



# More to offer than books: stakeholder perceptions of a public library-based meal programme

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To examine the perspectives of librarians and staff about *Lunch at the Library*, a library-based summer meal programme for children. The study examines: (i) motivating factors behind implementing the meal programme; (ii) issues of feasibility; and (iii) perceived programme outcomes.

**Design:** One-on-one semi-structured interviews with library stakeholders (librarians and staff) from a purposeful sample of California libraries.

**Setting:** Twenty-two library jurisdictions across California that implemented the *Lunch at the Library* summer meal programme in 2015 in areas of high financial need.

**Participants:** Twenty-five library stakeholders representing twenty-two of the thirty-three Californian library jurisdictions that implemented *Lunch at the Library* at their sites.

**Results:** Library stakeholders recognised the need for a child meal programme during summer. Despite lack of sufficient resources and personnel, they were motivated to implement the programme not only to fill a community need but also to ensure children at their libraries were primed for learning over the summer. Library stakeholders also perceived the public library's changing role in society as shifting from reference provision to social service provision either directly or by referral.

**Conclusions:** The public library is an ideal place to provide social services because of its accessibility to all. Librarians and library staff are motivated to address the social needs of their communities. This study demonstrates the feasibility of implementing new social programmes at public libraries. Funding to support these programmes would increase the library's capacity to address other community needs.

## Keywords

Food insecurity  
Summer meal programme  
Public library  
Child hunger  
Social services

Food insecurity (FI) is defined as a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food and is a significant public health problem in the United States<sup>(1,2)</sup>. Currently, 11.8% of US households are food-insecure (15.0 million households in 2017)<sup>(3)</sup>. Households with children are at a greater risk of FI for a number of reasons, including larger family size<sup>(3)</sup>. In 2017, 15.7% of households with children experienced FI (6.0 million households)<sup>(3)</sup>.

Children who live in food-insecure households experience a wide range of negative health outcomes. FI in young children can cause poor health, delays in cognitive development, and increased number of hospitalisations<sup>(4-7)</sup>. These negative health outcomes can continue as children age. School-aged children who are food-insecure struggle academically and often have behavioural issues<sup>(8,9)</sup>.

Additionally, parents in households that are food-insecure suffer from depression and anxiety related to having limited resources. This increased stress on parents strains the caregiver-child relationship leading to slower cognitive growth in children<sup>(10-12)</sup>.

To prevent FI in children, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) created several national programmes to provide children with access to healthy meals and snacks. One of the most widespread of these programmes is the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), created in 1946, that provides low-income children with free or reduced-price lunches<sup>(13-15)</sup>. During summer break, children who rely on the NSLP are at an increased risk of FI<sup>(14)</sup>. To compensate for seasonal loss of the NSLP benefit, the USDA developed the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) in 1975 to provide funding to sites that

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serve free meals to children  $\leq 18$  years old in low-income areas over the summer<sup>(16)</sup>. In the summer of 2017, the SFSP funded approximately 152 million child meals. Despite serving millions of meals, this programme is considered highly underutilised across the country because of lack of awareness of programmes serving meals during the summer and transportation barriers for participants<sup>(17–19)</sup>. In California, only 18% of eligible children (children who received meals through the NSLP during the school year) received free meals through the SFSP in 2017<sup>(20)</sup>.

A growing number of community organisations have used SFSP funding to provide meals to children during the summer, usually associated with camps and other programming. Libraries across the USA recently joined this effort in providing meals to children. The earliest documented summer meal programme at a library was in Oakland, California, during the summer of 2011 when librarians noticed children would stay at the library all day without anything to eat and often asked library staff for snacks because they were hungry<sup>(21)</sup>. Following the success of the Oakland library meals programme, other libraries across California developed similar summer meal programmes. To address the growing interest among libraries to serve summer meals, the California Library Association and the California Summer Meal Coalition joined forces in 2013 to support implementation of this programme across California libraries situated in areas eligible for SFSP reimbursement and branded the programme *Lunch at the Library*<sup>(22)</sup>.

A study by Bruce *et al.*<sup>(23)</sup> found that parents of children who participated in *Lunch at the Library* appreciated the open and welcoming nature of libraries and suggested that public libraries would be ideal sites for similar social programming. Other studies demonstrate the successful integration of social workers, nurses, legal aid, and other services to help library patrons navigate social needs<sup>(24–27)</sup>. While it is becoming more common for public libraries around the nation to address the social needs of their patrons, there is limited research on the impact of adding additional programming to the current roles of librarians and library staff, and how such programming aligns with the mission of libraries overall. It was important to capture the perspectives of librarians and library staff given their knowledge of the needs of the community, their role in designing and implementing library programming, and their influence on allocating library resources. The current study aims to examine motivating factors behind implementing *Lunch at the Library*, issues of feasibility, and programme outcomes from the perspective of librarians and library staff.

## Methods

In 2015, it was estimated that 101 public libraries served summer meals to children across California through the

*Lunch at the Library* programme<sup>(28)</sup>. Each participating library served lunches and/or snacks to children  $\leq 18$  years and was located in an area deemed eligible for federal reimbursement based on USDA criteria (areas where at least 50% of residing children are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals, based on local school or Census data)<sup>(16)</sup>. Funding for meals at the library was provided by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service Summer Food Service Program. Most libraries served as the fiscal sponsor, with others partnering with an external sponsor agency (e.g. YMCA, city youth and family organisation, etc.). Sponsors were responsible for adhering to USDA requirements and ordering meals through third-party food vendors. Library facilities varied between sites, but all libraries were required to have a refrigerator to store meals upon delivery and a designated area to allow children to eat on-site.

A purposeful sample of libraries from twenty-two library jurisdictions across California were approached to participate in the study<sup>(29)</sup>. Library jurisdictions represented cities or counties in northern, southern and central California and had population sizes ranging from  $<100\,000$  to 10 million people. Stakeholders were defined as librarians and library staff (e.g. administrators, programme managers, library assistants) involved in implementing lunch programmes at their sites. The California Summer Meal Coalition provided a list of stakeholder contacts for all libraries implementing the programme throughout California in 2015. Library stakeholders in each jurisdiction were contacted via email and/or phone to participate. An interview guide was developed using a programme implementation framework that outlined key aspects of the implementation process. The interview guide included twelve open-ended questions that examined motivating factors behind implementing the meal programme (e.g. patient needs and resources, prioritisation, implementation readiness), issues of feasibility (e.g. programme planning, engagement, execution) and perceived programme outcomes<sup>(30)</sup>.

All interviews were conducted in English via phone by M.D. or J.B. and audio-recorded for transcription purposes. Interviews lasted 20–60 min and were subsequently transcribed by members of the research team. The coding software Dedoose<sup>®</sup> was used to facilitate the organisation and analysis of transcripts<sup>(31)</sup>. Two coders (MD and KP) developed a preliminary codebook from six initial transcripts. The codebook was iteratively revised and adjudicated by the research team until reaching stabilisation<sup>(31–33)</sup>. The two coders received a final IRR Cohen's  $\kappa$  score of 0.83<sup>(34)</sup>. The final codebook was subsequently applied to the remaining transcripts, and coded data were then analysed for overarching themes in a similarly iterative process<sup>(32,33,35)</sup>. To minimise possible bias and strengthen the credibility of the findings, input from J.B. was incorporated throughout the critical review process<sup>(36)</sup>.



**Table 1** Participant demographics

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Female	24	96
Male	1	4
Title		
Librarian	14	56
Library staff (library manager, programme manager, library assistant)	11	44
Geographic distribution of libraries		
Northern California	9	41
Central California	6	27
Southern California	7	32
Library jurisdictions		
City	9	36
County	15	60
City and county combined	1	4
Library jurisdiction population		
<100 000	2	8
100 000–500 000	9	36
500 001–999 999	8	32
1–5 million	5	20
>5 million	1	4
Type of meals served		
Child only	19	86
Child and adult	3	14

## Results

Twenty-five library stakeholders were interviewed, representing twenty-two out of thirty-three California library jurisdictions that implemented *Lunch at the Library* in 2015. Stakeholders included librarians (*n* 14) and staff (e.g. library managers, programme managers, library assistants; *n* 11). Three programmes secured additional funding to serve meals to adults at their sites (Table 1).

### Domain 1. Motivations for Implementing the Lunch at the Library Programme

#### Theme 1. Awareness of the pervasive problem of community-level FI

Stakeholders were acutely aware of the social needs of communities that they serve. All of the libraries in this study were located in low-income areas, and stakeholders noted that, as a result of financial limitations, food was one basic necessity that many families in their area could not meet. One stakeholder discussed her encounter with some of the children who frequented her library:

'I'd walk kids home because I think in the neighborhood there were certain places kids can't walk [alone]. So I had walked a couple girls home and we had stopped at a 7-Eleven, and I asked them if they wanted anything. And you know you ask an eight year-old if you want anything you'd assume it would be a soda, candy, or chips, and they actually grabbed a bag of tortillas and I was sort of surprised as to why a kid would choose that. And when we got to their house, it was this trailer with a bunch of

people. There was bed sheets that separated the rooms and there was nothing to eat in the house. And so they were really happy to bring home something to share with their family'. – Central California Library

Stakeholders also witnessed firsthand that FI was especially heightened for children during the summer due to a loss of school meals. One stakeholder reported seeing children stay at the library without anything to eat from open to close. She said:

'We saw that usually in the summer, some of the children . . . stay in the library all day, and sometimes they are hungry. We see them at the vending machines getting food and of course, if they run out of coins, [they ask] the staff at the info desk for food or for coins so that they can get their food'. – Northern California Library

All stakeholders saw the lunch programme as an opportunity for the library to address the food security needs of children in their communities. Many recognised how important the lunch programme was and discussed it as a 'necessity' to those living in areas of poverty. One stakeholder said:

'I think [the lunch program] is definitely needed in the community so we understand maybe in other places it's sort of a fun way to get other people engaged . . . but for us, it's a necessity in a sense that we have pockets of poverty in a lot of the neighborhoods around the library so access to something like food is often taken for granted. For us, [the lunch program] was meeting a basic need for our kids and our families who live around the library'. – Central California Public Library

#### Theme 2. Meals encouraged utilisation of the library and educational resources

Several stakeholders discussed implementing the lunch programme as a way of promoting summer learning by increasing participation in educational programming and reducing summer learning loss. Stakeholders recognised that hunger interferes with a child's ability to learn, and stressed the importance of ensuring children's basic needs are met to allow them to effectively participate in educational programmes at the library, such as the summer reading programme, story times, arts and crafts, and science lessons. One stakeholder said:

'We understand that food insecurity and just not having the basic needs met is going to have a direct impact on the learning and literacy for young folks.'. – Northern California Library

All stakeholders wanted to promote summer literacy and learning among the children at their libraries because they knew that kids were at risk of the 'summer slide' when children lose academic gains from the school year over the course of the summer. Additionally, stakeholders knew that



being food-insecure further increased a child's risk of summer slide. By providing meals to children at the library, stakeholders believed they were priming kids to be able to learn, thus promoting literacy. As described by one stakeholder:

'We know that during the summer, there tends to be this reduction in improvement in math and literacy [for children]. When they are not fed, it continues to contribute to that ... if we could provide [meals] during our summer reading program ... they have that nutrition during the day, it could help improve their literacy skills and their learning over the summer, so there isn't too much of a slide'.  
– Northern California Library

In addition, stakeholders perceived an increase in library attendance during the summer, which they attributed to the lunch programme. Some stakeholders believed that the lunch programme brought people to the library who were not usual library-goers, introducing a new population to the public library. Others noted an increase in issuance of new library cards and circulation numbers for children's books and attributed these increases to the lunch programme. When discussing new library patrons, one stakeholder described:

'I think for us, the biggest success was that kids that never went to the library before are now the library's regular users. They're [the kids] in there every week and they've gotten to know the staff because during the summer [meal program], the staff would walk around and just chat with the kids and the parents'.  
– Southern California Library

Stakeholders also discussed making a conscious effort to schedule other library programmes (e.g. reading times, educational sessions, arts and crafts) around the lunch programme to boost attendance because the lunch programme was so popular. Stakeholders noted that some children came for summer programming and stayed for lunch; conversely, other children came specifically for lunch and stayed for activities. As such, some stakeholders would purposely schedule enrichment activities right after the conclusion of the lunch programme so that children were more likely to stay and participate. Discussing leveraging the popularity of the lunch programme, one stakeholder said:

'People know about [the lunch program] and they want to come participate, so when you have something that big that draws people in ... the lunch program is a good way to capture people in a room, give them something to eat, and then give them something else to do. Its basic but it makes sense'.  
– Central California Library

### *Theme 3. Motivation to implement new programmes to address social needs*

Despite being different from traditional library programming, stakeholders noted that the lunch programme aligned

with the library's mission to serve the needs of the community. Many stakeholders believed that it is no longer enough for the libraries to solely provide reference materials; they need to do more to serve the complex needs of their communities. For stakeholders, this evolution meant implementing programmes like *Lunch at the Library* that are new and different from the typical library resources offered. Stakeholders recognised that though their training was originally in library sciences, many see their roles shifting to be more 'social work'-oriented because that is what their communities need. In addition to extensively discussing the importance of food security, stakeholders also mentioned the following areas of social need among their library patrons: economic support, linkages to social services, and enrolment in public programmes. Speaking to the library's changing role in society, one stakeholder stated:

'I do hope that the food lunch program is a way for the library to open their doors a little bit more and realize there is a lot of socioeconomic things we can be addressing as a library that we haven't done traditionally ... so legal support and health care enrollment and sort of things like that are not generally associated with library. But I think the food program is a really good sort of way to get that bug into people's ear ... that there's a lot more we can be doing'. – Central California Library

### *Theme 4. Reinventing the library image*

An important theme that emerged from discussions with stakeholders was the reinvention of the library's image in the larger community and society. Stakeholders understood that patrons came to the library usually for books, reference materials and computer access. The lunch programme, they believed, allowed patrons to change the traditional notions they held and expand their view of what is offered at their public library. One stakeholder said:

'[The lunch program] is a positive for libraries because it's introducing to the community a new way of looking at the library, so that people start to understand that libraries really are about what we do as opposed to what we house'. – Central California Library

## **Domain 2. Programme Impact**

### *Theme 1. Impact on the community*

All stakeholders shared the perspective that the most important outcome of the lunch programme was being able to address a community need and provide meals to children who may be food-insecure. Stakeholders perceived the lunch programme as positively impacting their communities because of the enormous turnout and number of lunches they were serving. According to several stakeholders, *Lunch at the Library* programme participants and their parents provided positive feedback to staff,



including enjoying the meals and appreciating the community building aspect of the programme. One stakeholder recalled an encounter she had with a child who participated in the lunch programme stating:

‘My first day doing [the lunch program] there was a little boy and he walked up to the cart with the food, and he had a smile on his face and he grabbed a lunch, and he was like, “I love you.” And you know, I was like okay; this is why we’re doing this, because it works’. – Northern California Library

Additionally, stakeholders heard from parents of children participating in the programme about the financial help the programme was providing to families. Loss of free or reduced-price meals through schools strained family budgets over the summer. The lunch programme helped to alleviate some of that burden. As recounted by one stakeholder:

‘We had a parent that every day before she would go to work, she took her three kids to go eat lunch and she depended on [the lunch program] and that just those three meals were able to support her financially’. – Northern California Library

#### *Theme 2. Impact on library staff*

Library stakeholders felt that they were able to make a real impact on the lives of families in their communities. The ability to provide a tangible solution to an immediate community need rejuvenated many librarians and library staff. There was an overwhelming sense of satisfaction and joy with being able to provide this service to the community.

Another positive effect library stakeholders noted was an increase in teamwork. During the planning stages for the lunch programme, many stakeholders believed implementation would be difficult and daunting, especially for an understaffed library, which many of the sites were. The librarians and library staff discussed working together to determine the best way to shift roles and responsibilities to account for the increasing workload demands during summer months. While there was considerable variation in how each library chose to implement their meal programmes, stakeholders overwhelmingly noted the enormous feeling of accomplishment among all meal programme staff for being able to run the lunch programme successfully. When reflecting on the lunch programme, a stakeholder said:

‘I think that it’s a great program [Lunch at the Library]. All the libraries that I’ve worked with, they [librarians and staff] at first were a little afraid by the volume but once they got into it, they just work it in with everything else, and it’s just been the most rewarding thing that we’ve done in a long time’. – Southern California Library

Stakeholders also appreciated being able to build trust and relationships with community members. The lunch programme provided the opportunity for librarians and staff to have deeper interactions with library-goers, and

stakeholders discussed how they utilised this newfound trust to connect patrons with other resources available at the library. Discussing how the lunch programme facilitated building trust and leveraging that to connect library patrons with resources, one stakeholder said:

‘Having that trust from the community is really important in a sense that people saw us more than a educational and sort of access to resources hub, it was more like a home. Because there was trust and there was comfort, there was definitely an increase in dialogue and communication about what more the library could do. So whether that was bringing in a lawyer to talk about the new [legislative bill] AB60, the California Driver’s License Legislation . . . People felt a lot more comfortable because they saw us sort of catering to needs they felt and experienced so it became a success having people trust the library’. – Central California Library

### **Domain 3. Facilitating Factors and Barriers**

#### *Theme 1. USDA restrictions limited meal locations and participants*

Stakeholders discussed that not all libraries in their jurisdictions were located in an area that was eligible to participate in the lunch programme because of strict guidelines set by the USDA’s SFSP programme. Due to this restriction, stakeholders from jurisdictions of high-income disparity were concerned that children living in pockets of poverty in higher-income neighbourhoods would be missed. One stakeholder recognised this specific problem in her jurisdiction stating:

‘So we try to get really creative as far as being able to show that [eligibility] exists because . . . where it is a very affluent neighborhood we have to prove we are serving the children that are most at need and those children are coming from the school or an area that is at least 50% free or reduced lunch . . . In the Bay Area especially with pockets of poverty surrounded by affluence it’s tricky to find that eligibility. But we will continue to look and see how we can expand [to reach more communities]’. – Northern California Library

Though stakeholders understood that the USDA funding only supported child meals, they noted frustration with the inability to feed adults during the summer. The restriction on feeding adults made many stakeholders uncomfortable during the programme; meal programme staff often had to turn away parents who wanted a meal. Staff even had to sometimes go as far as ‘police’ parents to ensure only the children were eating the food because of funding restrictions. Speaking about turning adults away, one stakeholder said:

‘It can be hard with the parents, you’re supposed to be proactive about telling them they can’t eat the food because that jeopardizes us having the funding,



but of course that is an awkward conversation so I would say that is a hurdle especially when [the parents are] obviously hungry, you know it's tough'.  
– Central California Library

Other stakeholders discussed that including adults in the meal service would be a good way to improve the programme. One said:

'It would be good to have adults [participate] ... because they're going in as family and surely the whole premise now is the way to reach out to a lot of the families is to bring them in as families. And if you're dealing with the new immigrants, who are not familiar with the public library culture yet, that's the way to bring them in. There's no way you could have the children here without their parents, so why not feed [the parents] too. But to make it better, I think we should make it as a family program'. – Southern California Library

*Theme 2. Adequate resources and staffing necessary for programme implementation*

Stakeholders discussed having limited resources and staff to devote to the lunch programme, and many had to develop creative solutions, enlisting help from several community partners with supplies and volunteers (e.g. local food bank, school district). Libraries had to have a refrigerator to keep the perishable food cold, a separate place for children to eat that had tables and chairs, and cleaning supplies after the lunch programme was over.

The number of staff members and volunteers able to help with the programme was also important. There needed to be enough people available to run the lunch programme while still being able to operate normal library functions during the lunch period. Stakeholders also recognised the importance of 'buy in' from all staff working the lunch programme. Staff enthusiasm was essential to the programme running smoothly.

**Discussion**

Our study sought to examine stakeholders' perceptions of implementing the *Lunch at the Library* programme. As libraries move to address the larger social needs of their communities beyond their traditional role, it is important to understand how librarians and staff are able to adapt to the changing responsibilities.

***Library staff understand community needs***

Library stakeholders in this study recognised that their communities were struggling with child FI, particularly during summer months. The awareness of community needs exhibited by stakeholders in this study is typical of all librarians and library staff. From their daily and direct interactions with library patrons, librarians and staff have 'a

finger on the pulse' of their communities, aware of the diverse needs of its members<sup>(37,38)</sup>. Westbrook and Gonzalez<sup>(39)</sup> describe librarians as having a 'holistic understanding of local socioeconomic dynamics' that inform their librarianship practice. Librarians' awareness and understanding of social needs of the community is thought of as a major 'value-add' to the public library<sup>(40)</sup>. The ongoing shift from reference to service provision occurring at the libraries hinges on this understanding of community needs<sup>(40)</sup>. The ability of librarians and staff to help patrons interpret, understand, and utilise information relevant to their needs is particularly valuable in communities that face hardship.

***Libraries as important venue for reaching vulnerable populations***

The public library setting is ideal to provide social services. Public libraries are, by nature, one of the last truly free and accessible community resources. In many urban areas, the library has become the meeting place outside of work or home, sometimes described as the 'neighborhood living room'<sup>(41)</sup>. As such, this characteristic makes libraries perfect venues to reach populations not tied to the traditional safety net system<sup>(23,38,41,42)</sup>. Vulnerable populations can use the library as an entry point to access a multitude of social services<sup>(43-46)</sup>.

The meal programme brought new patrons in and introduced them to a different side of the public library. As libraries continue to expand and add more programmes for vulnerable populations, the public will increasingly view the libraries as more of a 'community anchor: places that address economic, educational, and health disparities in the community'<sup>(47)</sup>. Additionally, with advances in technology and cuts to funding, libraries have to reinvent themselves and re-evaluate what they offer the community. Libraries are easy targets for budget cuts in times of economic downturn, especially since they often are unable to show their true value to the society<sup>(41,48-50)</sup>. Therefore, it is important that libraries demonstrate their necessity in helping their communities thrive. Adopting new programmes that fulfil community needs provides good reason for continued funding and quells questions about the current usefulness of the public library system.

***Addressing community needs with limited resources***

Stakeholders in this study implemented *Lunch at the Library* because they were motivated to address the public's needs but also understood that their role in serving their communities is changing. Previous literature has shown that, as a whole, public libraries want to address the social needs of their communities. Libraries are adapting to the ever-changing needs of the public, a move that is driven by library staff and especially important in low-income communities with heightened social disparities.





Meeting community need, regardless of what they are, also aligns with the library's mission. According to the International Federation of Library Associations, a library's mission is to serve and enrich the lives of citizens in its jurisdiction<sup>(51)</sup>. Library stakeholders in this study believed the lunch programme embodied the mission of serving the needs of its community members despite being beyond its traditional role.

The libraries in this study were typical of most public libraries; they had limited budgets, personnel, and resources available to run the meal programme. Adding social programming at libraries is resource-intensive. Recently, public libraries in high-need areas have gone so far as including social workers and public health nurses at their sites<sup>(24,38,52,53)</sup>. However, integrating other service providers may not be an option for many libraries with a similar desire to provide social programming for their communities. Library stakeholders in this study demonstrated a willingness and capacity to provide important public resources. Despite facing obstacles, stakeholders managed to run the programme with a limited budget, committed to finding creative solutions to staffing and acquisition of resources. This often meant enlisting all library staff to help during the programme, which created positive unintended consequences. Having 'all hands on deck' increased teamwork and morale, which in turn increased staff job satisfaction<sup>(54)</sup>.

### **Fiscal support**

The high utilisation of *Lunch at the Library* emphasises the importance of supporting innovative library programming aimed at meeting community needs beyond traditional library services. The state of California is the first to recognise and support the potential impact public libraries could have on addressing a host of social issues in communities they serve. In early 2019, the California State Library awarded the California Library Association \$1 million to support local *Lunch at the Library* programmes for the summer of 2019<sup>(55)</sup>. It will be important to evaluate how this funding is used to support and expand programming across the state. The success for such funding in addressing the complex social needs of communities may be an important model for demonstrating how additional government funding can help libraries create and sustain innovative social programmes.

Library funding specific to social service provision could transform the public library system entirely. This financial backing would provide librarians and library staff the ability to expand current social services offered and develop new, innovative programmes to address social needs. Expanded social programming would continue to shift the roles and responsibilities of librarians and staff further toward service provision, a change that stakeholders in this study embrace and recognise as inevitable. Additionally, funding these types of programmes would strengthen the role of

public libraries as community anchors, demonstrating their role in improving the quality of life not only for frequent library-goers but the community at large. Other municipalities and states should follow California's lead in supporting library efforts through increased funding.

### **Feeding adults**

A restriction of USDA funding was the inability to feed adults, a limitation that stakeholders in this study expressed frustration over. Households in which children are experiencing FI are known to be *severely* food-insecure because adults will attempt to shield children from the lack of food as much as possible, usually going hungry themselves before they allow the children to<sup>(3)</sup>. Previous studies have shown that the inability of sites to feed adults is a barrier to children participating in SFSP-sponsored meal programmes<sup>(56-58)</sup>. The USDA itself recognises the benefits of feeding adults on child nutrition stating that serving adult meals 'boosts family and community engagement, creates a more positive and enticing atmosphere, provides children with healthy role models, increases participation and expands a site's impact on hunger and nutrition'<sup>(59)</sup>. Funding through the USDA should be expanded to include meals for adults to truly address household-level FI. Understanding that federal policy change around adult meals may be slow-moving, libraries should actively identify other sources of funding to support meal programmes that feed the whole family. One such source could be their local municipality governments that may offer more flexibility with funding than the USDA and have an interest in supporting the needs of families in their areas. In addition, libraries have previously leveraged public-private partnerships with like-minded organisations (e.g. food banks, local children's hospitals) to be able to provide meals to adults<sup>(23)</sup>.

### **Future research and policy implications**

With the expanding role of libraries in addressing the social needs of their communities, it will be important to evaluate the process of service provision at the library as it evolves. Assessing the use and take-up of benefits received at the library could determine the effectiveness of service provision as opposed to traditional social service agencies. Furthermore, because public libraries are nearly ubiquitous all over the world<sup>(60)</sup>, free to access and open to all, the *Lunch at the Library* programme can serve as a model for community-based child meal programmes if library stakeholders globally have similar drive and capacity to address local FI. To the best of our knowledge, *Lunch at the Library* is unique to the USA, and similar countries (Canada, the United Kingdom, etc.) do not have comparable library-based meal programmes. However, if libraries in underserved communities around the world are able to find viable and sustainable funding



sources, they have the potential to serve as an entry point for a multitude of social services.

Some urban library sites in our study were located in areas with large income inequalities. Due to USDA-SFSP restrictions, meal sites located in high-income areas may not be eligible for funding if the proportion of children receiving free and reduced-price meals is not over 50%. Despite this fact, many children living in pockets of poverty within these high-income areas live in households that struggle to make ends meet<sup>(61)</sup>. Without more flexible USDA eligibility requirements, many low-income children may lose access to necessary summer meals, further challenging organisations to identify ways to best serve children in these communities. Additionally, in the current political climate, families with children that are eligible for free and reduced-price meals at school may decline to claim the benefit due to immigration fears, further concealing the need in the area and affecting both school time and summer meals<sup>(61)</sup>. Reforms to USDA-SFSP funding restrictions provide an opportunity to ensure that all children have adequate access to summer meal programmes.

### Limitations

Given the qualitative nature of our study, our findings are only generalisable to our sample of libraries. However, we took advantage of California's size and heterogeneity to ensure we included library sites from both rural and urban areas across multiple jurisdictions and geographic regions. Additionally, there may be an element of recall bias as some of the stakeholders were not involved in initial implementation, but rather they inherited the programme from other colleagues. Though participants expressed both positive and negative perspectives, future studies could potentially explore other, more in-depth negative outcomes associated with the programme. Lastly, the limited scope of our study focused solely on librarians and library staff, though perspectives from other stakeholders, including community leaders and nutritionists, would have provided other important insights. Despite these limitations, we believe that our findings provide valuable insights regarding the implementation of library-based meal programmes and other social service programmes.

### Conclusion

Libraries are adapting to changes in their community and stepping up to the challenge of addressing complex social needs of their patrons. The *Lunch at the Library* programme is highly valued by library stakeholders despite the additional time, resources, and personnel required to run the programme, indicating the potential for libraries to expand the resources and support they provide to their patrons. This programme is an excellent

example of how librarians and library staff are reinventing the public library's image in society, proving that the modern public library has 'more to offer than books'.

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