

January 2021

New Jersey Summer Meals for Kids: 2020 Snapshot



Adele LaTourette, Director

192 W. Demarest Avenue
Englewood, NJ 07631

(201) 569-1804

hungerfreenj.org

Free Meals for Kids Soar During the Summer of COVID

New Jersey communities nearly tripled the number of free meals provided to children in summer 2020, while doubling the number of children reached.

This federally-funded nutrition helped to reduce childhood hunger during a time when many families faced job loss or reduced hours because of the COVID pandemic.

In July 2020 alone, more than 9 million meals were provided to roughly 203,000 children throughout the Garden State – a 183 percent increase in meals served over July 2019. The number of children served during that same time was twice the number served during

July 2019, according to Hunger Free New Jersey's analysis of New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA) data.

For the first time ever, New Jersey exceeded a national benchmark of reaching 40 percent of children who receive free or low-cost school lunch, serving 51 percent of these children in July 2020.

The reasons behind the increase are three-fold:

- Due to the pandemic, community leaders had a heightened awareness of the need to feed children in summer 2020, leading many communities to participate in federal summer meal programs that had not done so in the past.
- The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) waived key rules to make it easier for schools, non-profit organizations and local government agencies to feed children.
- A new state law went into effect requiring high-poverty school districts to participate in the federal Summer Food Service Program (SFSP).



At A Glance, Summer Meals for NJ Children, 2019 vs 2020

All Programs	July 2019	July 2020	Number Change	Percent Change
Number Meals Served	3,191,937	9,048,987	5,857,050	183
Avg. Daily Child Participation	101,381	203,524	102,143	101
Number Summer Meal Sites	1,438	1,339	-99	-7
Child Participation as a Percent of Children Receiving Free/Reduced Price School Lunch*	26	51	N/A	96

* School lunch participation based on October 2019.

Flexible Rules Spurred Increase

Recognizing that many summer recreation programs and camps would be closed or operating with far fewer children in summer 2020, the USDA waived several rules that are often deterrents to community participation. These included:

- Allowing meals to be served outside of group settings so meals could be distributed at a site and/or delivered to children's homes,
- Allowing sponsors to serve meals that do not strictly meet USDA nutrition guidelines,
- Allowing parents to pick up meals without their children being present,
- Allowing schools and other organizations to serve all children for free, regardless of the community's level of poverty. In normal times, only communities in which at least half of students qualify for free or reduced-price school meals can serve all children for free.

NJ Communities Respond to Need

These flexibilities helped school and community leaders quickly set up meal distribution sites that often provided multiple meals to families at one time. Some summer meal sponsors also teamed up with community organizations, such as food pantries and food banks, to provide additional food for adult family members. Under federal child nutrition programs, only children can receive subsidized meals.

While the number of meal sites was slightly lower in 2020, more food was distributed because of these flexibilities.



Participation Rises in Two Federal Summer Meal Programs

Schools and community organizations operated under two federal child nutrition programs in summer 2020: Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO).

Schools, community organizations, non-profits and local government agencies, such as recreation departments, can participate in SFSP, either as sponsors or sites. SSO is only available to school districts.

Prior to 2020, the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, which administers child nutrition programs on the state level, strongly encouraged school districts to participate in the Summer Food Service Program, which provides higher reimbursement and allows more flexibility in meal service.

Because of the pandemic and the flexibilities allowed in SSO and SFSP, the department encouraged districts that were not already participating in SFSP to serve meals under Seamless Summer. This resulted in a huge increase in the number of children served under this program, reaching more than 84,000 kids. By comparison, in July 2019, only 28,742 children were served through the National School Lunch Program – another summer feeding option for school districts.

Child participation in SFSP also rose 64 percent from July 2019 to July 2020, while the number of meals served grew 46 percent. Large increases in breakfast, lunch and dinners served were offset slightly by a drop in the number of snacks served.

Number of Meals Served, by Program

Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)	July 2019	July 2020	Number Change	Percent Change
Breakfast	1,064,237	2,452,222	1,387,985	130
Lunch	1,559,356	2,630,281	1,070,925	67
Dinner	52,463	99,463	47,000	90
Snacks	135,009	46,074	-88,935	-66
Total SFSP Meals Served	2,811,065	5,228,040	2,416,975	46

Seamless Summer Option (SSO)	July 2019*	July 2020	Number Change	Percent Change
Breakfast	0	1,878,472	1,878,472	N/A
Lunch	0	1,942,475	1,942,475	N/A
Total Meals Served	0	3,820,947	3,820,947	N/A

Average Daily Child Participation

Program	July 2019	July 2020	Number Change	Percent Change
Summer Food Service Program	72,639	119,344	46,705	64
National School Lunch Program	28,742	0	-28,742	-100
Seamless Summer Option	0	84,180	84,180	N/A
Total Average Daily Participation	101,381	203,524	102,143	101

* No NJ school districts were serving meals under SSO in July 2019.

NJ Kids Face Hunger Every Summer

This is all good news for New Jersey’s children and families. It is important to note, however, that tens of thousands of New Jersey children face hunger every summer, even in “normal” times, especially those who rely on school meals during the academic year. Many New Jersey food pantries report that more families turn to them for food in the summer months to replace the meals provided by schools.

While New Jersey communities have steadily expanded summer meal service over the past several years, in 2019, communities only reached about one quarter of low-income students, leaving far too many without this critical nutrition that can help them return to school in the fall ready to learn.

In summer 2021, we must build on the momentum created last summer through the urgency of the pandemic. School and community leaders should

continue to implement and expand summer meal programs, while the USDA should continue to provide flexibilities in how sponsors and sites can deliver meals to children. Community partnerships in implementing these programs are also critical to ensuring that all children have healthy food to eat during the summer.

The New Jersey Department of Agriculture is currently recruiting new sponsors to host sites through the Summer Food Service Program. Sponsors can be school districts, government entities, such as recreation departments, and non-profit organizations, such as social service agencies, faith-based organizations and other community agencies.

The New Jersey Department of Agriculture is currently recruiting new sponsors to host sites through the Summer Food Service Program. Call (609) 292-4498 to learn more.

Sponsors typically provide food to sites where children gather, including recreation centers, libraries, parks, playgrounds, housing developments and summer camps. Sponsors receive reimbursements from the USDA for all qualified meals.

Interested organizations must contact NJDA at (609) 292-4498 for information regarding how to become a sponsor. The application deadline is March 25, 2021.

Organizations can also become a site under a current approved sponsor in the area. Sites must track the number of meals served and meet health and safety requirements, but there are fewer administrative respon-

sibilities than those of a sponsor. Sponsors are responsible for delivery and payment of meals delivered to sites under their sponsorship. Sponsors also train site staff and assist with recordkeeping responsibilities.

Operating a site is a great way to get started in the summer meals program, especially for organizations that cannot assume the operational challenges of being a sponsor.

To learn more about becoming a summer meal sponsor or site, contact the New Jersey Department of Agriculture at (609) 292-4498.



**NEW JERSEY
FOOD FOR THOUGHT
CAMPAIGN**

Healthy Food. Strong Kids.

Hunger Free New Jersey leads the New Jersey Food for Thought Campaign, a statewide effort to reduce childhood hunger by expanding participation in federal child nutrition programs. This effective partnership of state agencies, health, wellness and education organizations, municipal government, child advocates and others has resulted in many more children receiving the nutrition they need to grow, learn and thrive.

The coalition builds statewide support for the expansion of federal child nutrition programs through outreach and communications. Our primary state partner is the New Jersey Department of Agriculture. National partners are the Food Research & Action Center and the American Dairy Association North East.

For more information about the campaign and child nutrition programs, visit njfoodforthought.org.

A Program of
Center for Food Action

**Hunger Free
New Jersey**

Fueling Change. Feeding All.

Adele LaTourette
Director

Hunger Free New Jersey
192 W. Demarest Avenue
Englewood, NJ 07631

(201) 569-1804

hungerfreenj.org

CONNECT WITH US!

[@hungerfreenj](https://www.instagram.com/hungerfreenj)



This report was written by Nancy Parello, HFNJ communications director. Questions? Contact Nancy at nparello@cfanjer.org.