

November 2020

Power Packs Study

COVID-19 DATA BRIEF

QUESTIONS? CONTACT POWERPACKS@GEORGETOWN.EDU



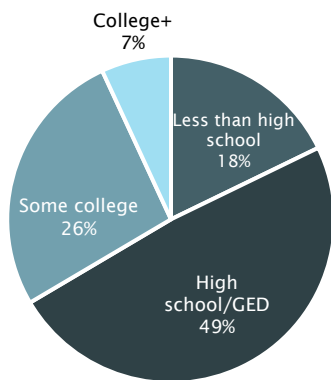
The Power Packs Study is led by PIs Dr. Rebecca Ryan and Dr. Anna Johnson at Georgetown University and Dr. Anna Gassman-Pines at Duke University



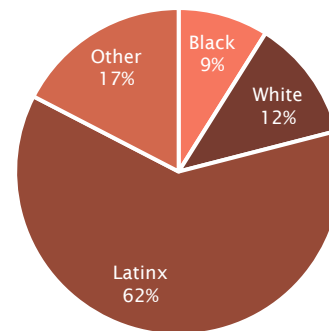


Introduction

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, US families have experienced dramatic increases in unemployment, income loss, and food insecurity (Schanzenbach, 2020), especially those in low-income, underserved communities. The Child Development and Social Policy (CDSP) Lab has been following over 200 low-income families living in rural Pennsylvania as part of a study of The Power Packs Project, a local weekend food assistance program (www.powerpacksproject.org).



Primary parent education level



Primary parent race/ethnicity

In January 2020, we began sending them daily text messages asking about their daily food insecurity and family wellbeing. When the pandemic hit, and Pennsylvania schools closed on March 13, we were able to track how the pandemic, and social restrictions that followed it, impacted household food insecurity and parent and child wellbeing. This data brief offers a window into what we learned.

Today, did you eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money to buy food?

How much of the time today did you feel angry or irritable?

Parents were asked about their food insecurity, depression and worry, parent-child interactions, sleep, and child mood and behavior.

Text message boxes (as shown above) feature real questions from our survey.



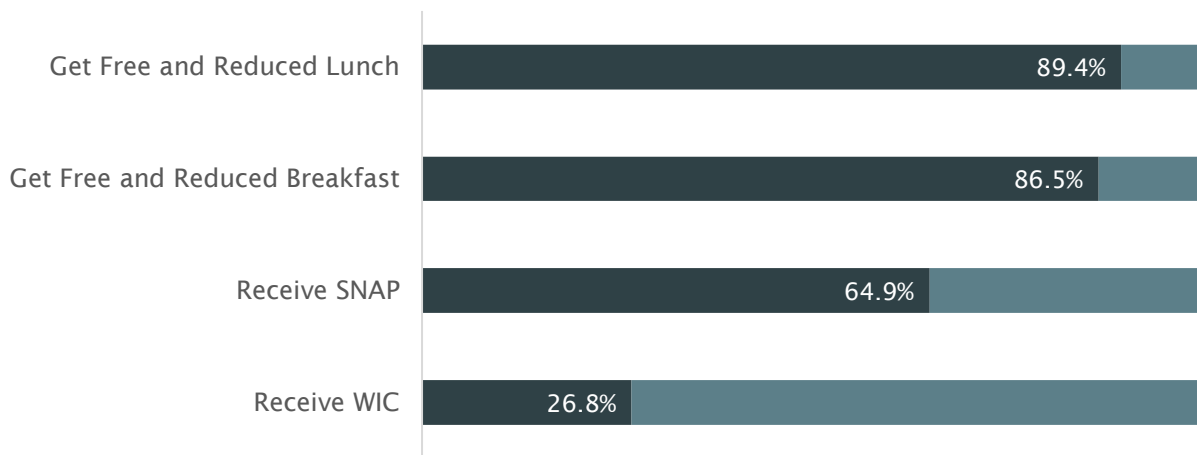
Trouble Using Food Assistance

After schools closed and Pennsylvania issued a stay-at-home order, the majority of families had trouble accessing the sources of food assistance they depend on to feed their families.

Most of their children receive free school lunch and breakfast:



Where families are receiving other sources of food



N = 188

The National School Lunch and Breakfast program is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private schools. It provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost, or free lunches to children each school day. Nearly all Power Packs children receive them.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Food 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. The majority of Power Packs Families receive it.

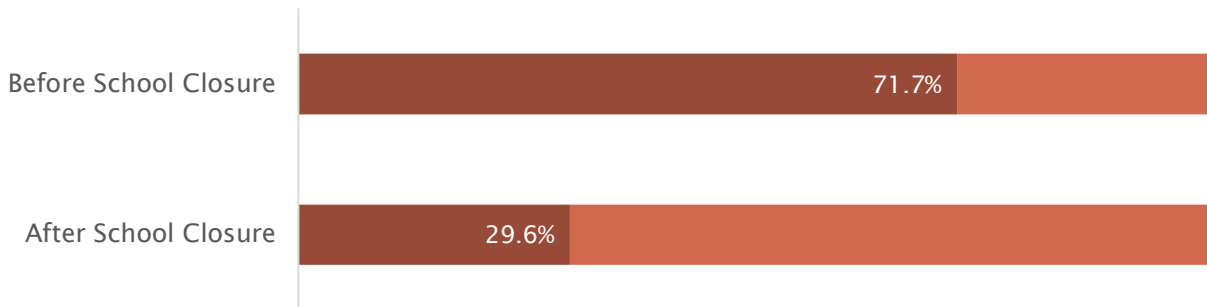
The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides federal food assistance to pregnant women, mothers with infants, and mothers with children under the age of 5. WIC provides supplemental nutritious food to participants, as well as other services. About a quarter of Power Packs families receive it.



When schools closed and Pennsylvania issued a stay-at-home order, parents had a lot of trouble accessing these sources of food. Many schools stopped distributing Power Packs. Furthermore, families often could not come to schools to pick up their food, so pick up rates for Power Packs dropped drastically.

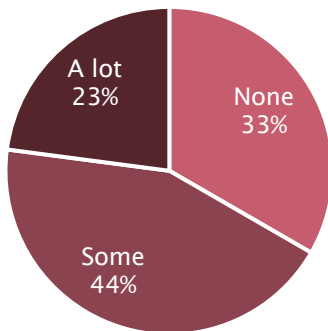


Percent of families who picked up their Power Pack before and after school closure



N = 272

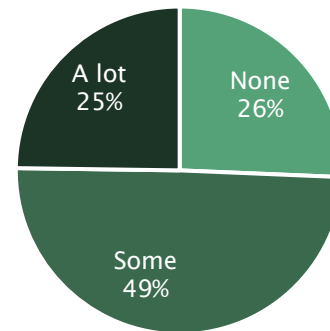
Parents also had trouble utilizing federal food assistance. Of the 65% of our families who receive SNAP benefits, the vast majority reported having some or a lot of trouble using those benefits because of the pandemic. Over a quarter of our families also receive WIC, and the vast majority of those families had some or a lot of trouble using their WIC benefits.



N=188



How much trouble has family had using WIC benefits?



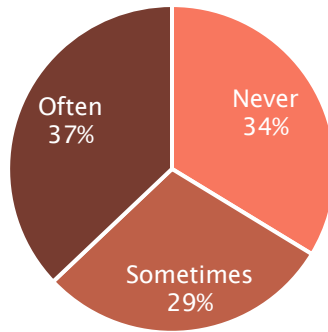
N=188



How much trouble has family had using SNAP benefits?



As families struggled to access Power Packs and federal food assistance, many took advantage of “Grab and Go” meals provided by the schools during the shutdown. These meals serve to replace the free meals children typically received at school each day. Most parents took advantage of Grab and Go meals at least once and nearly half did so every week.



N=188



How often has family picked up Grab and Go meals from school?

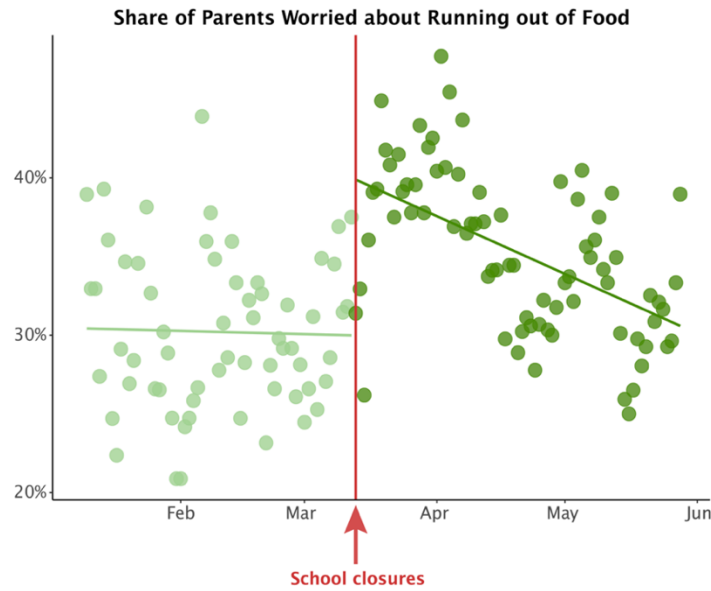
In sum, the pandemic seriously curtailed families’ ability to access sources of food assistance they overwhelmingly depend on. Next, we examine the impact this curtailment had on families’ daily food insecurity.



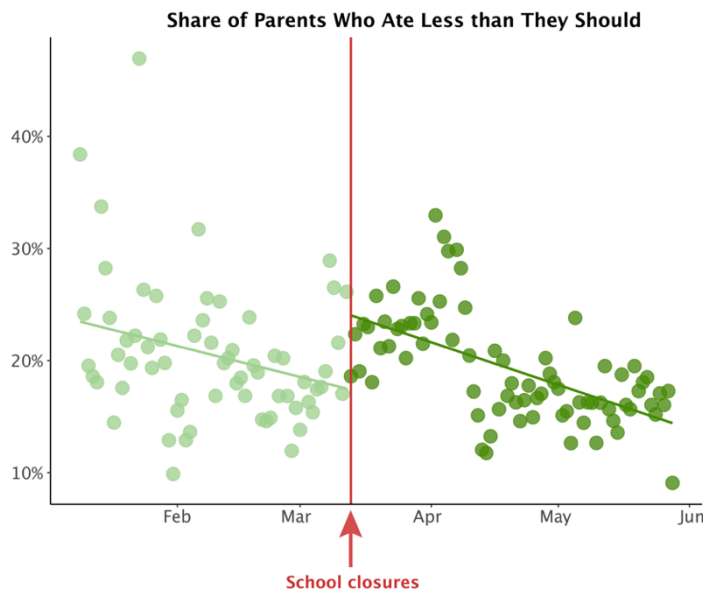
Food Insecurity

Not surprisingly, families' concerns about food insecurity increased after schools closed.

Today, were you ever worried that your food would run out before you got money to buy more?



The shift in the trend after schools closed in this graph shows a 9-percentage point increase in parents' worry about running out of food after March 13.

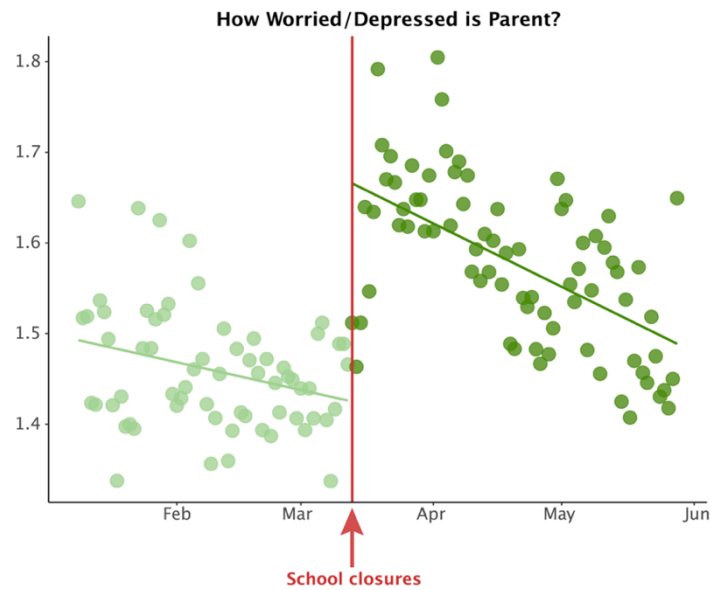


Today, did you eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money to buy food?

Likewise, parents reported a 6-percentage point increase in eating less than they should just after schools closed.



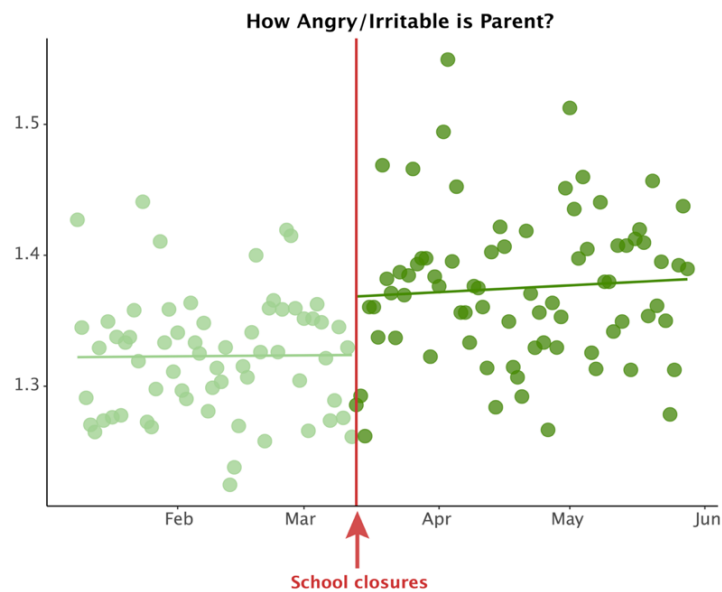
Parents' mental health also declined sharply after schools closed.



How much of the time today did you feel worried or depressed?

Parents' daily reports of worry or depression increased by over a third of a standard deviation immediately after schools closed, although with a decline thereafter.

How much of the time today did you feel angry or irritable?

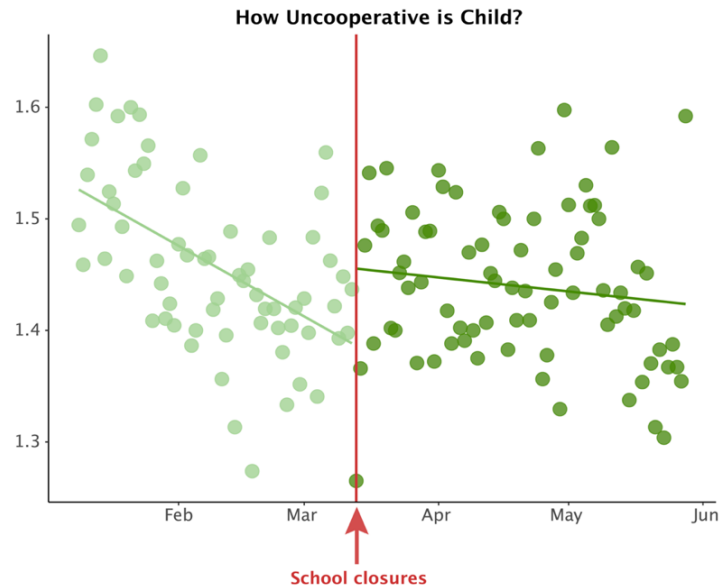


Parent anger and irritation likewise saw a sudden increase after school closures, but that increase remained through June.

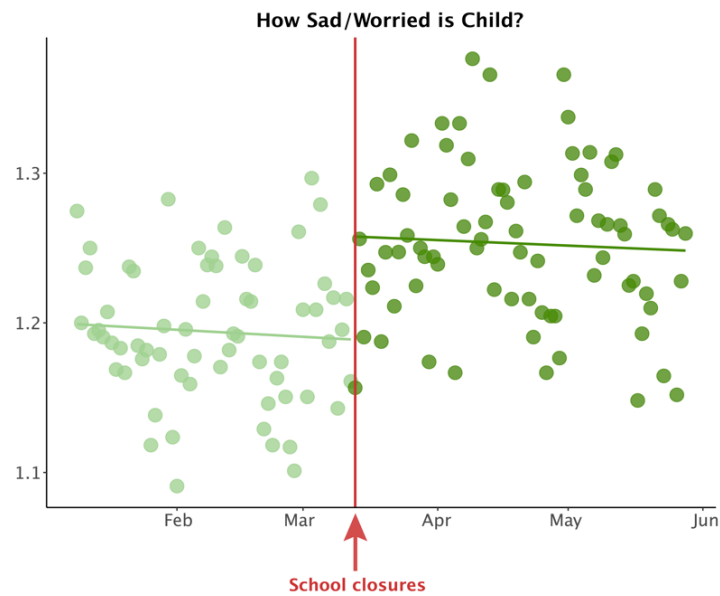


School closures did not just impact parents. Reports also showed increases in uncooperative behavior in children that remained elevated through June.

How much was your child uncooperative today?



Likewise, children's sadness and worry also saw a sudden increase after school closures that remained elevated through June.



How much did your child seem sad or worried today?



Plans for the Future

We plan to continue to follow these families with new daily diaries this winter and spring to capture how the ongoing pandemic – with widespread school closures and historic levels of unemployment – are impacting families’ food insecurity and wellbeing.

We will also ask families what public and private sources of support they are using. This will enable us to learn not only about how families are faring, but how they are managing amid this unprecedented crisis.



Suggested citation: Power Packs Study Team. (2020, November). *Power Packs Study: COVID-19 Data Brief*.