

Child Hunger: How School Nutrition Feeds Children Beyond School Meals



TJC ANTI-HUNGER TEAM

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AGENDA

- Introductions
- Child Hunger in TN Overview
- 2024 Vanderbilt Child Health Poll
- No Kid Hungry Back to School Report: Original Data On the Importance of School Meals
- Next Steps

29 YEARS OF TJC

For over 29 years, the Tennessee Justice Center has been standing with vulnerable Tennessee families and helping them access basic necessities of life.

- Individual case work
- Leveraging our knowledge
- Moving systems



NEED HELP?

TJC Program Assistance:

- SNAP
- WIC
- Summer EBT
- TennCare

TJC Resources:

- [Inquiry Form for Free Help](#)
- [Tools and Trainings](#)



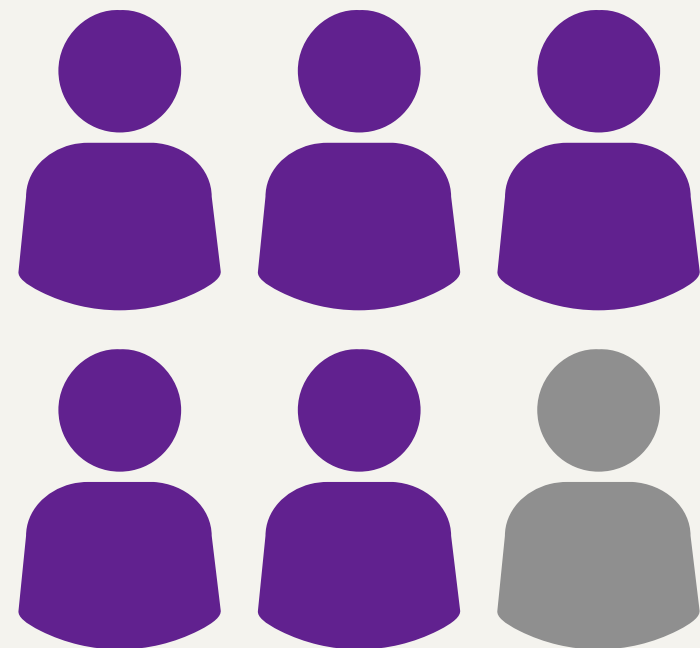
TJC ANTI-HUNGER ADVOCACY

End hunger in Tennessee by protecting and strengthening the federal nutrition programs: SNAP, WIC, Child Nutrition Programs

- Improve access and remove barriers to programs
- Advocate for solutions to systemic issues
- Educate and inform
- Provide policy expertise
- Direct client work



HUNGER IMPACTS TENNESSEANS



**1 IN 6 PEOPLE FACE
HUNGER
in Tennessee**



**1 IN 5 CHILDREN FACE
HUNGER
in Tennessee**



SCHOOL MEALS REDUCE CHILD HUNGER

- 308,920 Tennessee kids are food insecure.
- Providing school meals for all improves food security among all students and their families.
- School meals ensure students are hunger-free and ready to learn!





SCHOOL MEALS TN PARTICIPATION DATA

For the 2023-2024 school year:

- 432,260 Tennessee kids received free lunch
- 22,411 kids received reduced-price lunch
- 180,406 kids received a paid lunch



Jordan Wasser
Senior Program Manager
Vanderbilt University Medical Center



2024 Vanderbilt Child Health Poll (VCHP)

Food Insecurity (FI) Overview



Agenda

A thin green line extends from the left side of the 'Agenda' header. In the bottom-left corner, there are several overlapping geometric shapes: a teal triangle pointing right, a yellow triangle pointing down-right, and a green triangle pointing down-left.

About the Poll

2024 FI Poll data

NO MORE FI Study

2025 Poll Planning

Community Partner Questions

What is the Vanderbilt Child Health Poll?



About the Poll

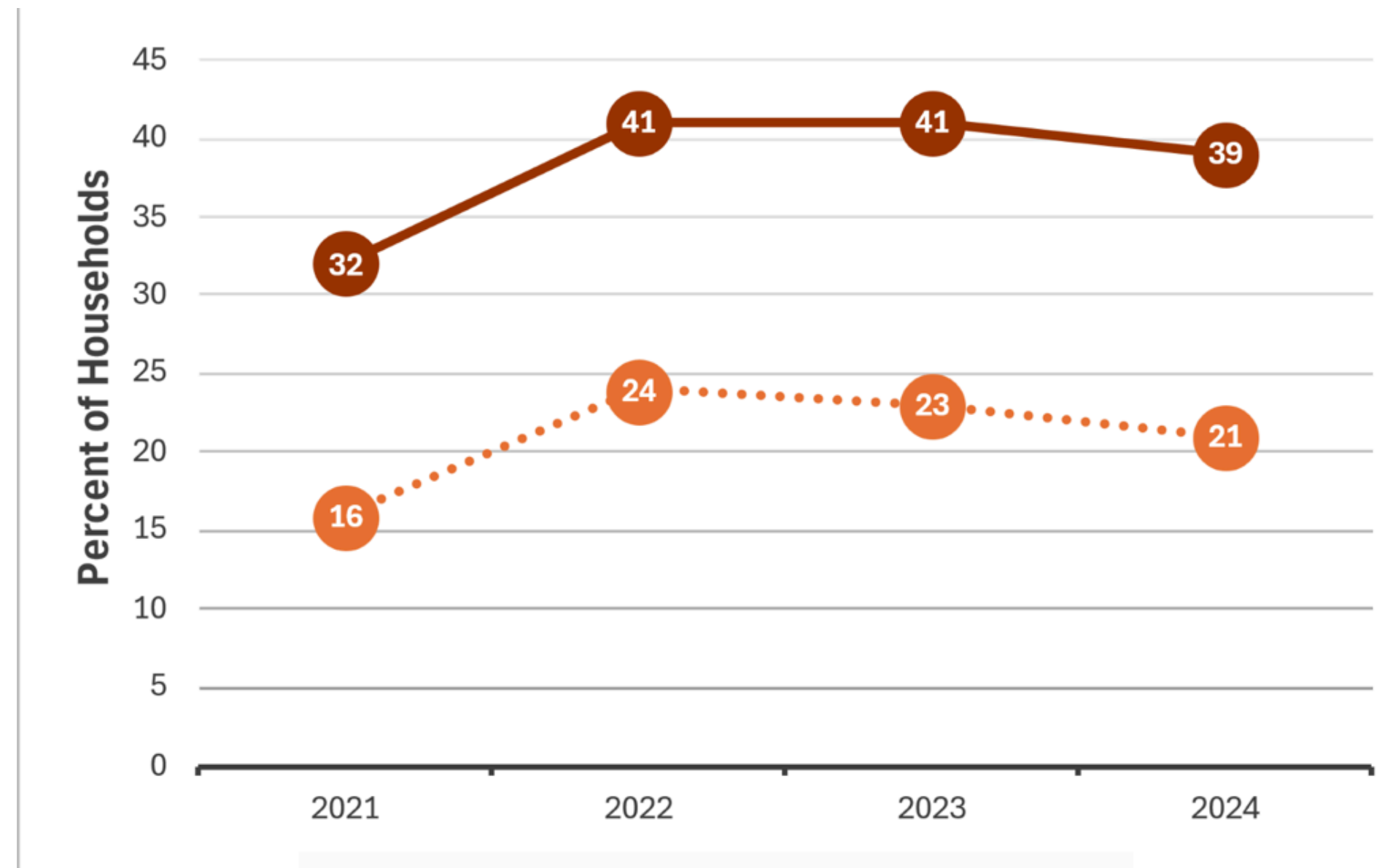


- The VCHP is conducted annually.
- Its purpose is to gauge parents' concerns about a wide range of topics.
- Data is collected from a representative sample of Tennessee parents across the three grand divisions of the state- west, middle, and east.
- In 2024, roughly 80% of all parents polled identified as registered voters
- Offers valuable information to a wide range of stakeholders across sectors.



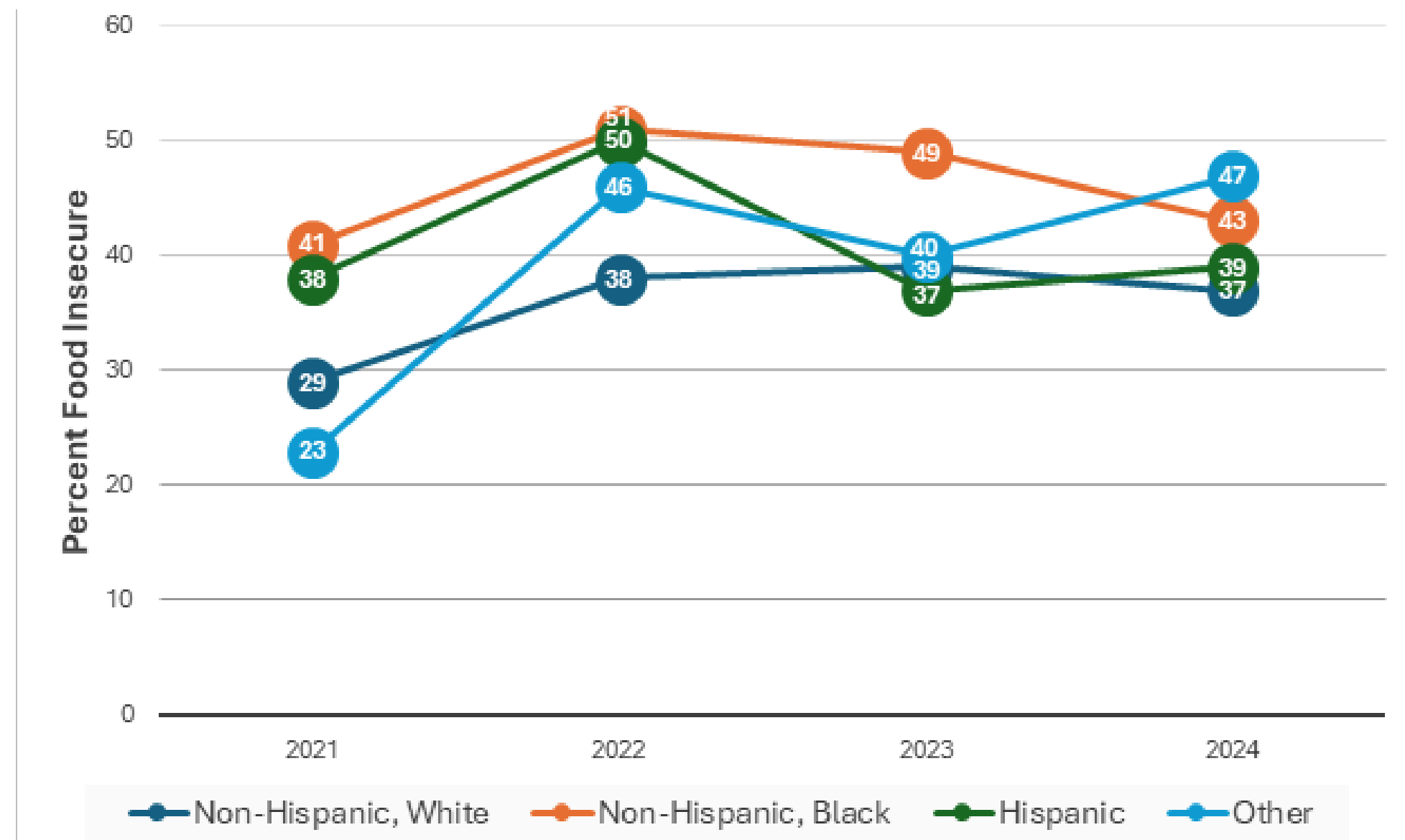
The Data

Food Security Over Time



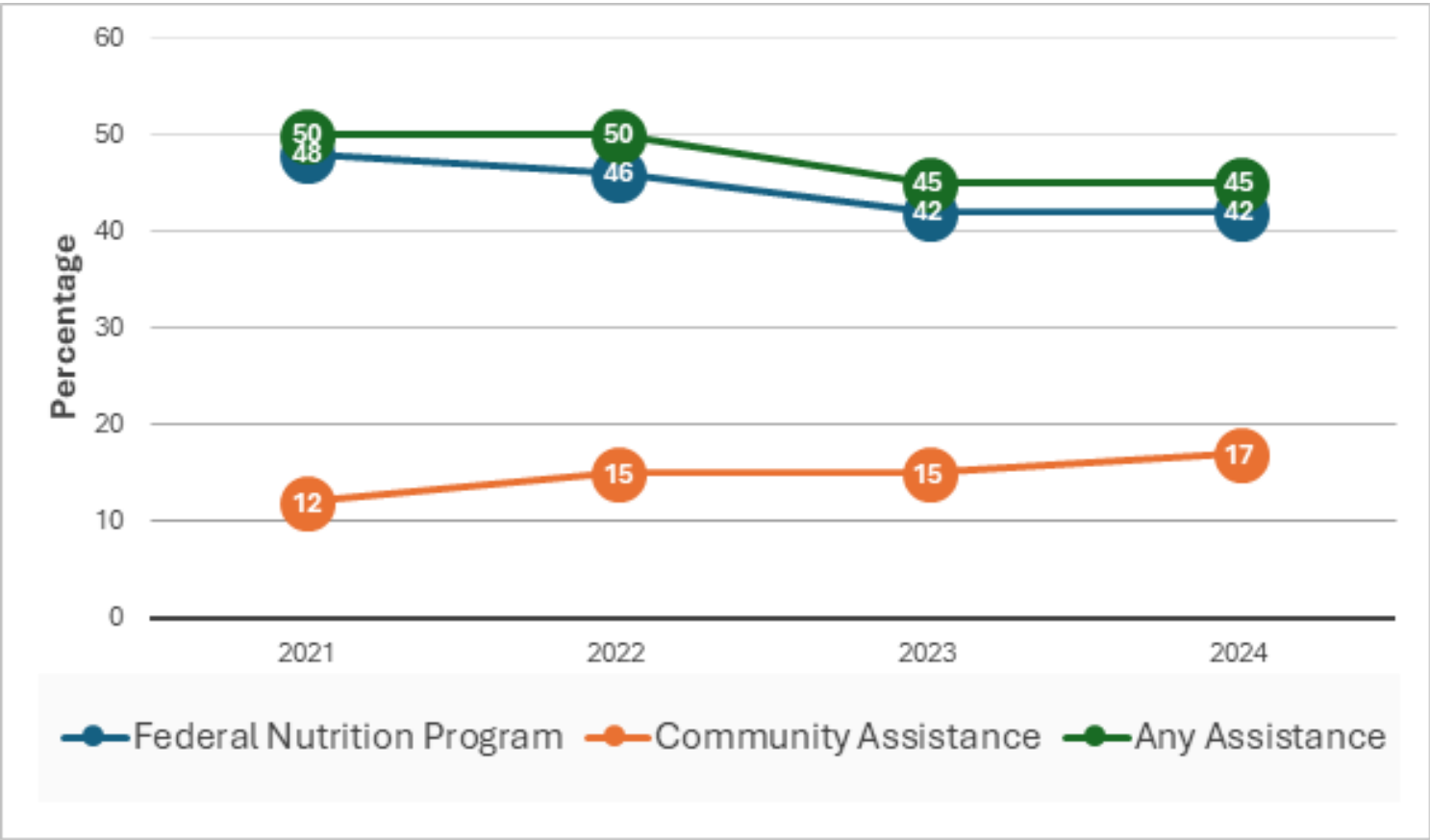
3.1 Any Food Insecurity and Very Low Food Security, 2021-24

Food Insecurity by Race and Ethnicity

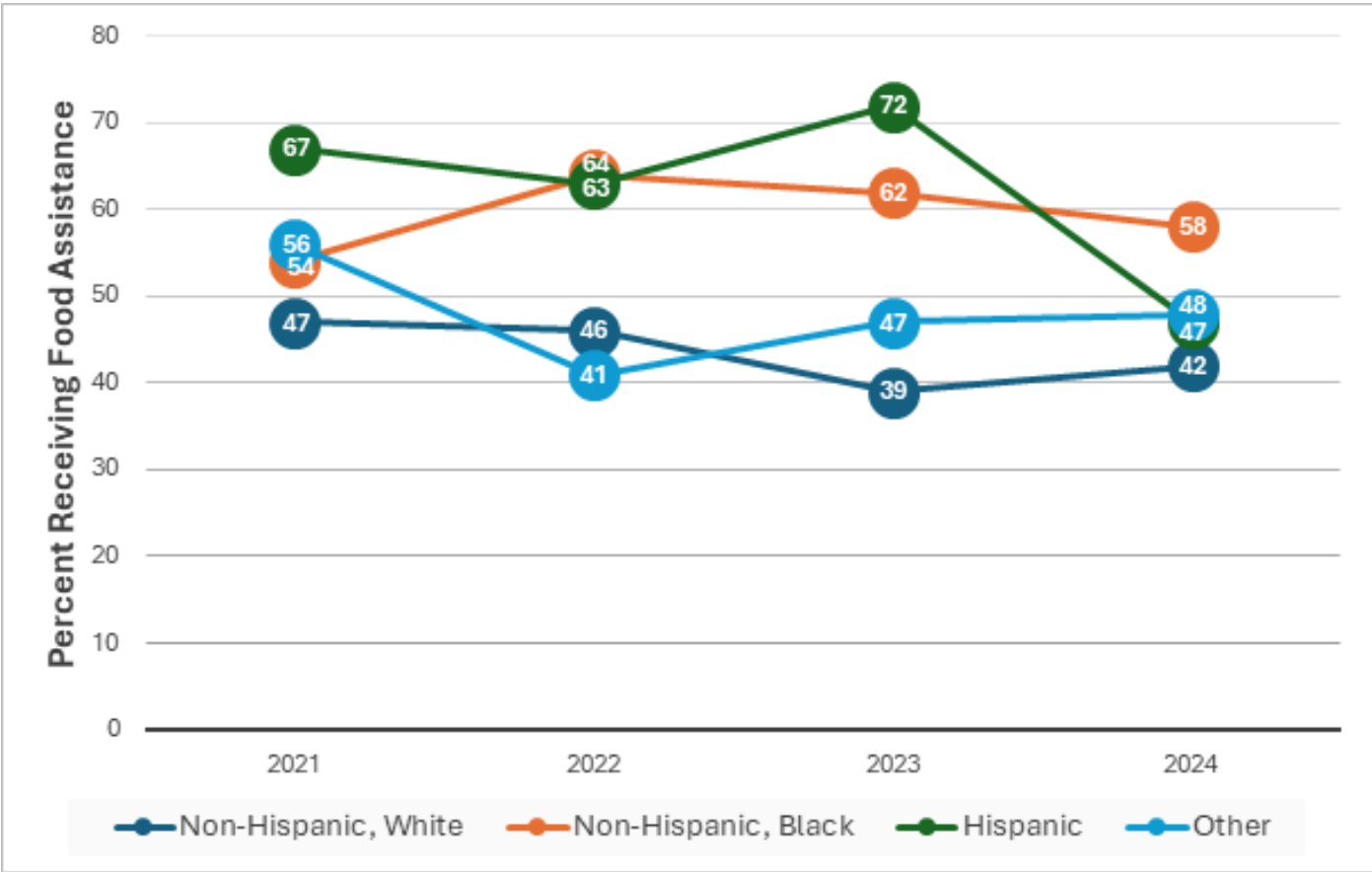


3.2 Any Food Insecurity by Race and Ethnicity, 2021-24

Food Assistance Program Use

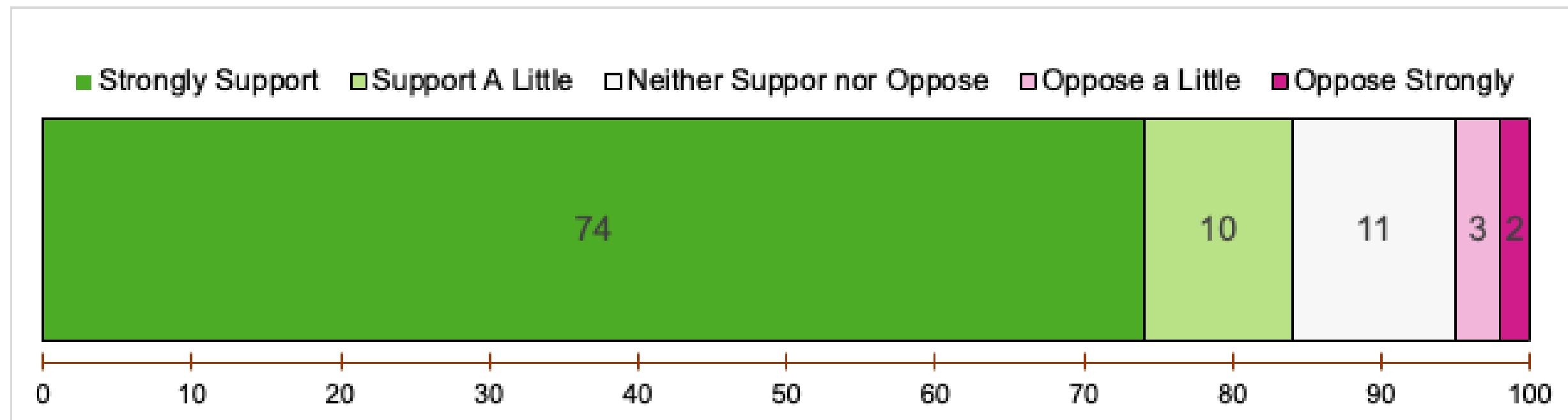


3.3 Food Assistance Program Use, 2021-24



3.4.1 Food Assistance Program use by Race and Ethnicity, 2021-24

Support for Free School Meals



3.5 Tennessee Parents' Support for Universal Free School Meals

Support for Free School Meals

Universal School Meal (USM)



IMPROVING academic achievement, attendance, and student behavior at school;



DECREASING childhood food insecurity;



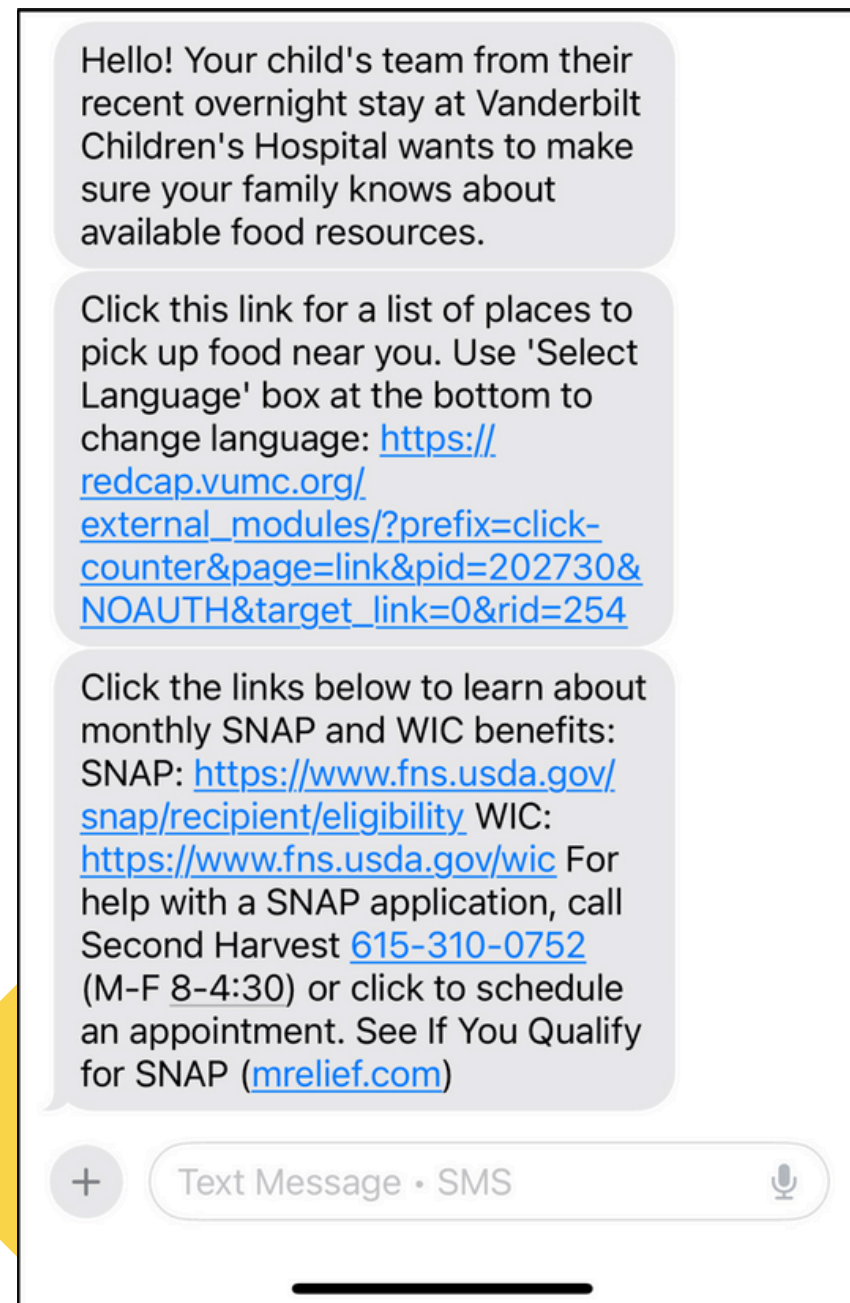
EATING more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and milk; and



REDUCING visits to the school nurse.

Cristin.Fritz@vumc.org

Novel Mobile Resource for Food Insecurity Study (NO MORE FI)



Is the addition of the Text Connect message after discharge **more effective** in connecting caregivers to food resources than our current resource provision approach alone?

- Pragmatic Randomized Controlled Trial among 500 English and Spanish-speaking caregivers with FI during admission

2025 VCHP



The 2025 VCHP is currently underway!

Community Partner Questions



- What kinds of resources or interventions would you like to see prioritized in response to these findings?
- What are the biggest barriers you see families facing around food access and nutrition in the communities you serve?
- If we could create one tool or product from this poll that would help your organization the most, what would it be?
- As we look to strengthen our dissemination approaches, we'd appreciate hearing from you. What methods have you found most helpful in getting information out broadly and effectively?



Thank you

Jordan Wasser

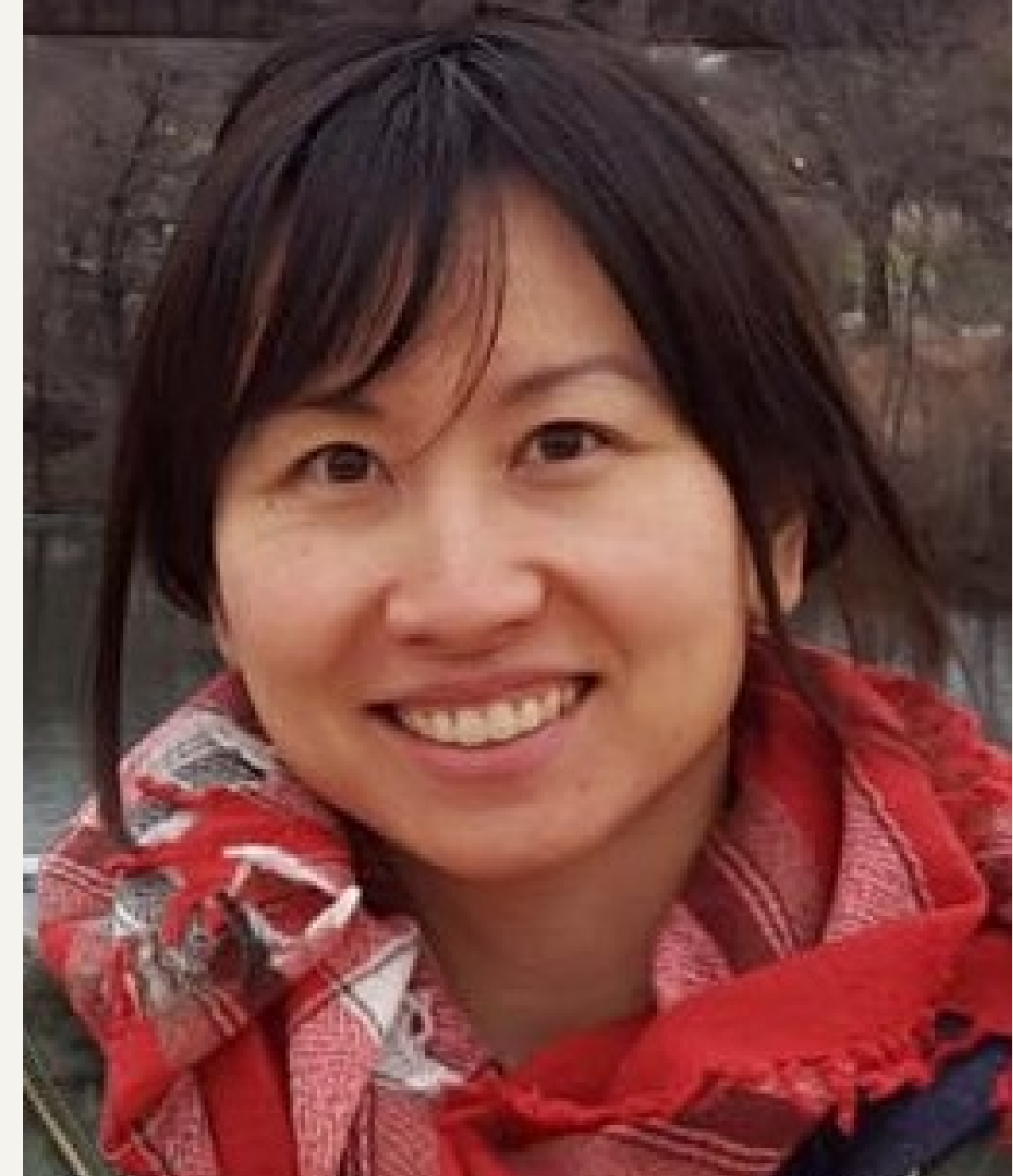
Jordan.wasser@vumc.org

<https://pediatrics.vumc.org/child-health-poll>

Karen Wong

Associate Director of Research

No Kid Hungry





No Kid Hungry Back to School Report: Original Data On the Importance of School Meals

October 16, 2025

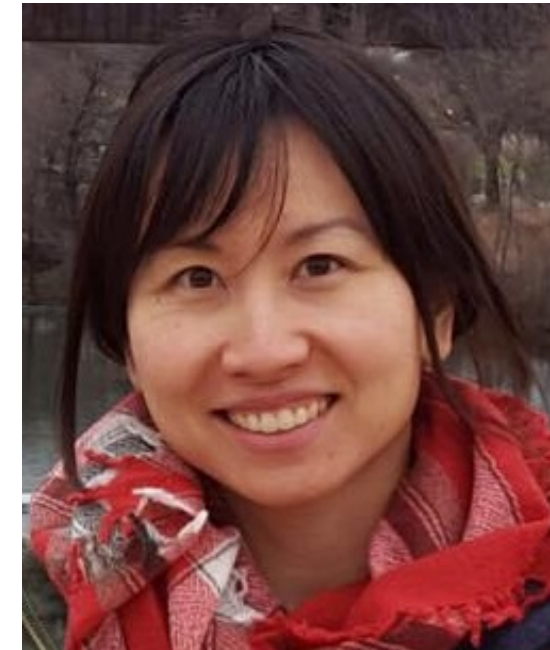


Project Leads



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Communication - No Kid Hungry



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Associate Director, Research -
No Kid Hungry

2025 Back to School Report Findings



Research Overview

No Kid Hungry conducted a national survey to gain a deeper understanding of the hopes and concerns parents and caregivers have about the upcoming school year and the vital role school meals play for kids and families both inside and outside of the classroom.

- **Why:** For many kids, summer break is the hungriest time of year when kids lose access to free and reduced-price school meal programs. Back-to-school time marks a big moment in the year for kids and families, where classes are back in session and school meals are accessible once again.
- **Key Takeaway:** As more families are struggling to put food on the table for their kids due to rising costs of food and a worsening job market, our national survey underscores how nutrition programs like school meals are an essential lifeline for families, providing financial and stress relief and ensuring kids have access to the most important school supply this school year: Food.



How Data Was Collected

Partnered with Marketing for Change

Survey research:

- Online survey in July 2025
- Nationally representative sample: 1,245 parents whose children eat free or reduced price school meals ($\leq 185\%$ FPL)

In-depth interviews:

- 75-minute interviews in July 2025
- 5 parents from across the country whose children eat free or reduced price school meals

Audience Highlight: Latino Segment

While 1 in 4 of all surveyed parents reported concerns that their child will not be able to eat meals or receive food at school coming into the 2025 school year, Latino parents were even more concerned than the national average.

School meal programs shutting down entirely, as well as eligibility, are among the top concerns cited.

One Latino parent described fears of *"increased hunger, which can lead to difficulty concentrating in school, behavioral problems, and decreased academic achievement,"* if the programs were to shut down or their family lost eligibility. Across Latino segments, parents consistently reported increased financial challenges over the last 12 months, as well as the overall benefits of school meal programs to their kids' learning and socialization.

Another Latino parent cited the programs' benefits to quality family time. **For example, losing access to school meals would force them to work extra jobs and they would lose out on time with their kids.**



Key Findings - The Economic Baseline

Families are struggling to put food on the table for their kids.

- More than 1 in 4 families reported experiencing the loss of a job, and 4 out of 10 parents reported a worsened financial situation.

- 2 in 3 parents worry food prices will continue to go up throughout the year.

Parents were worried about running out of food during the summer break & having to make tough trade-offs between food and other essentials.

- More than 1 in 3 parents reporting that they worried about their households running out of food during the summer break.
- 40% reported being worried about having to make tough trade-offs like choosing between paying emergency bills and purchasing healthy food for their children over the past year.

41%

of parents report that their families' financial situation is worse than it was 1 year ago

70%

of parents cite inflation and rising food costs as the primary factor impacting their family's finances

55%

of parents reported that rising food costs due to inflation has made it difficult to buy all of the food they would normally buy

Hear From Parents:



It feels like no matter how much you earn, nothing kind of remains. It's living paycheck by paycheck. When you are on a tight budget, a meals from school helps you pass through that difficult phase."

—Georgia father of one

*"Making ends meet is the biggest challenge right now. We both work with five kids in the house. It's a stretch every month to meet everybody's needs. It's tough in this economy. And we do have concerns about feeding them. We watch our dollars a lot closer, but **there are times when we can barely scrape things together to make a meal.**"*

—Colorado mother of five

*"What makes it hard for me now is the rise in prices. We are real budget-friendly, and so that kind of helps. As far as [grocery] shopping, I only try to get what we really need. Driving gas is really high, so I try to minimize where I'm going. It's just certain things that we really cut back on doing. **You just gotta know what you can actually go without and still be okay.**"*

—North Carolina mother of five



The high prices in food has affected a lot of things because you can do without clothes—you can have like five outfits and just wear those every day—but you have to have food every single day. That's something you can't go without. So you raise those prices, you have no choice but to pay. But that money is coming out of something else that you need. It's a big financial burden."

—North Carolina mother of five

Key Findings - School Meal Impact

Back-to-School marks the return of school meals- an essential lifeline for kids & families

- Nearly half of parents say their children may not have food to eat at school some days if the school meal program did not exist.

School meals support academic success and attendance, setting kids up for brighter futures.

- 83% of parents agree their children have a hard time concentrating when hungry. Having a full belly ensures that kids have the mental clarity necessary to learn. 88% report that school meals help their child(ren) focus and do better in school.
- 3 out of 5 parents report that school meals motivate their children to attend school regularly. And some parents report increased extracurricular engagement as well.



Hear From Parents:

*The other best thing about the lunch program at school—what I have seen in my daughter—is that it gives her the time to interact with kids in her class better. When they sit down for lunch together—**everyone is having the same lunch—it gives them that place to interact in a better way.***

—Georgia father of one

“When they’re hungry, they’re not very focused. They’re irritated, there’s more arguing—it becomes a very tense environment. ‘I just want to know what I’m eating next,’ and that’s all they can think about. Once they’ve had a nice lunch, they’re coming to ask questions; their mind is more open to things. They’re not blurred from hunger.”

—North Carolina mother of five



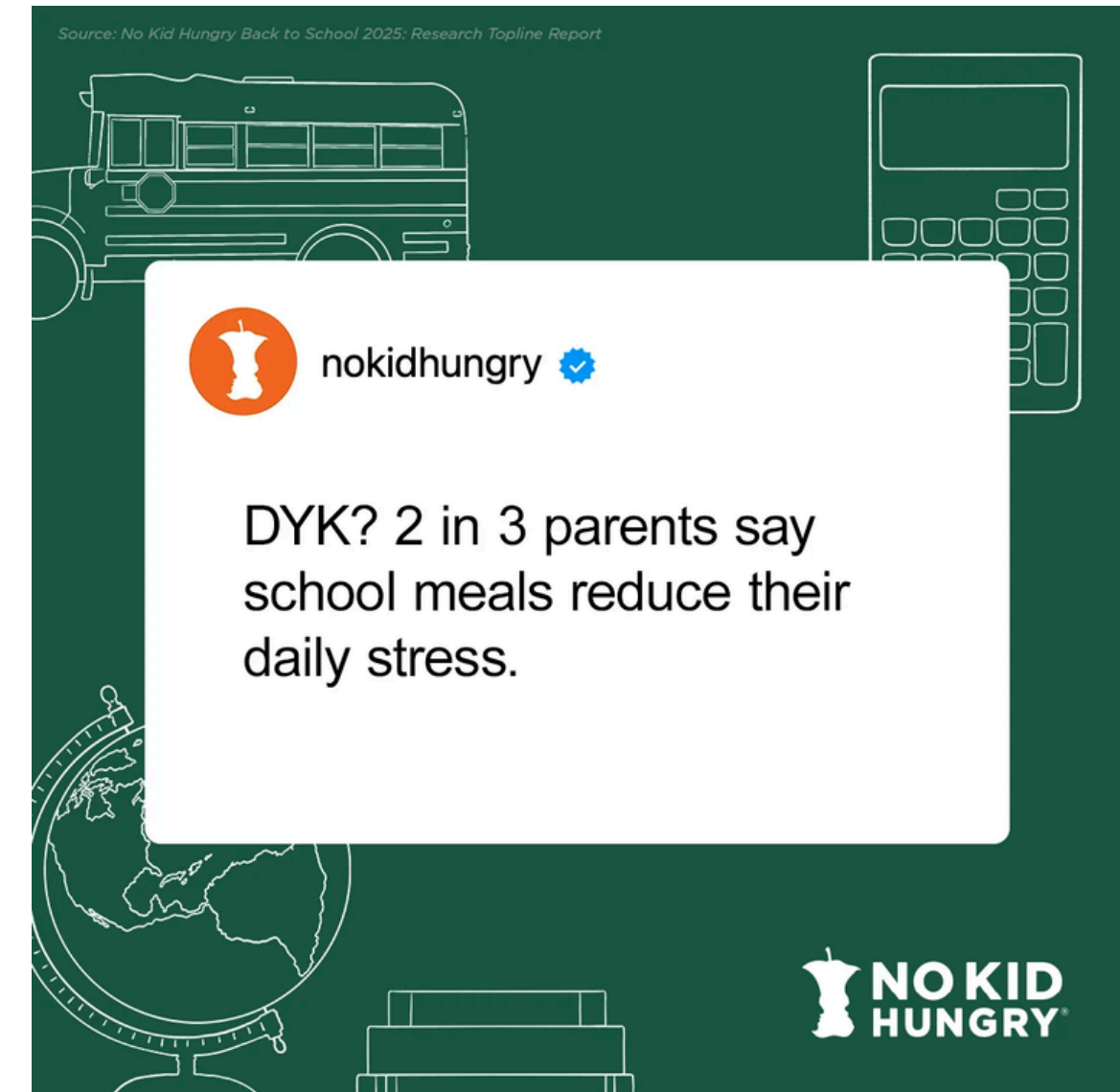
*School lunch is a blessing for my daughter **because it keeps her more balanced and concentrated.** Once she’s well-fed, her activities, like the way she answers questions and tackles some of the math problems, improve drastically.”*

—Georgia father of one

Key Findings - Ripple Effects Of School Meals

School meal programs build stronger families by reducing mental and financial stress for parents.

- Over 3 in 5 parents share that school meals are extremely valuable for their family. For many parents, this value can come in the form of mental health benefits and the ability to be more present with their kids.
- While nearly half of parents believe the stress they feel interferes with their parenting, even more – 2 in 3 – report that school meals help reduce it.



Hear From Parents:

"If we didn't have that buffer, it's going to be very tight and kind of depressing because you're not able to provide them with things which many of the kids in her school are able to do. That kind of also may demotivate her."

—Georgia father of one



*[The financial pressure] just weighs you down, it takes a lot of energy out of you. Less time for the kids, less focus for the kids, more focus on trying to make things work. **It's a bit freeing to not be weighed down with stress so much. We're able to better live your lives because we're [participating in] the programs.***

—Colorado mother of five



It makes a better community all around by having people more involved—they feel more a part of society. *They feel more like they belong and less like a dropout. They care more about their community, they're more willing to volunteer to be involved, to help out when needed."*

—Colorado mother of five

*"[Her mood] also affects us... and we react to her. We get upset with her. So it definitely helps. **It takes a big amount of stress from life away and keeps you more composed in doing things.**"*

—Georgia father of one

*"Having access [to meal programs] allows me to feel confident to get through my day, living a normal life not worried about food. I would be affected quite a bit if we didn't have access. **We would be more withdrawn in the community overall. I don't think we would be as interactive with the kids. We would be in depression, seriously.** If you're depressed—it affects going out in the community and being involved in things."*

—Colorado mother of five

Your Reactions

Feel free to share your thoughts in the chat box:

**Thinking about your community, what resonates?
Is anything surprising?**

2025 Back to School Report Resources



Shareable Resources

- Report English
- Report Spanish
- Blog English
- Blog Spanish
- Social Media Toolkit

WHO WE ARE

WHAT WE DO

WAYS YOU CAN HELP

PARTNERS

FUNDRAISE

DONATE

School Meals a Lifeline as 1 in 3 Parents Struggle This Summer

POSTED BY: NO KID HUNGRY | SEPTEMBER 4, 2025

New research by No Kid Hungry ([see full report](#)) reveals an overwhelming number of parents are struggling to put food on the table for their kids. This is especially true during the summer months when kids lose access to many essential free and reduced [school meals](#). Survey responses from more than 1,200 parents reveal that the return to school is a relief for those struggling to make ends meet and an essential tool for kids to thrive in school.

40% of Parents Worry Food Will Run Out Before the End of the Month

Carol, a mother of five in Colorado, described her family's situation: "Making ends meet is the biggest challenge right now. We both work with five kids in the house. It's just a stretch every month to meet everybody's needs." She said the rising cost of groceries has forced her family to make hard choices. Some weeks, they "barely scrape things together to make a meal."

Carol wasn't alone. **70% of parents cited inflation and rising food prices as their primary financial concern, and 55% reported difficulty purchasing their usual food supplies.** As prices continue to increase, the income of many is not keeping up. **4 out of 10 parents reported a worsened financial situation** compared to last year, and more than **1 in 4 lost their job.**

A father in Georgia talked about these challenges, "It feels like no matter how much you earn, nothing kind of remains. It's living paycheck by paycheck. When you are on a tight budget, a meal from a school helps you pass through that difficult phase."

School meals provide more than relief; they are lifelines for many families. "There's not as much stress on the finances," Carol shared. "We're better able to live our lives because we're in these programs."

Interview with Carol

Watch later

Share

Food Is The Most Important School Supply

Toolkit | 2025

No Kid Hungry Back-to-School Campaign

every kid deserves a great school year.

FOOD is the most important school supply

Parents are working harder to put food on the table—rising food prices and a worsening job market have made keeping up with kids' meals, and their overall health, a challenge.

For many kids, summer is the hungriest time of year as access to school-provided meals becomes more limited. The back-to-school season marks the return of these essential meals and a point of relief for parents and caregivers who balance steadily rising costs of living with the need to provide nutritious meals for their family. For those families, and the millions of others who are one unexpected expense from needing free or reduced-price school meals, federal nutrition programs are a vital resource that consistently make kids healthier and families happier. According to the research, over the past year, more than 1 in 4 families has experienced the loss of a job, and 4 out of 10 parents report a worsened financial situation. The result? **More than 1 in 3 parents worried about running out of food this summer.**

41%

of parents report that their families' financial situation is worse than it was 1 year ago

70%

of parents cite inflation and rising food costs as the primary factor impacting their family's finances

55%

of parents reported that rising food costs due to inflation has made it difficult to buy all of the food they would normally buy

Additional Assets

- [English Press Release](#)
- [Spanish Press Release](#)
- [Infographic English](#)
- [Infographic Spanish](#)



Los padres tienen dificultades para poner comida en la mesa



Más de **1 de cada 4 familias** informaron haber sufrido la pérdida de un trabajo. **4 de cada 10 padres** reportaron que su situación financiera había empeorado. **2 de cada 3 padres** temen que los precios de los alimentos sigan subiendo durante el año.

Esto resultó en que



Más de **1 de cada 3 padres** se preocuparon por la escasez de alimentos en sus hogares durante las vacaciones de verano.



40% se preocupó por tener que tomar decisiones difíciles, como elegir entre pagar facturas de emergencia y comprar alimentos saludables para sus hijos durante el último año.



Casi el 50% de los padres indicó que, si no existiera el programa de comidas escolares, sus hijos podrían no tener que comer en la escuela algunos días.

El efecto dominó: los programas de comidas escolares fortalecen a las familias



Más de **3 de cada 5 padres** opinan que las comidas escolares son sumamente valiosas para su familia.



Aunque casi la mitad de los padres creen que el estrés que sienten interfiere en su labor como padres, un porcentaje aún mayor—**2 de cada 3**—afirma que las comidas escolares ayudan a reducirlo.

Las comidas escolares preparan a los niños para el éxito académico



83% de los padres coincide en que a sus hijos les cuesta concentrarse cuando tienen hambre.



88% afirma que las comidas escolares ayudan a sus hijos a concentrarse y a rendir mejor en la escuela.



3 de cada 5 reporta que las comidas escolares motivan a sus hijos a asistir a la escuela con regularidad.

Fuente: Informe de Regreso a Clases No Kid Hungry 2025



Parents are struggling to put food on the table



More than **1 in 4 families** reported experiencing the loss of a job. **4 out of 10 parents** reported a worsened financial situation. **2 in 3 parents** worry food prices will continue to go up throughout the year.

Which resulted in



More than **1 in 3 parents** worried about their households running out of food during the summer break.



40% worried about having to make tough trade-offs life choosing between paying emergency bills and purchasing healthy food for their children over the past year.



Nearly 50% of parents saying that their children may not have food to eat at school some days if the school meal program did not exist.

The Ripple Effect: School meal programs build stronger families



Over **3 in 5 parents** share that school meals are extremely valuable to their family.



While nearly half of parents believe the stress they feel interferes with their parenting, even more—**2 in 3 parents**—report that school meals help reduce it.

Schools Meals set kids up for academic success



83% of parents agree their children have a hard time concentrating when hungry.



88% of parents report school meals help their children do better in school.



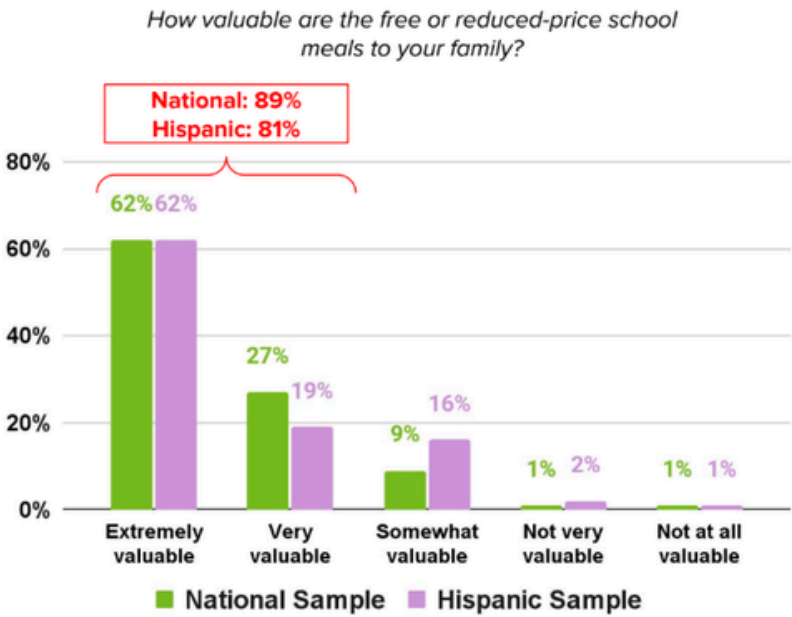
3 out of 5 parents report that school meals motivate their children to attend school regularly.

Source: 2025 No Kid Hungry Back-to-School Report

Topline Data

Source: Marketing for Change

Vast majority of parents find the school lunch program to be valuable

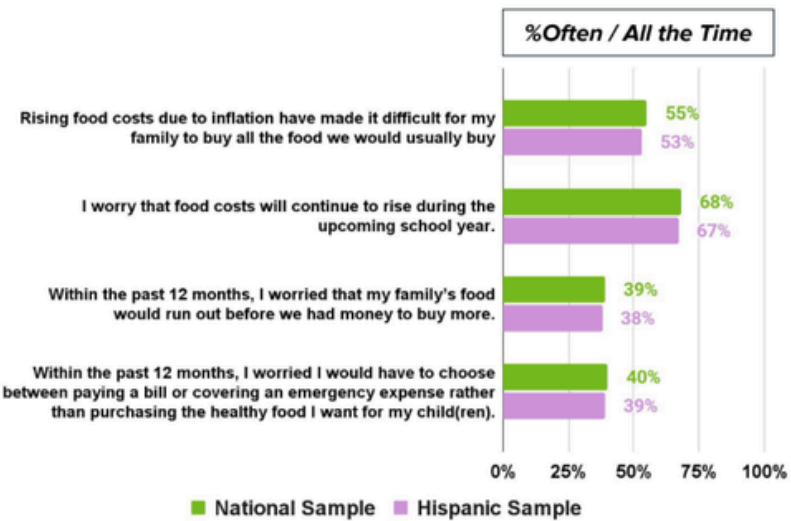


Over 3 in 5 parents believe the school lunch program is extremely valuable for their family.

Beliefs about the value of school meals did not differ by race-ethnicity, level of education, or receiving SNAP benefits.

Back to School Survey, 2025
(national sample: n = 1245, Hispanic sample: n = 386)

2 in 3 parents fear prices will continue to rise during the school year



Over 1 in 3 parents worried their families might:

- run out of food before they had money to buy more
- OR
- have to choose between paying an emergency expense or purchasing healthy food.

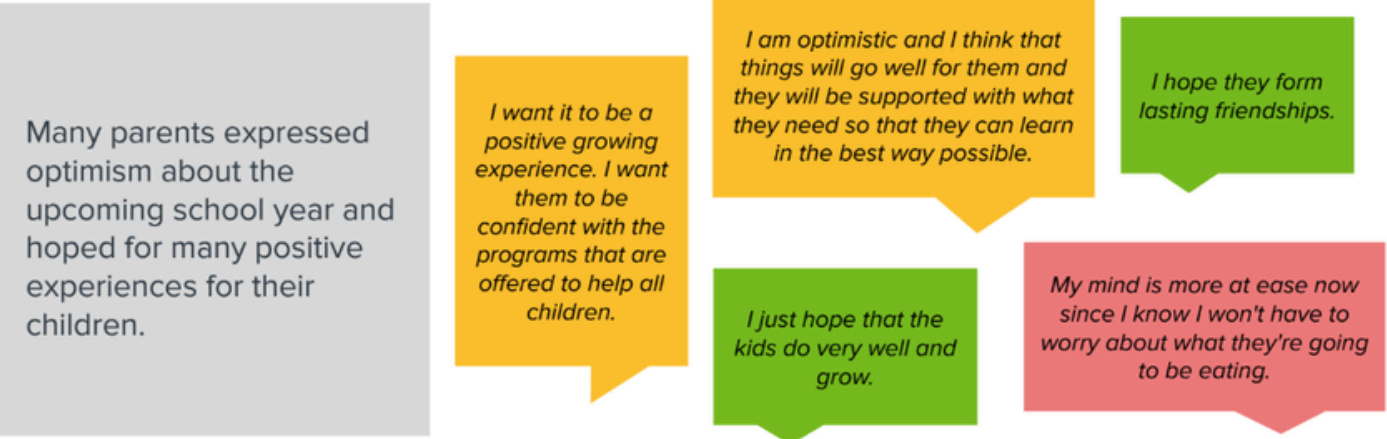
Parents on SNAP dealt with all four issues more frequently than other parents.

All reported differences significant at $p < .05$

Back to School Survey, 2025
(national sample: n = 1245, Hispanic sample: n = 386)

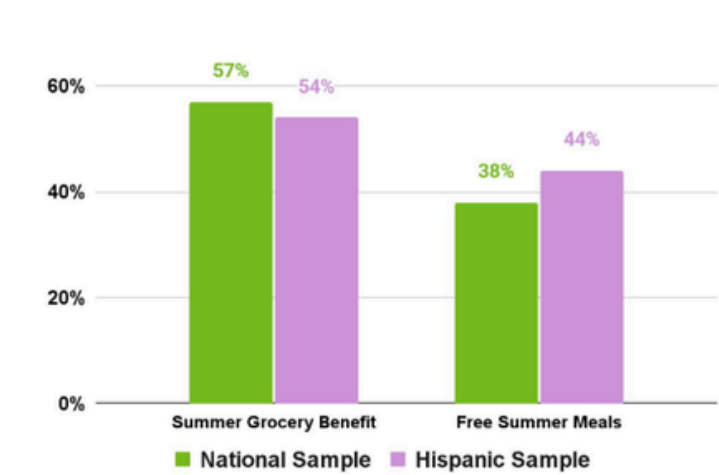
What's on parents' minds...

As you prepare for the upcoming school year, what's on your mind when it comes to your child(ren)'s school experience?



Back to School Survey, 2025
(national sample: n = 1245, Hispanic sample: n = 386)

Over half of parents received the summer grocery benefit



Q: Did your child(ren) receive the summer grocery benefit?
Q: When school is out, many schools and other community places provide free summer meals for kids. Did your child(ren) receive free summer meals?

Less than half of parents reported that their children ate free meals at school or other community centers during the summer.

Compared to Black and Hispanic parents, proportionally more White parents reported that their children received free summer meals.

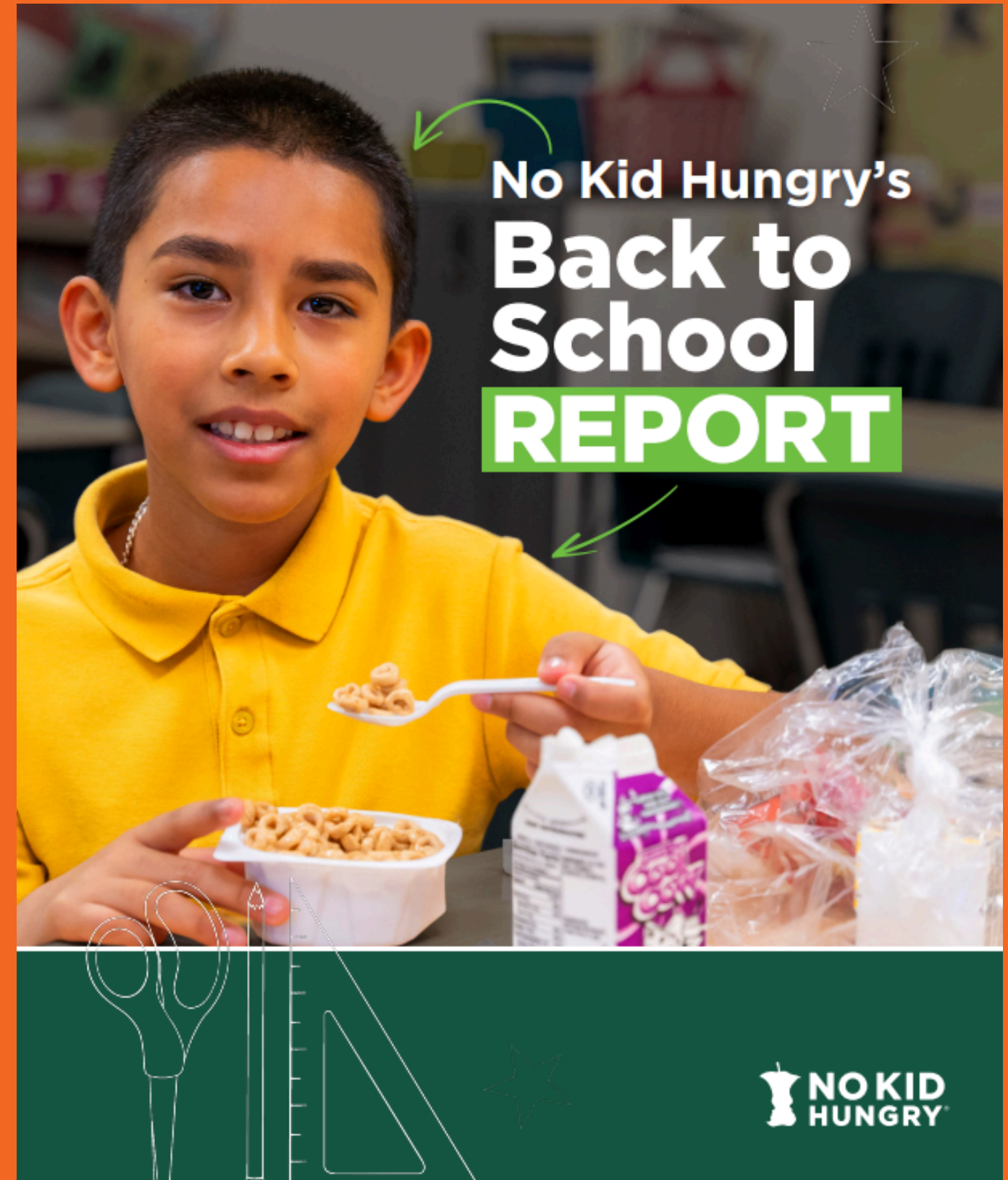
Parents receiving SNAP benefits were more likely to receive the summer grocery benefit and free summer meals for their children.

All reported differences significant at $p < .05$

Back to School Survey, 2025
(national sample: n = 1245, Hispanic sample: n = 386)



2025
Back to School Report
Ways to Leverage



Ways to Use These Resources

- To support communications and fundraising
- Provide a touch point with contacts or partners
- Ground recommendations for program access
- Advocate for programs
- Engage with community members

Your Reactions

Please share your thoughts and ideas in the chat box:

How might you use these resources in your work?



More School Meal Resources!

Visit our Center for Best Practices:

www.bestpractices.nokidhungry.org

Register for upcoming webinars:

www.bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/webinars





Thank you for your time!

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Karen Wong

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HOW CAN YOU SUPPORT SCHOOL MEALS?



HEALTHY MEALS HEALTHY KIDS

Healthy Meals Healthy Kids (HMHK) is an advocacy group with a variety of partners centered around a shared interest in bringing healthy meals to all children in all schools in Tennessee.

Our partners include:



JOIN THE COALITION!

Join us to bring no-cost school meals to every Tennessee child.

Our partner group meets monthly to share information, discuss updates and best practices, strategize, and learn from community partners across the state. Our goal is to engage people from across the state in this work and to keep partners up to date on the campaign.

Sign up [here](#).



NUTRITION NOTE



- Our monthly anti-hunger newsletter
- Updates for SNAP, WIC, Child Nutrition programs, legislative updates, and upcoming events and calls
- Join [HERE](#)

WAYS TO STAY CONNECTED

Monthly Calls

- WIC Champions
- Summer EBT
- SNAP Access
- Healthy Meals Healthy Kids TN (School Meals)

Quarterly Calls

- College Hunger
- Let's PAINT (Immigrant Access)



CONTACT US

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