

POSITION STATEMENT:

Increasing Diet Quality through Pandemic-EBT benefit, SNAP, and School Meals during and after COVID-19

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SUMMARY STATEMENT:

The Society of Behavioral Medicine recommends including more nutrient-dense foods in the Pandemic-EBT and SNAP benefit, as well as maintaining the meal pattern requirements of child nutrition programs to increase diet quality while also reducing food insecurity during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.



THE PROBLEM

Food insecurity is associated with diabetes and obesity in the U.S. population, which disproportionately impacts children in low-income households and from ethnic and racial minoritized backgrounds.¹ As COVID-19 spreads throughout the United States, food insecurity has doubled with 1 in 4 children within U.S. households considered food insecure.^{2,3,4} Prior to COVID-19, approximately 40 million individuals were recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to alleviate food insecurity and hunger each month (\$646 per month, \$1.40 per person, per meal, per month for eligible families of four).² In addition, over 30 million children relied on the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program each day. SBP and NSLP meal patterns mandated by the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act (HHFKA) established calorie, sodium, and saturated fat limits; set fruit, vegetable, and whole grains requirements; and eliminated high-fat milk.⁵ These changes improved the overall nutritional quality of school-provided meals,^{6,7,8} with better nutrition observed in school-provided meals compared with those brought from home (i.e., greater fruit intake, less added sugars and dietary fat intake).⁹ However, COVID-19 school closures and associated disruptions to these meal services have raised alarming concerns about increased hunger in children.¹⁰ Waivers and flexibilities amended existing policies to maintain meal access during these unprecedented times, permitting, among other things, alternate distribution methods (e.g., meal distribution centers and school-bus route delivery) to address this crisis of hunger. Yet these waivers also permitted flexibilities regarding adherence to

the meal patterns mandated by the HHFKA. There is thus great concern that, although meal provision persists, nutritional disparities, and associated health inequities, will be further exacerbated via lower diet quality meals provided to the most vulnerable youth. Maintaining optimal nutrition standards throughout the pandemic and beyond is of paramount importance to maximize children's diet quality, while also improving food security.

CURRENT POLICY

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) authorized \$100 billion in relief through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (responsible for administering child nutrition and food assistance programs) to make temporary changes to support food security during the pandemic, which includes the Pandemic EBT (P-EBT).^{2,10,11} This program allows states to provide between \$250 to \$450 per child in grocery benefits (depending on the average number of days schools were closed in the state) to make up for missed school meals in the spring of 2020.^{10,11} In addition to alleviating food insecurity, the P-EBT benefit (similarly to SNAP benefits) has the potential to maintain diet quality during COVID-19.¹² The FFCRA also included a nationwide waiver to support eligible families' access to nutrient-dense meals via other federal child nutrition programs (i.e., SBP, NSLP, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and SNAP).¹³ With policymakers extending P-EBT and waiver benefits through fiscal year 2021,^{10,13} beneficiaries are able to receive meals outside of the standard mealtimes to ensure children are still being fed during the pandemic.¹⁴

POLICY GAPS

- Although these new initiatives provide essential funding and supports to reduce hunger, there is concern that diet quality might be compromised for the most vulnerable children.
- Through P-EBT benefits, families can buy food at most grocery stores, farmer's markets, some corner stores, or online. However, hot or prepared foods are not eligible for purchase with this benefit in some states.¹⁵ This is challenging given that some families may not have the affordances (i.e., home inventory; budget and time constraints) to consume and prepare freshly cooked meals regularly, particularly nutrient-dense foods.^{16,17}
- Additionally, although a SNAP Online Purchasing Pilot have been substantially expanded across 47 states, there are certain issues that could help optimize its implementation, including retailers' involvement and education to help SNAP participants navigate the SNAP online purchasing system.¹⁸ Also, shopping for groceries online is not universally available through P-EBT or related food assistance benefits yet. Online grocery purchasing using food assistance benefits warrants consideration nationwide in order to increase food access among minoritized families since they have increased exposure risk while already experiencing the highest COVID-19 positivity rates in the country and potentially exacerbating nutrition and health inequities. There is thus a great need to provide expanded access to select healthful foods during and after the pandemic through online grocery shopping.
- The FFCRA included flexibilities and waivers that permitted schools to veer from the meal pattern requirements set forth by the HHFKA. However, guardrails were included in the wording of this law that stated that these meal patterns can only be waived if there are food chain supply disruptions. Yet, there are widespread observations and concerns that USDA is permitting schools to waive nutrition standards and apply meal patterns flexibilities much too liberally, despite lack of food supply disruptions, yielding provision of lower diet quality meals.¹⁹ These actions by the USDA are particularly concerning given pre-pandemic and more recent - efforts to loosen the healthy meal standards mandated by the HHFKA.
- It is critical that stakeholders work across and within sectors with the SBP/NSLP, WIC and SNAP to ensure that the meals provided are of high diet quality. The following recommendations could inform legislation to promote higher diet quality and address food insecurity through food assistance programs:

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) should expand the type of nutrient-dense foods allowed for purchase through the P-EBT and SNAP benefits, to include hot or prepared nutrient-dense foods that are culturally and personally acceptable to beneficiaries with low income while adhering to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Recommendation #2

To reduce exposure risk to COVID-19, policymakers should amend policies that minimize restrictions for online grocery shopping through food assistance benefits while 1) offering retail food storeowners incentives for using online point-of-sale strategies to promote and facilitate nutrient-dense food purchasing; 2) and providing user-friendly guidelines and interfaces to eligible families for ordering nutrient-dense foods using food assistance benefits (i.e., P-EBT, SNAP).

Recommendation #3

USDA should maintain the current meal pattern standards for school-provided meals and related child nutrition programs, and only permit waivers if there are true food service disruptions (i.e., agency/staff transitions) due to COVID-19.

Recommendation #4

Policymakers should develop government-funded programs to increase access to nutrient-dense foods via school meals that meet or exceed meal pattern standards post COVID-19. For example, establishing initiatives that bring fresh produce to school settings for eligible recipients (i.e., farm-to-school food trucks).

Recommendation #5

Consistent with President Biden's Executive Order to advance racial equity²⁰, policymakers must commit to addressing the root causes of poverty and hunger that ultimately shape food insecurity by developing policies and programs aimed at eliminating racial gaps in wages and housing credit, among others.

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