

COVID-19 & HUNGER IN KANSAS



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In the breadbasket of the richest country in the world, no one should worry about where their next meal will come from.

¹ Feeding America. "[State-By-State Resource: The Impact of Coronavirus on Food Insecurity.](#)" 2021.

² Perry, B., Aronson, B., & Pescosolido, B. "[Pandemic precarity: COVID-19 is exposing and exacerbating inequalities in the American heartland.](#)" Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. 2021.

COVID-19 increased hunger and hardship that already persisted in Kansas. Despite the crucial work of food banks, mutual aid programs, meal services, and food assistance, one in six Kansans and one in four Kansas children are food insecure. Feeding America, a nationwide network of more than 200 food banks, estimates food insecurity in Kansas increased from 12.1% to 14.1% during 2020.¹ The systemic oppression of marginalized identities also means an individual's vulnerability to hunger is affected by their race, education level, gender, immigration status, and beyond.²

Food insecurity is a political decision.

Our communities are inventive, resilient, and compassionate. Solutions to hunger are right in front of us. This report discusses how COVID-19 impacted Kansans' access to what we need to survive, ways communities and programs stepped up to fill the gaps, and opportunities to help Kansans not only recover from the pandemic but thrive.

COVID-19's Impact on Hunger and Hardship in Kansas

³ Hake, M. et. al. Feeding America. "[The Impact of the Coronavirus on Local Food Insecurity in 2020 & 2021.](#)" 2021.

We utilized various indicators to provide a snapshot of what hunger and hardship have looked like in Kansas one year into the pandemic, including but not limited to:

- Census Pulse Survey data
- Projections based on unemployment and poverty, which are two of the largest indicators of food insecurity³
- Utilization rates of food-based assistance programs
- COVID-19 infection and death rates as well as long-term health impacts

When framing the magnitude of the COVID-19 crisis and the economic fallout it caused, it must first be understood that Black, Brown, and Indigenous people have been hit the hardest by virtually every aspect of the pandemic.

CENSUS PULSE SURVEY INSIGHTS

The U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey collects weekly economic and social data amid the pandemic. Results from this survey reveal important effects of hunger experienced by Kansans across the state.

One of the important measures tracked in the Household Pulse Survey is food sufficiency for households in the last seven days. Respondents can report:

- They had enough of the types of food wanted
- They had enough food but not always the types wanted
- They sometimes did not have enough to eat
- They often did not have enough to eat

During the 24 periods tracked by the Household Pulse Survey through February 15, 2021, only 61.8% of Kansans reported having enough of the types of food they wanted for the previous seven

⁴ Holt-Gimenez, E. & Harper, B. “[Food—Systems—Racism: From Mistreatment to Transformation.](#)” Food First - Institute for Food & Development Policy. 2016.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Chilton, M. et. al. “[From Disparities to Discrimination: Getting at the Roots of Food Insecurity in America.](#)” Children’s HealthWatch. 2018.

⁷ Gamblin, M. & King, K. “[Racially equitable responses to hunger during COVID-19 and beyond.](#)” Bread for the World Institute. 2021.

⁸ Shields, D. “The Color of Hunger: Race and Hunger in National and International Perspective.” Rowman & Littlefield. p. 6. 1995.

days. Nine percent of respondents reported having not enough to eat during the previous seven days. The number of Kansans reporting they sometimes or often did not have enough food in the previous seven days peaked at 16.6% during the period tracked between December 9, 2020-December 21, 2020. The number of Kansans reporting they often did not have enough food in the previous seven days also peaked during the same period at 7.0%.

It’s important to note food insufficiency is a more severe hardship than food insecurity. While data from the Household Pulse Survey is reliable, it should not be directly compared to past estimates of food insecurity. This is why it’s important to look at additional indicators of hardship, including unemployment and poverty.

RACISM AND HUNGER

In a series on racism within the food system, researchers Eric Holt-Giménez, Ph.D., and Breeze Harper, Ph.D., write, “The food system is unjust and unsustainable but it is not broken—it functions precisely as [it] has always worked; concentrating power in the hands of a privileged minority and passing off the social and environmental ‘externalities’ disproportionately on to racially stigmatized groups.”⁴

Institutional and structural racism shape food policy and outcomes.⁵ Before the pandemic, people who experienced discrimination were almost twice as likely as others to struggle with hunger.⁶ Higher rates of food insecurity among people of color are a direct result of systemic racial discrimination in virtually every aspect of American life.⁷ Discrimination in the workplace, government policy around

housing and land ownership, racial segregation in schools, unequal access to healthcare, and mass incarceration are just some of the areas

where political decisions or actions create barriers to accessing food. To combat hunger, the racist policies and their long-term implications must be addressed. The two are inextricably linked.

Despite racist perceptions about food and economic assistance, the reality is that white people disproportionately receive more of it. “When all government transfer programs are combined, Black Americans receive about 74% and Hispanics receive about 71% of what European Americans receive per capita.”⁸

Institutional and structural racism shape food policy and outcomes.

⁹ Hubbard, M. "Food Security for the Indigenous (New York Times)." Mazon. 2021.

The impacts of racism within our systems cannot be underscored enough. Just as Black, Brown, and Indigenous people have been impacted by COVID-19 in disparate ways, they have subsequently experienced worse rates of hunger and hardship during the pandemic as well. On average, over the 24 periods of the Household Pulse Survey from April 23, 2020, through February 15, 2021, the number of people reporting they did not get enough to eat in the previous 7 days was 16.5% for Black Kansans, 16.0% for Hispanic Kansans, and 7.3% for non-Hispanic white Kansans.

While the House Pulse Survey was not able to capture COVID-19's impact on food sufficiency among Indigenous populations due to low survey participation rates, we know the pandemic disparately affected these communities. Before the pandemic, "[f]amilies living in Indigenous communities are twice as likely to experience food insecurity."⁹ Indigenous people also have higher rates of chronic disease (such as obesity, diabetes, asthma, and heart disease) than white Americans. The mortality rate for these chronic diseases



¹⁰ Lajoie, K. "COVID-19 and Specific Vulnerabilities of Indigenous Populations." Drake Undergraduate Social Science Journal. 2021.

¹¹ Parker, K., Minkin, R., & Bennett, J. "Economic Fallout From COVID-19 Continues To Hit Lower-Income Americans the Hardest." Pew Research Center. 2020.

¹² Laborde, D. & Smaller, C. "What Would it Cost to Avert the COVID-19 Hunger Crisis?" Ceres2030: Sustainable Solutions to End Hunger. 2020.

¹³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Economy at a Glance, Kansas." Retrieved May 2021.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. "Percent of total population in poverty, 2019: Kansas." 2021.

among Native Americans is three to five times higher than that of non-native Americans. The presence of even one chronic disease can significantly worsen the impact of COVID-19, meaning "Indigenous populations are more likely to experience the most severe effects" of the novel coronavirus.¹⁰

PROJECTIONS OF UNEMPLOYMENT AND POVERTY IN KANSAS

One of the bigger impacts of COVID-19 has been the effect on employment income. The economic fallout from COVID-19 continues to hit lower-income Americans the hardest.¹¹ Falling income not only reduces people’s ability to purchase food, but it also creates an overall drop in economic demand not in line with actual need. This distorts the market for food that is also contending with supply disruptions caused by lockdown measures and border closures, disruptions in production and supply chains for food, and panic and hoarding that have further impacted immediately available supply.¹²

In Kansas, an average of 41% of all Pulse Survey respondents over the 24-period range from April 2020 to February 2021 reported a loss of income due to the coronavirus pandemic. Not surprisingly,

those reporting a loss of income were far more likely to report not having enough to eat in the previous seven days. 15.8% of respondents reporting a loss of income during the pandemic also reported not having enough to eat.

At the onset of the pandemic, unemployment rates skyrocketed in Kansas (as well as across the United States). As of April 2021, unemployment rates were still not down to where they were before the pandemic.¹³

In 2019, the poverty rate in Kansas among the total population was 11.3%. Among children, it was 14.3%.¹⁴ According to Feeding America’s study on COVID-19’s impact on food insecurity, the 2020 projected Overall Food Insecurity Rate for Kansas is 14.1% and 20.7% for children and the 2021 projected Overall Food Insecurity Rate for Kansas is 13.1% and 18.6% for children.¹⁵

| Unemployment Rate | |
|-------------------|------------|
| Month | Percentage |
| Mar 2020 | 3.2% |
| April 2020 | 12.6% |
| May 2020 | 9.0% |
| June 2020 | 7.0% |
| July 2020 | 6.6% |
| Aug 2020 | 6.2% |
| Sept 2020 | 6.1% |
| Oct 2020 | 4.7% |
| Nov 2020 | 4.7% |
| Dec 2020 | 4.7% |
| Jan 2021 | 3.4% |
| Feb 2021 | 3.8% |
| Mar 2021 | 3.7% |

¹⁵ Feeding America generated these estimates by using actual annual unemployment rate information from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics and estimating poverty rates based on their historic relationships to unemployment. In their model, for every percentage point increase in annual unemployment, food insecurity is estimated to increase by 0.509%, and for every percentage increase in estimated annual poverty, food insecurity is estimated to increase by 0.332%. Feeding America. “[State-by-State Resource: The Impact of Coronavirus on FoodInsecurity.](#)” Accessed March 2021.

¹⁶ Hake, M. et. al. Feeding America. “[The Impact of the Coronavirus on Local Food Insecurity in 2020 & 2021.](#)” 2021.

While these rates reflect an increase, especially among child food insecurity, the projections are lower than prior estimates: “[A]ctual unemployment and estimated poverty levels have been lower than many experts originally predicted” in part because of the federal response “which has played an important role in mitigating the crisis.”¹⁶ Food assistance programs work to fight hunger.

DIRECT EFFECTS OF COVID-19 SYMPTOMS

In tracking the effects of COVID-19 on hunger, it is important to consider not only the effects of efforts to stop the spread of the disease but also the impact of the numbers of people experiencing the disease symptoms.

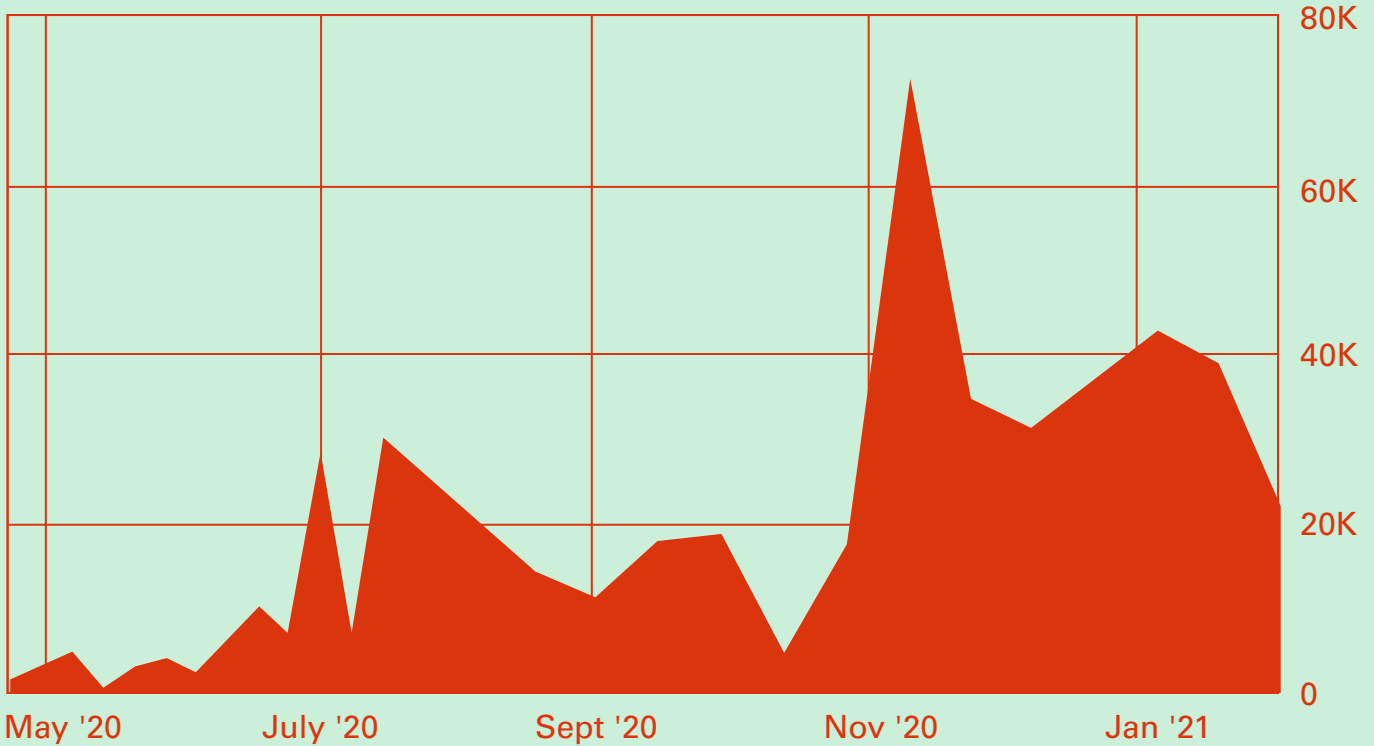
While much of the economic impact was felt during the early months of the pandemic, the number of people experiencing symptoms did not peak in Kansas until November 2020. There is a noticeable spike in the effects of hunger in early December, right after the time the number of those reporting being sick with COVID was peaking in mid-to-late November. Much of the effects on employment were the result of initial attempts to contain the spread of the coronavirus, while the hunger impacts seem to correspond most strongly with people dealing directly with coronavirus symptoms.

Food assistance programs work to fight hunger.

Even if quarantine or closures of certain businesses did not immediately impact one’s employment status, contracting COVID-19 or even being exposed to the virus could

mean weeks without work. In many cases, this could result in an employee’s termination. In the most fatal cases, a loss of a family member to the virus could also mean the permanent loss of an income-earner in a household.

Pulse Survey Kansas (Sick with Covid Symptoms)



Kansas Unemployment Rate (Seasonally Adjusted)

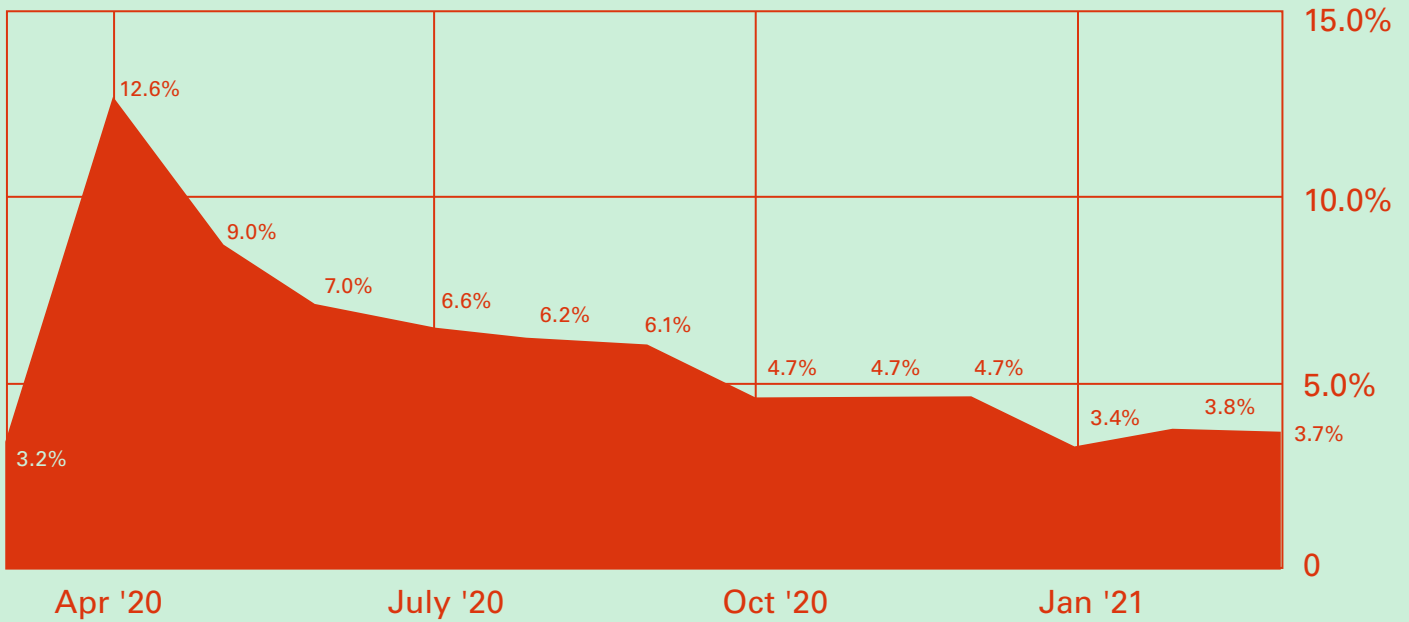




PHOTO CREDIT: CARLOS DE TORO

Step's Behind: Prior Barriers to Meeting Kansan's Needs amid COVID-19

Having a stronger foundation in fighting hunger could have made a world of difference for Kansas families. Harsh restrictions on programs like SNAP let hunger persist before the onset of the pandemic.

THE "HOPE" ACT

In 2015 and 2016 the Kansas Legislature passed SNAP restrictions (as well as restrictions on cash and child care assistance) through a series of bills informally referred to by its proponents as the "HOPE Act." This legislation put in place numerous barriers, making it harder for Kansans to access SNAP.

Among the most egregious parts of these restrictions are:

Prohibition on waivers for able-bodied adults without dependents:

Typically, able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) can utilize SNAP for only three months in a three-year period if they do not meet certain extra work requirements. The USDA allows states to temporarily waive these time limits based on evidence showing that an area has an unemployment rate of over 10 percent or does not have a sufficient number of jobs. These time-limit waivers do not waive the general SNAP work requirements. Unfortunately, these time limit waivers are restricted in Kansas, preventing families from being able to put food on the table when they fall on hard times due to job loss.

Disparate treatment of non-citizens:

As a diverse state, Kansas has many "mixed-status" households where some family members are non-citizens. When determining a family's eligibility for assistance, DCF is required to count the income and resources of everyone in the household. However, when calculating the amount of the benefits, the

non-citizen is not eligible to receive benefits, which hurts the family's ability to put food on their tables.

Banning categorical eligibility for food assistance:

With rising childcare costs and housing costs, many low-income Kansas families struggle to make ends meet but do not necessarily qualify for SNAP food assistance under the current guidelines. Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE) allows states to use less restrictive eligibility to ensure families' needs are met. Additionally, it also allows for states to have less restrictive asset tests, so that families can have savings without losing their food assistance. This is incredibly important for families to be able to save for their futures, and weather unexpected financial burdens. In Kansas, DCF is prohibited from using Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility, creating an undue burden on Kansas families.

An outright ban on SNAP outreach or advertisement:

SNAP Food Assistance is critical to ensuring low-income families get the support they need to put healthy, nutritious food on the table. Unfortunately, one-third of Kansans who qualify for this program are utilizing SNAP Food Assistance. This number is much higher for senior Kansans, with two-thirds of Kansas seniors who qualify not utilizing this important program. Through the HOPE Act, Kansas is disallowed from drawing any federal or state dollars to utilize on SNAP outreach programs.

Lifetime bans for those with drug felony convictions:

Many formerly incarcerated people faced hurdles such as poverty, housing instability, unemployment, and insufficient health care access before entering prison. These individuals face even more challenges once they are released. Currently, Kansans with one drug felony must complete treatment programs before qualifying for SNAP food assistance. Kansans with two drug felonies can no longer access SNAP in Kansas, period. This creates additional undue barriers to support that formerly incarcerated Kansans may need once released.

In short, the HOPE Act codified into state law the worst obstacles which have undermined anti-hunger policy in Kansas for nearly a decade. It will take legislative leadership to undo these mistakes. Removing these barriers is necessary for all Kansans to thrive.



Stepping Up: Anti-Hunger Programs that Worked amid COVID-19

Throughout the pandemic, numerous forms of assistance were passed through Congress including stimulus checks to qualifying individuals, Payment Protection Program loans for businesses, rental assistance, and more. Anti-hunger programs—such as Pandemic EBT, Child Nutrition Program flexibilities, and increased benefits and flexibilities to SNAP food assistance—have been some of the most effective responses to COVID-19-related hardship.

Ample programs and policy solutions already exist to strengthen not only our state's response to the COVID-19 crisis but our state's response to hunger, period.

PANDEMIC EBT

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act passed by the U.S. Congress authorized the Pandemic- Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) for households with children affected by school closures during the pandemic. The Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) and the Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) worked together to issue benefits to households that already received SNAP, as well as other eligible households that have children who normally received free or reduced-price meals at school. The program used the existing State SNAP EBT cards to issue benefits to current SNAP households and issued new EBT cards to eligible non-SNAP households. These EBT cards function like debit cards and can be used to purchase eligible food. Kansas issued benefits to households of children whose schools were closed for at least 5 consecutive days during the emergency designation and who would have received free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Act if not for the school closures.

¹⁷ Kone Consulting. [“Documenting P-EBT Implementation - Kansas Case Study.”](#) Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. 2021.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Becky Osborn worked with Kansas Appleseed to share her experience with P-EBT to advocate for additional actions Congress could take to fight hunger.

Hentzler, J., Kottler, H., & Bollig, C. [“Congress must act to ensure Kansas youths fed.”](#) July 2020.

P-EBT allowed families with a benefit of up to \$291 to be loaded on an EBT card for the three months that Kansas kids were out of school. This benefit calculated to around \$5.70 per day that Kansas kids were out of school due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

These monthly allotments were:

March 2020: \$57 (10 days)

April 2020: \$120 (21 days)

May 2020: \$114 (20 days)

The P-EBT program in Kansas served 170,760 children by issuing over \$49.7 million in benefits to families over four months during the 2019-20 school year.¹⁷ By the time P-EBT closed on July 31, 2020, 93% of eligible children were reached.¹⁸

For many Kansas families, these benefits have been critical in a time of great need and uncertainty.

“Pandemic—EBT helped our family by not having to decide which bill to skip in order to put food on the table for my daughter. Because we had this benefit, we were able to keep the internet turned on so she could continue her education virtually.” —Becky Osborn, Wichita¹⁹

In April 2021, the Kansas Department of Education and the Kansas Department for Children and Families were approved by the USDA to implement the second installment of P-EBT benefits. In addition to the second installment of P-EBT benefits to cover, the USDA also announced in April 2021 that it will be providing qualifying families \$375 in P-EBT benefits for the summer.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Agriculture - Food and Nutrition Service. "[Kansas: COVID-19 Waivers & Flexibilities.](#)" 2021.

THE SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM AND OTHER CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

A big reason schools have been such an important part of the solution in addressing hunger has been the child nutrition programs like the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, and, in particular, the flexibilities that were implemented with the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). Even though many schools have been closed to slow the spread of COVID-19, these programs have served as a vital lifeline for many hungry Kansas children. When kids are not attending school, thousands of Kansas children lose access to the school meals they receive during the regular school year.

Several policy changes expanding the reach of Child Nutrition Programs have proven vital during this unprecedented time.²⁰ These flexibilities (listed below) include changes in required meal times, changes in the setting food are allowed to be served in, changes in the requirements of parent/guardian meal pick up, changes around who has access, and changes around reporting requirements. Kansas should look at making some of these changes permanent so that the children who need meals can get them.

Key Child Nutrition waivers through June 30th, 2021:

Meal times: allows for the serving of meals outside of the standard meal times for the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Summer Food Service Program.

Non-congregate feeding: allows the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the Summer Food Service Program, to serve meals outside of the standard group setting.

Nationwide meal pattern waiver: allows meal pattern flexibility to the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Summer Food Service Program to ensure limited exposure to others in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Parent/Guardian pick-up waiver: allows parents and/or guardians to pick up meals for their children, without the student needing to be present.

²¹ Food Research & Action Center & Kansas Appleseed. “[Summer Food Service Program in Kansas.](#)” 2019.

²² Kansas State Department of Education. “[KSDE Data Central - Child Nutrition & Wellness Reports.](#)” 2021.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

SFSP/SSO area eligibility waiver: waives the requirement in the summer meals programs that “open site” meal service is limited to areas with at least half of the children in the area are low-income households.

Kansas’s participation in SFSP improved significantly over the past several years. The number of meals served in the program increased every year between 2011 and 2019.²¹ It rose from 846,119 meals in the summer of 2011 to 1,459,531 in 2019.²² During the pandemic, though, participation in summer meal programs increased significantly. Comparing the months of June, July, and August, the number of SFSP meals rose 4,878,299 from 2019 to 2020.²³ This represents a percentage increase of more than 340 percent. Through March 2021 the SFSP program has served over 53 million meals in Kansas since the beginning of the pandemic!²⁴

This dramatic increase in the number of meals would not have happened if not for the policy flexibilities and the heroic work of those serving meals to kids. The commitment of school nutrition department staff and volunteers made this system work. The USDA announced in April 2021 the extension of Child Nutrition Program waivers, allowing providers needed flexibilities to ensure children have continued access to free meals at school through June 2022, regardless of their ability to pay.

| Summer Meals Served vis SFSP 2019 vs. 2020 | | |
|--|---------|-----------|
| Month | 2019 | 2020 |
| Mar 2020 | 894,426 | 2,764,410 |
| April 2020 | 485,320 | 2,059,694 |
| May 2020 | 41,111 | 1,475,052 |

| SFSP Meals Served | |
|-------------------|------------|
| SFSP Year | Percentage |
| 2019 | 1,459,531 |
| 2020 | 35,508,041 |
| 2021 | 17,980,722 |



PHOTO CREDIT: ATOMS

SNAP FOOD ASSISTANCE

Kansas Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients rose from 189,266 in March of 2020 to 213,368 in June of 2020, thanks in part to temporary flexibilities and waivers (listed below) were put in place.

Work-related time limits

DCF temporarily waived work requirements and work training to receiving food assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic

Adjustments to Interview Requirements

During the first few months of the pandemic, households were not required to do initial in-person interviews before receiving SNAP.

Emergency Allotments to Current SNAP

Due to the pandemic, households who received SNAP benefits have their benefit increased to the maximum monthly allotment for a household of that size. This has continued through March 2021 and is anticipated to continue through the public health emergency.

Extended Certification Periods

SNAP participants normally require a minimum certification period of 6 months for most households, due to the pandemic, this requirement was waived to 12 months.

For seniors and people with disabilities the Certification Period, it was extended to 24 months.

Given the scope of the hunger problems facing Kansans, these flexibilities were not enough to fully overcome the barriers to SNAP. While the numbers of SNAP recipients did increase initially during the pandemic, they began decreasing during the second half of 2020 even as the number of Kansans reporting hunger needs was growing. Flexibilities, including allotment extensions, have led to another uptick at the beginning of 2021, but case levels are still below where they were in 2018 - when the economy was doing much better, and significantly below the levels they were in 2010 when communities were still recovering from the Great Recession. There are 204,667 recipients as of February 2021. But Kansas is well under the 319,848 number of recipients who received SNAP in August of 2013 when the economy was in relatively good shape.

Summary and Recommendations

COVID-19 has resulted in making hunger a bigger problem in Kansas. But make no mistake, hunger was already a problem in Kansas before the pandemic. Long-standing systemic barriers have prevented access to food from being the human right it ought to be. Racism and discrimination have made it difficult for all Kansans to thrive. Income inequality has shaped hunger, both in access to food and quality of food. But our traditional measures of a healthy economy cannot explain the outcomes of hunger. Unemployment rates were dropping rapidly even as people were responding to

surveys that their hunger needs were greater than ever. Child Nutrition programs and SNAP can be effective tools in fighting hunger.

To take our state's response to hunger from patchwork to permanent, Kansas must repeal the HOPE Act.

Millions of meals were served to thousands of Kansans who otherwise would not have received them if not for the flexibilities and waivers to food assistance and child nutrition

programs. Many Kansans were already not receiving enough food before the pandemic. The SNAP program in Kansas has generated an estimated \$694 million in economic activity since the beginning of the pandemic. Kansas should extend the flexibilities and waivers beyond the pandemic-making them permanent policy choices seeking to end hunger for all Kansans.

Extending these flexibilities and waivers will not be enough to address the problem of hunger. To take our state's response to hunger from patchwork to permanent, Kansas must repeal the HOPE Act.

Fundamentally, hunger is a political choice. We urge Kansans to come together and ensure that our elected officials are aware of this reality. Join us as we work to build a thriving, inclusive, and just Kansas for all of its residents.



KANSAS APPLESEED

Justice for all.

Kansas Appleseed is a statewide 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization dedicated to the belief that Kansans, working together, can build a state full of thriving, inclusive, and just communities. We're working for a future where:

- All Kansans have the resources they need to support themselves and raise healthy families.
- All Kansans can participate fully in the community under equal protection of the law.
- All Kansans benefit from a fair and effective system of justice.

Kansas Appleseed works with community partners to understand the root causes of problems, support strong grassroots coalitions, and advocate for comprehensive solutions so all Kansans can reach their full potential. When necessary, Kansas Appleseed pursues impact litigation to protect Kansans' rights and wellbeing.

KansasAppleseed.org

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Designed by Naomi Shultz.

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