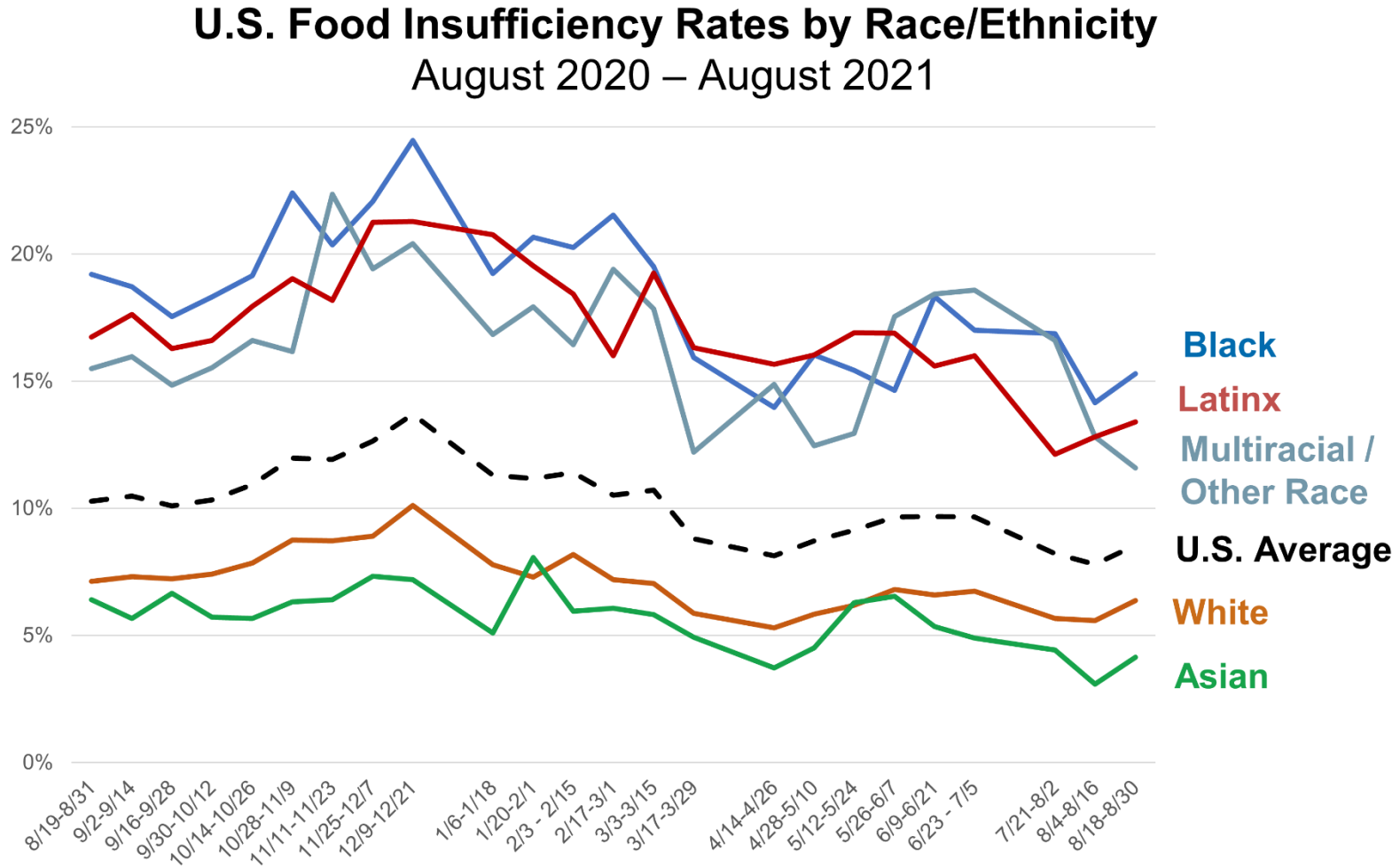


P-EBT & School Meals to Go

A Cost Effectiveness Analysis

Erica Kenney, ScD, MPH; James Krieger, MD, MPH; Lina Pinero Walkinshaw, MPH
Shen Ye, MS; Jessica Jones-Smith, PhD; Sheila Fleischhacker, PhD, JD, RDN

Introduction

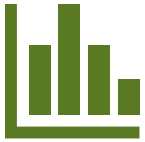
P-EBT

School Meals-to-go (MTG)

Our objectives: assess and compare these two approaches with respect to:

- **Reach:** how many targeted children actually got benefits?
- **Effect/benefits:** how many meals / how much cash did these children receive?
- **Cost effectiveness:** what was the societal cost per meal delivered and cost per benefitting child?

Methods



Study design

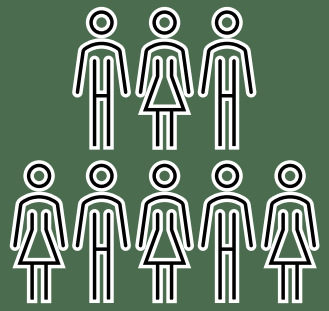
- Cross-sectional
- State-level data
- Aggregate to national level, weighting state data by state eligible population

Time period

- April/May 2020 – when schools uniformly closed

Data sources:

Population estimates



Population eligible

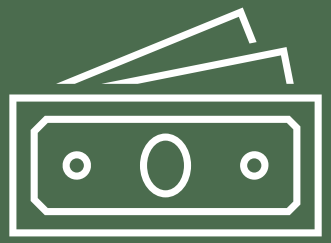
- National Center for Education Statistics (all eligible students)
- Estimates from state P-EBT plans and surveys compiled by FRAC/CBPP (FRPM-eligible students)
- American Community Survey (children aged 2-5)

Population reached

- Census Pulse (school meals)
- State P-EBT websites and public/media announcements
- USDA P-EBT Distribution Data reported to USDA by states
- State P-EBT Approved Plans

Data Sources:

Cost estimates



Program costs

- State and school administration
- Food (procurement, preparation and delivery)
- Sources
  - State P-EBT Approved Plans
  - Surveys of Nutrition Services Directors (USFA and project surveys)

Family costs

- P-EBT - $98 (cooking time, travel to stores)
- MTG - $49 (travel)
- Estimates from literature)

Meal values

- P-EBT - $5.70 reimbursement rate
- MTG - $5.85 reimbursement rate

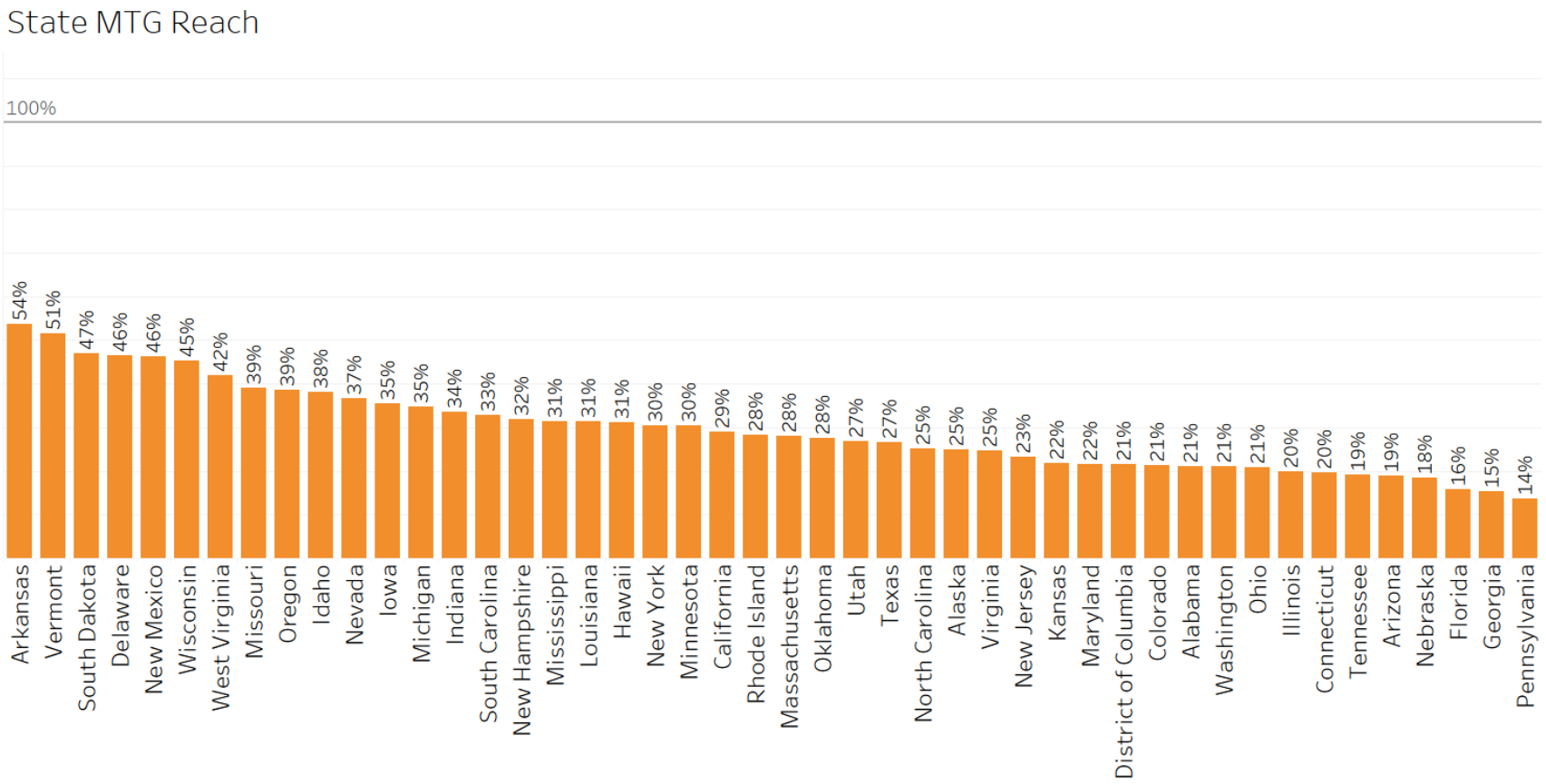
National Program Reach

Monthly, April-May 2020

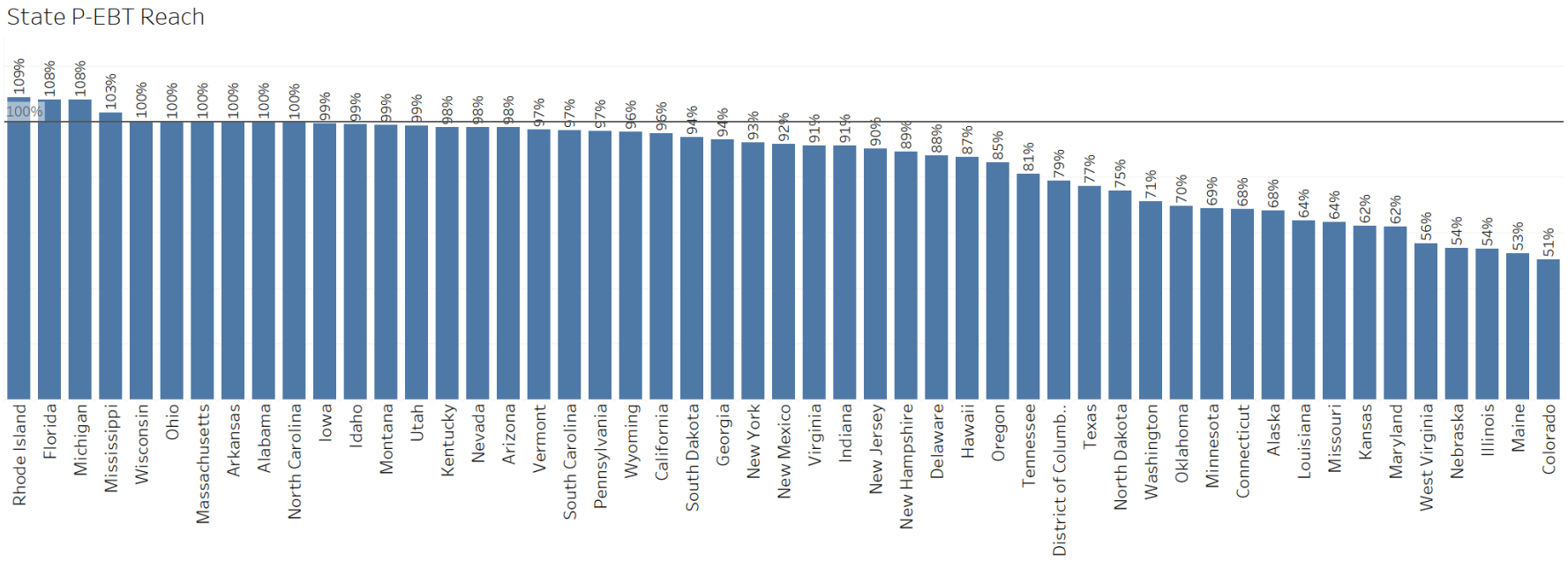
(weighted by state student population)

	Free and reduced-price eligible students		All students	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**
School Meals, ages 2-18	8,153,569	24.1%	9,250,539	15.0%
School Meals, ages 6-18	8,079,573	26.9%	9,496,935	18.7%
PEBT, ages 6-18	26,798,148	88%	*not applicable*	

Wide variation across states:
MTG reach



Wide variation across states:
P-EBT reach



Cost per Meal Delivered

School Meals to Go

Mean of **$7.97** cost per meal

Range across states of **$3.05 - $15.36** cost per meal

$$\frac{\text{(monthly program and participant costs)}}{\text{(N meals distributed to all students)}}$$

Pandemic EBT

20-day month

Mean of **$5.73** cost per meal

Range across states of **$5.30 - $8.32** cost per meal

$$\frac{\text{(monthly program and participant costs)}}{\text{(monthly total cash benefits distributed to eligible students)/(\$5.70/2)}}$$

Meals per Child

School Meals to Go

Mean of **54** monthly meals

Range across states of **15-146** monthly meals

$$\frac{\text{(monthly meals distributed)}}{\text{(N eligible students receiving meals)}}$$

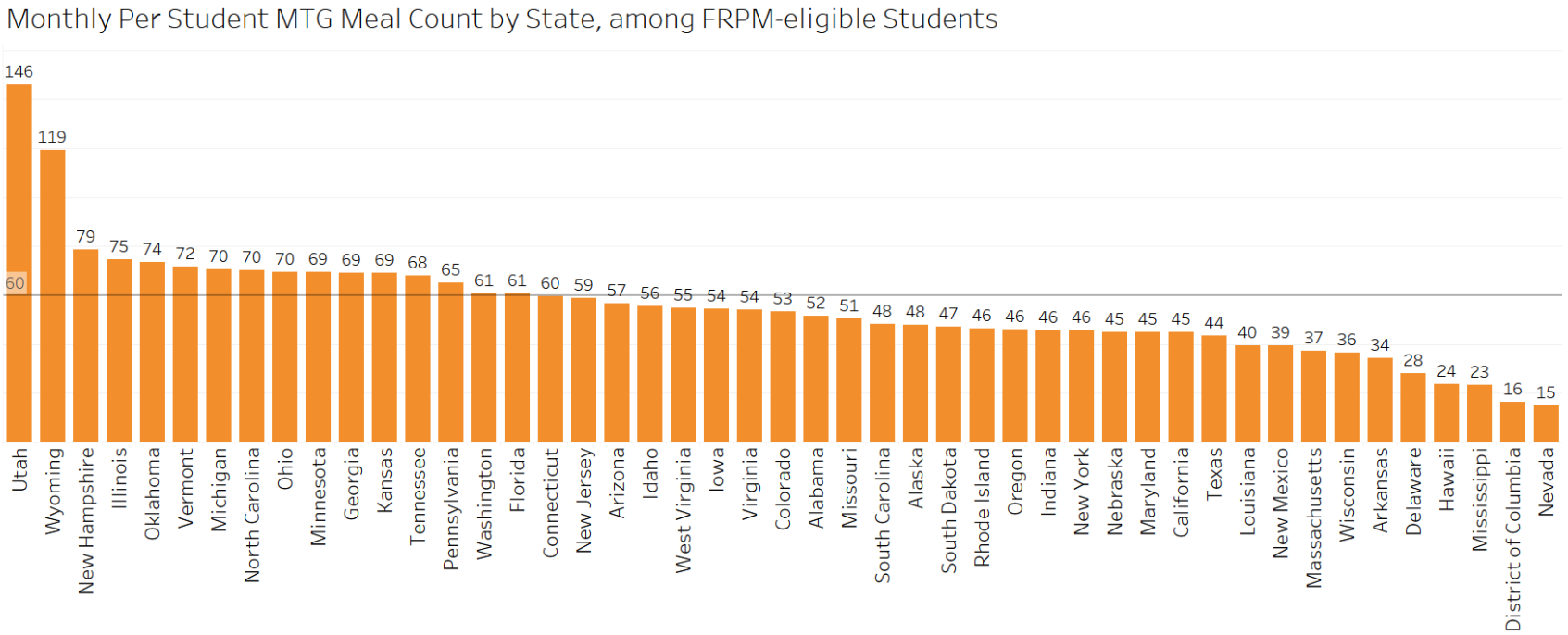
Pandemic EBT

Mean of **37** monthly meals

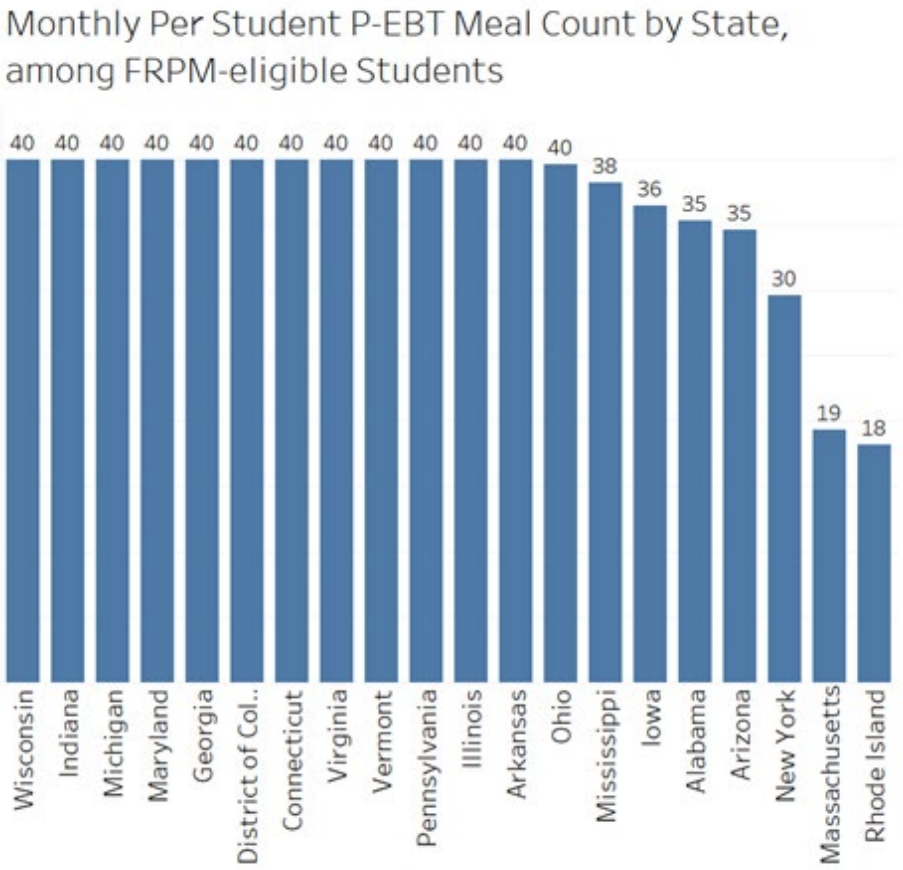
Range across states of **18-40** monthly meals

$$\frac{\text{(monthly total cash benefits distributed)/(\$5.70/2)}}{\text{(N eligible students receiving meals)}}$$

Wide variation across states:
Monthly meals per student - MTG



Wide variation across states:
Monthly meals per student – P-EBT



Cash Value of Monthly Benefits per Child

School Meals to Go

Mean of **$156.81** individual benefit value

Range across states of **$43.58 - $427.04** cash value

$$\frac{([\text{monthly meals distributed}/2] * \$5.85)}{(\text{N eligible students receiving meals})}$$

Pandemic EBT

Mean of **$104.69** individual benefit value

Range across states of **$51.83 - $114.00** cash value

$$\frac{(\text{Cash value of benefits distributed per month})}{(\text{N eligible students receiving meals})}$$

Cost per Benefitting Child-Monthly

School Meals to Go

Mean of **$363.04** monthly cost per child

Range across states of **$129.19 - $790.27** per child

$$\frac{\text{(monthly program costs)}}{\text{(N all students receiving meals)}}$$

Pandemic EBT

Mean of **$205.57** monthly cost per child

Range across states of **$151.38 - $227.33** per child

$$\frac{\text{(monthly program costs)}}{\text{(N eligible students receiving meals)}}$$

Cost per Benefitting Child - Daily

School Meals to Go

Mean of **$12.10** daily cost per child

Range across states of **$4.31 - $26.34** per child

$$\frac{\text{(monthly program costs)/30}}{\text{(N all students receiving meals)}}$$

Pandemic EBT

Mean of **$6.96** daily cost per child

Range across states of **$4.06 - $8.28** per child

$$\frac{\text{(monthly program costs)/20}}{\text{(N eligible students receiving meals)}}$$

Limitations
Messy data

Limitations
Data

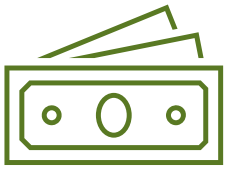
P-EBT

- Some states blended SNAP and P-EBT dollars in reports
- Used 2021 state plan data for administrative costs (2020 not available)
- Inconsistencies in USDA and state-level data on number of children participating and amounts disbursed
- State reports of number of participants difficult to interpret

MTG

- Census Pulse data may include small number of meals accessed from non-school sites
- Assumed *all* children (# reported in Pulse) received meals in household accessing MTG

Limitations



Cost data

- Administrative costs are estimated
  - Federal administrative costs not available
  - State costs are estimates from state plans, not actual
  - Participant costs are estimated from literature

Limited time frame: April/May 2020

- MTG costs may include start-up costs -may over-estimate on-going costs
- Early in program implementation

Preliminary Conclusions

Reach:

- P-EBT has broad reach, much greater than MTG
- MTG may have reached households not eligible for P-EBT due to income or immigration status

Benefits:

- MTG provides more meals per month by design, but to far fewer children

Costs per meal:

- P-EBT more cost-effective once up and running

Preliminary Conclusions

Variability:

- Wide variability across states in both programs in costs per meal and proportion of eligible children reached

Start-up complicated and costly:

- Needed to develop infrastructure, but now in maintenance phase and likely to be more cost effective

Preliminary Conclusions

Participant experience:

- P-EBT more convenient but requires home food prep
- MTG requires travel to distribution sites but provides ready-to eat meals

Preliminary Policy Implications

- **Both programs can feed children when school is out**
- **They should be continued (emergencies and routine times)**
  - MTG has limited reach but can reach children ineligible for P-EBT
  - P-EBT can reach more children at lower cost per meal
  - P-EBT should cover 30 days and operate whenever school is out
  - Programs are complementary

- **Programs should address nutritional quality**
  - MTG is likely higher nutritional quality if based on school meal stds
  - Consider incentives for using P-EBT for healthier food purchases

- **States need support**
  - Given variability in costs across states, supporting states to adopt cost-effective approaches would be useful

Thank you!

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We appreciate the members of the NOPREN Food Security Working Group who supported us with advice, data, and encouragement

September 27, 2021

Building Insights on Pandemic-EBT

State Perspectives on Implementation Challenges and Lessons Learned

URBAN INSTITUTE · ELEVATE · THE · DEBATE

APHSA
American Public Human Services Association

Partnership Between Urban and APHSA

- The Urban Institute and APHSA collaborated to learn from and with state administrators about P-EBT implementation
- As P-EBT evolved to include the 2020-2021 school year, the goal of our work ultimately focused on **documenting state perspectives on implementation challenges, lessons learned, and future recommendations**

Research Methods

- 2020-2021: Real-time insights from state SNAP directors through AASD All-State calls
- December 2020: Rapid response survey to states
- April 2021: Focus groups
  - 4 focus groups with 20 state P-EBT administrators
  - 1 focus group with state education officials
- Online tracker to summarize P-EBT plans

Urban Institute's State P-EBT Tracker

URBAN INSTITUTE

State-by-State Guide to the 2020–21 Pandemic EBT Program

Providing students and children under age 6 with free and reduced-price meal benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic

Last updated August 31, 2021

Millions of students and children under age 6 have lost access to free and reduced-price meals because their schools or child care facilities have closed or reduced hours during the pandemic. One of the many ways states and territories (collectively referred to here as "states") can respond is by providing families with emergency benefits through the federal Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program.

Although the program was authorized in October for the 2020–21 school year, initial implementation guidance was released in November, and legislation in late December made significant changes to plans for children under age 6. In January 2021, guidance for serving children under age 6

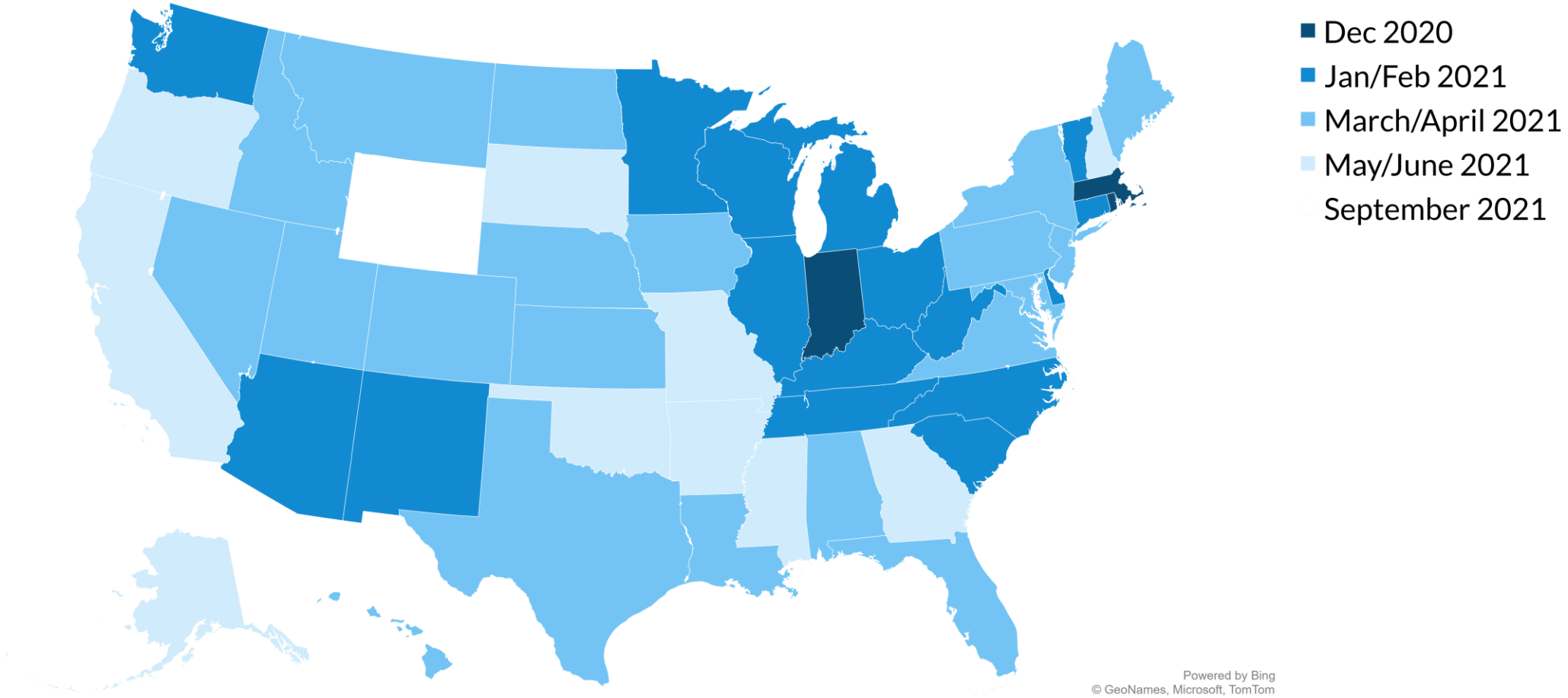
For the 2020–21 school year...

55 states have been approved to provide P-EBT **to students**

46 states have been approved to provide P-EBT **to children under age 6**

42 states have been approved to provide P-EBT **over the summer**

P-EBT School Year 2020-21 Plan Approvals, as of September 2021



Source: USDA FNS website, https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-guidance-coronavirus-pandemic-ebt-pebt as of July 7, 2021. Not graphed are the US Virgin Islands, approved in June 2021, the Northern Mariana Islands, approved in April 2021, the District of Columbia, approved in March 2021, and Puerto Rico, approved in January 2021.

Timeline of P-EBT for the 2020-21 School Year

Oct. 1: Continuing Appropriations Act, 2021 funded P-EBT though FY 2021

Nov. 16: FNS released school-age template & guidance

Dec 15: First SY 2020-2021 P-EBT plan from MA approved by USDA

Dec. 27: Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 clarified SAs and admin funds

Jan 29: New admin's FNS released child under 6 template & revised school guidance

March 11: American Rescue Plan Act, 2021 authorized summer P-EBT & extended P-EBT for duration of pandemic

April 26: FNS released summer P-EBT template & guidance

External Challenges in SY 2020-2021 P-EBT Implementation

Delays in Guidance & Funding

- Delays in Congressional authorization limited states' ability to adequately plan
- States needed to "sit and wait" for guidance
  - For example, states waited 5 weeks between initial authorization and guidance. 10 weeks later, new guidance was issued with significant revisions
  - Large states like NY & CA not approved until April 2021
- Though 100% reimbursement of administrative costs was helpful, states **needed funding quicker** and had to **spend money up front** on staffing, contracts, call centers, and other things

*"Inconsistent, changing, and **short-term guidance is problematic**. We had a **number of children who were missed** because of the data."*

– State P-EBT administrator

Simplifying Assumptions & Plan Approval

- Data on individual learning modes was not centrally available, so states hoped for more flexible simplifying assumptions
- States successfully proposed **predominant attendance modes** (treating all students in a school the same) and **standard benefit levels** (like a standard hybrid benefit), though FNS required **significant justification for all assumptions**
- Plan approval process was time-consuming; states sometimes waited 3-4 weeks for approval despite weeks-long back and forth before submission

> *"Simplifying assumptions were **anything but simple**."*
>
> *– State P-EBT administrator*

Internal Challenges in SY 2020-2021 P-EBT Implementation

Data Management & Benefit Issuance

- Eligibility data difficult to collect due to inconsistences in *if* and *how* schools were collecting FRPL applications due to waivers
  - FRPL data not sufficient; addresses were often wrong or outdated, or were for a biological parent vs. informal guardian; in one case, a parent got a card, but they later discovered there was a restraining order against that parent
- Most pressing barrier: tracking school status & learning mode
  - Some states had to **reconcile tens or hundreds of thousands of individual spreadsheets** from schools
- Mailing delays, supply chain issues, and prohibitory pricing practices among EBT vendors delayed getting benefits out even more

Staffing Constraints & Customer Service

- One large state hired 600 additional staff for customer service response, and remarked it still wasn't enough
  - Another state received 6000 calls from families on the first day of issuance, then 1000+ calls daily with many going unanswered
- Admin staff burnout from long hours, many working past midnight
- Use of vendors offered limited relief, but difficult to scale

> *"People **ran themselves into the ground** running this program. You could only do so much."* – *State P-EBT administrator*

Coordination Between SNAP & Child Nutrition

- Establishing an entirely new partnership between SNAP & DOE/child nutrition stakeholders in a short time period was difficult
- No shared data infrastructure
- Different methods of and priorities for data tracking

P-EBT for the 2021-2022 School Year

- New guidance for SY21-22 released in late Aug. 2021
- While the guidance remains similar to the prior year, many concerns remain with ever-changing environment
  - Establishing student & school eligibility
  - Working with schools to collect up-to-date student data
  - Shifting virtual attendance options
  - Creating standard benefit levels for special circumstances, such as for quarantine

Thank you!

Matt Lyons: mlyons@aphsa.org

Chloe Green: cgreen@aphsa.org

Poonam Gupta: pgupta@urban.org

Elaine Waxman: ewaxman@urban.org