

## Summer Camp as Food Relief

Low-Income Families in U.S. Make the Most of a Vital Lifeline

By ROGER THUROW and ANNA PRIOR

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*Lombard, Ill.*

Summer camp at the York Community Resource Center in suburban Chicago offers all the usual activities: arts and crafts, sports, computer games, new adventures in reading. But the prime attraction for Elizabeth Castro, who drops off her two children every morning, is the activity that begins at noon: lunch.

"Food is very expensive this summer," says Ms. Castro, who sells shoes at a department store. "Milk, bread, eggs, everything is going up and up. Except my income. "

The severity of the global food crisis, born of increased demand and dwindling stockpiles around the world, can be measured in many ways: rioting in developing countries, rising barriers on the free trade of agricultural goods, and the inexorable creep of hunger in places like the Horn of Africa. In the U.S., where the impact has so far been less dramatic but no less acute for the nearly 13 million households struggling to put enough food on the table, an unlikely barometer has emerged: Day camps, parents' traditional antidote for summer idleness, are now also a bulwark against soaring food prices.

To combat hunger in America, summer camps are spreading the word: There is such a thing as a free lunch.

"Free Meals this Summer for Kids and Teens," shouted a flyer distributed to Illinois students by a number of hunger-fighting groups as school ended last month. "Don't let your children miss out!"

It wasn't long before the Illinois Hunger Coalition's Hunger Hotline was besieged by parents asking about free-lunch sites. Through June, the number of calls had jumped more than 50% over last year's volume.

The free lunch comes from an underused federal benefit called the Summer Food Service Program permanently created by Congress in 1975 and administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It was designed to fill the hole when school ends and children no longer receive the free and reduced-price breakfasts and lunches available in school under other federal programs.

Within two years, 2.8 million children were signed up for the summer meals. But that was where the program crested, hindered by a lack of sites and the scarcity of summer bus service. In the

past 30 years, summer meals never again approached three million while the school-year free and reduced-price meals feed nearly 18 million children.

The gap between school and summer meals rarely cried out for attention until this year when food costs began exploding at a spectacular rate not seen since the early 1970s. A gallon of whole milk in May was up 15.4% over a year earlier, American cheese up 5.3%, a pound of white bread up 14.9%, eggs up 28%, government figures show. The price increases hit low-income households especially hard, since food costs comprise 10.5% of their total consumption compared with 5.5% for the richer households, according to a May report from Goldman Sachs Group Inc.

The USDA reported that 1.5 million more people were receiving food stamps in March than a year earlier. America's Second Harvest, the nation's food-bank network, surveyed 180 member agencies and found a 20% increase in the number of people coming into food banks this spring compared to a year ago.

Enter the summer camps, which are proliferating in number and expanding enrollment across the country. The Food Bank of Northern Nevada reports that it is feeding twice as many children this summer, more than 6,000 a day, than last summer. The Bay Area Food Bank covering counties in Alabama and Mississippi served more than 12,000 lunches this June, which is nearly double the number a year earlier.

For lower-income families, the food-cost crunch is being exacerbated by the soaring fuel prices. In fact, the cost of gas is creating an odd pattern in the summer food programs. The Bay Area Food Bank, for example, has recorded a 40% drop in lunches served at more remote rural sites compared with a doubling at urban sites. Darcy Long, the food bank's child-nutrition manager, says parents claim high gas prices are keeping them from driving their children to the sites, some of which might be miles away from their homes. The choice facing those parents: gas or milk?

Krish Patel, who earns \$7.75 an hour working nights at a fast-food chain, says he gave up driving when gas hit \$3.40 a gallon. He now walks nearly a mile from his apartment to the York Community Resource Center with his 10-year-old son, Deep.

"My son, he likes to eat. And the cost of everything he likes is up," says Mr. Patel, who says his food bill consumes nearly 15% of the family income. When lunch is served, Deep goes straight for the chocolate milk. At another table, 10-year-old America Torres puts down her book -- Dr. Seuss's "Oh, the Places You'll Go" -- and tears into the meal: A peanut-butter and jelly sandwich, carrot sticks with buttermilk ranch dressing dip, two plums, a packet of sunflower kernels and a half pint of milk. "Sometimes, my lunch is also my breakfast," she says.

"We call it brunch," says a friend sitting across the table.

Mariela Soejarto, the director of the community center, which is housed in the basement of the Church of the Brethren, serves about 40 meals every day provided by the Northern Illinois Food Bank. "I know some of the parents don't have enough food in the house, or they don't have time

to prepare it because they are working," she says. "For some of the children, this is the only place for them to come and eat."

Even schools are pitching in. In Chicago, there is the odd phenomenon of children going to school in the summer even when they aren't taking classes.

A sign on the front door of the Michael Faraday Elementary School announces to the community, "Meals are served" and lists the times of breakfast and lunch below a drawing of two children sharing a cupcake. Under a new state law signed last fall, all neighborhood children are welcome to eat at schools in low-income areas that are offering summer classes.

"We know a lot of our children aren't getting meals unless they're eating at school," says Faraday lunchroom manager Leola Smiley, who is feeding more than 120 this summer. "Dinner is potato chips, sodas, [Cheetos] Flamin' Hots," she says. "Vegetables? They don't get any if they don't get them here."

This summer, Michelle Cox is feeding 300 children at two sites in the city of Waukegan at the Boys and Girls Club of Lake County, Ill. A waiting list stretches up to 100 children; a third site had just opened in the neighboring city of North Chicago. "The food component of our program is absolutely vital for the parents and the kids," says Ms. Cox, the director of operations.

Arriving at one of the clubhouses in Waukegan, Tera and Reginald Hooks get the rundown from their three children on what they had for lunch: a cheese sandwich, crackers, cherries, cucumbers, a granola bar and milk.

"I'm so thankful they're getting milk. We go through a gallon a day at home, and a gallon of milk now costs almost as much as a gallon of gas," says Ms. Hooks, who works at the township office.

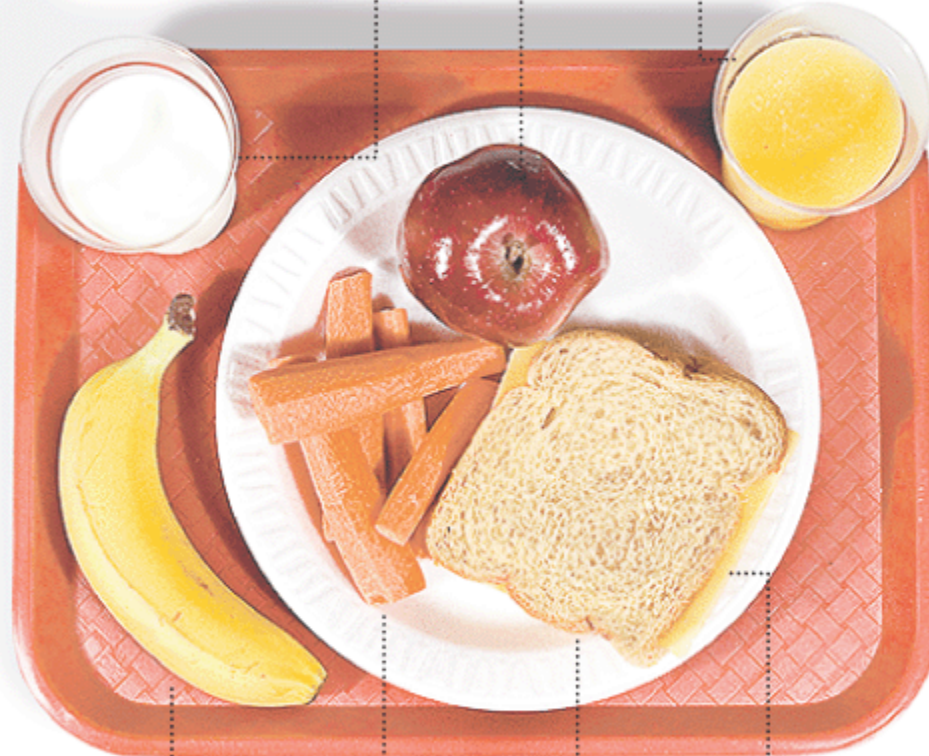
Kenneth Norels, who works at a cable company, needs the program so much that when he drops his boys off at the club every morning, he admonishes them to be on their best behavior. "Now don't give them any problems," he tells them.

Change in average price between May 2007 and May 2008 in U.S. cities

Whole milk  
**Up 15.4%**

Red Delicious apples  
**Up 12.8%**

Orange juice (frozen concentrate)  
**Up 3.2%**



Bananas  
**Up 25.2%**

Carrots\*  
**Down 1.5%**

Bread  
**Up 14.9%**

American cheese  
**Up 5.3%**

\*Change from June 2007 to May 2008

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Sergio Capursi/Wsj