

## USDA Child Nutrition Program Operations During the COVID-19 Pandemic, March Through September 2020 (Summary)

### Background

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service's (FNS) Child Nutrition (CN) programs 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, in spring 2020.

In response, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA), signed into law March 18, 2020, gave FNS authority to issue nationwide waivers of CN program requirements. In States that applied for the waivers, CN program operators served meals through the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) (which operate during unanticipated school closures as well as the summer), used new meal service methods that prioritized access and safety (such as grab n' go meals), and had streamlined administrative requirements.

FFCRA required States to report the use of each waiver and whether and how it improved services for CN program participants. This data collection fulfills States' reporting requirements and describes trends in program participation during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, March through September 2020. It is part of an ongoing study series examining CN program operations, repurposed to collect waiver reports from all States.

### Methods

FNS contracted with Mathematica to collect survey and administrative data from all State agencies that operated CN programs in March through September 2020.

The web-based survey collected information required by FFCRA about the use of each CN nationwide waiver and States' perceptions of whether and how waivers improved services to program participants. The survey also asked about meal service methods and challenges faced by States and local program operators.

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. For the data collection reported herein, State agencies were asked to provide these data at the site level. In total, 44, 44, 33, 45, and 45 State agencies provided site-level data for NSLP, SBP, SSO, SFSP, and

CACFP, respectively. The trends observed in the site-level data generally mirror the State-level data.

### Findings

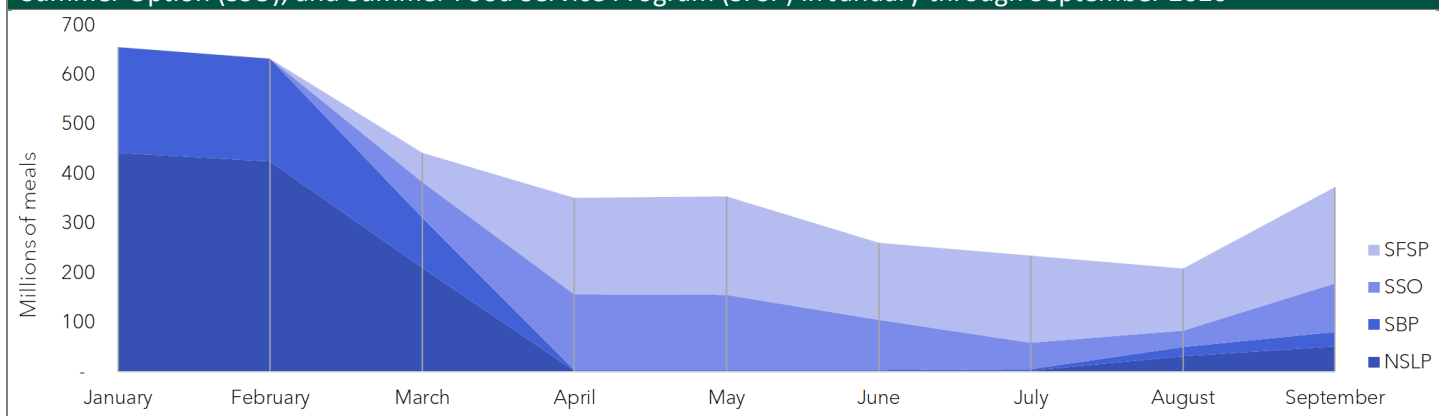
**The most-used waiver permitted use of SSO and SFSP during unanticipated school closures and enabled new meal service methods that prioritized access and safety.** The latter waivers relaxed program requirements to allow non-congregate feeding, meal service time flexibility, and parent/guardian meal pick up.

**SSO and SFSP operators commonly distributed two or more days of meals at a time to parents or guardians using drive-thru and walk-up methods.** SSO and SFSP operators most frequently used written and verbal communications and requested identifying information to ensure they distributed meals to parents or guardians of eligible children and did not distribute duplicate meals.

### Key Findings

- States reported that waivers of CN program requirements authorized by FFCRA improved services to children.
- The most-used waivers permitted use of SSO and SFSP during unanticipated school closures and enabled new meal service methods that prioritized access and safety.
- SSO and SFSP were the primary CN programs used to serve meals. While the total number of meals served through CN programs was lower than that of a typical school year, more than twice as many SSO and SFSP meals were served in July 2020 than July 2019.
- The pandemic disrupted CACFP operations more in childcare centers than in family daycare homes.

**Figure 1: Meals served through National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Seamless Summer Option (SSO), and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) in January through September 2020**

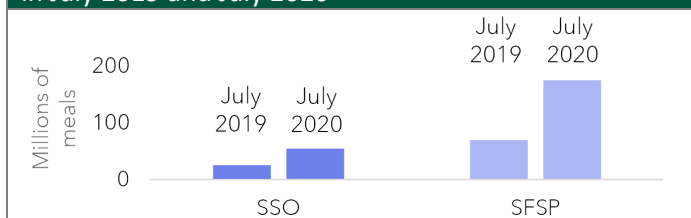


**States reported that less than half of program operators used the meal pattern flexibility waiver.** Ten percent of CACFP operators, 16 percent of SFSP operators, 30-31 percent of NSLP and SBP operators, and 45 percent of SSO operators waived meal pattern requirements.

**The waivers improved services to children.** States overwhelmingly reported that FFCRA waivers improved services for program participants. In particular, States perceived that waiver use reduced barriers to receiving meals and improved COVID-related safety for children.

**When the pandemic disrupted NSLP and SBP operations, program operators served meals through SSO and SFSP.** CN program operations were typical in the months preceding the pandemic. In mid-March 2020, the pandemic disrupted in-person education and, therefore, school-based CN program operations. As reported above, the most-used waiver allowed program operators to use SSO and SFSP to feed schoolchildren during the unanticipated school closures. SSO and SFSP were the primary CN programs used to serve schoolchildren meals through September 2020, but CN programs served fewer total meals than before the pandemic (Figure 1).

**Figure 2: Meals served through Seamless Summer Option (SSO) and Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) in July 2019 and July 2020**



**SSO and SFSP served more than twice as many meals in July 2020 than in July 2019.** CN programs typically serve

fewer meals in the summer than during the school year, and this was true in 2020 (Figure 1). However, SSO served 54 million meals in July 2020 compared to 25 million meals in July 2019, and SFSP served 175 million meals in July 2020 compared to 70 million meals in July 2019 (Figure 2).

**The pandemic disrupted CACFP operations in childcare centers more than in family daycare homes.** The number of meals served through CACFP decreased from March to April 2020 (site-level data are not available for earlier months). The decrease was larger in childcare centers (from 70 to 30 million meals) than in family daycare homes (from 18 to 13 million meals). By September, the total number of meals served was close to March levels.

**States reported that program operators faced operational challenges.** The greatest challenges were operating during staff absences, ensuring staff safety and obtaining personal protective equipment, redistributing staff to manage meal sites and delivery methods, providing meals during food shortages and supply chain issues, establishing new meal delivery methods, and obtaining meal packaging.

**States reported that program operators faced financial challenges.** The greatest challenges were receiving lower Federal reimbursement due to lower participation, purchasing personal protective equipment for staff, meal packaging costs, increased food costs, and meal transportation/delivery costs.

**States reported that rural program operators faced greater challenges.** About half of States reported that rural operators faced greater operational challenges than urban/suburban operators, and about two-thirds reported that rural operators faced greater financial challenges, especially with regard to transportation costs, meal site distance, and supply chain issues.

**For More Information:**

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: [www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis](http://www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis).