

School nutrition professionals' employee safety experiences during onset of the COVID-19 pandemic

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A new study in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, published by Elsevier, explores real-time personal and employee safety experiences and perspectives of school nutrition professionals ranging from frontline staff to state leadership across the United States during

the early weeks of the coronavirus pandemic.

A survey with both closed- and open-ended items was developed to explore the experiences of [school nutrition](#) staff, managers, directors, and state agency personnel. Descriptive statistics from the responses of 47 states were calculated, and a thematic analysis of an open-ended item was conducted.

"When we analyzed the survey's open-ended results, we found three themes in the responses. The most prominent theme, that 94 percent of our respondents reported, was that they had significant concern for risk of transmission or risk of exposure to the coronavirus while they were at work as they interacted with people in the community and their coworkers," said lead investigator Emily Vaterlaus Patten, Ph.D., RDN, CD, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA.

Another theme that emerged was concern with the processes including the administrative interactions, logistics, and protocols for serving emergency meals. For some, there was a feeling of distrust or lack of support from authority. School districts and state health departments were described as disconnected from the situation, apathetic, or uncaring. "I don't trust that a school nurse understands and/or even cares about whether or not we are safe. They are working from home and have no clue what we are up against," wrote a nutrition program director from Texas.

Personal concerns were also a common theme in the research results. Respondents described feelings of exhaustion, fear, and stress. Personal concerns were often rooted in the perspective that working through the pandemic was a high risk, low-reward situation. Others were concerned for themselves, their families, peers, or employees because of the risk factors associated with severe illness.

"This was and continues to be a challenging time for school nutrition professionals and this research highlights that they have demonstrated resilience through the whole process. USDA Waivers have helped improve conditions, and nutrition programs have innovated their distribution methods. I think we are celebrating the enormous number of meals that have been served during this time and the people that made it happen. They're veritable heroes. They've worked and self-sacrificed to mitigate [food insecurity](#) in their communities during this difficult time," Dr. Vaterlaus Patten said.

More information: Emily Vaterlaus Patten et al, School Nutrition Professionals' Employee Safety Experiences During the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2020.10.021](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2020.10.021)

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