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## Many needy California schoolchildren not taking part in subsidized summer meal programs

**Education budget cuts are blamed for 15% drop in participation in summer meal programs.**

By Alexandra Zavis, Los Angeles Times

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Fewer than 1 in 5 of the children who relied on free or reduced-price lunches during the 2009-2010 school year in California received subsidized meals last July, according to [a new report](#).

That represents a 15% drop in participation in summer meals programs from the year before at a time when enrollment in other federal nutrition programs is increasing because of the lingering effects of the recession.

The report by [California Food Policy Advocates](#) blamed cuts to the state's education budget, which caused many school districts to eliminate summer learning and enrichment programs. That reduced the places where needy students received breakfasts, lunches and snacks during the summer months.

The "summer nutrition gap" jeopardizes the health and academic success of about 2 million low-income children in California, where many families are facing unemployment and other financial hardships that have them struggling to meet basic needs, the report said.

This growing gap is part of a nationwide trend, according to the Washington, D.C.-based [Food Research and Action Center](#), which calculated that just 1 in 7 American children who received subsidized lunches during the school year received them last summer.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture funds three summer nutrition programs that subsidize meals served at schools, parks, recreation centers and other locations where at least half the children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

Participation in those programs in California peaked at more than 800,000 children a day in 2002, according to the report, which was based on data from the state Department of Education for the month of July. About 410,000 California children received subsidized lunches in July 2010.

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Local governments, nonprofits and other groups have been stepping in to reach more children using funding from the federal Summer Food Service Program, which reimburses for meals served at community sites. Participation in that program increased 26% from July 2009 to July 2010 but did not make up for losses in the National School Lunch Program and Seamless Summer Food Option, which are school-based. Meals subsidized by school-based programs were offered at about 4,200 sites last July, fewer than half the number the previous year.

The Los Angeles Unified School District, the state's largest, has increased the number of sites that offer free breakfasts, lunches and snacks even though it canceled the majority of summer school offerings for a third year because of budget shortfalls.

In July 2010, more than a million subsidized meals were served at 260 L.A. Unified schools, four times as many as the previous year when the program was available at only 95 schools, according to Laura Benavidez, deputy director of food services. This summer, free meals will be offered at 300 schools that offer learning or enrichment programs.

Lidia Albisures, a 43-year-old single mother with two children at Union Avenue Elementary and two at Belmont High, said she relies on free school lunches to help keep her family healthy. Until two weeks ago, she was earning about \$100 a week as a nanny. But the family she worked for moved out of the area.

She receives food stamps but starts running out of food about halfway through the month. "It's very difficult for me" to put food on the table, Albisures said.

The Los Angeles city and county parks and recreation departments, the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank and other groups will also be offering free meals and snacks to children ages 1 to 18 at sites throughout the county. To find a location, parents can call the county's information hotline, 211.

Such efforts to feed children in schools and community centers appear to be making a difference, said Matthew Sharp, a senior advocate with California Food Policy Advocates. Although the number of Los Angeles County children receiving lunches from federal summer meal programs declined 6% from July 2009 to July 2010, that was a smaller drop than in some other nearby counties. Participation fell 30% in Riverside, 26% in San Bernardino, 23% in San Diego and 7% in Orange counties.

[alexandra.zavis@latimes.com](mailto:alexandra.zavis@latimes.com)

*Los Angeles Times staff writer Ruben Vives contributed to this report.*

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