the orientation leader offered us one source of back-up: if we ever needed help saying “no” to parents, we were allowed to ask the librarians to tell them for us. Somehow even the option to delegate the task of food refusal to the librarians did not seem to lessen the burden of the instructions.

It is difficult to think about food insecurity because food is such a basic human need – it is universally understood, and inarguably important. Moreover, healthy food accessibility is not just about hunger and social justice, but it also forces us to confront issues of weight-related illness that are tied to food insecurity. Thus, this is a public health problem as well. The policy of the Summer Meals Program saying no to hungry parents can seem cruel and unjust. Compounding that, excluding parents is likely reducing the effectiveness of the program for children. This is because consistent mealtime structure featuring parental example and involvement has been shown to be highly correlated with better health outcomes for children. Unfortunately, this structure is not present as often in the case of children from low-income backgrounds. The Summer Meals Program is the U.S. government’s attempt to put a band-aid solution over the issue of poor child nutrition for children from low-income families during the

summer, by offering a free meal service available to all children during the months of June, July, and August. But by explicitly prohibiting parents from benefitting from the program as well, the SMP is missing one of the most key components of good child nutrition: promotion of good mealtime structure through parental example. What needs to be considered – and is perhaps more important – is what the children themselves, the Program recipients, are taking away from this policy.

Over the summer, I, like the other Summer Meals Program volunteers, found myself confronting the restrictions of the Program by adopting highly problematic forms of “rough justice.” Instead of adhering to the warnings of my orientation leader, I began breaking the rules and selectively and clandestinely giving away food to adults when it seemed safe. I began to pick up on coded signals from hungry parents who knew that if they waited patiently, a volunteer might be able to quietly slip them a meal at the end of the lunch hour.

During successful attempts, the librarians and I would quickly scan the library to see if any health inspectors were lurking, and then would silently approach any parents seated with their children and hand them a meal. The hardest cases, tragically, were those parents who directly asked for a meal, or had a child ask for a meal on their behalf. Many parents would stand in line with their children and politely request a lunch, and then a volunteer would have to explain that the meals were for children only. One day, I had to turn away a little boy who asked for a second lunch for his dad to take to work at a construction site. Sadly, it was those who directly asked for food to whom we had to say the firmest “no’s.” They were made the public examples of the Program’s strict policies.

In addition to the quandary regarding the Program’s problematic child/parent dynamic that I encountered during my food policy research on child nutrition at the CFJC, I unearthed

another difficult issue surrounding the Summer Meals Program. Participation rates in the Summer Meals Program in rural communities across America are not commensurate with the rate of the U.S. rural population that receives federal food assistance. This is despite the fact that a larger share of the rural population than the metro population participates in the SNAP (food stamp) program, as well as the school lunch, school breakfast, and WIC programs (“Federal Nutrition...”, FRAC, 2010). Upon this discovery, I realized that the USDA’s Summer Meals Program faced two issues: not only a total lack of parental example for good mealtime structure, but also an unintentional bias against child recipients in rural areas due to lack of accessible rural feeding sites. I began to hypothesize that the SMP could be leveraged in a different way to improve efficacy and to better fulfill its food justice and public health goals. In its current state the Program is flawed, and the essential components for Program improvement would be incorporating parents and enhancing rural accessibility.

Although the government cannot impose its policies on families within the home, it can emulate what it believes should be practiced within the home by modeling it through its social programs. What if our national summer food assistance program for children created a learning-based, familial atmosphere in which children and parents were able to learn about healthy mealtime structure together? What if instead of eating alone or with other children (as children do during the academic year), food insecure children had the opportunity to spend their lunchtimes being encouraged by their parents and their friends’ parents, learning by example what a healthy mealtime looks like by sharing their meals? Additionally, what if our food assistance program was made accessible to children in rural populations, in order to promote equality for all children regardless of the population densities of their communities?

It was Franz Kafka who once quipped: “So long as you have food in your mouth, you have solved all questions for the time being.” Summertime is a difficult time for many low-income families facing food insecurity, because the routine provided during the academic school year through in-school feeding programs is on three-month hiatus. But the reality is that hunger does not take a vacation; instead of letting summer remain a time of increased food insecurity, the United States Department of Agriculture should begin to view it as an opportunity to promote food security and better mealtime structure for low-income families with children.

There are already many aspects of the Summer Meals Program that make it an exemplary federal food assistance program. The Program is effective in its dual purpose of fighting the summertime hunger/obesity paradox for several reasons: its streamlined, anti-bureaucratic approach to providing food-insecure children with meals, its high participation rates, and its recent expansion to serving breakfast and snacks, besides lunch. As the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity has noted, promoting participation in the federal nutrition programs is an integral part of an anti-obesity agenda (“Federal Nutrition Programs...”, FRAC, 1, 2015). In these respects, the Summer Meals Program has successfully provided a higher number of wholesome meals to children from low-income backgrounds. But up to this point, it has altogether ignored a crucial feature that lies at the heart of the issue of child nutrition, one that has dramatic health and psychological impacts on children: mealtime structure.

Moreover, it has been largely unsuccessful in providing feeding sites that are open and accessible to rural children. The USDA’s Summer Meals Program presents a unique opening for the government to make a difference on this aspect of the larger issue that plagues the United States – the state of child nutrition in our country. The next step that the USDA must take is to evaluate not just what they feed children through the program, but *how* they choose to feed them.

Methodology

This study is written in the context of the greater conceptual framework of both public health relating to nutrition and the food justice movement (what exists of it). Because there is not currently a plethora of academic research on summer child nutrition programs in the U.S., or even on the food justice movement as a whole, it relies heavily on studies conducted by food justice groups and grassroots coalitions. Food justice, currently a burgeoning socio-political movement, does not have an established political theory or methodology. Rather, it is being pioneered by these organizations through their interpretations of the statistical data they gather and census data from the government. A large portion of the studies, reports, and fact sheets used are from the Food Research and Action Center in Washington, D.C. Currently FRAC is the leading nonprofit food justice research center in the United States. FRAC publishes annual policy reports on the status of the Summer Meals Program, and its reports on the SMP since 2009 were incorporated into this study.

Studies conducted by FRAC and its initiatives (namely their initiative “D.C. Hunger,” which is cited in this study,) contain the most cohesive and best available data out of all the current food justice studies conducted in the United States. I was first exposed to FRAC’s work at the grassroots level during my time as a Food Policy Research Intern at the Community Food and Justice Coalition. The CFJC, like many small nonprofit/government food justice organizations, relies heavily on FRAC studies, fact sheets, and reports when conducting food justice policy analyses that turn into policy recommendations.

In addition, I also examine public health journal articles for literature on the correlation between mealtime structure, sociodemographic factors, and obesity/obesity-related illnesses in children from low-income families. Whereas public health journal articles and studies provide

the hard data on health outcomes with statistical regressions to establish this correlation between mealtime structure and lowered risk of child obesity, the hunger status reports from food justice action groups provide not only the rates, but also the description of the status of hunger amongst low-income families in the U.S. This combination of qualitative, social justice-concerned food justice research, and quantitative, statistically backed public health and dietary data helps demonstrate both the public health and food justice consequences of the SMP on children in U.S. society.

The second component of the methodology incorporates my field notes from work as a volunteer in the Summer Meals Program and as a Food Policy Research Intern at the CFJC. Except for the recommendation of authorizing grants for mobile meal trucks, (an adapted version of policy from the proposed Summer Meals Act of 2014,) all policy recommendations produced through this study to encourage parental engagement are inspired by my real-life experience with the program as a volunteer. Although the federal government sets up social welfare programs to alleviate poverty in a certain manner, in reality these programs often operate in a different manner than intended on-the-ground. Hands-on exposure to the Summer Meals Program revealed consequences that are very different than what the USDA hopes for the Program, and thus these observations are integral to refining its framework.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Terminology

When I embarked on my internship at the CFJC and my experience as a SMP volunteer, I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of food justice jargon of which I had no previous knowledge. Even in the first few weeks of conducting research for the CFJC, I was introduced to myriad new terms that revealed the intricacies of federal food program policymaking. I quickly came to learn that grasping the basic concepts behind these terms is essential to comprehending policymakers' decisions and what the high-priority concerns are today in United States child nutrition policy.

Establishing which variants of health-related and food justice terminology are used in this study is essential before delving into the literature relevant to the Summer Meal's Program. Since the food justice movement is still developing, standard versions of terms such as "food insecurity" and "food hardship" are not necessarily widely agreed upon by experts. Similarly, this study pulls select definitions of health-related sociodemographic terms, (i.e. "mealtime structure" and "rural") from public health sources, including the USDA itself, that contain important definitions which are relevant to the nature of this study. In order to lay the foundation for interpreting the claims and results of this study, this policy background distills the pertinent terminology and explains the usage and origin of these select terms in the greater realms of literature.

Starting with the broadest term, this study defines "food justice" as specifically applying the social issue of food, nutrition, and food security to the greater concept of justice. As a political movement, "food justice" has been defined in a variety of ways to suit the distinct missions of individual groups within different branches of the movement. This study will be

subscribing to the broad “Three Pillar” definition of food justice generated by the Brooklyn Food Coalition:¹ (1) healthy food for all, (2) sustainable food systems, and (3) justice for food workers (Brooklyn Food Coalition, 2014). Within this definition of food justice, I will be narrowing focus to only the first “pillar,” healthy food for all, which is synonymous with food security and nutrition. Household food security is defined as “access by all household members at all times to enough food for active healthy living” (Nord & Romig, 2006). This aspect of the definitive purpose behind food justice provides the scope in studying the Summer Meals Program in relation to food security and child nutrition.

“Food insecurity is a term defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that indicates that the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire such food, is limited or uncertain for a household. The USDA also reports on “very low food security,” which occurs when one or more people in the household were hungry over the course of the year because they couldn’t afford enough food (D.C. Hunger, 2014).”

According to a report conducted by the USDA’s Economic Research Service published in September 2014, titled “Household Food Security in the United States in 2013²,” in 2013 14.3% of U.S. households (17.5 million households) were food insecure, while 5.6% (6.8 million

¹ The Brooklyn Food Coalition is a grassroots organization dedicated to the vision of a just and sustainable food system in Brooklyn. It is fundamentally committed to building an inclusive, multi-racial, multi-cultural alliance of residents and community-based groups from all of Brooklyn; this inclusive vision reflects that of the greater food justice movement in the U.S.

²It is important to note how the study was conducted by the USDA through the ERS: “The 2013 food security survey covered 42,147 households comprising a representative sample of the U.S. civilian population of 123 million households. The food security survey asked one adult respondent in each household a series of questions about experiences and behaviors of household members that indicate food insecurity, such as being unable to afford balanced meals, cutting the size of meals because of too little money for food, or being hungry because of too little money for food. The food security status of the household was assigned based on the number of food-insecure conditions reported” (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, Singh, 2014, 2).

households) had *very low food security* (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, Singh, 1, 2014).

Additionally, the report found that “Children and adults were food insecure at times during the year in 9.9 percent of households with children. At times during the year, these 3.8 million households were unable to provide adequate, nutritious food for their children. The percentage of households with food-insecure children was essentially unchanged from 2011 and 2012 (10.0 percent in each year)” (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, Singh, 2014, 1). From a statistical standpoint, rates of food insecure households in the U.S. had declined from 2011 to 2013, but the rate between 2012 and 2013 did not budge (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, Singh, 2014, 1). This means that there has been a slight decline in food insecurity in the U.S. over recent years. However, the rate of decline has been very small, and when viewed on a year-by-year basis, it has barely budged.

There also exists the status of “*food hardship*,” a term defined by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). A respondent is defined to have experienced food hardship if he or she answers yes to the following question: ‘Have there been times in the past twelve months when you did not have enough money to buy food that you or your family needed?’³” (D.C. Hunger, 2014) Between 2008-2011 the national food hardship rate jumped from 17.8% to 18.6%, and in 2012 it was reported at 18.2% of all households in the United States (FRAC, 2013). It is important to define food hardship and bring awareness to the fact that although the U.S. government does not employ measures to calculate the level of food hardship, there exists this category of the U.S. population that is always just hovering above the level of true food

³FRAC initiative “D.C. Hunger” gives the following source information on this definition: “This question is asked as part of a survey conducted by Gallup through the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index project, and provided to FRAC to be analyzed. Gallup has been interviewing 1,000 households per day almost every day since January 2, 2008 for this project. Through 2012, more than 1,000,000 people have been asked a series of questions on a range of topics including emotional health, physical health, healthy behavior, work environment and access to basic services (D.C. Hunger, 2014).”

insecurity. These families can certainly benefit from the Summer Meals Program, though they may be largely statistically invisible to the U.S. government, and are currently only estimated through nongovernmental entities.

Citing FRAC's February 2013 Food Hardship Report, "Nearly 15 percent of respondents in Washington, D.C. experienced food hardship (reported not having enough money in the past twelve months to buy food for themselves or their family) in 2010" (D.C. Hunger, 2014). Food hardship is widely unstudied in the U.S., and FRAC is the only food justice center as of yet to perform an in-depth assessment of food hardship levels in a specific population. Since FRAC is based in D.C., this is the only metropolitan area for which we have current food hardship levels substantially documented. Furthermore, according to FRAC's food hardship study from their D.C. Hunger initiative, "In 2008-2012, 30.5 percent of households with children in the District of Columbia said they were unable to afford enough food. This is the second worst rate in the nation, exceeded only by Mississippi. The food hardship rate for households without children drops to 13.5 percent" (D.C. Hunger, 2014).

Finally, "mealtime structure:" for public health advocates, a good mealtime structure means "Providing a consistent environment and a fixed daily schedule of meals and snacks"⁴ (Medical College of Wisconsin, 2014). But mealtime structure is also understood to be a complex set of choices in meal patterns and behaviors between parents and children, as stated in a study published in the American College of Nutrition in 2013. "Mealtime structure includes social and physical characteristics of mealtimes including whether families eat together, TV-viewing during meals, and the source of foods (e.g., restaurants, schools). Parents also play a direct role in children's eating patterns through their behaviors, attitudes, and feeding styles"

⁴ Included below the initial definition by the Medical College of Wisconsin: "Ideally, the adult supervising the feeding is also eating so that they are able to model appropriate feeding behaviors for the child" (Medical College of Wisconsin, 2014).

(Patrick, Nicklas, 2013, 83).” Mealtime structure does not specifically pertain to *what* children are eating, but rather encompasses the *who* and *how* involved in a child’s meal patterns. This ultimately contributes to the level of regularity and physical and psychological security a child experiences during their mealtimes.

Policy Background

Beginning with a brief, general explanation of the background of the National School Lunch Program – the most popular in-school federal food assistance program for United States schoolchildren – I examine the origin and purpose of its summertime counterpart, the Summer Food Service Program. Understanding the progression of its development allows this study to assess where the SFSP stands today.

In 1946, the National School Lunch Act was signed by President Harry Truman as the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (Food and Nutrition Service, 2013). Created to promote household food security for children from low-income families, the federally assisted meal program operates in over 100,000 public and non-profit private schools and residential child care institutions, providing nutritionally-balanced, low-cost or free lunches to school age children during the academic school year. In 1998, Congress expanded the Act into the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which now includes reimbursement for snacks at afterschool educational programs. In 2012 alone, the NSLP served lunches to more than 31 million school children each day (Food and Nutrition Service, 2013).

According to the USDA’s August 2014 Edition of their Eligibility Manual for School Meals, there is a multi-step process for enrolling one’s child in the National School Lunch Program, which is the most widely-used federal meal assistance program for children during the academic year (Food and Nutrition Service, 2014). This process includes household income

eligibility, income verification, and can include indication of a household's concurrent enrollment in other federal food assistance programs SNAP, WIC, and/or TANF. A Local Educational Agency (LEA), a school administrative agency, public or private nonprofit, or educational agency recognized by the state, determines eligibility of applicants in the area and is responsible for the application, certification, and verification activities of the National School Lunch Program (Food and Nutrition Service, 2014). United States citizenship or immigration status is not required for eligibility in the National School Lunch Program, or the Summer Food Service Program. The NSLP is open to all children enrolled in a participating school, and approximately 95% of public schools participate (FRAC Child Nutrition Fact Sheet, 2012).

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) was established in 1968 as an amendment to the National School Lunch Act, and is synonymous with the Summer Meals Program. Established to provide free meals that meet Federal nutrition guidelines to children under age 18 when school is not in session, the SFSP serves meals at feeding sites that are located in areas with significant concentrations of low-income children (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2013). The Program provides lunches and snacks to a smaller number of children in school programs, camps, and other organized activities during the summer months (Nord & Romig, 2006).

A major difference between the Summer Food Service Program and the National School Lunch Program is the process of determining eligibility amongst child recipients. The SFSP distributes free meals in a "no-questions-asked" manner on a first-come, first-serve basis at various State agency-approved, open community sites such as libraries, schools, recreation centers, playgrounds, parks, churches, community centers, day camps, residential summer camps, housing projects, and migrant centers, or on Indian reservations (USDA Food and

Nutrition Service, 2013). Three additional, rare site types exist within the SFSP (closed enrolled, migrant, and National Youth Sports Program sites,) but for the purpose of this study only the most common type – open sites – will be taken into consideration.

Unlike the National School Lunch Program, the SFSP does not require any action on the parents' part for their child to partake in the Program, other than bringing their child to an open site. The elimination of bureaucracy and red tape within the Summer Meals Program makes it the most popular federal free meals program for children during the summer months, and its popularity continues to grow.⁵ However, as discussed later, this growth is not found in rural areas where accessibility to the Program is much more limited.

Public Health Views

The Summer Meals Program is unique in that it intersects between two categories of literature: public health and food justice. The public health literature that relates to examining the health goals of the Summer Meals Program – that is, to improve child nutrition by combatting rates of both hunger and obesity – shows that there is overwhelming evidence from pediatric and child psychology journals supporting the theory that parents significantly influence their children's future dietary behavior. In a recent meta-analysis pooling across 17 studies including 182,836 children and adolescents, frequency of shared meals was significantly related to nutritional health and weight status. For families who shared meals together three or more times per week, the odds of their children being overweight were reduced by 12%, the odds of eating unhealthy foods was reduced by 20%, and there was an increase in odds of eating healthy foods by 24% (Hammons and Fiese, 2011).

⁵ According to the USDA's Economic Research Service, using data from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, in 2013, the number of Program sites and participants increased. During the summer of 2013, SFSP provided meals to more than 2.4 million children daily at 42,654 sites during the program's peak month of July (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2013).

Other recent studies, however, have begun to dig deeper in discovering the intricate overlay between various socio-economic factors and childhood obesity and obesity-related illnesses. An observational study conducted in 2012 of 200 family mealtimes containing children with asthma, a disease highly correlated with being overweight or obese in children, found that families who indicate that shared mealtimes are an important part of family life and hold special meaning to them are less likely to have a child who is obese. Families with children who were considered healthy weight were also observed to spend more time gathered together during the meal and to engage in more positive forms of interpersonal communication than families with a child who was overweight or obese (Fiese, Hammons, Grigsby-Toussaint, 370-371).

The study also discovered an interesting intersection between neighborhood location and family ecologies, revealing that in low-income families in which parents had more involvement in mealtime structure, the children were less likely to be overweight or obese. The inverse of this relationship was also true. Children who simultaneously experienced risks in the domains of family mealtimes and neighborhood poverty were the most likely to have unhealthy weight (Fiese, Hammons, Grigsby-Toussaint, 370-371).

Summer poses a unique challenge for the government of the United States in addressing the nutritional needs of low-income children. While the National School Lunch Program is administered to children enrolled and attending school each day, these same children are often more difficult to reach during the summer months when school is not in session. According to the public health literature, rates of child hunger and obesity are paradoxically linked, and that this paradox only intensifies during the summertime. Moreover, it has been statistically demonstrated that both obesity rates and food insecurity rates increase within the demographic of children from low-income families during the summer months (Cooper, FitzSimons,

Vijaykumar, 2007). Yet, these families are simultaneously experiencing much higher rates of food insecurity.

A longitudinal study of food insecurity as it relates to obesity in preschool children showed that persistent household food insecurity without hunger was associated with 22% greater odds of child obesity (odds ratio=1.22; 95% CI 1.06 to 1.41) compared with those persistently food secure ($P<0.05$) (Metallinos-Katsaras, Must, and Gorman, 2012). This is supported by information presented by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), the leading U.S. nonprofit food justice organization aimed at improving public policies and public-private partnerships to eradicate hunger and undernutrition in the United States (“About FRAC,” 2014):

“In summer, certain groups of young people are at greater risk for obesity and unhealthy weight gain without the structure and physical activity offered during the school year. At the same time, some children have a harder time getting access to meals they can count on when school is out of session. In many cases, hunger and risk for obesity coexist within the same individual, family, or community” (Cooper, FitzSimons, Vijaykumar, 2007).

One would think that due to today’s problematic nature of U.S. child nutrition status in the summertime, a national food service program would have booming participation rates. But evidence shows that, although the SFSP has experienced a modest increase in overall participation rates over the years, this has not been the case. In fact, the SFSP has continued to remain an underutilized resource, never fully meeting participation expectations set by food justice action centers.

In 2011, FRAC conducted its recurring summer nutrition status study, and published its findings. The data in FRAC’s resulting report were collected from the USDA and an annual survey of state child nutrition officials conducted previously by FRAC. This study, like others

that have been conducted on child nutrition by food justice advocacy groups, found that: “Despite record numbers of children being eligible for and receiving free and reduced-price meals during the 2009–2010 school year, participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs fell in 2010 nationally. This was the second year of declines in participation. FRAC speculates that this decline is due to state budget cuts, forcing school districts to eliminate or reduce their summer programs” (Cooper, FitzSimons, 2011). Growth in Program participation rates has not been steady over recent years, and currently there is a prevailing theory as to why.

A 2010 study of the same period concluded that, in at least in some demographics, the main reasons for lowered participation were lack of transportation and long distances to Summer Food Service Program sites (Wauchope, Stracuzzi, 2010). Rates of poverty and food insecurity are among the highest in for families living in rural parts of the U.S., yet less than one-third of all SFSP sites are located in rural communities (Wauchope, Stracuzzi, 2010). This is problematic because poverty rates in the U.S. are highest in rural areas. Additionally, the Carsey Institute study concluded that: “transporting meals to children or children to meals has always been and will continue to be the biggest challenge in operating summer food service programs in rural areas.”

SFSP state administrators and local sponsors interviewed confirm that reality. Finding strategies to address the problem of distance and population density, respondents said, is key to successful startup and implementation” (Wauchope, Stracuzzi, 2010). Through these two studies, by FRAC and the Carsey Institute, it appears that accessibility to the Program is most hindered by lack of state funding and the remoteness of feeding sites in rural areas. Studies like these show that the biggest obstacle against improving nutrition for low-income children in rural areas

will be determining how to get around transportation barriers in order to bring more meals to more children in rural America.

Theories of Justice

“Food justice” is obviously rooted in broader theories of justice. There is lots of debate surrounding what justice means, but in essence justice is *the right thing to do*. Scholars have differing views on justice; for some theorists, justice is about individual rights, while for others justice is more about maximizing the benefit for a whole society, (ex. a libertarian would disagree with a socialist on the level of priority of government intervention vs. individual rights). Michael Sandel sums up the great difficulty in this: “To ask whether a society is just is to ask how it distributes the things we prize – income and wealth, duties and rights, powers and opportunities, offices and honors. A just society distributes these goods in the right way; it gives each person his or her due. The hard questions begin when we ask what people are due, and why” (Sandel, 2009, 19). Two theories of justice are especially useful when it comes to issues of access to healthy food.

John Stuart Mill’s notion of “utilitarianism,” based on English moral philosopher and legal reformer Jeremy Bentham’s original concept, posits a just order as one that maximizes overall benefit for society. The utilitarian philosophy recognizes that we all like pleasure and dislike pain, and makes this the basis of moral and political life (Sandel, 2009, 34). At the legislative level, utilitarianism says that “a government should do whatever will maximize the happiness of the community as a whole” (Sandel, 2009, 34). Mill later refined this idea in his Greatest Happiness Principle: “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is

intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure” (Mill, 2001, 13-14). Mill’s theory of Utilitarianism postulates that in order to have a just society, it must always be working towards creating a society in which the greatest amount of members are receiving the maximum amount of benefit, a.k.a “happiness,” or a life in society devoid of pain and conducive to pleasure.

Furthermore, Mill proffers that: “according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality; which may accordingly be defined, the rules and precepts for human conduct, by the observance of which an existence such has been described might be, to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation” (Mill, 2001, 20-21). Social programs like the SMP fall under this description of Utilitarian morality, as they aim to secure an existence for “all mankind, and not to [oneself or one’s family] only” (Mill, 2011, 21). Thus, we as a society have a moral duty to provide means of happiness – or a life devoid of pain, including hunger – for as many members of society as is possible within our capacity to do so.

Sandel, however, points to some flaws in Mill’s conception that might undermine that claim to provide food for all as a means to ensure existence and minimize pain. In many forms, utilitarianism does not respect individual rights (Sandel, 2009, 37). Sandel explains that “utilitarian logic, if consistently applied, could sanction ways of treating persons that violate what we think of as fundamental norms of decency and respect,” because “for the utilitarian, individuals matter, but only in the sense that each person’s preferences should be counted along with everyone else’s” (Sandel, 2009, 37). To illustrate this point, Sandel applies utilitarianism to torture as an interrogation tactic: under utilitarian logic, it would theoretically be acceptable to torture one terrorist, (thereby taking away his right to happiness,) if it meant gaining information

that would save the lives of many (Sandel, 2009, 38). So while utilitarianism as a form of justice is generally beneficial for the greater good, its major caveat is that it allows for instances of injustice towards an individual to be morally permissible.

On the other hand, the principle of utility might mitigate that sort of problem. Since under Mill's utilitarian principle utility equates to overall happiness – a life filled with “intended pleasure and the absence of pain” (Mill, 2001, 17) – health is an integral part of utility. Food and health-related issues like widespread obesity and anxiety over how to find food, a.k.a food insecurity, could very well lead to less overall happiness in society, especially since it is unclear that even more food or money for those with access to resources already would make their (the rich) life *as much* better as providing basic food access to the poorest. So, utilitarian justice would seem to provide one argument in support of food justice.

Another prominent theory of justice goes even further to bolster claims for food justice. John Rawls provides the idea of “justice as fairness.” He begins by explaining that a just distribution of goods is what it would look like if it were made during a hypothetical situation which he dubs the *original position*. In the original position, we are all rational beings, but we know nothing about the future. Instead, “the principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance,” (Rawls, 2007, 205) meaning we do not know where we will end up in society, or anything about our race, class, gender, or religious and political affiliations (Sandel, 2009, 141). We would choose the system with a certain number of rights and liberties for everyone, and we would make sure that opportunities are open to everyone.

Rawls explains that “the original position is, one might say, the appropriate initial status quo, and thus the fundamental agreements reached in it are fair. This explains the propriety of the name ‘justice as fairness’: it conveys the idea that the principles of justice are agreed to in an

initial situation that is fair” (Rawls, 2007, 205). Hence, since under this concept everyone is by default placed in a situation of equal ignorance, “the principles we would agree to would be just” (Sandel, 2009, 141).

There is an important point to draw from Rawls’ theory of justice that applies to the food justice movement. In looking at justice as fairness, in Rawlsian terms, no rational person in the original position would agree to starve. Very likely, no rational person would disagree with ensuring sufficient access to enough healthy food at all times of the year for everyone. This would also mean that summertime is not excluded. It is a matter of justice in that it is what we would want for ourselves, and probably for our own children.

Furthermore, Rawls postulates that in the original position, a society would come to agree on two defining principles: “first[,] equality in the assignment of basic rights and duties, second[,] that social and economic inequalities, for example inequalities of wealth and authority, are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society” (Rawls, 2007, 206). In Rawls’ theory, the concept of equality is fundamental to creating a just society, and each person is presumed to have the requisite ability to understand and to act upon whatever principles are adopted, meaning that everyone is capable of a sense of justice (Rawls, 2007, 206). “Together with the veil of ignorance, these conditions define the principles of justice as those which rational persons concerned to advance their interests would consent to as equals when none are known to be advantaged or disadvantaged by social and natural contingencies” (Rawls, 2007, 206). Thus, in a society where justice as fairness is the main principle, no one would condone creating misery for the least well-off members. The Rawlsian would want to make sure that even the least advantaged members of society are able to eat, because that would be the fair and just way to run a society of fundamentally equal

constituents.

Both utilitarian and Rawlsian justifications offer food justice advocates theoretical backing. However, it appears that Rawls' notion of justice as fairness could be the most useful of the two, because opting for Mill's utilitarian system could place one's own individual liberties at stake. As Sandel explains, "Behind the veil of ignorance, we don't know where we will wind up in society, but we do know that we will want to pursue our ends and be treated with respect. [For example,] in case we turn out to be a member of an ethnic or religious minority, we don't want to be oppressed, even if this gives pleasure to the majority" (Sandel, 2009, 151). While Rawls' theory of justice pays attention to both the good of society as a whole and to individual liberties, Mill's utilitarian ideal neglects a way to counter any abuse of an individual by the majority. This quality of Rawls' notion of justice as fairness makes it especially useful when applying it to the most basic social good, food, because equal access to food is both necessary to the society, and to the individual. Therefore, Rawls could be seen as a background assumption in the justice theory literature relevant to this study.

Food Justice

Another view relevant to the Summer Meals Program is that of the greater food justice movement. This study, (as already established in the Introduction,) subscribes to the Brooklyn Food Coalition's first "pillar" of food justice, which is "healthy food for all." FRAC, like the Brooklyn Food Coalition and other food justice groups, essentially holds the conviction that there is a notion of social justice associated with the food we eat – that people should not starve and that healthy food is a basic human right. This differs from the public health strand of literature, which is outcomes-based and practical in nature. While public health literature is useful for demonstrating the health impacts of hunger and obesity through quantitative and

qualitative studies, the food justice movement pertains to the social justice implications of the food that we consume.

According to FRAC, “133 congressional districts had at least one in ten households with children reporting difficulty accessing affordable fresh fruits and vegetables” (“A Half-Empty Plate...,” 2011). Maintaining a social justice point of view, FRAC holds that there are seven key factors contributing to why low-income and food-insecure people are vulnerable to being overweight and obese: limited resources; lack of access to healthy, affordable foods; fewer opportunities for physical activity; cycles of food deprivation and overeating; high levels of stress; greater exposure to marketing of obesity-promoting products; and limited access to health care (“Why Low-Income and...,” 2014). These factors disproportionately affect low-income populations, which, according to the food justice movement, is a social injustice.

Moreover, food justice coalitions like FRAC make economic arguments that bolster their call-to-action for the food justice movement. Most of these arguments pertain to making sure that government resources, especially state funding, are fully utilized to make healthy food accessible to as many as possible. In FRAC’s June 2014 Summer Nutrition Status Report, they present the following argument for lowering the instances of “missed opportunities” for improving food justice for children in the U.S.:

“The child poverty rate is still much higher than before the recession...As the economy slowly recovers, it remains urgent that states continue and build 2013’s progress in feeding children summer food. It is important to embrace policies such as Summer Nutrition not only to improve child nutrition and health but to boost state economies. Summer Nutrition Programs provide healthy meals to low-income children, and funnel millions of dollars to the states. For every lunch that an eligible child does not receive, the state and community miss out on \$3.4125 in federal SFSP funding. When added together, it can mean millions of dollars are left on the table” (Sims, Anderson, FitzSimons, Burke, Kapp-Klote, 2014, 6).

In their white paper titled “Facilitating Change in the Food Justice Movement,” which reads more like a treatise on the ultimate goals behind the movement rather than a report or a product of academia, the Social Justice Learning Institute & People’s Grocery claim that the larger question behind the movement is asking how we get multiple stakeholder organizations to work side-by-side in partnership with local communities (Castillo, Henderson, Scorza, p. 25, 2012). In the case of the Summer Meals Program, the USDA and the federal government are the stakeholder organizations, which the Institute & People’s Grocery believe need to “acknowledge that though they may have some knowledge of the issue, if they do not live in the community they seek to serve with their resources, they may not be fully aware of the challenges facing that community” (Castillo, Henderson, Scorza, p. 25, 2012). The other methods of integrating stakeholder organizations and local communities outlined in the white paper include building relationships and fostering collaboration.

The Institute & People’s Grocery delineate their strategy for this in the white paper; they claim that it is possible to “build relationships between community members and stakeholder organizations, through community tours, site visits and presentations by community members. Inviting them to community town hall meetings and focus groups are ideal for relationship building” (Castillo, Henderson, Scorza, p. 25, 2012).

Additionally, they argue that “fostering collaboration occurs throughout the educating and relationship building processes. When community members and stakeholder organizations both know and understand their roles in the food justice movement, they are better equipped to collaborate by maximizing their contributions to the movement” (Castillo, Henderson, Scorza, p. 25, 2012). This notion of “fostering [community] collaboration” within the food justice movement resonates with Rawls’ justice arguments. Consider: how could a community expect to

construct an equitable society if individuals are unable to view each member as necessary to create an equal community together? In Rawls' "original position," as in the food justice movement, community is key. Without fostering a strong sense of community, individual community members will be blind to seeing the social disparities which affect those members who are least well-off. Under this condition, a society is bound to experience inequity.

Chapter 3: Parents & Mealtime Structure

The literature shows that rates of childhood obesity and food insecurity both rise during the summertime months for children of low-income backgrounds. It also shows that increased mealtime structure and access to free or reduced-cost, nutritious meals are effective in alleviating both problems. The USDA's Summer Meals Program works to provide a free, healthful meal service to counteract these issues simultaneously.

It is no secret that overall diet quality is directly correlated with academic performance. A 2008 study using multilevel regression methodology published in the *Journal of School Health* examined "the association between indicators of diet quality and academic performance while adjusting for gender and socioeconomic characteristics of parents and residential neighborhoods" (Florence, Asbridge, Veugelers, 2008, pg. 209). The study had a sample size of 5,200 grade 5 students from Nova Scotia, Canada (Florence, Asbridge, Veugelers, 2008, pg. 209), and produced the following table comprised of statistical regressions run between academic performance and various independent variables relating to diet quality, weight status, and sociodemographic characteristics of the children⁶:

⁶ It should be noted that 234 (4.5%) outlying children were excluded from the sample because their energy intakes were observed to be either less than 500 kcal or greater than 5,000 kcal per day (Florence, Asbridge, Veugelers, 2008, pg. 212).

Table 3. Diet Quality, Weight Status, and Sociodemographic Characteristics: Associations With Poor Academic Performance

Independent Variable	Odds Ratio (95% CI)	Multivariate Odds Ratio (95% CI)
DQI-1 overall score*		
First tertile (lowest)	1	1
Second tertile	0.74 (0.61-0.90)	0.82 (0.67-1.00)
Third tertile (highest)	0.59 (0.48-0.72)	0.70 (0.56-0.88)
Gender		
Female	1	
Male	2.04 (1.75-2.93)	2.16 (1.82-2.57)
Urban/rural residence		
Rural	1	
Urban	0.70 (0.58-0.85)	
Weight status*		
Normal	1	
At risk for overweight	1.09 (0.91-1.32)	
Overweight	1.41 (1.10-1.81)	
Parental marital status		
Married or common law	1	
Separated or divorced	1.17 (0.94-1.47)	
Single or widowed	1.72 (1.27-2.34)	
Parental education		
Secondary or less	1	1
Community college	0.79 (0.67-0.92)	0.90 (0.75-1.08)
University	0.34 (0.28-0.43)	0.44 (0.33-0.57)
Graduate university	0.39 (0.29-0.53)	0.55 (0.39-0.78)
Annual household income (\$)		
<20,000	1	1
20,000-40,000	0.63 (0.48-0.82)	0.73 (0.54-0.97)
40,000-60,000	0.38 (0.29-0.50)	0.50 (0.37-0.67)
>60,000	0.30 (0.23-0.39)	0.50 (0.38-0.67)
School-level academic performance		
<10% failure	1	1
10-19% failure	2.10 (1.71-2.60)	1.82 (1.45-2.29)
20-29% failure	3.65 (2.89-4.63)	2.77 (2.12-3.61)
30-39% failure	7.41 (5.37-10.24)	5.63 (3.95-8.64)
School neighborhood average income		
First tertile (lowest)	1	
Second tertile	0.86 (0.68-1.10)	
Third tertile (highest)	0.63 (0.50-0.79)	

CI, confidence interval.

*Odds ratios are adjusted for energy intake following established recommendations.³¹

Findings presented are adjusted for nonresponse.

The findings originate from 4589 students with available information on weight status and academic performance participating in the CLASS.

(Florence, Asbridge, Veugelers, 2008, pg. 209)

The table demonstrates that particular sociodemographic factors (low parental education, high weight status, low annual household income, low school neighborhood average income,) made a child statistically more likely to have poor academic performance. When specifically interpreting the annual household income variable, it is highly significant to note that children from a family whose annual income was \$60k only had a .30 odds ratio of poor academic performance, while children from a household in which the parents made less than \$20k per year had a 1-to-1 correlating odds ratio with poor academic performance.

The Summer Meals Program targets children from low-income households, households in which there are trends of low parental education, low annual household income, and households located in low-income neighborhoods. The Program improves child nutrition in the United States for children of low-income households, in effort to raise diet quality for children who fall into these categories of sociodemographics that statistically make them more likely to experience lower diet quality, and thus lower academic performance. But, the SFSP does not go far enough; while food justice advocates have stated that the Summer Meals Program does good work, it could be better. As it stands, the Summer Meals Program is missing all components of parental engagement, leading this study to conclude that parents should be incorporated as a measure of Program reform.

The notion that parents are the main influencers in their children's eating habits is also nothing new. Today, there are health-related public entities that try to impress this concept upon the public. For example, the New York State Department of Health advocates that parents create good mealtime structure for their children, and states that "The most important strategies for preventing obesity are healthy eating behaviors, [which include establishing] daily meal and snack times, and eating together as frequently as possible" (NY State Dept. of Health, 2012). But, this recommendation seems to be often unfulfilled in U.S. households with children, where many families allow children to eat separately from the parents and/or watch television while eating.

In a 2010 Australian study published in the journal "Obesity Reviews" from the *International Association for the Study of Obesity*, it was found that "Parental practices such as...availability (degree to which parents provide a healthy environment), role modelling (particularly weight-related behaviours) and nutritional knowledge have been shown to be

associated with child eating, physical activity habits and child weight status... Additionally, children are more likely to consume a healthy diet and accept new foods when parents model healthy eating themselves and provide children with healthy food options” (Skouteris, McCabe, Swinburn, Newgreen, Sacher, Chadwick, 2010, pgs. 315-316). The study produced the following diagram demonstrating the parental variables determined to exert the most influence on child weight:

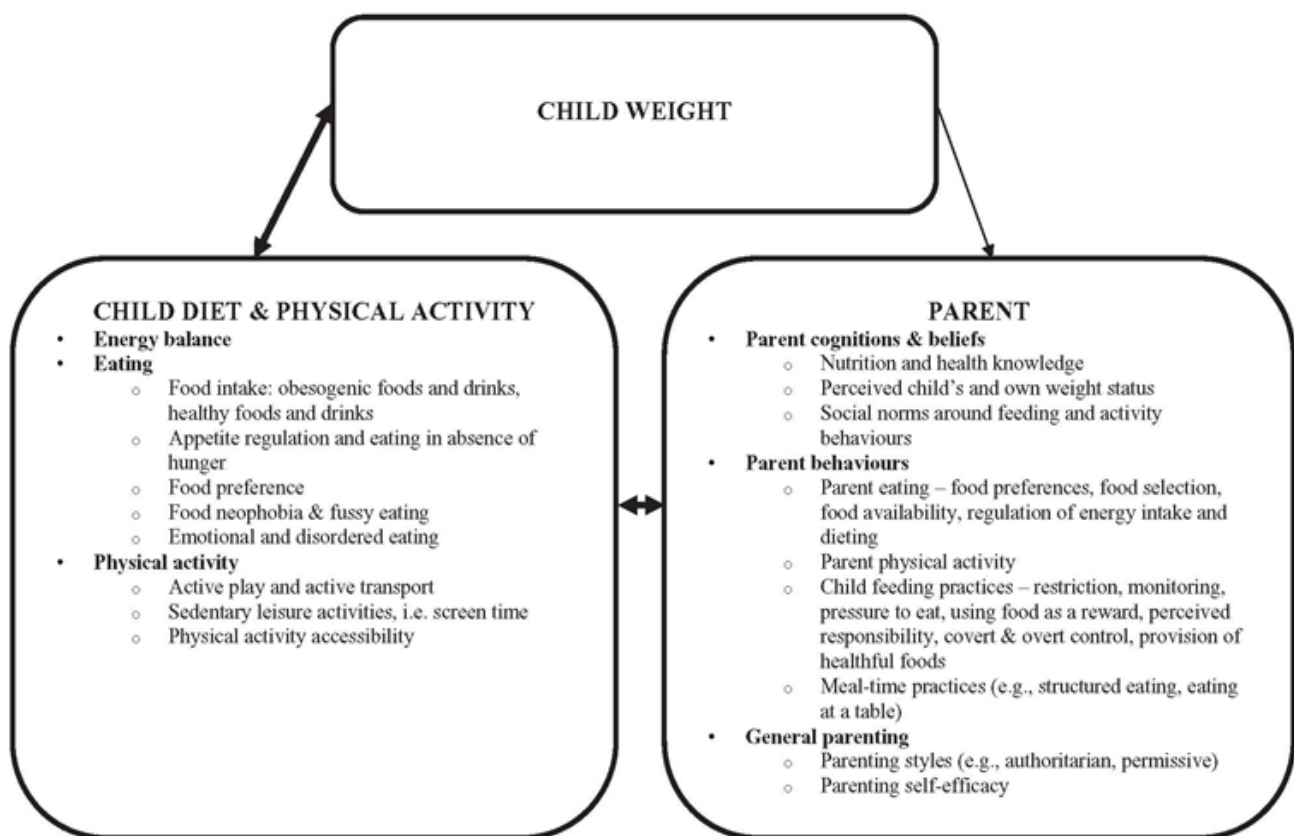


Figure 1 Established associations between parental influences, child diet and physical activity, and child weight status (1,12,23,24,38). Child weight is directly affected by energy balance as a function of food intake and physical activity. The parent both is affected and affects child weight-related behaviours.

Parental influence and obesity prevention in pre-schoolers: A systematic review of interventions, *Obesity Reviews* 12 (5) (05): 316, 2011

Directing attention to the “Parent behaviours” section of the Parent bubble in the diagram, we find “Parent eating,” “provision of healthful foods,” and “Meal-time practices (e.g., structured eating)” listed as some of the key factors affecting the triad relationship between parents, child diet, and child weight. Through this we find further evidence that parental involvement via engagement with and example for children’s mealtimes has a positive effect on child weight. The conclusion of the study offered more promising news: “our findings have highlighted that teaching parents about nutrition and fostering healthy lifestyle behaviours results in improved knowledge and behaviours that can result in weight improvements for their children” (Skouteris, McCabe, Swinburn, Newgreen, Sacher, Chadwick, 2010, pg. 327).

Mealtime structure appears to be absent more often in single-parent households, according to a study published in the international research journal *Appetite*. In two-parent households, 87% reported that the family eats together, and 95% reported having parents present in the room during mealtimes. However, in single-parent households, only 53% reported that the family eats together, and only 74% reported having the parent present in the room during mealtimes (Orrell-Valente, J. K., Hill, L.G., Brechwald, W.A., Dodge, K. A., Pettit, G. S., & Bates, J. E., 2007). Noting the differences in parents’ decisions and the mealtime structure between single-parent and two-parent households in the U.S. is crucial, because single-parent families are far more likely to face economic disparity, experience food hardship, and thus utilize food assistance programs like the Summer Meals Program.

In the U.S., the median income for single-mother families in 2013 was roughly \$26,000, only one-third the median income for married couple families in 2013, which was \$84,000. Additionally, nearly half of single-mother families made less than \$25,000 annually (Single

Mother Guide, 2014). In another statistic cited by the self-help website Single Mother Guide from the National Women's Law Center, "Single mothers are more likely to be poor than married couples. The poverty rate for single-mother families in 2013 was 39.6%, nearly five times more than the rate (7.6%) for married-couple families" (Single Mother Guide, 2014). More than half (51.9%) of single-mother families live in extreme poverty with incomes below half of the federal poverty level, which means about \$9,900 for a family of three. "This translates into a weekly family budget of about \$200" (Single Mother Guide, 2014).

The prevalence of poverty in single-parent households greatly impacts their food sources and mealtime structure. Citing data from the USDA, in 2013 One third (34.4%) of single mother families were "food insecure," and one seventh (13%) used food pantries (Single Mother Guide, 2014). In 2013 two-fifths (45.8%) of all single mothers received food stamps, and approximately two-thirds received free or reduced price meals (Single Mother Guide, 2014). Poverty is rampant in single-parent households in large part because many employed single mothers are earning poverty wages; in 2013, about 40% of single parents were employed in low-wage jobs (Single Mother Guide, 2014).

In a 2013 qualitative study published in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, a survey was distributed to 59 parents in a mix of 41 single-parents and dual-parent families. The results confirmed that parents from both types of households had strong opinions regarding their children's mealtime structure:

"Parents from both single- and dual-headed households identified that family meals provided structure, or a routine, in the family, which allowed for children to feel safe and secure. One mother from a single-headed household stated, 'It [family meals] provides good structure, kids know what's expected, it's something they can rely on, always having a time to be together, to eat together, and that makes kids feel safe and protected.' In addition, a father from a dual-headed household stated, '. . . having a routine like a family meal every night makes kids get used to eating healthy, they just do it because it is part of their lifestyle.'

Parents from single- and dual-headed households reported that family meals were a place to communicate/talk with their children, which allowed them to stay informed about their children's lives, show their child attention and love, and create a space for children to feel comfortable bringing up anything they wanted to. Parents also thought that this open communication and comfortable feeling during family meals led to an increased likelihood that children would eat more healthfully" (Berge, Jerica M., Hoppmann, Caroline, Hanson, Carrie, Neumark-Sztainer, Dianne, 2013).

Based on the results of the study, it is clear that there was no lack of concern for promoting good mealtime structure in either type of household. But, the realities that occur within each family type appear to be quite distinct. The second question in the study's survey was, "Research Tells Us that Many Families Face Challenges in Helping Their Families Eat Family Meals. What Are Some of the Challenges Your Family Faces with Eating Family Meals?" To this question, single-parent and dual-parent households differed significantly in their answers. Single parents cited cost and sole responsibility as being the two largest issues they faced during family meals (Berge, et al., 2013). One single mother's response indicated that "the funds weren't there" for family meals every night, and another reported that it was difficult to be the person solely responsible for carrying out family meals.

Parents in dual-parent families reported having less serious concerns regarding family meals, naming time constraints, being tired, and "lack of ideas" as their top concerns (Berge, Jerica M., Hoppmann, Caroline, Hanson, Carrie, Neumark-Sztainer, Dianne, 2013). The results of the study concluded that "for single-headed households, it would be important to focus on budgeting and low-cost meals" when improving public health strategies for obesity-prevention interventions that parents will buy into and will support their family structures (Berge, et al., 2013).

Another 2014 study published in *Appetite* performed longitudinal research on relations between observed parenting behaviors and dietary quality of meals for young children. The study

hypothesized that “parents’ positive behavior support (PBS) – characterized as skillful behavior management and proactive structuring of children’s activities – would predict dietary quality over the course of early childhood” (Montaño, Zorash, Smith, Justin D., Dishion, Thomas J., Shaw, Daniel S., Wilson, Melvin N., 324, 2014). 731 families were studied, who had been recruited from WIC sites across the country. Parents were routinely observed at home eating meals with their children and executing PBS during mealtime, and study observers would rank the parents behavior on three observational scales to determine if they exhibited positive behaviors while they ate with their children. These behaviors included actions such as encouraging the child with praise/positive incentives, using verbal structuring to make the task [of eating] manageable, and keeping child in visual range and looking at them often (Montaño, et al., 326, 2014).

The study ultimately concluded that: “Positive behavior management and proactive parenting practices are an important foundation for establishing a healthy nutritional environment for young children. Family-centered prevention interventions for pediatric obesity may benefit from targeting PBS in service of promoting better dietary quality” (Montaño, et al., 324, 2014). “Smith and colleagues found that intervention effects on PBS were related to serving more nutritious meals, which predicted healthier weight trajectories” (Montaño, et al., 327-328, 2014). The study further concluded: “Given that PBS was related to better dietary quality, even though diet was not specifically targeted, family-based interventions for [type 2 diabetes] may benefit from targeting PBS as an effective means of improving specific health behaviors, such as providing more nutritious meals” (Montaño, et al., 328, 2014). What is interesting about this study’s findings is that positive parental behavior seems to be correlated with higher nutritional

quality in meals served to children. These positive parental behaviors also seem to correlate with an overall trajectory of lower child weight.

The research shows that child nutrition and weight are heavily influenced by parental action. But, as it stands, there is a hole in United States child nutrition policy regarding the inclusion of parents in the most widely-used federal summertime food assistance program. Since summertime is the most vulnerable time of the year for both food insecurity and rising rates of obesity, this also makes it the worst time of the year to leave out parents. Currently, parental involvement is altogether absent from the program, and this is highly problematic. Nutritional studies on children, like the Patrick and Nicklas study cited earlier, have underscored why parental example is important in creating healthy mealtime structure.

“Children learn about eating not only through their own experiences but also by watching others. A growing body of research demonstrates similarities between parents’ and children’s food acceptance and preferences, intake, and willingness to try new foods. Mothers and children show similar patterns of food acceptance and food preferences. Children’s intake of fruit and vegetables was positively related to parents’ intake of fruit and vegetables, and parents’ modeling of healthful dietary behaviors was associated with low-fat eating patterns and lower dietary fat intake” (Patrick, Nicklas, 2013, 84).

Research has led this study to conclude that parental involvement will be key in furthering the program. Even as early as 2005, when child obesity was a burgeoning issue in the U.S. just starting to grab the nation’s attention, various public health studies were establishing the correlation between parental influence on mealtime structure and child weight. An April 2005 study from the Children's Nutrition Research Center under the Department of Pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas published in the *Journal of the American College of Nutrition* nearly ten years ago found the following:

“Research has demonstrated that children's eating patterns are strongly influenced by characteristics of both the physical and social environment. Additionally, characteristics of the social environment, including various socioeconomic and sociocultural factors such as parents'

education, time constraints, and ethnicity influence the types of foods children eat. *Mealtime structure is also an important factor related to children's eating patterns.* Mealtime structure includes social and physical characteristics of mealtimes including *whether families eat together*, TV-viewing during meals, and the source of foods (e.g., restaurants, schools). Parents also play a direct role in children's eating patterns through their behaviors, attitudes, and feeding styles. Interventions aimed at improving children's nutrition need to address the variety of social and physical factors that influence children's eating patterns” (Patrick, Nicklas, 2005, 83).

Considering the fact that public health experts have been advocating for a decade for greater parental participation in children’s mealtime structure as a means to lower rates of unhealthy diet and weight patterns, a significant policy change towards their suggestions is long overdue.

While food justice advocates have stated that the Summer Meals Program does good work, it could be better. The purpose of the policy piece produced through this study is not to dismember the Summer Meals Program; instead the goal is to maintain the integrity of the Program, meaning maintaining its popularity and record of success, but also altering its structure considerably.

The Summer Meals Program, as it stands, is more of a remedying social program to problems of child nutrition in the U.S., and this policy change to incorporate parents would change the Program’s direction. It would do so by using parental mentorship to help the Program become more of a *preventative* measure for issues of child obesity and obesity-related illnesses. From a systemic perspective, incorporating parents into the Program is a bold idea because it represents a shift in ideology in the part of the USDA: that the U.S. government wants parents to help improve their children’s nutrition through a more hands-on approach.

This shift in ideology will be produced through parents eating with children side-by-side instead of merely bringing them to feeding sites. The policy piece produced through this study is novel in that it would change the very ideology of the Program from being child-centered to child-*parent*-centered. Of course, this is not the only benefit that these food-insecure parents will

reap. From the food justice and social justice vantage, they will also be benefitting from the increased food security of one nutritious meal guaranteed, alongside their child, per day during the summertime.

Chapter 4: Rural Access

The most prominent food policy argument on behalf of the rural population is that federal nutrition programs are vital for the economic health of rural America (“Federal Nutrition Programs...”, FRAC, 1, 2015). “Federal nutrition safety net programs contribute greatly to the health and well-being of Americans, but are especially important to rural Americans. They supplement low wages, promote nutrition, and improve educational attainment. They foster activity and development in rural economies. Maximizing their utilization is integral to any strategy to improve economic conditions for rural Americans” (“Federal Nutrition Programs...”, FRAC, 1, 2015). Due to greater instances of poverty and economic hardship in rural communities, SNAP, WIC benefits, and child nutrition programs (like school lunch, school breakfast, and the Summer Meals Program,) are disproportionately important to rural America (“Federal Nutrition Programs...”, FRAC, 1, 2015).

Many rural households depend on federal food assistance programs in order to provide healthy food for their children, and data shows that the largest federal food assistance programs that apply to children other than the SMP (SNAP, WIC, and the National School Lunch Program) have higher participation rates in rural areas than in metro areas. According to a Carsey Institute analysis of 2007 federal data, 22.4 percent of households in rural America had children participating in the National School Lunch Program, versus 17.1 percent of the total national population of households with children⁷; 18.3 percent of rural households had children participating in the National School Breakfast Program, compared to 13.2 percent of the total population of households with children; and 9.4% percent had children participating in the WIC program compared to 6.8 percent of the total population of households with children (“Federal

⁷ During the 2013 federal fiscal year, more than 21.5 million low-income children *overall* received free or reduced-price meals daily through the National School Lunch Program (Food and Nutrition Service, 2015).

Nutrition Programs...”, FRAC, 3, 2015). Considering these three large food assistance programs are experiencing higher rates of participation in rural areas than in metro areas, it does not make sense that the Summer Meals Program continuously experiences lower rates of participation than in metro areas, with many rural program sites often not meeting the mandatory participation rate.

Currently, a site is only eligible if 50 percent or more of the children in the area are eligible for free or reduced price meals during the school year (Wauchope, Stracuzzi, 2010). Transportation issues due to long distances from rural feeding sites during the summertime are the most likely explanation for the discrepancy in rural participation rates in the SMP. In a 2004 study conducted in Washington that conducted focus group interviews with 8 to 14 year olds at a YMCA, the children were asked their perspective on why some children did not come to the lunch program. Their answer was that it was often “too hot to walk to the site” (Cotugna, Vickery, 8, 2004). In rural areas, inexpensive public transportation is often far away or not available. This response indicates the following: families that are would-be Program recipients are faced with the choice of walking long distances in the summer heat to program sites, or foregoing their participation altogether.

Adding to the disparity for rural populations, the very definition of “rural” is sometimes ambiguous. When conducting economic analyses, the U.S. government’s definition of “rural” varies. Defining a rural population in the United States, a country where much of the population dwells in areas that cannot neatly be categorized as rural/urban populations, often proves difficult. Currently, the government employs three major definitions of “rural” – one provided by the Census Bureau, one by the Office of Management and Budget, and one by U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Services (Rural Information Center, 2006). Differences in population size that may initially appear insignificant can have a dramatic impact on how a

policy affects one area of the U.S. versus another (USDA ERS, 2013). This study uses the USDA Economic Research Service's definition of "rural:"

"ERS researchers and others who analyze conditions in "rural" America most often study conditions in nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) areas, defined on the basis of counties. Counties are the standard building block for collecting economic data and for conducting research to track and explain regional population and economic trends. Nonmetro counties include some combination of:

1. open countryside,
 2. rural towns (places with fewer than 2,500 people), and
 3. urban areas with populations ranging from 2,500 to 49,999 that are not part of larger labor market areas (metropolitan areas)
- (USDA ERS, 2013)"

The unfortunate truth is that poverty unfairly impacts rural communities throughout the U.S., though they are often overlooked. As stated in a FRAC report on the current economic status of rural populations: "Although we often equate poverty with distressed urban areas, in fact, nearly 90 percent of the U.S. counties that are persistently poor are non-metropolitan counties. In 2009, 16.6 percent of the population, or nearly 8.1 million people, living in rural (non-metropolitan) areas were poor. This poverty rate is significantly higher than the rate for metropolitan areas (13.9%) and also is higher than the national average of 14.3%. For children, the situation is even more severe, with 23.5 percent of children living outside of metropolitan areas living in poverty" ("Federal Nutrition Programs...", FRAC, 2, 2015).

Viewing these troubling facts through the lens of the justice theory discussed earlier in this study, it is clear that the Rawlsian terms of "justice as fairness" are simply not being met for children living in rural areas. Living in a society in which children in rural areas are not guaranteed access to healthy food simply because of where they live – a fact over which they have no control – does not pass Rawls's test of an equitable society. This is because, again, no rational person under the "veil of ignorance" would agree to live in a society in which some children are denied access to a federal food assistance program during the summer simply

because they do not live in the most populated areas. And, according to the theory behind the food justice movement, we know that access to healthy food for all is an individual right that should be protected and upheld in any just society – meaning that rural populations must not be excluded.

Therefore, in addition to general economic arguments that advocate for governmental action on federal nutrition policy, at the center of the food justice movement there also exists this justice argument for improving food security within rural communities. Making the SMP more accessible transportation-wise via mobile meal trucks would decrease food insecurity for rural Program recipients in the summertime by making it more accessible to children/parents in rural areas. Furthermore, providing portable picnic tables or simply even blankets for parents and children to gather upon would increase positive examples of mealtime structure for children by encouraging parents and kids to eat together even in remote feeding sites or traditional feeding sites in rural areas.

In addition, Mill's utilitarian argument still holds up the argument for improving access to food programs for the country's rural populations. Since we understand through Mill that we have a goal to maximize happiness for the greatest possible amount of society members, it is problematic to ignore those members residing in rural areas. From Mill's standpoint, we have an ethical obligation to do so. Furthermore, as I will show in Chapter 5, it is relatively easy to begin accomplishing this goal by adjusting the Summer Meals Program for rural populations.

According to 2009 data from the USDA and the Census Bureau, twenty percent of rural households with children are food insecure. Some of the unique challenges faced by rural families that lead to such a high level of food insecurity include, but are not limited to: costs to

obtain affordable, healthy food, substantial travel distances, limited access to grocery stores, and limited availability of healthful, affordable foods (“Federal Nutrition Programs...”, FRAC, 2, 2015). Based on responses to a nationwide Gallup poll, the fifteen states with the highest rates of difficulty accessing affordable fruits and vegetables are primarily U.S. states with high rural populations, except for D.C., which ranks at fifth in the nation for highest rate of households with children experiencing difficulty. The following table depicts the full ranking of the top fifteen states:

15 States with the Highest Rates of Difficulty Accessing Affordable Fresh Fruits and Vegetables among All Households (2008-2010)

State	Households with Children		All Households	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
Alaska	42.4	1	38.5	1
Wyoming	16.4	3	18.3	2
Montana	18.3	2	17.1	3
North Dakota	16.4	3	14.6	4
Hawaii	14.9	7	13.6	5
West Virginia	13.9	8	13.1	6
South Dakota	15.9	6	12.9	7
District of Columbia	16.3	5	12.2	8
New Mexico	13.5	9	12.1	9
Oklahoma	12.2	13	11.9	10
Vermont	12.5	12	11.9	10
Nevada	12.9	10	11.5	12
Idaho	12.7	11	11.2	13
Arkansas	11.8	14	11.0	14
Maine	10.2	20	10.9	15

A Half-Empty Plate: Fruit and Vegetable Affordability and Access Challenges in America, FRAC, page 11, 2011.

In order to establish requisite demand for tailoring large pieces of state or federal legislation to vulnerable groups, we can look at two examples of blanket policies involving school beverage consumption as a case study: California's SB1413, and the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. Both accounts – one a state policy and the other a federal policy – highlight the need to customize broad legislation for populations with unique needs.

This data regarding the effects of SB1413 is a closer examination of the outcomes of federal mandates that negatively affect rural populations. It comes from doctors Sarah Ramirez, PhD, MPH and Randall Stafford, MD, PhD, affiliated with the Stanford Prevention Research Center and the Stanford School of Medicine, who used the town of Seville (population <6,000) in the San Joaquin Valley area of California's rural, mostly-Latino Central Valley for their study. The study opens with describing the conundrum faced by Christopher Kemper, the superintendent and principal of Stone Corral Elementary: Kemper could choose to either make educational purchases for the school, or make water available to students throughout the school day. Drinking fountains at Stone Corral Elementary are not allowed for use due to the town of Seville's contaminated tap water, making expensive (and environmentally irresponsible) bottled water the only alternative for keeping kids hydrated throughout the school day. Seville is just one of many towns in the Central Valley of California that has unsafe drinking water.

With the passing of California Senate Bill 1413 in 2010, the choice was made for Kemper through state-level policy. The bill is an effort to limit access to unhealthy, sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) to children at school, and requires school districts to offer free fresh water at mealtimes, but offers no additional state funding to do so. While this policy has positive intentions to fight childhood obesity and make fresh drinking water more available to young

California students, the study found that “this policy could exacerbate the disparities already facing rural and other resource-poor communities across the nation” (Ramirez, Stafford, 2013, 886). Limiting access to SSBs is just another single policy change implemented by the California state government, designed to fight the complicated problem of childhood obesity in a piecemeal fashion. Its approach and time for implementation at rural communities like Seville presents further challenges that end up placing schools’ administrations in difficult situations of need to comply with government program changes while running on very little financial resources. The study offers the following commentary on the disadvantages of piecemeal policies like SB 1413:

“While on the surface this California policy seems to show the way to a solution to the growing child obesity problem, it has several glaring flaws. The policy does not provide any funding for schools to make water available, it does not specify how the policy will be enforced, and it does not identify best practices through which schools might effectively improve the consumption of healthy beverages among school age children. Most importantly, the original California policy allowed school governing bodies to request a temporary waiver by adopting a resolution saying it cannot comply for fiscal or health and safety reasons. The provision of safe drinking water through filtration systems, bottled water, or pipe flushing (a high pressure process to improve water quality by removing sand or other water particle deposits) will be a challenge for resource-poor public schools. These schools may be the very ones who require the most assistance as they are more likely to be located in regions where water pollutants such as arsenic exceed regulatory maximum contaminant levels (MCL)” (Ramirez, Stafford, 2013, 887).

The Ramirez and Stafford study does not mean to disparage the good intent behind the child obesity prevention efforts of bills like SB 1413. Rather, it makes a valid point that the California state government is already negating efforts to combat childhood obesity by disadvantaging poor, unhealthy, rural communities that most need help, like Seville in the San Joaquin Valley.

Furthermore, this pattern of hurting the communities that most require government assistance is likely to continue at the federal level, under the expansion of a similar stipulation, section 203 in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. Modeled after California’s SB 1413, section 203 of the HHFKA “now requires schools participating in federal meal programs, such as the National School Lunch Program, to make water available during mealtimes at no cost to

students. Unlike the California policy, which allowed for a one-year waiver, the USDA is urging schools to implement the requirement no later than the beginning of School Year 2011–12” (Ramirez, Stafford, 2013, 886-887). Thus, these difficulties faced by California are also being faced at the federal level by other states across the country.

In the last 10-15 years, policymakers have pushed for passing programs and initiatives aimed at preventing obesity through “decreasing television viewing, decreasing consumption of high-fat foods, decreasing consumption of sugared beverages, increasing fruit and vegetable intake, and increasing moderate and vigorous physical activity” (Ramirez, Stafford, 2013, 886). But while the aspirations of these grand initiatives have been noble, Ramirez and Stafford’s study finds a major pitfall behind them. “Importantly, however, the diversity in scope and quality of these interventions have been limited to demonstrate effectiveness of the interventions” (Ramirez, Stafford, 2013, 886). What is deducible from the example of SB 1413 as a case study are the following two lessons: (1) that passing legislation aimed at tackling a problem as complex as child obesity in a piecemeal fashion is not effective, and (2) that one-size-fits all legislation does not work for some disadvantaged communities.

Incorporating the second section in this study’s policy proposal would likely address these issues of inequality for child Program recipients in rural communities. Unlike the drinking water mandates in SB 1413 and the HHFKA, this study’s policy proposal is specifically tailored to accommodate rural populations. Just as it is unfair for the government to expect rural communities to implement a drinking water accessibility program as easily as urban communities with greater resources, it is unfair for them to expect rural communities to implement a food accessibility program in the same manner. If rural communities cannot cover

adequate drinking water for schoolchildren, how can they be expected to provide them feeding sites without additional governmental assistance?

Chapter 5: Policy Recommendation & Cost-Benefit Analysis

A RESOLUTION TO AMEND THE USDA’S SUMMER MEALS PROGRAM

Section 1. WHEREAS, the first change to the USDA’s Summer Meals Program will be to allow up to one (1) parent, (or caregiver as recognized by the child, grandparent, relative) per child to eat with their child for up to one (1) meal for free per day at any Program feeding site. Under this policy a “parent” is defined as the parent, grandparent, relative, or designated caregiver recognized by the child.

Section 2. WHEREAS, the second change will be modeled after the Summer Meals Act of 2014, to authorize grants for the Secretary of Agriculture to allocate in order to design and create mobile meal trucks that will allow more children and parents in remote areas access to the meals program. This recommendation differs from the mobile meal truck idea in the Act through its recommendation of, in addition to the trucks, the provision of portable picnic tables and/or blankets to rural feeding sites in effort to create space around the trucks that will encourage parents to eat with their children, fostering good parental feeding example. These new features of mobile meal trucks and portable tables and picnic tables/blankets should be heavily advertised online through the USDA’s website and through flyers posted throughout public community sites (libraries, playgrounds, community centers, farmers’ markets, etc.) in an effort to reach more parents and caregivers with children in rural areas of the United States.

In this chapter I introduce this study's two policy proposals: one adapted and one original. The policy proposal changes that pertain to rural populations – authorizing the Secretary of Agriculture to create mobile meal trucks, and allotting picnic tables and blankets to set up around the trucks at rural feeding sites – are inspired from an actual piece of legislation that was killed in Congress in 2014, the Summer Meals Act. Though the resolution and bill were not passed by the House and Senate, this study carries forward the mobile meal trucks idea since it is, from this study's perspective, the most innovative clause in the Summer Meals Act. It is also the most conducive to the second prong of this study's argument, which is that the social equity of the Summer Meals Program could be improved by better accommodating rural populations.

Beginning with some brief biographical information of the Act: on June 25, 2014, the Summer Meals Act of 2014 (S.2527) was introduced to Congress in the Senate. Sponsored by Sen. Kristen E. Gillibrand [D-NY], since its introduction the Act has been read twice and referred to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry (Civic Impulse, 2014). An identical piece of legislation sponsored by Rep. Don Young [R-AK] was introduced in the House as H.R. 5012 on June 26, 2014. The version in the Senate has 13 cosponsors, and the one in the House has 40.

According to a legislative tracking project, Govtrack, that gets most of its information from the government Congressional database THOMAS, these two pieces of legislation had a projected 2% and 1% chance of being enacted, respectively (Civic Impulse, 2014). Again, simply because both versions of the Summer Meals Act were shot down by Congress does not mean they are unworthy of attention. Sections of their text contained groundbreaking ideas for improving the Summer Meals Program, particularly the idea to authorize the Secretary of

Agriculture to establish grants for producing mobile meal trucks that would create mobile Program feeding sites in rural areas.

The Summer Meals Act of 2014 introduced several changes to the USDA's Summer Meals Program. First, it would have lowered the threshold within the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act in order to include more candidates for the program, by amending the Act to redefine "areas in which poor economic conditions exist." The Act also asked to redefine where the summer food service program for children may operate as "areas in which at least 40% (currently, 50%) of the children have been determined to be eligible for free or reduced price school meals under the school lunch and breakfast programs (Civic Impulse, 2014)." Second, the Act proposed to reimburse service institutions other than school food authorities for up to one meal and one snack per child each day during after-school hours, weekends, and school holidays during the regular school calendar. As it currently stands, such institutions are reimbursed for meals and snacks served to children over the summer months or to children who are on vacation under a continuous school calendar (Civic Impulse, 2014).

The third, most creative measure proposed through the Act, is to authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to award competitive grants to service institutions to increase participation in the summer food service program for children at congregate feeding sites, through innovative approaches to limited transportation and mobile meal trucks (Civic Impulse, 2014). As the final proposed change, the Act allows for service institutions that are participating in the summer food service program for children to serve up to three meals, or two meals and one snack, during each day of operation. This differs from the current situation of the Program in that this option right now is only reserved for camps and service institutions that serve meals primarily to migrant children (Civic Impulse, 2014).

The meal trucks clause is the most important to my study's argument and policy proposal because it offers a fresh solution towards a long-standing problem in enforcing large pieces of federal nutrition policy. The meal trucks concept symbolizes a concerted effort by the government to understand the circumstantial limitations that are uniquely experienced by rural communities, and to acknowledge those differences by catering to rural populations through tailored policy stipulations that allow for better access. The lack of access to federal nutrition programs, though unintended, has plagued rural populations in recent years. The beauty of this clause in the Act is that the government displays an attempt to modify big nutrition legislation for a community that is more vulnerable to food insecurity.

This is so refreshing because the toughest challenge in federal policymaking lies in implementing equal and comprehensive change, while simultaneously tailoring policies to better serve special populations. In the case of the USDA's Summer Meals Program, this caveat appears to most greatly impact children in rural populations, and adopting this specialized clause in the Summer Meals Program would mitigate that inequality. As has been demonstrated through both utilitarian and "justice as fairness" justice theory principles by Mill and Rawls, the U.S. government should be improving the Summer Meals Program until it is readily accessible to all disadvantaged groups of children.

No rural child deserves to miss out on the nutritional and social benefits of the Summer Meals Program simply because he or she lives in a remote area. The policy proposal in this study contains a clause that attempts to accommodate the special needs of low-income children in rural areas. Section 2 calls for allowing the meal truck grants, as well as funds to provide portable picnic tables and/or blankets upon which children and their parents may sit – an additional stipulation that is original to this study and adds on to the promise of the Summer Meals Act.

The idea here is that the picnic supplies would surround the meal trucks, incentivizing children and parents to eat and interact with one another.

Section 1 of this study's policy proposal addresses the parental engagement and mealtime structure component of this study's argument. This clause stipulates that the Program's current child-only policy will be opened up to include parents as recipients. As explained in Chapter 3, the public health literature shows that children benefit significantly from sharing regular, healthy meals with their parent or parents. This is because doing so provides them with a better sense of mealtime structure, which has been shown to be highly correlated with lower child weight and less risk of child obesity and obesity-related illnesses. Good mealtime structure can only be created through positive parental behaviors that are consistently modeled by parents during mealtimes shared with their children. The fact is that parents are major influencers in their children's eating patterns.

Furthermore, allowing parents to consume meals with their children through the Program creates an opportunity to improve food security for low-income parents. The following cost-benefit analysis demonstrates that opening up the program to adults will create advantages that include supplying free lunches to food insecure parents during weekdays, and incentivizing them to consume these meals in a community environment with their children. The low-bureaucracy nature of the Summer Meals Program also disguises the fact that it is a federal food assistance program, meaning that allowing parents to eat with their children could further help to foster a sense of community at each local feeding site. Ultimately, this parental incorporation clause could help to lift the stigma of social welfare programs by reshaping the Program model to be much more inclusive and community-focused, further creating a positive example for children.

Cost-Benefit Analysis

The purpose of a cost-benefit analysis in economics is to estimate and total up the equivalent money value of the benefits and costs to a given community of projects to establish whether they are worthwhile⁸. The following analysis breaks down the possible costs and benefits associated with incorporating parents into the Summer Food Service Program, as well as authorizing grants for mobile meal trucks and picnic equipment. This important disclaimer precedes my analysis: in my capacity as an undergraduate student, I cannot conduct a formal cost-benefit analysis – one that attaches dollar figures to all the consequences of this policy change. However, I can describe and evaluate the various advantages and disadvantages of the policy change, with dollar figure where possible. The analysis is brief, and by no means meant to represent a definitive or precise assessment of how the consequences of the proposed policy changes to the USDA’s Summer Meals Program would affect child nutrition in the United States. Actually, its purpose (like any cost-benefit analysis,) is to first estimate the intended costs and benefits of the policy changes, and then to begin anticipating and analyzing the potential unintended consequences of the policy changes. Armed with this information, a policymaker or any other concerned party can better assess the potential impact and desirability of the policy change.

We begin with estimating the monetary costs of the policy changes, which are, in this case, the cost of additional food for parents, as well as the cost of grants for mobile meal trucks and picnic tables and blankets for rural feeding sites. Estimating the cost of additional meals is less difficult than estimating the cost of the trucks and picnic supplies. According to the most recent figures – from 2013 – available on the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service website, in 2012 Congress appropriated \$398 million for the SFSP (Food and Nutrition, 2013). “By

⁸ Watkins, Thayer. “An introduction to cost-benefit analysis.” San Jose State University Department of Economics Available from <http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/watkins/cba.htm>.

comparison, the program cost \$110.1 million in 1980; \$163.3 million in 1990; \$267.2 million in 2000; and \$327.4 million in 2008” (Food and Nutrition, 2013). Currently, the USDA will reimburse local programs that run feeding sites \$3.47 per lunch for “Self Preparation-Rural Sites” and \$3.41 per lunch for “Other Types of Sites (Vended-Urban)” (Food and Nutrition, 2013).

With this information we can begin to estimate how much it would cost to feed parents through the program. Theoretically, the United States government would need to expect its participation rates in the summertime to increase by 50%, meaning that for every two children that participate, we can expect an average of one caregiver/parent to participate. A 1:1 ratio of children to parents, a.k.a assuming that there would definitely be one parent for every child participant, would not be realistic in estimating new costs, because it is not safe to assume that every single child will have a parent or caregiver participating in the program with them for up to one meal per day throughout the program.

We must consider the myriad real-life circumstances that will prevent a certain amount of parents from having the opportunity to consistently participate, like parental employment during the lunch hour, parental disability preventing parents from accessing a feeding site, and potential parental unwillingness to participate in this food assistance program. We also must account for siblings who participate in the program that would drive the number-of-children-to-parent ratio down. During my experience with the Program in Oakland, I observed that approximately 25%, or about 1 in 4, child participants came with one or more siblings. Thus, a conservative estimate arrives at the 2:1 child-to-parent ratio, meaning that total program costs for the SFSP will be around 150% of what they currently are.

To calculate the cost of merely increasing meal supply by 150%, we take the average of the cost of a lunch (\$3.55 (at rural sites) + \$3.49 (at urban sites)⁹ = **\$3.52**) and multiply it by 150% of the total number of meals served to children per day in 2013 during the peak month of July¹⁰ (2.4 million lunches (2,400,000) x 150% = **3.6 million (3,600,000)**), which gives an estimated cost of **\$12,672,000** per day (as compared to the current cost of approximately \$8,256,000/day). Next we multiply this number by **60** days, to account for the program's summertime duration (three months of four, 5-day weeks of operation), which brings us to the final figure of **\$760,320,000¹¹** in estimated lunch costs, compared to the current estimate for lunch costs, which is around \$495,360,000.

To be sure, these figures are in no way meant to be exact representations, and are rough calculations based on available data from the USDA's website regarding per diem and per capita lunch costs. The final \$7.60m figure only accounts for the cost of *lunch* and no other kind of meal (average snack = ¢.83, average breakfast = \$2.00). In addition, it uses numbers from July of 2013, which was the peak month of that year. But even if the result is somewhat off the mark of what new meal costs would be for both children and parents at a 2:1 ratio, the calculation demonstrates that simply increasing the number of meals served raises program costs by just over a quarter of a million dollars, approximately \$264m. Granted, this does not take into account the cost of additional distribution transportation necessary to transport the additional food. But with this policy change, we do not have to alter the infrastructure of the Program, we

⁹ Federal Nutrition Service. 2014. *Federal Register* 79 (4) (January 7): 803.

¹⁰ This study only uses data collected by the USDA from the month of July because data for the months of June and August are not readily available; using figures from the peak month of July for the SMP appears to be the USDA's benchmark in estimating average participation rates, and thus this study conforms to its protocol.

¹¹ It is important to note the recent upward trend in Program use, since further increase in participation rates should be expected; between July 2012 and July 2013, the USDA reported an increase of 161,000 children, or 5.7%. This was the largest percentage increase since 2003. (Sims, Kate, Anderson, Signe, FitzSimons, Crystal, Burke, Michael and Kapp-Klote, Hannah. June 2014. *Hunger doesn't take a vacation: Summer nutrition status report 2014*. Washington, D.C.: Food Research and Action Center).

only need to increase the number of meals served to children and parents.

The second estimation we must make is how much the last clause of the policy change would cost – that is, authorizing the Secretary of Agriculture to allot grants for the creation of mobile meal trucks, and for picnic tables and blankets for satellite feeding sites. Once again this study finds itself limited in its capacity to perform such a calculation, given this is an unprecedented policy move in the U.S., and would require extensive technical knowledge of feasible food truck models in order to estimate. However, we do have one powerful benchmark by which we can start approximating the cost of this clause: the Summer Meals Act of 2014. Though in real life the bill was killed during the last session of Congress, the text of the original clause – the inspiration behind this particular clause in our study’s policy proposal – is still available. In part C of Section 2 of the Summer Meals Act, the bill moves to amend section 13(a) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act by striking paragraphs (9) and (10) and inserting the following:

(9) Improve nutrition in underserved, hard-to-reach areas –

(A) In general --

Subject to the availability of appropriations provided in advance in an appropriations Act specifically for the purpose of carrying out this paragraph, the Secretary may award competitive grants to service institutions selected by the Secretary to increase participation in the program at congregate feeding sites through—

(i) innovative approaches to limited transportation; and

(ii) mobile meal trucks

(Civic Impulse, 2014)

Luckily, there is line (E) under part C of Section 2 of the Act attaching a figure to the creation of mobile meal trucks, which states: “There is authorized to be appropriated to the Secretary to

make competitive grants under *this paragraph* \$10,000,000 for each fiscal year” (Civic Impulse, 2014). The \$10m price tag of the grants would be comparable to the amount needed from the U.S. government for the policy change in this study. Additionally, this study’s call for picnic tables and blankets in addition to mobile meal trucks could still fall under the “innovative approaches to limited transportation” allowance within the clause.

As the next step of the cost-benefit analysis, we must estimate all the foreseeable benefits of the policy changes. The first, most obvious, intended advantage of the program is encouraging better mealtime structure for children, which could result in better eating habits, lessening the risk of obesity. Without implying that implementing these policy changes would directly result in lowered obesity costs, it is important to realize that the total amount of extra money spent on childhood obesity per year in the U.S. is estimated by the Brookings Institution to be \$14.3 billion (Hammond and Levine, 2010). Unfortunately it is not within the capacity of this study to estimate a definite, causal relationship with these proposed policy changes and potential future changes in government health spending. But increased mealtime structure and food security has been established to *correlate* with lowered rates of obesity and obesity-related illness in children¹². Spending more on food in order to incorporate parents/caregivers into the program and provide that additional level of mealtime structure for low-income children is a worthwhile investment if it means observing a correlated trend in lowered rates of childhood obesity during the summertime months. These proposed legislative changes are aimed at preventing childhood obesity and related illness rather than the treating it. Clearly the U.S. government should be pursuing policy changes that may produce positive effects in lowering childhood obesity, as a measure of lowering the obesity epidemic and its associated costs.

¹² Skouteris, H., M. McCabe, B. Swinburn, V. Newgreen, P. Sacher, and P. Chadwick. 2011. Parental influence and obesity prevention in pre-schoolers: A systematic review of interventions. *Obesity Reviews* 12 (5) (05): 315-28. USDA Food and Nutrition Service.

Finally, we must consider two other potential unintended consequences of making these policy changes. First, though the Summer Meals Program is first and foremost a child nutrition program, parents battling food insecurity will receive the benefit of one additional free meal per day during the summertime through their child's participation. The unintended disadvantage to this, however, is the problem of incommensurate meal portion size for parents. Although the Program's meals are wholesome, they are designed to nourish children, and thus may not be enough to satisfy the average adult. One way to mitigate this potential negative consequence would be to tell parents to view the meal they receive as a subsidy, rather than a substitute, for a proper meal. At least if parents are alerted that these meals are not intended to be enough for an adult lunch, they will understand that the Program is designed to mainly benefit children, and their expectations for the Program satisfying their adult nutritional needs will be understandably lowered.

An additional solution would be to encourage parents to finish their child's leftovers from their meal, especially if their child is quite young. In my experience as a volunteer, I frequently observed a majority of children under the age of eight or nine leaving 20-30% of their meals uneaten. I often witnessed children throwing away or leaving behind a third to a half of their sandwich, their fruit (ex. grapes, apple) or vegetable (ex. plastic pack of carrots or celery), and only consuming a third to half of their milk (plain or chocolate). These leftovers often amounted to substantial caloric quantities that could supplement a parent's meal, but under the current restrictions of the Program, parents are totally forbidden to consume any of their child's food, even leftovers that will be thrown in the garbage. Thus, we can extrapolate that lifting the ban on parents consuming child meals could lead to another positive unintended consequence of reduced food waste.

The second unintended advantage of the Program could be promoting a better sense of community through regular gathering and community spaces that are used as feeding sites during the summertime in low-income areas. In urban areas, which often lack large community spaces that are safe for children, and in rural areas, where community spaces may simply be few and far between, this could make a significant impact on a child's sense of community building during formative school-age years. The boost in regular socialization with other children and parents during the summer is especially necessary for developing social skills during this plugged-in era of technology, where it is not uncommon for children to spend their summer days snacking while watching TV or playing video games instead of socializing.

However, with the increased use of the community spaces comes another possible unintended disadvantage: fraud. There is potential for parent fraud through abuse of the Program, meaning that single adults could pose as a parent or caregiver of a child in order to receive a free meal. Yet, this consequence seems unlikely to become a big issue; frankly, an adult would need to put in a lot of effort to come to a feeding site and pose as a parent – all for the relatively small gain of a free meal, designed for children no less. Realistically, the probability of this form of fraud becoming an issue big enough to hamper the entire Program's effectiveness is so low that it is almost negligible.

A final potential unintended disadvantage of the Program would be that making the Program more accessible to rural populations via meal trucks might mean fewer qualified volunteers or deter potential volunteers, because some volunteers at these mobile sites will need to possess a valid driver's license in order to drive and operate the trucks. However, this consequence could become an unintended advantage of the program: if truck drivers are needed for the mobile sites, this could be an opportunity for the U.S. government to create more jobs in

rural America. With the mobile meal truck component of this policy change, the U.S. government could choose to authorize the USDA to hire truck drivers for the Program's rural feeding sites.

To sum up, these policy changes call for a 53% increase in total Program cost, which is a significant increase in government spending. However, when weighing the possible advantages of this study's proposed policy changes over its disadvantages, the foreseeable advantages of increased parent participation, improved rural access, reduced food waste, and increased sense of community building clearly outweigh disadvantages of the additional cost of food and truck drivers, and the low possibility of fraud. Helping to feed adults and increasing parental example and mealtime structure for child recipients are the most important advantages here, and cost is the greatest disadvantage. The extra spending seems reasonable and rational given the greater potential impact of the policy changes.

Let us take a step back and consider the overall results of this chapter's evaluation. The cost-benefit analysis of this study's policy changes demonstrates that the proposed changes are a reasonable price to pay for furthering the public health and food justice goals of the Program. From a larger values perspective, if we are interested in the government promoting food justice, we could add to that aim through making these policy changes to the Summer Meals Program. Ultimately, implementing these changes will result in a dual obesity-prevention effort, and a way to increase food accessibility for children in families struggling with food hardship and/or food insecurity.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The old economic principle “there’s no such thing as a free lunch” is somewhat precarious to the nature of this policy proposal. Yes, it advocates for giving out more free lunches, to both children and adults. But the significant stipulation behind this expansion is that the adults must be parents caring for their child. The true price of a “free lunch” is giving the child their sustained time and attention – a resource that can never be commoditized. Parent and child together then enjoy this free, healthy lunch, fostering a wholesome community environment amongst other recipient families. Thus, there is experiential value contained within the “free lunch,” making it a gift for both parent and child.

The idea of allowing parents and caregivers to eat with their children up to once per day was born from the observation, as a volunteer with the program, that approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of children in the Oakland program were dropped off at the César E. Chávez Library feeding site, and either ate alone or with other children during the lunch hour. From my observation as a volunteer who distributed food to the children, this was not due to a lack of parent interest. Indeed, there was a demonstrated demand for food by parents. For every shift I worked at the Summer Meals Program, approximately 3-5 parents would outright ask for food themselves, or a child would approach myself or another volunteer and request food for their parent.

In my observation, the parents who requested food and the children who requested food on their behalf generally appeared unaware of the “no parents” rule, and their requests always seemed a good faith effort to obtain food for the parent. However, because of the USDA’s strict rule excluding parents from the Program, volunteers were never allowed to distribute food to parents.

Being forced to consistently turn away parents from the program caused me to reevaluate the function and outcome of the Summer Meals Program. I began to view each parent refusal as a missed opportunity for a food-insecure child to eat a regular, nutritious meal with their primary caregiver, a person whom they admired and regularly looked to for structure in their life. It was also a missed opportunity to supply a nutritious lunch (although child-sized,) for a food-insecure parent who had already proactively brought their child to utilize a commendable federal government food assistance program.

The ramifications of improving the Summer Meals Program could be huge: “If every state had reached the goal of serving 40 children Summer Nutrition for every 100 receiving free and reduced-price lunches during the school year, an additional 4.7 million children would have been fed each day, and states would have collected an additional \$313 million in child nutrition funding” (Cooper, FitzSimons, 2011). Allowing in one parent or caregiver per household containing a child participant would increase participation rates to levels at which they meet – more hopefully, surpass – the current goals of the Program. Incorporating parents would also likely encourage more households to begin participating in the program. This would in turn bring in more children and their parents, further driving up participation rates. Improving rural Program accessibility is another positive step in the right direction towards reaching the Program’s full potential. This would allow more families in remote locations to reap the benefits of the Program, which would in turn cause participation rates to rise – especially in states with large rural populations.

This study is not meant to harshly criticize the USDA’s Summer Meals Program. Harsh criticism would gloss over the many positive outcomes of the Program that have already come to fruition – good program accessibility in urban areas, the elimination of low-income status

verification and bureaucracy for parents during the summertime, and a good system of volunteer participants. Instead, it is my hope as the author that this research brings to light the areas of the Program that must be improved in order to help the Summer Meals Program reach its full potential as far as improving public health outcomes and equal access for all children.

Paradoxically, summer is the most vulnerable time of the year for American children from low-income families, with increased risks of both obesity and hunger proven to be analogous. This study demonstrates that there is strong evidence of a tangible way for the U.S. government to tackle both of these problems in one fell swoop: by strengthening and expanding the Summer Food Service Program through involving parents. Implementing this policy strategy will fight both issues contained in child nutrition in the United States.

This study further concludes that a two-prong plan-of-action should be integrated into the Summer Meals Program to fight child obesity and food insecurity, while making sure this vital program is equally accessible for all children in the U.S. The goal of these recommendations is to begin incorporating parental example into the Summer Meals Program so that child participants reap the added structural benefits correlated with positive parental example, while increasing rural access to the Summer Food Service Program by bringing mobile feeding sites to rural areas.

It is crucial that the U.S. government does not forget the vitally important role that the Summer Meals Program plays for millions of schoolchildren every day during the summer. 203 child participants interviewed one-on-one were asked: “What might you have had for lunch today if you didn’t come here?” About 18 percent said bread and mayonnaise, noodles, cereal with or without milk, a piece of fruit, or nothing (Cotugna, Vickery, 7, 2004). If ever there were a social program in which to invest, it should certainly be this one. The most disadvantaged

members of America's youngest generation depend on today's policymakers to champion their equal right to enough healthy food everyday. Ultimately, improving the USDA's Summer Meals Program is not merely a political argument, but a justice argument.

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