

February 2022

Power Packs' Effects on Food Insecurity

HOW POWER PACKS SUPPORTS FAMILIES

QUESTIONS? CONTACT POWERPACKS@GEORGETOWN.EDU



The Power Packs Study is led by PIs Dr. Rebecca Ryan and Dr. Anna Johnson at Georgetown University and Dr. Anna Gassman-Pines at Duke University





Introduction

Healthy child development begins with having consistent access to food of the quantity or quality needed to fuel a healthy life. In other words, **healthy development begins with food security**. In 2020, the Child Development and Social Policy Lab (CDSP) partnered with the Power Packs Project, a private non-profit food assistance program based in rural Pennsylvania (www.powerpacksproject.org). Power Packs aims to support children’s healthy development by providing food packs with fresh foods and recipes every Thursday to public school students and their families.

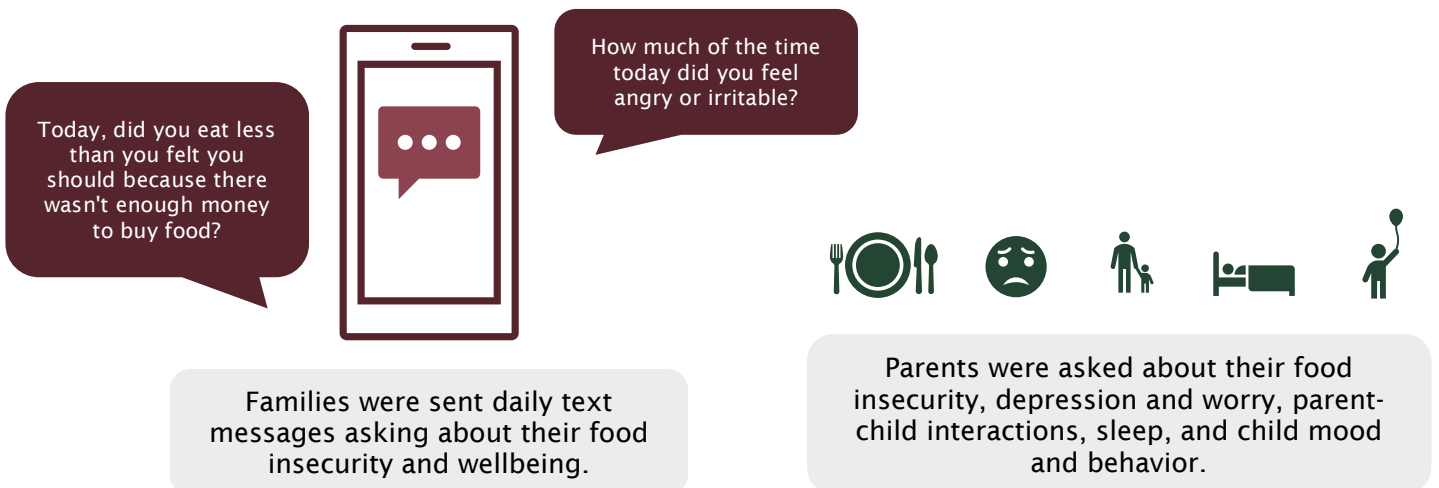
The program has two main goals:

1. **Reduce food insecurity** among children and their families
2. **Enhance family meal routines** by enabling families to cook from scratch and share family meals.

The CDSP lab and the Power Packs Project wanted to know if the program was meeting its goals. We asked:

1. Does picking up a Power Pack **reduce families’ food insecurity**?
2. Does picking up a Power Pack **enhance family meal routines**?

To answer these questions, we began sending parents daily text messages asking about their daily food insecurity and family wellbeing. By sending these messages, we were able to track how Power Packs impacted household food insecurity and parent and child wellbeing.



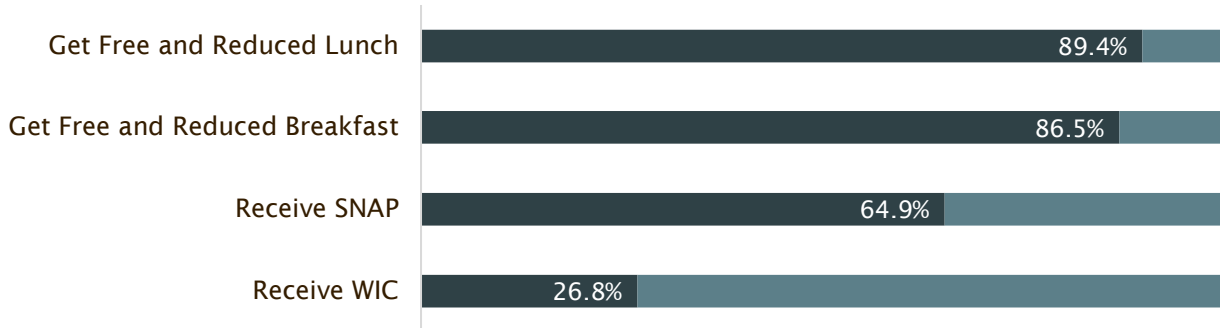


Power Packs' Effect on Food Insecurity

To understand how Power Packs impacts families' food insecurity, it was important that we understood what other sources of food assistance families received. Power Packs would likely play a different role in families' food security if it were the families' *only* source of assistance versus being one source *alongside* SNAP (formerly known as food stamps) or free and reduced-priced school meals. In June 2020, the vast majority of Power Packs families reported using at least one other form of food assistance besides Power Packs. Specifically, most families received food from the following sources:



Where families are receiving other sources of food



N = 188

*The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federal food assistance program that serves low-income households. SNAP benefits are delivered monthly through electronic debit cards, which can then be used to buy food.

These findings are relevant because we've found that pack pickup varies depending on the time of month. Specifically, for Power Packs families who receive SNAP, pickup rates were higher at the end of a SNAP cycle (4 weeks after SNAP payment). In other words, **families who get food stamps are more likely to use Power Packs when their benefits run out**, suggesting they use the program as a buffer against food insecurity.



SNAP Pickup Rates by Weeks since SNAP Payment



N = 103

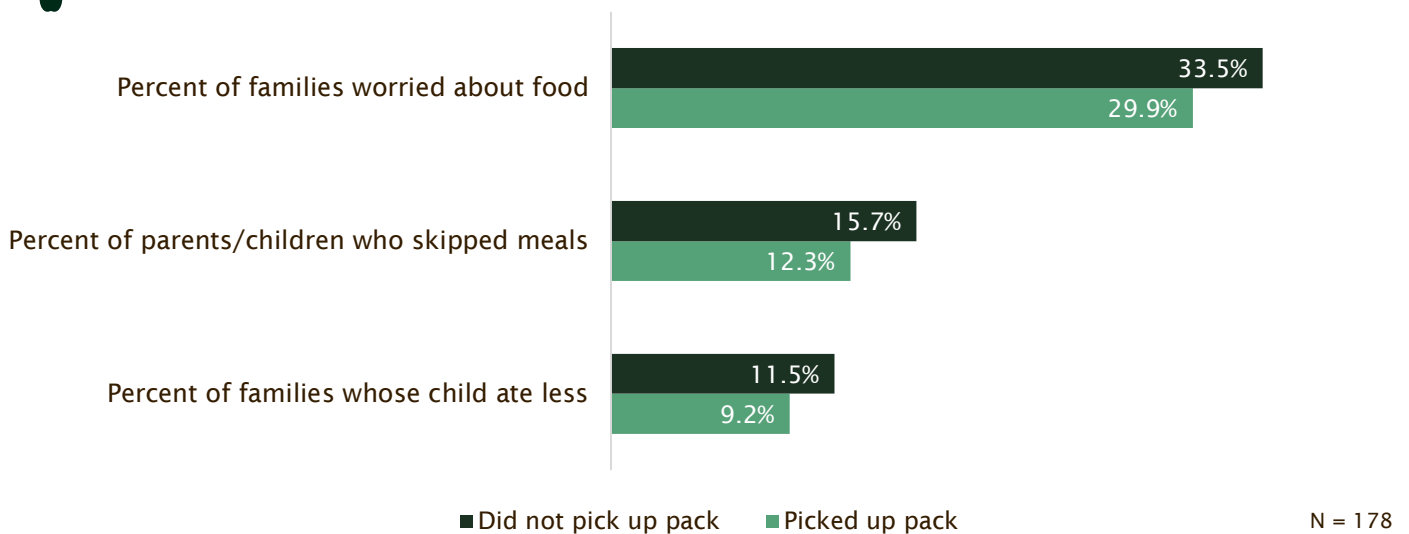


By comparing food insecurity in the weeks a family picked up their pack to the weeks when they did not, we found that **Power Packs reduced food insecurity for all families on average**. For example, families were 3 percentage points less likely to worry about food in the weeks they picked up their packs and were 2 percentage points less likely to report that their child ate less than they should because they ran out of money to buy food.

Power Packs reduces food insecurity for **all families** — **but it reduces food insecurity even more for families who do not receive food stamps**. That means Power Packs had even **larger benefits** for families who did **not** receive federal food stamps, or “SNAP”.



Power Packs’ Effect on Food Insecurity for Families who Don’t Receive SNAP



In the weeks they picked up their packs, families **who did not receive SNAP** had lower overall food insecurity scores and were 4 percentage points less likely to worry about food specifically. More impressive, **Power Packs reduced the likelihood families would experience more severe forms of food insufficiency**: families were almost 4 percentage points less likely for a parent or child to skip a meal in the weeks they picked up their packs and 2 percentage points less likely to report a child cutting back on food. Research finds that these forms of child food insecurity are even more strongly linked with children’s behavior problems and mood than household or parent food insecurity.



Enhancing Meal Routines

Food security not only promotes optimal nutrition in children and families, but it also makes healthy food routines – like cooking from scratch and sharing family meals – possible. These healthy routines improve parents’ and children’s physical health and family functioning, providing parents and children with opportunities for positive communication and connection. This is particularly true in Latinx communities, a population that makes up two-thirds of our sample, in which family occupies a valued place in cultural life and shared meals provide a central context for family connection.

One of the core missions of Power Packs is to promote and sustain these family practices.

86% of families cook from scratch in weeks where they pick up their packs



N = 179

Power Packs families are 5 percentage points more likely to cook from scratch in the weeks they pick up their packs! We think this is because Power Packs not only provides food, but fresh meat, vegetables, and other ingredients with accompanying recipes to encourage healthy eating routines. To our knowledge, Power Packs is the only backpack program in the country to provide such a service.



Key Takeaways and Policy Implications

Over the coming months, the CDSP lab will continue studying the effects of Power Packs on families' economic and psychological wellbeing. We will also work with Power Packs to make sure as many families as possible pick up their packs each week so that they can experience these benefits.

Key Takeaways

- 🍎 **Power Packs reduces food insecurity for families**, particularly indicators of severe food insecurity among children.
- 🍎 **Families use the program in different ways:** non-SNAP families use the program to *reduce* existing food insecurity, while SNAP families use it to *prevent* themselves from becoming food insecure.
- 🍎 **Power Packs families are more likely to cook from scratch** on the weeks they pick up their packs.

Policy Implications

These findings demonstrate that while federal food assistance programs like SNAP and school meals are essential to low-income families' food security, they do not eliminate families' food needs. Local food assistance programs like Power Packs play an essential role in smoothing families' food consumption each month, improving parent and child health and wellbeing in the process. Moreover, for families who do not receive federal food assistance, Power Packs plays an essential role each week in reducing severe forms of food insecurity that research tells us can undermine both parent and child wellbeing.

Suggested citation: Power Packs Study Team. (2022, February). *Data Brief: Power Packs' Effects on Food Insecurity*.

Funding for this study and Data Brief was provided by a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation to the authors (#2005-25249)