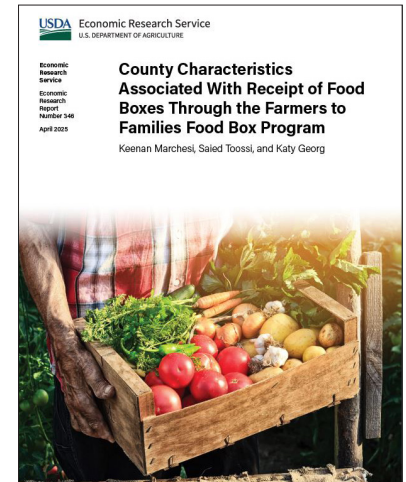




County Characteristics Associated With Receipt of Food Boxes Through the Farmers to Families Food Box Program

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What Is the Issue?

The onset of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in March 2020 forced widespread closures of private businesses, government offices, and nonprofits nationwide. The subsequent economic recession contributed to an increase in food hardship for millions of individuals and families. As a result, many turned to Federal food and nutrition assistance programs and/or charitable food assistance (e.g., food banks and pantries) to meet their food needs. To help support individuals and families, the Federal Government passed legislation in late March 2020 authorizing USDA to create the Farmers to Families Food Box Program (Food Box Program). Through this program, USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), the program administering agency, contracted with food producers, processors, and distributors (hereafter "contractors") to package domestically produced agricultural commodities into boxes (hereafter "food boxes") and deliver them to nonprofit organizations (e.g., food banks and food pantries) for distribution to people in need. Making food available in this way may have been particularly important during the pandemic as evidence has suggested that private, charitable food assistance may help to fill gaps in Federal food and nutrition assistance programs. However, evidence about whether and to what extent the Food Box Program was able to reduce food hardship is limited, and there are no data linking the food boxes delivered through the program to individuals or families. Absent such data, this report used administrative and survey data to examine whether counties characterized by greater levels of need (based on measures of their food environment, food access, rates of food hardship, economic conditions, demographic composition, and urbanicity) were more likely to receive food boxes. In so doing, this report presents new information that can help to inform whether and to what extent the program may have helped to reduce food hardship.

What Did the Study Find?

- From May 2020, when the Food Box Program began operating, through May 2021, when the program concluded, 177.6 million food boxes were delivered across five rounds of contracts (each covering a different number of weeks) at a cost of \$5.5 billion.

ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

- Nearly 78 percent of all U.S. counties received food boxes at some point during the program's duration. Only five States and two territories had fewer than 50 percent of their counties receive at least one food box.
- The program reached the most counties in round two (July 1–September 18, 2020), when food boxes were delivered to 57.6 percent of all counties and reached the fewest counties in round four (November 1–December 31, 2020), when food boxes were delivered to 28.4 percent of all counties. About one-fifth of the counties that received food boxes received them in all five rounds of the program.
- Across rounds one through four, counties were more likely to receive food boxes the greater their (1) population; (2) share of households receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits with low access to food retailers; (3) unemployment rate; and (4) share of non-Hispanic Black residents. Counties with a greater share of low-income residents with low access to stores were less likely to receive food boxes.
- In round five, when the program began prioritizing the delivery of food boxes to economically distressed communities, counties were more likely to receive food boxes the greater their (1) population; (2) poverty and unemployment rates; and (3) shares of Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black households, population groups more likely to experience poverty and food hardship. Nonmetropolitan counties adjacent to a metropolitan area were less likely to receive food boxes relative to metropolitan counties.

How Was the Study Conducted?

This study used publicly available information about the Food Box Program to describe the program. The authors used administrative data on the program from August, October, and December 2021 provided by USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service to examine trends in the contents and numbers of food boxes delivered, and program expenditures, and assess how the program's food boxes were distributed across States and counties. These data were supplemented by data from the USDA's Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, Food Environment Atlas, Food Access Research Atlas, and Atlas of Rural and Small-Town America; the American Community Survey, 5-year estimates; and Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap. This study used difference-in-means tests and regression analyses to determine the association between county characteristics and the receipt of food boxes.