

A Snapshot of Families' Experience With the Pandemic EBT Program

When schools closed in March 2020 in response to the pandemic, 30 million children lost access to the free and reduced-price school meals¹ that help reduce childhood hunger, support health, and ease the pressure on household food budgets. Congress created the Pandemic EBT Program to replace the school breakfasts and lunches families lost when schools closed. The program provides an EBT card with grocery benefits to families whose children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals.

Pandemic EBT was modeled after the successful Summer EBT demonstration projects, which were shown to reduce food insecurity and improve nutrition. Pandemic EBT also has helped reduce food insecurity. Studies conducted by The Hamilton Project estimated that Pandemic EBT lifted 2.7–3.9 million children out of hunger in spring of 2020² and reduced food insufficiency³ among Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) households by 28 percent in the 2020–2021 school year.⁴

To further support families, Congress added benefits for children under the age of six in SNAP households, in addition to school-age children, and summer benefits for both school-age and children under the age of six, to the Pandemic EBT Program. This summer will be the last year that summer benefits are provided through the Pandemic EBT Program, and they will only be available to school-age children. Beginning in 2024, states will provide summer benefits for school-age children through the new, nationwide Summer EBT Program.

To better understand the impact of providing grocery benefits to families when their children lose access to free or reduced-price school meals and the experience families had in accessing benefits, the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) surveyed 153 parents and guardians who received Pandemic EBT benefits at some point during the last three years.

Parents and guardians reported that the benefits:

- allowed them to worry less about having enough food (109);
- allowed their family to have enough food through the month (98);
- allowed them to purchase more nutritious food (83); and
- allowed them to pay other bills, like rent and utilities (73).

Survey respondents were able to check all that apply. Fifty-one respondents checked all the options, and only two respondents did not check any of the options.

Currently, states are submitting plans to provide summer benefits for 2023. Nine states — Alaska, Idaho, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, South Dakota, and Texas — have not submitted plans. If those states do not submit a plan by July 14, the families in those states who rely on school meals to help make ends meet will miss out on the grocery benefits provided by Pandemic EBT.

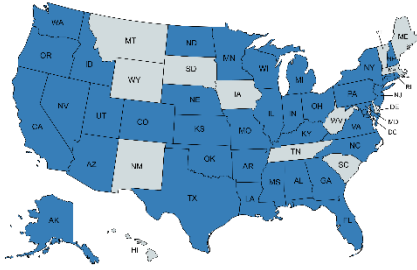
¹ Available at: https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Summer-EBT-Report_FRAC_041023.pdf

² Bauer, Lauren et al., The Hamilton Project (2020), *The Effect of Pandemic EBT on Measures of Food Hardship*. Available at: https://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/files/P-EBT_LO_7.30.pdf. Accessed on February 7, 2023.

³ Food insufficiency measures whether a household generally has enough to eat, making it more severe than food insecurity, which measures whether a household is worried about food running out, and the variety, quality, and quantity of food consumed. Very low food security and food insufficiency are closer in severity.

⁴ Brookings's Institute (2021). *An update on the effect of Pandemic EBT on measures of food hardship*. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/an-update-on-the-effect-of-pandemic-ebt-on-measures-of-food-hardship/>. Accessed on February 7, 2023.

About This Survey

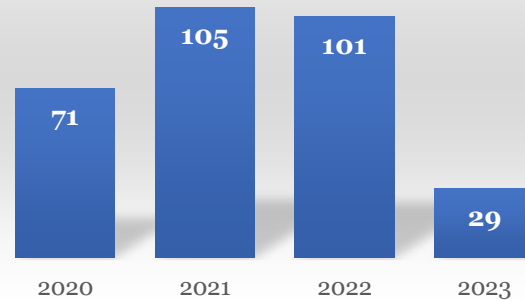


FRAC developed a survey to collect information on parents and guardians' experiences with Pandemic EBT. The survey was posted on FRAC's website in both English and Spanish. It also was distributed to individuals who had contacted FRAC over the last three years for assistance to receive benefits. One hundred and fifty-three individuals who received benefits filled out the survey. Surveys were submitted by individuals residing in 37 states and the District of Columbia. The states represented are shaded in blue.

Participation in Pandemic EBT

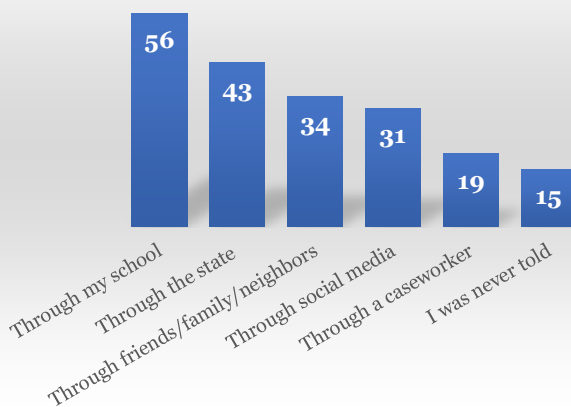
Seventy-one out of the 153 respondents (46 percent) reported receiving benefits during 2020, the first year of the program. In 2021, 2022, and 2023 (as of May 2023), 105 (69 percent), 101 (66 percent), and 29 (19 percent) respondents reported receiving benefits respectively. The peak year for Pandemic EBT was the 2021–2022 school year, which was the year when many schools faced closures or hybrid learning because of the pandemic. This was also the first school year in which students under six received benefits. Many schools returned to normal operations the following school year (2022–2023).

Which years did you receive Pandemic EBT?



Outreach and Communication

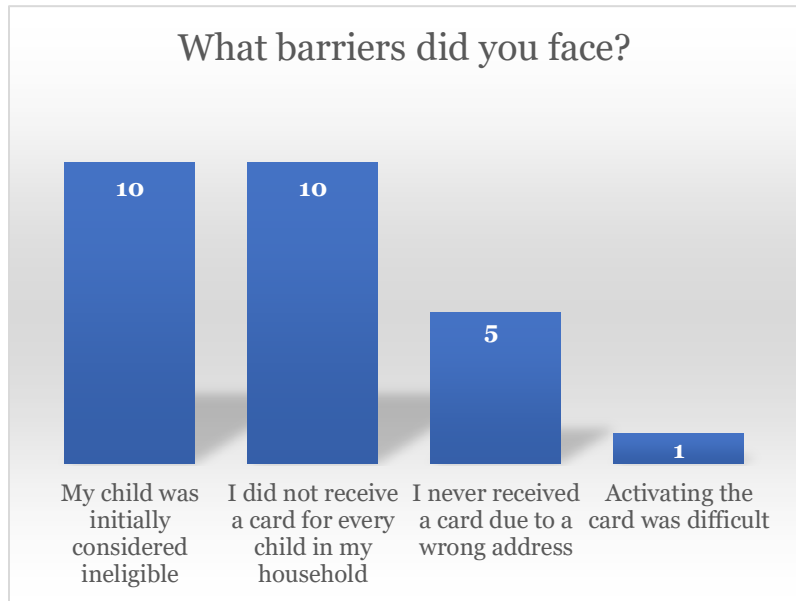
How did you hear about the Pandemic EBT Program?



Outreach and communication were important to supporting the success of Pandemic EBT. The most common ways that families found out about Pandemic EBT was from their school (56 respondents), the state (43 respondents), through social media (34 respondents), or through a caseworker (19 respondents). Others found out about it through informal channels such as friends, family, or neighbors (34 respondents), but 15 respondents stated that they had not received information on Pandemic EBT from any source. These responses highlight the need for a comprehensive outreach and communications plan by states to ensure that all eligible families know about the program.

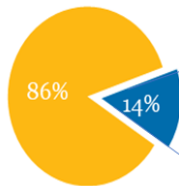
Barriers to Pandemic EBT

Thirty-three (22 percent) of the 153 respondents who participated in Pandemic EBT reported facing barriers to receiving benefits. Ten were initially considered ineligible; 10 did not receive benefits for every child in the household; 5 never received a card due to it being sent to the wrong address; and 1 had difficulty activating the card. To resolve issues, individuals most often reported calling a state phone number, with other pathways including emailing a state email, filling out an online inquiry form, and working with their school district.

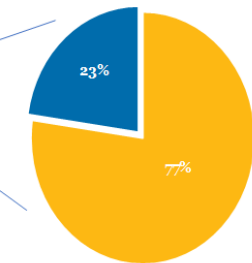


Pandemic EBT Expungement

Have you had benefits expunged?



Were you notified prior to expungement?



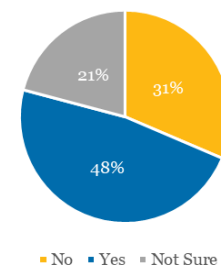
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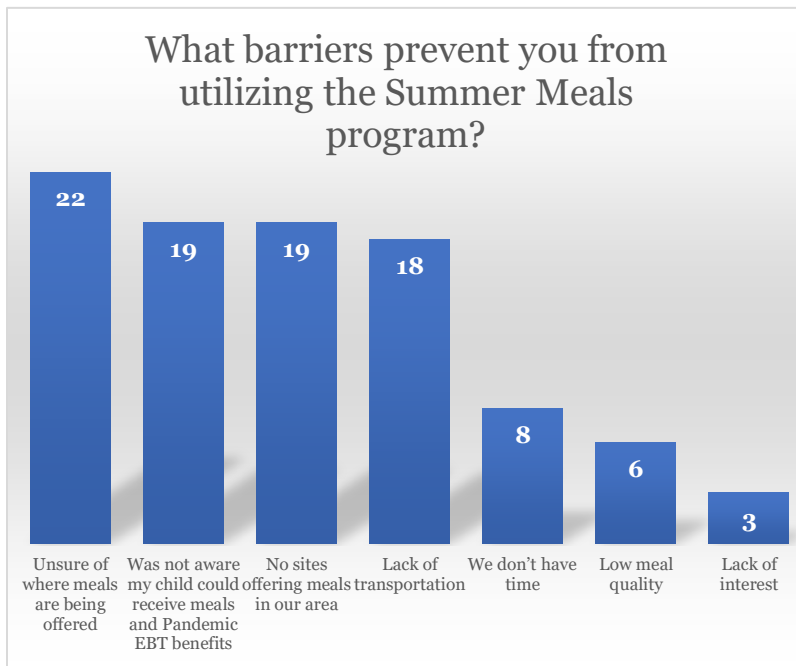
Expungement, or removal of benefits from an individual's card, occurs when benefits go unused for a certain length of time. In most states, it is 274 days. One hundred and thirty-one individuals (86 percent of respondents) reported that their benefits have not been expunged. Of the 22 individuals that reported having benefits expunged, 17 (or 77 percent) were never notified that their benefits were going to be removed. Moving forward, state agencies should notify families before their benefits expire to maximize utilization.

Participation in Summer Meals

The Summer Pandemic EBT Program was designed to replace the loss of school meals during summer vacation. The Summer Nutrition Programs are an important complement to providing Pandemic EBT benefits during the summer. To gauge the awareness of and participation in the Summer Nutrition Programs, the survey included questions about their experience with the Summer Nutrition Programs. Of the 153 survey respondents, 48 (31 percent) reported their children had not participated in summer meals, 73 (48 percent) reported they had participated in the program, and 32 (21 percent) were unsure if they had participated.

Has your child ever participated in a Summer Meals program?





Of the 80 respondents that reported their children did not participate or were unsure if they participated, 22 (24 percent) indicated they were unsure of the location of meal sites 19 (20 percent) also indicated that there were no sites offering meals in their area, and 19 respondents (20 percent) did not know they could receive both Pandemic EBT benefits and a summer meal. A smaller number of respondents stated they did not have time to access summer meals (8), the meals offered were of low quality (6), or they were not interested in participating (3).

Conclusion

Nearly all families that received Pandemic EBT over the last three years reported that the benefits played an important role in ensuring that their family had the food they needed. The Pandemic EBT Program was modeled after the Summer EBT demonstration projects that also provided grocery benefits to families when schools closed (in this case during summer vacation) and food insecurity increases due to the loss of access to school meals. Providing EBT benefits during the summer to families with school-age children was found to reduce food insecurity and improve nutrition. Even though most children have returned to school, the summer remains a difficult time for families. This summer, states can, and all should, provide summer benefits to school-age children through Pandemic EBT. Moving forward, the creation of the permanent, nationwide Summer EBT Program will allow states to continue providing critical benefits to families to overcome summer hunger.