



Opportunities for CalFresh Healthy Living to support equitable school meal access during emergency school closures

Research Brief • May 2022

WHAT WE DID

- Collected district website and social media posts and California Department of Education meal claims data from a stratified, random sample of 190 CalFresh Healthy Living-eligible districts in May 2020.
- Performed descriptive analyses of meal distribution, meal site characteristics and change in meal participation.
- Examined meal site location data to understand meal accessibility for under-resourced communities.

Findings were published in *Preventive Medicine Reports*:

<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2022.101794>

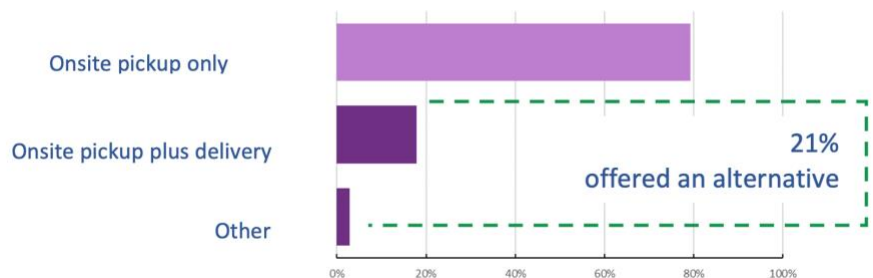
In March 2020, schools nationwide closed due to COVID-19. This impacted meal access for millions of children in California.¹⁻⁴ Despite monumental efforts by school districts to provide meals, and USDA waivers to reduce barriers, meal participation declined during closures. Our study was designed to identify barriers to meal participation and opportunities for programs, like CalFresh Healthy Living (CFHL), to support capacity building of schools to provide equitable meal access during school closures. As communities cope with floods, fires and other natural disasters, emergency school closures will likely occur in the future.

SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS

- Total school meals served among sampled CFHL eligible districts decrease by a median of 46% between May 2019 and May 2020.
- School districts did a commendable job of providing meals and information for high priority populations. Some areas for improvement were identified:



- Most districts only offered onsite meal pickup.



- Though districts placed more meal sites in areas with the greatest population <185% Federal Poverty Level (FPL), the number of meal sites was not proportionate to the size of the population in those areas. **Figure 1.**



Footnotes:

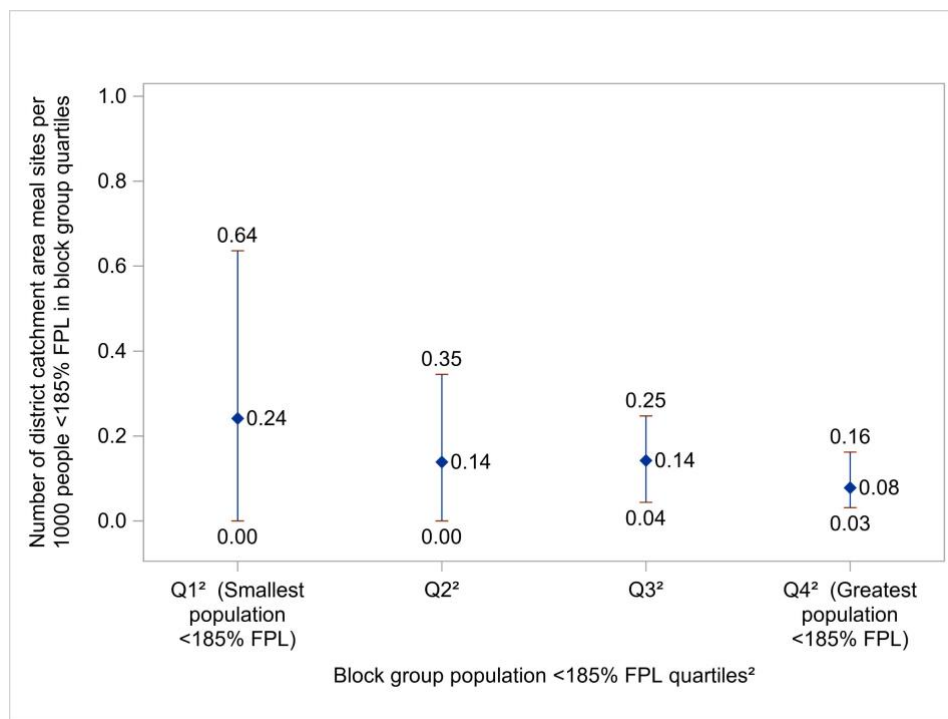
¹ School Nutrition Programs 2018-19 County Profile. California Department of Education, ; 2018-2019. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sh/sn/#free>. Accessed 05 10 2021. ² Ralston K, Treen K, Coleman-Jensen A, Guthrie J. Children's Food Security and USDA Child Nutrition Programs. *Economic Information Bulletin No. (EIB-174) 33 pp2017*. ³ Huang J, Barnidge E. Low-income Children's participation in the National School Lunch Program and household food insufficiency. *Soc Sci Med.* 2016;150:8-14. ⁴ Cullen KW, Chen TA. The contribution of the USDA school breakfast and lunch program meals to student daily dietary intake. *Prev Med Rep.* 2017;5:82-85. ⁵ Defined as meal sites open before 9am and/or after 4 pm in addition to between 9am-4pm.

Image: "20200409-FNS-LSC-0090" by USDAgov



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FIGURE 1: The number of meal sites per 1000 people <185% FPL in District Catchment Area Block Groups that have been ranked into quartiles by size of population <185% FPL



Footnotes:

¹ Q1/first quartile, Q2/second quartile, Q3/third quartile, Q4/fourth quartile. Q1 defined as blocks groups with smallest population <185% FPL. Q4 defined as greatest population <185%FPL.

² Block group population <185% FPL derived using American Community Survey 2014-2018 5 year-estimate data.

EMERGENCY MEAL SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

Facilitate collaborations that help schools:

Increase their capacity to offer meal delivery options and extended pick up hours

- ✓ Most schools only offered meal pickup and only operated between 9am-4pm. Lack of delivery options and limited hours could pose barriers for families without reliable transportation or work schedules that conflict with meal distribution hours.⁵⁻⁷

Expand their capacity to provide healthy, high-quality meals and promote meal availability accurately and effectively during school closures.

- ✓ Some schools miscommunicated program eligibility criteria. Inaccurate information may decrease program participation.
- ✓ Most schools did not post menus. Meal quality information may incentivize participation during school closures.^{8,9}

Facilitate meal site placement that maximizes access and ensures equity.

- ✓ Meal sites were placed in lower-income areas, but the density of sites was not proportional to the size of this population.

Footnotes:

⁵ U.S Department of Transportation Bureau of Transportation Statistics. The Longer Route To School. In: U.S Department of Transportation, ed2021. ⁶ UC Berkeley Labor Center. Low Wage Work in California Data Explorer. <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/low-wage-work-in-california/#>. Accessed July 29 2021, 2021. ⁷ Carrillo D, Harknett K, Logan A, Luhr S, Schneider D. Instability of Work and Care: How Work Schedules Shape Child-Care Arrangements for Parents Working in the Service Sector. Soc Serv Rev. 2017;91(3):422-455. ⁸ Connolly K, Babbin MI, McKee SL, et al. Dedication, innovation, and collaboration: A mixed-methods analysis of school meals in Connecticut during COVID-19. J Agric Food Syst Community Dev. 2021;10(2):11-27. ⁹ United States Department of Agriculture food and Nutrition Service. School Breakfast Program Marketing Ideas. 2013.