

Trends and Challenges Related to Food Insecurity Among Rural Households with School-aged Children –Before, During, and Beyond the Pandemic

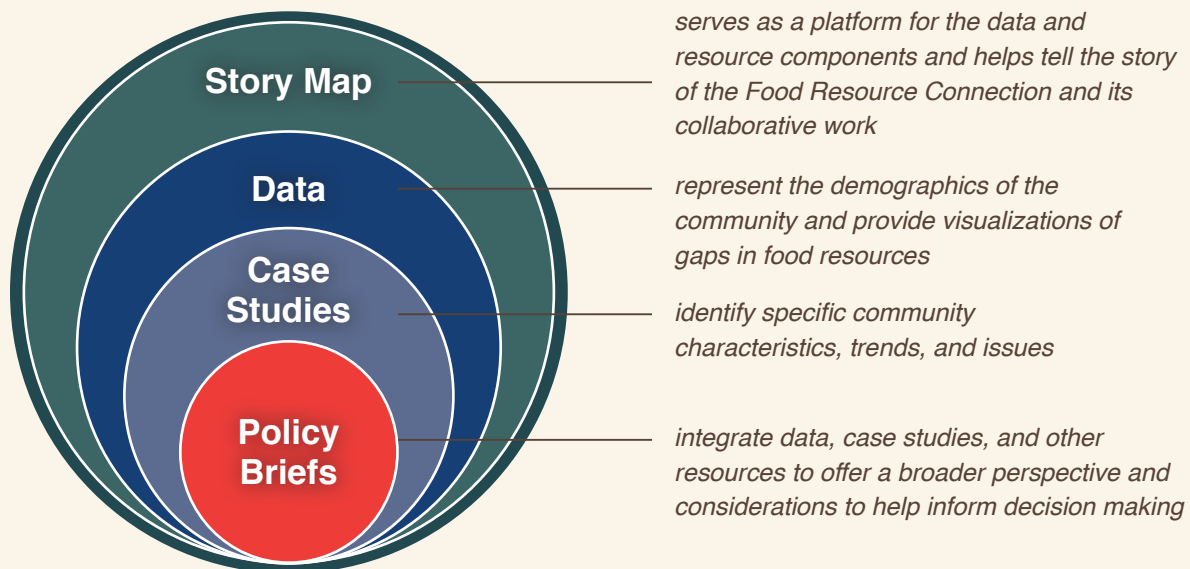
Overview

This policy brief is part of a suite of tools developed by the University of Delaware’s Institute for Public Administration and the Delaware Council on Farm and Food Policy. It presents Delaware-specific issues related to school-aged children from rural, low-income, and/or minority households, including a case study of food-security vulnerabilities in western Sussex County. Examples of how continual data and

mapping resources can be used to better understand the communities in this region are featured.

National food insecurity issues and efforts are discussed to provide broader context. This brief presents long-term considerations and opportunities to address barriers to accessing community food resources at the state and local levels.

Elements of the Food Resource Connection



Prepared for the Food Resource Connection by the University of Delaware Institute for Public Administration in partnership with the Delaware Council on Farm and Food Policy



UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE
BIDEN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC
POLICY & ADMINISTRATION



Delaware Council
on Farm and Food Policy



Exacerbated Food Insecurities

As COVID-19 swept through communities, schools closed, and the food hardships experienced before the pandemic worsened for many children. Federal, state, and local response efforts continue to mitigate these challenges; however, ongoing information and data about how families access school and community nutrition resources are important to developing longer-term programs and solutions.

Analyses of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's ongoing Household Pulse Survey (April 2020 – March 2021) found that in March 2021 approximately 8.8 million American children were living in households reporting to have experienced weekly food hardships—a significant increase from 1.1 million children in December 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic began.¹ Lack of food access among children in the United States has been unprecedented in recent decades and poses long-term threats to children's educational attainment and economic well-being. Inadequate food access has been evidenced to cause developmental challenges, obesity, heart disease, and iron deficiencies.¹

Compared to residents in urban communities, food insecurity among children is often exacerbated in rural communities, as residents face amplified barriers to accessing meal programs such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Summer Food Service Program (SFSP). Prior to the pandemic, studies assessed lack of adequate transportation and long distances between children's homes and program sites as primary challenges associated with recruiting local meal site sponsors and attracting children in rural areas to participate in such programs.² While more recent information suggested that program waivers instituted as a result of COVID-19 have led to an increased number of summer meals distributed in rural areas, inadequate transportation is still referenced as a primary challenge in connecting children with meal sites in rural communities.³ The USDA noted that in urban areas 80 percent of children in low-income

households live within one mile of a meal service site, while the same percentage of low-income children in rural areas live within ten miles of a site.⁴

Food hardships reported during the pandemic were especially high for children of Black or Latino households.⁵ The Urban Institute examined data from the Coronavirus Tracking Survey, a nationally representative survey of nonelderly adults conducted from September 11–28, 2020. The Institute assessed food insecurity in the 30 days before the survey for families with children ages 6 through 18 and found that charitable food continued to be an important resource during the pandemic, particularly for Black and Latino households.⁶

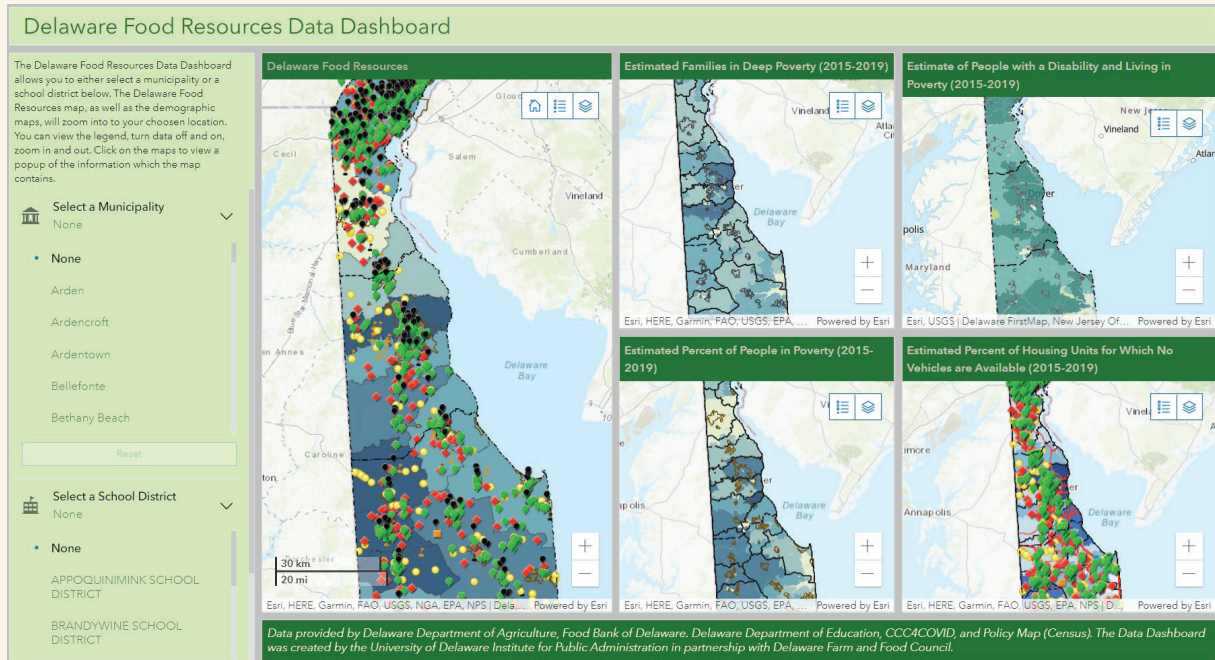
Barriers experienced by these populations in accessing meal site locations has emerged as an increasingly important consideration for districts and policymakers of several rural southern states.⁷

National Response

Passed in March 2020, the First Families Coronavirus Response Act and the CARES Act both address food insecurity by increasing the role of and providing increased funding to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Through the First Families Coronavirus Response Act, states were allowed to request waivers for providing temporary, emergency SNAP benefits to households already enrolled in the program with children who would normally receive free or reduced-price meals. Through the Act, Congress also implemented the Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) program. Modeled after summer EBT programs, the P-EBT has mitigated hunger for roughly three million children since the start of the pandemic.^{8,9}

The CARES Act provided an estimated \$16 billion appropriation for SNAP designed to cover increases in administrative and benefit costs resulting from unemployment.¹⁰ While helping to mitigate food insecurities, concerns about the sustainability and effects of these policies have focused on eligibility, lower nutritional standards, and the potential for negative impacts on immigrant families.¹⁰

Connecting Food Resources to Communities in Delaware Story Map



The Connecting Food Resources to Communities in Delaware story map (which includes the data dashboard shown above) is a platform for the growing partnership among IPA, the Delaware Department of Agriculture, the Delaware Council on Farm and Food Policy, the Delaware Department of Education, the Food Bank of Delaware, and the Cape Community Coalition (formerly Cape Community Coordination for COVID). The story map provides mapping tools, current data, case studies, and policy briefs to support partner organizations and other statewide policymakers in decision making on issues involving opportunities and barriers related to food insecurities in Delaware. Featured information includes specific community characteristics, demographic information, school district data, and the location of existing food resources.

To view the story map, visit <https://arcg.is/0nuHH9>.

Throughout the past two years, USDA programs have remained an important factor in mitigating food insecurity for vulnerable families and school-aged children. To make meal services more flexible and accessible, 18 USDA waivers were made available during the pandemic. These waivers supported meal distributors, often schools or school districts, through the following ways:

- extending deadlines for applications to provide meals
- relaxing nutrition requirements
- opening up summer meal programs to more districts
- waiving in-person oversight visits
- allowing for multiple meal deliveries or pick-ups
- permitting parents or guardians to receive meals without a child being present¹¹

Grassroots Efforts Sparked During Pandemic Identify Needs in Western Sussex County



Cape Community Coalition (CCC), formerly Cape Community Coordination for COVID, is a group of organizations that aims to connect resources in the Delaware community amidst the pandemic.¹⁸ Initially formed to coordinate a local response to the COVID-19 virus and food access concerns in eastern Sussex County, CCC partnered with Delaware Sea Grant, the Institute for Public Administration, and others to support community needs. While the coalition’s focus areas began in the coastal communities near Lewes, it evolved to support western Sussex given its high social vulnerability.¹⁹ The coalition connects people in these communities to locations where meals are distributed, one factor in combating food insecurity.²⁰

State and Local Responses

With pandemic-related school closures forcing communities to reconfigure meal distribution practices, state and local governments worked with districts and other community organizations to develop meal delivery and meal pick-up models.¹² These included “grab-n-go” meal sites and meal deliveries to school bus stops or homes. To support the delivery of shelf-stable food packages, the USDA also initiated public–private partnerships in some rural areas.¹³ In 2021, many states began proposing and passing legislation relating to food access. Trends among these policies include streamlining application processes for food programs and services, supporting and integrating locally grown food programs, and eliminating reduced-price copays and penalties for school meal debt.¹⁴

For example, Maine passed legislation to require publicly available, online applications for the free and reduced lunch program.¹⁴ Washington now provides funding to eliminate reduced price copayments for breakfast and lunch for all students in the state.¹⁴ In New York, schools and school districts are now prohibited from suing for unpaid meal fees.¹⁴ In Connecticut, children cannot be denied a meal or otherwise disciplined for unpaid meal fees.¹⁴

Despite a March 2022 lift in Delaware’s emergency declaration, the state’s COVID-19 Emergency Allotments (EAs) have been extended at least through June 2022. EAs provide \$95 to all SNAP-participating households and further extend benefits so all households reach the maximum benefit per household size.¹⁵

Understanding the Issue at a Community Level

Data and mapping tools can help identify some of the community level food-security risks, gaps, and inequalities among local jurisdictions. Over time, information derived from these tools can also help drive new and emerging policies around food access for school-aged children in rural areas. For example, data on racial gaps in meal site access have become a focus for policy researchers, education advocates, and attorneys. Data and mapping of meal site locations in relation to racial composition and percentage of no car households have shed light on access inequities among several school districts in rural areas of southern Louisiana.¹⁶

The Connecting Food Resources to Communities in Delaware story map highlights some of the specific community level initiatives, trends, and issues related to community food access in Delaware. U.S. census data and GIS maps illustrate community

characteristics that might present potential food insecurities and/or barriers to food resources in rural areas in Delaware. For example, compared to other statewide jurisdictions, western Sussex County is a more rural community with relatively high concentrations of school-aged children living in poverty (see Figure 1).

As a result of several state and local grassroots initiatives, additional community food resources and supports, like CCC, became available in western Sussex during the pandemic. Despite these efforts, social vulnerabilities remain high in municipalities and unincorporated communities compared to other areas of Sussex County and the state.¹⁷

Specific risk factors in the area are highlighted in the story map and include the percentages of low income families, no car households, and English as a second language (ESL) populations. These and

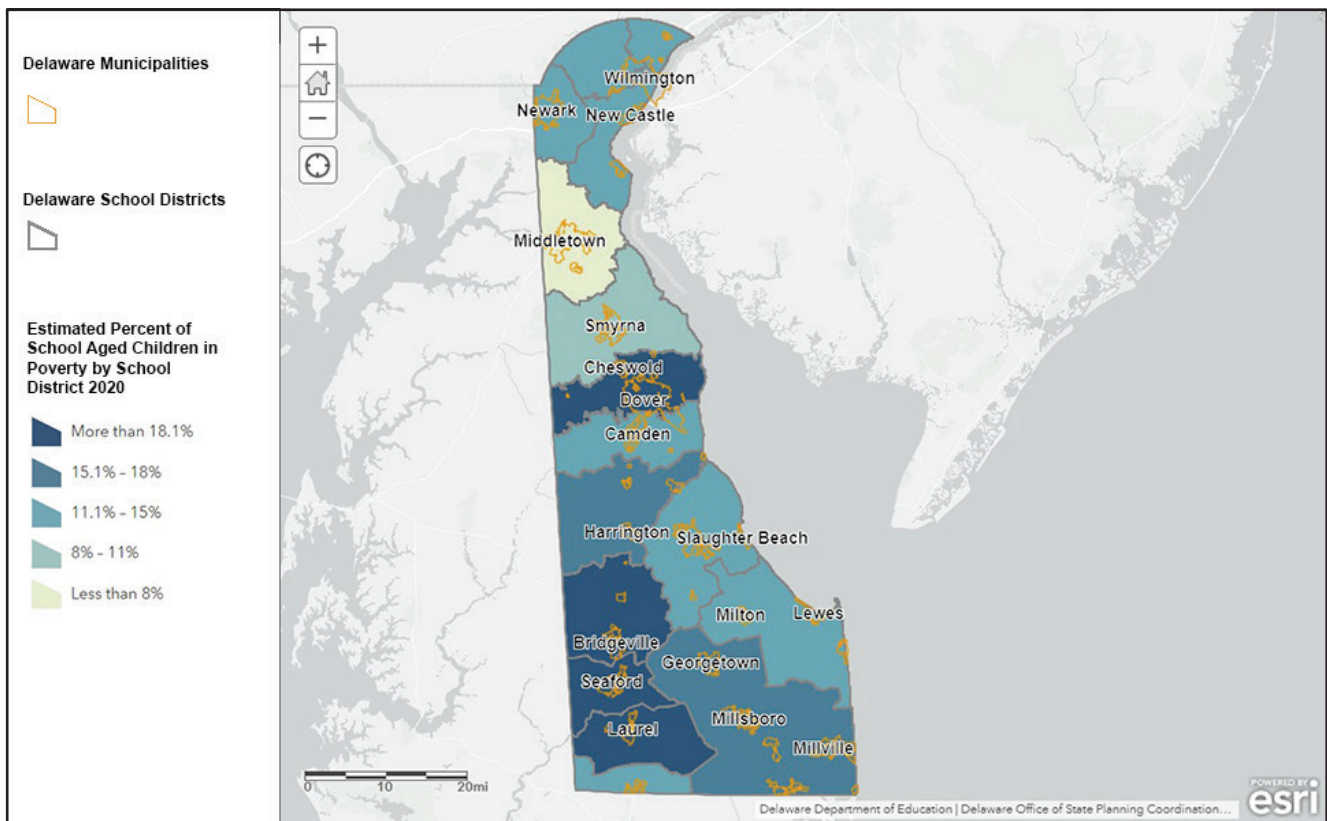
other community characteristics are important in considering access barriers to community food resources and other information before, during, and after emergency situations.

To learn more about food insecurity risks and community characteristics of Delaware jurisdictions, please visit <https://arcg.is/0nuHH9>.

Longer-Term Considerations and Opportunities

As emergent phases of the pandemic fluctuate, the potential discontinuation of USDA waivers through the summer months are concerning for some policymakers, school nutrition advocates, and local nonprofit organizations.²¹ Predicted return to pre-COVID food program policies may pose significant

Figure 1. Estimated Percent of School-Aged Children in Poverty by School District, 2020



2020 Percent School-aged Children in Poverty, the Census' Small Area Income & Poverty Estimates (SAIPE), Policy Map | Delaware Department of Education | Delaware Office of State Planning Coordination (OMB) | New Jersey Office of GIS, Esri, HERE, Garmin, SafeGraph, FAO, METI/NASA, USGS, EPA, NPS

Emerging Challenges

Shortages within the supply chain have posed new challenges to meal services and programs. Public schools across the United States are not receiving enough food to feed students and are being forced to place additional orders to supplement their meals. Substituting foods that cannot be delivered due to supply chain issues drives up food costs for these schools.²² Simultaneous labor shortages have left many schools without cafeteria employees, leading many to forgo hot lunches altogether to avoid asking teaching staff to serve meals.²² Additionally, changes in eligibility for USDA's SFSP and a transition to pre-COVID policies may require districts to rely more on community based and charitable meal programs to fill access gaps this summer. Reimbursements for schools may decrease as well.²³



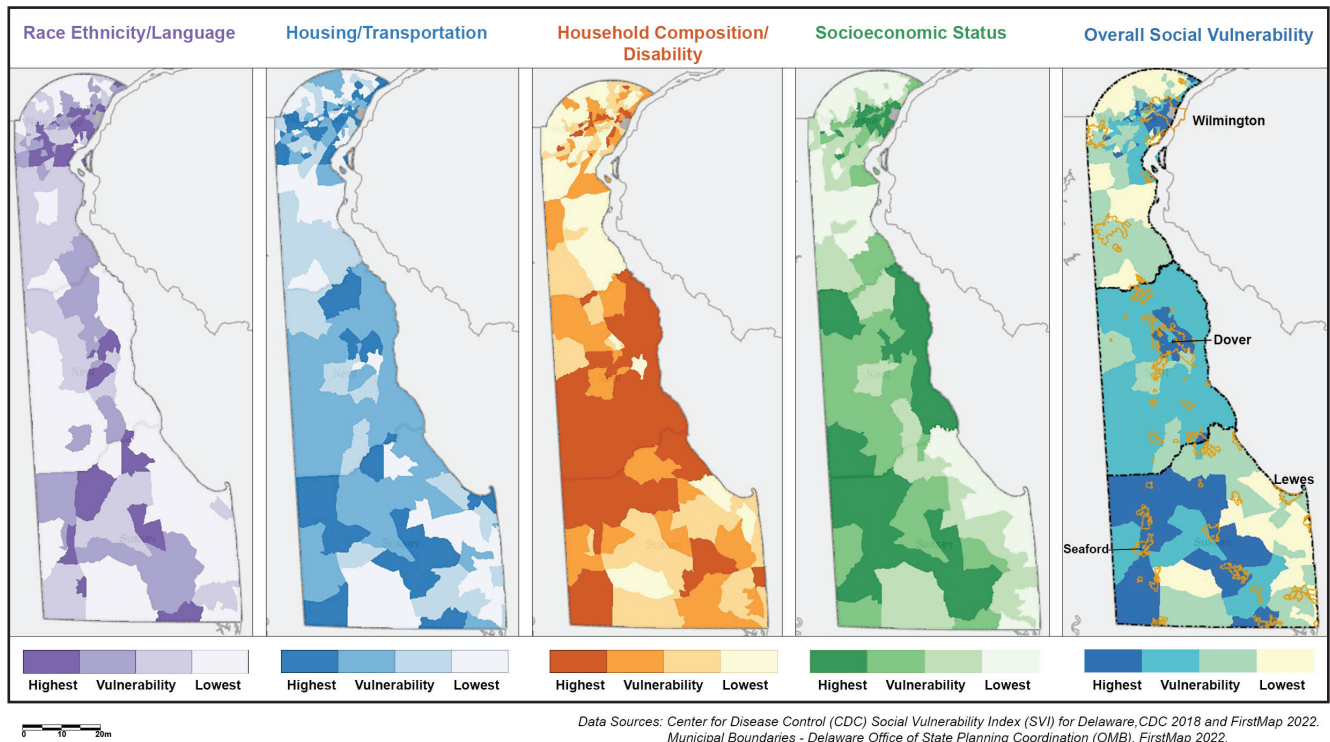
challenges for many communities nationally and in Delaware. Families that are no longer eligible for summer meal programs may face food hardships in the coming months and into the next school year. These include rural area and low-income families, as well as children throughout the state.

Important considerations in rural areas include potential barriers to accessing meal services: transportation, broadband, and communication regarding year-round community food resources. Understanding these barriers and other community specific data (as identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] Social Vulnerability Index, shown in Figure 2) will help state and local policymakers, schools, and service providers continue to collectively work toward better long-term options for feeding children and their families.

End Notes

- 1 Keith-Jennings, B., Nchako, C., & Llobrera, J. (2021, April 27). Number of Families Struggling to Afford Food Rose Steeply in Pandemic and Remains High, Especially Among Children and Households of Color. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/4-27-21fa2.pdf>
- 2 Wauchope, B., & Stracuzzi, N. (2010). Challenges in Serving Rural American Children through the Summer Food Service Program. Carsey Institute. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED536108.pdf>
- 3 No Kid Hungry. (2021, August). New Analysis Shows COVID-19 Waivers Led to More Summer Meals in Rural Areas. http://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/COVID%20Waiver%20Benefits%20for%20Rural%20Communities_FINAL_8.21.pdf
- 4 USDA. (2021, October 20). USDA Summer Meals Study. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/usda-summer-meals-study>
- 5 Keith-Jennings, B., Nchako, C., & Llobrera, J. (2021, April 27). Number of Families Struggling to Afford Food Rose Steeply in Pandemic and Remains High, Especially Among Children and Households of Color. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/number-of-families-struggling-to-afford-food-rose-steeply-in-pandemic-and>
- 6 Gupta, P., Gonzalez, D., & Waxman E. (2020, December). Forty Percent of Black and Hispanic Parents of School-Age Children Are Food Insecure. Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/103335/forty_percent_of_black_and_hispanic_parents_of_school_age_children_are_food_insecure_0.pdf

Figure 2. Delaware's CDC Social Vulnerability Indicators, 2018



- 7 Held, Lisa. (2021, January 27). The Pandemic Reveals Racial Gaps in School Meal Access. Eater. <https://www.eater.com/22251352/school-meal-access-racial-gaps>
- 8 Neuberger, Zoe. (2021, May 21). American Families Plan Could Substantially Reduce Children's Food Hardship. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/american-families-plan-could-substantially-reduce-childrens-food-hardship>
- 9 Poole, M. K., Fleischhacker, S. E., & Bleich, S. N. (2021, March 11). Addressing Child Hunger When School Is Closed – Considerations during the Pandemic and Beyond. The New England Journal of Medicine. <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2033629>
- 10 Dunn, C. G., Kenney E., Fleischhacker, S. E., & Bleich, S. N. (2020, April 30). Feeding Low-Income Children during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The New England Journal of Medicine. <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/nejmp2005638>
- 11 Kinsey, E. W., Hecht, A. A., Dunn, C. G., Levi, R., Read, M. A., Smith, C., Niesen, P., Seligman, H. K., & Hager, E. R. (2020, October 7). School Closures During COVID-19: Opportunities for Innovation in Meal Service. American Journal of Public Health. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305875>
- 12 EAB. (2020, March 26). Meal delivery vs. meal distribution stations: two ways to combat hunger while schools are closed. <https://eab.com/insights/expert-insight/district-leadership/meal-delivery-vs-meal-distribution-stations-two-ways-to-combat-hunger-while-schools-are-closed/>
- 13 USDA. (2020, March 17). USDA Working with Private Sector in Response to COVID-19. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/news-item/usda-019520>
- 14 School Nutrition Association. (2021, October 1). 2021 State Legislative Summary: Third Quarter Report. https://schoolnutrition.org/uploadedFiles/Legislation_and_Policy/State_and_Local_Legislation_and_Regulations/SNA-2021-Third-Quarter-State-Legislative-Report.pdf

- 15 Delaware Health and Social Services. (2022, May 27). Delaware's Emergency Allotment Extension Request. <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/DE-SNAP-COVID-EA-Extension-June-2022-Acknowledged.pdf>
- 16 Gupta, P., Gonzalez, D., & Waxman E. (2020, December). Forty Percent of Black and Hispanic Parents of School-Age Children Are Food Insecure. Urban Institute. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/103335/forty_percent_of_black_and_hispanic_parents_of_school_age_children_are_food_insecure_0.pdf
- 17 ESRI. (2022). Estimated Families in Deep Poverty (2015-2019). Delaware Food Resources Data Dashboard. <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/dashboards/05ccbf7c76fd4711b01045b6c895ff5a>
- 18 Cape Community Coalition. (2022). What is Cape Community Coalition? Retrieved June 17, 2022 from <https://capecommunitycoalition.org/>
- 19 Thomas, Adam. (2020, July 28). UD Helps with COVID-19 in Sussex County. <https://research.udel.edu/2020/07/28/sussex-county/>
- 20 Cape Gazette. (2020, April 17). COVID-19 coordination coalition identifies new needs, adds new partners. <https://www.apegazette.com/article/covid-19-coordination-coalition-identifies-new-needs-adds-new-partners/200982>
- 21 Poole, M. K., Fleischhacker, S. E., & Bleich, S. N. (2021, March 11). Addressing Child Hunger When School Is Closed – Considerations during the Pandemic and Beyond. The New England Journal of Medicine. <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMp2033629>
- 22 Ortiz, Erik. (2021, September 30). Supply chain issues, labor shortages make serving school lunches a struggle. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/education/supply-chain-issues-labor-shortages-make-serving-school-lunches-struggle-n1280516>
- 23 Reiley, L., & Romm, T. (2022, March 7). Pandemic expansion of school lunch programs appears slated to end suddenly. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/03/07/school-nutrition-program-covid-waivers/>

Authors

Prepared by

Institute for Public Administration

Julia O'Hanlon

Policy Scientist

Nicole Minni

Associate Policy Scientist

Emma Crowell

Public Administration Fellow

Sarah Pragg

Assistant Policy Scientist

In partnership with

Delaware Council on Farm and Food Policy

About the Institute for Public Administration

The University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration (IPA) addresses the policy, planning, and management needs of its partners through the integration of applied research, professional development, and the education of tomorrow's leaders. Visit us online at www.ipa.udel.edu.

180 Graham Hall
University of Delaware
Newark, DE 19716-7380

phone: 302-831-8971 | email: ipa@udel.edu



UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE

**BIDEN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC
POLICY & ADMINISTRATION**