

Federal Emergency Food Responses to COVID-19

Elisabeth Faw, Nutrition Sciences MPH candidate



The public health emergency of COVID-19 increased hunger (1). From 2019 to 2020 household food insecurity rose from 10.5% to 11.8% adding an additional three million people. Food insecurity was experienced to a greater extent among families with children (from 13.6% - 14.8%) and ethnic and racial disparities with Black households reporting food insecurity of 21.7% in 2020 versus 7.1% in White households (1). **This brief summarizes the new authorities and budget allocations to Food and Nutrition Service Programs that provided Emergency Food Responses to COVID-19.** For each program this brief will introduce the program, outline aspects of the program that have changed in response to COVID-19, and where possible provide research if the policies have improved food or economic security. The new authorities and budget allocations were provided in the following five legislative acts:

- Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) enacted, March 18, 2020: provided emergency supplemental appropriations through September 2020 to the WIC program, commodity assistance program, school meals, SNAP, and others. Read [HERE \(2\)](#).
- The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, enacted March 27, 2020: provided federal funding for costs associated with COVID-19. Read [HERE \(3\)](#).
- Continuing Appropriations Act and Other Extensions Act, enacted October 1, 2020: extended emergency supplemental appropriations for fiscal year 2021. Read [HERE \(4\)](#).
- Consolidated Appropriations Act, enacted December 27, 2020: consolidated appropriations through September 2021, provided emergency response and relief. Read [HERE \(5\)](#).
- American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), enacted March 11, 2021: extended and expended emergency relief programs including SNAP, P-EBT, WIC and others. Read [HERE \(6\)](#).

SNAP

What is the Program?

SNAP provides benefits for purchasing food from authorized SNAP retailers to applicants through an electron benefit transfer (EBT) card. It is the largest food program administered by the USDA with over forty million participants nationally (1).

What has changed?

The March 2020 FFCRA allowed for temporary increases in SNAP benefits through an emergency allotment (7). The allotments were available if there was both a declared public health emergency and state emergency and allowed states to increase benefits up to the maximum amount for the household size to address temporary food needs (8). This policy was interpreted differently under the Trump and Biden administrations. Under the Trump administration the USDA interpreted the policy to apply to households that were receiving below the maximum benefits, with those already receiving the maximum benefit not receiving any additional increase (8). Under the Biden Administration, states were allowed to provide allotments that exceeded the maximum benefit, with a minimum increase of \$95 to all household (8).

In addition to the emergency allotments provided for in the FFCRA, the December 2020 Consolidated Appropriations Act funded a 15% increase to the maximum SNAP benefits from January – June 2021. The March 2021 ARPA extended this temporary increase through September 2021. When the temporary increase in benefits ended, the Revision of the Thrifty Food Plan went into effect, which resulted in raising the maximum SNAP benefits by 21%, netting a 6% increase (7).

In addition to the emergency allotment, the FFCRA gave the USDA the ability to waive administrative requirements (8). These included waivers to the recertification requirements, reporting systems, certification periods, and allowed easier reporting (8). The FFCRA temporarily lifted the three-month limit on benefits for those that were unemployed, under fifty, and without dependents in their home (7). The FFCRA also allowed states flexibility to increase access to the program by allowing applications to be submitted online or through the telephone and allowing participants to continue with reapplying.

In Washington State, emergency allotments started April 4, 2020, for the March and April benefits. Maximum allotments were increased 15% beginning January 2021 (10).

For more detailed information on changes in SNAP benefits, including the pilot online purchasing program, visit the CPBB's article on [Temp Flexibility in SNAP](#) (7).

For a list of SNAP COVID-19 Waivers, see the [FNS site](#) (10).

What research exists analyzing the program's success?

[Fang et al.](#): Survey results show that SNAP extensions were not enough to alleviate hunger for those that are most at risk. Study found that among SNAP users, only 10.2% reported an increase in their benefits after the FFCRA increases and that 61.4% of SNAP users reported being food insecure vs. 51.6% in the overall sample. The report also found that food insecurity for those that were unemployed during the pandemic was significantly higher at 77% than those that were employed at 45.4%, and this group also had lower associations with food assistance programs (11).

[Urban Institute](#): Finds SNAP benefits are not adequate in covering the cost of moderately priced meals in 21% of US counties even after the Thrifty Food Plan updates (12).

[Bresnahan et al.](#): Results from an online survey of SNAP administrators for certification periods, application support, food assistance and purchasing, communications, and reflections/ future directions. Findings from the survey include results that show the majority (63%) of states would have wanted to increase benefits to all households compared to excluding those that already received the maximum allowance and that 90% of state respondents found the waiver for interviews and certification extensions were critical in maintaining benefits during the pandemic (13).

Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer

What is the Program?

A new program established under the March 2020 FFCRA for families with school children that provides benefits in lieu of the free and reduced-cost meals that children lost when schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (1). Children were eligible if they would have received free or reduced-price meals if the school did not close (14). It is estimated that up to two-thirds of school-aged children are eligible to receive P-EBT (15). The benefits were the equivalent of at minimum five days of free meals reimbursements and were further increased 15% under the Biden administration (8). The benefits were provided on the households current EBT card if they participate in SNAP, or a new EBT card and can be used to purchase groceries at SNAP-authorized retailers (8).

What has changed?

After the FFCRA established P-EBT, further laws have expanded the program. The October 2021 Continuing Appropriations Act further expanded the program by including schools with reduced hours and gave access to children whose families participated in SNAP that were at a childcare center impacted by pandemic closures or reduce hours (8). The December 2020 Consolidated Appropriations Act also provided program flexibilities for potential expansions, such as allowing children <6 in households receiving SNAP to be covered (8). In March 2021, the ARPA allowed states to continue P-EBT through the summer or through the remainder of the public health emergency.

P-EBT is a state-led program and individual state agency plans had to be approved by the Secretary of Agriculture (14). Program implementation and timing of delivery of P-EBT benefits therefore varies by state (15).

In Washington State, P-EBT benefits started June 28, 2020. Benefits were available for

1. Families that were receiving SNAP benefits and had children that usually received free or reduce price school meals automatically qualified without needing to apply. Applications for free and reduced-price school meals needed to be submitted by June 30, 2020 to receive P-EBT funds (10).
2. Families who were eligible for free or reduced-price school meals but whose families were not receiving SNAP needed to apply for P-EBT by September 23, 2020 (10).

In Washington benefits are provided through a P-EBT card, separate from an EBT card.

P-EBT was extended for students eligible for free or reduced-price meals for the 2020 – 2021 school year but were not able to access school meals due to pandemic closures. Washington state expanded P-EBT benefits through the 2021 summer and included children under the age of 6 (10).

What research exists analyzing the program's success?

[Hamilton Project](#): Found that in the first week of P-EBT distributions the rate of children reporting not getting enough to eat dropped 30%, preventing hunger in 2.7 – 3.9 million children. The rate of impact declines over time (15).

[Kenney et al.](#): Assessed P-EBT and Meals to Go programs in terms of reach, benefit effect, and cost effectiveness. The analysis found that P-EBT has broader reach and is more cost effective, however MTG provides more meals a month to a smaller group of children that may not be reached by P-EBT (16).

Child Nutrition Programs

What is the Program?

The School Breakfast Program (SBP), National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and Seamless Summer Option (SSO), provide reimbursement for meals served at school. While all children can participate, meals are provided at a free or reduced cost to children based on income (1). Thirty million students participate in school lunch daily with twenty-two million receiving free or reduced-price lunch (17). Additionally, high-risk schools may be able eligible to offer free meals to all students (1).

What has changed?

After schools began to close due to COVID-19, schools started offering summer meal programs which can operate during school closures with approval, or they continued operating the SBP and NSLP's after the USDA confirmed they could operate during virtual learning (8). In addition, the USDA issued numerous waivers to meal programs in response to COVID-19's disruption of operations. The March 2020 FFCRA gave authority to the USDA to waive school meal regulations, allowing for flexibilities in how children could receive school meals and easing operational burdens (18). For example, the non-congregate feeding waiver has allowed schools to expand where school meals are offered to parking lots, libraries, along bus routes, and even home delivery (18). Other waivers have allowed schools to respond to increased need by expanding how meals are offered. Examples include offering meals 7 days a week, providing several meals at once, and providing bulk items to families (18). Another key waiver is the area eligibility waiver which allowed school districts to serve free meals to all children through the summer meals programs without meeting area income eligibility requirements (8).

Schools expanded operations and changing innovation increased costs and resulted in financial strain for school operations (19). The March 2020 CARES Act provided billions of dollars in relief funding to cover some of the increased costs associated with supporting school meal programs due to COVID-19 (19).

Key Nationwide Child Nutrition Response Waivers

- > **Mealtime Waiver:** allowed meals to be served outside normal mealtimes and allowed for serving multiple meals at one time. (Release date, Mar 20)
- > **Non-congregate Feeding Waiver:** allowed meals to be served for off-site consumption, including pickup, delivery, and grab-and-go. (Release date, Mar 20)

> **Meal Pattern Flexibility Waiver:** provides flexibility in meeting meal pattern requirements for reimbursable meals. (Release data, Mar 25, extended April 21)

> **Parent/ Guardian meal Pick-up Waiver:** allows parents or guardians to pick-up meals without a child present. (Release data, Mar 25)

> **Community Eligibility Provision Data Waiver:** Extended deadlines for reporting and election processes within CEP. (Release data, Mar 25)

> **Mealtime Waiver:** allowed sites to determine site eligibility instead of collecting income eligibility applications for SSO and SFSP. (Release date, Apr 21)

> **Full list of waivers can be found [HERE](#) (20).**

> **Meal sites for when schools are closed can be found [HERE](#) (21).**

What research exists analyzing the program's success

USDA [Economic Research Service](#): Working paper that assesses the ability of the child nutrition programs to adapt and meet the needs of the communities they serve. This paper suggest that the child nutrition programs were able to meet increased food needs during the pandemic (22).

[Kinsey et al](#): Findings show that by the end of March 2020 approximately 169.6 million breakfasts and lunches were missed weekly due to schools closing. The number of missed meals held steady through the end of April. The authors discuss the impacts of missed meals on health, nutrition, and food security (23).

[Kenney et al](#): Investigates how School Food Authorities (SFAs) pivoted to provide meals outside of their normal operations and the ways in which this created implementation and financial hardship. The mixed method study finds meal costs increased dramatically due to delivery expenses, COVID-19 safety protocols, increased numbers of meals served without reimbursement, and maintaining staffing levels (24).

Women, Infants and Children (WIC)

What is the Program?

A program for low-income women that are pregnant, new mothers, infants, and children up to age 5 that provides benefits for supplemental nutritional food, breastfeeding support, education, and additional health care services. The program is a discretionary program and therefore has a set budget (1).

What has changed?

The March 2020 FFCRA allocated supplemental funding for the WIC program and gave the USDA authority to issue waivers that allowed for greater social distancing and reduced visits to WIC clinics (8).

Key Waivers for the WIC Program

> **Remote Benefit Issuance Waiver:** allowed benefits to be distributed remotely so that participants did not have to visit a clinic in person to pickup (8). Approved for Washington State March 24, 2020 (10).

> **Physical Presence Waivers:** Participants can enroll or re-enroll without visiting a clinic in person. In addition, certain medical tests may be delayed (8). Approved for Washington State March 20, 2020 (10).

> **Four Month Benefit Issuance:** State agencies are allowed to provide up to 4 months' worth of benefits on EBT cards at one time (8).

Additional waivers eased administrative tasks due to the pandemic. A full list of waivers can be found from the FNS [HERE](#) (25). Waivers approved for Washington State can be found [HERE](#) (10).

The October 2020 Continuing Appropriations Act extended the USDA's ability to issue waivers and the December 2020 Consolidated Appropriations Act created a task force focused on food delivery through WIC (8). Options explored by the task force include online ordering, telephone ordering, pickup, and home delivery. The March 2021 ARPA made further changes to the WIC program by authorizing the USDA to increase the value of the Cash Value Benefit (CVB), a voucher available for WIC participants for fruits and vegetables (8). States could request increasing the vouchers from \$9/month/ child and \$11/month/mother to up to \$35 for 4 months (8). Washington implemented the temporary increase from June -September 2021 (9). The ARPA also allocated funding to WIC program modernization efforts with the goal of increasing participation in the program long term (8).

What research exists analyzing the program's success?

[FRAC](#), One Year of WIC During COVID-19: This brief outlines the importance of WIC waivers, including changes in participation and food costs during the first year of COVID-19. FRAC finds that the waivers made WIC more accessible, with a 2.1% increase in participation, reversing declines in participation prior to the pandemic (26).

Food Distribution Programs

What are the Programs?

[The Emergency Food Assistance Program:](#) USDA Foods purchased federally are given to emergency food organizations such as food banks. During COVID-19 this program received additional funding under the March 2020 FFCRA and CARES Act, the December 2020 Consolidated Appropriations Act, and the March 2021 ARPA (27).

[Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations:](#) USDA Foods are provided for eligible households living on reservations. The March 2020 CARES Act provided \$50 million for facility and equipment and \$50 million for food purchases (28).

[Commodity Supplemental Food Program:](#) Provides nutritious USDA foods to low-income adults over 60 years of age. The December 2020 Consolidated Appropriations Act provided an additional \$13 million to this program during COVID (29).

Other USDA Programs and Initiatives

What are the Programs?

[Farmers to Families Food Box Program:](#) A new USDA program that provided boxes of food to people from May 2020 – May 2021 (19). The box provided foods from local suppliers to nonprofit organizations and government agencies with the goal of avoiding food waste (30).

[Emergency Meals to You:](#) A new USDA program that provided boxes of foods specifically to households with school-aged children (20). The program is a public-private partnership with the USDA and Baylor University's Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, McLane Global, and PepsiCo to mail the food boxes to children in rural areas of participating schools (31).

[Disaster Household Distribution:](#) Allowed states to use existing USDA Foods inventory that was set aside for other nutrition assistance programs for disaster/ emergency feeding. After the COVID-19 emergency declaration, the USDA approved twenty-one states, thirty-three tribal nations and Guam's requests to operate this program (21). Washington State received USDA approval for distribution beginning April 16, 2020 through May 15, 2020 to serve approximately 894,000 individuals (32).

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