

# Complete Eats: The USDA Summer Food Service Program at CHOP

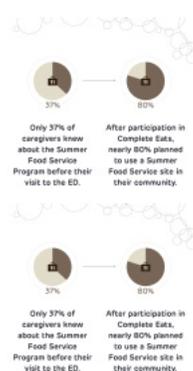
## Statement of Problem

In the United States, nearly [22 million](#) low-income children depend on free or reduced-price meals during the school year. Unfortunately, while summer should be a time of carefree play, with loss of this programming, it's too often a time of hunger. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides meals through the Summer Food Service Program, but many families either don't know about or aren't accessing the program. In Pennsylvania alone, only [1 out of every 10](#) students who use free and reduced-price school lunch accessed summer meals each year.

In Philadelphia, summer meals programs are available to all children 18 and younger, regardless of income and without an application. These programs can be particularly helpful in a city where more than [21%](#) of children are food insecure, compared to less than [17%](#) nationwide. Despite having more than 1,000 Summer Food Service Program sites across the city, many eligible kids don't participate.

## Description

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Dr. Cullen and her colleagues were concerned about this discrepancy—they had seen the significant impact hunger could have on children's physical and mental health. So, they decided to explore what was causing this gap and how they could help. Knowing the hospital is often one of the only institutions children come into contact with over the summer, Dr. Cullen and her team zeroed in on the emergency department (ED) as a setting to provide meals for kids, particularly those in low-income and high-risk families.

In 2017, along with Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) colleagues and community partners, Dr. Cullen's team created the program called Complete Eats: an implementation of the Summer Food Service

Program in CHOP's ED. (Partners included: CHOP Clinical Sites and CHOP Career Path; Nutritional Development Services of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia; Pennsylvania Departments of Education and Health; and USDA.) Their goals were to determine whether the hospital was a feasible location to operate a summer meals program, whether it was acceptable to caregivers and if the program was able to successfully connect families with community resources to improve food security.

Once roomed in the ED, a patient and all kids between the ages of 2 and 18 in the room received a meal ticket that they could exchange for a balanced boxed lunch and information on additional summer meal sites and food resources in their community. Interns from [CHOP's Career Path program](#), a supported employment program for individuals with disabilities and/or chronic illnesses, distributed the food. The researchers then recruited caregivers to participate in a brief, voluntary, anonymous survey.

Over a [six-week pilot period in the summer of 2017](#), the team distributed nearly 370 meals to patients and siblings in the ED with no reported disruption to clinical care. Nearly 90 caregivers completed the survey, giving the program high ratings—91% agreed there was a need for a program like Complete Eats, and 86% felt that the hospital was a good location to provide meals for children. More than 90% indicated the process was easy and they felt comfortable that it was administered in the ED.

The researchers also evaluated caregivers' awareness about the federal Summer Food Service Program, which previous research showed to be a major barrier to participation. Only 37% of caregivers knew about the program before their visit to the ED. However, after participation in Complete Eats, nearly 80% planned to use a site in their community and most felt confident they could find a location.

The data showed that providing meals in a clinical setting through Complete Eats was feasible and acceptable, and had significant potential to enhance the reach of the federal Summer Food Service Program in Philadelphia. Strong clinical-community partnerships allowed the program to thrive and following the pilot program, CHOP expanded Complete Eats to include five outpatient clinical settings, serving over 20,000 meals each summer.

These partnerships additionally allowed rapid ramp-up amid school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The program operated nearly continuously from March 2020, serving over 80,000 meals and helping connect families with needed federal and community emergency food assistance programs, and will continue through summer 2021. In the summer of 2020, over 40% of program participants reported food insecurity, and a strong desire for additional food resources. With the information provided by Complete Eats, 52% of participants had repeat use of the free meal program either at CHOP or within their community. Among repeat participants, there was a 68% decrease in reported concerns about food access within a 30-day period, with the largest impact among those using the program each weekday.

## Next Steps

Complete Eats continues to expand. Dr. Cullen and her team are completing a formalized evaluation of the effectiveness and implementation of the program. They hope to continue the success of Complete Eats to reach children across the city with healthy meals to help them grow and thrive, and that this program can serve as a model for other health care institutions across the country.

*To find a Summer Food Service Program site near you—anywhere across the country—text "Food" to 877-877.*

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## Suggested Citation

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## PolicyLab Leads

### **Danielle Cullen MD, MPH, MSHP**

#### **Faculty Member**

Danielle Cullen (she/her) is a faculty member at PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) and assistant professor of pediatrics and pediatric emergency medicine at CHOP and the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. She is also a senior fellow of the University of Pennsylvania Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics and co-course director for Master Level Introduction to Implementation Science at the University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Cullen's research focuses on socio-economic health disparities, in particular childhood food insecurity. Her long-term goal is to improve health equity among socially disadvantaged children through the development of effective, acceptable, and feasible strategies to identify social risk and improve family engagement with resources. She is dedicated to community involvement in research and programmatic design, and leveraging methods from Community-Based Participatory Research and Implementation Science to enhance reach and sustainability of developed programs. Her current interdisciplinary research portfolio includes: mixed-methods evaluations of social determinant screening modalities, locations and referral processes; a hybrid implementation-effectiveness study of the USDA's summer food service program across five CHOP clinical settings; and a qualitative evaluation of low-income families' experiences with a clinically-based subsidized organic produce box program.

In addition to her research, Dr. Cullen is a member of the advisory board for the hunger pillar of CHOP's Healthier Together initiative and CHOP's social risk screening and resource map sponsorship board. She serves on multiple city-wide committees, including as co-chair of the food insecurity workgroup for the multi-institutional COACH (Collaborative Opportunities to Advance Community Health) initiative to address social determinants of health in southeastern Pennsylvania.

Dr. Cullen earned her Master of Public Health in Maternal and Child Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and her medical degree from Jefferson Medical College. She completed residency in General Pediatrics at the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC. There, with support from the American Academy of Pediatrics, she developed a screening and intervention protocol for food insecurity in the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh Emergency Department. This protocol was integrated into the electronic medical record system as the standard of care and has now been expanded to the hospital's inpatient and outpatient settings. She completed Pediatric Emergency Medicine fellowship at CHOP while also serving as a T32 research scholar, earning her Master of Health Policy Research from the University of Pennsylvania.



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## Team

### **Rachel Brown** **MPH**

#### **Clinical Research Program Manager**

Rachel Brown (she/her) is a clinical research program manager at PolicyLab at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Ms. Brown works with Dr. Danielle Cullen on a mixed-methods research portfolio aimed at reducing health disparities by addressing unmet social need among children and their families. She also supports the implementation and evaluation of several clinically based food programs.

Ms. Brown received her Master of Public Health in Community Health and Prevention from Drexel University. While completing her graduate degree, she was an Urban Health Collaborative fellow in the Policy & Community Engagement Core as well as a graduate intern at PolicyLab. She also worked with Drexel's Center for Public Health Readiness and Communication as a crisis communications associate, developing strategic outreach plans and content to support the university's pandemic response.

Prior to pursuing her master's degree, Ms. Brown held several communications and community engagement roles at organizations including the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia and SteegeThomson Communications. She earned her bachelor's degree in media & communications from Ursinus College.



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## **Funders of Project**

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## Related Tools & Publications

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[Food for Thought: How We Screen for Food Insecurity Matters](#)  
[Blog Post](#)

May 15, 2019

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[Hunger Goes Virtual: The Importance of School Meals as Classrooms Stay Closed](#)  
[Blog Post](#)

Sep 10, 2020

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[Modernizing WIC Enrollment to Improve Access to Healthy Food for Children and Families](#)  
[Blog Post](#)

Mar 29, 2021

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[Screening for Food Insecurity: Amplifying the Caregiver Perspective](#)  
[Blog Post](#)

Sep 21, 2021

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[Food for Thought: A Randomized Trial of Food Insecurity Screening in the Emergency Department](#)  
[Article](#)

Jan 2019

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[USDA Request for Public Comment: SNAP Requirements for Able-bodied Adults Without Dependents](#)  
[Tools and Memos](#)

Apr 2019

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[Complete Eats: Summer Meals Offered by the Emergency Department for Food Insecurity](#)  
[Article](#)

Sep 2019

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[USDA Request for Public Comment: Requirements for National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs](#)

[Tools and Memos](#)

Mar 2020

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[Food for Thought: A Qualitative Evaluation of Caregiver Preferences for Food Insecurity Screening and Resource Referral](#)

[Article](#)

Apr 2020

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[Exploring the Gap: Food Insecurity and Resource Engagement](#)

[Article](#)

Aug 2020

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[Association of WIC Participation and Electronic Benefits Transfer Implementation](#)

[Article](#)

Mar 2021