

23. COVID-19-induced disruptions of school feeding services exacerbate food insecurity in Nigeria

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The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown policies have disrupted education, health, and nutrition services globally, with severe implications for children's well-being. As the pandemic spread, more than 190 countries implemented countrywide school closures, affecting 1.6 billion children around the world. In addition to the direct effects on learning, these closures affect household food security by interrupting school feeding services.

In Nigeria, abrupt nationwide school closures beginning in March 2020 left more than 9 million students without regular school meals. Despite anecdotal evidence and speculative hypotheses, we lack rigorous empirical studies on the impacts of these closures, particularly on household food security and children's overall welfare. Furthermore, understanding the overall and differential impacts of disruptions to school feeding services is critical for designing post-COVID-19 recovery policies. With these needs in mind, [in a recent paper in the Journal of Nutrition](#), we quantify the impacts of disruptions to school feeding services on Nigeria's household food security and contribute new insights from the latest on-the-ground research.

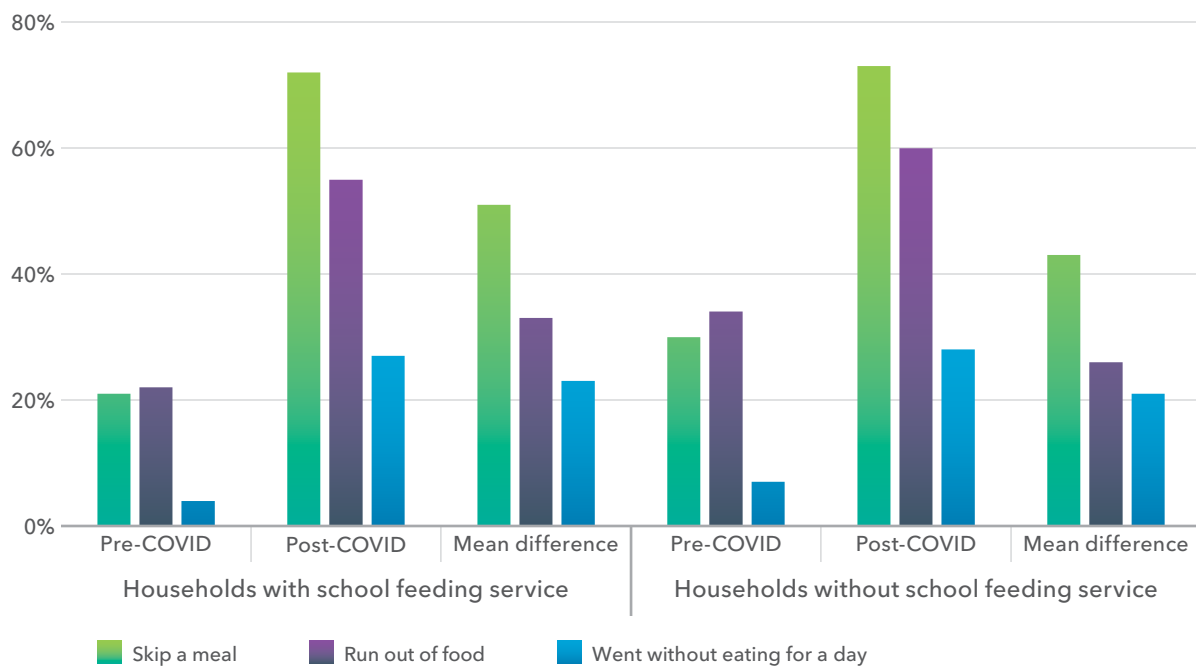
We focused on identifying the differential impacts of the pandemic and its associated disruptions to school feeding services on various household types in Nigeria. In our analysis, we utilized two rounds of longitudinal household surveys: one pre-COVID-19 in-person survey conducted in January/February 2019, and one post-COVID-19 phone survey in April/May 2020, both coming from the Nigeria's Living Standards Measurement Study-Integrated Survey on Agriculture (LSMS-ISA). Out of the total sample of 4,976 households from the 2019 survey, we completed interviews with 1,906 households for the post-COVID-19 round.

In evaluating household access to and disruption of school feeding services, we combined sub-district-level (that is, local government area or LGA) information on access to such services from the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs with the longitudinal household survey data from LSMS-ISA. We then employed a [difference-in-differences](#) approach and examined temporal trends in the food security of households with and without access to school feeding services before and after the COVID-19 outbreak.

In January 2020, immediately before the start of the pandemic, 314 of 368 LGAs in our sample (85 percent) were running school feeding services. Almost half (47 percent) of households had at least one primary school age child (age 6–9) and school-going children. About 83 percent of the sampled households lived in LGAs with school feeding programs.¹ After the start of the pandemic, these services were disrupted.

¹ In our difference-in-differences estimations, LGAs administering school feeding services before the outbreak of the pandemic assume a value of 1 and LGAs not providing these services assume a value of 0.

FIGURE 1 Differences in food security indicators across households with and without access to school feeding



We employed three indicators for food insecurity experiences (incidence of skipping a meal, running out of food, and going without eating in the last 30 days)² and a fourth, an aggregate index constructed using these indicators, all of which come from the LSMS-ISA. Using the difference-in-differences approach, we then examined temporal trends in the food security of households with and without access to school feeding services.

Our results indicate that on average Nigerian households experienced a substantial increase in food insecurity in the post-COVID-19 survey round. The share of all households skipping a meal, running out of food, and going without eating increased by 47, 32, and 20 percent, respectively. These findings can be attributed to the spread of the pandemic and the associated government restrictions on livelihood activities. Disruptions to school feeding services further increased the food insecurity experiences of households with primary school children, that is, the beneficiaries of such services.

The disruption of school feeding services increased the probability that a household skipped a meal in the last 30 days by 9 percentage points (see [Figure 1](#)). Similarly, these disruptions were associated

² The first indicator asks if a household head or any other adult in the household had to skip a meal because there was not enough money or other resources to get food. The second indicator measures whether the household has run out of food and takes a value of 1 if the household ran out of food due to a lack of money or other resources for food. The third indicator takes a value of 1 if the household or any other adult in the household went without eating for a whole day due to a lack of money or other resources.

with a 0.2 SD increase in the food insecurity index. That is, households with primary-school-going children were more likely to experience further deterioration in food security due to the disruption of school feeding services. As Figure 1 indicates, before COVID-19, households with access to school feeding services reported significantly lower levels of food insecurity than those without access. However, the onset of the pandemic and the disruption to school feeding services not only resulted in significant increases in food insecurity for both households with and without access to services but also eliminated any advantage previously gained by households with access.

Our findings also show that the disruption to school feeding programs had heterogeneous impacts. Single mothers and poorer households were 8 percent and 11 percent more likely to report a higher probability of skipping a meal, respectively, as these households are more likely to rely on school feeding services for accessing nutritious diets and are likely to be disproportionately affected by the closure of such services.

These findings clearly show that COVID-19-related disruptions to education and nutritional services have endangered household food security in Nigeria over and above the impacts of lockdowns and other social distancing measures. The heterogeneous impacts of the disruptions also corroborate evolving studies arguing that the pandemic has increased existing gender and income inequalities.

These findings can help inform immediate and medium-term policy responses to address continuing elevated levels of food insecurity, including the design of alternative social protection policies and nutritional services to mitigate longer-term adverse economic and welfare impacts. The findings also highlight the important role school feeding services programs provide to vulnerable households even in normal times, and the major negative impact of their loss during a crisis. This shows the importance of building the resilience of vulnerable households to shocks, in Nigeria and in other low- and middle-income countries. Our findings can inform future investment options and nutrition-sensitive interventions to facilitate and ensure sustainable recovery.

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