Keeping America Fed: U.S. Food Insecurity in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This is the first of three papers to accompany Abt Associate’s podcast series on food insecurity and food assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. In the series, Abt’s experts and guests explore the resources and actors across the local, state, and federal landscapes that are “keeping America fed.” The purpose of the series is to underscore key aspects of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic and to discuss the current and future research needed to address food assistance gaps.

This first paper introduces some of the key concepts of food insecurity leading up to and during the pandemic and then explores the current landscape of food insecurity in the U.S. The paper includes sections on populations vulnerable to food insecurity, food assistance gaps, and how research can help close those gaps and provide evidence of effectiveness and improved outcomes.

Acknowledgements

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An Introduction to Food Insecurity During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the blink of an eye, the COVID-19 pandemic transformed all aspects of American life and shrouded the U.S. economy in uncertainty. A key piece of U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) definition of food insecurity is tied to uncertainty. So economic shocks such as mass unemployment and the loss of other income, such as those that have happened during the pandemic, can be expected to fuel an increase in food insecurity.

First, it is important to understand how food insecurity has traditionally been defined and measured in the U.S. Annual data on the scope of food insecurity in the U.S. is based on USDA’s food security statistics, which are produced through the Current Population Survey’s Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS) - a nationally representative survey conducted by the Census Bureau. Food security and food insecurity for households is described along a continuum, and is measured for two time spans—1) during the previous year and 2) during the previous 30 days. The standardized CPS-FSS questions assess a variety indicators of a household’s access to food, including how often households worry about having enough food or having enough money to buy food, adults skipping meals or eating less than they should, and how often children in the household have gone without eating.

Many communities and organizations have been fielding surveys on food insecurity and using a variety of questions or methods that may not have been tested in the historical way of defining food insecurity. That raises the question: how can we best understand, quantify, and compare food insecurity data during the COVID-19 pandemic? The annual CPS-FSS measures both food insufficiency and food insecurity, while the Census’ Household Pulse Survey (CHHPS) conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic includes questions only to measure food insufficiency. While the two measures are related, they are distinct from each other. The CHHPS uses food insufficiency as a measurement because it was designed to provide near real-time data to aid in local and federal recovery. Instead of asking about food access

### Exhibit 1. Food Security and Food Insecurity Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Security</th>
<th>High Food Security</th>
<th>Marginal Food Security</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Households had no problems or anxiety about consistently accessing adequate food.</td>
<td>Households had problems at times or anxiety about accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety, and quantity of their food intake were not substantially reduced.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Insecurity</th>
<th>Low Food Security</th>
<th>Very Low Food Security</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Households reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.</td>
<td>At times during the year, eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money and other resources for food.</td>
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</table>

over the span of 12-months (i.e., the measurement of food insecurity), the CHHPS is concerned with the impact of the pandemic and therefore collects information on food sufficiency over the past 7 days.

Members from Northwestern University’s Institute for Policy Research, Schanzenbach and Pitts, detail in their research from June 2020 that current analysis of food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic requires a comparison between food insufficiency and food insecurity. Schanzenbach and Pitts adopt the “conditional probability approach” to compare food insufficiency and food insecurity and found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, “the incidence of food insecurity has doubled overall, and tripled among households with children.” Exhibit 2 displays a figure from their research, where they predicted the number of food insecure households in February 2020 (brown square), and compare it to the post-COVID average of food insecure households (green dot).

The Schanzenbach and Pitts finding on the incidence of food insecurity is more concerning when considering how the pandemic and resulting economic recession are compounding a previously existing food insecurity crisis. Before COVID-19, roughly 35.2 million people (including 10.7 million children) lived in food insecure households, according to the USDA’s data from 2019. In 2018 and 2019, some populations were more likely to experience food insecurity than others; rates of food insecurity were higher for households with children, households headed by single parents or caregivers, and Black- and Hispanic-headed households. In addition, the U.S. food insecurity statistics were still recovering from long-term effects of the Great Recession; 2018 was the first year that food insecurity declined compared with the 2007 pre-recession levels. The downward trend of food insecurity continued in 2019, as shown by the recently released data on 2019 food insecurity. (Coleman, Rabbitt, Gregory & Singh, 2020; Coleman, et al., 2019)

The CHHPS data collection from the end of April 2020 shows that the trajectory of progress since the Great Recession (2007-2009) is reversing. Given the amount of time it took to recover from the Great Recession, there may be long-lasting effects on food insecurity from the current recession. While food insecurity has declined slightly since April 2020, food insecurity in June was still higher than the 2018 and 2019 levels (Schanzenbach, 2020).

As the Census Bureau began releasing the CHPPS data with information about household experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was clear that racial disparities in food insecurity persisted (Exhibit 3). Food insecurity increased more during the pandemic for people of color.
Black- and Hispanic-headed households than it did for white-headed households. As the pandemic continues, the economy reopens, and the unemployment rate decreases, it will be critical to continue to track these food insecurity trends.


Another tool for assessing the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity is Feeding America’s Map the Meal Gap (MMG) study, which predicts and maps changes in U.S. food insecurity based on projected changes to unemployment and poverty. In April, Feeding America reported that the number of food insecure children could escalate to 18 million because of the COVID-19 pandemic, up from 10.7 million children in 2018. On the other end, just as the youngest individuals in our nation are vulnerable to food insecurity, so are an estimated 5.5 million seniors age 60 and older. Many seniors regularly face challenges accessing food due to mobility and transportation limitations. (Feeding America, 2020).

Additionally, Abt Associates has developed the web-based COVID-19 Assessment & Tracking Tool (CATT). CATT can be customized to collect real-time data on critical policy and problem areas, including physical and mental health, employment, and food insecurity, to help inform decision-making during the pandemic. Clients have customized surveys using Abt’s internal database of more than 1,250 COVID-19-related questions. Overall, the projections of food insecurity and the strains on the U.S. food assistance programs have highlighted the need for a transformation and greater recognition of how we keep America fed.

Food Assistance Programs and Resources

The existing food assistance framework in the U.S. is made up of two pillars, (1) federal- and state-administered food and nutrition programs and (2) more localized, non-governmental emergency food assistance such as food banks and pantries. In the remainder of this section, we review these two pillars generally and highlight a few examples of their key programs while describing some of their COVID-19 adaptations. In future papers, we will explore these programs in greater detail.

Federal and State-administered food assistance

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the Food Stamp Program, is the largest federal food assistance program and may be the most recognizable. SNAP provided monthly benefits to 35.7 million low-income Americans in a typical month in 2019. The average benefit was about $130 per person per month, which recipients may use to purchase food items at SNAP-authorized retailers. SNAP uses Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT), a system that provides recipients benefits each month on a plastic card called an EBT card, which works like a debit card.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) provided USDA with authority to let states temporarily modify procedures to make it easier for families to continue participating in or apply for SNAP because of the mass unemployment. In addition, the FFCRA increased overall monthly SNAP benefits by 40 percent, giving American families more purchasing power. Before the pandemic, a few states and retailers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>White-headed households</th>
<th>Black-headed households</th>
<th>Hispanic-headed households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment during the Great Recession peaked at around 10%.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment during the 2020 Recession reached 14.7% in May 2020.</td>
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had begun piloting online transactions using SNAP benefits. Due to the increased need for online shopping because of COVID-19, the pilot has expanded. As of August 2020, the pilot is operational in 43 states and another four states are authorized to implement the program, including the District of Columbia.

Additionally, under the authority granted by the FFCRA, USDA announced the Farmers to Families Food Box program in April of 2020. USDA has extended the service through the end of October. Under the program, USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is partnering with national, regional, and local suppliers to purchase up to $3 billion in fresh produce, dairy, and meat products. Suppliers package family-sized boxes and transport them to food banks, community and faith-based organizations, and other non-profits serving Americans in need.

**USDA Administered School-Based Programs**

USDA also administers a variety of school-based programs such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). Twenty-two million children receive free or reduced-price lunches during a typical school year and due to COVID-19 closures, school districts and states had to rapidly adapt their services to continue providing meal services to children and families who depend on school meals. Schools were able to adapt due to nationwide waivers issued by USDA and the FFCRA, which granted the USDA greater flexibility. The USDA also extended flexibility for School Meal Programs through the end of 2020, which allows all operators to continue serving free meals to all children, regardless of their eligibility. Nearly all states applied and were approved to administer Pandemic-Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT), which provides households with children eligible for free or reduced-price school meals a card to cover the costs of meals that would typically be served in schools. For most of the U.S., the value is $5.70 per child, per school day, which equals $114 a month. This amount can vary by state.

Schools went to great lengths to find new ways to continue delivering meals to kids and families such as allowing guardians to pick up meals and in some cases having bus drivers drop meals at homes. Data released annually, and updated in July 2020, on NSLP participation rates show that even with the best intentions, schools had difficulty serving the same number of children in the spring of 2020 as they did when children attended school in-person. The data for May through August 2020 are not yet available, so it is not known how schools fared in serving meals to children toward the end of the school year. As schools across the country either reopen for in-person instruction,

### Examples of USDA Waivers Supporting School Meal Operations during COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents and guardians may pick-up and bring home meals for their children</td>
<td>(i.e., grab-and-go meals.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools may provide multiple meals at once</td>
<td>(i.e., multiple days of meals can be picked up at the same time.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Exhibit 4. Total federally-subsidized lunches served, January-April 2019 vs. 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Total Lunches Served 2019</th>
<th>Total Lunches Served 2020</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>480,993,440</td>
<td>505,781,491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>482,845,426</td>
<td>486,762,293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>492,071,826</td>
<td>303,511,418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>517,363,116</td>
<td>293,215,793</td>
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transition to fully-remote learning, or adopt a hybrid model of in-person and remote learning, the difficulty in reaching all eligible students will likely continue.

Non-governmental emergency food assistance

In addition to the federal and state programs and supports, there are local food banks, pantries, and other meal programs and services. Due to COVID-19 there has been an increased demand at food banks, which face a variety of operational challenges due to pandemic-related safety procedures, declining numbers of volunteers and donations, and supply chain issues.

The emergency food assistance sector is made up of countless small, local, community-based organizations, such as Neighbors in Need, a nonprofit that operates food and diaper pantries that serve at least 1,000 families in greater Lawrence, Massachusetts. Anecdotally, and as we heard from the Deputy Director of Neighbors in Need in Abt’s first “Keeping America Fed” podcast, like school districts, most of these nonprofit organizations had to quickly pivot to meet the increased need for food while changing most of their operating models. Organizations, working with local and state governments, have created pop-up pantries and teamed together to deploy new methods of food distribution such as grab and go models, drive-thru service, seniors-only hours, and even home deliveries.

While Feeding America and the Meals on Wheels America organizations represent a network of organizations that can provide insights into their changing operations, it is too soon to tell how all of the independent organizations have adjusted during the pandemic.

Existing Food Assistance Gaps and Need for Future Research

Research continuously offers areas for additional exploration and discussions of challenges in methodologies. Gaps in serving food insecure households already exist within the pre-existing systems, and gaps persist in food assistance adaptations to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section we introduce several areas that warrant additional research.

Measures of Food Insecurity: As shown in Schanzenbach and Pitts’s research, there are currently different methods and questions being used to collect and monitor rapid, short-term changes in food insecurity in the U.S. Researchers have widely accepted that rises in unemployment rates are linked to rises in food insecurity, but the two bodies of research are still siloed. Key takeaway: There is a critical need to build and expand real-time food insecurity monitoring systems and to solidify the relationship between unemployment and food insecurity data.

Food Assistance: Not all of those who qualify receive food assistance in the U.S. and conversely, not everyone who is food insecure qualifies for public food assistance. Research is needed to better understand the decisions of individuals and households who do not access public food assistance. Additionally, even those who receive food assistance may still be food insecure. As previously mentioned, this is where local organizations such as food banks and meal programs become instrumental. Additional descriptive and evaluation research on the use of non-governmental food assistance would help federal and local stakeholders better understand what federal food assistance programs are not covering and thus how food distribution networks could better fill these gaps.

Feeding America is the largest network of hunger-relief organizations in the U.S. and estimates serving over 40 million people annually through 200 food banks.

In early April 2020, they announced that 41 percent of their food banks were reporting an immediate, critical funding shortfall because of the sudden and increased demand for their services. (Feeding America, 2020)

Meals on Wheels America is an organization that delivers meals to seniors who are unable to purchase or prepare their own meals in 5,000 communities across the country.

A Meals on Wheels America survey from May 2020 found that nearly all programs have an increased demand, with 4 out of 5 programs reporting that new meal requests have doubled since March 1, 2020.
Key takeaway: Research can offer solutions on how to improve accessibility and use of food assistance.

Food Insecurity and the U.S. Economy: Considering that the U.S. national and local unemployment rates have an impact on the incidence of food insecurity, there could be more research to understand how food assistance contributes to or stimulates economies. Research on the Great Recession stimulus packages has suggested that SNAP spending during a recession stimulates and stabilizes the economy based on a “multiplier” theory. In 2019, the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) found that “during a slowing economy, $1 billion in new SNAP benefits would lead to an increase of $1.54 billion in Gross Domestic Product (GDP)...54 percent above and beyond the new benefits” because of increased SNAP-household spending which in turn allows businesses and their owners or employees to increase their spending as well. Key takeaway: The 2020 recession provides an opportunity to further our understanding of how increasing food assistance may bolster household spending and the economy at large. While the 2020 recession may be a unique economic downturn, it may provide an example of how adjustments to food assistance benefits such as SNAP can have an impact on the local and national economies and reduce food insecurity for households.

Disproportionality of Food Insecurity among Households: Early data show that food insecurity is not felt evenly across the U.S. The pandemic has further exposed the food insecurity disparities between vulnerable households (those already at risk for food insecurity prior to the pandemic) and other households. Vulnerable households continue to experience food insecurity at higher rates than national averages. Given that many of those who are vulnerable to food insecurity are also populations vulnerable to health risks related to COVID-19, there may be increased interest in understanding what approaches work best for reaching these populations and reducing the rates of food insecurity. Key takeaway: The current populations who are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity are known, but more research can be done to measure how food assistance programs are, or are not, reaching them and how to improve key outcomes.

Closing

The trend of declining food insecurity during 2018 and 2019 is cause for some optimism. However, during these years, roughly 1 in 10 households still experienced food insecurity, with some populations more vulnerable than others. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity has doubled, hitting racial minorities and households with children particularly hard, and undoing much of the recent progress made toward addressing food insecurity. Using the years following the Great Recession as a lesson, we can expect that the 2020 COVID-19 recession may have a lasting impact on food insecurity in the U.S. During the pandemic, we have seen countless examples of food assistance actors quickly adapting to change their operations and greatly expand their capabilities. Using these innovations as case studies or lessons to learn how to reshape what food assistance looks like could be valuable for helping other communities wanting to implement similar changes or programs.

We have reviewed how research and data collection in the midst of the pandemic presents challenges. Yet research in this period is critical because it creates greater depth in the understanding of the relationships between the U.S. population, national and local economies, food insecurity, and the systems that aim to address it. Building upon Abt’s current and previous work evaluating food assistance programs, we expect to continue to identify best practices and models to address food insecurity. As gaps in food assistance mechanisms have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that key stakeholders, programs, and communities have the data and information needed to deliver high-quality services and address the increased levels of food insecurity.

Our work on Keeping America Fed will continue, as there is still much to learn. In our upcoming papers, we will explore the food assistance landscape and the consumer perspective during COVID-19 in greater depth.
References


