

USDA Child Nutrition Program Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic, July 2020 Through December 2021 (Summary)

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service's (FNS) Child Nutrition Programs (CNP) help ensure that children have access to nutritious meals. The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) operate in schools and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) operates in childcare settings. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted in-person education and childcare services, and therefore NSLP, SBP, and CACFP operations, from spring 2020 through the next two school years.

In response, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), signed into law March 18, 2020, gave FNS authority to issue nationwide waivers of CNP requirements. The waivers authorized the use of the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) to serve all meals for free during non-summer months, allowed new meal service methods that prioritized access and safety, and streamlined administrative requirements.

FFCRA required States to report the use of each waiver and whether and how it improved services for CNP participants. This data collection fulfills States' reporting requirements and describes trends in program participation and operations from July 2020 through December 2021. It is part of an ongoing series examining CNP operations, repurposed to collect waiver reports from States. A previous report in the series detailed waiver usage and trends in program participation and operations from March through September 2020.¹

Methods

FNS contracted with Mathematica to collect survey and administrative data from all State agencies that operated CNPs between July 2020 and December 2021. Mathematica also surveyed School Food Authorities (SFAs) that operated CNPs during the same period.

The web-based survey for State agencies collected information required by FFCRA about the use of each nationwide waiver and States' perceptions of whether and how waivers improved services to program participants. The survey also asked about State implementation of the Child Nutrition Emergency

Key Findings

- Nearly all (90 percent) of SFAs reported using a COVID-19 waiver flexibility in SY 2020-21. FNS waivers contributed to greater access to healthy meals across all CNPs.
- Area Eligibility waivers were key to improving access to meals through CACFP and SFSP in SY 2020-21 and Summer 2021.
- SFAs reported three persistent challenges during SY 2020-21 and Fall 2021: supply chain issues and food shortages, staffing, and obtaining meal packaging.
- By September 2021 (when most students returned to full-time in-school instruction and meals were served for free due to the COVID-19 waivers) the number of meals served through NSLP, SBP, SSO, and SFSP had returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Operational Costs Reimbursement Programs and challenges faced by State agencies during school year (SY) 2020-21 and summer 2021.

All 67 State agencies that operate NSLP, SBP, SSO, SFSP, or CACFP report monthly data to FNS about program participation and meals served, which are aggregated at the State agency level. State agencies provided these data from October 2020 through September 2021 at the site level for study purposes.

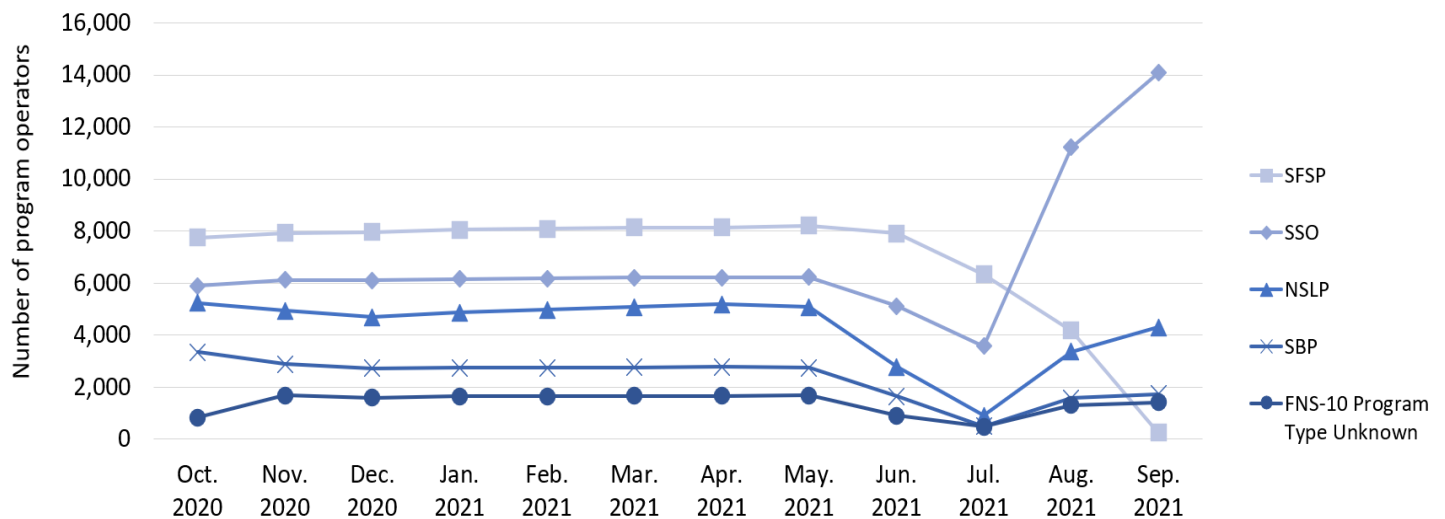
The web-based survey administered to a nationally representative sample of 1,094 SFAs gathered

¹ Severn, V., Washburn, L., Frisk, R., et al. (2023). *USDA Child Nutrition Program Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic, March through September 2020*. Prepared by Mathematica, Contract No. 12319819A0009/12319819F0162. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Conor McGovern. Available at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/research/cn/pandemic-operations-march-sept-2020>

information on how SFAs used CNPs and waivers to provide meal services during SY 2020-21 and October through December 2021. The survey also collected

information about how the pandemic impacted SFA operations and finances during the same period.

Figure 1. Program operator participation in Child Nutrition Programs, October 2020 through September 2021ⁱ



ⁱ All 50 States, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands provided SFA- sponsor- or institution-level data included in this figure.

Findings: Meal Service Operations

SFAs reported that most students received instruction in school buildings during SY 2020–21. Seventy-four percent of SFAs reported that most students received in-person instruction for most of SY 2020-21. Forty-one percent of SFAs reported that students were in the classroom full-time, while the remaining SFAs were using a hybrid model. Small and rural SFAs and SFAs with poverty levels below 60 percent were more likely to have in-person instruction than other SFAs.

Most SFAs reported serving in-school meals in cafeterias and out-of-school meals using curbside pickup during SY 2020-21. Cafeteria service was more common in small and rural SFAs and SFAs with poverty levels below 60 percent than other SFAs.

During SY 2020-21, most meals were served through SFSP or SSO. Child participation and meals served through school-based and summer CNPs surpassed the numbers from early pandemic months.¹ In addition, child participation and meals served during summer 2021 remained higher than pre-pandemic levels. In September 2021, the number of meals served across NSLP, SBP, SSO, and SFSP either matched or exceeded pre-pandemic monthly totals for October 2019 through February 2020.

Findings: Programs and Access

Nearly all (90 percent) of SFAs reported using a COVID-19 waiver flexibility in SY 2020-21. Waivers contributed

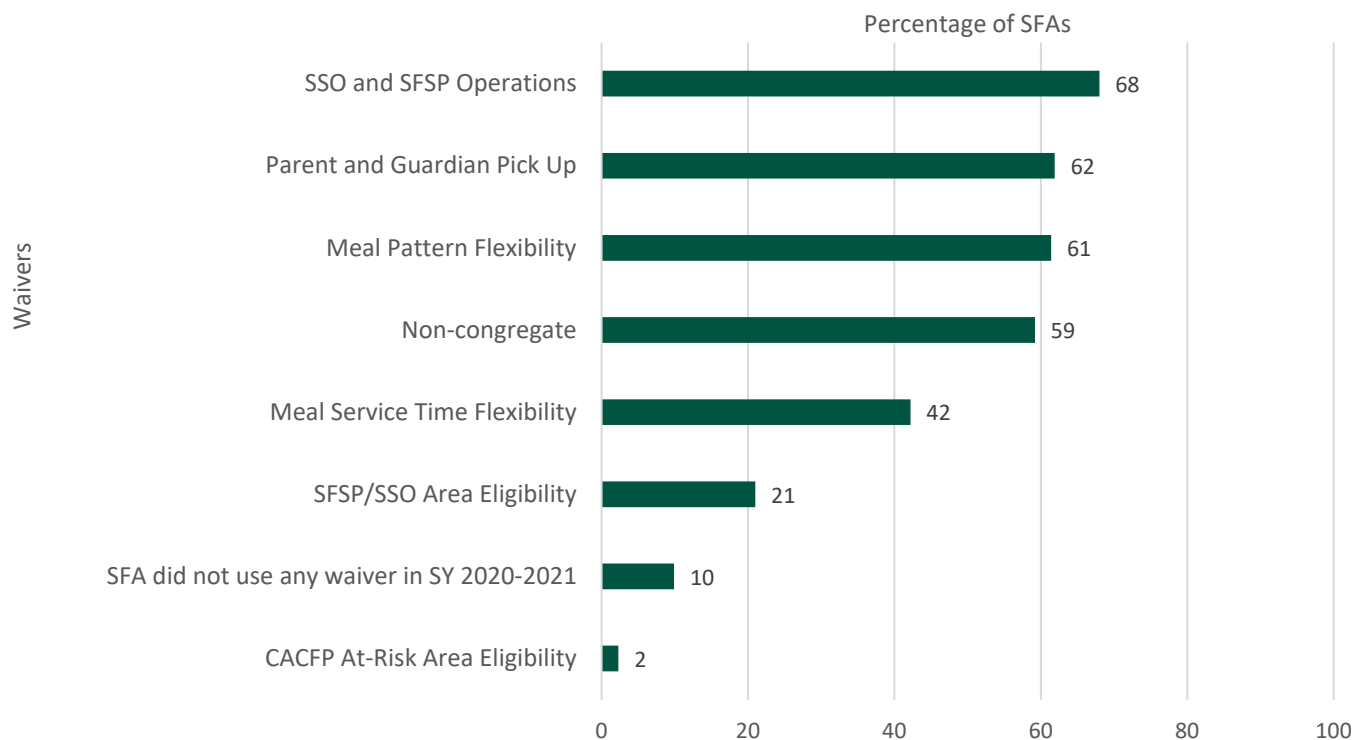
to greater access to healthy meals across all CNPs by providing all meals free and allowing alternate meal service methods such as non-congregate meal service.

The most-used waiver in SY 2020-21 permitted operation of SSO and SFSP. Sixty-eight percent of SFAs reported using the SSO and SFSP Operations waiver to serve free meals to all children in non-summer months (see Figure 2). About 8,000 program operators used SFSP and about 6,000 used SSO each month between October 2020 and June 2021 (see Figure 1).

About 60 percent of SFAs reported using the Non-Congregate Meal Service and Parent Guardian Pick up waivers and 40 percent used the Meal Service Time Flexibility waiver. These waivers allowed CNP operators to use alternative meal service methods to prioritize access and safety. State agencies and SFAs reported that these waivers improved services to children.

About 61 percent of SFAs reported using the Meal Pattern Flexibility waiver. This waiver helped compensate SFAs for supply chain issues that impacted their ability to provide meals that would meet meal pattern requirements. State agencies and SFAs most frequently reported using this waiver for grains and milk, followed by vegetables. States reported that that the Meal Pattern Flexibility waiver was used most for SFSP and less than half of program operators used it for multiple food components.

Figure 2. Percentage of SFAs that used each COVID-19 Child Nutrition Nationwide Waiver during SY 2020-21ⁱⁱ



ⁱⁱ Percentages were calculated by dividing the number of SFAs that reported using each COVID-19 Child Nutrition waiver by the total number of SFAs.

Area Eligibility waivers were key to improving access to meals through CACFP and SFSP in SY 2020-21 and Summer 2021. Ninety percent of State agencies reported that Area Eligibility waivers increased participation and reduced barriers to children receiving meals. In spring 2020, State agencies reported that these waivers contributed to an increase in the number and geographic distribution of meal sites.

State agencies reported that On-site Monitoring waivers reduced administrative burden overall and allowed State agencies and program operators more flexibility. Nearly all State agencies and program operators used one or more On-site Monitoring waivers to conduct virtual visits, on-site visits with social distancing, and desk audits for all programs in SY 2020-21.

Nearly all State agencies opted into the Child Nutrition Emergency Operational Costs Reimbursement Programs,² which provided additional funding for program operators that experienced pandemic-related disruptions between March and June 2020. Seventy-eight percent of State agencies and SFAs said the payments

were highly or somewhat effective. Most SFAs used or planned to use the funds to cover food costs.

Findings: Operational and Financial Challenges
While States reported benefits to On-site Monitoring waivers, developing and implementing new monitoring protocols was challenging for State agencies. Most States also reported challenges with maintaining resources to run all CNPs simultaneously, review and approve waiver requests, and provide technical assistance to program operators.

SFAs reported three persistent challenges in SY 2020-21 and fall 2021: staffing, obtaining meal packaging, and food shortages or supply chain issues. Sixty-eight percent of SFAs reported operational challenges during SY 2020-2021, and 64 percent reported operational challenges in fall 2021 (see Table 1). Forty percent of SFAs reported financial challenges, many of which are associated with their top operational challenges.

² Funds were authorized under Sec. 722 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021

Table 1. Percentage of SFAs reporting that certain factors contributed to challenges in SY 2020–21 and fall 2021ⁱⁱⁱ

Top Operational Challenges	SY 2020–21	Oct–Dec 2021
Food shortages or supply chain issues	55.9	59.3
Managing meal service during staff absences	52.2	46.2
Obtaining meal packaging	46.4	47.3
Staffing meal sites	44.7	39.2
Establishing and using new or alternative meal service methods	37.6	12
Ensuring staff safety or obtaining personal protective equipment	30	15.4

ⁱⁱⁱ Percentages were calculated by dividing the number of SFAs that reported each factor contributing to each challenge by the total number of SFAs that reported using a Child Nutrition Program.

For More Information:

Washburn, Liana, Veronica Severn, Brett Eiffes, Katie Niland, Leah Jennings, and Kevin Conway. (2023). Child Nutrition Program Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic: School Year 2020–2021, Summer 2021, and Fall 2021. Prepared by Mathematica, Contract No. AG-3198-B-16-0004/12319819F0021. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support.