



Brain Food: Student Meal Provision Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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VOLUME 2, ISSUE 6

November, 2020



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SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY

While food is a basic necessity, many Missourians, especially children, often go hungry due to food affordability and accessibility. For example, in 2018, 13% of all Missourians and 15% of Missouri students were classified as food insecure.¹ This means that those Missourians did not have “enough food for an active, healthy life.”² Amid the COVID-19 pandemic and resultant economic recession, even more of Missouri’s children are at risk of becoming food insecure, thus heightening the need to support them. This problem is compounded by widespread school closures, as a significant amount of Missouri students rely on their schools for regular, healthy meals. As a consequence of the global crisis, more than 125,000 additional Missouri children may become food insecure.³

In this policy brief, we summarize the issue of growing food insecurity among Missouri children, detailing the role of some of the federal programs that support them. As more families become food insecure in the wake of the pandemic, we also note evidence of the impact of hunger on critical student outcomes.

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Food Assistance Programs in Missouri

The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as “food stamps,” assists hundreds of thousands of low-income Missourians by supplementing family food budgets so that those families can stay healthy, move towards self-sufficiency, and avoid cycles of poverty. Similar to SNAP, federal and state safety net programs are essential lifelines for families, especially in times of crisis. Each year, federal and state safety net programs like SNAP combine to lift an estimated 1.1 million Missourians, including 250,000 children, out of poverty, lowering Missouri’s effective poverty rate from 28.4% to 10.7%.⁴

Compared to national trends, Missourians tend to rely more heavily on SNAP during times of economic recession. For example, Missouri experienced a 39% increase in total SNAP enrollment between 2006 and 2011, as shown in Figure 1.

During that same period, nearly 100,000 additional Missouri children came to rely on SNAP for food, displayed below in Figure 2. Missouri is experiencing similar SNAP enrollment increases resulting from the COVID-19 economic downturn. Between the beginning of the statewide shutdown in March and May, more than 100,000 new Missouri applicants and around 60,000 new families began receiving SNAP benefits.

SNAP is not the only government program on which Missourians rely for food. Across the nation, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) combats food insecurity among students by providing free and reduced-price meals to low-income students. This year, approximately half of the nearly 900,000 Missouri students received free or reduced-priced meals in their schools, a rate similar to national trends.^{9 10} With reduced access to NSLP meals during the months of school closure, Missouri families faced a more significant financial burden to feed their children. Only in mid-May did some families receive a one-time retroactive benefit for providing food to their children instead of their schools, even as statewide unemployment skyrocketed.^{11 12} Given that student hunger may lead to a compromised emotional well-being,

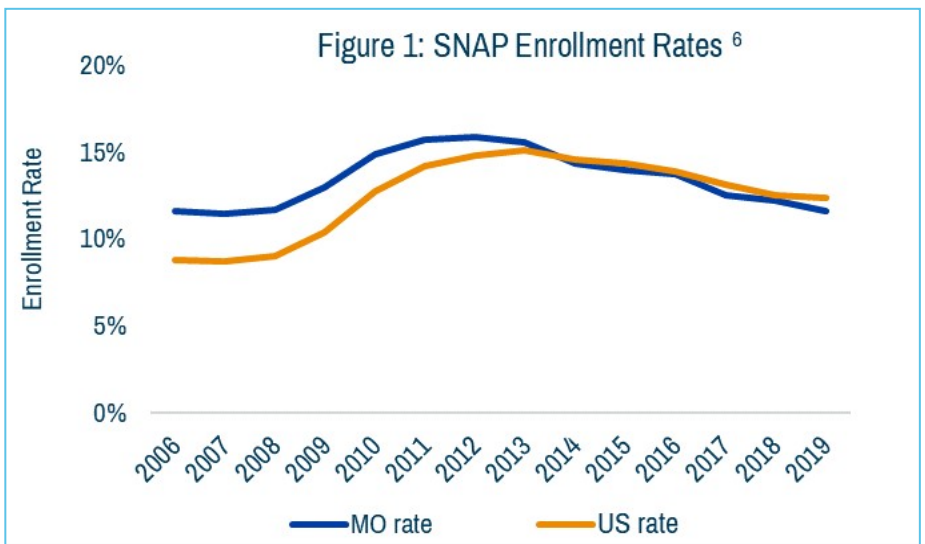
Special points of interest:

- More than 125,000 children may soon become food insecure in Missouri
- 50% of Missouri children receive meals through the National School Lunch Program
- More than 400,000 Missouri children receive SNAP benefits
- 15% of all Missouri students are Food Insecure

lower school engagement, a higher likelihood of repeating a grade, and overall declines in student achievement, the delay in providing NSLP benefits likely negatively impacted students' academic and physical well-being.^{13 14}

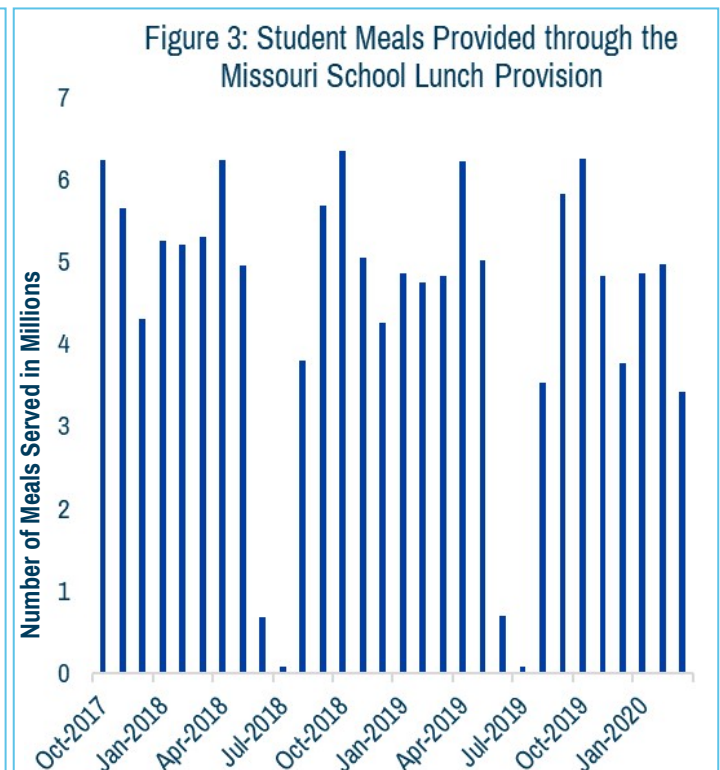
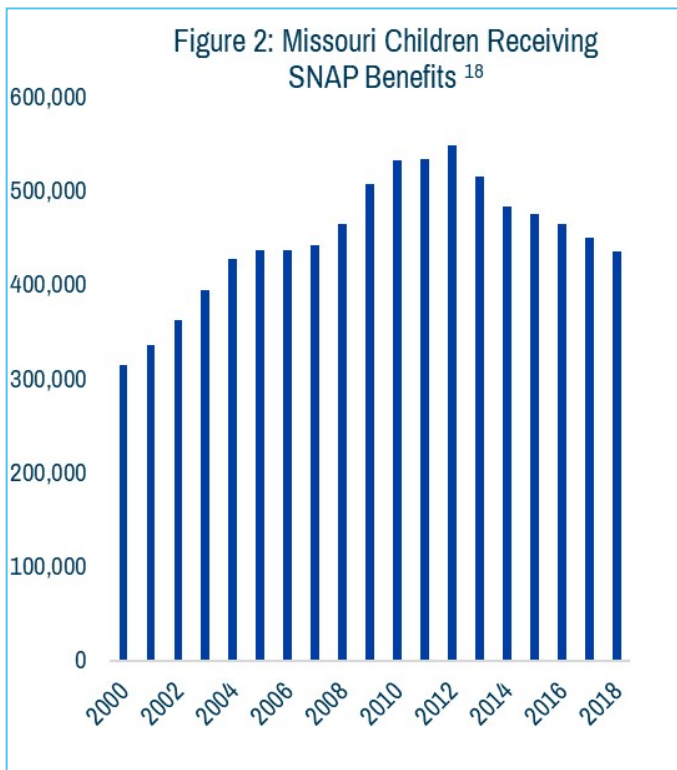
Although Missouri students have returned to school, a limited number of districts have decided to operate in an online-only capacity. Over the first few months of the school year, Missouri has witnessed several rising hotspots of COVID-19, leading to growing concerns for school reopening and the possibility of another closure.¹⁵

Future school closure would again generate meal uncertainty and increased food insecurity. While some districts have explicitly outlined plans to avail food to their students, others have not made their food plans public or have stated they will not provide meals to students if they are not in school. For instance, Ft. Zumwalt school district has indicated there will be no meal delivery services to students who opt into virtual learning.¹⁶ On the other hand, other districts, like the Ferguson-Florissant School District which has opted for complete virtual learning, have committed to continue meal distribution to students.¹⁷



Student and Child Food Insecurity in Missouri

Despite the NSLP and additional family benefits, many children remain hungry. For some, the price of food is too high, while for others, healthy food is not available nearby. Today, 19% of Missouri's children aged 17 and under live below the poverty line (\$26,200 a year or \$2,183 a month for a family of four), a higher rate than statewide figures.^{19 20} The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates that a minimal food plan for a family of four costs \$849.80 per month (\$10,197.60 per year). For Missourians living in poverty, this means that nearly half of after-tax family income would have to be spent on food to meet the



USDA low-cost food plan in Missouri. ²¹ Without access to meals provided through schools, families may have paid more out-of-pocket to compensate for the estimated \$30 of school-provided food per student per week. ²² In sum, many families likely took on an increased financial burden while schools were closed.

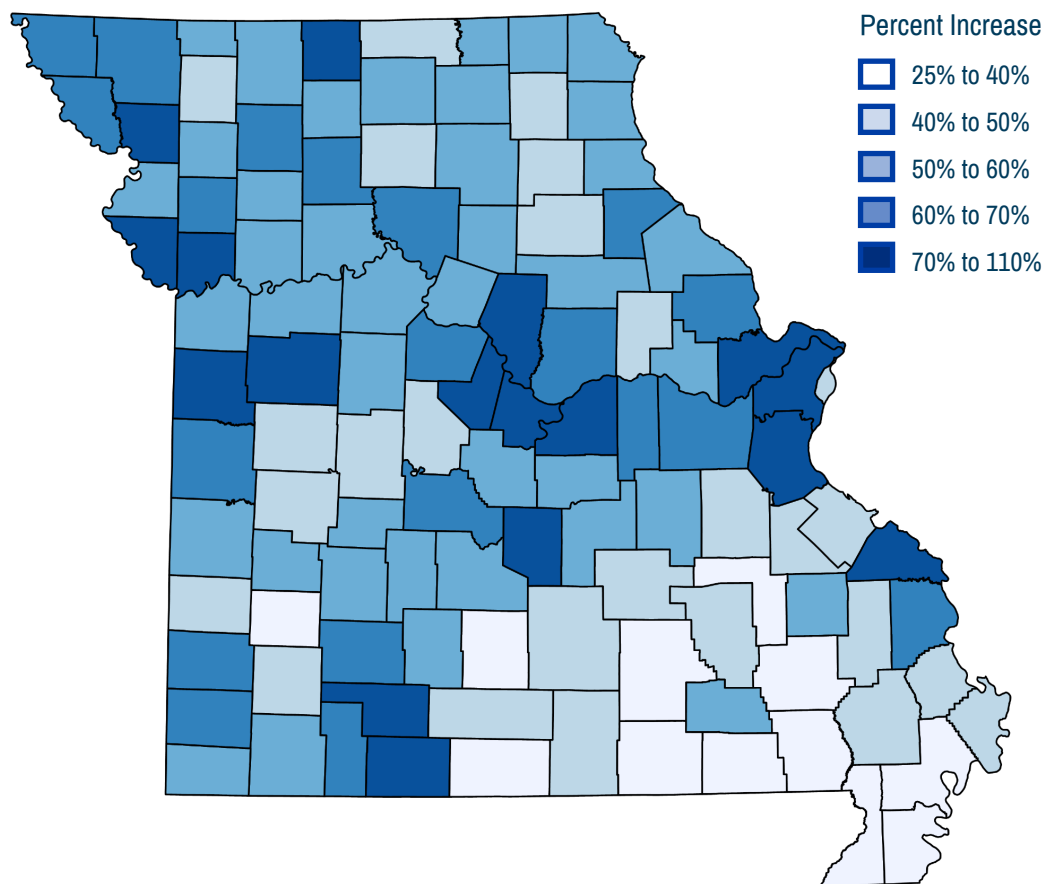
For low-income students, factors beyond the classroom, including food insecurity, can significantly impact school performance. At school, students who are secure in their food access tend to outperform hungry children. ^{23 24} Even the monthly arrival of SNAP benefits to families can raise a student's test scores. ^{25 26} Currently, families at or near the poverty line may soon become food insecure if they were not already. Projections from Feeding America predict up to a 60% increase in child food insecurity in Missouri due to the pandemic and school closures; that translates to around 125,000 newly food-insecure children. ²⁷ Nearly a quarter of those children would be residents of either Kansas City or St. Louis, areas

where many of the state's most impoverished families live. ²⁸ Statewide action is necessary to protect families from going hungry.

Statewide Food Security Responses

In mid-May, Missouri issued benefits to all families (both SNAP and non-SNAP) as long as the children in those families were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This retroactive benefit provided funding to Missouri families for the days that their child had missed meals in school. ²⁹ Some Missouri school districts offered a more immediate response for families and children by setting up meal stops around cities and district areas or bussing meals to students. Districts, however, still faced extraordinary challenges due to COVID-19. Regrettably, two bus drivers who had been delivering food to students in the Ferguson-Florissant School District died from COVID-19 related illnesses. ³⁰ In southeastern Missouri, a region with some of the highest child food insecurity rates in the state, ³¹ state officials

Figure 4: Percent Change in Child Food Insecurity by County from 2018 to 2020



Note: Feeding America's projections of how food insecurity may increase in 2020 due to COVID-19 are calculated using state and county level data from 2009-2018 and projections of unemployment and poverty rates in 2020. ²⁹

temporarily deployed the National Guard to districts unable to find enough people to distribute meals.^{32 33}

Despite state assistance, school district meal provision remains fraught with challenges. For example, Kansas City 33, one of Missouri’s largest districts, suspended meal distribution to its students after a staff member tested positive for COVID-19.³⁴ Highlighting the changing logistical difficulties of feeding Missouri students amid the pandemic, Jordan Gordon, director of child nutrition services for Kansas City Public Schools, commented, “It is highly implausible for us to open up a school cafeteria in a traditional manner that most of us are used to seeing by the start of August.”³⁵ Though districts like Kansas City 33 will take precautions, temporary food suspensions may be increasingly common. As more Missouri families become food insecure, even temporary food insecurity can have long-lasting negative impacts.³⁶

Fortunately, the USDA offered an extension to the NSLP Seamless Summer Options program (SSO) and the Summer Food Services Program (SFSP) to continue through December.³⁷ Effectively, these extensions will allow all children in a district (0 to 18 years of age) to receive meals through their school at no cost until December or until funds run out.³⁸ While this change will certainly provide relief to families across the state, Missouri school districts still lack straightforward guidance from DESE on how to safely offer meals to all students, regardless of the learning plan mode. Some of Missouri’s most vulnerable students may be enrolled for online courses this semester; how those students access regular meals remains a looming question in many districts.

To address health concerns related to in-school meals, the CDC recommended either substituting the cafeteria lunch period for meals in classrooms or rotating cafeteria use for schools opening in-person.³⁹ In either scenario, the CDC suggests students remain in small, socially distant groups. Currently, there are no statewide requirements for cafeteria workers or required changes to lunch protocols.⁴⁰ Instead, school districts decide how they want to serve meals. Some districts may do away with a lunch period altogether, while others might continue their customary practices. Safety protocols may be different based on the space, staff, and other available resources to each district.

The fact remains that many families still relied on school districts to provide their children with food amid school closures. Many school districts were not able to do so consistently or at all. Furthermore, it appears that only around 60% of eligible Missouri families received any additional federal relief for their

children.⁴¹ Though Missouri students are back in school, either in person or virtually, many more families likely will rely on the benefits of federal social programs like SNAP now than before the pandemic. Finding and delivering information for potential food benefits (i.e., SNAP and FRL) to these at-risk families should be one of the state's top concerns right now.

Table 1 : Timeline of Major Events Impacting Food Security

Pandemic Response	Date Approved
Governor Temporary Closes Schools	3/21/2020
SNAP: Emergency Allotment (extended through July)	3/24/2020
Governor Closes Missouri Schools for Entire School Year	4/9/2020
Pandemic EBT (extended through September)	5/15/2020
Waive Initial and Recertification Interviews (July extension denied)	6/29/2020
Summer School Food Services Program & NSLP Seamless Summer Options Extension (offered through December)	8/31/2020

Conclusions

Amid the pandemic, Missouri families face new challenges that may put student health and education at risk. To combat these risks, Missouri must take steps to ensure all eligible families have the proper information and access to enroll in SNAP and other food-related government benefits. Missouri must also update current enrollment systems to ensure all benefits-eligible families receive them. Though most students may be back at school, many remain at home, perhaps without access to food. Creating plans to ensure students are fed is a crucial piece of schools’ reopening plans, and statewide guidance could help ease the burden on families and schools. In the future, Missouri might consider joining organizations like Feeding America and others in advocating for increased SNAP benefits, similar to successful expansion during the Great Recession.^{42 43}

As we enter winter, hardships for families may get worse before they get better. As a result, Missouri should consider supporting alternative out-of-

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school meal distribution programs, like the National Guard plan in southeast Missouri. Even in normal times, too many Missouri students struggle with food insecurity. While districts can meet students' needs and provide access to meals right now, they will need support as they continue to navigate COVID-related challenges. Furthermore, families will continue to require relief to address circumstances driven by the ongoing recession.

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