

# Latino Children + Summer Meal Programs

Insights from Latino Parents in Mixed Status Families | June 2017



# Background.

California Food Policy Advocates, working with PerryUndem, conducted four focus groups with Latino parents of children who participate in low-cost or free school breakfast and lunch programs. All parents in this study are either in mixed status families or are themselves undocumented.

As the school year ends, parents are making decisions about whether or not their children will participate in summer meal programs. Nutritious summer meals support student health and their ability to learn over the summer.

While some schools will continue to offer meal programs over the summer, many will not and interested parents will need to take their children to different community locations. Having their children go to unfamiliar locations to obtain meals can be a barrier to parents in mixed status families, who may worry about their family's safety.

This study hopes to understand the barriers parents in mixed status families face to enrolling their children in a summer meal program – including immigration concerns and fears. The goal is to identify messages, facts, and even symbols that could motivate and comfort parents so that they consider enrolling their children in summer meal programs.

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- The Alliance Health Care Foundation
- The California Health Care Foundation
- No Kid Hungry – Share our Strength
- The Stupski Foundation
- The Walter and Elise Haas Fund

# Methods.

- The focus groups were held in San Diego (5/24) and Fremont (5/25).
- Two focus groups were held in each location.
- Groups lasted 120 minutes each.
- Each group involved 10-11 parents and a total of 42 parents participated.
- Parents were recruited through a combination of focus group facility databases and community based organizations that serve immigrant and Latino families.
- The parents in the focus groups were either undocumented themselves or had a spouse or partner who is undocumented.
- Parents were assured that their participation would be confidential so that they would feel comfortable participating in the groups.

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# Summary:

## Current Environment.

1. **Mixed status families do not feel safe.** Deportation concerns are front-of-mind. They are staying inside. They are uncomfortable whenever the family is apart. They are learning about their rights, seeing attorneys, saving money, considering returning to Mexico, and making plans in case the worst happens.
2. **Their children are negatively impacted.** Parents say their children have become fearful. They hear the news despite parents' best efforts. Parents are putting on a brave face.
3. **They are experiencing racism.** They feel negative attitudes towards Latinos and immigrants were always present but they are at an all time high now. Many experience racism in their daily life because "Trump has made it okay."
4. **Their homes, their children's schools, church... these are places they feel more comfortable.** But they say there is no place they feel completely safe. Grocery stores, apartment complexes, rec centers – they have heard recent deportation stories about these locations.
5. **They feel more comfortable in locations that have diverse ethnic groups.** They are avoiding events and venues that draw many Latinos. "More diversity is better."
6. **Schools are the place parents are learning their rights.** Many parents say their children's schools have held meetings since the election of Donald Trump and disseminated information so that parents know their rights and can feel reassured that their children are safe.
7. **There is confusion over "sensitive locations."** We tried to define this term as "places in the community that ICE and CBP agents generally avoid" but that did not reassure parents. Many said, "But they could still go there, right?" The term also makes many feel less secure because they equate "sensitive" with the word "fragile."
8. **It may be better to portray these locations as "welcoming to immigrants."** "Sensitive locations" did not resonate and "safety" is not something that can be guaranteed for these families. Given these realities, using a symbol (more on that on the next slide) to show a location does not discriminate based on immigration status and is welcoming to all may be best.
9. **They have few trusted messengers.** These parents did not seem to know about local organizations and resources that help immigrant families. They trust schools and teachers, and some trust churches and attorneys who help immigrants. Some knew about First 5 and trusted them. Most did not know state or local politicians. There is little to no trust for the police.

# Summary:

## Summer Meal Programs.

10. **Parents highly value free or low-cost school meals.** Despite everything else going on in their lives, they appreciate that the meals help save money, are convenient, are mostly healthy, and are liked by their children. A number of these families deal with food insecurity on a regular basis and the school meals make a difference.
11. **They are not thinking of summer.** Even though summer is almost here, many of these parents have not formed summer plans. They are tired, stressed out, and want a break.
12. **The big barrier is a lack of information.** Most have not heard about the summer meal programs. A handful have seen notices (at schools or a local rec center) and others knew about these programs from the past but most were not aware.
13. **Initially, they say they will skip the summer meals.** They feel they can feed their children at home and it is just not on their radar yet.
14. **But once they receive basic information, they want their children to participate.** They do not need much convincing that summer meals would help their family and be better for their children, who they want “out of the house and active.”
15. **The best reason for their children to participate:** they like that the program “helps children learn and be active while getting a free, healthy meal.” Combining “meals” with “learning and activities” is an important idea for these parents. Your outreach messages should hit all of these themes.
16. **Meals alone may not be enough to get these families to attend.** A major draw for the summer meal programs are those sites with activities – education and enrichment opportunities as well as other active and social activities.
17. **Some locations are better than others.** If the location is “nearby,” that helps. If their school is offering summer meals, even better. They trust their schools. If it is a YMCA, a Boys and Girls Club, or a familiar rec center, parents are okay. Going to police stations for summer meals will not work for them. They are uncertain about libraries.
18. **A symbol identifying it as a site that welcomes immigrant families would help.** All parents say they would like the summer meal locations to have a visible symbol indicating that they and their children are welcome. It would also increase parents’ comfort if a trained individual who could deal with ICE or CBP agents would watch over their children on site.
19. **Schools and Facebook are the best ways to communicate with parents.** They want a flyer or email from school and postings on Facebook.

**New Environment.**

# There is no such thing as safe anymore.

“

There is no Latino here who is not concerned. You could be detained when you are getting in your car in the morning.”

Parents do not feel 100% safe anywhere anymore since Donald Trump was elected. Only in their own homes and possibly at their child's school do they feel more comfortable. They are staying inside more, only going out as much as necessary, and are nervous when any family member is out of the home. Children are especially worried whenever their parents leave – they have become fearful.

They are reducing risk. “I make sure I don't have a tail light out.” “I am considering classes to show I am trying to improve my life.” “I don't go where there are a lot of Latinos.”

“Safety” is not a realistic concept anymore. Parents used the word “comfortable” because there is always some risk of deportation. The question is how much risk can they tolerate.

The news and social media are fanning their worries and some do not allow their children to watch TV news anymore. They are constantly hearing stories of deportation and separated families.

**“I know Obama deported a lot of people but we didn’t see racism. Now, this president has opened up racism and everything is now distorted.”**

**All parents feel that racism towards Latinos was on the rise in America.** They attribute this to the election and campaign of Donald Trump. It makes them sad and feel unwanted.

**Most feel that there had always been racism towards Latinos, but now people who have racist feelings are comfortable enough to show it.** This is particularly a fear in terms of immigration officials and police officers.

**There is fear of economic discrimination now.** Some feel that employers are now less likely to hire an undocumented worker or else demand more proof of their status.

**Some parents feel that conflict and discrimination within the Latino community has increased.** Those with a more secure immigration status look down on those who are undocumented.

**They do not think there will be an end to the racism in the foreseeable future.** While Trump is office, they expect racism to get worse.

Words used to describe what it feels like to be an Latino immigrant currently:

Frustrated  
Anguished  
Sad  
Separated families

Terrorized  
Stressed  
Discriminated against  
Rights violated

**Racism has increased.**

## We must be ready to leave...

**With a constant fear of deportation, many parents are making arrangements for their children in case they are taken away.** Some are meeting with lawyers to make arrangements and are designating who they want to care for their children if they are deported.

**Others are trying to get their children dual citizenship.** They have visited the Mexican Consulate so that children who are American citizens can come with them when they are deported.

**Many parents are saving money in case they or their children need to travel.** This makes it more important than ever for them to find ways to save money and free school meals are one of these ways. Those without family in America are particularly concerned because they have fewer people to care for their children if they are detained.

**Some are thinking of leaving.** Between the increased racism and the increasing fear of deportation, some parents say they have discussed leaving and returning to Mexico. They feel it is too stressful to stay.

“ We have seen attorneys. They say don't speak if we are stopped. If we have a clean record, that's better.”

# Changing behaviors.

**Most parents, particularly in the San Diego groups, have stopped going to certain places due to immigration concerns.** For some, public places like parks and flea markets are places of increased risk of deportation. Grocery stores are dangerous to those in San Diego. Others are simply afraid to drive out of fear that local police and the highway patrol were cooperating with ICE.

**They travel as a family.** As much as possible, they try to stay together. They are anxious when they are apart, not knowing if a family member will be detained.

**Places where Latinos tend to congregate are seen as particularly risky.** Parents felt that ICE agents were more likely to target these locations. As a result, places with lots of people and greater diversity are viewed as safer.

**Some are changing jobs or staying in jobs they want to leave.** Some are also fearful of applying for a new job due to immigration concerns. A few acknowledge they use fake social security numbers and are afraid they will be caught. Due to increase racism and fears, they say it is harder than ever to get a job.

**Though used to keeping a low profile, many parents are trying to be even more discreet.** Owning anything flashy or any behavior that is too noticeable is seen as dangerous.



Children should not have to worry about this. This an adult problem, it is very sad and they are suffering.”

**They worry about their children.** A major concern of most parents is the effect the current environment has on their children.

**Children are fearful.** Parents feel that their children can sense their parents’ fears which in turn make them more afraid. They live in constant fear not only for their parents who may be deported, but for themselves who may be separated from their family.

**Some parents say that their children have been victims of harassment or bullying at school because of their ethnicity or their parents immigration status.** But they also have many friends and support as well.

**Parents would like any program that their children participate in to be inclusive and diverse.** It makes it easier when their friends also participate.

**“My kids are afraid to answer the door.”**

# **Government Programs + Summer Meals.**

**Most parents are nervous about enrolling in public programs.** They do not want to provide the kind of personal information required to apply.

There is also a feeling that enrolling could make it difficult to become documented later on. They have heard that prior enrollment in Medi-Cal or other programs would be held against them when they try to become citizens.

Others do not enroll because they do not want to be seen as “abusing the system” by those opposed to immigrants. They generally say they are trying to “live good lives” and stay out of trouble so that they are seen as “worthy of being here.”

“With the new President, I have no intention of asking for this program.”

Yet, participating in free and low-cost school meals does not seem to make parents nervous. They seem to see these as “school” programs rather than “government” programs.

Also, many have children enrolled in Medi-Cal and some parents receive help from WIC. When it comes to their children, parents seem willing to take greater risk. They want their children to be healthy and to succeed in life and so will risk enrolling them in public programs.

They are confused about CalFresh. While a few have experience with the program, many believe they earn too much to qualify. Others are unfamiliar with the program and only became more familiar when we referred to the EBT card. Because food insecurity is an issue for a number of these families, their disconnect with this program was concerning.

“If we have an immigration issue, I don’t want them to see I have all of these assistance programs.”

## Enrollment in government programs.

# Food insecurity is an issue for some.

There are varying degrees of food insecurity among parents but all agree that food is an important budget consideration. Even those who do not worry about where their family's next meal will come from are grateful for the free school meal program.

Most prefer to cook for their children at home but sometimes have difficulty cooking healthy food due to expense. Chips, fast food, and soda are extremely cheap and easy to provide.

Some parents have gone to foodbanks in the last 12 months, usually at a church or a school. They report mainly good experiences and did not feel judged or looked down on by those working at the foodbanks. Even those who do not end up going to food banks report often being low on money by the end of the month and sometimes having difficulty making ends meet.

These families are more likely to eat simpler, less nutritious foods such as rice and beans by the end of the month. It is just more affordable.

“Healthy food is too expensive but junk food is cheap. Soda is cheaper than water!”

# School meal programs are popular.

**These parents value school meals and almost all have positive feelings about them.** They feel that free school meals help the family save money, the food is mostly healthy, their children mostly like the meals, and it helps working parents who can be too busy to always provide meals.

**Some fear that the program's funding will be cut and the meals will no longer be free.** This is a fear parents have about government programs in general. "Trump is cutting everything!" A few parents have also heard that the meals are going to become less healthy.

**While most see the meals as healthy, some parents have heard of their children being served junk food.** They mention pizza and hamburgers and feel that the program could be improved. A few also say their children do not like the meals and will "only eat the apple."

# Summer meal programs.

Parents have not yet figured out their children's summer meal plans, even with summer only a few weeks away for some. These parents seem tired and are waiting for the school year to wind down. They want a break. Right now is a good time to get them information about summer meal programs.

Initially, the majority say they do not intend for their children to participate. A frequently given reason is, "I can feed them at home." Again, this seems more the result of parents being worn down by the long school year and less about not wanting their children to participate.

Once they hear a brief description of the summer meal program, almost all say they are interested in having their children participate. The more information parents have about the program, the more likely it is that they will enroll their children.

What they heard:

"Free meals are available to children and youth during the summer in California. Many of the families that benefit from these meals receive free or reduced price school breakfast or lunches during the school year. While school is on summer break, certain sites are designated as places where children can eat meals. These places could be schools, local libraries, community centers, churches, parks, or Boys and Girls clubs."

# Reasons to participate in summer meal programs.

	Top Choice
Summer meal programs can get children out of the house, which helps them be active and healthy even while they are not in school.	22
At many summer meal locations there are also educational activities which means your children can have a healthy meal AND won't fall behind in school.	16
Children who participate in summer meal programs are better able to stay at a healthy weight.	3
Summer meal programs are free, which means feeding your children during the summer won't hurt your budget.	1
Summer meal programs are convenient. They are often nearby in your community.	0

**“Meals” may not be enough.** Even though many parents are worried about food insecurity, healthy meals for their children are not the biggest draw of the summer meal program.

**“Getting children out of the house” was a big theme for parents.** Combining this with “meals” and “learning and activities” is appealing to parents. They see these programs as a good way for children to socialize and make friends. Messages promoting summer meal programs should hit these themes.

**Unaware of locations but prefer schools.** Parents are not aware of all the locations meals are provided and are more likely to enroll in the program if they could continue to go to their children’s school.

# Barriers to participation.

1. **Lack of awareness.** This is the main barrier. As mentioned, these parents have not planned their children's summers and have not yet heard about summer meal programs. Reaching them soon with the details of these programs is key for their participation. They want to know about the locations, the schedule, the menu (if possible), and what other activities are available.
2. **Perception that meals will not be healthy.** This feeling varied by school district, with some parents feeling school meals were healthy and other reporting their children were given pizza and other junk food. Those who feel school meals were not healthy are worried that summer meals will follow suit. Letting parents know that there would be healthy options such as fruit or vegetables would make these parents more confident in summer meal programs.
3. **Transportation is not an issue for most parents.** Parents are willing to make time and take their children to summer meal programs as long as they are reasonably close.
4. **Other barriers like the family returning to Mexico for the summer or just wanting a simple summer with the children at home also came up.** But most parents are interested in having their children participate in the meals once they learn more about them.

# **Immigration Fears + Sensitive Locations.**

# Messages to increase parents' comfort.

	Top Choice
You can sign up your children without giving their immigration status or the immigration status of anyone in their family.	14
There are trained adults in each location who will watch over your children and help them if there is a problem.	9
Your children are legally allowed to remain silent if questioned by an immigration officer.	4
Some places that offer summer meal programs – like schools and churches – are “sensitive locations,” which means ICE or CBP agents generally avoid them.	3
Your children can have a “Know Your Rights” card which they could show to an ICE or CBP agent if stopped.	2
Your children could pick up the meals at a location without staying	1

For some parents, the biggest concern about summer meal programs is their immigration status. The parents in San Diego are more concerned than those in Fremont, possibly because of their proximity to the border.

The idea that summer meal programs do not require giving out personal information is the most comforting to parents. Parents feel that any information on government forms (such as social security numbers on school meal applications) could be potentially used against them by immigration officers or could be an impediment to citizenship in the future.

Parents also like the idea of trained adults on site. It would comfort parents to know that an adult who is trained to deal with ICE or CBP agents will be on hand to watch over their child.

Picking up meals is not a popular idea. Parents like the idea of their children getting out of the house and doing activities. If this policy is pursued in the future, it should be emphasized that this is only an option and not the program in its entirety.

# ***“Sensitive locations sound like something could happen.”***

There is confusion over “sensitive locations.” This concept is hard for parents to understand. In fact, explaining that meal programs would be served at “sensitive locations” that ICE and CBP agents “generally avoid” only make them feel more vulnerable.

By not guaranteeing these locations are 100% safe – i.e., ICE or CBP agents could, in fact, enter these locations if they wanted to – just reminds them how vulnerable their family is. This suggests we might not want to use this term in association with summer meals – it only heightens parents’ fears.

Part of this lack of trust is that many parents have heard rumors of such sites already being the target of raids. Even a single story of a parent being detained on the way to their child’s school can cause them to question all such sensitive locations. Some report hearing that ICE agents had even gone to churches looking for undocumented immigrants.

Many feel that nothing short of legislation preventing ICE or CBP agents from going to certain places would suffice. A few believe that even this would not be enough and that immigration authorities are willing to circumvent the law to get to undocumented immigrants.



Of course they know [undocumented people are there]! The government is smart, they are going to raid it. They know there are a lot of Latinos.”

# Some places make parents more “comfortable” than others.

**Their children’s schools are parents’ preferred locations for summer meals.** If the school is not available, a nearby location is key (they do not want to be far from their children). They are also open to their children receiving meals at a local YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, or recreational centers. They are more torn about churches and libraries. They would not feel comfortable going to a police station.

**A few parents have received assurances from principals and teachers that helped make them confident going to their children’s schools.** Parents feel their children’s schools have been their best partner during these stressful months since Donald Trump’s election. They say schools have hosted information sessions and shared information with parents about their rights and the steps schools are taking to ensure the safety of their children.

“I’d go if it’s close to home. I wouldn’t want my daughter and me to be separated too far.”

# Trusted messengers.

**There are few trusted messengers.** Parents say their children's schools and teachers are who they trust most to give them information about these programs. Many already receive school newsletters via email or in the mail. Those who have heard of summer meal programs heard about it in this way. Facebook and flyers home from school would do a lot to promote the programs.

**There is little awareness of state politicians and even less awareness of local politicians.** Few can name California's governor and are hesitant about whether or not he could be trusted. Parents feel that politicians only care about the Latino community during elections and do little to actually better their lives once elected.

**There is some awareness of local organizations that advocate for immigrants but little knowledge of what they actually do.** They know about First 5 and feel they do good work. They are vague about others. It is likely that they would trust these organizations if they had more information about them.



## Facebook

Facebook (on their phone) is a main way that these parents gather news, share information with each other, and stay connected. They recommend any information about summer meals should be posted on Facebook or otherwise they might miss it.

In the focus groups, we tested five symbols/images that could be displayed at summer meal locations to make parents feel more secure. The majority of parents believe that this would be helpful and add to their comfort level while at the locations.

The symbols tested in the groups were pulled from other sources or quickly developed to learn about parents' preferences and hear their reactions. They are not meant to reflect finished products or ideas.

# **Symbols/Images.**

# Todos pertenecemos aqui (we belong here).



This image was the most popular.

Pros: parents like the diversity of races and cultures. They feel it emphasizes that in America, we are all immigrants, not just Latinos.

All agree strongly with the message of inclusion and diversity. It feels welcoming.

Cons: some parents feel that the dark background was slightly ominous and off-putting.

Several parents feel the subhead (we will defend ourselves) is combative and did not seem to fit the broader theme of peace and inclusion. Their recommendation is to drop the subhead.

# 18

out of 42 parents chose this as the best image.

# La migración es hermosa (migration is beautiful).



This image was the second most popular.

Pros: many parents strongly identify the symbol of the butterfly with migrants.

The butterfly is also understood to mean freedom and liberty in a broader sense.

Parents are happy that this is a child friendly image.

Cons: some parents do not make the link between the butterfly and immigration.

A few feel uncomfortable with any variation of the word "immigrant" or "migration." They suggest the alternate text of: "Freedom is beautiful."

# 10

out of 42 parents chose this as the best image.

## Bienvenidos (welcome).



This image was the third most popular.

Pros: parents like the different colors, associating them with inclusion and diversity.

The message is clear and easily understood.

Cons: most parents do not immediately associate this with a welcome mat.

Many parents do not feel particularly strongly about this image one way or the other. It is boring compared to the others.

8

out of 42 parents chose this as the best image.

Estas seguro conmigo (you are safe with me).

**ESTÁS SEGURO  
CONMIGO.  
ESTOY A TU LADO.**



This image was the fourth most popular.

Pros: parents like the message of safety and the statement itself.

Cons: while not seen as a negative or confusing image, few think this is a very compelling image compared to images of diverse faces or a butterfly.

4

out of 42 parents chose this as the best image.

# Fist.



This image was the least popular.

Pros: a few parents identify this as a symbol of resistance and solidarity – and they like it.

Cons: most see it is an aggressive and hostile image.

Many feel this image is not child-friendly and is inappropriate for a summer meal program.

Most parents express that they have been trying to stay under the radar and not cause problems. This image may draw unwanted attention and make them uncomfortable.

2

out of 42 parents  
chose this as the  
best image.

**Recommendations.**

# Looking forward.

Based on the feedback of parents in the focus groups, here are ideas to consider when thinking about summer meal programs for children in mixed status families:

- Reach parents soon with messages about the summer meal programs. It is not on their radar.
- Use schools, teachers, rec centers, and Facebook to spread the word.
- Give parents basic facts such as when and where sites are operating and explain that meals are free.
- Use a message that combines “free healthy meals” with “educational and other activities.” Meals alone may not be enough of a draw.
- Make it clear that parents do not need to provide information about their immigration status on the application.
- If true, also mention that trained individuals will be at these sites to watch over their children in case ICE/CBP agents appear.
- Use schools as sites for the meals as much as possible. If not possible, direct parents to local rec centers, Boys and Girls Clubs, and the YMCA. Do not suggest police stations as sites.
- Do not promise parents and children safety. These parents feel that is over-promising. No where is safe.
- Do not use the term “sensitive locations.” It did not work in the focus groups and even backfired, making parents feel more vulnerable, not less.
- But make it clear that immigrants are welcome at these sites. This is a message they can believe. They want to feel welcome.
- Use a symbol. Either diverse faces of children or a butterfly could probably work. Just make it welcoming, child-friendly, and pro-immigrant. Avoid aggressive images or language.
- Consider working on policy that makes it illegal for ICE and CBP agents to raid locations that serve children. This is the only thing that will make parents feel at least temporarily safe in these locations.

