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Recovery Legislation Could Help End Summer Childhood Hunger

By Zoë Neuberger

The end of the school year usually coincides with a troubling spike in childhood hunger as low-income children lose access to free and reduced-price school meals. Federal policymakers likely staved off child hunger this coming summer through temporary pandemic measures, including extending the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, which provides grocery benefits in place of school meals. They now have an opportunity to include a permanent summer EBT program in economic recovery legislation so that summer hunger does not return after the pandemic ends.

The infrastructure for this program already exists, now that states have implemented P-EBT and are preparing to continue it into the summer. And there is bipartisan interest in addressing summer hunger among children. Policymakers should enact a measure in President Biden's American Families Plan to invest \$25 billion over the next decade to make summer EBT available nationwide every summer.

Children's Food Hardship Spikes in Summer

School meals play a critical role in preventing hunger during the school year, but long-standing federal summer nutrition programs reach just 1 in 7 of the children who rely on free or reduced-price meals during the school year.¹ The 50-year-old Summer Food Service Program provides free meals to children in group settings, usually combined with education or enrichment programs, and schools can also offer meals under a National School Lunch Program option that simplifies administration during the summer.²

Despite efforts to increase participation, both programs have limited reach. It is difficult to set up a meal program that operates for just a short period of time and there is limited funding for enrichment programs. As a result, the number of available sites is limited, particularly in areas where

¹ Food Research & Action Center, "Hunger Doesn't Take a Vacation: Summer Nutrition Status Report," August 2020, <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/FRAC-Summer-Nutrition-Report-2020.pdf>.

² For more information about this option, known as the Seamless Summer Option, see Food and Nutrition Service, "An Opportunity for Schools," U.S. Department of Agriculture, August 13, 2013, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/opportunity-schools>.

low-income children are dispersed. Where there are sites, families may not be aware of them or may not have the work flexibility or transportation to get children to them when meals are being served.

In 2019, participation in these two federal summer nutrition programs declined for the fourth year in a row, with 75,000 fewer children receiving summer lunches than in the previous year.³ Access to these summer meal programs also varies widely across the country, reaching fewer than 1 in 10 children who rely on free or reduced-price school meals in some states and 1 in 4 children in a few others.⁴

This gap in nutrition assistance has led food hardship to rise among children in the summer. Households with school-aged children experience greater summertime increases in food hardship than households with no or younger children, and the absence of school meals plays a substantial role.⁵ When summer meals are available, they can reduce the chance that a child experiences the most severe form of food hardship, known as very low food security.⁶

Food insecurity affects people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds throughout the year. But, due in significant part to harsh, long-standing inequities and structural racism in education, employment, and other areas, food insecurity is particularly acute for people of color. In 2019, children experienced food insecurity in nearly 12 percent of Black, non-Latino households and nearly 8 percent of Latino households, compared to 5 percent of white, non-Latino households.⁷ (See Figure 1.) Racial disparities are even greater for very low food security, with children in Black families five times likelier to experience it than children in white families.⁸

³ Food Research & Action Center, *op. cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Mark Nord and Kathleen Romig, “Hunger in the Summer: Seasonal food insecurity and the National School Lunch and Summer Food Service programs,” *Journal of Children and Poverty*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2006, pp. 141-158, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10796120600879582>; Jin Huang, Ellen Barnidge, and Youngmi Kim, “Children Receiving Free or Reduced-Price School Lunch Have Higher Food Insufficiency Rates in Summer,” *Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 145, No. 9, September 2015, pp. 2161-68, <https://doi.org/10.3945/jn.115.214486>.

⁶ Daniel P. Miller, “Accessibility of summer meals and the food insecurity of low-income households with children,” *Public Health Nutrition*, Vol. 19, No.11, August 2016, pp. 2079-89, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/public-health-nutrition/article/accessibility-of-summer-meals-and-the-food-insecurity-of-lowincome-households-with-children/0D371AD6B660E965FBFAFA6BFF328F824>.

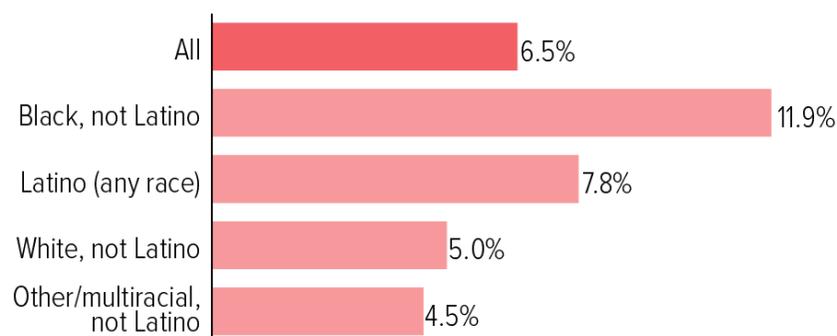
⁷ Household race is based on the race of the person in whose name the housing unit is owned or rented. Alisha Coleman-Jensen *et al.*, “Household Food Security in the United States in 2019,” Economic Research Service, Department of Agriculture, September 2020, Table 3, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/99282/err-275.pdf>.

⁸ Coleman-Jensen *et al.*, *op. cit.*

FIGURE 1

Children’s Food Insecurity Higher in Black and Latino Households

Share of households with children who are food insecure, 2019



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

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Expanding access to nutrition assistance in the summer can help keep children healthy and ready to succeed in school. Reading and math skills often decline in the summer, and this slide may be greater for children in low-income households.⁹ Even short periods of food insecurity pose long-term risks for children. Conversely, interventions that provide access to affordable food and reduce food insecurity have been linked to better health for young children as well as long-term improvements in health and longevity, greater high-school completion, and higher earnings and self-sufficiency in adulthood.¹⁰

Reducing children’s food insecurity by increasing their access to healthy food during the summer may play a meaningful role in positioning them for ongoing educational success. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits have been shown to improve educational outcomes during the school year,¹¹ and similar payments provided through a summer EBT program when school meals are not available could likewise contribute to improved educational outcomes.

⁹ David M. Quinn and Morgan Polikoff, “Summer learning loss: What is it, and what can we do about it?” Brookings Institution, September 14, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/summer-learning-loss-what-is-it-and-what-can-we-do-about-it/>.

¹⁰ Claire Zippel and Arloc Sherman, “Bolstering Family Income Is Essential to Helping Children Emerge Successfully From the Current Crisis,” CBPP, updated February 25, 2021, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/bolstering-family-income-is-essential-to-helping-children-emerge>.

¹¹ Edward Frongillo, Diana F. Jyoti, and Sonya J. Jones, “Food Stamp Program Participation Is Associated with Better Academic Learning among School Children,” *Journal of Nutrition*, Vol. 136, No. 4, 2006, pp. 1077-80, <http://jn.nutrition.org/content/136/4/1077.full>; and Hilary Hoynes, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Douglas Almond, “Long-Run Impacts of Childhood Access to the Safety Net,” *American Economic Review*, Vol. 106, No. 4, 2016, pp. 903-934. P-EBT distributes benefits through the same EBT cards and financial management system that states and the Agriculture Department use for SNAP benefits.

Summer EBT Is a Proven Model

Providing grocery benefits circumvents the barriers that prevent many eligible families from accessing meals at summer sites. In fiscal year 2010 Congress directed the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to carry out demonstration projects to determine whether providing a supplementary summer grocery benefit could reduce food insecurity among low-income children and improve their nutrition.¹² Summer EBT achieved both goals, substantially decreasing food hardship and improving nutritional outcomes. An independent evaluation published in 2016 found that:

- The most severe form of food hardship — very low food security (or less formally, hunger¹³) — dropped by one-third in response to a monthly summer EBT benefit, falling from 9 percent to 6 percent of children.¹⁴
- Children receiving summer EBT consumed more fruits and vegetables and whole grains.¹⁵

The summer EBT demonstration also served as the model for P-EBT, which policymakers established soon after COVID-19 hit the United States.¹⁶ P-EBT operated in every state for the spring of 2020¹⁷ and substantially reduced food hardship among children by providing grocery benefits to replace meals that children were missing due to school and child care closures.

Researchers found that among SNAP participants who received P-EBT benefits, “P-EBT paid out over the preceding two weeks reduce[d] household food insecurity by 6 percentage points and the share of households reporting that members sometimes or often do not have enough food to eat by 7 percentage points. It also reduce[d] the rate of children’s food hardship by 8 percentage points. . . . [D]uring the first week after P-EBT benefits [were] paid, the rate of children not getting enough to eat decline[d] by 11 percentage points — which is more than a 30 percent reduction in the usual rate in this population.”¹⁸

¹² P.L. 117-80 § 748.

¹³ Prior to 2006, households with *low* food security were described as “food insecure without hunger,” and households with *very low* food security were described as “food insecure with hunger.” Although changes in these descriptions were made in 2006 at the recommendation of the Committee on National Statistics (to distinguish the physiological state of hunger from indicators of food availability), the criteria by which households were classified remained unchanged. Coleman-Jensen *et al.*, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Ann M. Collins *et al.*, “Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration: Summary Report,” Abt Associates and Mathematica Policy Research, May 2016, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/ops/sebctfinalreport.pdf>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ CBPP, “CBPP/FRAC P-EBT Documentation Project Shows How States Implemented a New Program to Provide Food Benefits to Up to 30 Million Low-Income School Children,” www.cbpp.org/pebt.

¹⁷ All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands implemented P-EBT for the spring of the 2019-2020 school year. USDA has approved P-EBT plans for 49 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands for the 2020-2021 school year; the state awaiting approval is Wyoming. See USDA, “State Guidance on Coronavirus P-EBT,” June 28, 2021, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-guidance-coronavirus-pandemic-ebt-pebt>.

¹⁸ Lauren Bauer *et al.*, “The Effect of Pandemic EBT on Measures of Food Hardship,” Hamilton Project, July 2020, p. 5, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/P-EBT_LO_7.30.pdf.

Temporary Summer EBT Program Ramping Up Now

The success of P-EBT led policymakers to extend it into the summer through the American Rescue Plan.¹⁹ For the first time this summer, all low-income children will be eligible for grocery benefits to replace the school meals they are missing. Each state, once USDA approves its plan, will be able to offer approximately \$375 in grocery benefits to cover the cost of summer meals for each low-income child.²⁰

If all states participate, nearly 30 million school-aged children will qualify for P-EBT this summer.²¹ (See Table 1.) As of June 28, USDA had already approved plans for summer P-EBT for 13 states and Puerto Rico,²² and other states are expected to follow.²³ States with an approved plan for the upcoming 2021-2022 school year will be able to offer benefits during the summer of 2022 as well. But this program is temporary, and when it ends summertime hunger spikes will likely return.

Permanent Summer EBT Program Would Prevent Resurgence of Child Hunger

Creating a permanent summer EBT program would be a major step toward eliminating hunger among low-income children. The infrastructure for this program already exists, now that states have implemented P-EBT and are preparing to continue it into the summer. An investment in summer EBT could be made alongside measures to help more community organizations offer summer programs with meals, so children could benefit from enrichment activities as well.

President Biden's American Families Plan would invest \$25 billion over the next decade to make summer EBT available nationwide every summer.²⁴ There is also bipartisan interest in Congress in addressing summer hunger, with multiple bills pending in both chambers. Policymakers should seize the opportunity to address the summer gap in our safety net as part of recovery legislation, and make sure childhood hunger does not return with the end of the pandemic.

¹⁹ P.L. 117-2 § 1108. Thirteen states plus Puerto Rico had summer P-EBT plans approved as of June 28, 2021. USDA, "State Guidance on Coronavirus P-EBT," *op. cit.*

²⁰ USDA, "USDA to Provide Critical Nutrition Assistance to 30M+ Kids Over the Summer," April 26, 2021, <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2021/04/26/usda-provide-critical-nutrition-assistance-30m-kids-over-summer>.

²¹ USDA has also estimated how many children will qualify and the amount of assistance that could flow to each state. See "Pandemic EBT — Summer 2021," <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/21-04-24-p-cbt-final.pdf>.

²² USDA, "State Guidance on Coronavirus P-EBT," *op. cit.*

²³ Implementation of P-EBT for the 2020-2021 school year was more complicated than for the 2019-2020 school year because many schools operated hybrid programs that combined in-person with remote instruction and states had to determine the extent to which students had access to meals at school. States are still submitting summer P-EBT plans because they generally turned to those after USDA approved their school-year plan and they began implementation. Developing and implementing summer EBT for future summers would be much simpler.

²⁴ White House, "Fact Sheet: The American Families Plan," April 28, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/28/fact-sheet-the-american-families-plan/>.

TABLE 1

Number of Children Eligible for Pandemic EBT Benefits, Summer 2021

State	Number of School-Aged Children
Alabama	468,000
Alaska	68,000
Arizona	631,000
Arkansas	324,000
California	3,862,000
Colorado	354,000
Connecticut	261,000
Delaware	94,000
District of Columbia	69,000
Florida	1,933,000
Georgia	1,143,000
Hawaii	93,000
Idaho	123,000
Illinois	1,122,000
Indiana	575,000
Iowa	241,000
Kansas	234,000
Kentucky	586,000
Louisiana	613,000
Maine	77,000
Maryland	418,000
Massachusetts	446,000
Michigan	838,000
Minnesota	319,000
Mississippi	349,000
Missouri	456,000
Montana	63,000
Nebraska	149,000
Nevada	323,000
New Hampshire	42,000
New Jersey	576,000
New Mexico	267,000
New York	2,150,000
North Carolina	891,000
North Dakota	40,000
Ohio	846,000
Oklahoma	438,000

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Number of Children Eligible for Pandemic EBT Benefits, Summer 2021

State	Number of School-Aged Children
Oregon	289,000
Pennsylvania	945,000
Rhode Island	70,000
South Carolina	487,000
South Dakota	63,000
Tennessee	666,000
Texas	3,633,000
Utah	207,000
Vermont	39,000
Virginia	628,000
Washington	458,000
West Virginia	226,000
Wisconsin	393,000
Wyoming	29,000
American Samoa	15,000
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands	12,000
Guam	29,000
Puerto Rico	279,000
Virgin Islands	11,000
All	29,960,000

Source: "Pandemic EBT – Summer 2021," U.S. Department of Agriculture, April 26, 2021, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/21-04-24-p-ebt-final.pdf>.