



# Farmers to Families Food Boxes

2020-2021 Impact Report

U.S. Programs, Rural Education



Save the Children®

# Farmers to Families Food Boxes

## Introduction

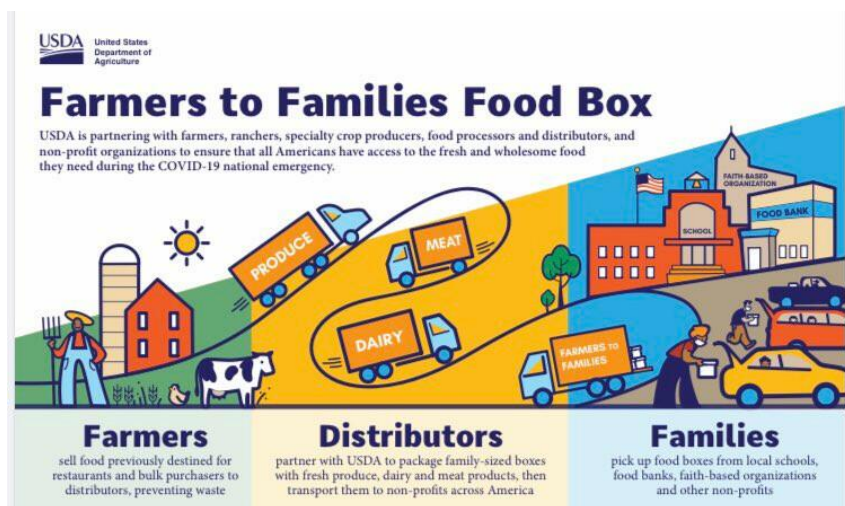
Because of the clear connection between education outcomes and food security, Save the Children is working to ensure that all children in rural America receive the nourishing food they need to thrive as learners and in life. Our strategy includes **meeting the immediate need for food assistance** through the distribution of nourishing food; **strengthening government nutrition programs** to meet rural need; and **developing new solutions** to address rural child hunger.



Even before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, 1 in 7 children in America were food insecure<sup>1</sup>, which means they lacked consistent access to enough food for a healthy, active life. The pandemic has exacerbated child hunger across America; it is estimated that food insecurity rates tripled for households with children<sup>2</sup>. School closures and disruptions to food distribution systems – like food banks and other feeding programs – diminished the access rural children had to fresh, healthy food. Save the Children’s participation in the USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box program helped fill this gap and made a deep impact in rural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Program Overview

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s Farmers to Families Food Box program was launched in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. USDA partnered with for-profit food distributors, who were significantly impacted by the closure of restaurants, hotels, and other food service businesses, to purchase agricultural products and distribute them to Americans in need.



Farmers to Families was designed to be a “truck to trunk” program: Food distributors sent refrigerated trucks of food boxes to communities, and families received the boxes directly from the back of the trucks

<sup>1</sup> Feeding America (2018), Child Food Insecurity in The United States, <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/child>

<sup>2</sup> Diane Schanzenbach and Abigail Pitts (2020), Northwestern University, *Food Insecurity Triples for Families with Children During COVID-19 Pandemic*. <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/news/2020/food-insecurity-triples-for-families-during-covid.html>

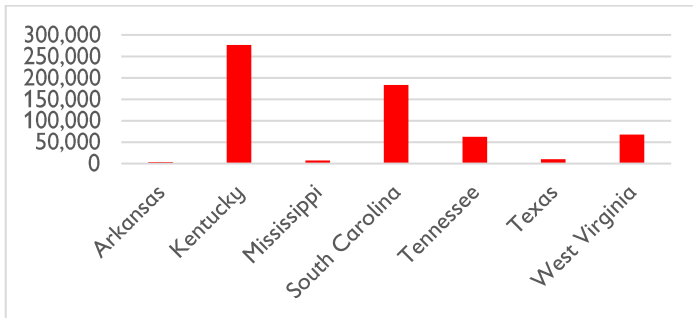
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right into their own vehicles' trunks. This allowed for the distribution of nourishing, perishable product in communities with limited cold storage and distribution capacity – a primary barrier to food access in rural communities. Food distributors were responsible for finding non-profit partners to arrange for families to receive the food boxes. Save the Children coordinated “last mile” delivery of food boxes by **connecting 11 food distributors to over 120 community partners in seven states**, ensuring the resources reached children and families in rural communities.

## Impact

Save the Children participated in the third round of the Farmers to Families Food Box program starting in late September 2020 through the fifth and final round of the program, which ended in May 2021.

**Over 600,000 food boxes** (610,740) filled with about 30 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables, cooked meat, eggs, milk, and other dairy products were distributed in rural communities in seven states.

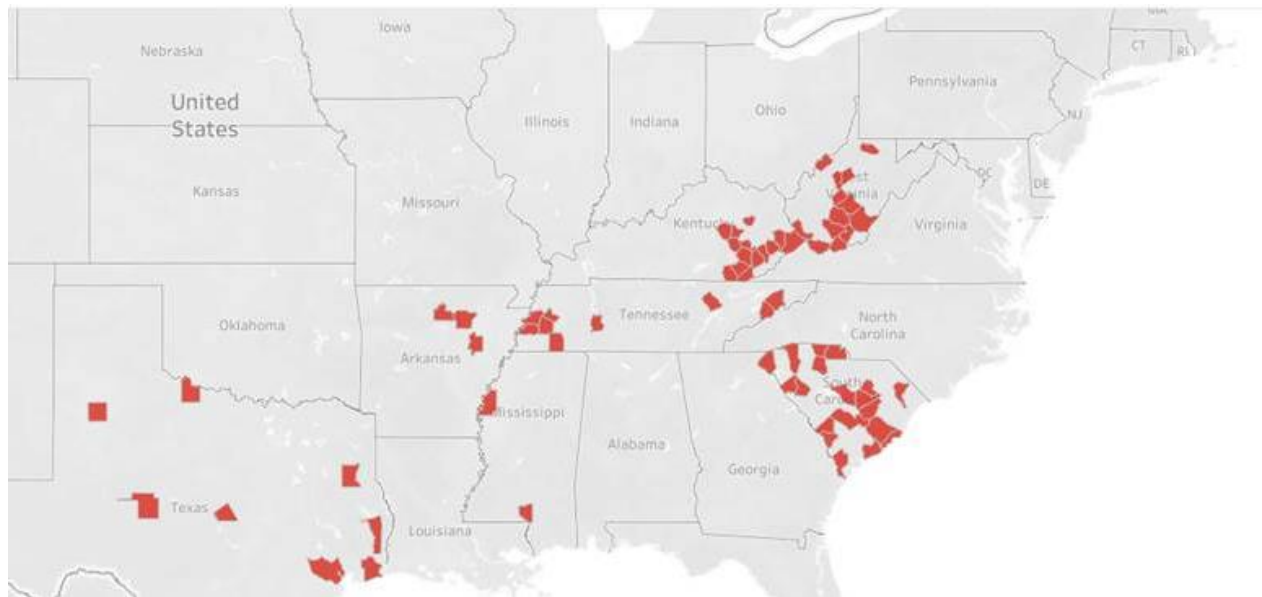


That is the equivalent of **more than 15 million meals** distributed, which reached **237,191 children between September 2020 and May 2021**.

Year	Meals Distributed	Children Reached
2020	4,900,000	89,600
2021	10,200,000	147,591
Total	15,100,000	237,191

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## Counties Receiving Food Boxes



Demand for the boxes was incredibly high, with many families willing to wait in line for hours in order to receive a box of nourishing, fresh food. One recipient of the food boxes was Johnny, a single father raising a fourth-grade son. Like many Cocke County Tennessee residents, Johnny worked in Gatlinburg before COVID forced the closure of tourism businesses in the spring of 2020. When the pandemic hit, Johnny lost his job cleaning cabins. Johnny shares, *“The best part about the food boxes is the fresh fruits and vegetables. It is a lot easier to buy ravioli than apples or other fruits because they cost too much. I can’t afford it. These food boxes helped us a lot. Things get hard especially toward the end of the month. I was so glad to get the food boxes because that was a few things I didn’t have to worry about.”*

Click [here](#) to see a video with more information about the impact of the Farmers to Families program.

**Valuation:** USDA stipulated that non-profit organizations acting as the intermediary should receive financial support from the distributors to support the costs associated with “last mile” distribution of the food boxes. While not every distributor fulfilled this requirement, the combination of this last mile cost capture, along with the valuation of the contents of the food boxes, Save the Children received **over \$22 million through Farmers to Families.**

Year	Dollars
2020	\$9,075,424
2021	\$13,446,639
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$22,522,063</b>

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## Support Provided to Partners

Save the Children partnered with 123 schools, churches, municipalities, and other community-based organizations to ensure families in rural communities received the food boxes. The following support was provided to partners to ensure successful program implementation:

- Training and technical assistance on pre-implementation planning meetings that included topics such as food safety and impact tracking
- Educational fliers on nutrition, learning activities, and social/emotional wellbeing to distribute with the food boxes
- Template recruitment flier to let families know when boxes would be distributed
- Media release templates
- Radio Public Service Announcement and social media announcement verbiage



Families and community partners alike braved the elements and inclement weather for Farmers to Families food box distributions. In WV, the car line wrapped through the snow-covered mountains.



*“We don’t typically buy a whole lot of apples; we didn’t even get out of the parking lot before the boys had started eating the apples (from the food box).”*

## Alignment of Program and Policy

The Farmers to Families Food Box program was quickly developed and launched by USDA soon after the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were a number of problems related to rapid program implementation in the early rounds, including the following:

- Large sections of the country – including many rural areas – received no food boxes
- Untested companies with no food distribution experience received USDA contracts
- Insufficient financial support for the non-profits that the food distributors relied on to facilitate “last mile” distribution directly to families in need
- Insufficient notice before new rounds of funding were released, meaning neither the distributors nor their partner non-profits could plan effectively

Save the Children **actively advocated for improvements to the Farmers to Families Food Box program** to better serve families in rural communities. In addition to meetings with key Members of Congress, Save the Children and our advocacy affiliate, the Save the Children Action Network, partnered together to submit

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both written and oral comments to the White House and USDA. Many of Save the Children's recommendations were enacted for later rounds of the program, including the inclusion of more high-need rural communities and greater accountability for distributors to honor delivery commitments.

## Lessons Learned

The COVID-19 pandemic left millions of families in the U.S. struggling to keep nourishing food on the table. Families in rural communities faced additional barriers to food access because of geographic isolation; transportation challenges; limited retail outlets – especially those that accept federal nutrition benefits; and an already inconsistent emergency food distribution system that was stretched to the breaking point during the pandemic.

The Farmers to Families Food Box program allowed Save the Children to address some of these barriers and increase access to nourishing food in the rural communities we serve. Many community organizations such as food pantries lack sufficient cold storage capacity to safely distribute fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy products, or eggs. The program eliminated this barrier by ensuring the delivery of nourishing perishable products directly to families in need through the use of refrigerated trucks.



Families in rural communities can also miss out on commodities provided through USDA programs because they lack a food pantry in their community, or because operational food pantries in rural communities often only operate for a few hours a month. The Farmers to Families Food Box program allowed rural communities not benefitting from USDA programs such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) to receive nourishing food. Save the Children is concerned that USDA has announced no plans to ensure continued service to rural communities that do not benefit from TEFAP food distributions now that the Farmers to Families Food Box program has ended.

Rural communities also have a number of strengths, including strong social ties and a deep connection to place. Save the Children saw these strengths in action as community leaders quickly mobilized hundreds of volunteers – often with less than 24 hours' notice – to support the distribution of the food boxes to struggling families. Residents of rural communities have demonstrated their determination to ensure all children have access to the nourishing

food they need for a healthy, active lifestyle.

# Farmers to Families Food Boxes

Save the Children plans to build upon the strengths of rural communities and the success of the Farmers to Families Food Box program by continuing to support feeding programs and meal distribution efforts in economically disadvantaged rural communities through grant funding and local staff support.

## Conclusion

In collaboration with schools and community-based organizations, Save the Children supports the preparation and delivery of millions of meals in rural communities across the United States so that children's bellies are full and their minds are ready to learn. The Farmers to Families Food Box program allowed Save the Children to respond to the critical need for access to fresh, nutritious food during the global pandemic crisis. Save the Children will build on the lessons learned from the Farmers to Families program to help ensure that all children in rural America have the nourishing food they need for a healthy, strong foundation to thrive as learners and in life.

