Improving Response and Operational Efficiency Under the Constraints of Time-Sensitive Program Evaluation

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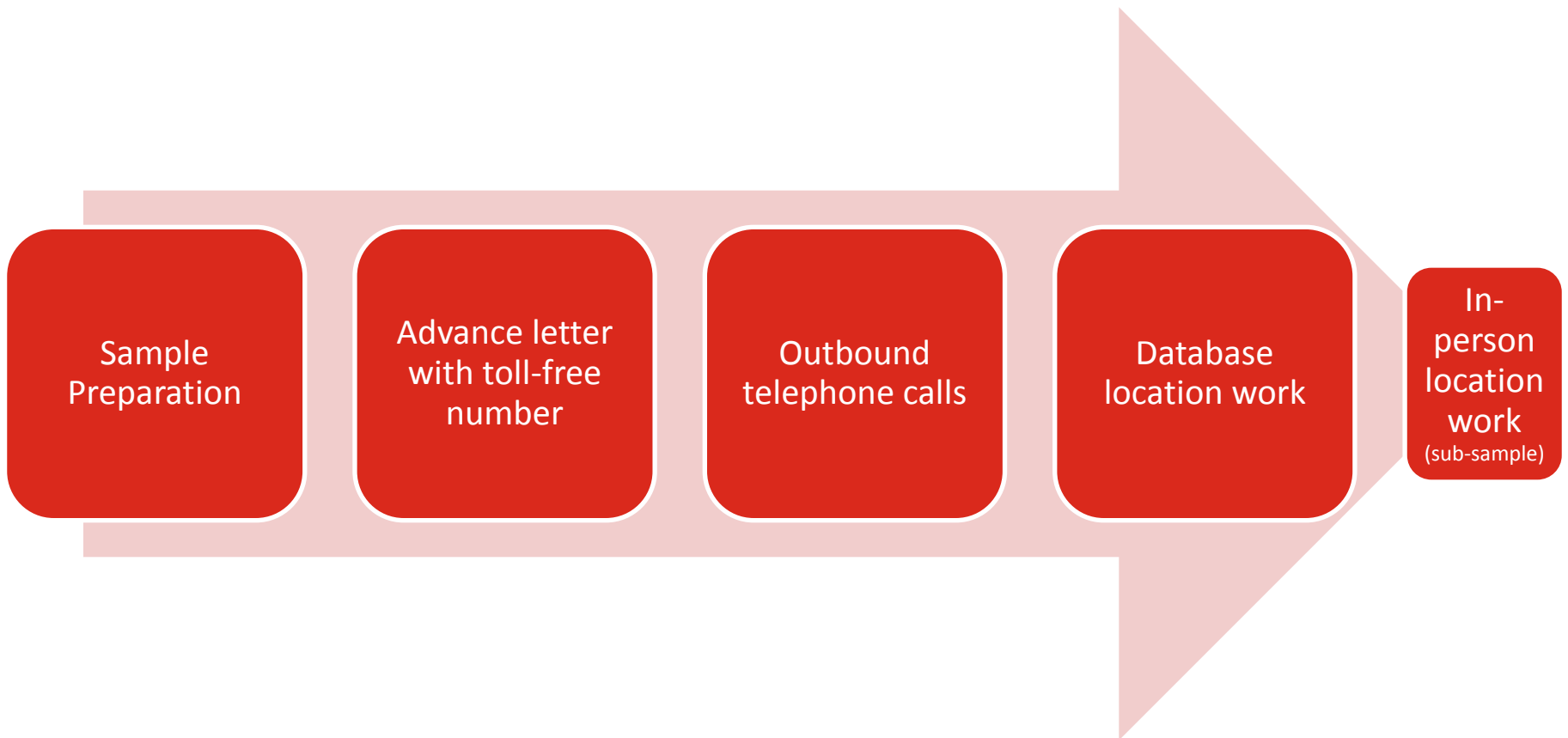# Problem: Summer meals for low-income school-age children

- Children's development, health, and well-being depend on access to safe and secure sources of food.

- Only 10-15% of school-age children who get the National School Lunch program access existing summer food programs.

- The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is assessing new approaches to provide them with food benefits.

What is the Summer EBT for Children demonstration?

- Funded by Congress in 2010

- In the 2012 Demonstration, SEBTC provided
  - Approximately $60 per child per month during the summer
  - To families with children eligible for National School Lunch program during the school year
  - Using existing SNAP or WIC electronic benefit delivery systems

- Evaluation's primary outcomes
  - Very low food security among children (VLFS-C)
  - Children's nutritional status, household food expenditures, use of public federal nutrition programs

Finding elusive respondents

Sample Preparation → Advance letter with toll-free number → Outbound telephone calls → Database location work → In-person location work (sub-sample)

Plan v. Reality

Plan

- Sample size: 27,000 per wave

- Select the 15 grantees most capable of implementing the program from the pool of applicants.

- Grantees would be made up of one or two school districts.

- Start dates by grantee would be staggered.

- Survey sample size would be equal across grantees.

Reality

- Sample size: 27,000 per wave

- Only 14 applications were received. All were accepted.

- The 14 grantees included 127 school districts.

- Start dates by grantee were clustered toward the end of the school year.

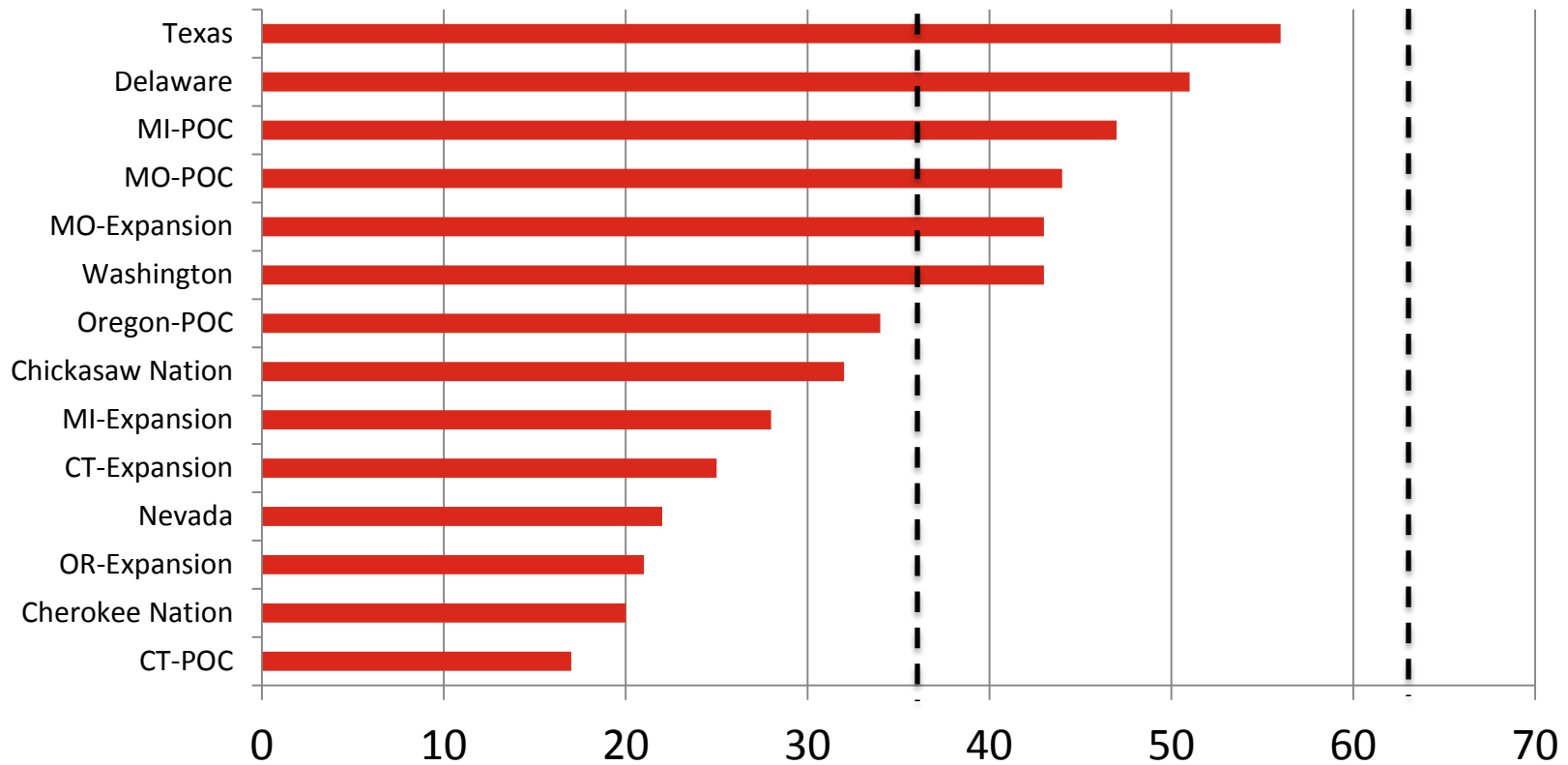- Survey sample size varied by program capacity at the site level.

Severely truncated schedule

Days for Interviewing - Baseline

Reality
37 days (AVG)

Plan
63 days

Cost, Time and Error

- We expected the largest source of survey error to come from not locating respondents within the short time available.

- We were able to use the adaptive design structure and features originally intended for cost efficiency for time efficiency.

- In this project, time efficiency cost more.

Key System Settings

Push project-level settings to the case-level and phone-level.

- Maximum attempts per phone

- Time between attempts

- Maximum phone numbers attempted

Available Data

Administrative Data

- Time for data collection
- Consent process at each site
- Contact data quality
  - Coding Accuracy Support System (CASS)
  - National Change of Address database (NCOA)
  - Type of Phone
  - Phone Source

Collected Data

- Effectiveness of phone ranking
- Number of attempts to complete
- Number of phone numbers used
- Rounds of location per case
- Missed contact opportunities (records completed on highest ranked phone after another phone number was dialed)

Adjusting the Protocol

- More attempts and more time for higher ranked phone numbers.

    – Fewer attempts for low ranked phones

    – Quicker transition to advanced location and possible in-person location

- Less time between attempts for cases with a short data collection period.

Additional Summer Changes

- More dialing attempts for phone numbers confirmed during the baseline interview.

- If the baseline data collection period was short, we re-dialed the high ranked phones (unless confirmed incorrect by a person)

- Limited the effort on some cases during the summer peak; focus effort on cases more likely to benefit

  – Included metrics in the summer files to indicate baseline effort at each phase of the protocol.

Exceeded Operational Goals

Summer

27,827 interviews

80.3% Response Rate

Program Impact

"Preliminary analyses for 2012, with the demonstrations fully implemented at 14 sites, suggest the elimination of VLFS-C for about one-third of the children who might otherwise have experienced it."

from: Report on the Summer Food for Children Demonstration Projects for Fiscal Year 2012

http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/DemoProjects/SummerFood/2012/2012SFCReporttoCongress.pdf   [or search the USDA website for SEBTC]

Evaluation of the Summer EBT for Children