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- [Archive](#)
- [Special Coverage](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Tune In](#)
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Millions of California Kids Missing Out on Meals During the Summer



Aaron Mendelson/KQED

Skyla Pang (left) and Janice Pang (right) eat at Oakland's Main Library.

Reporter: Aaron Mendelson

School's out for summer, and for some kids that can mean carefree summer days. But for many kids in California, summer means going hungry or eating unhealthily.

Thousands of schools, community centers and libraries in California serve kids meals in the summer -- for free. But they only reached 400,000 youth last July, about 1 in 5 children who qualify for free or reduced price lunch during the school year.

The "TeenZone" of Oakland's Main Library is one of the nearly 4,000 meal sites in California. Brian Boies manages the space, with features video games, Top 40 music and art projects -- in addition to stacks of books.

A few minutes after noon, Boies walks the around room and asks kids a question: "Would you like a lunch?"

Once he's got a count, he and a volunteer grab a cart. It's the kind of cart librarians use to re-shelve books and movies, but this one wheels around shrink-wrapped lunches. Boies collects them from a fridge in the library basement and heads back upstairs.

This afternoon, the library serves 42 lunches to kids under 18. About 20 of those kids eat in the TeenZone on the second floor.

Food Bank. That's where parents bring their younger kids.

Janice Pang, 11, is getting ready for sixth grade in the fall, and today she's here to enjoy the meal of a ham sandwich, celery, an apple and milk.

"It tastes really good," she says. Pang and her sister, 4, come here a few times a week.

They're here today with Wai Pang, their dad. He says the summer meals are a big help for his family.

To "prepare the lunch at home, we need to spend a lot of time," he said. "But if we come here, they just eat. It saves time and money."



Aaron Mendelson/KQED

A handful of federal programs feed kids during the summer, but a lot of families are missing out. About 2.3 million kids in California qualify for free or reduced price lunch during the school year. But only 413,000 kids ate free meals last July.

The Oakland library is one of nearly 3,800 sites across the state, tracked by the [California Department of Education](#). There are 100 in Oakland alone, and more than 450 in Los Angeles. But getting kids to the sites can be a challenge for families.

"When people look back on their summer experiences, they remember going to the park and playing," Tia Shimada, of the nonprofit California Food Policy Advocates, said. "That idealistic view of summer is not reality for millions of kids across our state."

A poster at Oakland's Main Library advertises the summer lunch program.

Shimada co-published [a report](#) on the "summer nutrition gap" last month, using data from the state's Department of Education. She found almost 2 million California children miss out on nutrition over

the summer.

The organization's Oakland office is just down the street from the main Library, in the city where the Black Panthers invented the concept of free breakfast in the 1960s.

"These summer meal programs are critical for students' health and for student development," Shimada said. "And if we want to see kids in California achieve, we have to make sure that they have access to nutritious meals year round."

That access suffered during California's budget shortfalls, as summer school programs that fed kids closed their doors. With them went millions of healthy lunches. According to past California Food Policy Advocates reports, summer meal programs reached half as many kids in 2013 as they did in 2002.

The issue isn't only about a lack of food, but also its quality. Shimada said youth may be "getting an unhealthy number of calories or calories that lack the quality of nutrition that they actually need."

Researchers [have found](#) unhealthy weight gain in kids during summers.

Librarian Brian Boies said the alternatives to lunch at the library aren't always healthy.

“Teens that would normally go to McDonald’s across the street are now coming here for a lunch,” he said, “and they and their parents can spend their money on something else.”

But summer meal programs struggle to get the word out. The USDA has experimented with EBT cards for summer food, trying to give families flexibility. A number of reports have found if kids don’t get the right food, or enough food, they’re more likely to fall behind once the school year begins.

- More: [Find summer meal service sites across the state \(Calif. Dept. of Education\)](#)

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