Child Nutrition Program Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic - July 2021 through September 2022

The child nutrition programs served more meals during school year 2021-22 than during the first two school years of the pandemic.

- School year 2021-22 was the third school year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most schools were open for in-person instruction and served meals in their cafeterias. The child nutrition programs served more meals from October 2021 through June 2022 than from October 2020 through June 2021 or October 2019 through June 2020.
- During school year 2021-22, program waivers let school food authorities serve free meals through the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) and get reimbursed at the higher rate of the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). School food authorities served most meals through SSO in school year 2021-22.

The child nutrition programs served fewer meals during summer 2022 than during the first two summers of the pandemic.

- Summer 2022 was the third summer of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most schools were closed for the summer, and summer meal sites opened. The child nutrition programs served fewer meals in July 2022 than in July 2020 or July 2021. The number of meals in July 2022 was comparable to July 2019 (before the pandemic).

- School food authorities and other types of program providers may run child nutrition programs in the summer. School food authorities may use SSO or SFSP, whereas other types of program providers must use SFSP. Many school food authorities continued using SSO from the school year into the summer and were reimbursed at the higher SFSP rate. SSO was widely used, but most program providers served summer meals through SFSP.

State agencies used the waivers and flexibilities we provided and said they improved services to children.

- Sixty-eight state agencies ran child nutrition programs during the study period. All of them used two or more of the waivers and flexibilities we provided during the study period.
- State agencies said several waivers improved children’s access to meals by reducing barriers, increasing participation, increasing the number of meal sites, and improving safety. One of these waivers (mentioned above) let school food authorities serve meals through SSO, instead of the school meal programs, during school year 2021-22. School food authorities that used SSO didn’t need to collect payments from children, so they could serve meals faster and in settings without electronic payment systems (like classrooms).
- Some waivers let program operators serve meals that didn’t meet every meal pattern requirement. Like previous pandemic years, state agencies said program operators most often waived the milk, grains, or vegetable requirements (although there was wide variation across programs). Program providers used these waivers to keep kids fed when they faced supply issues that made it difficult to get foods they needed to meet the requirements.
- Some waivers provided administrative flexibilities. These waivers reduced the amount of reporting state agencies needed to send us and let them adapt their oversight methods to permit safe, socially distanced monitoring. State agencies said these waivers let them focus their administrative resources on priority areas and provide technical assistance to their program operators.

State agencies overcame many challenges during the study period.

Almost all state agencies said they faced challenges while overseeing the child nutrition programs in school year 2021-22 and summer 2022. State agencies were able to overcome some challenges by collaborating with one another and with program operators, as well as by receiving helpful guidance and assistance from FNS regional and national offices.

Why FNS Did This Study

This study is part of the School Meal Program Operations study series, and had two main purposes:

1. To collect information required by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), and
2. To help us understand child nutrition program operations during school year 2021-22 and summer 2022.

FFCRA required state agencies to report which waivers they used and how they improved services to children. Through this study, state agencies met their FFCRA reporting requirement and helped us understand child nutrition program operations during the third school year and summer of the pandemic.

How FNS Did This Study

The study team collected data from the state agencies that oversee the child nutrition programs:

- A web survey was used to ask state agencies which waivers they used during school year 2021-22 and summer 2022, how the waivers improved services to children and what challenges they faced overseeing the child nutrition programs during the study period.
- States sent fiscal year 2022 program data about schools, sites, and outlets, which they collect to send FNS statewide reports.

- Yearly assessments help us ensure that the child nutrition programs are effective. Program assessments are so important they're written into law - see part §1769i of the National School Lunch Act.
- Federal agencies must comply with the Paperwork Reduction Act. Before collecting data from the public, we publish the data collection plans and asks the public for comments. You can read the Information Collection Request and 60-day and 30-day requests for public comments.

Programs This Study Evaluates

- National School Lunch Program
- School Breakfast Program
- Summer Food Service Program and Seamless Summer Option
- Child and Adult Care Food Program

Suggested Citation

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