

Background

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) began as a 3-year pilot program in 1968 and was authorized as a permanent program in 1975 by an amendment to the National School Lunch Act (P.L. 94-105).¹ The SFSP is intended to ensure that low-income children continue to receive nutritious meals and snacks in the summer months when school is not in session. Through the program, approved sponsors, including local school districts, local government agencies, camps, or private nonprofit organizations, provide free meals to children in areas with concentrations of low-income children, and receive Federal reimbursement to assist with costs of preparing and serving meals at feeding sites.

SFSP sites must be located in low-income areas or serve groups with a majority of enrolled low-income children. The eligibility threshold is defined in law as areas in which at least 50 percent of the children come from families with incomes at or below 185 percent of the Federal poverty level, making them eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Children enrolled in an activity program at an SFSP site receive free meals if at least half of the enrolled children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Camps only receive payments for meals served to children who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals.

Description of the Pennsylvania Pilot

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-265) authorized a pilot to operate in rural Pennsylvania during the summers of 2005 and 2006.² The purpose was to test whether lowering the site eligibility threshold from 50 percent to 40 percent would increase the number of children participating in the program. The legislation directed USDA, through the Food

and Nutrition Service (FNS), to evaluate the impact of the pilot eligibility criterion on: (1) the number of sponsors operating sites that offer meals under the SFSP, (2) the number of sites offering meals through SFSP, (3) the geographic locations of sites, (4) services provided at the sites, and (5) other factors influencing participation.

Method

Data collection included site visits to the Pennsylvania Department of Education and 8 of 133 rural sponsors operating in 2004; mail, phone, and electronic surveys of 74 rural site sponsors and 147 rural site supervisors active in 2006; 100 randomly selected monitor reports of rural sites active in 2006; and collection of administrative data from the Pennsylvania's Child Nutrition Program Electronic Application and Reimbursement System (PEARS)³ for 2004-2006. The numbers of sponsors, sites, and participating children were compared across time from the summer of 2004 to the summer of 2006 for the pilot (40-percent) and 50-percent sites. Geographic analysis was conducted, consisting of analyses of distances children travel to sites and locations of sites relative to population centers and poverty. We refer to sites as 50-percent sites if they meet the more stringent 50-percent threshold; and as 40-percent sites if they fail to meet the 50-percent threshold, but do meet the 40-percent threshold.

Findings

Number of Sponsors

- ❖ **During the 2 years of the pilot, 72 new sponsors began administering rural sites.** In 2005 (the first pilot year), about one-third (10 of 31) of the new rural sponsors were sponsors of 40-percent sites. In 2006, 7 of the 41 new rural sponsors (17 percent) were administering 40-percent sites.

¹ National School Lunch Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-105, Section 13, October 7, 1975: 89 Stat. 515)

² The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 (P.L. 108-265, Section 13, June 30, 2004; 118 Stat. 749)

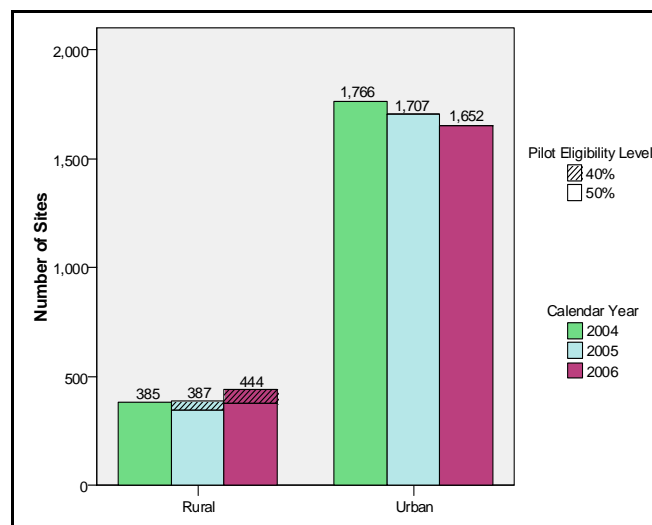
³ <http://www.pears.ed.state.pa.us>

- ❖ **Pre-existing SFSP rural sponsors also began administering sites meeting the 40-percent threshold.** In 2005, 10 SFSP sponsors already in the program added at least one 40-percent site.
- ❖ **There is a great amount of fluctuation in and out of the SFSP for sponsors administering rural sites.** Although 72 new SFSP rural sponsors were added during the pilot period, 44 sponsors no longer were administering rural sites, resulting in a net gain of 28 rural sponsors during that 2-year period. Of the 20 rural sponsors serving at least one 40-percent site in 2005, 16 continued serving 40-percent sites in 2006.
- ❖ **The characteristics of rural sponsors serving 40-percent sites are similar to traditional sponsors.** Rural sponsors not administering residential camps are mostly school districts (49 percent) and non-profit organizations (44 percent). This is equally true of pilot (40-percent) and 50-percent sponsors.

Number of Sites

- ❖ **The number of rural SFSP sites in Pennsylvania increased by 15 percent while the number of urban SFSP sites declined by 6 percent during the pilot.** We cannot say how much of this increase was due to the pilot and how much to other factors. All rural sites in Pennsylvania, including residential camps, increased from 385 in 2004 to 444 in 2006, and urban sites decreased from 1,766 to 1,652 (figure 1).
- ❖ **The number of new SFSP sites serving rural areas meeting the 40-percent threshold increased each year.** Forty new 40-percent sites were added in 2005 while 67 new pilot sites were added in 2006. They represented 10 percent of all rural sites in 2005 and 15 percent in 2006. One fourth of the 40-percent sites in 2005 had been SFSP sites previously that would not have qualified based on area eligibility had the thresholds not changed to 40 percent.

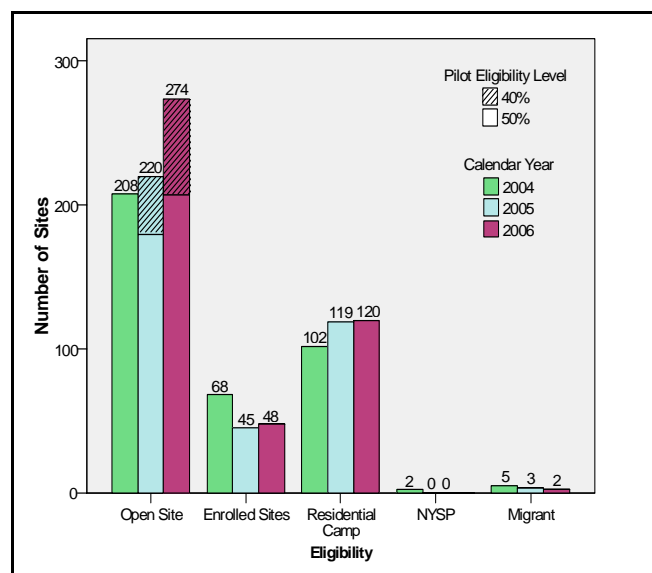
Figure 1 – The Number of Rural Sites and Urban Sites, 2004 - 2006



Source: The Pennsylvania Rural Area Pilot Evaluation, 2007, Administrative Data, PEARS Database

- ❖ **All of the new rural 40-percent SFSP sites were open sites (where eligibility is based on area rather than children enrolled).** Open sites increased from 208 in 2004 to 274 in 2006 due in part to the increase in pilot sites. However, enrolled sites decreased from 68 in 2004 to 48 in 2006 (figure 2).

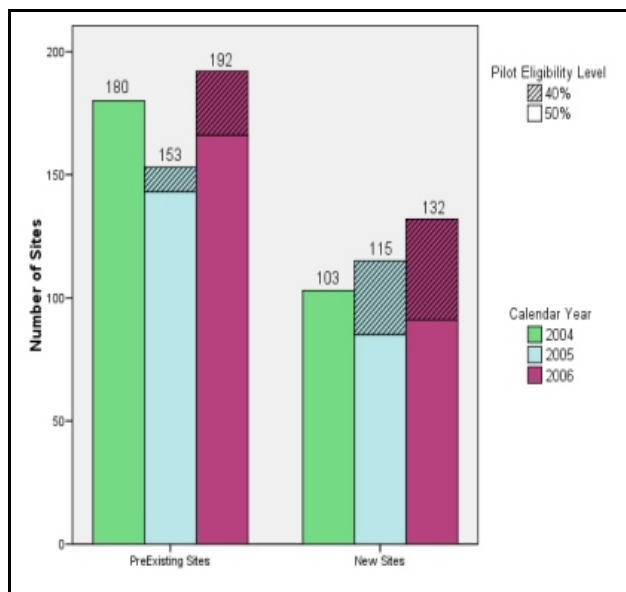
Figure 2 – Eligibility Types of Rural Sites, 2004 - 2006



Source: The Pennsylvania Rural Area Pilot Evaluation, 2007, Administrative Data, PEARS Database

- ❖ **The total number of rural SFSP sites in Pennsylvania, excluding residential camp sites, fluctuates from year to year.** Pennsylvania SFSP sites retained from year to year decreased from 180 in 2004 to 153 in 2005, but increased to 192 in 2006 (see figure 3). New rural sites increased from 103 in 2004 to 115 in 2005, and then to 132 in 2006.

Figure 3 – New Versus Preexisting Rural Sites, 2004 - 2006



Source: The Pennsylvania Rural Area Pilot Evaluation, 2007 Administrative Data, PEARS Database

Meals Provided

- ❖ **Almost all rural SFSP sites provide at least lunch.** In 2006, 90 percent of sites served lunch, 28 percent served breakfast, 21 percent served snacks, and 1 percent served dinner. About two-thirds offered one meal, almost one-third offered two meals or a meal and a snack, and 4 percent offered three meals.

Effect of Geographic Location on sites

- ❖ **Despite increases in the number of rural sponsors and sites, there are still areas of rural poverty not served by SFSP.** The areas without SFSP sites are the most rural areas, which may not have enough density of children to easily establish and maintain an SFSP site.

- ❖ **Most sites serve children who live in close proximity to the site.** Sponsors of both 40-percent and 50-percent sites reported that over 80 percent of the children came from within a 1-mile radius of a site.

Effect of Ancillary Services Provided at the Sites on SFSP Participation

- ❖ **Activities provided by SFSP sites are important elements in attracting children to the sites.** Among the activities frequently found at SFSP sites are arts and crafts, structured play, playgrounds, sports, and academic enrichment. About 39 percent of sites reported activities and meals as equally important. Another 32 percent reported activities alone and an additional 19 percent reported meals alone as the most important reasons for children's attendance.

Other Factors Influencing SFSP Participation

- ❖ **Sponsors expressed concerns about SFSP.** The concerns most frequently heard were: low reimbursements, too many reporting requirements, and the short duration of the pilot – 2 years only.
- ❖ **Transportation remains an issue.** Most sponsors and site administrators reported that transportation is very important to the success of SFSP in rural areas. Typically, children walk, ride bikes, or receive rides.

Conclusion

In conclusion, lowering the eligibility threshold to 40 percent had the desirable impact of increasing the number of sponsors and sites. The 15-percent growth in 50-percent and 40-percent rural SFSP sites and the addition of 17 new sponsors which had at least one 40-percent site during the pilot are indications that lowering the eligibility threshold from 50 percent to 40 percent has the potential to increase rural SFSP meal service to poor children in rural areas. Those sponsors and sites serving rural areas close to the 50-percent threshold may be more inclined to continue serving children in future years knowing that they may be eligible at the 40-percent threshold, should the legislation be extended.

Full report: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/oane/>

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