

## Q&A: Pandemic exposed weakness in ensuring healthy food access in child care

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When child care programs across the country closed due to COVID, millions of children lost access to the healthy food they had been receiving through the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program, exposing the weakness in our country's systems for ensuring young, low-

income children have access to healthy food.

Katherine Bauer, assistant professor of nutritional sciences at the University of Michigan School of Public Health, discusses the issue and proposes strategies to repair problems. Her research focuses on identifying social and behavioral determinants of obesity among [children](#) and adolescents, and the translation of this etiologic research into feasible and effective community-based interventions.

## **How was the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program affected by the pandemic?**

The federal Child and Adult Care Food Program ensures that 4.6 million children in the U.S. are fed healthy meals and snacks by their childcare providers. We know that these meals and snacks meet rigorous nutritional standards and keep families from being [food](#) insecure. When COVID spread through the U.S. and child cares across the country closed or had their enrollment dramatically limited to allow for social distancing, few people were talking about the fact that millions of children had lost access to this healthy food. Strong measures were put in place to ensure that [older children](#) who could no longer attend school weren't going hungry, and the government did put some provisions in place to make food distribution by child cares easier during COVID, but most child care programs just did not have the capacity to feed children during this tumultuous time.

## **Why?**

The child care system in our country is broken. We depend on a patched network of small businesses to provide one of the most essential services, caring for our children. Most child cares operate on razor-thin margins and cannot survive for even a couple of weeks without tuition

revenue, let alone purchase and distribute meals for families with the promise of eventual reimbursement. Shockingly, little [financial support](#) has been provided to child cares through our federal stimulus packages, particularly in comparison to the funding dedicated to keep other industries running. We're seeing that nearly one in five child cares are still closed due to COVID and 40% of child cares won't make it through the year without significant investment. That equals hundreds of thousands of children losing access to nutritious food and millions of children without care, impacting their parents' ability to work.

As COVID continues, we need to figure out sustainable ways to get healthy food to families whose children have lost their child care or financial support to replace the healthy food lost.

## **Are there any immediate solutions?**

An immediate solution is to provide Pandemic EBT to families of young children. P-EBT is cash assistance given to families to replace the meals children missed due to school closures. In the spring, school-aged children who were missing breakfast and lunch received P-EBT, but children who were missing meals in child care did not. I am thrilled to share that now this fall the federal government is providing P-EBT to young children. This is a first step to supporting the nutrition and financial security of low-income families who have lost child care.

Long term however, we need the Child and Adult Care Food Program to be financially supported in the same ways that other food programs, like the National School Lunch Program, are. For example, schools are provided funding through the National School Lunch Program not only to cover the cost of food, but also the infrastructure to purchase and prepare food. Meanwhile, child cares are only reimbursed for food. Additionally, as I mentioned, we don't have nearly the robust infrastructure to track children receiving meals through their child care,

either within or across states. In times of national emergencies like this, we need a system so we can actually know which children have lost meals because they're not attending child care.

Our second recommendation is to make it easier for child care programs to participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program. It's well documented that there are many barriers to child care programs enrolling in CACFP. There's fairly onerous documentation required. The reimbursements for food don't cover the true costs of feeding children. So, many child care providers, even though they're eligible to participate in the program, say "this isn't worth my time."

We think it's really important to simplify the Child and Adult Care Food Program, reduce the reporting burden, increase reimbursement rates for food, and get more providers on the [program](#) to give them more of a safety net in good and lean times.

Our final suggestion is that we need to prioritize and invest in child care. There are many ripple effects of child care closings. Parents can't go to work. Children are missing academic, social and emotional opportunities. And as we're saying, what's often forgotten is that they're missing nutrition. So we would like to see in these pandemic relief initiatives, much more attention, much more funding to support child care across the country so they're not closing and they can support families and feed kids the [healthy meals](#) that they deserve.

## **What's next for you as you continue to research this issue?**

At this point we're conducting two complementary studies. For one of them, we're going to talk to child care providers across the country and ask them how they've approached child feeding during the pandemic:

Did you feed children in the spring? How did you do it? What are you doing now? What are your major challenges, your concerns? What support do you need? This will provide critical insight regarding best practices and how we can help ensure children are receiving [healthy food](#) as COVID continues.

And then in a second study, we are looking closely at several states, Michigan included, to do a deeper dive as to what happened at the state level regarding feeding young children who had lost their meals due to child care. This will allow us to understand what resources and policies successful states have that other states could replicate to ensure that these young children continue to be fed, since we unfortunately see no end to COVID in sight.

## **How did Michigan children fare?**

Michigan was the first state to get P-EBT for their children. The state did an incredible job to get P-EBT benefits to every child that they could. So actually here in Michigan, some young children who had lost their meals due to child care were able to get P-EBT benefits because of the state specific interpretation of the law. And now of course, the state is working on getting P-EBT benefits out to even more families thanks to the federal government and continuing to support nutrition in [child](#) cares through providing technical assistance. Michigan is really a model that other states could replicate.

Provided by University of Michigan

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