



NEW ANALYSIS SHOWS COVID-19 WAIVERS LED TO MORE SUMMER MEALS IN RURAL AREAS

All communities have historically faced barriers in connecting kids with summer meals – the summer meals programs typically reach just a small fraction of the kids who receive free or reduced-price lunches during the school year. **These barriers are amplified in rural communities.** For example:



Economies of Scale

With fewer kids spread over large areas, sponsors in rural areas can struggle to serve the number of meals needed to make operations financially sustainable.



6 out of 7

kids who may have needed summer meals pre-pandemic were missing out.



Site Locations

Traditionally, the summer meals programs rely on locations where children gather to eat on site, such as pools, parks, libraries and schools. In rural areas, there may be fewer places that are easy for kids to access once or twice daily.



305% increase

The number of summer meals served in rural areas rose 305% in 2020 compared to 2019, No Kid Hungry analysis shows.



Transportation

Getting kids to summer meal sites is more difficult in the summer when school buses don't run. This is even more challenging in rural areas with limited public transportation options and limited walkability. Sponsors also face greater costs delivering meals to sites or operating mobile routes because of the larger geographic areas they have to cover.

Fortunately, a solution exists: the nationwide waivers implemented in response to COVID-19 helped many rural communities overcome these barriers and serve more meals. The non-congregate, meal service time, and parent or guardian meal pick-up waivers facilitated innovative service models like home delivery and weekly meal bundles. New data analysis from No Kid Hungry show just how much these waivers meant for rural communities.

Analysis Details

To determine whether these waivers benefited rural communities, No Kid Hungry analyzed Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and National School Lunch Program Seamless Summer Option (SSO) data obtained from eight states: Alabama, California, Maryland, Michigan, Montana, Texas, Utah, and Washington. These states were able to provide site-level data for both 2019 and 2020. Depending on the state, different months were included in the analysis--some states only have July data, while others use June-August data. However, for each state, the same months were included for both 2019 and 2020. Each site was classified as rural or non-rural, using the U.S. Census Bureau definition, by matching sites to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) using site ID number or ZIP codes. The rural status of was unknown if there was no school within the site's ZIP code. This represented 15 percent of all sites. These sites are excluded from the analysis results discussed below.

Analysis Results

Across these eight states, there were just under 29 million summer meals served in 2019. In 2020, there were over 111 million meals served: a 288 percent increase. In rural ZIP codes specifically, the increase was higher at 305 percent, meaning **there were four times as many meals served in rural communities thanks to the waivers**. In non-rural ZIP codes, the increase similar at 286 percent.

Census Bureau Classification of Site ZIP Code	Meals Served in Summer 2019	Meals Served in Summer 2020	Percent Change
Rural	2,815,343	11,407,405	305%
Non-Rural	25,916,241	100,108,815	286%
Grand Total	28,731,584	111,516,220	288%

Discussion

The widespread benefit of these waivers is unsurprising due to the common challenges associated with serving summer meals. Even in dense, urban communities, few children can consistently get to meal sites once or twice each day. Far too few children from low-income families have access to summer camps and activities that provide meals as a regular part of each day, and even those rarely run for the full summer break or on weekends.

Given the even greater challenges of reaching children in rural communities and the ongoing challenges of transportation over vast areas, it is all the more impressive that these waivers achieved the level of impact they did.

To successfully end summer hunger in rural communities, it is critical to make permanent these waiver flexibilities allowing kids to receive multiple meals at one time for off-site consumption.

