

# Impact of COVID-19 on Child Care Programs, Potential Solutions & Emerging Opportunities



The National Collaborative on Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR) works to accelerate progress on reversing the epidemic of overweight and obesity among U.S. youth. In 2020, NCCOR formed a workgroup focused on determining needs related to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on childhood obesity, with a focus on child care, which includes traditional early care and education (ECE) and after-school settings.

## Executive Summary

The Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition, in partnership with the NCCOR workgroup, conducted a study to explore how Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) and American Rescue Plan (ARP) investments may affect the child care landscape and be maximized to integrate nutrition, physical activity, and healthy growth.



### 17 key informant interviews

- 7 Practitioners
- 6 Researchers
- 4 Federal representatives

## Impact on Children & Families

### Child Care Deserts

**COVID-19 Impact:** Decreased enrollment due to state and local COVID-19 restrictions and families choosing not to re-enroll their children, led to financial hardship and closures, often in programs serving rural, low-income, and/or diverse communities, creating child care "deserts."

**Potential Solutions:**

- Focus on strategies necessary to keep centers open.
  - Implement emerging safety strategies such as smaller student to teacher ratios, masking, and social distancing.
  - Leverage federal flexibilities to ensure revenue continues to flow to the center: Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) waivers for targeted meal patterns, nutritional requirements, monitoring requirements, and increased reimbursement rates.

### Worsening Food Insecurity & Declining Nutrition

**COVID-19 Impact:** While not attending child care, children missed meals and snacks, may not have received them at home and/or have had limited exposure to fresh fruits and vegetables. Additionally, staffing shortages, particularly among kitchen staff, impacted nutritional quality of meals served.

**Potential Solutions:**

- Continue emerging meal provision strategies to help food insecure families: grab-and-go meals, meal kits, backpack programs, onsite food pantries, and meal transportation.
- Focus on reestablishing family style dining, taste testing, new recipe development, and creative strategies to reintroduce fruits and vegetables for children returning to child care.

### Declining Physical Activity

**COVID-19 Impact:** Virtual learning, as well as limited access to outdoor recreation in lower income/urban neighborhoods, may have resulted in a reduction in physical activity.

**Potential Solutions:**

- Continue to move more play and learning activities outdoors (e.g., nature trails, gardens), for a positive impact on both physical and mental health.
- Provide physical activity training opportunities to empower child care providers to be healthy role models.
- Reexamine licensing requirement in after-school settings by state, which could positively impact physical activity-related policies and practices.

## Impact on Child Care Programs & Staff

### Increased Stress

**COVID-19 Impact:** Staff experienced stress when centers closed or operated with limited capacity. Personal health and safety concerns, low wages, food insecurity, new responsibilities beyond the core curricula, and supporting the mental health of children and families were primary stressors.

**Potential Solutions:**

- Provide health and wellness support for staff.
- Provide resources and training for staff on youth mental health and transitioning families back into child care.



*"I think the teachers need, and the directors probably need, some mental health support. COVID was extremely difficult for everybody in that regard. And a lot of the burden was on these essential workers who, I would consider child care [staff] essential workers."*

– Researcher

### Decreased Enrollment, Closures & Limited Staffing

**COVID-19 Impact:** Decreasing enrollment, compounded by a reduction in CACFP reimbursements, caused loss of revenue and temporary and permanent closures. Reopening programs experienced staffing shortages in part due to low wages.

**Potential Solutions:**

- Leverage the Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) to increase meal reimbursements for CACFP, especially for family child care settings.
- Increase staff salaries and strengthen benefits.
- Maximize increased interest of state and local partners, eager to help address structural issues of child care programs.



### Rising National Awareness of Existing Issues

**Impact:** COVID-19 resulted in increased national awareness of staffing and operational struggles in child care programs, food insecurity among child care staff and participating families, and the challenges faced by families due to high cost of child care.



## Considerations for Strategic Use of Recovery Funds

### Focus on Recruiting, Retaining & Training Child Care Staff

- Increase staff salaries and workplace benefits.
- Hire designated nutrition and wellness staff and/or incorporate nutrition and wellness training in onboarding practices to facilitate staff as “healthy lifestyle” role models.
- Provide child care programs with training and assistance in business operations, with focus on financial stability.
- For after-school settings, reevaluate training requirements since needs will differ there compared to ECE.
- Provide mental health support to address high stress levels.



*“[We need] increased salaries for teachers so that we can get teachers back into the centers to provide more care for families. So, we’re not dealing with the staffing shortages. We can create a safe environment that encourages families to bring their children back.”*

– Practitioner



### Promote Sustainable Changes with a Partnership Focus

- Form advisory group(s) composed of key partners from local to federal levels to support child care programs in utilizing recovery funds.
- Use recovery funds to make long term changes. Sustainable investments related to nutrition and physical activity include developing and maintaining:
  - School gardens
  - Nature trails
  - Nutrition education curriculum
  - Food service equipment
  - Cooking classes
  - Nutrition and physical activity training for staff
  - Technology software
  - Coordinated, cross-program data sharing systems
- Increase coordination among federal and state representatives to advocate for sufficient and sustainable funding for child care programs.
- Leverage current CNR to advocate for more permanent sustainable changes.



*“Think of how you invest in your program rather than just spend money, which is easier said than done, but it is the way to take an opportunity like this, which I think if we all had our druthers, we’d say we’d never wanted this to happen, but it did and now programs have an infusion of capital and they can really put some thought behind it and do some things that forever change their programs.”*

– Practitioner



### Prioritize Equity

- Ensure technical assistance and guidance is made available to child care programs and families impacted the most (e.g., helping child care programs with writing proposals to receive financial support).
- Invest in local municipalities and community organizations (e.g., YMCA, parks and recreation departments) to support people most disproportionately impacted the most by COVID-19.
- Ensure strategies align with specific community characteristics (e.g., income, transportation, partnerships).
- Conduct equity assessment to help guide spending decisions.
- Conduct strategic planning and targeted outreach to bring low-income and ethnic minority community members into conversations with local and state officials within their communities/neighborhoods.



*“Investing in those organizations that have those direct connections with the programs that are serving BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] communities, that are serving children that are most impacted by disproportionately impacted, investing in those community-based organizations that have the relationships, I think could really be a boon to ensuring that those programs have more of that community level support.”*

– Practitioner

## Future Research Needed

Evaluating the impacts of the COVID-19 recovery funds on nutrition and physical activity in child care settings will be crucial moving forward. Recommended evaluation components include feasibility, sustainability, process evaluation, and exploring child care staff, family, and child perceptions of changes made with recovery funds, along with impacts to food security status. In particular, future research could support the following areas and projects:

- **Health and Wellness:** Evaluate increasing salary and benefits of child care staff and impact on staff health, wellness, and turnover/retention.
- **Federal Food Assistance:** Pilot and evaluate a child care version of USDA’s Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) that provides free fruit and vegetable snacks to high need elementary schools or conduct a study among non-CACFP participating child care programs on the barriers to participating in CACFP.
- **Health Equity:** Evaluate if there was equitable funding allocation, and how under-resourced communities utilized the recovery funds, as well as the potential impacts of these funds on health equity.
- **Technology:** Establish and evaluate a community information exchange ecosystem with the goal to decrease burden on families by allowing care coordination and data sharing between social service agencies.