



September 2021

USDA FOOD BOX PROGRAM

Key Information and Opportunities to Better Assess Performance



A Century of Non-Partisan Fact-Based Work

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-353](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The COVID-19 pandemic caused disruptions in the U.S. food supply chain and contributed to a national hunger crisis. In response, USDA implemented the Food Box Program in May 2020. USDA directed a total of \$6 billion in congressional appropriations to the program, which lasted 1 year. The program included organizations such as food banks, which received food boxes; contractors that purchased and delivered the food; and food producers, such as farmers and ranchers.

The CARES Act contained a provision for GAO to conduct monitoring and oversight of the use of funds related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This report examines the extent to which USDA collected and analyzed data on participants in the program, including data necessary to assess performance in meeting program goals.

GAO analyzed information from USDA's website, database, and departmental guidance. GAO also compared USDA's efforts to collect and analyze data on the program against federal guidance, USDA's strategic plan, and documents that include lessons learned. GAO also interviewed USDA officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that USDA apply the lesson learned from the Food Box Program regarding collecting and analyzing data to assess program goals to current and future emergency food assistance programs. USDA agreed with the recommendation.

View [GAO-21-353](#). For more information, contact Steve D. Morris at (202) 512-3841 or morris@gao.gov.

September 2021

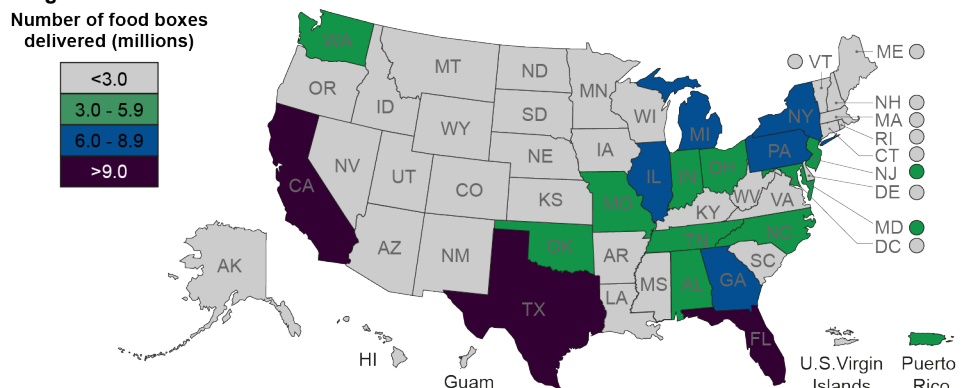
USDA FOOD BOX PROGRAM

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What GAO Found

Through contractors, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Farmers to Families Food Box Program purchased fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy, and meat products from producers and delivered them to recipient organizations, such as food banks. USDA's goals for the program included providing food to those in need, helping contractors retain jobs, and supporting producers. USDA collected large amounts of data and analyzed various data on deliveries to recipient organizations—that is, total number of food boxes delivered to each state and per million people in each state—and determined that the program met its goal of providing food to those in need. GAO further analyzed USDA's data and found that 243 contractors delivered more than 176 million food boxes to recipient organizations across the U.S. and territories by the end of the program (see figure). GAO's analysis also found that food boxes were delivered to nearly 78 percent of all U.S. counties, including to more than 89 percent of counties where at least 20 percent of the population lives in poverty.

Number of Food Boxes Contractors Delivered to Recipient Organizations for the Food Box Program



Sources: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-21-353

USDA could not analyze the program's performance in meeting its other two goals: (1) helping contractors (i.e., distributors of goods) retain jobs and (2) helping food producers faced with declining demand—because USDA did not systematically collect the necessary data. For example, USDA did not collect data on (1) the number of jobs contractors might have lost but ultimately retained as a result of participating in the program and (2) the number, category, and size of participating producers or whether the pandemic had reduced demand for or sales of the type of product the producer provided for the program.

USDA officials acknowledged that a key lesson learned during the implementation of the Food Box Program was the need to collect and analyze such data but that the department did not have time to do so. Federal guidance expresses the importance of balancing speed with transparency, and states that federal managers should use data and evidence to achieve program goals. By applying this lesson learned to current and future emergency food assistance programs, USDA would have greater assurance that it can assess program effectiveness even when it must move quickly in implementing a program.

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Abbreviations

AMS	Agricultural Marketing Service
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
Food Box Program	Farmers to Families Food Box Program
FNS	Food and Nutrition Service
OMB	Office of Management and Budget
TEFAP	The Emergency Food Assistance Program
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture

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September 8, 2021

Congressional Committees

As part of its response to disruptions in the food supply chain caused by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, in May 2020, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) implemented the Farmers to Families Food Box Program (Food Box Program).¹ For this program—which ran through May 31, 2021—USDA, through contractors, purchased and delivered fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy, and meat products across the country. The program’s goals included providing food to those in need and supporting food distribution companies and domestic food producers that could be affected by the disruptions. Six billion dollars in congressional appropriations were directed to the program.²

To implement the program, USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) contracted with local, regional, and national distributors to purchase food from domestic producers.³ These contractors packaged the products into family-sized boxes and transported the boxes to recipient organizations—such as food banks, community and faith-based organizations, and other nonprofits—that serve persons in need. Within weeks of its implementation, the program had purchased and delivered millions of food boxes across the U.S. and its territories, according to USDA officials.

The CARES Act includes a provision for us to conduct monitoring and oversight of the use of funds made available to prepare for, respond to,

¹Round 1 of the Food Box Program began on May 15, 2020.

²In March 2021, USDA announced plans to offer boxes of pre-packed, fresh produce through The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)—known as TEFAP Fresh Produce—until September 30, 2021.

³Throughout this report we refer to distributors as “contractors.” USDA also refers to them as vendors. For rounds 1 and 2, all contractors were awarded contracts to deliver food boxes. For rounds 3, 4, and 5 of the program, AMS established basic ordering agreements with contractors. A basic ordering agreement describes terms applying to future orders between the parties. Once basic ordering agreements were established, contractors could compete to fulfill specific requirements for the program.

and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ This report examines the extent to which USDA collected and analyzed data on the Food Box Program, including data necessary to assess achievement of program goals.

To address this objective, we reviewed federal laws; analyzed departmental guidance and documents, and information on USDA's website; and we interviewed USDA officials. We also reviewed and analyzed data on obligations, expenditures, and various aspects of contractors and recipient organizations contained in USDA's Web-Based Supply Chain Management database as of June 4, 2021. These data covered the duration of the program from May 15, 2020 through when the program ended, on May 31, 2021.⁵

We reviewed these data for completeness, accuracy, and reliability by electronically testing or reviewing them for missing elements, inconsistencies, errors, and outliers; and by reviewing related documentation. We also interviewed USDA officials about their data system as it relates to data quality and to clarify any potential issues as we reviewed the data. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of describing program spending and identifying contractors that participated in the program, contract obligations, and number of food boxes delivered. We also determined that some data fields for recipient organizations were sufficiently reliable for the purpose of identifying the ZIP codes and counties in which these organizations were located. However, we found the data were unreliable for the purpose of identifying recipient organizations by name and type of entity because of inconsistencies in how organization names were entered into USDA's database, and because unique identifiers were not used. We discuss these data issues later in this report.

We also analyzed the extent to which USDA collected and analyzed data to assess its progress toward program goals. We compared USDA's data

⁴Pub. L. No. 116-136, § 19010(b), 134 Stat. 281, 580 (2020). We regularly issue government-wide reports on the federal response to COVID-19. For the latest report, see GAO, *COVID-19: Continued Attention Needed to Enhance Federal Preparedness, Response, Service Delivery, and Program Integrity*, [GAO-21-551](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 19, 2021). Our next government-wide report will be issued in October 2021 and will be available on GAO's website at <https://www.gao.gov/coronavirus>.

⁵Although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA's supply chain management database.

collection and analysis efforts against the April 2020 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance on supplemental funding provided in response to COVID-19, an objective in USDA's 2018–2022 Strategic Plan related to improving data collection and utilization,⁶ and USDA's documentation of lessons learned during implementation of the program. We did not comprehensively review all of USDA's lessons learned and its efforts to implement them.

To analyze USDA's performance in meeting its secondary goal of targeting economically distressed communities, we allocated ZIP codes in recipient addresses to counties, and then assessed food box deliveries to counties in which an estimated 20 percent of the population lives in poverty, according to 2015–2019 American Community Survey 5-year estimates for those counties.⁷ The U.S. Census Bureau uses the 20 percent threshold to define Census tracts as "poverty areas." We applied this threshold to USDA data by county. We conducted all analyses, including matching of ZIP code-level recipient address data to counties, using SAS software.⁸

We conducted this performance audit from September 2020 to September 2021 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

⁶Office of Management and Budget, *Implementation Guidance for Supplemental Funding Provided in Response to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*, OMB Memorandum M-20-21 (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 10, 2020), and U.S. Department of Agriculture, *USDA Strategic Plan 2018-2022* (May 2018).

⁷U.S. Census Bureau, *2015–2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates*, accessed Nov. 3, 2020, https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/summary_file/2019/data/5_year_entire_sf/.

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Background

Program Funding

Several pieces of legislation appropriated the funds that USDA made available to the Food Box Program.⁹ USDA implemented the program in five rounds, and each round ran for about 1 to 4 months. Figure 1 shows funding sources and amounts, obligations, and purchases (expenditures) for the five rounds of the program.

⁹The Families First Coronavirus Response Act provided “such amounts as are necessary” for the Secretary of Agriculture to purchase commodities for emergency distribution in the United States during a public health emergency designation during fiscal year 2020. Pub. L. No. 116-127, div. A, tit. I, §1101(g) and (i), 134 Stat. 178, 180 (2020). The Office of Management and Budget apportioned the following amounts for the Food Box Program from the Families First Coronavirus Response Act: (1) \$3 billion in May 2020, and (2) an additional \$1 billion in September 2020. The CARES Act provided a \$9.5 billion appropriation to the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture for coronavirus relief. CARES Act, Pub. L. No. 116-136, div. B, tit. I, 134 Stat. 281, 505 (2020). In October 2020, the Office of Management and Budget apportioned \$0.5 billion of that amount for the Food Box Program. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, appropriated \$11.2 billion to the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture for coronavirus relief. Pub. L. No. 116-260, div. N, tit. VII, subtit. B, ch. 1, § 751, 134 Stat. 1182, 2105 (2020). In January 2021, the Office of Management and Budget apportioned \$1.5 billion for the Food Box Program.

Figure 1: Congressionally Appropriated Funding Amounts and USDA Obligations and Purchases (Expenditures) for USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program

	Round 1 (May 15 – June 30, 2020)	Round 2 (July 1 – Sept. 18, 2020)	Round 3 (Sept. 22 – Oct. 31, 2020)	Round 4 (Nov. 1 – Dec. 31, 2020)	Round 5 (Jan. 19 – May 31, 2021)	Total
 Funding amount and source	Up to \$3.00 billion (Families First Coronavirus Response Act) ^a		Up to \$1.00 billion (Families First Coronavirus Response Act) ^a	Up to \$0.50 billion (Appropriations under the CARES Act) ^b	Up to \$1.50 billion (Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021) ^c	Up to \$6.00 billion
 Obligations	\$1.11 billion	\$1.95 billion	\$0.92 billion	\$0.49 billion	\$1.42 billion	\$5.88 billion
 Purchases (or expenditures)	\$0.95 billion	\$1.79 billion	\$0.87 billion	\$0.48 billion	\$1.38 billion	\$5.47 billion

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information. | GAO-21-353

Notes: This figure presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

According to USDA, the department determines purchases (or expenditures) by the payments it makes on invoices it receives from contractors. As such, purchases (or expenditures) can be lower than obligations because of the time it takes for USDA to receive and process invoices.

^aFamilies First Coronavirus Response Act, Pub. L. No. 116-127, div. A, tit. I, §1101(g) and (i), 134 Stat. 178, 180 (2020).

^bThe CARES Act, Pub. L. No. 116-136, div. B, tit. I, 134 Stat. 281, 505 (2020).

^cConsolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, Pub. L. No. 116-260, div. N, tit. VII, subtit. B, ch. 1, § 751, 134 Stat. 1182, 2105 (2020).

Program Goals and Description

According to USDA officials and documentation, the department rapidly implemented the Food Box Program to address three critical needs USDA identified that were caused by the COVID-19 pandemic:

-
1. providing food to those in need by delivering food boxes to recipient organizations,
 2. helping local and regional companies (contractors) that supply and distribute goods to retain jobs that could be lost as a result of institutional closures, and
 3. providing alternative outlets for domestic producers faced with declining demand because of institutional closures.¹⁰

These three critical needs comprised the key goals of the program, according to USDA officials and program documentation. USDA later added three secondary goals. Two of these secondary goals related to providing food to those in need: (1) delivering food boxes to recipient organizations in every county in the United States,¹¹ and (2) targeting economically distressed communities.¹² The third, related to supporting domestic producers, focused on ensuring that contractors included small farming operations in their food purchases.¹³

The Food Box Program included five types of food boxes—fresh fruit and vegetables; milk; dairy; precooked meat; and combination boxes, which

¹⁰USDA officials said that the department did not provide a definition of producers as it related to the Food Box Program. However, officials said the term generally refers to farmers, ranchers, dairy operators, and fishers.

¹¹USDA's January 2021 preliminary report on the Food Box Program, issued after the fourth round, stated that a goal of the Food Box Program was to deliver food boxes to every county in the United States.

¹²The communities USDA targeted are Opportunity Zones, which are economically distressed communities that may be eligible for certain tax incentives. The Opportunity Zones designation was created by Congress in 2017. The designation incentivized investments in low-income neighborhoods. Pub. L. No. 115-97, § 13823, 131 Stat. 2054, 2183 (codified at 26 U.S.C. § 1400Z-1). USDA also began basing the amount of food each state received on the total number of unemployed persons and the number of people with incomes below the poverty level in the state, according to USDA officials.

¹³For the Food Box Program, USDA defined small farming operations as those servicing local and regional interests and farmers markets.

had a mix of fruit and vegetables, milk, dairy, and precooked meat, eggs, or egg products.¹⁴ (See fig. 2 for photos of examples.)

Figure 2: Examples of Food Boxes for USDA's Farmers to Families Food Box Program



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). | GAO-21-353

After the first two rounds of the program, USDA made changes to the program on the basis of feedback from stakeholders. Such changes included adding to its solicitations a focus on delivering food to economically distressed communities; adding a requirement that contractors cover all costs for purchasing and delivering food boxes, including the “last mile,” or delivery to the recipient organization;¹⁵ awarding contracts only for combination boxes to ensure that food boxes

¹⁴In its solicitations for the program, USDA distinguished between fluid milk (milk) and dairy products such as cheese, butter, and sour cream (dairy). Also, in its solicitations for rounds 1 and 2, USDA provided examples of products permitted in the food boxes, but did not require specific contents. Starting in round 3, USDA indicated that it would purchase only combination boxes that weighed from 30 to 40 pounds and contained: (1) 10–12 pounds of fresh fruit and vegetables, including 2–4 pounds of root vegetables (e.g., potatoes, yams, and carrots), 2–4 pounds of fruits with longer storage life (e.g., citrus, apples, and melons), and one or two locally grown fruit or vegetable items, as available; (2) 5–6 pounds at least two dairy items, such as cheese, butter, and sour cream; (3) 5–6 pounds of at least two pre-cooked meat items but not more than 1 pound of lunch meat; and (4) at least 10 pounds of meat and dairy combined.

¹⁵According to USDA, the “last mile” is defined as the final movement of goods from a transportation or distribution hub to the final delivery destination—the individual user of the food box. For purposes of this report, the individual user is the recipient organization, not the individual who will consume the food.

contained a variety of products; and streamlining the contracting process.¹⁶

Agency Roles

Within USDA, AMS generally has been responsible for commodity procurement (solicitations, awards, and contract management). It typically coordinates with other USDA agencies, such as the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), that provide food assistance and work with food banks and schools. According to USDA officials, AMS implemented the Food Box Program without assistance from FNS because FNS officials had concerns about the large volume of food and rapid time frames for program implementation. As a result, according to USDA officials, AMS worked directly with contractors to deliver food boxes to recipient organizations. The Food Box Program was the first program in which AMS worked directly with contractors to deliver food, according to department officials.

USDA's Efforts Following the Food Box Program

In March 2021, USDA announced its intent to continue to provide certain types of food boxes starting on June 1, 2021. Specifically, USDA reported it would use pandemic assistance funding to purchase fresh produce to be offered in boxes to those in need through the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), administered by FNS in coordination with AMS.¹⁷ USDA also announced in April 2021 that AMS would implement the new Dairy Donation Program, through which dairy cooperatives and processors are reimbursed for their donations of dairy products to nonprofit organizations that distribute food to people in need.¹⁸ In June 2021, USDA announced that through TEFAP it would spend up to \$1 billion to purchase food from producers and assist food banks.¹⁹

¹⁶As we reported in March 2021, USDA streamlined its contracting process for rounds 3, 4, and 5 by using basic ordering agreements. USDA established basic ordering agreements with contractors, which then competed to fulfill specific requirements for the Food Box Program. USDA officials said that the changes provided greater flexibility to specify requirements as the program progressed.

¹⁷AMS helps administer TEFAP by managing food procurement through solicitations, awards, and contract management.

¹⁸The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 directed the Secretary of Agriculture to establish the Dairy Donation Program. Pub. L. No. 116-260, div. N, tit. VII, subtit. B, ch. 2, § 762, 134 Stat. 1182, 2111 (2020).

¹⁹According to USDA's website, this effort is funded through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, Pub. L. No. 117-2, 135 Stat. 4, (\$500 million), and the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, Pub. L. No. 116-260, 134 Stat. 1182 (2020), (\$500 million).

Prior GAO Work

We have previously reported on the Food Box Program.²⁰ For example, in September 2020, we reported that USDA's implementation of the program included some oversight and monitoring mechanisms but that AMS did not conduct program reviews for the first two rounds of the program.²¹ We also reported that USDA did not have plans to evaluate the program to identify successes, challenges, and lessons learned. We recommended that USDA evaluate the Food Box Program after the third round. USDA did not do so after the third round ended on October 31, 2020, because, according to officials, they did not have time to conduct the review before implementing the next round. However, in January 2021, in response to a requirement in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, USDA conducted a preliminary review of the program after the fourth round and before issuing solicitations for the fifth round.²² Among the lessons learned in its review, USDA found that the program did not collect and analyze data on job retention and producers. USDA also developed a briefing document for the incoming administration that included potential improvements for any future rounds or similar programs.

²⁰GAO, *COVID-19: Opportunities to Improve Federal Response and Recovery Efforts*, [GAO-20-625](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 25, 2020); *Agriculture Spending: Opportunities Exist for USDA to Identify Successes and Challenges of the Farmers to Families Food Box Program to Inform Future Efforts*, [GAO-20-711R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 16, 2020); *COVID-19: Federal Efforts Could Be Strengthened by Timely and Concerted Actions*, [GAO-20-701](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 21, 2020); *COVID-19: Sustained Federal Action Is Crucial as Pandemic Enters Its Second Year*, [GAO-21-387](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 31, 2021); and *COVID-19 Contracting: Opportunities to Improve Practices to Assess Prospective Vendors and Capture Lessons Learned*, [GAO-21-528](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 29, 2021). In our March 2021 report, we made two recommendations: that the Secretary of Agriculture direct the Administrator of AMS to (1) issue guidance on the use of the COVID-19 National Interest Action code for the Farmers to Families Food Box Program or successor food distribution program; and (2) assess the contracting personnel needed to fully execute the program. As of August 2021, USDA had implemented the first recommendation, but not the second.

²¹[GAO-20-711R](#).

²²PL 116-260, div. N, tit. VII, subtit. B, ch. 1, § 751, 134 Stat. 1182, 2107.

USDA Collected Data on the Food Box Program but Did Not Systematically Collect Data Related to Two Key Program Goals

USDA collected large amounts of data about its Food Box Program, but it did not collect and analyze data necessary to assess the program's performance in meeting two of its three key program goals. USDA analyzed the various data on deliveries to recipient organizations and determined that the Food Box Program met its key goal of providing food to those in need. Our additional analyses of USDA's county-level data also suggest that USDA largely met this key goal. However, we found that USDA did not collect and analyze the data necessary to assess the program's performance in achieving its other two key goals, which related to helping contractors retain jobs and producers deal with decreasing demand for their products. USDA officials told us that they were focused on implementing the program under tight time frames and did not collect and analyze some data necessary to assess program performance—this was a key lesson learned for the department after round 4 of the program.

Food Box Delivery Data Suggest the Program Largely Met Its Goal to Provide Food to Those in Need

USDA and GAO analyses of delivery data suggest the Food Box Program largely met its goal to provide food to those in need. Specifically, USDA analyzed data on food box deliveries to track the number of food boxes delivered to recipient organizations in each state. It determined from this analysis that the program met its goal of providing food to those in need. USDA analyzed data it collected from contractors that included where the contractors delivered food boxes to primary recipient organizations, such as food banks.²³ These primary recipient organizations could either provide the food boxes directly to individuals or distribute food boxes to other organizations in different locations to provide to individuals.²⁴ USDA determined delivery using the location of the primary recipient organization, rather than the final destination of the boxes (i.e., the individuals who received the boxes for consumption).

USDA posted some data—that is, the total number of food boxes that contractors delivered across the country—on its public website. It also analyzed the total number of food boxes delivered to each county within each state. USDA officials told us that the department's analyses of state- and county-level data determined that the program delivered millions of food boxes to all 50 states; Washington, D.C.; and the U.S. territories of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. According to these

²³Specifically, USDA obtained recipient organization names and locations, such as ZIP codes, from contractors that entered these data into USDA's supply chain management database.

²⁴These secondary organizations could be in different locations than where the food boxes were delivered. For example, food banks in Texas and Ohio distributed food boxes to other organizations in other counties in the state.

officials, the department viewed the breadth of food deliveries to recipient organizations—across all 50 states; Washington, D.C.; and territories—as suggesting that the program met its goal of providing food to those in need.

Our analysis of the delivery data, which included assessing deliveries to high-poverty counties, suggests that the Food Box Program met USDA’s secondary goals related to providing food to those in need.²⁵ Specifically, our analysis of county-level data on primary recipient organizations allowed us to determine the extent to which the program met the two secondary goals related to providing food to those in need: (1) delivering food boxes to every county in the United States²⁶ and (2) targeting economically distressed communities.²⁷ We analyzed data as of June 4, 2021, and found that contractors delivered millions of boxes of food to recipient organizations distributed across most U.S. counties, including nearly all high-poverty counties, or counties in which 20 percent or more of the population lives in poverty.²⁸ Our analysis of these data suggests that USDA largely met its key goal of providing food to those in need by

²⁵We analyzed county-level delivery data because although USDA analyzed its data at the county level, it did not include this analysis in its response to our questions about whether it met its goal of providing food to those in need.

²⁶USDA’s January 2021 preliminary report on the Food Box Program, issued after the fourth round, stated that a goal of the Food Box Program was to deliver food boxes to every county in the United States.

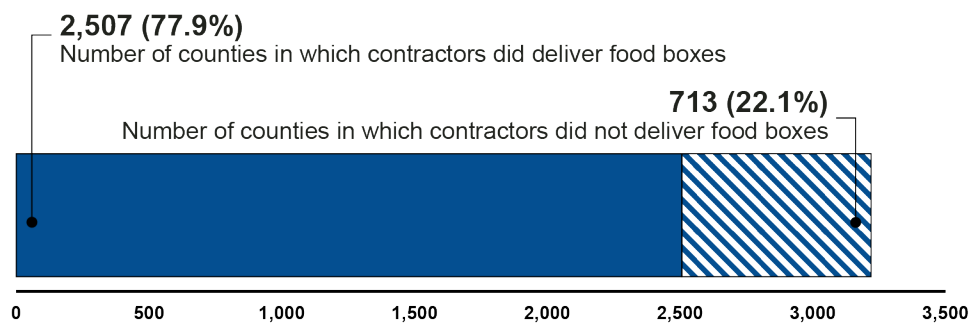
²⁷As described above, as part of a programmatic change made between the second and third rounds, USDA based the amount of food each state received on the total number of unemployed persons and the number of people with incomes below the poverty level in the state. Additionally, the communities that USDA targeted are Opportunity Zones, which are economically distressed communities that may be eligible for certain tax incentives. For more information about these Opportunity Zones, see www.irs.gov/credits-deductions/businesses/opportunity-zones.

²⁸For the purpose of characterizing the extent of distribution of food boxes across counties in this report, “most” represents at least 75 percent, and “nearly all” represents at least 85 percent. For the purpose of our analysis, we considered food box deliveries to recipient organizations in at least 75 percent of counties and at least 85 percent of high-poverty counties as the threshold for determining whether USDA largely met its goal of providing food to those in need. For information on how we analyzed USDA’s performance in meeting its secondary goal of targeting economically distressed communities, see our methodology section.

delivering food boxes to recipient organizations in most U.S. counties, including nearly all high-poverty counties.²⁹

More specifically, we found that across the five rounds, contractors delivered more than 176 million food boxes to primary recipient organizations in 2,507 out of the 3,220 counties (77.9 percent) in the U.S. (see fig. 3).³⁰ However, as described above, these primary recipient organizations could distribute food boxes to individuals or other organizations in different locations, including different counties. As a result, the number of counties in which food boxes were distributed to individuals may be higher. (For more information about deliveries per county, see apps. I and II.) In a written response to our questions about why contractors may not have delivered food boxes to every county, USDA officials cited challenges including resource constraints that contractors experienced, such as a lack of trucks and personnel to deliver the boxes.

Figure 3: Number of Counties in Which Contractors Delivered Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations for USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program, Rounds 1–5



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. | GAO-21-353

Notes: This figure presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

²⁹Because USDA did not track food box deliveries to secondary recipient organizations or final recipients (e.g., individual families), we chose to use data on deliveries to primary recipient organizations and high-poverty counties to assess delivery performance.

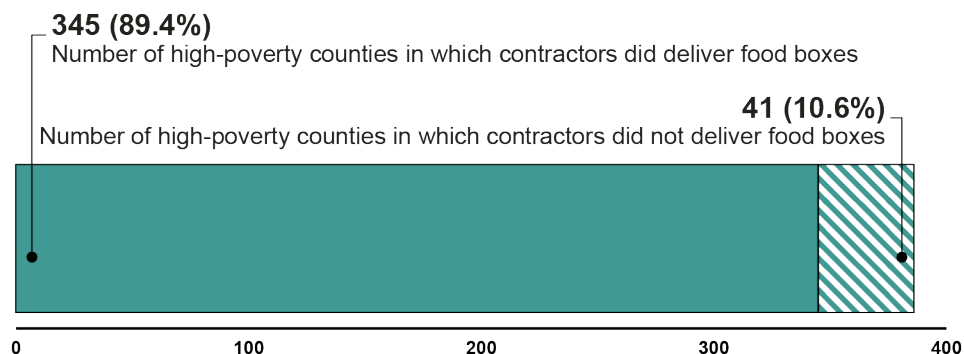
³⁰Our analysis included counties and entities that the U.S. Census Bureau considered equivalent to counties, such as parishes in Louisiana; boroughs, municipalities, and others in Alaska; and incorporated places in Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, and Virginia that are independent of any county, which are known as independent cities. Of the 713 counties in the U.S. in which contractors did not deliver food boxes, 114 are in Texas and 82 are in Virginia; the remaining counties are distributed across the states.

Our analysis included counties and entities that the U.S. Census Bureau considered equivalent to counties, such as parishes in Louisiana; boroughs, municipalities, and others in Alaska; and incorporated places in Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, and Virginia that are independent of any county, which are known as independent cities.

Recipient organizations could provide the food boxes to individuals directly or could distribute food boxes to other organizations for them to provide to individuals. In addition, recipient organizations could be located in different locations than where the food boxes were delivered. As a result, the number of counties in which food boxes were delivered may be higher.

In addition, contractors delivered food boxes to recipient organizations in 345 of the 386 high-poverty counties (89.4 percent) (see fig. 4). For more information about food deliveries in high-poverty counties, see appendix II. For summary information about food box deliveries at the state and county levels, see appendix III.

Figure 4: Number of High-Poverty Counties in Which Contractors Delivered Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations for USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program, Rounds 1–5



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. | GAO-21-353

Notes: This figure presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

Our analysis included counties and entities that the U.S. Census Bureau considered equivalent to counties, such as parishes in Louisiana; boroughs, municipalities, and others in Alaska; and incorporated places in Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, and Virginia that are independent of any county, which are known as independent cities.

The Census Bureau uses the 20 percent threshold to define Census tracts as “poverty areas.” We applied this threshold to USDA data by county. We refer to these counties as high-poverty counties.

Recipient organizations may distribute food boxes to other organizations that then provide the food to individuals. Those organizations could be in different locations, including different counties. Therefore, the number of counties in which food boxes were delivered may be higher.

However, because of the way the available data were stored in USDA’s database, we were not able to reliably identify the type of recipient organizations (e.g., food banks, faith-based organizations, or schools) to which individual contractors delivered food boxes or how many food

boxes each recipient organization received. We discussed our findings with USDA officials, who said that USDA relied on contractors, many of which were unfamiliar with the department's database, to collect recipient organization data and input these data. According to the officials, this reliance resulted in a lack of consistency across some of the entries. The officials agreed that having data about the type of recipient organizations may have been helpful to better understand the program's progress toward its goal of providing for persons in need.

USDA Collected Large Amounts of Data on Contractors but Not on Job Retention

USDA Data on Contractors Allowed GAO to Analyze Aspects of the Program

USDA collected a large amount of data related to contractors that enabled us to analyze and describe contractor participation, contract obligations, prices of individual food boxes from different contractors, and food box delivery rates.³¹

Contractor participation. In total, 243 contractors participated in at least one of the five rounds of the Food Box Program.³² The majority of contractors (160) participated in two rounds of the program (see table 1).³³

³¹We analyzed these and other data for deliveries made from May 15, 2020, through May 31, 2021. The data we received from USDA are as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors could still input data into USDA's database past that date.

³²Throughout this report, a contractor is considered participating in the program if AMS awarded the contractor a contract in round 1 or 2, or if AMS established a basic ordering agreement with the contractor and subsequently awarded the contractor at least one contract in rounds 3, 4, or 5 of the program.

³³The data we received from USDA and analyzed include one contractor to which USDA did not intend to provide a contract to deliver food boxes, but mistakenly did so because the contractor was miscoded in USDA's internal tracking mechanism for the program. According to USDA officials, the contractor delivered some food boxes before USDA recognized the mistake and terminated the contract for convenience of the government. The number of food boxes this vendor delivered does not appear in the data we include in this report.

Table 1: Number of Contractors that Participated in One or Multiple Rounds of USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program

Number of contractors that participated in one round of the program	32
Number of contractors that participated in two rounds of the program	160
Number of contractors that participated in three rounds of the program	32
Number of contractors that participated in four rounds of the program	16
Number of contractors that participated in all five rounds of the program	3
Total number of contractors that participated in the program	243

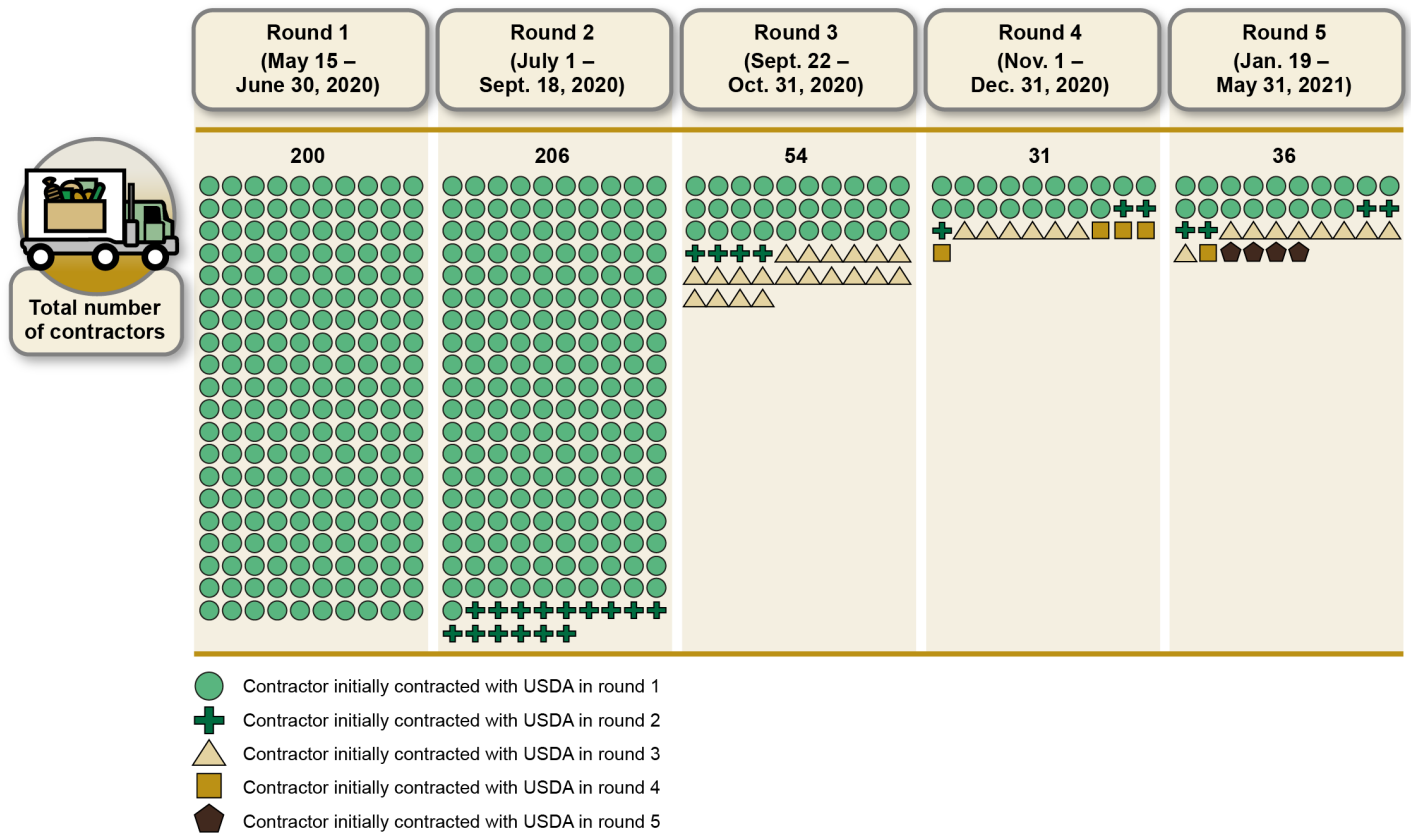
Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information. | GAO-21-353

Notes: In this table, a contractor is considered participating in the program if AMS awarded the contractor a contract in round 1 or 2, or if AMS established a basic ordering agreement with the contractor and subsequently awarded the contractor at least one contract in rounds 3, 4, or 5 of the program.

This table presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

Figure 5 shows the number of contractors that participated in each of the five rounds and contractor participation across the rounds. As the figure shows, most of the contractors that participated in round 1 also participated in round 2, but many of these contractors did not participate in subsequent rounds. The total number of contractors decreased after round 2. According to USDA’s preliminary review from January 2021, after round 2 of the program USDA required contractors that could deliver food boxes to larger geographic areas and prioritized proposals that also offered the lowest prices. As a result, the total number of contractors decreased because fewer contractors were able to meet those requirements. For more information on contractors, see appendix IV.

Figure 5: Number of Contractors That Participated in USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program, by Round



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information. | GAO-21-353

Note: A total of 243 contractors participated in at least one of the five rounds of the Farmers to Families Food Box Program. In total, 32 contractors participated in only one round of the program, and 211 contractors participated in multiple rounds of the program. In this table, a contractor is considered participating in the program if USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) awarded the contractor a contract in round 1 or 2, or if AMS established a basic ordering agreement with the contractor and subsequently awarded the contractor at least one contract in rounds 3, 4, or 5 of the program.

Contract obligations. According to our analysis, across the five rounds, the largest contract obligation to a contractor was \$310 million and the smallest was \$7,700.³⁴ The mean contract obligation across all five

³⁴Contract obligation refers to a definite commitment under a contract that creates a legal liability of the government for the payment of goods and services ordered or received. To calculate the total amount to a contractor, we summed the contract obligations within and across the rounds in which that contractor participated. For example, the largest contract obligation was the total amount obligated to the contractor in round 3 and round 5 of the program because the contractor only participated in those rounds.

rounds was \$24.2 million per contractor, and the round with the largest mean amount was round 5 with a mean contract obligation of \$39.4 million. Table 2 shows the maximum, minimum, mean, and total contract obligations for each round of the program.

Table 2: Maximum, Minimum, and Mean Contract Obligations for USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program, by Round

	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5	Rounds 1–5
Maximum obligated amount	\$107.0 m	\$135.8 m	\$86.0 m	\$68.6 m	\$224.2 m	\$310.2 m
Minimum obligated amount	\$1,400	\$6,300	\$47,481	\$206,164	\$1.7 m	\$7,700
Mean obligated amount	\$5.6 m	\$9.5 m	\$17.0 m	\$15.7 m	\$39.4 m	\$24.2 m
Total contract obligations	\$1.11 billion	\$1.95 billion	\$0.92 billion	\$0.49 billion	\$1.42 billion	\$5.88 billion
Number of contractors	200	206	54	31	36	243

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information. | GAO-21-353

Notes: This table presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

Round 1 of the program ran from May 15 through June 30, 2020; Round 2, July 1 through September 18, 2020; Round 3, September 22 through October 31, 2020; Round 4, November 1 through December 31, 2020; and Round 5, January 1 through May 31, 2021.

To calculate the total amount obligated to a contractor, we summed the contract obligations within and across the rounds in which that contractor participated. For example, the largest contract obligation was the total amount obligated to the contractor in rounds 3 and 5 of the program because the contractor only participated in those rounds. Across the five rounds, the largest amount obligated to a contractor was \$310 million and the smallest was \$7,700.

Of the 243 contractors who participated in the program, 21 contractors, or less than 10 percent, received more than 50 percent of the program’s total obligations. Specifically, across all five rounds of the program, USDA obligated a total of about \$3 billion to these 21 contractors, with a mean obligated amount of about \$142 million. These 21 contractors collectively delivered boxes in all 50 states; Washington, D.C.; Puerto Rico; and the U.S. Virgin Islands. USDA provided a written response about the concentration of contract obligations provided to these contractors. In this response, USDA officials stated that price was one of the criteria in the department’s competitive bidding process in rounds 3 through 5. As a result, USDA awarded contracts to the lowest bidders, which meant that the contractors in these rounds were those that were able to outbid other contractors.

Price of individual food boxes. The price for individual food boxes varied widely among contractors.³⁵ For example, precooked meat boxes ranged from \$17.65 to \$180 each. According to USDA officials, the differences in the prices contractors offered in their proposals were based on box content and size (weight),³⁶ delivery locations, and other factors. For example, USDA officials said that some states, such as Alaska, required higher transportation costs, which were included in the price per food box. Table 3 shows the range in prices for combination food boxes. For more information about the price ranges for the various types of individual food boxes, see appendix V.

Table 3: Price for Combination Food Boxes in USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program, by Round

Price	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5
Maximum	\$150.00	\$150.00	\$99.00	\$64.95	\$105.00
Minimum	\$10.30	\$10.30	\$34.95	\$32.61	\$27.79
Mean	\$63.09	\$63.25	\$45.23	\$38.89	\$31.90
Median	\$76.05	\$67.18	\$44.39	\$38.90	\$31.25
Contract obligations	\$258,797,740	\$476,266,382	\$916,478,455	\$485,648,656	\$1,416,651,915
Number of food boxes specified in contracts	4,102,321	7,529,684	20,260,689	12,488,297	44,402,739

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. | GAO-21-353

Notes: This table presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

Round 1 of the program ran from May 15 through June 30, 2020; Round 2, July 1 through September 18, 2020; Round 3, September 22 through October 31, 2020; Round 4, November 1 through December 31, 2020; and Round 5, January 1 through May 31, 2021.

Maximum and minimum prices per food box described in this table reflect the highest and lowest prices, respectively, offered by contractors in their proposals, not established maximum or minimum allowable prices.

The mean and median prices in this table refer to the mean and median prices of the food boxes when weighted by the number of food boxes in each contract. The mean and median price of the food boxes we reported in March 2021 (GAO-21-387) refer to those prices per contract. In that report, we used “cost” rather than “price” as we do here.

³⁵Prices per individual food boxes, the maximum number of food boxes as identified in the contract at that price, and the number of food boxes delivered were included in the data set that USDA provided to GAO.

³⁶As noted earlier, the first two rounds of the Food Box Program included five types of food boxes—fresh fruit and vegetables; milk; dairy; precooked meat; and combination boxes, which had a mix of fruit and vegetables, milk, dairy, and precooked meat, eggs, or egg products. After round two, USDA provided contracts only for combination boxes.

Food box delivery rates. USDA provided contracts based on the maximum number of boxes that contractors indicated they could deliver to recipient organizations during the contract’s performance period. The data that USDA collected provide information on the delivery rate—that is, the percentage of boxes contractors delivered out of the maximum number of boxes specified in the contracts. According to USDA, the contract value is the maximum amount USDA will pay the contractor for delivering the maximum number of food boxes specified in the contract. USDA only made payments to contractors based on invoices the contractors submitted to the department for delivered food boxes. As such, contractors were not paid for food boxes they did not deliver.

Contractors had delivered more than 176 million food boxes to recipient organizations by the time the program ended, on May 31, 2021, according to our analysis of USDA data as of June 4, 2021. The highest number of deliveries occurred in round 2 (66 million boxes), between July 1 and September 18, 2020, according to our analysis of USDA data. Overall, across the five rounds, participating contractors delivered nearly 83 percent of the maximum amount of food boxes specified in their contracts with USDA, through May 31, 2021. Delivery rates generally increased over time. For example, the contractors participating in round 1 delivered about 69 percent of boxes specified in their contracts. In comparison, the contractors participating in round 5 delivered 97 percent of the boxes specified in their contracts. Table 4 shows the delivery rates for each round.

Table 4: Number of Food Boxes Specified in USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program Contracts and Delivered by Contractors to Recipient Organizations, by Round

Round	Number of food boxes specified in the contracts	Number of food boxes delivered	Delivery rate (percent)
Round 1	52,214,517	35,756,182	68.5
Round 2	83,446,850	66,075,880	79.2
Round 3	20,260,689	18,929,999	93.4
Round 4	12,488,297	12,465,712	99.8
Round 5	44,402,739	43,176,144	97.2
Total	212,813,092	176,403,917	82.9

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information. | GAO-21-353

Notes: This table presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

Round 1 of the program ran from May 15 through June 30, 2020; Round 2, July 1 through September 18, 2020; Round 3, September 22 through October 31, 2020; Round 4, November 1 through December 31, 2020; and Round 5, January 1 through May 31, 2021.

The delivery rate is the percentage of boxes contractors delivered of the maximum number of food boxes specified by their contracts.

Through our analysis of the data, we were able to identify additional characteristics of delivery, including the total number of food boxes delivered to recipient organizations by state and territory, and by type (produce, dairy, or meat, for example), and food boxes delivered per 1,000 estimated persons in each state. Appendixes VI and VII present our analysis and description of these characteristics.

USDA Did Not Systematically Collect Data to Assess Job Retention

USDA did not systematically collect and analyze data from contractors that would allow it to quantitatively assess the program's performance related to its key program goal of helping contractors with job retention. For example, USDA did not collect and analyze data before and after program implementation that would allow it to assess the number of jobs contractors expected to lose but were able to retain because of their participation in the program. USDA officials said that they did not collect data on job retention because they were not required to do so and they did not have time to build new data fields into the existing database to collect such information.

However, USDA stated that, according to anecdotal information department staff collected, contractors that participated in rounds 1 and 2 of the Food Box Program experienced fewer job losses than they otherwise would have without the program.³⁷ The review also stated that, according to this same anecdotal information, in some cases contractors hired additional staff to meet the demands of the program, and that some smaller contractors who did not participate in the third or subsequent rounds struggled to maintain some of the jobs they were able to retain by participating in rounds 1 and 2.

USDA Did Not Systematically Collect and Analyze Data on the Goal of Supporting Producers

USDA did not systematically collect and analyze data about producers necessary to assess the extent to which the Food Box Program achieved

³⁷U.S. Department of Agriculture, *USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Preliminary Review* (Washington, D.C.: January 2021).

its goal of supporting producers.³⁸ We reviewed data from USDA's supply chain management database and did not identify any data about producers that supplied food for the program. USDA officials could not quantify for us the extent to which the program supported producers. For example, they could not provide data such as the number or category of producers, producer demographics (e.g., locally or minority-owned) or the size of the farming operation (e.g., small, medium, or large), to allow for analysis related to the program's key or secondary goals in this area.

USDA directed contractors to capture and document certain information about producers; however, it did not compile or analyze this information for program oversight purposes. For example:

- Starting in round 3, USDA required potential contractors to submit certain information about subcontractors, which could include producers, as part of their proposals. This information included the business name, whether the business was a producer or other type of subcontractor (e.g., wholesaler), the product or service to be provided, and address.
- USDA required contractors to maintain, and provide upon USDA's request, documentation that could help it ensure that the food sourced for the program originated from domestic producers.³⁹

According to department officials, USDA used this information solely to help the department evaluate each contractor's ability to deliver the food boxes and support domestic producers. The department did not store this information in a manner that would allow for analysis related to producers.

Systematically collecting and analyzing data about producers could have enabled USDA to assess the extent to which the Food Box Program supported various types of producers. Examples of such data may include (1) category of producer (e.g., farmer, rancher, or specialty crop producer); (2) size of operation; (3) type and quantity of product each

³⁸USDA internal presentations and documents reflected the department's goal to assist producers who faced declining demand that, in some cases, led to food rotting in fields and animals being euthanized. In addition, USDA officials told us that a main impetus of the program was to support producers that faced declining demand because of institutional closures and to help relieve economic harm to these producers.

³⁹USDA also requires that contractors maintain this same information for its TEFAP Fresh Produce program. In addition, the Dairy Donation Program requires donating cooperatives and processors to maintain documents that demonstrate their eligibility, such as documentation of the date of production and the amount paid for the raw milk, and states that participants are subject to reviews or audits of the documents.

producer provided; (4) the price the producer was paid; and (5) whether the pandemic reduced demand and sales for the type and quantity of products the producers provided for the program. Collecting data about the category of the producer and size of the operation could have allowed USDA to ensure that the program targeted and helped support small farming operations, particularly since the department included this characteristic in its criteria for evaluating contractors' proposals to participate in the program.

USDA officials provided multiple reasons for not systematically collecting and analyzing data on producers that would have allowed the department to assess performance in achieving its program goal. For example, according to department officials, AMS typically does not require detailed reporting about entities such as producers that source food into other commodity purchase programs (e.g., TEFAP), and it did not build such reporting requirements into the Food Box Program. The officials also told us that USDA did not collect and analyze data for producers because of the limited time the department had to implement the program.

Collecting and Analyzing Data Is a Key Lesson Learned

USDA did not collect and analyze data necessary to assess the Food Box Program's performance in achieving two of its three key goals. USDA officials acknowledged prior to the program's end that a key lesson learned was the need to collect and analyze such data.

USDA collected and documented lessons learned during the implementation of the Food Box Program through the following:

- A preliminary review of the program in January 2021.⁴⁰
- A briefing document in January 2021 for the incoming administration that included potential improvements for any future rounds or similar programs.
- A series of listening sessions in March 2021 with recipient organizations, contractors, and producers and other stakeholders,

⁴⁰U.S. Department of Agriculture, *USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Preliminary Review*.

such as food and agriculture industry organizations, to gather feedback and to inform its decision about the future of the program.⁴¹

In these documents and listening sessions, USDA identified a range of lessons learned on various topics, including the need to collect and analyze program data. Appendix VIII provides examples of key lessons learned that USDA collected through these various sources.

As we previously discussed, USDA did not collect data on two of the three key goals of the program, specifically, on supporting producers and job retention, which limited the department's ability to assess the achievement of these goals. USDA officials acknowledged in the January 2021 preliminary review that not having these data was a key lesson learned.⁴² For example, not having data on producers, such as data on the volume and prices of individual products sold to contractors, as well as lack of data on job retention limited the department's ability to address congressional interest in this area of the program. USDA documented,

⁴¹Specifically, during the first two rounds of the program (May 15, 2020, through September 18, 2020), industry organizations, recipient organizations, contractors, and producers, raised concerns about various aspects of the program. These concerns included AMS's delays in reporting the awarding of certain large contracts, some contractors' inability to deliver at least 90 percent of their contracted food boxes, and certain areas (e.g., rural) of the U.S. being underserved. In response to these concerns, in August 2020, the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis launched an investigation into alleged mismanagement in the program.

⁴²USDA made some programmatic changes based on feedback it obtained in March 2021. For example, after receiving feedback from stakeholders that the Food Box Program could have done more to facilitate participation by local and regional producers and socially disadvantaged producers, USDA announced plans to spend up to \$400 million to establish cooperative agreements with state and tribal governments or other local entities to purchase food from local and regional producers and socially disadvantaged producers. Also, Section 2501 of the Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade Act of 1990, as amended, defines a socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher as a farmer or rancher who is a member of a socially disadvantaged group. Pub. L. No. 101-624, § 2501, 104 Stat. 3359, 4062 (codified as amended at 7 U.S.C. § 2279(a)). The section goes on to define a socially disadvantaged group as a group whose members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities. For a number of programs, USDA provides program-specific definitions in regulation of whom these groups include. These groups include American Indians or Alaskan Natives, Asians, Blacks or African Americans, Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, and for some programs, women.

but did not implement, this key lesson learned related to data collection and analysis prior to the program's end.⁴³

April 2020 OMB guidance on supplemental funding provided in response to COVID-19 (M-20-21) expresses the importance of balancing speed with transparency, and states that federal managers should use data and evidence to achieve program goals.⁴⁴ Furthermore, USDA's 2018–2022 Strategic Plan cites collection and analysis of accurate and reliable data to make decisions, evaluate outcomes, and improve the effectiveness of its programs. This plan also refers to accuracy and completeness as being important aspects of data.

As described above, although the Food Box Program has ended, USDA intends to continue to distribute certain types of food boxes and other assistance through its other emergency food assistance programs, such as TEFAP.⁴⁵ For example, USDA plans to, through TEFAP, provide boxes of fresh produce and spend up to \$1 billion to purchase food from producers and assist food banks.

These activities provide USDA an opportunity to apply the key lesson learned from the Food Box Program on collecting and analyzing data into its current and future programs in order to collect necessary data to assess how well its programs are meeting goals and to address congressional interest. By applying this lesson learned to current and future emergency food assistance programs, USDA would have greater assurance that it can assess program effectiveness—and make program changes as warranted—even when it must move quickly in implementing a program.⁴⁶

Conclusions

As part of USDA's response to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the department rapidly set up the Food Box Program

⁴³U.S. Department of Agriculture, *USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Preliminary Review*.

⁴⁴Office of Management and Budget, *Implementation Guidance for Supplemental Funding Provided in Response to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*.

⁴⁵For purposes of this report, emergency food assistance programs are food assistance programs focused on emergencies or disasters, such as the Emergency Food Assistance Program and the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

⁴⁶USDA identified several lessons learned from the Food Box Program but, for this report, we are focused on the lesson learned related to USDA collecting and analyzing data to assess performance against its goals.

to achieve three key goals: provide food to those in need by delivering food boxes to recipient organizations, help contractors that supply and distribute goods to retain jobs that could be lost because of institutional closures, and provide alternative outlets for producers faced with declining demand because of institutional closures. Our analysis of USDA data suggests that USDA broadly met its key goal of providing food to those in need.

However, USDA did not collect data on two of the three key goals of the program, specifically, on supporting producers and job retention, which limited the department's ability to assess the achievement of these goals. USDA officials told us that they did not collect and analyze the data necessary to assess the performance of the Food Box Program because they did not have time to do so. USDA officials acknowledged, however, that collecting and analyzing data was a key lesson learned from the program. By applying the lesson learned about collecting and analyzing necessary data to current and future emergency food assistance programs, USDA would have greater assurance that it can assess program effectiveness even when it must move quickly in implementing a program.

Recommendation for Executive Action

The Secretary of Agriculture should take steps to apply the lesson learned from the Food Box Program regarding collecting and analyzing data to assess program goals to current and future emergency food assistance programs. (Recommendation 1)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to USDA for review and comment. In an email response, USDA agreed with our recommendation and stated that it had no further comments.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Agriculture, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff members have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3841 or morriss@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on

the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IX.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve D. Morris". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Steve D. Morris
Director, Natural Resources and Environment

List of Committees

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Chairman
The Honorable Richard Shelby
Vice Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Ron Wyden
Chairman
The Honorable Mike Crapo
Ranking Member
Committee on Finance
United States Senate

The Honorable Patty Murray
Chair
The Honorable Richard Burr
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United States Senate

The Honorable Gary C. Peters
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The Honorable Rob Portman
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House of Representatives

The Honorable Richard E. Neal
Chairman
The Honorable Kevin Brady
Republican Leader
Committee on Ways and Means
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Delivery of Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations, by County

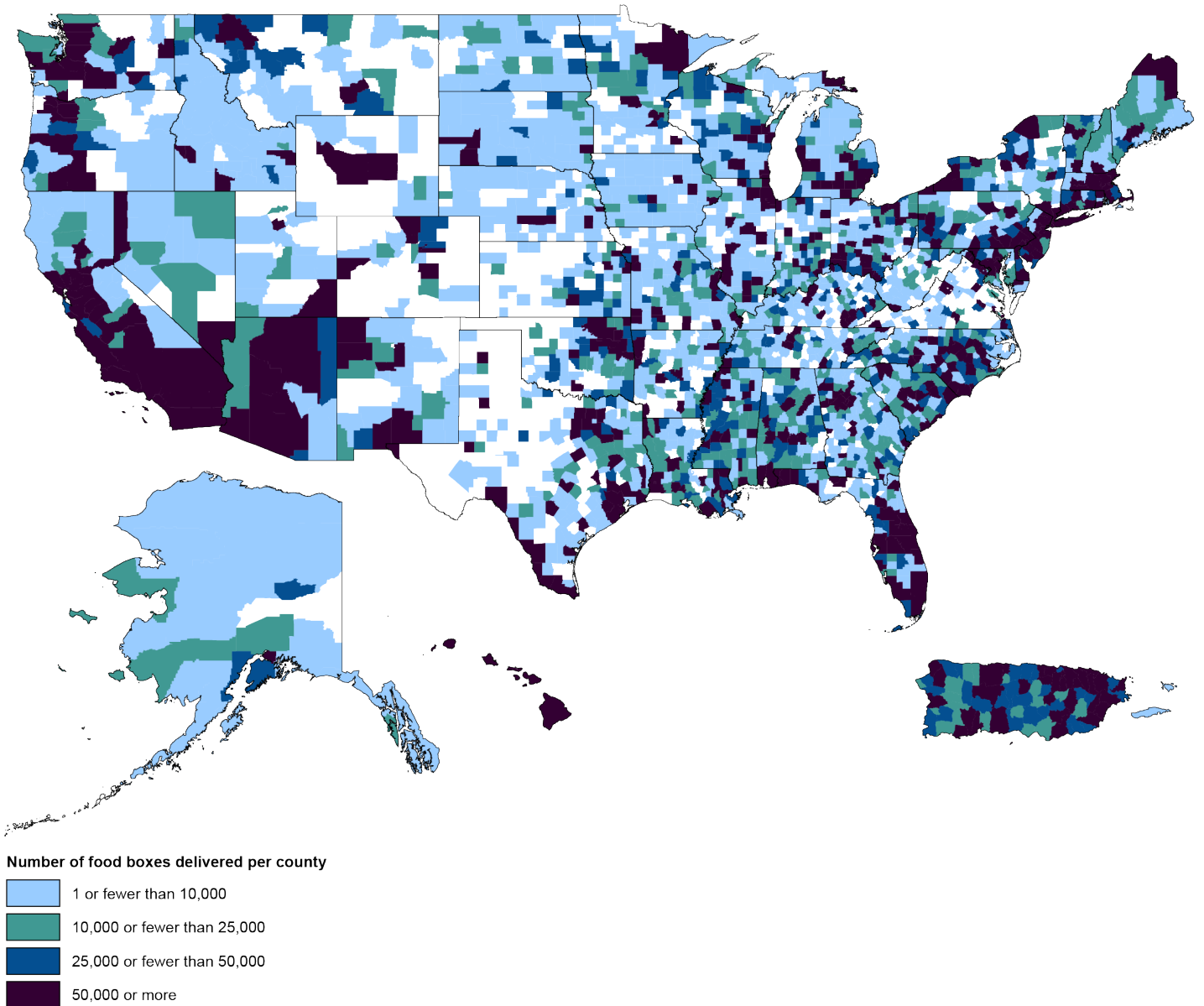
In total, the Farmers to Families Food Box Program (Food Box Program) delivered food boxes to recipient organizations in 77.9 percent of the counties (2,507 of 3,220) in the U.S. by the time the program ended, on May 31, 2021, according to our analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data as of June 4, 2021.¹ During the five rounds of the Food Box Program, contractors that participated in the program delivered food boxes to all of the counties in eight states; Puerto Rico; and Washington, D.C.² This represented a total of 92 counties for these eight states. The eight states were Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Vermont. For the remaining 42 states, contractors delivered boxes to about 77 percent of counties overall (2,336 of 3,049 counties). Figure 6 shows the number of food boxes delivered to recipient organizations per county, and figure 7 shows the number of food boxes delivered per 1,000 persons, per county, across the five rounds of the program.

¹Our analysis included counties and entities that the U.S. Census Bureau considered equivalent to counties, such as parishes in Louisiana; boroughs, municipalities, and others in Alaska; and incorporated places in Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, and Virginia that are independent of any county, which are known as independent cities. Recipient organizations could provide the food boxes to individuals directly or could distribute food boxes to other organizations for them to provide to individuals. In addition, recipient organizations could be located in different locations than where the food boxes were delivered, including different counties. As a result, the number of counties in which food boxes were delivered may be higher.

²A contractor is considered participating in the program if USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) awarded the contractor a contract in round 1 or 2, or if AMS established a basic ordering agreement with the contractor and subsequently awarded the contractor at least one contract in rounds 3, 4, or 5 of the program.

Appendix I: Delivery of Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations, by County

Figure 6: Map Showing Number of Food Boxes Delivered to Recipient Organizations per County for USDA's Farmers to Families Food Box Program, Rounds 1-5

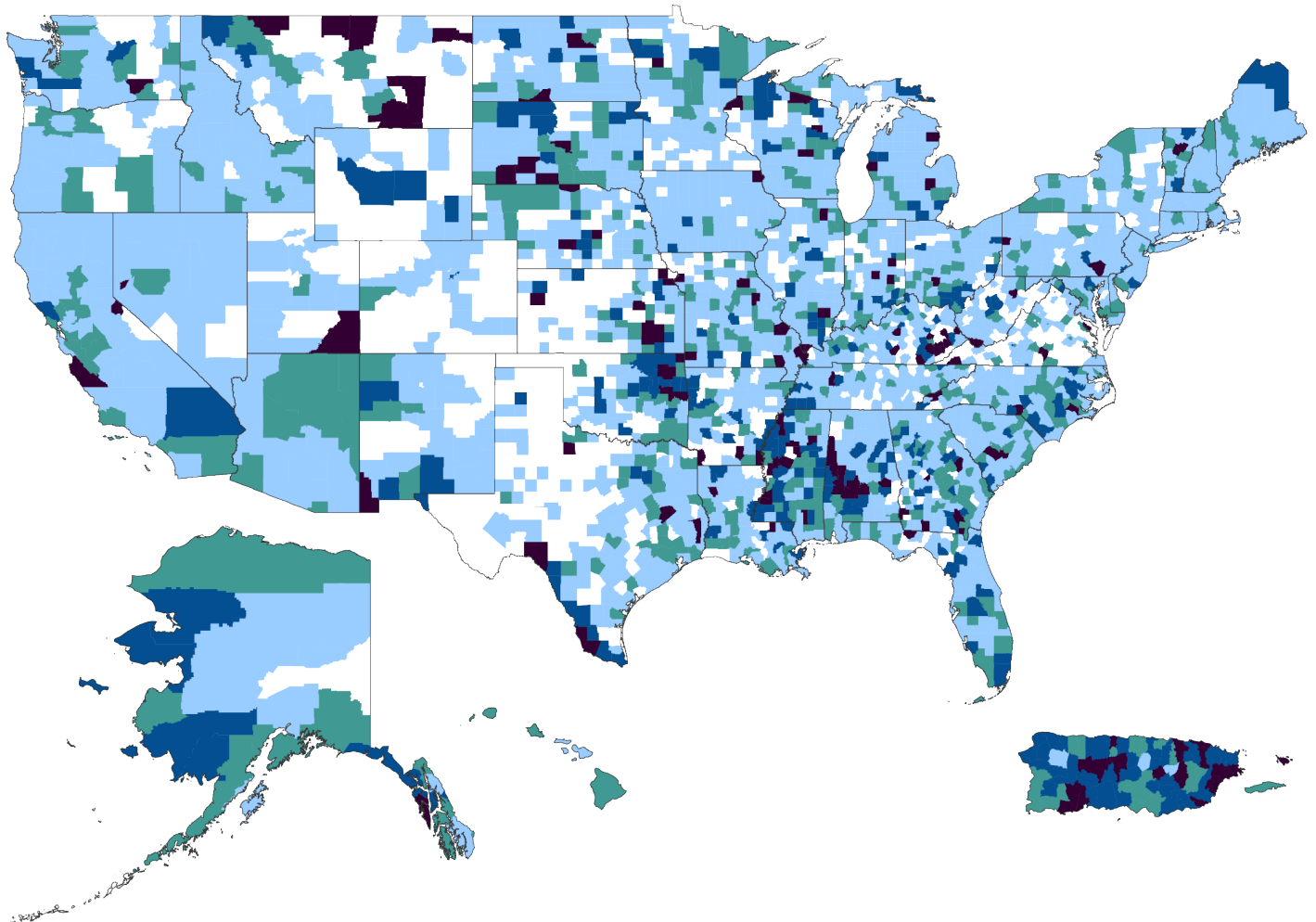


Sources: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information and MapInfo. | GAO-21-353

Note: This figure presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA's supply chain management database.

Appendix I: Delivery of Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations, by County

Figure 7: Map Showing Number of Food Boxes Delivered to Recipient Organizations per 1,000 Estimated Persons, by County, for USDA's Farmers to Families Food Box Program, Rounds 1–5



Number of food boxes delivered per 1,000 estimated persons by county

- 1 or fewer than 500
- 500 or fewer than 1,000
- 1,000 or fewer than 2,000
- 2,000 or more

Sources: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information, Census data and MapInfo. | GAO-21-353

Note: This figure presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA's supply chain management database.

Appendix II: Delivery of Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations in High-Poverty Counties, by State

Contractors that participated in the Farmers to Families Food Box Program delivered over 25 million food boxes to recipient organizations in 89 percent (345 of the 386) of the counties we identified in which 20 percent or more of the population lives in poverty, according to data as of June 4, 2021.¹ We refer to these as high-poverty counties.² For example, in California, contractors delivered food boxes to 57 of 58 counties, including all five high-poverty counties. In Mississippi, contractors delivered food boxes to 80 of 82 counties in the state, including 31 of 32 high-poverty counties.

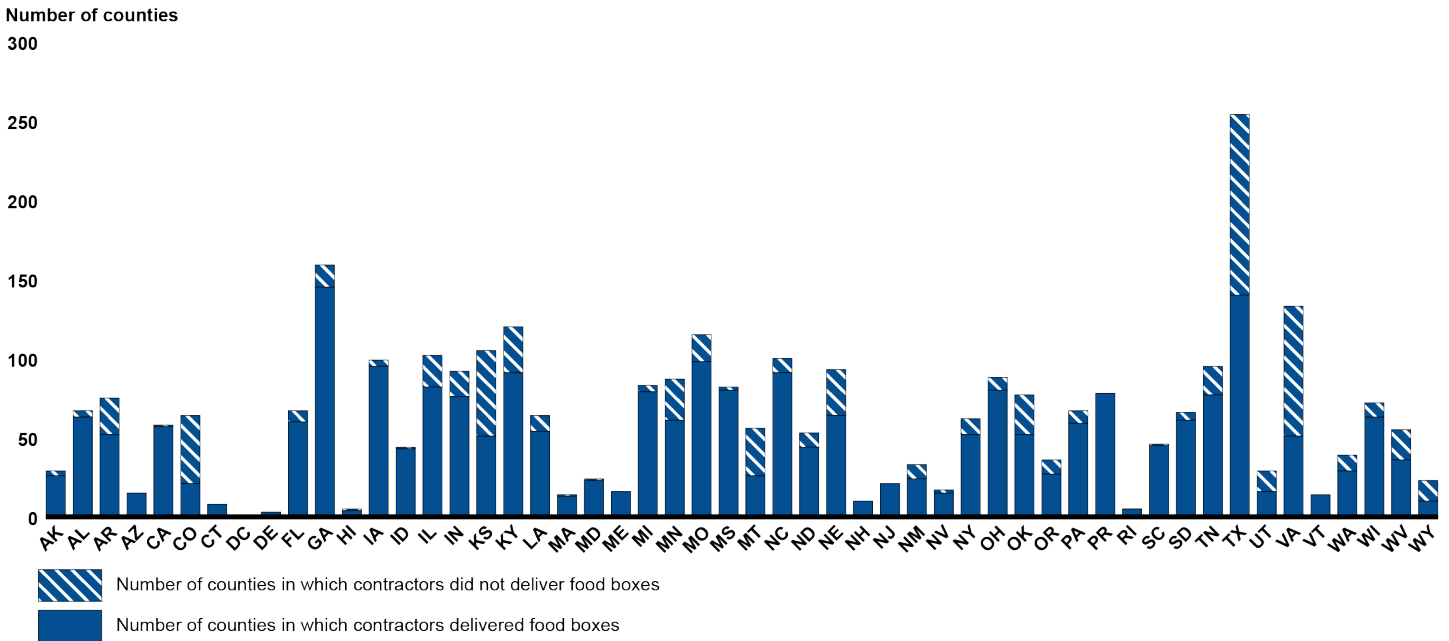
The three states in which contractors delivered food boxes to the lowest percentage of counties were Colorado, Virginia, and Wyoming. In Colorado, contractors delivered food boxes to 21 of 64 counties (33 percent), including two of four counties categorized as high-poverty counties. In Virginia, contractors delivered food boxes to 51 of 133 counties (38 percent), including three of 13 high-poverty counties. In Wyoming, contractors delivered food boxes to 10 of 23 counties (44 percent). Figure 8 shows the number of counties in which contractors delivered and did not deliver food boxes. Figure 9 shows the number of high-poverty counties in which contractors delivered and did not deliver food boxes.

¹These results include data as of June 4, 2021. Although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) supply chain management database. A contractor is considered participating in the program if USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) awarded the contractor a contract in round 1 or 2, or if AMS established a basic ordering agreement with the contractor and subsequently awarded the contractor at least one contract in rounds 3, 4, or 5 of the program. Also, recipient organizations could provide the food boxes to individuals directly or could distribute food boxes to other organizations for them to provide to individuals. In addition, recipient organizations could be located in different locations than where the food boxes were delivered. As a result, the number of counties in which food boxes were delivered may be higher.

²To analyze USDA's performance in meeting its secondary goal of targeting economically distressed communities, we allocated ZIP codes in recipient addresses to counties (see our methodology section for more detail), then we assessed food box deliveries to counties in which an estimated 20 percent or more of the population lives in poverty, according to 2015–2019 5-year estimates from the American Community Survey for those counties. The U.S. Census Bureau uses the 20 percent threshold to define Census tracts as "poverty areas." We applied this threshold to USDA data by county.

Appendix II: Delivery of Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations in High-Poverty Counties, by State

Figure 8: Number of Counties in Which Contractors Delivered and Did Not Deliver Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations for USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program, by State, Rounds 1–5



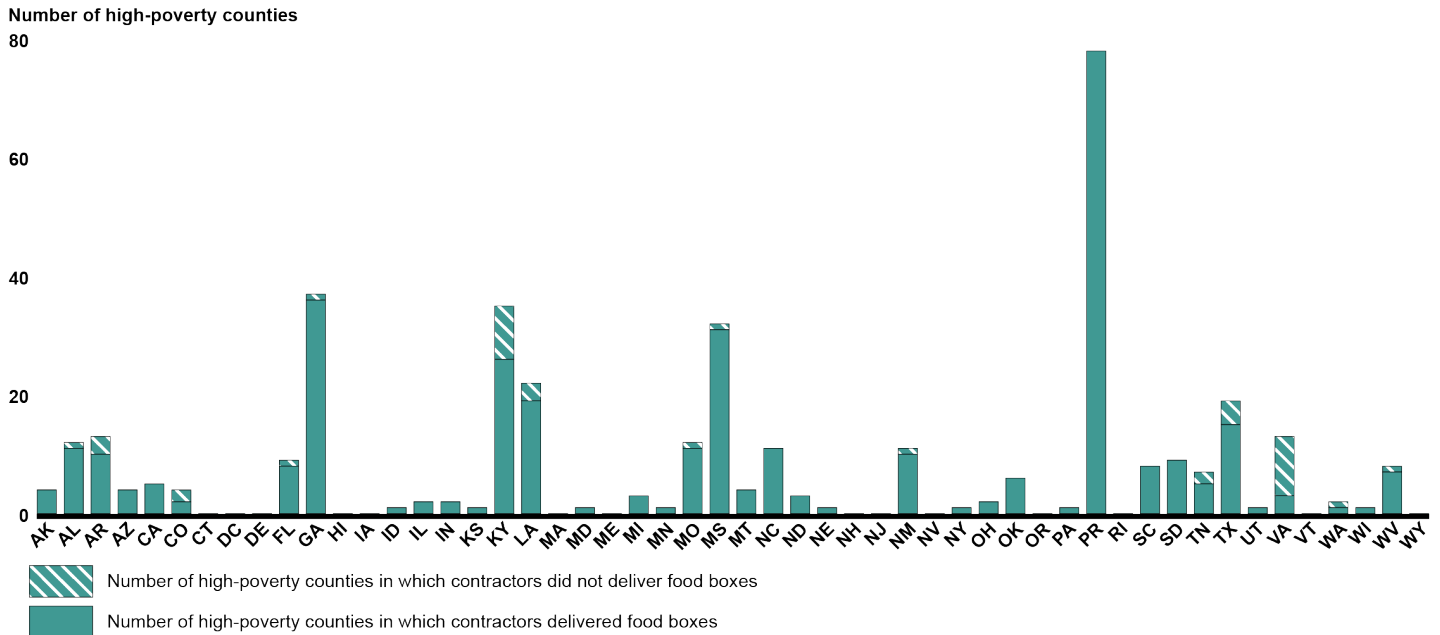
Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. | GAO-21-353

Notes: This figure presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

Recipient organizations could provide the food boxes to individuals directly or could distribute food boxes to other organizations for them to provide to individuals. In addition, recipient organizations could be located in different locations than where the food boxes were delivered. As a result, the number of counties in which food boxes were delivered may be higher.

Appendix II: Delivery of Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations in High-Poverty Counties, by State

Figure 9: Number of High-Poverty Counties in Which Contractors Delivered and Did Not Deliver Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations for USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program, by State, Rounds 1–5



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. | GAO-21-353

Notes: This figure presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

The U.S. Census Bureau uses the 20 percent threshold to define Census tracts as “poverty areas.” We applied this threshold to USDA data by county.

Recipient organizations could provide the food boxes to individuals directly or could distribute food boxes to other organizations for them to provide to individuals. In addition, recipient organizations could be located in different locations than where the food boxes were delivered. As a result, the number of counties in which food boxes were delivered may be higher.

States that appear without a bar indicates that those states do not include any high-poverty counties.

Appendix III: Summary of Food Box Delivery Data, by State

Contractors delivered about 176 million food boxes to recipient organizations by the time the Farmers to Families Food Box Program ended, on May 31, 2021, according to our analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture data as of June 4, 2021. Table 5 provides a snapshot of food box deliveries per state for the program.

Table 5: Food Boxes Delivered to Recipient Organizations per State for USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program, Rounds 1–5

State or territory	Number of food boxes delivered (% of all food boxes delivered in U.S.)	Number of food boxes delivered per 1,000 estimated persons	Number of counties in state	Number of counties in which food boxes were delivered	Number of high-poverty counties ^a	Number of high-poverty counties in which food boxes were delivered	Number of food boxes delivered in high-poverty counties (% delivered in state)
AK	298,515 (0.2)	405	29	26	4	4	41,216 (13.8)
AL	3,124,030 (1.8)	641	67	63	12	11	459,776 (14.7)
AR	1,813,783 (1.0)	605	75	52	13	10	202,099 (11.1)
AZ	2,593,629 (1.5)	368	15	15	4	4	156,350 (6.0)
CA	21,490,015(12.2)	547	58	57	5	5	1,149,974 (5.4)
CO	1,827,155 (1.0)	326	64	21	4	2	1,296 (0.1)
CT	1,361,490 (0.8)	381	8	8	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
DC	425,046 (0.2)	614	1	1	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
DE	323,599 (0.2)	338	3	3	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
FL	16,590,673 (9.4)	794	67	60	9	8	750,444 (4.5)
GA	6,409,738 (3.6)	616	159	145	37	36	915,285 (14.3)
GU	160,287 (0.1)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
HI	755,284 (0.4)	531	5	4	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
ID	772,220 (0.4)	450	44	43	1	1	14,522 (1.9)
IL	7,477,407 (4.2)	586	102	82	2	2	29,721 (0.4)
IN	4,246,714 (2.4)	637	92	76	2	2	342,622 (8.1)
IA	988,720 (0.6)	315	99	95	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
KS	1,290,851 (0.7)	443	105	51	1	1	39,190 (3.0)
KY	1,986,309 (1.1)	446	120	91	35	26	829,089 (41.7)
LA	2,575,933 (1.5)	552	64	54	22	19	748,147 (29.0)
MA	2,076,916 (1.2)	303	14	13	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
MD	3,090,339 (1.8)	513	24	23	1	1	499,210 (16.2)
ME	415,195 (0.2)	311	16	16	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
MI	6,824,377 (3.9)	685	83	79	3	3	2,090,564 (30.6)
MN	1,651,819 (0.9)	297	87	61	1	1	19,168 (1.2)
MO	4,251,159 (2.4)	696	115	98	12	11	363,470 (8.5)

**Appendix III: Summary of Food Box Delivery
Data, by State**

State or territory	Number of food boxes delivered (% of all food boxes delivered in U.S.)	Number of food boxes delivered per 1,000 estimated persons	Number of counties in state	Number of counties in which food boxes were delivered	Number of high-poverty counties ^a	Number of high-poverty counties in which food boxes were delivered	Number of food boxes delivered in high-poverty counties (% delivered in state)
MS	2,800,421 (1.6)	938	82	80	32	31	1,397,689 (49.9)
MT	546,919 (0.3)	521	56	26	4	4	118,782 (21.7)
NC	4,734,042 (2.7)	461	100	91	11	11	846,030 (17.9)
ND	304,628 (0.2)	403	53	44	3	3	93,846 (30.8)
NE	884,252 (0.5)	462	93	64	1	1	12,001 (1.4)
NH	308,411 (0.2)	229	10	10	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
NJ	3,044,757(1.7)	343	21	21	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
NM	1,214,977 (0.7)	581	33	24	11	10	315,454 (26.0)
NV	1,230,965 (0.7)	414	17	15	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
NY	7,807,761 (4.4)	399	62	52	1	1	1,506,539 (19.3)
OH	4,925,546 (2.8)	423	88	80	2	2	193,904 (3.9)
OK	3,561,104 (2.0)	905	77	52	6	6	178,140 (5.0)
OR	1,956,208 (1.1)	474	36	27	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
PA	7,210,858 (4.1)	564	67	59	1	1	2,736,147 (37.9)
PR	4,895,782 (2.8)	1,475	78	78	78	78	4,895,782 (100.0)
RI	269,903 (0.2)	255	5	5	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
SC	1,895,643 (1.1)	378	46	45	8	8	328,048 (17.3)
SD	560,724 (0.3)	644	66	61	9	9	143,481 (25.6)
TN	2,991,569 (1.7)	446	95	77	7	5	39,106 (1.3)
TX	19,880,798 (11.3)	703	254	140	19	15	3,356,048 (16.9)
UT	694,178 (0.4)	224	29	16	1	1	94,295 (13.6)
VA	2,527,885 (1.4)	299	133	51	13	3	306,453 (12.1)
VI	65,813 (0.0)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
VT	484,066 (0.3)	775	14	14	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
WA	3,632,583 (2.1)	491	39	29	2	1	3,586 (0.1)
WV	650,718 (0.4)	358	55	36	8	7	120,735 (18.6)
WI	2,282,697 (1.3)	394	72	63	1	1	9,942 (0.4)
WY	219,226 (0.1)	377	23	10	0	0 ^b	0 ^b
Total	176,403,917 (100)	537^c	3,220	2,507	386	345	25,348,151

Legend:
 % - percentage
 N/A – information not available
 GU – Guam
 PR – Puerto Rico
 VI – U.S. Virgin Islands

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. | GAO-21-353

**Appendix III: Summary of Food Box Delivery
Data, by State**

Notes: This table presents data as of June 4, 2021 because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA's supply chain management database.

Our analysis included counties and entities that the U.S. Census Bureau considered equivalent to counties, such as parishes in Louisiana; boroughs, municipalities, and others in Alaska; and incorporated places in Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, and Virginia that are independent of any county, which are known as independent cities.

Recipient organizations could provide the food boxes to individuals directly or could distribute food boxes to other organizations for them to provide to individuals. In addition, recipient organizations could be located in different locations than where the food boxes were delivered. As a result, the number of counties in which food boxes were delivered may be higher.

^aThe U.S. Census Bureau uses the 20 percent threshold to define Census tracts as "poverty areas." We applied this threshold to USDA data by county.

^bThere were 0 counties in this state that met the U.S. Census Bureau's threshold for poverty counties, so there were no poverty counties in which contractors could deliver food boxes.

^cThis includes the number of food boxes delivered to recipient organizations per 1,000 estimated persons across all states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. The U.S. territories of Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands were not included because the U.S. Census Bureau does not collect data on their populations for the American Community Survey, which we used in our data analysis.

Appendix IV: Number of Contractors That Participated in the Food Box Program

The 243 contractors that participated in the Farmers to Families Food Box Program (Food Box Program) were located in 45 states and Puerto Rico, according to our analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data as of June 4, 2021.¹ The states and territories in which contractors were not located were Washington, D.C.; Guam; New Mexico; North Dakota; South Dakota; West Virginia; Wyoming; and the U.S. Virgin Islands.²

In any given round, contractors located in at least 20 states participated in the program:

- Round 1: 38 states and Puerto Rico
- Round 2: 43 states and Puerto Rico
- Round 3: 26 states and Puerto Rico
- Round 4: 20 states
- Round 5: 24 states

The state or territory in which the most contractors were located varied across the rounds:

- Rounds 1 and 2: California (30, 27)
- Round 3: Florida (six)
- Round 4: California, Florida, Ohio, and Washington (three in each)
- Round 5: California (five)

The contractors delivered food boxes to all 50 states; Washington, D.C.; Guam; Puerto Rico; and the U.S. Virgin Islands by the time the program ended, on May 31, 2021, according to our analysis of USDA data as of June 4, 2021.³ The state or territory in which the most contractors delivered food boxes changed across the rounds:

¹A contractor is considered participating in the program if USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) awarded the contractor a contract in round 1 or 2, or if AMS established a basic ordering agreement with the contractor and subsequently awarded the contractor at least one contract in rounds 3, 4, or 5 of the program.

²To determine the location of contractors participating in the Food Box Program, we used the address included for each contractor in USDA's supply chain management database. The state in which a contractor was located may not be the same as the state(s) in which it delivered food boxes.

³The number of boxes delivered refers to those received by and accepted by recipients and for which contractors will be paid by the government, according to USDA.

Appendix IV: Number of Contractors That Participated in the Food Box Program

- Rounds 1 and 2: California (37, 34)
- Round 3: Florida (11)
- Round 4: Ohio and Texas (three in each)
- Round 5: California, Florida, Maryland, New York, Rhode Island, Washington (two in each)

Table 6 presents information about the number of contractors located in each state, and table 7 presents information about the number of contractors delivering food boxes in each state. The state in which contractors were located is based on the address included for each contractor in USDA's supply chain management database. A contractor's location may not be the same as the state(s) in which the contractor delivered food boxes.

Table 6: Number of Contractors That Participated in USDA's Farmers to Families Food Box Program Located in Each State, Rounds 1–5

State	Number of contractors located in the state					
	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5	Rounds 1–5
AK	0	1	0	0	1	1
AL	3	3	0	0	0	3
AR	1	1	0	0	0	1
AZ	3	4	1	1	1	4
CA	30	27	5	3	5	33
CO	1	1	0	0	0	1
CT	3	3	0	0	0	3
DC	0	0	0	0	0	0
DE	0	1	1	1	0	1
FL	11	11	6	3	3	16
GA	5	6	3	0	0	6
GU	0	0	0	0	0	0
HI	5	5	0	1	1	5
IA	2	2	1	0	1	3
ID	1	1	0	0	0	1
IL	10	10	1	0	1	11
IN	2	2	0	0	0	2
KS	4	3	1	1	1	4
KY	0	0	2	0	1	2
LA	1	1	2	1	1	3

**Appendix IV: Number of Contractors That
Participated in the Food Box Program**

State	Number of contractors located in the state					
	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5	Rounds 1-5
MA	6	6	1	0	1	6
MD	4	4	5	2	4	8
ME	0	2	0	0	1	2
MI	10	10	2	1	2	10
MN	1	1	1	1	0	2
MO	6	6	2	1	0	6
MS	3	3	0	0	0	3
MT	0	1	0	0	0	1
NC	5	5	2	0	0	6
ND	0	0	0	0	0	0
NE	0	2	0	0	0	2
NH	1	1	0	0	0	1
NJ	4	4	2	0	1	7
NM	0	0	0	0	0	0
NV	0	0	0	0	1	1
NY	10	10	1	1	0	11
OH	6	6	2	3	1	6
OK	1	1	1	1	1	1
OR	3	3	0	1	1	3
PA	17	17	2	2	2	17
PR	3	3	2	0	0	3
RI	2	2	0	0	0	2
SC	4	6	0	0	0	6
SD	0	0	0	0	0	0
TN	1	1	1	1	1	1
TX	7	5	3	1	1	9
UT	1	1	0	0	0	1
VA	1	2	2	2	1	3
VI	0	0	0	0	0	0
VT	2	2	0	0	0	2
WA	12	13	1	3	2	15
WI	8	7	1	0	0	8
WV	0	0	0	0	0	0
WY	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	200	206	54	31	36	243

Legend:
GU – Guam

Appendix IV: Number of Contractors That Participated in the Food Box Program

PR – Puerto Rico
 VI – U.S. Virgin Islands

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information. | GAO-21-353

Notes: This table presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

Round 1 of the program ran from May 15 through June 30, 2020; Round 2, July 1 through September 18, 2020; Round 3, September 22 through October 31, 2020; Round 4, November 1 through December 31, 2020; and Round 5, January 1 through May 31, 2021.

To determine the location of contractors participating in the Food Box Program, we used the address included for each contractor in USDA’s supply chain management database. The state in which a contractor was located may not be the same as the state(s) in which it delivered food boxes.

A contractor is considered participating in the program if USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) awarded the contractor a contract in round 1 or 2, or if AMS established a basic ordering agreement with the contractor and subsequently awarded the contractor at least one contract in rounds 3, 4, or 5 of the program. Some contractors participated in multiple rounds of the program. As such, column totals do not provide the total number of unique contractors.

Table 7: Number of Contractors That Participated in USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program That Delivered Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations, by State and Round

State	Number of contractors delivering food boxes to the state				
	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5
AK	1	3	1	1	1
AL	12	17	3	1	1
AR	11	7	4	1	1
AZ	11	9	4	1	1
CA	37	34	5	1	2
CO	9	10	3	1	1
CT	13	13	1	1	1
DC	6	8	2	1	1
DE	8	7	2	1	1
FL	22	22	11	2	2
GA	15	21	5	1	1
GU	2	2	1	0	1
HI	5	5	1	1	1
IA	10	10	3	1	1
ID	4	4	2	1	1
IL	25	25	6	1	1
IN	22	21	5	1	1
KS	7	6	4	1	1
KY	9	13	5	1	1
LA	6	8	3	1	1
MA	15	18	2	1	1

Appendix IV: Number of Contractors That Participated in the Food Box Program

State	Number of contractors delivering food boxes to the state				
	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5
MD	15	16	7	1	2
ME	4	6	1	1	1
MI	19	21	3	1	1
MN	12	13	4	1	1
MO	14	12	7	1	1
MS	10	14	8	1	1
MT	3	6	1	1	1
NC	17	18	7	2	1
ND	3	5	2	1	1
NE	7	7	4	1	1
NH	8	10	1	1	1
NJ	15	15	2	1	1
NM	7	9	4	1	1
NV	7	7	4	1	1
NY	20	24	8	2	2
OH	16	18	5	3	1
OK	9	7	4	1	1
OR	7	6	2	1	1
PA	28	28	6	2	1
PR	3	3	2	1	1
RI	7	9	1	1	2
SC	12	15	4	1	1
SD	4	4	2	1	1
TN	14	17	6	1	1
TX	18	16	5	3	1
UT	4	5	3	1	1
VA	14	18	2	1	1
VI	0	1	1	1	1
VT	3	2	2	1	1
WA	17	16	4	2	2
WI	12	14	5	1	1
WV	6	9	2	1	1
WY	1	2	2	1	1

Legend:
 GU – Guam
 PR – Puerto Rico
 VI – U.S. Virgin Islands

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information. | GAO-21-353

Appendix IV: Number of Contractors That Participated in the Food Box Program

Notes: This table presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA's supply chain management database.

Round 1 of the program ran from May 15 through June 30, 2020; Round 2, July 1 through September 18, 2020; Round 3, September 22 through October 31, 2020; Round 4, November 1 through December 31, 2020; and Round 5, January 1 through May 31, 2021.

A contractor is considered participating in the program if USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) awarded the contractor a contract in round 1 or 2, or if AMS established a basic ordering agreement with the contractor and subsequently awarded the contractor at least one contract in rounds 3, 4, or 5 of the program.

Appendix V: Price and Number of Food Boxes, by Type

The prices for an individual food box for the Farmers to Families Food Box Program (Food Box Program) varied widely among contractors. During the first two rounds, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) permitted distribution of boxes consisting of only fresh fruits, dairy, fruit and vegetables, precooked meat, milk, or a combination. For the third through fifth rounds, however, USDA provided contracts only for combination boxes. Table 8 shows the range in prices for individual food boxes, by type.

Table 8: Price per Food Box, by Type, for USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program, by Round

Food box type		Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5
Combination	Maximum	\$150.00	\$150.00	\$99.00	\$64.95	\$105.00
	Minimum	\$10.30	\$10.30	\$34.95	\$32.61	\$27.79
	Mean	\$63.09	\$63.25	\$45.23	\$38.89	\$31.90
	Median	\$76.05	\$67.18	\$44.39	\$38.90	\$31.25
	Contract obligations	\$258,797,740	\$476,266,382	\$916,478,455	\$485,648,656	\$1,416,651,915
	Number of food boxes specified in contracts	4,102,321	7,529,684	20,260,689	12,488,297	44,402,739
Dairy	Maximum	\$85.20	\$93.60			
	Minimum	\$5.00	\$7.00			
	Mean	\$34.01	\$34.81			
	Median	\$29.22	\$29.00			
	Contract obligations	\$140,163,233	\$231,078,363			
	Number of food boxes specified in contracts	4,121,474	6,637,849			
Fresh fruit and vegetable	Maximum	\$90.00	\$580.00 ^a			
	Minimum	\$9.70	\$9.70			
	Mean	\$23.41	\$22.73			
	Median	\$22.25	\$21.95			
	Contract obligations	\$438,062,085	\$817,116,197			
	Number of food boxes specified in contracts	18,711,212	35,946,172			
Milk	Maximum	\$35.05	\$35.05			
	Minimum	\$1.35	\$1.35			
	Mean	\$4.38	\$4.04			

**Appendix V: Price and Number of Food Boxes,
by Type**

Food box type	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5
Median	\$3.79	\$3.55			
Contract obligations	\$95,610,611	\$111,470,845			
Number of food boxes specified in contracts	21,838,452	27,615,258			
Precooked meat					
Maximum	\$149.01	\$180.00			
Minimum	\$17.65	\$17.65			
Mean	\$52.11	\$54.75			
Median	\$42.55	\$45.66			
Contract obligations	\$179,319,600	\$313,073,866			
Number of food boxes specified in contracts	3,441,058	5,717,887			

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. | GAO-21-353

Notes: This table presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

Round 1 of the program ran from May 15 through June 30, 2020; Round 2, July 1 through September 18, 2020; Round 3, September 22 through October 31, 2020; Round 4, November 1 through December 31, 2020; and Round 5, January 1 through May 31, 2021.

According to USDA, the solicitation for round 3 of the program indicated a preference for combination boxes over individual box types. In rounds 3, 4, and 5, contractors only provided combination boxes.

Maximum and minimum prices per food box described in this table reflect the highest and lowest prices, respectively, offered by contractors in their proposals, not established maximum or minimum allowable prices.

^aThe maximum food box price of \$580.00 applied to 31 of 9,601 food boxes delivered by one contractor across rounds 1 and 2 (for a total of \$17,980), according to our analysis. According to USDA documentation, each of these 31 food boxes weighed 570 pounds. A USDA official clarified that each of these food boxes was a container with 570 pounds of apples.

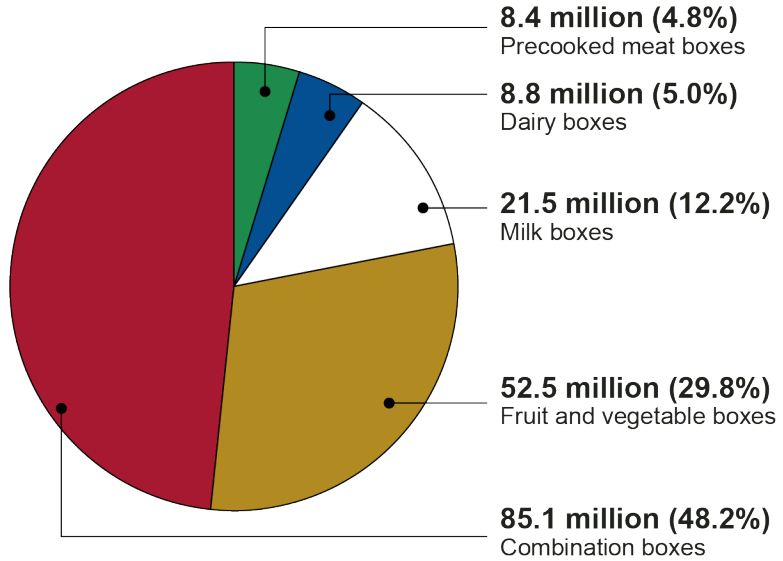
Most of the food boxes that contractors delivered to recipient organizations for the Food Box Program were combination boxes (48.2 percent), followed by fruit and vegetable boxes (29.8 percent), according to data as of June 4, 2021.¹ Figure 10 shows the number and type of food boxes delivered across the five rounds of the program.

¹According to USDA, the solicitation for round 3 of the program indicated a preference for combination boxes over individual box types. In rounds 3, 4, and 5, contractors only provided combination boxes. As a result, milk boxes were only delivered during the first two rounds.

Appendix V: Price and Number of Food Boxes,
by Type

Figure 10: Number and Type of Food Boxes Delivered to Recipient Organizations for USDA's Farmers to Families Food Box Program, Rounds 1–5

Total number of boxes: 176,403,917



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data. | GAO-21-353

Notes: This figure presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA's supply chain management database.

According to USDA, the solicitation for round 3 of the program indicated a preference for combination boxes over individual box types. In rounds 3, 4, and 5, contractors only provided combination boxes.

Appendix VI: Delivery of Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations, by Type and State

Contractors that participated in the Farmers to Families Food Box Program (Food Box Program) delivered the largest numbers of food boxes to recipient organizations in California, Florida, and Texas—the states with the largest populations—(see fig. 11) by the time the program ended, on May 31, 2021, according to our analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data as of June 4, 2021.¹ California and Texas accounted for over 19 million food boxes each. Contractors delivered fewer than 8 million food boxes to recipient organizations in each of the remaining states; Washington D.C.; as well as the U.S. territories of Guam; Puerto Rico; and the U.S. Virgin Islands.² Contractors delivered the fewest numbers of food boxes (less than 300,000 boxes each) to recipient organizations in Alaska, Rhode Island, and Wyoming—which are among the states with the smallest populations—as well as the U.S. territories of Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands.³

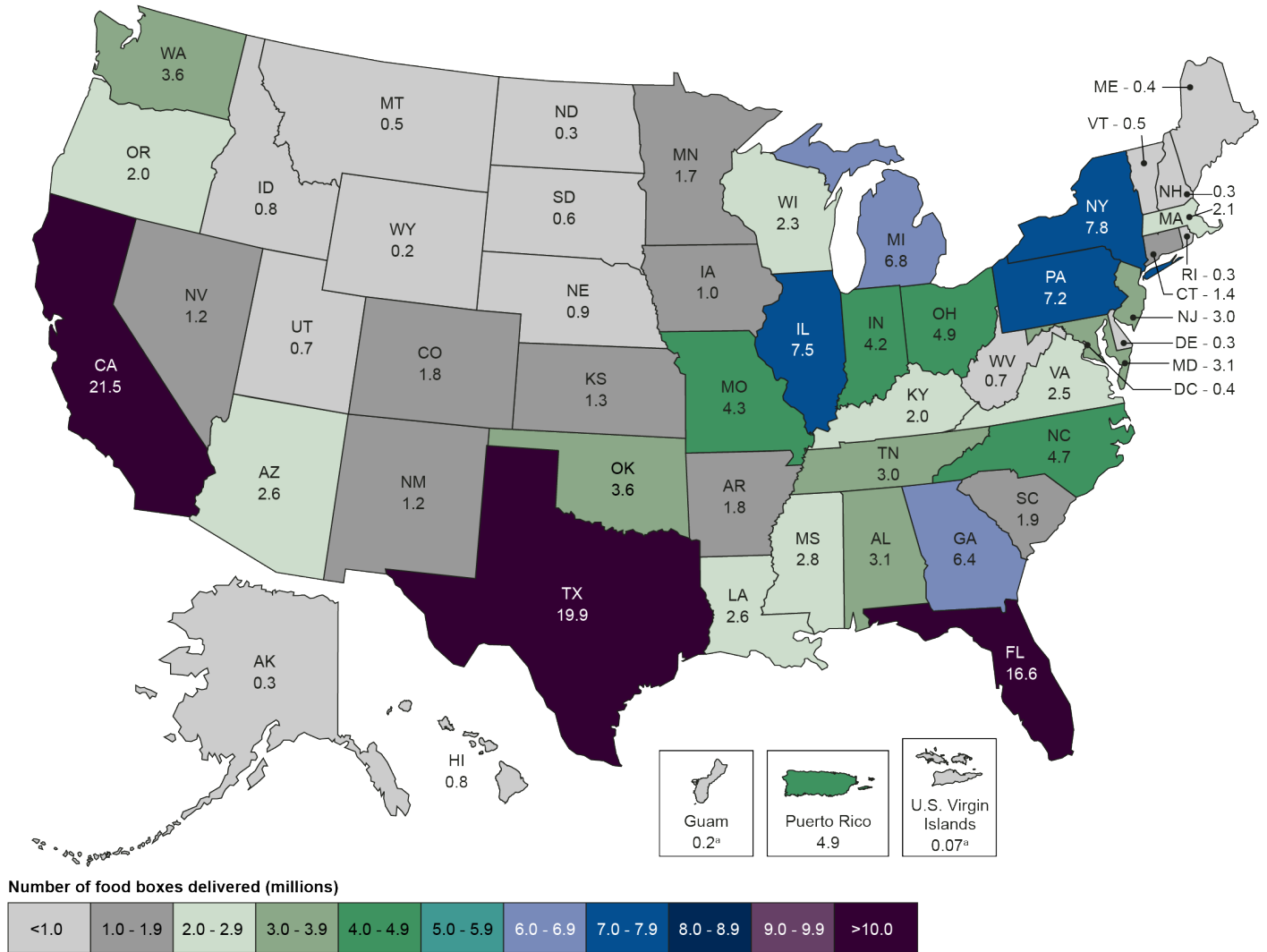
¹A contractor is considered participating in the program if USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) awarded the contractor a contract in round 1 or 2, or if AMS established a basic ordering agreement with the contractor and subsequently awarded the contractor at least one contract in rounds 3, 4, or 5 of the program.

²Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands—territories of the U.S.—participated in the Food Box Program.

³The U.S. Census Bureau does not collect data on populations of Guam or the U.S. Virgin Islands for the American Community Survey, which we used in our data analysis. USDA officials said that, starting in round 3 of the program, the department based the amount of food each state received on the total number of unemployed persons and the total number of people with incomes below the poverty level in the state.

Appendix VI: Delivery of Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations, by Type and State

Figure 11: Number of Food Boxes Delivered to Recipient Organizations for USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program, by State, Rounds 1–5



Sources: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-21-353

Note: This figure presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

Contractors that participated in the Food Box Program delivered food boxes to recipient organizations in all 50 states; Washington, D.C.; and Puerto Rico in each of the five rounds, according to our analysis of USDA

**Appendix VI: Delivery of Food Boxes to
Recipient Organizations, by Type and State**

data as of June 4, 2021.⁴ Across rounds 1 and 2, contractors delivered more fruit and vegetable boxes than the other types of food boxes.⁵ However, as previously mentioned, most of the food boxes that contractors delivered across rounds 1 through 5 were combination boxes (48.2 percent). Figure 12 presents data on the number of food boxes delivered to recipient organizations in each state per type of box.

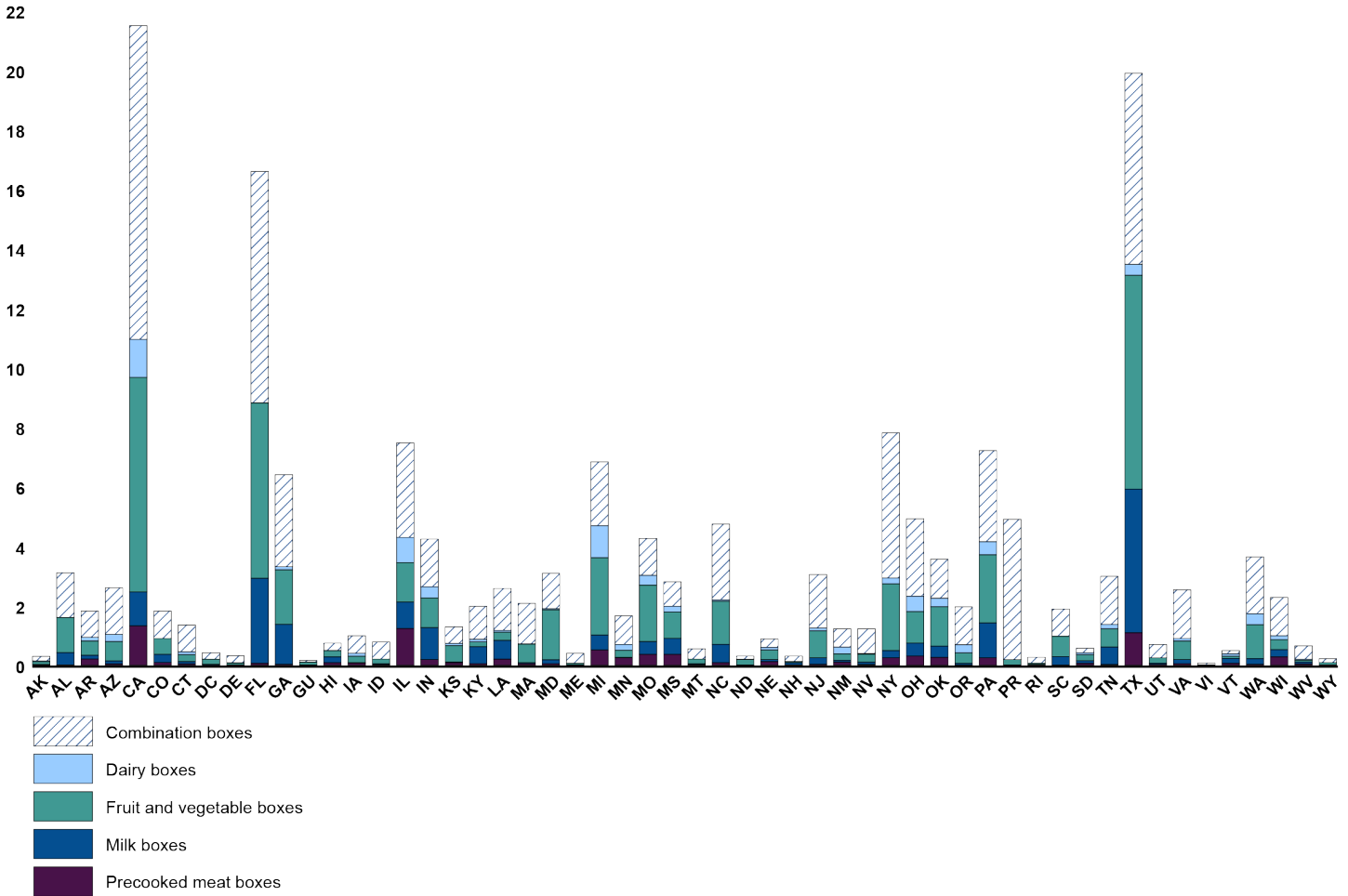
⁴Contractors did not deliver food boxes to Guam in round 4, but did deliver them in rounds 1, 2, 3, and 5. Also, contractors did not deliver food boxes to the U.S. Virgin Islands during round 1, but did deliver them in rounds 2 through 5.

⁵According to USDA, the solicitation for round 3 of the program indicated a preference for combination boxes over individual box types. In rounds 3, 4, and 5, contractors only provided combination boxes.

Appendix VI: Delivery of Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations, by Type and State

Figure 12: Number and Type of Food Boxes Delivered to Recipient Organizations for USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program, by State, Rounds 1–5

Number of food boxes delivered per state (in millions)



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information. | GAO-21-353

Notes: This figure presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

Recipient organizations could provide the food boxes to individuals directly or could distribute food boxes to other organizations for them to provide to individuals. In addition, recipient organizations could be located in different locations than where the food boxes were delivered. As a result, the number of counties in which food boxes were delivered may be higher.

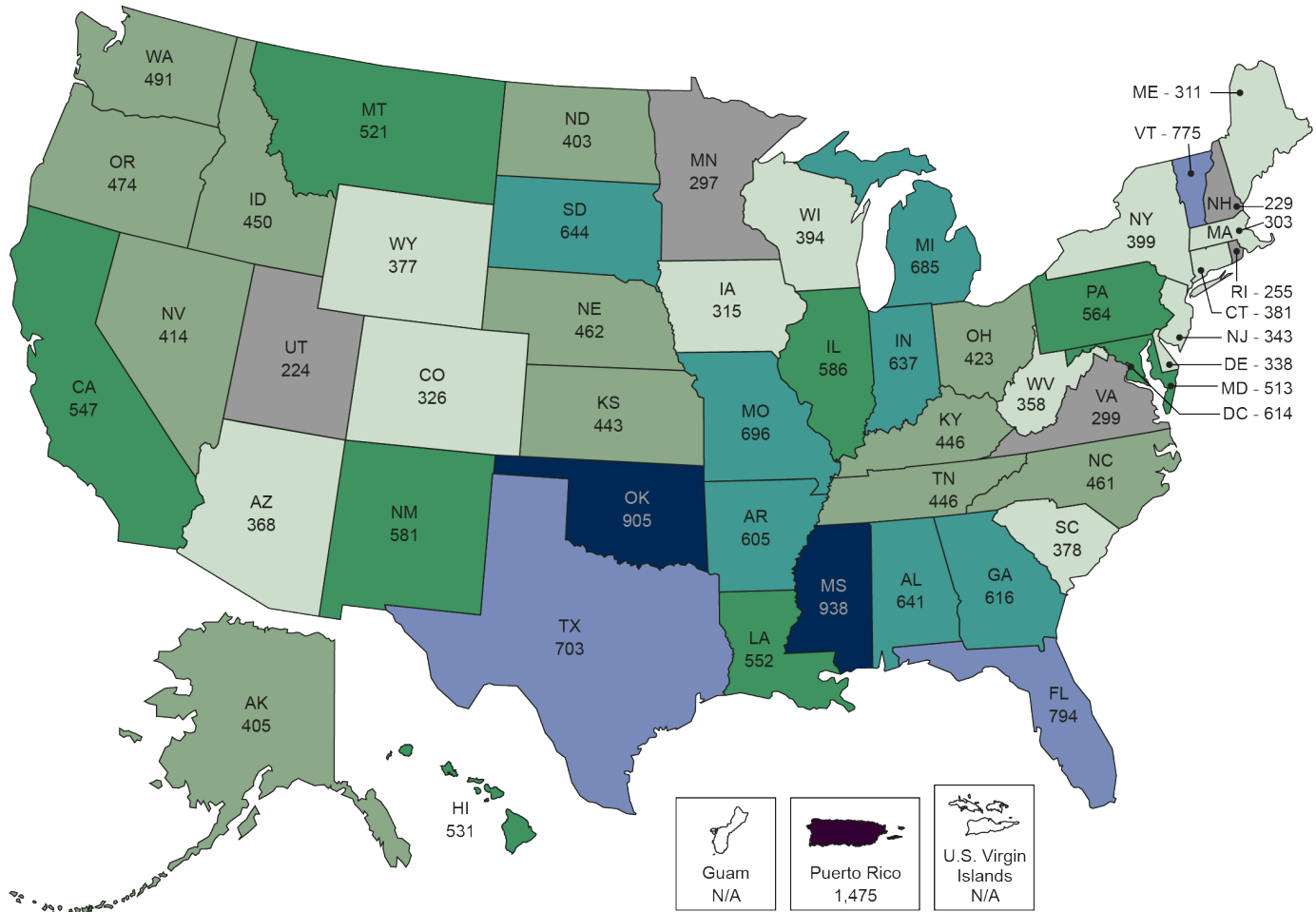
Appendix VII: Delivery of Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations per 1,000 Estimated Persons, by State

Across rounds 1 through 5, contractors delivered, on average, 537 food boxes to recipient organizations per 1,000 estimated persons across all states; Washington, D.C.; and Puerto Rico (see fig. 13) for the Farmers to Families Food Box Program by the time the program ended, on May 31, 2021, according to data as of June 4, 2021.¹ Recipient organizations in Puerto Rico received the most food boxes per 1,000 estimated persons (1,475). The states in which contractors delivered the fewest number of food boxes to recipient organizations per 1,000 estimated persons were Utah (224), New Hampshire (229), and Rhode Island (255).

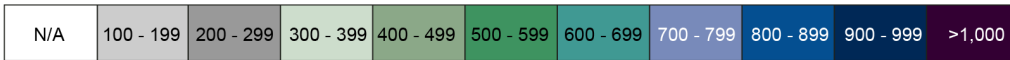
¹The U.S. territories of Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands were not included because the U.S. Census Bureau does not collect data on their populations for the American Community Survey, which we used in our data analysis.

Appendix VII: Delivery of Food Boxes to Recipient Organizations per 1,000 Estimated Persons, by State

Figure 13: Number of Food Boxes Delivered to Recipient Organizations for USDA’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program, per 1,000 Estimated Persons, by State, Rounds 1–5



Number of food boxes delivered per 1,000 estimated persons



Sources: GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) information; Map Resources (map). | GAO-21-353

Note: This figure presents data as of June 4, 2021, because although the program ended on May 31, 2021, contractors were able to continue entering data into USDA’s supply chain management database.

Appendix VIII: USDA's Lessons Learned from the Food Box Program

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) took steps to collect, from various sources, lessons learned from its implementation of the Farmers to Families Food Box Program (Food Box Program). For example, in January 2021, USDA conducted a preliminary review of the program that included lessons learned.¹ USDA also developed a background briefing document that included lessons learned from the department's experience. In March 2021, USDA conducted listening sessions with various stakeholders, such as food and agriculture industry organizations, to obtain feedback about the program.² We provide below examples of such lessons learned, some of which USDA implemented during later rounds of the program, and describe USDA's statements about these lessons.

Program Oversight

- Better data collection and analysis for the program would have helped USDA understand issues of importance to Congress and others. In its preliminary review, USDA stated that its contracting process has not traditionally required detailed reporting (i.e., data collection and USDA analysis) by recipient organizations, contractors, and producers on sources of food; the types of producers supplying them; benefits, if any, to small farming operations;³ and contractors' retention of jobs, among other things. As such, USDA did not build such reporting into the program. This made it difficult to obtain and provide this information to address congressional interest, according to USDA.

Contractor Distribution of Food

- Improvements in the distribution process could streamline coordination and enhance efficiency. In its background briefing document, USDA identified multiple areas where the Food Box Program could have improved contractor distribution methods and

¹U.S. Department of Agriculture, *USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Preliminary Review* (Washington, D.C.: January 2021).

²USDA received over 7,000 comments from over 300 stakeholders about the program. USDA retained a firm to summarize and document these comments. Based on the firm's May 2021 analysis of these comments, stakeholder recommendations focused on the following topics: (1) box structure and content, (2) distribution methods and processes, and (3) contractor selection and participation practices.

³For the Food Box Program, USDA defined small farming operations as those servicing local and regional interests and farmers markets.

processes. For example, the Food Box Program could have collaborated with USDA's Food and Nutrition Service and appropriate state agencies and their food distribution networks to benefit from their expertise, efficiency, and coordination with existing food distribution programs.

- Including a requirement for contractors to cover costs for “last mile” delivery. After round 2 of the program and in response to stakeholder feedback, USDA made a change to require that contractors cover costs of the “last mile” of delivery—meaning, delivery to the recipient organization. Specifically, USDA's preliminary review stated that, during the initial round, some food boxes were delivered to central distribution centers, forcing recipient organizations to incur extra costs in traveling to these centers to retrieve the food boxes. In response, USDA included a requirement in its solicitations for contractors to include in their bids the full delivery cost to the recipient distribution point.

Food Box Contents

- Specific food box types could better meet needs of the public. Although contractors provided only combination food boxes in the last three rounds of the program, stakeholders stated, during a listening session in March 2021, that food boxes with specific types of food (for example, fruits and vegetables, dairy, and meat) could accommodate recipients with varying dietary, cultural, and nutritional needs. In addition, stakeholders stated that food boxes could be tailored to persons in a variety of situations (for example, homeless or recipients without kitchen equipment).⁴ Further, feedback from food bank representatives identified combination boxes as requiring additional time to unpack and store appropriately. In its background briefing document, USDA stated it could partner internally, with the Food and Nutrition Service, and externally, with appropriate state agencies, to clearly define distribution requirements, including modifying contents of food boxes to meet the needs of different ethnic and cultural populations.

⁴USDA clarified the requirements for meat products to limit the amount of processed meats and to improve the quality of the contents of the box. Additionally, USDA clarified the definition of cheese and labeling requirements to ensure that suppliers understand the specification and submit pricing accordingly.

**Appendix VIII: USDA's Lessons Learned from
the Food Box Program**

USDA officials told us that external entities also reviewed various aspects of the Food Box Program with recommendations to USDA for future programs. For example, Harvard Law School and the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition issued a report on the program, as did the United Fresh Produce Association.⁵ These reports describe lessons learned that were similar to the ones USDA identified.

⁵Harvard Law School Food Law and Policy Clinic and National Sustainable Agricultural Coalition, *An Evaluation of the Farmers to Families Food Box Program* (February 2021); United Fresh Produce Association, *Produce Box Working Group, Recommendations for USDA's Food Box Program* (March 2021).

Appendix IX: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Steve D. Morris, (202) 512-3841 or morriss@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Tahra Nichols (Assistant Director), John Barrett (Analyst in Charge), Kevin Bray, Tara Congdon, Grant Mallie, John Mingus, Cynthia Norris, Isabel Rosa, Amber Sinclair, and Rajneesh Verma made significant contributions to this report.

Related GAO Products

COVID-19 Contracting: Opportunities to Improve Practices to Assess Prospective Vendors and Capture Lessons Learned. [GAO-21-528](#). Washington, D.C.: July 29, 2021.

COVID-19: Sustained Federal Action Is Crucial as Pandemic Enters Its Second Year. [GAO-21-387](#). Washington, D.C.: March 31, 2021.

Agriculture Spending: Opportunities Exist for USDA to Identify Successes and Challenges of the Farmers to Families Food Box Program to Inform Future Efforts. [GAO-20-711R](#). Washington, D.C.: September 16, 2020.

COVID-19: Federal Efforts Could Be Strengthened by Timely and Concerted Actions. [GAO-20-701](#). Washington, D.C.: September 21, 2020.

COVID-19: Opportunities to Improve Federal Response and Recovery Efforts. [GAO-20-625](#). Washington, D.C.: June 25, 2020.

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