

Food insecurity and schools during the pandemic

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The coronavirus pandemic has brought a number of challenges to

schools, which were forced to close in the spring to help slow the spread of infection. One major challenge for schools was ensuring that students' nutritional supplementation needs were met when they were not attending school in person.

As schools across the country begin to welcome students back in person or for virtual learning, equity must be at the forefront of decisions pertaining to [school](#) emergency food services, finds a new study from the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis.

"Ensuring access to food during these critical times is of paramount importance to meeting the public health needs of vulnerable populations at greatest risk for [food security](#). Further, as schools contemplate re-opening plans, a greater emphasis should be placed on ways to maintain practices developed over the closure period, protecting access to [supplemental nutrition](#)," said Gabriella McLoughlin, postdoctoral research associate at the Brown School's Prevention Research Center.

McLoughlin is lead author of the paper "Addressing Food Insecurity Through a Health Equity Lens: A Case Study of Large Urban School Districts During the COVID-19 Pandemic," published in the August edition of the *Journal of Urban Health*.

McLoughlin and her co-authors conducted a mixed-methods study evaluating emergency meal distribution and strategy implementation from March to May in four large urban school districts: Chicago Public Schools, Houston Independent School District, Los Angeles Unified School District and New York City Department of Education.

"We found that these four urban districts took distinctive steps to enhancing participation in emergency feeding programs through a health equity lens," McLoughlin said. "However, given the significantly lower than typical participation rates observed in each district, we present key

ways that this could be mitigated by focusing on equity as a key priority. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology and document analysis highlighted some gaps in reach and potential ways that they can increase participation in emergency meal programs."

Federal nutrition assistance programs like the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) help to address child [food insecurity](#) and improve access to healthy foods, McLoughlin said.

"Nearly 30 million students participate in SBP and NSLP daily, and 85% of SBP and 71% of NSLP participants receive free or reduced-price meals based on household income, meaning their families do not have adequate means to purchase food absent safety net programs," she said. "For many students, school meals make up one-third to one-half of their caloric intake in a day."

"Given the detrimental impact of COVID-19 on the economic landscape of the U.S. and subsequent surge in food insecurity prevalence, continuation of meal sites that serve meals to students and families may serve as a vital strategy to offset ongoing depravity," McLoughlin and her co-authors wrote. "This will be especially important for families/children at a greater risk for contracting COVID-19 who wish to remain at home and/or for parents who still cannot return to work through job loss or ongoing furlough.

"Further, depending on the school schedule and whether schools opt for a rotation system—minimizing attendance and asking students to be at school on certain days of the week—operating walk-up and drive-up meal sites would facilitate equitable access to supplemental nutrition despite students not attending schools full time. Continuation of various waivers granted by the USDA may therefore be necessary to combat rising [food](#) insecurity rates and ease the transition of going back to school amid the pandemic."

More information: Addressing Food Insecurity through a Health Equity Lens: A Case Study of Large Urban School Districts during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Urban Health*. [DOI: 10.1007/s11524-020-00476-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-020-00476-0)

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