

# FEEDING KIDS DURING COVID-19:

A SURVEY OF  
ORGANIZATIONS  
SERVING KIDS



## INTRODUCTION

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In May 2020, No Kid Hungry's Center for Best Practices distributed a survey to organizations serving food to kids in the context of COVID-19 school closures. The survey was designed to gather information about how organizations are serving meals and other food to families in their communities, the worries that are keeping them up at night, the children they fear they are not reaching, and the innovative strategies that are working well for them right now. Survey responses provide insight into the range of circumstances confronting organizations serving kids as they embark on the next school year.

We distributed the survey on the Center for Best Practices' listserv, to all organizations that applied for a Coronavirus Emergency Relief Grant from Share Our Strength, and on the Facebook pages of school nutrition professional groups.

## SURVEY RESPONDENTS

We received 1,831 responses from a large and diverse set of organizations reaching children during this challenging time. Respondents included organizations from all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. (Responses are based on the number of organizations responding to each question. For several questions, respondents could select multiple options, so the total is greater than survey sample total.)

### Organization Type

(checked all that apply)

ORGANIZATION TYPE	NUMBER	PERCENT
School district	933	51%
Non-profit Organization	774	42%
School	215	12%
SFSP Sponsor	174	10%
Food Pantry	174	10%
SFSP Site	101	6%
Religious Organization	93	5%
CACFP Sponsor	84	5%
Other	83	5%
Child Care Center/Home	80	4%
CACFP Site	69	4%
Food Bank	67	4%
Government Agency	48	3%
Health Care Provider	18	1%

### Areas Served by Organization

(checked all that apply)

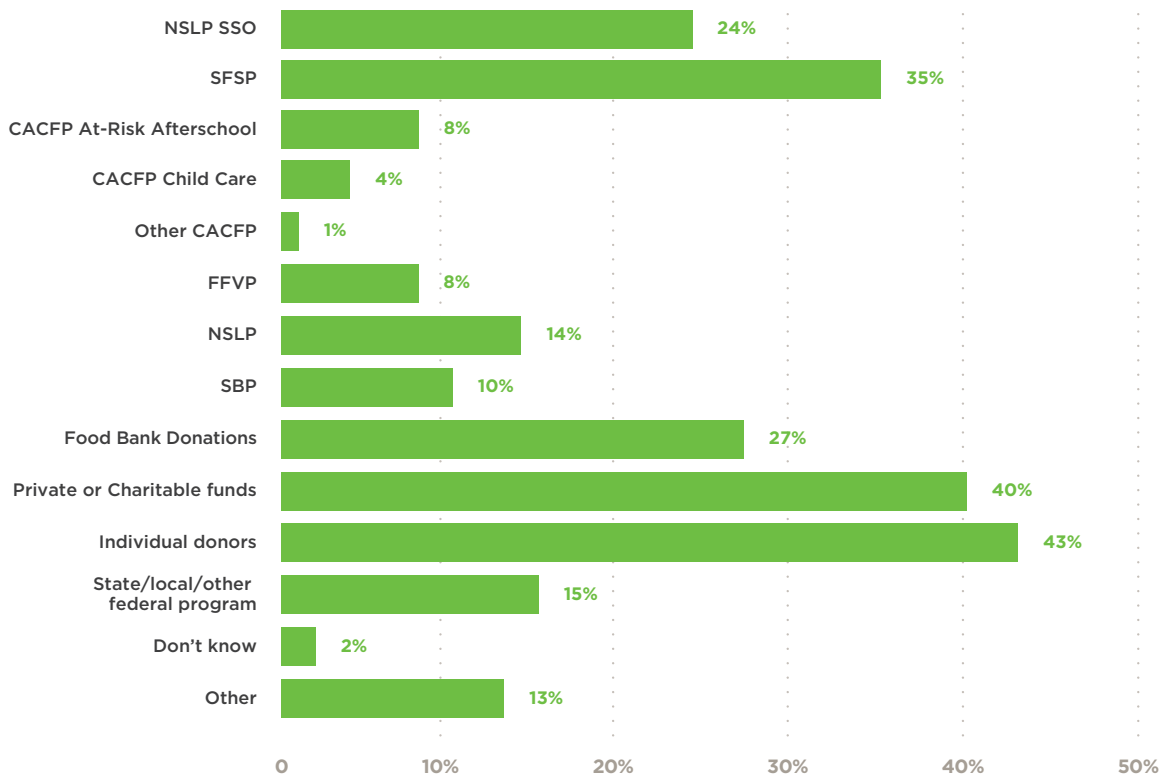
	NUMBER	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS SERVING
Rural	1,172	64%
Tribal	83	5%
Suburban	615	34%
Urban	809	44%

## ARE YOU SERVING MEALS THROUGH CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS?

(e.g. Summer Food Service Program, Seamless Summer Option, Child and Adult Care Food Program, etc.)

**Sixty-nine percent** (69%) of respondents were serving meals through federal child nutrition programs, either exclusively (50%) or in addition to serving meals/food that are not reimbursable (19%). **Twenty-six percent** (26%) of respondents were not serving meals through federal child nutrition programs (serving through charitable donations or other funding), and **five percent** (5%) selected “Other.”

## HOW ARE YOU FUNDING YOUR CURRENT WORK SERVING FOOD IN YOUR COMMUNITY?



# REACHING KIDS

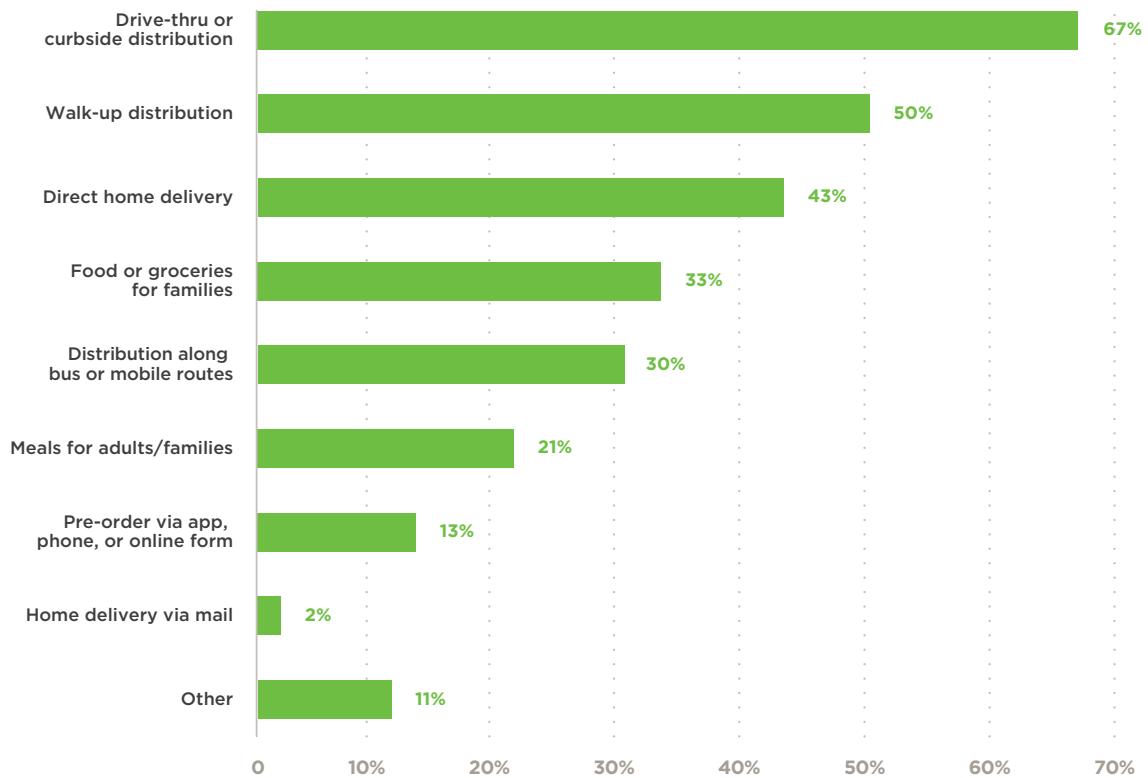
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## Service Models Used During COVID-19

The organizations surveyed were using a wide range of strategies to reach families in the context of COVID-19 and school closures. Below is a summary of service models used for all organizations responding, as well as a comparison across organizations serving rural, tribal, suburban and urban areas, and schools/school districts only. Drive-thru or curbside distribution was the most common service model across geography served and organization type, followed by walk-up distribution.

### WHAT SERVICE MODELS ARE YOU USING TO PROVIDE FOOD OR MEALS?

(checked all that apply)



## WHAT SERVICE MODELS ARE YOU USING TO PROVIDE FOOD OR MEALS? (BY SUB-GROUP)

(checked all that apply)

	ALL ORGS		RURAL		TRIBAL		SUBURBAN		URBAN		SCHOOLS/ DISTRICTS ONLY	
	# ORGS	%	# ORGS	%	# ORGS	%	# ORGS	%	# ORGS	%	# ORGS	%
Drive-thru or curbside distribution	1,234	67%	807	69%	57	69%	424	69%	516	64%	779	77%
Walk-up distribution	914	50%	542	46%	39	47%	327	53%	464	57%	501	49%
Direct home delivery	790	43%	512	44%	33	40%	279	45%	357	44%	407	40%
Food or groceries for families	603	33%	331	28%	38	46%	277	45%	382	47%	107	11%
Distribution along bus or mobile routes	549	30%	438	37%	28	34%	139	23%	172	21%	426	42%
Meals for adults/families	390	21%	206	18%	25	30%	176	29%	268	33%	73	7%
Pre-order via app, phone, or online form	236	13%	167	14%	4	5%	70	11%	89	11%	150	15%
Home delivery via mail	35	2%	24	2%	2	2%	9	1%	17	2%	19	2%
Other	204	11%	116	10%	8	10%	103	17%	119	15%	38	4%

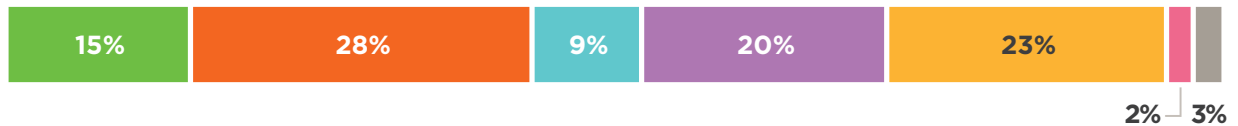
## Trends in Participation

We want to understand the trends in participation these organizations observed, comparing children reached during Spring 2020 COVID school closures to the numbers of children they typically reach during the school year. We also wanted to learn how participation varied over the course of Spring 2020 school closures. The former provides insight into the reach of their emergency responses compared to a typical school year, while the latter speaks to the need, willingness and ability to access available food as the crisis continued.

### ARE YOU SERVING MORE OR FEWER CHILDREN THAN TYPICAL DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR?

■ *Many Fewer*   
 ■ *Fewer*   
 ■ *About the Same*   
 ■ *More*   
 ■ *Many More*   
 ■ *Don't Know*   
 ■ *N/A*

#### All Respondents



#### Only Respondents Serving Reimbursable Meals



#### Only Schools/Districts



Overall, 43% of respondents reported serving fewer or many fewer children than typical during the school year, and a similar 43% were serving more or many more children. However, these trends varied considerably by organization type and geography served. Among the subset of organizations serving reimbursable meals, 58% reported serving fewer or many fewer children, and among schools/school districts, 66% reported serving fewer or many fewer children.

When considering geography served, only 24% of organizations working in tribal areas reported serving fewer or many fewer children than typical during the school year, while 64% reported serving more or many more children. In rural (43%), suburban (39%) and urban (34%) areas, a larger percentage of respondents reported serving fewer or many fewer children than during the school year.

**SINCE SCHOOLS CLOSED IN YOUR AREA, WHAT MEAL PARTICIPATION TRENDS HAVE YOU SEEN FROM WHEN YOU BEGAN EMERGENCY MEALS SERVICE THROUGH TODAY?**

■ Increase    
 ■ Decrease    
 ■ Fluctuating    
 ■ Stayed the Same    
 ■ Other

**All Respondents**



**Only Respondents Serving Reimbursable Meals**



**Only Schools/Districts**



The majority (69%) of respondents reported an increase in meal participation from the time their schools closed until May, indicating the breadth of the need in many communities. This trend was relatively consistent across geography served and organization type, with a relatively smaller proportion (64%) of schools/school districts noting an increase and a larger proportion (76%) of organizations serving in tribal areas noting an increase in meal participation.

## WHAT WOULD YOU NEED TO REACH ALL KIDS?

To better understand the barriers that exist in efforts to reach kids with food, we asked those providing meals to kids: “What would you need in order to reach all kids struggling with food insecurity in your community?”

The image below depicts the themes that emerged with greatest frequency. Meal providers raise issues with not having enough food due to higher food costs, supply chain issues, or their desire to serve meals to adults. They need vehicles to deliver meals or food trucks to distribute food. They wrote that they are lacking basic equipment, especially for food storage and refrigeration. Some note that they need funding to support alternative strategies for reaching undocumented families, such as being able to provide gift cards.



While many cite operational challenges that more funding or grant dollars could alleviate, others describe the need for policy change around universal free meals, increases to SNAP, and clarity around the waivers and extensions they needed to continue serving summer meals. A handful of respondents cite a need for a more coordinated response from anti-hunger organizations. Finally, many respondents say they need help with outreach to families and persuading families to participate. They describe a lack of clarity about families’ needs, not knowing which families most need help, and how best to reach families and encourage them to participate in the programs they offer. They cite specific outreach and communication needs such as better marketing tactics, ways to encourage families to ask for help, methods of finding and reaching families who are not participating, better data on families’ needs, contact information for families, and connections to other local organizations who might be more successfully reaching families.

### What would you need to reach all kids with food?

- Food
- Transportation
- Food storage and refrigeration
- Support for alternative strategies for undocumented families
- Policy change
- Coordinated response from anti-hunger organizations
- Better way to conduct outreach to families
- Funding
- Staff/volunteers



## ARE THERE KIDS YOU WORRY YOU ARE NOT REACHING DURING THIS CRISIS?

Respondents discuss many groups of children they worried they were not reaching in the context of school closures. Below we describe 11 populations or characteristics that respondents frequently mentioned in response to this question. These were the children on which their worries centered as they worked to ensure access to food in their communities. There are clear links between several of these groups, highlighting the compounding nature of some of the barriers to food access during this time.

- **Immigrant and non-English-speaking households:** respondents expressed concerns both around unfamiliarity with rules (they felt these households might be lacking accurate or the most up-to-date information) and because of fear related to accessing meals.
- **Homeless and displaced households:** respondents worried about losing contact with families as they relocate.
- **Households experiencing abuse:** “I not only worry about how these families are being fed, I worry about the child/domestic abuse that could be happening. We want to get eyes on these families as much as possible, which is part of the reason we want to hand deliver meals.”
- **Households with struggling caregivers:** respondents described households with a “lack of organizational skills,” parents/guardians struggling with substance abuse, and those who are not engaged or whom are otherwise unable to take advantage of the services available. This took different forms, but survey respondents identified children they were not reaching because of their caregivers’ difficulties.
- **Households with health concerns:** this includes families who do not feel they can safely get meals because of household members’ health conditions, as well as households with members with restrictive diets which it is hard to respond to in the current context.
- **Households with limited access to technology:** these families lack the skills to identify options online and complete necessary forms, as well as access to social media, reliable phone service and internet.

*“We often have families we lose track of because their phone service is shut off.”*

*“Everyday we are getting someone that says we did not know we could receive these meals. Even though we have sent home notices, put it on the radio, newspaper, school website, social media.”*

- **Households with transportation barriers:** families that lack vehicles, gas money, and that live far from distribution sites.
- **Grandparents caring for grandchildren:** related to several of the other categories, respondents worried many in these households were less able to access meals because grandparents weren't regularly using social media, may not feel comfortable leaving the house, may not drive or experience other transportation barriers.
- **Households with working parent(s) who cannot get to distribution sites:** respondents were concerned about parents who were still working, and who were therefore unable to get to distribution sites during their hours of operation. Respondents worried their children were not able to receive meals, and were perhaps unsupervised at home.
- **Young children 0-5**
- **Newly eligible:** respondents worried about not reaching children in homes who have not accessed food/financial supports previously, or in homes with caregivers that are "too proud to ask for help."

While most respondents worried there were children they were missing, some felt confident they were reaching everyone who needed support, and described specific efforts to communicate with every child in their community ("no family forgotten"). This was especially true of small districts, which made the task of reaching out to every household more doable:

*"Our staff has done an AMAZING job of reaching out through phone, email, text, Facebook, etc.... so my worries are minimal. We are a district of less than 1000, so this is manageable."*

*"We live in a very small town, so anyone we have not checked off, we call or text."*

Despite these heroic efforts, most respondents worried about children who were isolated and faced barriers to accessing food, due to one or more of the factors outlined above. Some of these specific concerns suggest a need for differentiated strategies to support families in a variety of circumstances, including targeted strategies and resources to reach particular underserved populations (i.e. grandparents caring for grandchildren or homeless families).

## SUPPORTING FAMILIES

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### WHAT DO FAMILIES NEED THAT THEY ARE NOT GETTING?

During the early months of the pandemic when schools and businesses were closed across the country, staff providing meals often continued to interact with families and many have a sense of the concerns particular to their communities. We wanted to know what this group was hearing from families, so we asked: “What do families in your community need that they are not getting—food and otherwise? Can you tell us what you are hearing from parents/caregivers and children?” Responses fell into two categories: material needs and psychosocial and emotional needs. The chart on the following page depicts those that emerged with greatest frequency.

Among the material needs, many respondents describe food needs that are going unmet, in spite of their greatest efforts. Because many programs serve only breakfast and lunch, respondents listed other meals—dinner and weekend meals, for instance—that they are not currently serving, but that they believe families need. Others cite families who specifically ask for fruits and vegetables, meat, healthier food, and baby formula. One respondent writes, “Surprisingly we are hearing from families and from the community that what people are asking for most is fresh produce...Last week we received a call from a widowed mother of three small children, all she asked for was fresh fruits and vegetables. We asked her if she needed anything else for her children and she replied that all they wanted was some fresh fruits and veggies.” Many also wish families were able to choose their own food, rather than rely on the meals they are serving. Others spoke of the need to provide meals for adults, not only kids. One respondent explained, “Adults are not getting food. They can get assistance from the local food pantry, but they are not going there for help, they don’t feel like they have the paperwork to qualify, or they don’t know/want to cook the food themselves at home. Once we began to serve adults, the number of children we served increased by 37 percent.”

Respondents also report that caregivers were struggling to buy and find items like paper towels, toilet paper, and diapers, as well as various personal care products. They describe quickly running out of these items if they provided them at meal sites. They also report that families were struggling to pay their bills, especially



rent, utilities, and phone. Finally, many explain that they know of families in their communities who do not have access to internet, making it impossible for their children to participate in e-learning, and difficult for caregivers to apply for jobs.

While the primary job of most respondents is to ensure kids have food, their responses illustrate a much broader and deeper set of concerns for families in their communities. Many meal providers describe being concerned about the toll of poverty, school closures, caretaking, and job loss on caregivers' and kids' mental health. One says, "One of the significant challenges that is impacting our community is the mental and emotional toll. We have people breaking down in line and asking for resources for support. We are nutrition workers but are having to explore ways to connect struggling families with social workers and local resources for emotional wellbeing." Respondents also describe being concerned about the "social, emotional, and recreational needs of children." They describe parents fearing that by not being in school, kids are missing out academically and socially. They write about kids not having anything to do and explain that there is a need for educational activities, physical activities, something fun and engaging, a way of socially interacting with other kids, and quality online content. One respondent writes, "...many low-income households lack internet access and/or computers, so their children are missing out on e-learning opportunities. Many children also live in high-crime areas where they cannot safely go outside to play and get fresh air. Tensions at home are increasing the risk of child abuse, substance use, and violence."

Material Needs	Psycho-social-emotional needs	Other
<p><b>Food:</b> adult meals, weekend meals, dinner, groceries, "food they choose," fruit and vegetables, meat, healthy food, baby formula</p> <p><b>Personal hygiene/ household items:</b> toilet paper, paper towels, diapers, personal care products</p> <p><b>Help with paying other bills:</b> rent, utilities, phone</p> <p><b>Internet:</b> especially for kids engaged in distance learning, but also for caregivers applying for jobs</p>	<p><b>Things for kids to do:</b> "social, emotional, and recreational needs of children"</p> <p><b>Mental health services, stress relief, emotional support</b></p>	<p><b>Childcare for parents who are working</b></p> <p><b>Jobs and help getting jobs in the future</b></p> <p><b>Masks</b></p> <p><b>Healthcare</b></p> <p><b>School supplies</b></p> <p><b>Help with applying for Unemployment</b></p>

# SUPPORTING AND LEARNING FROM MEAL PROVIDERS

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## Meal Providers' Worries

Like all of us, respondents were caught off guard by the sudden closure of schools, and unprepared for lock downs, quarantining, and social distancing due to the coronavirus pandemic. Yet those whose job it is to feed kids found themselves responsible for immediately coming up with plans to get food to kids in a world turned upside down. Knowing they must be under tremendous pressure, we wanted to check in with those doing this important, difficult work. We asked them, "What is keeping you up at night? What are you most worried about?" The image below depicts the concerns that emerged with greatest frequency.



## Operating Logistics

Logistically, they worry most about their staff, procurement of food, procurement of packaging, food storage and delivery, and their budgets.

They need staff in order to operate, but are worried about their health. Respondents write that many of their employees are in high-risk categories due to age or underlying medical conditions and explain that it is nearly impossible to stay socially distant in kitchens while preparing food. One respondent elaborates, “I worry about my staff that fall into the 70+ range and their safety. But, they are the die-hards that won’t stay home.” Others explain that they worry staff will not come to work, explaining that many are scared of getting sick, have kids at home, are burnt out, or whose low hourly wages are less than the benefits they receive through unemployment.

**“I worry about my staff that fall into the 70+ range and their safety...”**

Basic equipment needs also emerged as a primary concern. Many respondents cite the difficulty of finding packaging for the types of meals they are now distributing, items they did not need when the majority were serving meals in school cafeterias pre-COVID. Now, their food distribution methods require them to keep food hot or cold outside of cafeterias and kitchens. As summer approached, many said they were worried about keeping food cool and did not have the equipment to do so. One respondent elaborates, “Packaging equipment such as bags, gloves, masks, etc. have been a little more challenging to the point I have driven to another community forty-five minutes away to pick up some of these items or have ordered and waited several weeks for delivery or else paid a high price for a demanded item.”

Essential to the business of distributing meals to kids, providers describe having a difficult time obtaining food. One respondent says certain foods are “like the hottest Christmas toy,” as suppliers run out of products that work well in this situation. Many describe that it is especially difficult to find foods that pack well and share the disappointment and frustration they feel when they deliver a meal and then realize that products are crushed or broken open.

One meal provider says, “Procurement? Procurement is out the window at this point in time. Heck, I take what I can get. Products that work are hard to find.” Given their constraints, many respondents also worry about the healthfulness of the food they are currently able to provide.

**“Procurement? Procurement is out the window at this point in time. Heck, I take what I can get. Products that work are hard to find.”**

Finances, generally, are a major concern among respondents. Many school nutrition directors wrote that they had always proudly balanced their budgets, but now feared they would be in the red. One says, “Since I took over twenty years ago we have always run in the black. We could quite possibly encroach on the general fund this year.” Others say they are going to “go broke” and that their “budget has been blown by this emergency.”

### **Kids, Families, and Communities**

On top of the stress of having to figure out the logistics of feeding kids outside of schools and under very different circumstances, meal providers worry about whether the kids they are accustomed to seeing are okay. They worry that they are not reaching all kids with food, and worry about kids’ safety and social-emotional well-being. They are concerned that incidents of neglect and abuse are likely increasing, or that some parents are forced to leave children home alone if they do not have childcare but have to physically show up for work. One respondent describes,

*“I am on the bus route that goes through some of the lower income areas in our community...We don’t have enough time with the children when we are handing out the meals to make sure their needs are being met. I have seen children who were previously outgoing become quiet and withdrawn....I have seen teachers get back on the bus sobbing after they have seen their students and where they are living....I worry that we are going to lose track of some of these kids and all the strides we have made during the year will be lost and it will be like starting over again.”*

They also worry about the widening academic achievement gap, kids with nothing to do, kids’ inability to play and get exercise, and social isolation. They worry about the overall well-being of families in their communities – their economic and mental and emotional well-being, as well as caregivers’ abilities to meet the basic needs of their families. And they worry more generally about their communities, describing local businesses and factories shutting down and wondering how such closures will impact their communities long-term.

The uncertainty of the situation overwhelms many respondents. At the time when the survey was released, providers did not know if USDA would extend program waivers into the summer and worried how they would feed kids if they were not. They explain that they do not know how to plan for the future and describe feeling a sense of grief at what feels like backward progress. One food service director explains, “I worry things will never be the same. I worry all the hard work and effort we put into salad bars will be gone forever.” Others echo this sentiment, describing recent improvements they will be forced to abandon such as quality programming and enrichment activities, efforts to be more environmentally responsible, and salad bars that provided kids with healthy food choices.

## Innovative Practices

As meal providers struggle to keep their operations running and worry about backward progress, programmatic improvements, big ideas, and future-oriented goal setting are presumably the furthest thing from some people's minds. At the same time, the crisis forced many to make adaptations to their operations in order to reach kids in their communities. We wanted to learn more about what strategies respondents are employing and capture some of these crisis-inspired innovations, so we asked respondents to share their innovative practices and ideas.

Innovative practices fell into five categories, depicted in the chart on the following page: 1) new partnerships 2) new distribution methods 3) engaging and making use of volunteers 4) improvements in outreach and communication to families 5) addressing other needs in addition to food needs.

We want to chronicle and explore innovations to food access that work now and are likely to work well in the future. Survey respondents describe businesses prioritizing helping their communities over making a profit. Restaurants are providing kids with free meals. Meals are being delivered along bus routes. Community members are asking how they can help and the responsibilities of custodians, public works employees, police officers, and school counselors have shifted to include delivering meals to kids and checking in on how they are doing. Food service directors have realized the importance of calling caregivers to assure them that their family can and should participate in their school's meal program. As the crisis shined a light on the multiple challenges low-income caregivers face as they attempt to make ends meet and care for their children, more people have started to find ways to broaden their efforts in order to do more for the families they are reaching with food. If there is a bright side to this crisis, perhaps it is that it may provide an opportunity to do some things better in the future. All of the innovations described are illustrative of individuals, schools, communities, and businesses prioritizing helping their neighbors and strengthening their communities. Innovations, big and small, can be born out of these values and mindsets.





<p><b>Partnerships</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respondents described new partnerships they formed in their efforts to feed kids during the pandemic.</li> <li>• Unique partnerships included those with private schools, country clubs, prisons, grocery stores, other service providers, local businesses, and restaurants.</li> <li>• Restaurant partnerships were the most common new partnership described.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Distribution</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delivering meals with school buses on regular bus routes was commonly cited. A few were exploring how to use or partner with Amazon or Instacart.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Volunteers</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providers described utilizing volunteers from their communities to deliver meals, bag food, and “adopt” apartment buildings.</li> <li>• Respondents also described a sort of “repurposing” of people such as teachers, custodians, school counselors, public works employees, and paraprofessionals who were now delivering or distributing meals as well as checking in on kids.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Outreach and Communication</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some successful meal providers described a “no family forgotten” approach to outreach in which they found ways to touch base with all families in their school about their food needs. Others described methods of continually checking in with families.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Food+</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many meal providers described pairing food with other things families need.</li> <li>• Some paired the delivery or distribution of food with activities for kids, such as books, STEM activities, educational materials, and excercises.</li> <li>• Recognized opportunities for food drop-off to be about more than just food-- they were also “wellness visits” in which a trusted community member could check in on families.</li> <li>• Some respondents spoke of the importance of multi-component approaches in which a meal site can serve as a hub to connect families with other services or resources.</li> </ul>

## LOOKING FORWARD

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As we navigate the uncertainties of the 2020-2021 school year, the experiences of organizations serving food to children during Spring 2020 COVID school closures hold important lessons and suggest areas to consider as we look forward.

- **Immediate logistical and financial concerns**

Many meal providers convey that they are worried about being able to continue to provide meals for kids. Similar to the additional cost of disinfecting wipes and hand sanitizer in schools that are re-opening, those providing meals to kids cited concerns around packaging and refrigeration. No Kid Hungry's emergency grants are assisting some of those providers, but the need is great.

- **Designing outreach and strategies focused on specific populations or geographies**

Many respondents believe that they are not reaching all kids who could benefit from their programs. We should continually work to improve the user experience of programs so that families can and want to participate. Additionally, we can research and explore a more diverse set of strategies focused on reaching specific, underserved populations.

- **Capture and explore crisis-inspired innovations**

We were inspired by many of the innovative strategies meal providers are employing in order to feed kids during the coronavirus pandemic. We are digging deeper into some of these strategies, interviewing providers who described innovative strategies in this survey or in their emergency grants application.

- **Food+**

Respondents describe family and community needs that extend beyond food insecurity. In some cases, meal providers' own innovations paired access to food with access to personal care or household products, activities for kids, or an opportunity to check in on kids. We should continue to explore strategies for responding to families' other needs along with access to food.

- **Guard against backward progress**

Meal providers describe a fear of "backward progress." We share their concern, given the high degree of uncertainty around future operations and the immense task before schools and other organizations serving children at this time. We should consider how we guard against backward progress - for instance, ensuring that food served to low-income kids is healthy and nutritious - and support those who are trying to make forward progress.