

HUNGRY FOR EQUITY:
A CASE STUDY ON CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS' EFFORTS TO ADDRESS FOOD
INSECURITY AND RACIAL JUSTICE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

In early 2020, the novel COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States, catalyzing an economic, political, social, and public health crisis. According to the USDA, 10.5% of American households experienced food insecurity in 2020, with the numbers increasing significantly to 7.2% of Hispanic households and 21.7% of Black, non-Hispanic households. Food insecurity is especially detrimental to young people's growth and academic achievement, thus warranting immediate attention. Building on previous research quantifying the effectiveness of emergency school meals during the pandemic, this study instead uses qualitative research methods to analyze the successes and failures of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Grab N Go meal distribution program. Approaching the subject with an equity lens, it asks: how did teachers, staff, parents, and other community members feel about their district's efforts to support food insecure students? In what ways does the current food system reflect America's historical and contemporaneous valuation of racial food politics? Through surveys and interviews with key community stakeholders, this study concludes that while the Grab N Go meal sites mobilized quickly to feed hungry students, there were a number of factors that deterred families from picking up, including poor food quality, limited hours of operation, and pandemic-related health hazards. As a diverse metropolis of nearly nine million people, Chicago continues to stand on a history of racial segregation and discriminatory policies. By using this city as a microcosm for the US, this study 1) evaluates the current intersection between racial equity and food insecurity at local and national levels and 2) proposes community-informed policy recommendations to improve food distribution for those in greatest need.

Keywords:

Food insecurity, race, socioeconomic status, racial health disparities, equity, Chicago Public Schools, school meals, COVID-19

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Introduction

It was a Friday afternoon like no other. Ms. Green¹ had been teaching at Chicago Public Schools (CPS) for twenty years, with a focus in special education for the past five. She had just gotten off work for the week and stopped at Target, as she normally did, before boarding the ‘L’ train home.

Standing on the rickety platform, Ms. Green was preoccupied remembering how earlier in the day, she had overheard quiet rumblings amongst teachers that schools may be closing due to the novel COVID-19 pandemic, though nothing had been confirmed yet. However, on the train ride home, she started conversing with a policeman, who validated her fears. “At first, I was shocked,” she recalled. “This had never happened. There was no forewarning.” It was a Friday, and Governor Pritzker had decided that schools would start closing that Tuesday.

When Carrie, a CPS parent and caregiver to three students, heard the initial news that schools were closing, she was worried about keeping her own family safe, but also about her neighbors’ abilities to keep *their* families safe. “We live in a mixed-income community,” she said. “And so, we’ve been very concerned about neighbors who weren’t able to do what we did, which is work from home and continue staying employed as their service industries got hit by COVID-19.”

At the onset of the pandemic, Assistant Principal Abbott was troubled by the vast uncertainties. Specifically, she was concerned with finding the most efficient and effective way to get food to those that needed it. “As an educator, I was definitely worried about my teachers [and] the education that we were going to be providing to our students,” she said. “But given that

¹ All names in this paper, with the exception of public figures, are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

we do have a high population of low-income families that rely on meals or on the school for childcare, that was definitely a concern. So, we try to put as many supports in place that will help those families.”

On March 13th, 2020, the official news broke that all Illinois schools, including private and charter, were closing. What followed was a tumultuous two-week period as teachers, administrators, and families hastened to adjust to the lockdown mandate and transition to remote learning. During that break, CPS Central Office focused on continuing to provide a critical resource that would only become more essential during the pandemic: free school meals. A day later, on March 14th, CPS announced on Facebook they would begin providing three days’ worth of brown-bag, to-go breakfasts and lunches for families to pick up from the hours of 9AM to 1PM. During the 2020-2021 remote school year—between September 8, 2020 and March 23, 2021—over 600 CPS locations served a combined total of 16,995,700 meals.²

As defined by the USDA, food insecurity is the inability to acquire adequate food for one or more household members due to insufficient money or resources. Food insecurity also has varying levels of severity. For example, “very low food security” is categorized by disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake. In the US, household food insecurity rates had been declining steadily since the 2008 economic recession, and even with the emergence of COVID-19 in 2020, overall rates remained astonishingly stable due to federal assistance programs and increased benefits. However, for certain groups in the US, these statistics were not applicable. Since March 2020, the Black-White divide in who experiences food insecurity has continued to widen, revealing a legitimate human rights issue with need for further examination.

² See Appendix 1, figure 1

Because food-related aid was not sufficient to address pre-existing health disparities, it was critical to establish a grab and go meal option to alleviate child hunger and help families in need. As a diverse and bustling metropolis of nearly nine million people, Chicago represents a microcosm of the United States, and can be used to analyze the pressing issue of food insecurity at a national scale. Specifically, I examine the equity of the CPS Grab N Go meals during the beginning of the pandemic when learning was held remotely. While “equality” is defined as each group receiving the same resources or opportunities, “equity” recognizes that each individual has different circumstances and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome; this paper looks at equity with the goal of achieving fairness and justice for historically underrepresented groups. Additionally, prior research has relied on quantitative data to weave together a narrative, yet numbers do not tell a comprehensive story, especially in matters regarding human rights. Guided by the 1990s disability movement slogan “Nothing about us without us is for us,” this paper uses survey and interview responses from the greater CPS community to concretize their lived experiences and make a case for transformative social change at both local and national levels. I argue that CPS’s Grab No Go meals provided an essential resource for families experiencing food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet myriad barriers to sufficient, accessible, safe, and culturally-appropriate food reveal the urgent need for improvement and reflect the societal valuation of racial food politics in the US. COVID-19 layered onto a food system that was not meeting the needs of its colored communities before, so why would crisis infrastructure be expected to work?

Research Questions

This project asks: How did staff, parents, and other members of the CPS community experience and evaluate their school district’s efforts to support food insecure students? With food

insecurity rates increasing nationally for certain groups during the COVID-19 pandemic, to what extent was the Grab N Go meal program successful, and what were some of the main challenges hindering widespread knowledge and seamless access? In what ways did CPS's emergency meal distribution expose an already broken food system that left 10.5% of the population food insecure, and how does this reflect America's historical and contemporaneous valuation of racial food politics? Lastly, what lessons can the US learn from other countries regarding equitable food practices, and how can those examples be implemented into the current food infrastructure, at the local and national levels? Since food insecurity disproportionately affects communities of color, this project seeks to elucidate the Black-White divide in food access, with the hopes of reducing it. Case studies provide an in-depth, detailed examination of a particular event so as to explore a larger pattern or phenomenon; the CPS Grab N Go meals offer a smaller-scale glimpse into the interconnection between food insecurity and racial equity, which is representative of the country as a whole. Since the US is seen by others as a global powerhouse, its choice of whether to maintain or narrow the racial health disparity will have reverberations on health equity and human rights around the world.

Literature Review

Research on food insecurity is a relatively new topic in the US. The issue suffused into American public imagination in the twentieth century, during the transition from agrarian to industrialized society. This shift helped designate hunger as a policy matter, rather than just a biological and physiological concern. While this research is still forthcoming, studies on the intersection of food and race are even more underrepresented in the literature. Thus, this project aims to 1) further explicate the link between food insecurity and racial equity by examining the multifarious

aspects of “access” and “equity” and 2) propose a set of district-wide changes that could be replicated across the nation to ensure all students can access food.

With an estimated 10.5% of Americans experiencing food insecurity in 2020 and 12.1% in 2021, food as an object is inherently political. The myriad health effects of food insecurity—including physical, cognitive, and developmental impairments—are especially detrimental in young children. In the city of Chicago specifically, years of systemic racism and discrimination have exacerbated racial health disparities, marking the region as crucial to examining the link between food and race.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has only magnified pre-existing health disparities. A prior study of CPS’s Grab N Go meals utilized publicly available data in conjunction with geographic information systems (GIS) software and the Getting to Equity (GTE) framework, which is a systematic way the researchers evaluated four key components of equity: healthy options, number of deterrents, community capacity, and social and economic resources.³ Their seminal study relied on qualitative data from aggregate figures rather than qualitative information from people. My project attempts to fill this gap by soliciting CPS community members’ experiences with, feelings towards, and perspectives on the meal program. This ethnographic approach allows for greater nuance than strictly quantitative data can provide, and it allows for Chicago residents to voice their opinions on the issues that pertain to them, thereby inviting community feedback to address a structural issue. In this way, my research will hopefully amount to improved policies for alleviating food insecurity, with a focus on the highest

³ Gabriella M McLoughlin et al., “Addressing Food Insecurity through a Health Equity Lens: A Case Study of Large Urban School Districts during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Urban Health : Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 97, no. 6 (December 2020): 759–75.

risk groups.

I. Food as a Non-Neutral Object

Food is a biological building-block of human existence—foundational to survival—which has accrued social, cultural, economic, and political meanings across the world. In her ethnographic research on American production of artisanal cheese, Heather Paxson writes, “The value of food to humans endlessly transcends quantitative measures. [...] Beyond providing a source of nutrition and an economic livelihood, food is everywhere a medium of cultural and social exchange.”⁴ Food solidifies an anchored sense of identity and connectedness to others—what people choose to consume determines, to a considerable extent, the human experience.⁵ Michael S. Carolan corroborates this idea in arguing that the world is shaped by *lived* experience, and he invigorates social theory by inserting living, breathing, feeling bodies into methodological approaches and conceptual frameworks.⁶ Since people think *with* and *through* their bodies, food must also be thought of relationally—in connection to nature, knowledge, and everyday life. Thus, food is invaluable to how people interact with the world and each other.

And yet, as an object that relies on distribution in order to be effective, food has the ability to produce—and reproduce—social inequality. At both a personal and transnational scale, food, as a signifier of social hierarchy, has a role in the formation of race.⁷ In her work, Sheller (2016) takes a singular food object, the banana, and delineates its ties to racial boundaries, meanings, and embodiments. She considers how the banana—and its paths of mobility through

⁴ Heather Paxson, *The Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America* (University of California Press, 2012).

⁵ Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (Penguin, 2007).

⁶ Michael S. Carolan, *Embodied Food Politics*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2016).

⁷ Mimi Sheller, “Chapter 15: Skinning the Banana Trade: Racial Erotics and Ethical Consumption,” in *Geographies of Race and Food* (Routledge, 2013), 291–311.

governance systems—have contributed to the emergence of personalized corporeal ethics, which disrupt spatial and temporal gaps. Her work builds upon Caroline Knowles’s concept of the “racing of space,” in which race and ethnicity are made by the connections between people, spaces, and places.⁸ In regard to food and the various people and places it may encounter, the object itself has the capacity to uphold human rights disparities across spatiotemporal and geographic boundaries and across global scales. This inequality is best seen in economist Amartya Sen’s 1940s observations of hunger in India, Bangladesh, and Saharan countries, in which he challenges the common perception that a lack of food is due to a lack of production.⁹ Instead, Sen posits that the phenomenon of famine is a crisis of power, not hunger. In a time with vast technological advancements and global exportation, today’s issue of food insecurity is not about scarcity of food, but rather scarcity of democracy.¹⁰

II. Impacts of food insecurity and the need for school meals

Food insecurity affects two billion people globally, or approximately 25.9% of the world’s population, demarcating itself as a serious public health issue.¹¹ Prior to the pandemic, food insecurity rates were at a national decade low, following similar drops in unemployment and poverty levels. In 2019, just 10.5% of US households were food insecure, a significant decrease from 12.3% in 2016.¹² However, even before the emergence of COVID-19, food insecurity rates were disproportionately higher for certain demographics, such as those living below the federal

⁸ Caroline Knowles, *Race and Social Analysis* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003).

⁹ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

¹⁰ Anna Lappé, “Who Says Food Is a Human Right?,” September 14, 2011.

¹¹ Melissa K. Thomas, Lori J. Lammert, and Elizabeth A. Beverly, “Food Insecurity and Its Impact on Body Weight, Type 2 Diabetes, Cardiovascular Disease, and Mental Health,” *Current Cardiovascular Risk Reports* 15, no. 9 (September 2021): 15.

¹² Alisha Coleman-Jensen, “Household Food Security in the United States in 2016,” 2016, 44.

poverty level, households located in principal cities, and Black and Hispanic-headed households.¹³ For example, in 2019, 4.9% of White people experienced food insecurity in the US, whereas 15.6% of Hispanic people and 19.1% of Black people did not have sufficient food. America's broken food system is exemplified by the presence of over 6,500 food desert tracts¹⁴—areas with limited access to a variety of healthy and affordable food—as well as a proliferation of food swamps in low-income neighborhoods, which are areas containing a high-density of establishments selling high-calorie fast food and junk food.¹⁵ Furthermore, in the US, the Big Food industry has played a large role in widening this disparity by marketing their least nutritious products, such as candy and sugary drinks, to Black and Hispanic youth. These commercials often recruit famous athletes and celebrities in order to engage younger consumers.¹⁶

Overall, the excessive diffusion of fast-food and the flagrant lack of healthy choices in poor, urban, and minority neighborhoods has created a virtual food apartheid, or an institutionalized form of segregation and racism embedded in the actions of corporations, business, and governmental policies.¹⁷ American medical anthropologist Paul Farmer denotes this phenomenon as “structural violence,” or the way by which social arrangements are constructed to put specific members of a population in harm's way.¹⁸ The US's current food

¹³ Alisha Coleman-Jensen, “Household Food Security in the United States in 2019,” Economic Research Report (United States Department of Agriculture, 2020).

¹⁴ Paula Dutko, Michele Ver Ploeg, and Tracey Farrigan, “Characteristics and Influential Factors of Food Deserts,” Economic Research Report (United States Department of Agriculture, 2012).

¹⁵ Kristen Cooksey-Stowers, Marlene B. Schwartz, and Kelly D. Brownell, “Food Swamps Predict Obesity Rates Better Than Food Deserts in the United States,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 14, no. 11 (November 2017): 1366.

¹⁶ JL Harris et al., “Increasing Disparities in Food-Related Advertising Targeted to Black Youth” (Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, 2019)

¹⁷ Dr. Mark Hyman, *Food Fix: How to Save Our Health, Our Economy, Our Communities, and Our Planet--One Bite at a Time* (Little Brown Spark, 2020).

¹⁸ Paul E Farmer et al., “Structural Violence and Clinical Medicine,” *PLoS Medicine* 3, no. 10 (October 2006): e449.

system reflects a neglect for the health of its minority groups, and the racial disparity only continues to widen.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, food insecurity increased in nearly every country due to economic recession, disruption of food supply chains, and increased consumer demands compounded by labor shortages and surging food prices. In 2020, an additional 83 to 132 million people experienced food insecurity who otherwise would not have.¹⁹ In the US, however, the overall food insecurity rates remained unchanged from 2019 to 2020 at 10.5% (13.8 million households), according to the 2020 report on Household Food Security in the United States published by the USDA.²⁰ This rate remained stable due to early mobilization of various support programs as part of the American Rescue Plan, including federal stimulus checks, a 15% increase in SNAP benefits, and \$880 million to deliver produce to mothers and babies via WIC. Furthermore, under the Child Tax Credit, families with qualifying children received monthly payments of \$250 or \$300 per child, depending on age, and throughout the pandemic, the National School Lunch Program continued to serve meals to its students and families. Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) was also developed as another form of assistance to serve eligible school children affected by school closures, but it only became available months after the initial outbreak. Because of this lag, it was imperative to get school meals right.

The school meal is an important object to examine largely because food insecurity has especially detrimental effects on young children. Food insecurity in the first five years of life can limit neural plasticity and lead to cognitive impairment.²¹ It can also influence child development

¹⁹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, “Executive Summary: THE STATE OF FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION IN THE WORLD 2020,” Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2020.

²⁰ Alisha Coleman-Jensen, “Household Food Security in the United States in 2020,” Economic Research Report (United States Department of Agriculture, September 2021).

²¹ Danielle Gallegos et al., “Food Insecurity and Child Development: A State-of-the-Art Review,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 17 (August 26, 2021).

by triggering the stress-related hypothalamic-pituitary axis through exposure to increased stress and anxiety. Furthermore, parents whose emotional and financial support are being used to manage food may have reduced emotional and financial capacity to facilitate child development (ie: less money to spend on extracurricular learning or less time to create a supportive and interactive environment for the child).

Lack of proper nutrition can also have negative consequences later in life, greatly impacting adolescent development, academic achievement, reproductive outcomes, stress management, and overall quality of life. Biologically, food insecurity can cause sub-optimal energy, protein, and micronutrient intake, which can lead to an increased risk for chronic disease, such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, as well as adverse mental health outcomes including stress, depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, and suicidal ideation.²² Food insecurity is also linked to birth defects, greater rates of asthma, anemia, less nutritious diets, and cognitive and behavioral problems which affect well-being and school-performance.²³ For example, one study found that the timing of SNAP benefits, a federally-funded nutritional supplement program, directly impacted academic performance.²⁴ Low-income students who sat in an exam two weeks prior to their assigned SNAP issuance scored six points lower than those who sat for the same exam in the two weeks following disbursement. This study is significant, since academic performance affects the probability of attending high school or a four-year college, which in turn impacts crime rates, incidences of drunk driving, and the ability to attain a job. Evidently, it is imperative to prevent food insecurity early in life.

²² Thomas, Lammert, and Beverly, “Food Insecurity and Its Impact on Body Weight, Type 2 Diabetes, Cardiovascular Disease, and Mental Health.”

²³ Lauren Bauer, “Hungry at Thanksgiving: A Fall 2020 Update on Food Insecurity in the U.S.,” The Hamilton Project, November 23, 2020.

²⁴ Timothy N. Bond et al., “Hungry for Success? SNAP Timing, High-Stakes Exam Performance, and College Attendance,” Working Paper, Working Paper Series (National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2021).

These studies evince the need for school lunches, which can reduce early food insecurity, improve access to nutritious foods, positively impact health, and meet nutrition needs, thus leading to a better learning environment.²⁵ Beginning at the turn of the 20th century, in response to the effects of rapid industrialization and compulsory education laws, the US launched early “penny lunch” programs in larger cities to provide poorer children with meals.²⁶ However, it wasn’t until the Great Depression that the federal government began subsidizing meals as an emergency measure in the early 1930s. In 1946, US Congress passed the National School Lunch Act to assist states in providing an adequate supply of food and expand nonprofit school lunch programs.²⁷ This act reflected a new era of direct federal involvement in public health and education, yet the final legislation focused on socioeconomic status and failed to contain anti-discrimination provisions. In 1966, the Child Nutrition Act was passed, which added more subsidies for low-income children and provided school milk and school breakfast programs. At the same time, poor Black students weren’t getting meals at their schools, revealing early disparities in school-based nutrition. In response, the Black Panther Party began a free breakfast program in 1969 to help alleviate food insecurity in Black children.

In 2010, Congress made strides towards greater health transparency by passing the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, which allowed the USDA to overhaul school meals in order to meet new nutrition standards. According to data from 2019, the NSLP provided reduced-price or free lunches to 29.6 million children at a total cost of \$14.2 billion. In 2020, due to the pandemic, NSLP provided approximately 22.6 million participants with food.²⁸

²⁵ Food Research and Action Center, “Benefits of School Lunch,” *Food Research & Action Center* (blog), 2021.

²⁶ A.R. Ruis, “Perspective | Universal School Lunches Have Enormous Potential — If the Program’s Flaws Are Fixed,” *Washington Post*, September 2, 2021.

²⁷ Emelyn Rude, “An Abbreviated History of School Lunch in America,” *Time*, November 19, 2016.

²⁸ “USDA ERS - National School Lunch Program,” accessed December 3, 2021.

McLoughlin et al.’s 2020 study of food distribution in four of the largest urban school districts (Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Houston) is a seminal text in the existing literature regarding food insecurity, children, and COVID-19. The researchers collected documents, policies, and communication from school district websites and analyzed each district’s strategies using the Getting to Equity (GTE) framework. They also used geographic information systems software to identify meal site locations relative to student populations, areas of high poverty and high minority populations, and food deserts. The study found that all districts developed strategies to optimize meal provision and increase healthy options, but that there were limitations in the following areas: nutrition, language and images on promotional materials, and physical distance to meal sites. Their findings support ongoing efforts to alleviate food insecurity during the pandemic and continue future meal provision through summer programs. They were limited, however, by their reliance on publicly available data—they did not recruit participants for primary data collection. My study builds upon their research by incorporating stakeholder perspectives from both parties—employees of the school system and current families—to contextualize the numbers that McLoughlin and her team found and produce a nuanced, more empathetic understanding of people’s lived experiences.

III. Racial segregation in Chicago

Food politics are exceptionally important to study in the context of Chicago, a city complicated by historical racial segregation and discrimination. Beginning in 1916 until 1970, the Great Migration saw 500,000 African Americans move from the Southern part of the country to the North, “setting the stage for lingering hypersegregation.”²⁹ At this time, Chicago’s Black

²⁹ Natalie Y. Moore, *The South Side: A Portrait of Chicago and American Segregation* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2016).

population grew from 44,103 to over a million, and yet, Black families were scared to move into White neighborhoods due to city-wide enforced practices of segregation: redlining, racial steering, foreclosures, bad mortgages, failed school policies, and general divestment from financial, developmental, and educational resources that had the power to advance communities of color.³⁰ As a result, Black residents were confined to living in the “Black ghetto” or “Black Belt,” located on the South Side of the city.

Chicago’s residential segregation resulted in an agonizing timeline of violence and unrest during the 20th century. In the 1919 Race Riots, for example, a racial clash erupted in a multi-day streak of violence, leaving thirty-eight people dead, 537 injured, and 1,000 homeless. A year later, a restrictive code of real estate ethics and covenants to property deeds would shape Black neighborhoods for decades,³¹ and by the 1930s, Black residents were spatially isolated in the city,³² setting the foundation for discriminatory food practices down the road.

Though their living conditions were poor, Black residents found joy in a cultural renaissance of literature, arts, music, and faith, and in the 1940 supreme court case *Hansberry v. Lee*, 500 homes in contested areas became open to Black families, symbolizing a small victory.³³ This small win was nonetheless overshadowed when the Hyde Park Property owners created pamphlets delineating restrictive covenants in 1944, claiming its validity and essentialness to the well-being of Hyde Park and Greater Chicago. In the late 1940s through the 50s, White mobs began rioting as Black families moved into new neighborhoods, and as a result, White families sought racial refuge in the suburbs in a social phenomenon known as “White flight.”³⁴

³⁰ David A. Ansell, *The Death Gap: How Inequality Kills* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

³¹ Michael Jones-Correa, “The Origins and Diffusion of Racial Restrictive Covenants,” *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 4 (2000): 541–68.

³² Margaret Garb, “Drawing the ‘Color Line’: Race and Real Estate in Early Twentieth-Century Chicago,” *Journal of Urban History* 32, no. 5 (July 1, 2006): 773–87.

³³ Allen R. Kamp, “The History behind *Hansberry v. Lee*,” *U.C. Davis Law Review* 20, no. 3 (1987 1986): 481–500.

³⁴ Natalie Y. Moore, *The South Side: A Portrait of Chicago and American Segregation*.

Today, the city remains racially and socioeconomically divided, with wealthier, White families living in the North, and poorer families of color living in the South and West. This residential segregation has led to diverging health outcomes. For example, the Illinois Advisory Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights has deemed certain regions in Chicago as “low food access zones,” including Washington Park, Greater Grand Crossing, Pullman, West Pullman, Roseland, South Deering, and South Chicago.³⁵ To exemplify this divide, in his book *Food Fix*, Dr. Mark Hyman writes, “Your zip code is a bigger determinant of your health outcomes than your genetic code.”³⁶ The geographic divide continues to determine where the health services, healthy grocery stores, and reputable schools are located, thus contributing to racial disparities in both health and education.

In conjunction with health, education is also impacted by residential segregation. A contemporary example of historical disinvestment can be seen in the mass Chicago Public School closures. In 2013, former Mayor Rahm Emanuel and CPS CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett moved to close fifty under-enrolled, underperforming schools—the most at one time in any school district in the nation—in an attempt to save money.³⁷ Emanuel justified this by arguing that locking kids into a failed system was unacceptable, but most of these schools were located in Black and Brown communities.³⁸ Between 2002 to 2018, a total of 70,160 Chicago students had experienced either a school closing or a total re-staffing of their school first-hand. Of those students, 88%, or 61,420 students, were Black.³⁹

³⁵ Zoe Makoul, “The Fight for Fruits & Veggies,” *South Side Weekly* (blog), November 30, 2016.

³⁶ Hyman, *Food Fix: How to Save Our Health, Our Economy, Our Communities, and Our Planet--One Bite at a Time*.

³⁷ Kalyn Belsha, “Behind Sale of Closed Schools, a Legacy of Segregation,” *The Chicago Reporter*, January 13, 2017.

³⁸ Linda Lutton et al., “Chicago Closed Or Shook Up 200 Schools: Who Was Helped, Who Was Hurt?,” *WBEZ Chicago*, December 3, 2018..

³⁹ WBEZ, “WBEZ: A Generation of School Shakeups (PUBLIC DATA)” (Google Sheets, 2018).

The closures were more than a physical act. By marking certain schools as failures, it symbolically implied that the students, parents, and teachers involved were also failures.⁴⁰ In response to the news, the affected parents and families expressed “institutional mourning” by protesting for the schools with which they had come to form strong emotional ties. Because of CPS’s history of divesting from its Black and Brown students primarily, the site offers a significant case study in which to examine the intersection of food insecurity and racial equity during COVID-19.

IV. COVID-19 exacerbates disparities

Racial health disparities in the US are not new. Jackman and Shauman (2019) estimate that the accumulated number of excess deaths—an important comparative measure in assessing the size and social impact of subpopulations “missing” due to discriminatory social practices—was 7.7 million African Americans throughout the 20th century.⁴¹ Factors that contributed to this alarmingly high number include declining access to medical care, lower education levels, higher rates of economic insecurity, greater exposure to environmental hazards, and lower socioeconomic status linked to institutionalized racism. Furthermore, Hunt and Whitman (2015) examined seventeen different health status indicators and found that the disparities widened for eight of them nationally, and for nine of them in Chicago between 1990 to 2010.⁴² They claim the mortality gap is responsible for over 60,000 excess Black deaths per year, revealing that there has been minimal progress made in closing the divide.

⁴⁰ Eve L. Ewing, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago’s South Side* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

⁴¹ Mary R. Jackman and Kimberlee A. Shauman, “THE TOLL OF INEQUALITY: Excess African American Deaths in the United States over the Twentieth Century,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 16, no. 2 (ed 2019): 291–340.

⁴² Bijou Hunt and Steve Whitman, “Black:White Health Disparities in the United States and Chicago: 1990–2010,” *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* 2, no. 1 (March 1, 2015): 93–100.

Research from 2020-2021 underlines how Black people and communities of color have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. One study boldly asserts that “US racial inequality may be as deadly as COVID-19.”⁴³ In this article, Wrigley-Field and her team compare the Black-White COVID-19 mortality rate in the US and find that White deaths would have to increase by six times to amount to the same number of Black deaths that occurred. Additionally, the researchers argue that the mass mobilization and reorganization of society to combat and protect against COVID-19 shows that when the US has the desire to make change, they have the resources to do it. And yet, when it comes to reorganizing social institutions to minimize racial disparities, the government has paid little attention. Along the same lines, Dyer (2020) posits that Black Americans in Chicago are three times more likely to be diagnosed with COVID-19 and six times more likely to die from the disease than their White counterparts.⁴⁴ This disparity is due to underlying conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and asthma, as well as lifestyle differences, such as the fact that Black Americans are more likely to be essential workers, live in states where lockdowns were delayed, and have historical distrust of US biomedicine because of past abuses, such as the Tuskegee study.

Though household food insecurity rates appeared to have been buffered by early pandemic safety nets, a closer look at the data reveals that the Black-White divide widened. The national average for food insecurity remained unchanged from 2019-2020 at 10.5%, yet the statistics were significantly higher than the national average for households with Black, non-Hispanic people (21.7%) and households with Hispanic people (7.2%).

⁴³ Elizabeth Wrigley-Field, “US Racial Inequality May Be as Deadly as COVID-19,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117, no. 36 (September 8, 2020): 21854–56.

⁴⁴ Owen Dyer, “Covid-19: Black People and Other Minorities Are Hardest Hit in US,” *BMJ*, April 14, 2020, m1483.

Given its history of racial and socioeconomic inequality, Chicago represents a unique case study in which to examine this disparity. According to the 2019 Community Health Needs Assessment for Chicago and Suburban Cook County, food insecurity is most prevalent in the neighborhoods of Austin, Brighton Park, Woodlawn, Roseland, Blue Island, and Maywood,⁴⁵ all of which are located on the South and West Sides where communities of color predominantly tend to live. Narrowing racial health disparities in one of the most segregated cities in the country would be a symbolic step toward making America great—for the first time.

Methods and Methodology

This project investigates the degree to which CPS was successful in feeding its students during the COVID-19 pandemic. How did staff, parents, and other members of the CPS community feel about their school district’s efforts to support food insecure students? What did the program achieve, and what were the main challenges barring access? While prior research relied on quantitative methods, this project instead uses a qualitative approach to relay a more personal story, emphasize the subjects as complex humans with feelings and opinions, and highlight smaller nuances that numerical data may not have the capacity to reveal. These methods seek to give the subjects a voice where past research only represented them as numbers. In using these methods, I also hope to broaden the scope of research by integrating the social, historical, and political frameworks that created a defective food system in the first place. By sharing people’s stories with food access before and during the pandemic, I argue that many of the problems that arose with emergency food distribution could have been avoided if there had been an effective foundation in place beforehand.

⁴⁵ Alliance for Health Equity, “Community Health Needs Assessment for Chicago and Suburban Cook County 2019” (Chicago: Alliance for Health Equity, 2019).

My ethnographic research methods consist of survey responses and interviews, both of which were conducted virtually in 2021. Through acknowledging the various dimensions of my project, I seek to articulate my objects as “multiplicities,” “lines of circulation,” and a “biography of things”⁴⁶ rather than small-scale, two-dimensional items. This project takes inspiration from Eve Ewing’s (2018) narrative techniques, in which she interviews a range of community stakeholders with the goal of producing an intimate and genuine account of people’s struggles and triumphs.⁴⁷ This paper similarly attempts to uplift underrepresented, minority voices.

A Google survey was sent to CPS staff, teachers, and parents in order to understand their perspective on the CPS meals. I used an exploratory survey to ask open-ended questions that would better define the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of the CPS community members. This type of survey provides rich qualitative information that can lead to the discovery and proposal of new initiatives and solutions to food insecurity. Specifically, these questions asked how the meal sites were promoted, whether everybody knew about this resource, what the successes and challenges were, and whether or not the food distribution was equitable.⁴⁸ Additionally, short answer questions enabled respondents to expand upon their choices, thereby allowing for greater detail. The only two questions that were required asked (1) whether or not families took advantage of the meals before the program, and (2) to the respondent’s knowledge, did schools nearby distribute meals during the pandemic? All other survey questions were completely voluntary and at the discretion of the respondents to fill out according to their comfort levels.

⁴⁶ Joseph Dumit, “Writing the Implosion: Teaching the World One Thing at a Time,” *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 2 (2014): 344–62.

⁴⁷ Ewing, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard*.

⁴⁸ See Appendix 2, figure 1

At the end of my survey, I included an option to be contacted for a semi-structured interview. Like the surveys, the interview questions were designed to be open-ended and sensitive in nature, with the goal of understanding my subjects' experiences. Though CPS mobilized relatively quickly to distribute meals, they were logistically limited by space, time, and resources. Was there a divide between what families need and what the schools could feasibly do? What improvements could have been made to ensure greater food equity for all? By looking at the pandemic in the 2020-2021 school year primarily, I track adjustments in the meal distribution program and record people's feelings over time. With Carr and Lempert's (2016) ideas on scalar distinctions in mind,⁴⁹ I argue that though mundane, a meal has sociopolitical ramifications. This seemingly small-scale object is greatly imbued with social, biological, political, cultural and economic meaning. These techniques attempt to produce an intimate and genuine account of people's struggles and triumphs with food, or the lack thereof.

Overall, I received a total of thirty survey responses and conducted twelve virtual interviews. I then used qualitative data analysis (QDA) to categorize people's opinions and experiences and draw conclusions about food insecurity and racial equity in Chicago. For my surveys and interviews, I used thematic analysis to group responses based on similarities and derive meaning from them. This method was most effective for this project, since I am investigating overall trends and opinions rather than specific word choices or discourse. Thematic analysis is also beneficial, since respondents often mention the same challenges or successes to meal distribution (Ie: "poor food quality" or "fed many people").

Results

⁴⁹ E. Summerson Carr and Michael Lempert, eds., *Scale: Discourse and Dimensions of Social Life*, 2016.

As a viable and easily-implementable pathway towards greater food equity, school meals have been an essential resource within CPS for years. However, amidst the chaos and instability of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became even more essential that schools continued to provide meals as a source of both nutrition and familiarity for students and their families. Since food insecurity disproportionately affects Black and Brown people in the US, school meals have the opportunity to narrow the racial health disparity.

CPS's Grab N Go meal distribution demonstrates a continued effort to support their families and combat increasing food insecurity in a time of crisis. Within two weeks, the district mobilized to offer a valuable resource, and most of the research participants believed that anyone who needed food could have accessed it. Serving over 300,000 students at one point, the district was able to alleviate a mental and financial burden for recently unemployed or struggling families. However, there were substantial challenges to access, including barriers in advertising the sites, limited hours of operation, safety, and poor food quality—all of which indicate avenues for improvement. The following results include direct quotations from survey respondents and interviewees.

Successes

Varied Methods of Advertising

At a minimum, CPS as a district used at least eleven different ways of advertising the meal sites. These included: social media, school and district newsletters, email, reaching out to families directly, radio or television ads, signs posted outside of schools, food service workers on the sidewalk, school announcement boards, and school and district websites. Nearly half the survey respondents (46%) ranked these strategies “very effective” in reaching students and their

families⁵⁰ indicating that the advertisements were generally successful; many people knew about the resource, but whether or not they took advantage of it was a different matter.

One survey respondent who had moved to Chicago during the pandemic fondly recalled how the security guards at both of her kids' schools had offered to order her some meals while they were waiting to register for the summer session. Other survey responses included short phrases such as "Through media, families were well aware of the free food they could receive" and "They made it known what was available and where for the families who needed it."

David had been walking down the street when he encountered people who appeared to be serving meals outside an elementary school in Hyde Park. As a father of two boys who attended a private Chicago preschool, he had been unaware that CPS was offering this service. But as a lower-income family with a third child on the way, the meals looked like they could be of benefit. Outside the school, the food service workers informed David that even if his children didn't attend the school, he could still take the food. So, he did.

Furthermore, CPS's advertising methods reached enough people that they were able to pass along the message to their social networks. One survey response cited "word of mouth" as a primary source of information. Similarly, Grace, a CPS grandparent of one, had heard about the meal sites from other parents who lived in the area and decided to try it. Thus, CPS's advertisements generated enough buzz within the community for people to hear about it from family, friends, and neighbors.

Relieved a financial burden and alleviated stress

⁵⁰ See Appendix 1, figure 2

The Grab N Go meals offered a convenient and generally dependable resource during a time of financial crisis and public uncertainty. Packaging together multiple meals for pick-up at once, the to-go bags helped the families that relied on the resource. In terms of convenience, the locations were generally walkable for nearby residents, with an option for delivery for families that had contracted COVID-19 or for those who filled out a form to request it. “I think what made it really helpful was that you didn't have to go to your school that you attend, you go to whatever the closest school is,” said Ms. Smith, a case manager and lead teacher support at CPS. “So that helped with access, because not all of our students live in this area or can walk to school. Some of them are traveling really far away.”

Survey respondents also indicated that the food was well-organized and widely-promoted, and that the food service workers were friendly and worked quickly and efficiently. Furthermore, anyone from the family aged eighteen and over—not just parents—could pick up the brown bags, thereby widening the options.

For Carrie, whose family did not have immediate financial concerns surrounding food, the meals still held incredible value. “[The meals] make it really easy for families to not have to worry about packing lunches, figuring out what their kids are going to eat, making sure their kids aren't going to be hungry throughout the day. Just knowing I don't have to pack a lunch every day is huge.”

Throughout the pandemic, Assistant Principal Abbott looked out for her parents as much as her students. “Many people lost their jobs, or their jobs were put on hold,” she said. “We have a lot of essential workers [at our school], including restaurant servers. And I think that having the option to come and pick up a meal definitely supported the families in a way that it wasn't an added thing for them to worry about. And for the students that know their families are struggling,

knowing they can have breakfast and lunch at school is definitely going to alleviate whatever the circumstances may be at home.”

David’s spouse, Alison, observed the success of the meals in action: “I have one friend that had mentioned [she picked up food.] They have four kids, tight on money, and it was a big help to them. You know, they didn’t have to buy milk now. And we make [our kids’] lunches every day. But for busy parents, [the meals] could take a lot of the stress and burden off to not have to think about lunch that day.” In summary, the meals represented a small but important slice of continuity from pre-pandemic days, allowing parents to expend their income and energy elsewhere.

No identification necessary

In an attempt to remove as many barriers as possible, the Grab N Go meal sites did not require any proof of need, nor did they ask for any form of identification. This also helped to remove much of the stigma associated with taking free food. Because of this, anyone was allowed to take food--even non-CPS affiliated neighbors and passersby.

Rebecca had just moved to Chicago in June with her kindergartner and fourth grader, both of whom were enrolled in CPS. To her, it was important that food service workers did not ask people whether or not they were qualified to receive food. “There’s less of a stigma, since anyone can go up and get it. We live in a country that does not have great social safety nets. And this feels like something that could *be something*.”

Overall, when asked about the successes of the Grab N Go meals, survey and interview respondents frequently cited that CPS was triumphant in doing what they set out to do: mobilize

quickly to provide children with food. They were also able to overcome social barriers in that visitors were not dissuaded by stigma.

Other

On top of these successes, there were other factors that contributed to people's praise. In the event that the food staff could not provide food that day, they would recommend other sites that parents could pick up from. Additionally, if families needed, they could fill out an online form to have CPS deliver the food to their homes. Moreover, each brown bag contained a sufficiently large amount of food. "You could easily feed at least one person for three days," said Rebecca. "And I would assume if people are food insecure, they may be able to stretch it further. It wasn't just like a hot dog—it was a hot dog with a side and a fruit or vegetable. And it was a decent amount of food. It came with two almost grocery bags full of food. I was impressed with the amount."

Challenges

Lack of technology and unreliable internet

The top three most popularly cited modes of promotion were all internet-based: email communication, social media posts, and the school or district-wide newsletter. These methods all rely on dependable access to technology, as well as basic technological literacy, which could limit who saw and understood the promotions. Furthermore, lower-income families are more likely to have inconsistent access to technology and they are more likely to be prone to food insecurity, meaning that the people who needed the food the most, may not have been made aware of the resource. With 63.8% of CPS students qualifying for free or reduced school meals

in SY 2020-2021,⁵¹ non-technology-based advertisements were critical to reaching the most people. Survey respondents cited their concerns over this, saying that some families do not have web access or email and that in the beginning of the pandemic, there was difficulty with setting up Wi-Fi services, especially for lower-income families. One respondent said, “[The Grab N Go program] was covered on the news, but the contact information flashed quickly, and many families did not know how to follow up.” Another parent wrote, “I do not think we would have gotten food if we had not encountered a food service worker outside the neighborhood school while walking by.” One survey respondent summed it up: parents with access to the internet were better informed than those without. Therefore, those with the greatest need had the greatest difficulty in accessing the information.

Assistant Principal Abbot acknowledged that her school could have provided more varied forms of advertisement that were not computer or smart-phone-based: “We have heavily relied on internet to send communication. But I know that I have several families that may not be too tech savvy, parents that still don't have an email, parents that don't know how to navigate through Facebook or Instagram or anything like that, right? So how are we reaching those families? We do posters for everything else, we do posters to advertise for pre-k and high school, so why not do a poster to advertise for a meal site?”

Lack of language diversity

In SY 2020-2021, 18.6% of CPS students were categorized as bilingual, which refers to the state definition of students who are English learners.⁵² This also assumes that English is not the first

⁵¹ Chicago Public Schools, “Limited English Proficiency, Special Ed, Low Income, IEP Report,” Demographics, 2021, <https://www.cps.edu/about/district-data/demographics/>.

⁵² Chicago Public Schools, “Limited English Proficiency, Special Ed, Low Income, IEP Report.”

language for most of their families as well. Thus, promotions were significantly less effective for a large portion of the CPS community. According to one survey respondent, families at their school speak approximately eighty-five different languages, and yet, most promotions about the Grab N Go sites were only made available in English, with a small handful available in Spanish. This implies that the advertisements were not able to reach everyone. One respondent wrote, “The most effective communication for low-income families is through direct, verbal communication from teachers when the communication is done in the family’s home language.” Another person wrote, “Written communication cannot clarify uncertainties and some childcare providers cannot read, especially in English.” Therefore, CPS promotions should be more culturally-inclusive in order to achieve greater equity.

Limited hours of operation and geographic barriers to pick-up

While some parents were able to work from home remotely, others were still in-person throughout the pandemic, especially if they were essential workers. For these families, the meal sites’ limited hours of operation—between 9AM to 1PM—made it difficult to retrieve the food. Among survey respondents, many cited that the appointed hours were not conducive to their work schedules, and there was not an option for evening or weekend pick-up. Adding to this problem, in order to pick up the food, one had to be eighteen years or older, which made students at home dependent on having an adult present or being old enough to go alone. Another issue was the burden of traveling far distances to the meal sites, since many students do not live in the immediate area of their school. In the SY 2020-2021, 54% of students chose to attend a school other than their zoned school, with the average commute distance at 1.5 miles and fifteen

minutes for elementary students and 3.3 miles and twenty-nine minutes for high school students.⁵³ Therefore, meal sites were not geographically accessible to everyone.

One survey respondent wrote: “I can only speak for our school. Delivery was made an option if needed. The hours were convenient for pick up in the morning-lunch, however, if you were not able to get there at that time, I could see that as inconvenient and not equitable to people having to work.”

Jenny, an elementary school and dual-language teacher at CPS for eight years, was worried for working parents and new immigrant families who did not have contacts within the larger community to help them coordinate food pick-ups or help watch their children when they drove for pick-up. In terms of physical limitations, Ms. Schaffer and Solé were concerned for students who had mobility issues or disabilities preventing them from physically moving in their space. “Some of these children are in wheelchairs,” said Solé. “And I realized that they couldn’t even come [to school] with their iPads in the beginning of the year, because of lack of transportation. These are students that are bused into the school.” Thus, physical and temporal limitations prevented easy access for everyone.

Poor food quality

According to Rebecca, brown bag meals consisted of cereals, breakfast bars, frozen muffins, hot dogs, chicken nuggets, tater tots, fruits, vegetables, and other basic foods from CPS’s catering company, Aramark. Bags came with basic direction sheets about reheating or under-heating, with some items requiring an oven for this task.

⁵³ CPS, “CPS Annual Regional Analysis” (Chicago, 2021 2020).

While it is expected that food quality during a global health crisis may not be held to the same standards as in normal times, survey respondents often complained about the level of freshness of the food. On some days, it was inedible, said one respondent. Meals would come with items missing, such as burgers without buns. “The food we got, especially produce, was often bad—moldy, rotting, or fermenting,” said one respondent. Another person wrote: “As a teacher, I can say lots of kids just didn’t eat, because while the food looks good, there’s something off about it. Even the apples are discolored with the preservatives injected into it. We did get the CPS meals throughout the pandemic and even my kids would sometimes not eat anything at all after a bite.”

In an interview, Grace, who works in the food industry and has previously worked in the school lunch program, observed that the food came pre-packaged, which may have reduced its quality: “Sometimes the milk is froze, the juice’s froze. So, when you’re trying to distribute this stuff, it’s not always on thought. There will be sometimes when we get vegetables on Friday, and when you open it, it would just be water. So, the rotation of the food needed to be monitored more.”

Alison felt that the food quality was unacceptable: “I get pretty angry over it. I thought the quality was terrible. It just made me so sad, because [my family has] access to better food, but I know a lot of families that were using this service don’t have that option. So, it was really heartbreaking. It was all this packaged stuff, just so loaded with sugar—like they’re supposed to drink chocolate milk and then this sugary bar. And it was also very repetitive, like they would often have a pizza and breaded chicken twice in one week; there wasn’t a lot of variety. But when you look at kids with obesity and all these struggles, it’s because we’re not offering good food options.” Ultimately, Alison stopped picking up meals. “Even though it would have helped us

save money if we kept getting it, we just didn't feel okay serving it to our kids,” she reasoned. Alison hypothesized that they may have been receiving expired food, because CPS was not able to distribute it fast enough, implying a lot of people in their neighborhood that needed the food were not getting it. This example further explicates—on a smaller scale—the idea that food insecurity is an issue of distribution, not supply.

Another aspect of food quality is cultural appropriateness and dietary inclusivity. The meals did not provide adequate vegetarian, gluten-free, or dairy-free options, requirements that are increasingly important as rates of food allergies increase.⁵⁴ Most meals were also culturally inappropriate for Muslim students with dietary guidelines, and there were not enough Halal options, making the meals culturally inappropriate for many. Carrie said, “[The meals] certainly weren't the type of content that a lot of families would need to survive and thrive...Even people in need have a desire for the food that they prefer,” she said. A more equitable approach would further take into account the nutritional density, freshness, and diversity of the food being served.

Overall, issues of food quality could have been widely avoided if COVID-19 had arrived to a properly functioning set of conditions—but that was not the case. “If we had a good program to begin with, that was really having nutritional needs met for our students in a healthy way, we would have been halfway there. But we didn't have that to start with,” said Jenny.

Health, safety, and other barriers

In terms of safety, the locations of the meal sites required people to leave their homes and enter the building to collect the lunches. For some, this may have felt dangerous and risky at the onset of the pandemic, and there was even a case in the fall of 2020 in which food service workers

⁵⁴ Ralph Jones, “Why Food Allergies Are on the Rise,” BBC Future, October 25, 2020.

were not properly social distancing. Unfortunately, one person contracted COVID-19, forcing the entire lunchroom staff to quarantine for fourteen days. Due to the lack of personnel available to cover the positions, the site was ordered to shut down for the duration of the quarantine period, leaving families in jeopardy. The school did, however, offer other locations they could pick up from.

Relatedly, another challenge occurred when families themselves tested positive for COVID-19. While in one case, the school was able to deliver meals to them, Assistant Principal Abbot wondered what happened to other families who had contracted the virus that the school was unaware of.

Still, there were other challenges in CPS's Grab N Go meal program. This included an excess of food on Fridays, which respondents felt should have been advertised to families in need; confusion or doubt that they would be able to receive food; and fewer schools on the South and West sides, equating to fewer pick-up sites. The latter is another instance of under-resourced areas receiving less support. And while many respondents indicated that they were able to get food without barriers, Rebecca recalled how during a week-long enrichment program, CPS staff members had not asked her ten-year-old daughter if she wanted to take home food with her. "As a college professor, one of the questions we always ask ourselves is, is there a barrier to ask?" she said. "And it's awkward standing around at a school waiting for someone to bring you back. I had to wonder, are people not picking up meals because it's harder to ask? Usually people who need the food don't necessarily want everyone to know they need the food, and food insecurity is definitely stigmatized."

Overall, the majority of survey respondents (28.6%) rated the food access "neutral" in terms of equity, with 25% designating it as "not very equitable" and 3.6% giving it a "not

equitable at all.”⁵⁵ Unfortunately, many respondents expressed general negative emotions about the Grab N Go meals as a whole. One survey respondent recalled arriving to the site, only to see that no staff members were present. Instances such as those reduce the trust that families have in their school and make it less likely that they will return for food. “Food distribution didn’t seem like a priority,” said one person. “We aren’t thrilled with the food provided, but it’s better than nothing,” said another. Significant barriers limited how many people could pick up food—and how many wanted to.

Solutions

Using this data, it is imperative that national policymakers, state governors, mayors, and CPS leadership are held accountable and pressured to make active strides towards creating a more functional and just food system. I propose the following five suggestions for improving accessibility in the lunchroom, all of which were informed by the research participants. (1) Schools should increase their in-person and technology-independent methods of communication so as to reach lower-income families without reliable access to technology or Wi-Fi. This should take the form of greater visual signage—such as posters or advertisements in local newspapers—as well as more direct verbal communication from school administrators. (2) CPS should invest in more infrastructure to maintain relationships with families and conduct personal outreach to parents. Currently, not all schools have a full-time nurse, social worker, or psychologist, which greatly affects schools' ability to know the needs of families. This change should include hiring a full-time psychologist or bilingual social worker per school to serve as intermediaries who can proactively check in on families and help them utilize the available resources. These additional staff hires would alleviate the responsibility of teachers to check in on families, thereby allowing

⁵⁵ See Appendix 1, figure 3

them to focus on educating their students. These additions would also effect greater knowledge of the meal sites, increase the number of pick-ups, and decrease the amount of excess food. (3) The variety of food should be expanded to include all dietary restrictions and cultural preferences. Popularly cited complaints indicate the need for gluten-free, dairy-free, and vegetarian options, as well as Halal foods. (4) Food distribution hours should be expanded or shifted later to be available for parents to pick up on their way home from work. Alternatively, they should operate on one day of the weekend, at a minimum, to account for the needs of essential workers who cannot work from home. (5) Lastly, an increase in oversight is needed to better regulate each distribution site. These staff members will verify that each bag has fresh and complete meal kits, ensure that food service workers are present and properly distanced, and proactively ask every family that leaves if they want to take food home in an effort to remove stigma. Most importantly, this suggestion would show that the schools care about their families and are prioritizing their health and well-being. Overall, these five improvements would establish the foundations for accessible food distribution. In case of future emergency or crisis, these suggestions would ensure that a solid framework is already in place.

Limitations and Steps for Further Research

There are certain limitations to this study, which can be addressed with further research. First, survey responses included feedback from teachers and principals as well as CPS families, without differentiating between them. By separating the two groups, the data may reflect diverging perspectives on successes and challenges, which could help bridge the gap between families' experiences with pick-up and faculty members' differently situated perspectives on logistical challenges, labor shortages, etc. In addition, this paper did not record any identifying

information, nor did it collect demographic data from respondents. Because food insecurity disproportionately affects low-income communities of color, it would be helpful to have this information in order to better help the groups at highest-risk. Future studies should collect data on zip codes, which meal sites were frequently visited, respondents' race, their annual incomes, and their prior experience with food insecurity, if any. Lastly, this paper only conducted research with consenting adults—no minors were surveyed. While parents are good representatives of their children and faced many of the physical, mental, and financial burdens of meal pick-up, it may be interesting to understand how the students themselves found the meals.

Conclusion

Since that Friday afternoon when Ms. Green had ridden the “L” train home and learned that schools were closing, she has gained a nuanced understanding of her students' living circumstances. “Being a teacher, with me having so many things on my mind and stuff, I never really think about [how] some kids would have starved into dinner or [that] there is food deprivation at their home,” she said. Other teachers like Solé echoed this sentiment, expressing how the pandemic opened their eyes as they saw into their students' homes for the first time. So, although the pandemic was undoubtedly devastating, one silver lining was that people became more aware of food insecurity and its societal manifestations.⁵⁶ “We know that there's large amounts of poverty in our country, in our city, and we know it's growing,” said Jenny. “We know that the number of homeless children is growing, that lack of access to good food and high-quality food is diminishing sadly, even though we have more capacity to reach greater

⁵⁶ See Appendix 3, figures 1-4

numbers with larger quantities and more international food. And we're not doing that. So, I don't think it can be overstated how important this program is.”

While free or reduced-price school meals are an essential resource in normal times, they were even more imperative during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced schools to close nationally and globally in March of 2020. Because of Chicago’s long-standing history of residential segregation and discrimination, the city offers an informative case study in which to investigate current food insecurity rates and the impact of subsequent aid. This qualitative research reveals that CPS made a concerted effort to feed its students and their families. The district mobilized quickly to provide a free resource for all who needed it; generally, survey and interview respondents felt that the meals were helpful in alleviating a burden, and the majority of people were informed about them. However, although the meals were available to everyone and were advertised using a multitude of mediums, there were numerous challenges that limited who possessed knowledge of the sites and who could feasibly pick up the food. These included barriers to technology and internet availability, limited language options, burdensome operational hours, and poor food quality, among other factors. These challenges reveal the need for greater oversight, diversified food options, in-person advertising and personal outreach, and expanded hours of operation.

Ultimately, the Grab N Go meals were only a small part of a larger, structural issue. “In my opinion, the district provided continuous meal distribution for families in a very important way, but it cannot remedy the larger issue of food insecurity that was made worse by the pandemic,” said one survey respondent. “[There] needs to be a systemic change that brings more access to fresh and affordable food in areas where food deserts exist.” This research puts into focus the immediate and long-term repercussions of food insecurity on health, education, and

social relations, as exacerbated by pandemic conditions. The question therefore remains, if the pre-pandemic food system in America was not serving communities of color before, why would emergency aid be expected to do so? This paper calls for social and political change to ensure greater food equity for all communities living in the US, even after COVID-19 has become endemic. In thinking about equitable solutions, it is vital to consider their universalizability; free school meals for all offer one potential avenue for hope.

Since the 1997 Education Act, Sweden has served as a model for healthy, free school lunches for all primary school students. The practice was reexamined in 2011 to specify that the meals should be “nutritious,”⁵⁷ including a cooked meal, starch, vegetable, drink, and crisp bread. Other countries have also enacted similar policies, including Finland and Estonia. As a world-leader, does the US have the responsibility to do the same? And if implemented, would other countries follow?

Fortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has already sparked a discourse on universal meals among American politicians. In the same way that the Great Depression served as a catalyst for the establishment of the National School Lunch Act, the pandemic—with its increased awareness of food insecurity—has the potential to enact a new, more equitable national policy. For the first time in its history, the USDA enabled schools to provide free meals to all children through waivers on program requirements and increased reimbursements rates through June 2022.⁵⁸ Additionally, in August, California became the first state to pass a bill that authorizes providing free meals for all public-school students with no requirement for means testing. Beyond issues of financing, it is imperative that universal free meals address the country’s history of

⁵⁷ Emma Patterson and Liselotte Schäfer Elinder, “Improvements in School Meal Quality in Sweden after the Introduction of New Legislation—a 2-Year Follow-Up,” *European Journal of Public Health* 25, no. 4 (August 1, 2015): 655–60.

⁵⁸ Ruis, “Perspective | Universal School Lunches Have Enormous Potential — If the Program’s Flaws Are Fixed.”

discrimination and track record of serving innutritious meals. If they do, this policy solution has the power to address some of the US's structural racial inequities.

The COVID-19 pandemic clearly establishes food insecurity as an ongoing structural challenge in the US and offers a firm reminder that food is both necessary for survival and a fundamental human right. Although the right to an adequate standard of living—including food—is stated in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,⁵⁹ the US has largely relegated cultural and economic rights as less legitimate and has yet to ratify the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.⁶⁰ With most hunger in the US being attributed to waste, leakage, a lack of storage, and ineffective distribution, it is imperative to legitimize food as a human right and hold governments accountable in collaborating with other top-producing countries to not distribute more but rather ensure access by historically excluded groups. Supporting smaller-scale lunchroom initiatives will set the foundations for scaling outwards to strengthen and recognize global food pathways as an interconnected, circular network.

Ensuring that all communities have access to healthy, fresh, and culturally-appropriate food is a matter of recognizing people's inherent dignity and agency. Though the Grab N Go meals evince a historically fragile and deficient food system, the fight for food justice will continue to grow through those who courageously share their stories. "School meals give someone who otherwise might go hungry, food," said Jenny. "And there's nothing more valuable."

⁵⁹ United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," 1948.

⁶⁰ Lappé, "Who Says Food Is a Human Right?"

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Appendix 1: Images

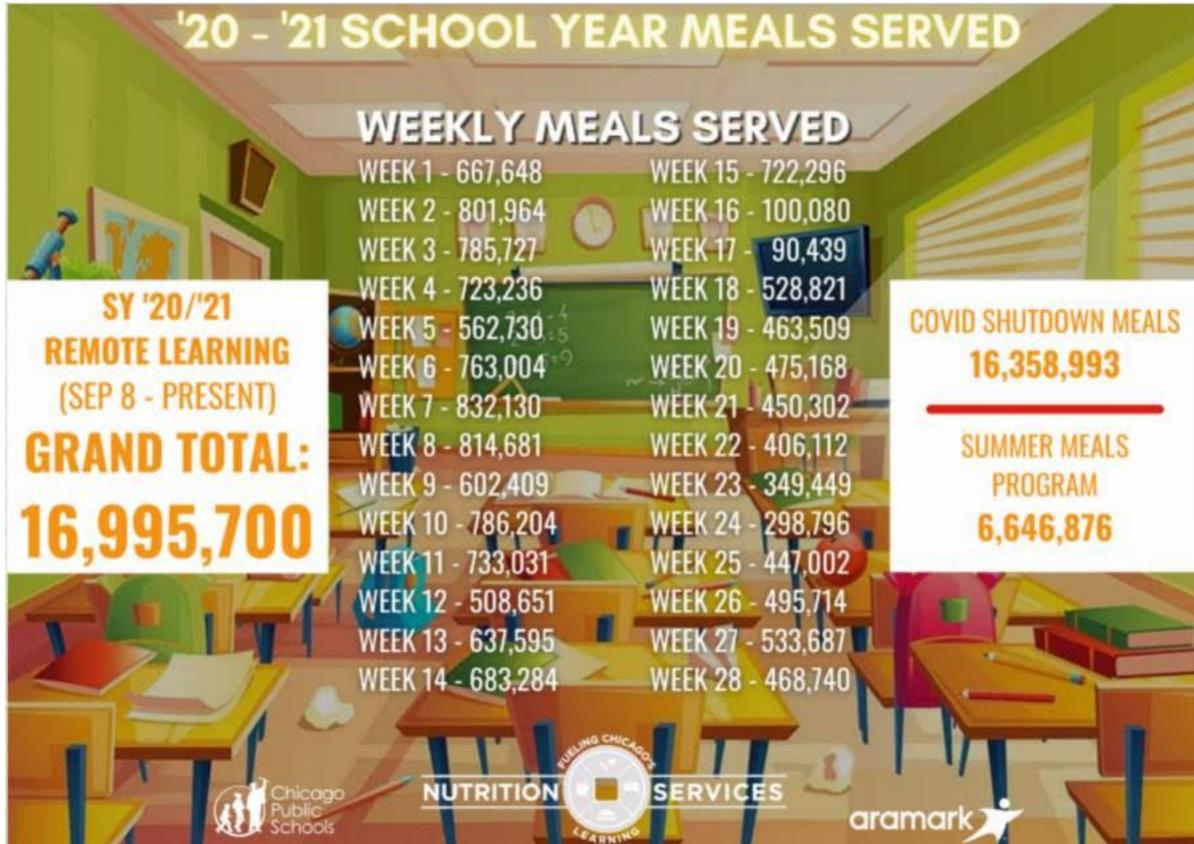


Figure 1. '20-'21 School Year Meals Served (2021). Nutrition Services, CPS.

How effective were these promotions at reaching students and their families, in your opinion?

28 responses

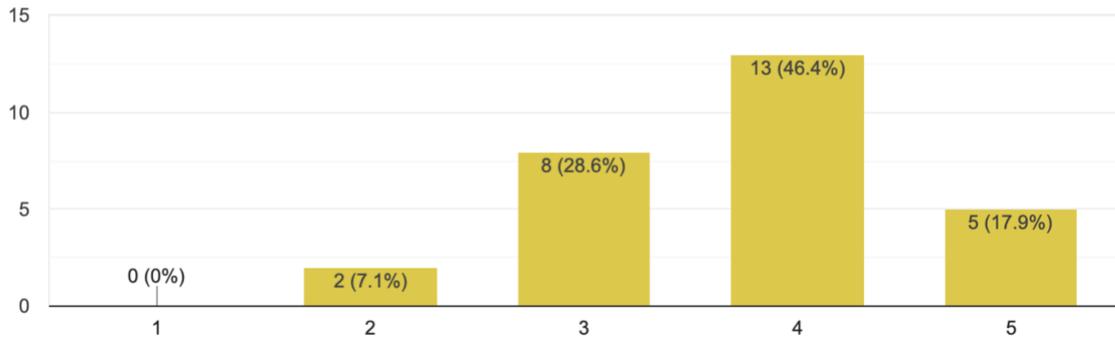


Figure 2. Effectiveness of Promotions at Reaching Students and Their Families (2021).

To what extent do you believe that access to food was equitable? (Could families from various backgrounds access the food and promotional materials?)

28 responses

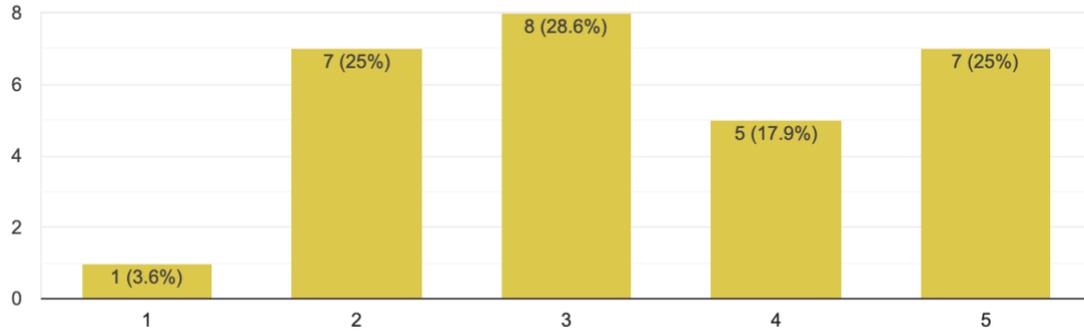


Figure 3. Extent to Which Respondents Believed Access to Food Was Equitable (2021).

Appendix 2: Food Distribution During COVID-19 Survey (2021)



Section 1 of 6

Food Distribution During COVID-19 Survey

Thank you for taking this survey. Your responses will aid our research in understanding CPS community members' feelings toward meal distribution programs during unprecedented events like COVID-19. Please note that your response is anonymous unless you opt to share your name and contact details at the end of the survey. Any and all questions or comments may be directed to the researcher, Lily Levine, via email at lilylevine@uchicago.edu.

By continuing to complete this survey, you are consenting to participate in the research. You may find the survey consent form, as well as research details, details on confidentiality, and data security, here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/13ZK1HfWBpHne4hEK1DF99wabBQW-L5al/mobilebasic>

I consent

I do not consent

Food Insecurity During the COVID-19 Pandemic



Thank you for taking this survey. Your responses will aid our research in understanding CPS community members' feelings toward meal distribution programs during unprecedented events like COVID-19. Please note that your response is anonymous unless you opt to share your name and contact details at the end of the survey. Any and all questions or comments may be directed to the researcher, Lily Levine, via email at lilylevine@uchicago.edu.

Before the pandemic began, did you and other families take advantage of the meal program? *

1 2 3 4 5

Very few students ate free or reduced school meals Almost all students ate free or reduced school meals

To your knowledge, did your school, or a school nearby, distribute meals at some capacity during the pandemic? *

Yes

No

Yes, a school nearby distributed meals at some capacity during the pandemic.



This section will ask questions about your experiences with the food distribution. Please note that all questions are optional – if you do not feel comfortable answering one question, you may skip it. The survey will take an estimated 5-10 minutes to complete.

How did your school or district promote their food distribution during the pandemic?

- Using social media (such as posting the dates and times for food pickup, etc.)
- Using a school or district newsletter
- Communicating via email
- Reaching out to families directly
- Communicating via radio or TV announcements
- Other...

How effective were these promotions at reaching students and their families, in your opinion?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all effective	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely effective				

Please explain your above answer in 1-2 sentences.

Long answer text

The amount of students consuming school meals during the pandemic has...

- Increased since before the pandemic
- Decreased since before the pandemic
- Stayed the same since before the pandemic

Please explain in 1-2 sentences.

Long answer text

To what extent do you believe that access to food was equitable? (Could families from various backgrounds access the food and promotional materials?)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not equitable	<input type="radio"/>	Very equitable				

Please explain in 1-2 sentences.

Long answer text

In your opinion, what has your school succeeded at in terms of providing food to students who need it during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Long answer text

In your opinion, what has been a major challenge for your school or district in terms of providing food to students who need it during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Long answer text

Have you heard any feedback from parents regarding their experiences with the meal distribution, or do you have anything else to add?

Short answer text

No, my school or others nearby did not distribute meals during the pandemic.



This section will ask questions about your opinion on food distribution during the pandemic. Please note that all questions are optional -- if you do not feel comfortable answering one question, you may skip it. The survey will take an estimated 5-10 minutes to complete.

Do you believe there was a need for free or reduced meals during the pandemic?

Yes

No

Please explain in 1-2 sentences.

Long answer text

If an unexpected event happened in the future which forced students and staff to stay home, what would you like to see change in terms of supporting students who may not have access to food, if anything?

Long answer text

Section 5 of 6

Interview option

We greatly appreciate your feedback. Your insight is an incredible help for further research, and we would love to follow up with you for a brief 15-20 min Zoom or phone interview at your convenience. If you are interested in interviewing, please provide your name and contact details below. Thank you very much for your time.

Would you like to participate in a brief 15-20 min interview to build on your survey responses at your convenience? Please note that your identity will remain anonymous.

Yes

No

Name (Optional and will not be shared- but, please fill this out if you would like to interview.)

Short answer text

Email address (Please fill this out if you would like to interview.)

Short answer text

After section 5 Continue to next section

Section 6 of 6

Thank you.

Your response is greatly appreciated. Please reach out to Lily Levine at lilylevine@uchicago.edu with any questions or concerns.

Figure 1. Food Distribution During COVID-19 Survey (2021).

Appendix 3: Quotations

“I can't help to think about them as little hierarchy of needs. Our students are incredibly perceptive, and they know when their families are in a difficult situation. So, I think even knowing that they'll be able to come and pick up a meal without their families is totally okay. I currently have students that might be sitting in lunch, and they'll ask for a second plate. So, how can I word this, I think for the families that really need it and for the students that know that their families are struggling, [for them] to know that they can have breakfast and lunch at school is definitely [going to] alleviate whatever the circumstances may be at home.”

Fig 1. Value of School Meals to Assistant Principal Abbott (2021).

“I think the very basic answer to this is that having something in your stomach when you're trying to learn or function is a very significant, basic need that needs to be met. And so, to have access to that immediately, the first thing in the day, if that's not something that can exist at home, is something that's going to be one less thing that's going to make it harder for a student to learn in school. And so, I think that's definitely a major value added. I think providing those types of supports builds trust with families and schools. But it's something that's been in existence since I've been teaching, so I've never not seen this as an option for students. It's like you almost kind of take it for granted, because you don't even think about it as something that wouldn't exist, because it already does.”

Fig 2. Value of School Meals to Ms. Smith (2021).

“CPS is not equitable. And, again, I hope everyone has seen that we have to be more equitable. And in the data [for] the distribution of food, for example, the South Side is where food is mostly needed, and not so much way up in some area where there's just access. That's what we should focus on. There shouldn't be some kind of balance.”

Fig 3. Main Takeaways to Solé (2021).

“Just thinking broadly about equity for a minute, I think that it's demonstrated to me that there are just so many barriers between people who don't have the means to get the resources to buy... we're a lower-income like family, but we don't face as many barriers as a lot of other people do, so just to encounter the meal program and see how it benefited some people...but for families that were dependent on the school that was closest to us, it was really probably what they needed. You know, they may not have had the means or the resources to get that food elsewhere. So, I just think people face so many barriers to meeting basic needs.”

Fig 4. Main Takeaways to David (2021).