

Pandemic-EBT and Grab-and-Go School Meals: Costs, reach, and benefits of two approaches to feeding children during school closures — Lessons from COVID-19 responses

Research Brief, August 2022

Overview and Recommendations

COVID-related school closures across the United States in spring 2020 disrupted the school meal programs that provide critical access to healthy food for millions of children — including children in elementary and middle school and adolescents in high school — from households with low incomes, leading to increased food insecurity. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) responded with innovative policies that allowed states and school districts to implement the Grab-and-Go School Meals (GGSM) and Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) programs. Together, these programs ensured children’s access to billions of meals and mitigated the effects of school closures on food insecurity. P-EBT reached more children and provided meals at lower cost. GGSM offered prepared meals and reached people not eligible for P-EBT. Both programs should be continued to assure food access when schools are closed during planned breaks and future crises.

Introduction

When school is in session, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) play an essential role in improving nutrition, reducing food insecurity, and promoting health among U.S. children, particularly those from families with lower incomes.¹⁻⁶ Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 30 million children received lunch daily through the NSLP, 23 million of whom qualified for free or reduced-price meals (FRPM) because their household incomes were at or below 185% of the federal poverty level.⁷ Schools served nearly 15 million breakfasts each day through the SBP.⁸

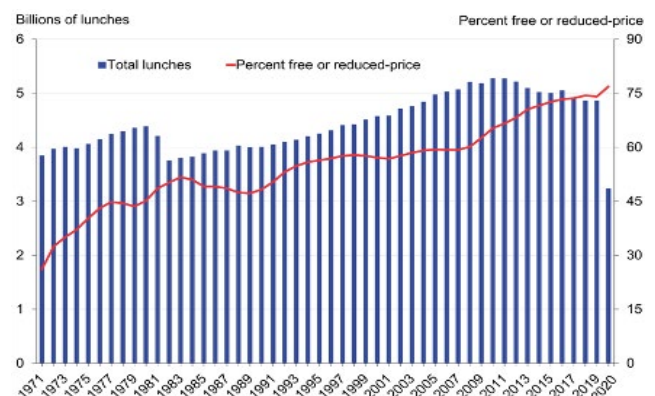
In spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to widespread school closures, disrupting millions of children’s access to school meals and increasing their risk of food insecurity (figure to right).^{7,9} In response to this urgent situation, USDA, which oversees federal nutrition assistance programs, rapidly developed two key approaches. First, building on the existing Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and the related Seamless Summer Option (SSO) program through which schools and other community-based organizations provide meals when schools are closed for the summer, USDA released [a series of regulatory waivers](#) that allowed schools to distribute prepared meals directly to the community for consumption off-site (Grab-and-Go School Meals or GGSM). School food authorities switched from preparing meals for students to eat inside schools to distributing prepared meals for offsite

This brief summarizes research findings from a Healthy Eating Research rapid-response study focused on school meals during COVID-19. Specifically, this study assessed the reach, benefits, and costs of the P-EBT and GGSM responses during the spring of 2020. [The full manuscript can be found here.](#)

Key points

- COVID-related school closures in spring 2020 disrupted children’s access to school meals, leading to increased food insecurity.
- Two innovative policies offered different approaches to feeding children — Grab-and-Go School Meals (GGSM) and Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT).
- GGSM allowed school food services to prepare meals for families to take home immediately following school closures.
- P-EBT issued debit-like cards to income-eligible families for purchasing food to replace missed meals.
- P-EBT reached 89% of eligible children, while GGSM reached 27%.
- The overall cost-per-meal provided was \$6.46 for P-EBT and \$8.07 for GGSM.
- These complementary programs provided millions of children with food while schools were closed.

National School Lunch Program lunches served and share free or reduced-price, fiscal years 1971-2020



consumption via community distribution sites or mobile delivery systems. GGSM were implemented in many districts within 48 hours of schools being closed,¹⁰ serving as a rapid initial response to shore up the school meals safety net. Second, USDA launched the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, which provided the cash value of missed school meals (breakfast and lunch) through issuance of EBT cards that function as debit cards for use in food stores. Children who would have received FRPM if their schools were not closed or operating with reduced hours were eligible to receive P-EBT benefits.^a These programs appear to have blunted the effect of school closures on food access.¹¹

This study assessed the reach, benefits, and costs of the P-EBT and GGSM responses during the spring of 2020.

Methods

The primary analysis was a cross-sectional study of children ages 6-18 living in households with incomes that made them eligible for FRPM. The research team examined how many children received benefits from GGSM and P-EBT, the size of the benefits received, and the implementation costs of each program during spring 2020, when most schools were closed. In a secondary analysis, the research team assessed the number of children ages 0-18 who received GGSM, as all children, regardless of household income, were eligible for these meals.

Data sources

Program Reach. Reach is the proportion and number of those eligible for a program who receive benefits. Researchers used several secondary data sources to estimate the number of FRPM-eligible students in each state, as well as the number of those students who received GGSM and P-EBT benefits.¹²⁻¹⁵

Program benefits. The number of meals delivered through GGSM was obtained from administrative data provided by USDA. The cash value of P-EBT benefits provided by each state was approximated using estimates from states' P-EBT applications and USDA administrative data.^{13,15}

Costs. Implementation cost data for GGSM was collected from two surveys of school district food service directors¹⁶ and estimates of time required for parents to travel to schools to pick up food were developed by the research team.¹⁷ P-EBT implementation costs were collected from state P-EBT applications to the USDA¹³ and researchers estimated the cost of time spent by caregivers to prepare meals from foods purchased with P-EBT.¹⁸

Data sources: Eligible students

- ▶ Food Research & Action Center and the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities “Pandemic EBT Implementation Documentation Project”
- ▶ U.S. Census American Community Survey

Data sources: Program reach/benefits

- ▶ U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey (GGSM)
- ▶ State P-EBT websites and public/media announcements
- ▶ P-EBT distribution data reported to USDA by states
- ▶ State P-EBT approved plans
- ▶ USDA Child Nutrition Tables (School meal distribution and reimbursement data for NSLP, SBP, SSO, and SFSP)

Data sources: Costs

- ▶ State P-EBT approved plans and applications
- ▶ Surveys of school district nutrition services directors
- ▶ Literature

See the full list of data sources in the appendix table at the end of the brief.

Analysis

Using these estimates, researchers then calculated:

- The percentage of FRPM-eligible students reached by each program.
- The average meals received (for GGSM) or meal equivalents that could be purchased (for P-EBT) per month.
- The cash benefit received (for P-EBT) or cash-value equivalent received (for GGSM) per month.
- The implementation cost-per-meal provided.

The analysis of cost-per-meal delivered included:

- The costs to public agencies implementing the programs (labor for both programs; food procurement, delivery and materials for distributing for GGSM; and value of benefits issued for P-EBT).
- The uncompensated costs to parents for securing and providing meals (time and travel expenses to obtain GGSM and food preparation time for meals prepared at home with P-EBT benefits).

^a This included households whose income was >185% of the federal poverty level but attended schools participating in the Community Eligibility Provision, which allows schools to serve free meals to all students regardless of income.

Findings

The table below summarizes key findings from the study.

- Together, the programs reached most of the children who previously received meals served at school. P-EBT reached many more FRPM-eligible children (26.9 million; 89% of FRPM-eligible) than GGSM (8.0 million; 27% of FRPM-eligible). GGSM reached an additional 2.5 million children not eligible for FRPM (17% of all children ages 0-18).
- Both programs provided close to the maximum meals possible to distribute per recipient per month. GGSM delivered a mean of 50 meals per recipient per month with a cash value of \$148 and P-EBT provided a mean of 39 meal-equivalents per recipient per month, valued at \$110.
- The mean overall cost per meal, including both program operation costs and uncompensated costs for families, was \$8.07 for GGSM, while for P-EBT it was \$6.46. Breaking down this overall cost, the uncompensated cost for families for GGSM (\$1.00 per meal) was lower than for P-EBT (\$3.56 per meal). Meanwhile, the cost to the federal, state, and local entities operating the programs was lower for P-EBT (\$2.90 per meal) than for GGSM (\$7.07).
- States varied dramatically in terms of reach, benefits distributed, and costs. The proportion of FRPM-eligible children reached ranged across states from 14% to 54% for GGSM and from 51% to 100% for P-EBT. The mean retail cash value of monthly benefits across states ranged from \$44 to \$176 for GGSM and from \$55 to \$114 for P-EBT. The mean cost-per-meal varied from \$2.97 to \$15.27 for GGSM and from \$6.41 to \$6.79 for P-EBT.

Program reach in April/May 2020

- ▶ GGSM - 8 million children (27% of FRPM-eligible)
- ▶ P-EBT - 27 million children (89% of FRPM-eligible)

Benefits delivered per child served (mean)

- ▶ GGSM - 50 meals per month valued at \$148
- ▶ P-EBT - 39 meals per month valued at \$110

Cost per meal delivered (mean)

- ▶ GGSM - \$8.07
- ▶ P-EBT - \$6.46



Conclusions and Policy Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic created a huge challenge for families of children who depend on schools as a source of nutritious meals. The innovative and flexible P-EBT and GGSM programs, developed collaboratively by the USDA, states, and school districts, offered an unprecedented opportunity to learn about policies to assure provision of nutritious meals when schools are closed.

Both programs made significant contributions to keeping children fed; however, there were important differences between the programs with respect to reach, meals provided, and costs.

- P-EBT reached many more children — 89% of those eligible — at a lower cost-per-meal than GGSM.
- GGSM may reach children needing meals who might not be served by P-EBT, since GGSM offered meals to all children under 18 regardless of household income, while P-EBT served only FRPM-eligible students.
- GGSM ensures nutritional adequacy of meals, since the meals had to meet basic USDA standards. In contrast, P-EBT dollars could be used to purchase any non-prepared foods or beverages.

The two programs are complementary and should be continued as part of responses to future emergencies. Future development of these programs should consider:

- Expanding P-EBT coverage to all days in a month — not just school days (as it was structured during the pandemic) — and offering it during all times when schools are closed for lengthy periods, both during future emergencies as well as during planned closures (i.e., winter, spring, and summer breaks) given the reach and cost-effectiveness of this program. Summer P-EBT has previously been piloted by USDA in several states, suggesting it would be possible to scale this program up.¹⁹ Making P-EBT readily available during emergencies would also require developing systems so that it could be quickly deployed to avoid delayed benefit distribution.
- Expanding the reach of existing summer feeding programs that operate similarly to GGSM, like the Summer Food Service Program and Seamless Summer Option, and offering them at other times when schools are closed in addition to summer.
- Incentivizing parents to purchase healthier foods when using P-EBT benefits, which will promote the nutritional quality of meals prepared from food purchased with P-EBT benefits.
- Developing nutrition standards for GGSM that align with standards for meals served in schools while considering the constraints that programs may face in providing packaged meals for off-site consumption.
- Identifying cost-effective approaches to implementation and helping states adopt them to reduce variation in costs across states, especially for GGSM.

Future research and policy should focus on streamlining operating costs for both programs, identifying how the two programs can operate together more synergistically, and exploring how to optimize the nutritional quality of meals provided by the programs.

P-EBT and GGSM successfully assured access to nutritious food during school closures for millions of children who rely on schools for healthy meals. These programs should be continued and expanded so that children are food secure whenever schools are closed, whether during future emergencies or regular school breaks.

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Appendix 1:

Data sources for estimating program reach, benefits, and implementation costs for grab-and-go school meals and the Pandemic-Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) programs, Spring 2020*

Source	Data Description
REACH	
U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey	Number and proportion of free and reduced-price meal-eligible (FRPM) families who report picking up a free school meal
USDA P-EBT 2019-2020 SY State Plans ¹³	Total number of P-EBT/FRPM-eligible children per state (for some states)
American Community Survey ¹⁴	Number of children aged 0-19 per state
Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and Food Research & Action Center, "Pandemic-EBT Implementation Documentation Project" ¹²	Surveys of total number of P-EBT/FRPM-eligible children; number of times P-EBT benefits were issued in each state
State Government Websites and Press Releases	Number of children receiving P-EBT
USDA P-EBT Distribution Data ¹⁵	Number of children receiving P-EBT
BENEFITS	
USDA Child Nutrition Tables (School Meal Distribution and Reimbursement Data for NSLP, NSBP, SSO, SFSP)	Total meals distributed in each state for April and May of 2020
USDA P-EBT Distribution Data ¹⁵	Total dollar amounts disbursed per state per month for March-June 2020
USDA P-EBT 2019-2020 SY State Plans ¹³	Planned/budgeted dollar amounts to be disbursed for P-EBT for March-June 2020
COSTS	
USDA P-EBT 2019-2020 SY Approved State Plans ¹³	State-requested P-EBT administrative funding for the 2020-2021 academic school year
USFA School Meal Cost Survey ¹⁶	District-level cost associated with delivering school meals (including administrative, operating, and food costs) for seven of the largest U.S. school food authorities
UW School Meal Cost Survey (primary data)	District-level cost associated with delivering school meals (including administrative, operating, and food costs) for a convenience sample of 17 districts nationally
Davis & You (2010): Family cooking time and meal prep cost estimates ¹⁸	Estimated cost to FRPM-eligible family (including time and wage) to prepare home meals
Voulgaris et al (2017) Travel to school time and mileage to school estimates ¹⁷	Estimated travel cost for a family to reach a school site to pick up a school meal to-go (including time and mileage costs, taking into account drivers and bus-riders)

* The months of April and May 2020 were analyzed for grab-and-go meals, while the months of March, April, May, and June were analyzed for P-EBT.

About Healthy Eating Research

Healthy Eating Research (HER) is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Technical assistance and direction are provided by Duke University under the direction of Mary Story PhD, RD, program director, and Megan Lott, MPH, RDN, deputy director. HER supports research to identify, analyze, and evaluate environmental and policy strategies that can promote healthy eating among children and prevent childhood obesity. Special emphasis is given to research projects that benefit children and adolescents and their families, especially among lower-income and racial and ethnic minority population groups that are at highest risk for poor health and well-being and nutrition related health disparities. For more information, visit www.healthyeatingresearch.org or follow HER on Twitter at [@HERResearch](https://twitter.com/HERResearch).

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