

THE HUNGER PANDEMIC:

Is **COVID-19 induced food-insecurity** a pandemic of its own?

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WHAT IS FOOD INSECURITY? HOW HAS COVID-19 IMPACTED PEOPLE'S ACCESS TO FOOD?

The United States' struggle with food insecurity is not a novel issue, but has only been exacerbated in the past eight months by the COVID-19 pandemic. Food insecurity is distinct from hunger, hunger being defined by Feeding America as the physical sensations experienced resulting from lack of food, whereas food insecurity brings into question access to consistent nutritious food. Further, according to Feeding America research, while food insecurity has fluctuated in the United States since the Great Recession, it has gradually improved in recent years.

FOOD INSECURITY IS...

“a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active and healthy life,” as well as a “lack of available financial resources for food at the household level.”

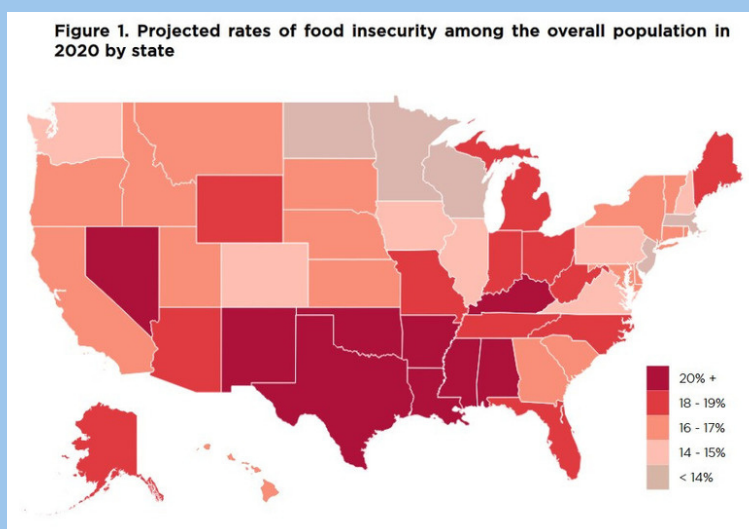
- Feeding America

37,200,000

US households experiencing food insecurity before COVID-19

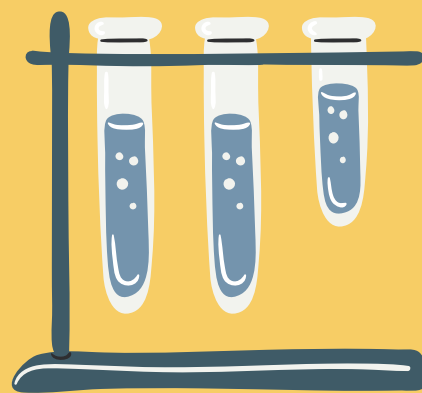
50,400,000

US households experiencing food insecurity in 2020 during COVID-19



But, the emergence of the novel coronavirus has had detrimental effects to this positive upward trend. Pre-COVID-19, Feeding America data reported as of October 2020 reflects that about 37.2 million people nationwide lived in food insecure households. Recent reports now project that in 2020, that number may be closer to 50.4 million people, a result of the serious economic downturn the pandemic has created. The relationship between food insecurity and COVID-19 is cyclical — as COVID-19 rates worsen nationwide, the ability to access adequate sources of nutrition diminishes, and as the ability to access enough healthy food decreases, the ability to ensure proper human development and fight off illnesses viruses like COVID-19 worsens as well.

WHY COVID-19 AND FOOD INSECURITY GO HAND-IN-HAND: A SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVE



Access to sufficient and nutritious food is integral in the body's ability to strengthen our immune system and fight off infections and viruses like that of COVID-19. **The immune system** is a complex network of pathways and defense systems that recognizes and fights against foreign invaders like viruses by producing **antibodies** — blood proteins produced in response to an invader that combines with that invader to disactivate it. COVID-19 represents such an invader.

The body's ability to produce antibodies relies heavily on the presence of certain **micronutrients** — small amounts of essential elements needed to sustain normal growth and development (including the growth and functioning of immune cells). Micronutrients include vitamin C, vitamin D, iron, protein, zinc, and more, and are often found in fruits, vegetables, and proteins, nutrient-rich foods that enable us to sustain healthy lives and build up strong immune responses. The economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic — declining national income (particularly for lower-income Americans) and disruptions to the food supply chain — decrease demand for and access to these nutrient-rich yet highly perishable foods more than they do processed foods, according to the International Food Policy Research Institute. When access to these kinds of foods declines, our ability to ward off COVID-19 declines as well, heightening the risk of a more serious experience with the virus and lasting effects.

WHAT CONCERNS DO STAKEHOLDERS HAVE ABOUT FOOD INSECURITY CAUSED BY COVID-19?



FINANCIAL CONCERNS

Many of the concerns we gathered from stakeholders related to food insecurity were financial in nature — from the ongoing economic crisis straining wallets to social safety net organizations straining resources. It is impossible to disentangle the pandemic’s impact on food insecurity without discussing the harsh economic realities brought on by the pandemic.

“Due to special COVID funding the funds are there for me to [support everyone] and people are starting to get used to the amount of food that I'm currently able to give them. However if the money runs out then I will need to make adjustments as to what I'm able to provide.”

- **David Jacobs, Project Soup Food Pantry**

THREATS TO VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

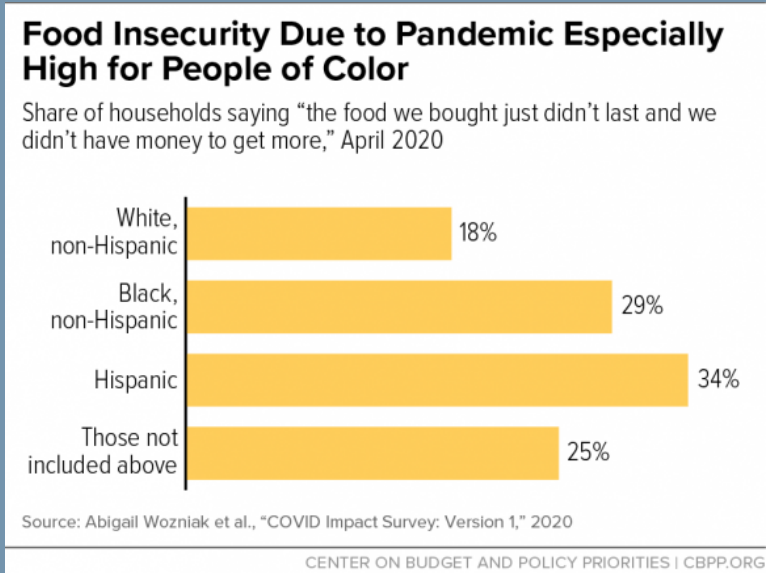
From the elderly, essential workers, and children to BIPOC and low-income communities, it is clear that, although everyone has been impacted by the pandemic, we have all not been impacted **equally**. From those experiencing housing insecurity, to students unable to take advantage of free and reduced lunch programs, food insecurity intensified by COVID-19 is having a disproportionate impact on populations that were already vulnerable due to existing systemic inequities.

“[I] hear a lot of people concerned about food insecurity in children who are not attending school right now. Being at home all day adds so many new bumps in a parent’s life, including feeding them the meals they’d normally get at school.”

- Tufts Community Health Student and Food Rescue volunteer (A'22)



LACK OF SUPPORT FROM THOSE WITH RESOURCES AND PRIVILEGE



“People just want to talk about it, but no one wants to actually do something about it.”

- **Nakia Navarro, Building Audacity**

Despite the serious harm the pandemic is inflicting, some raised concerns that those who hold privilege and resources are not doing enough to mitigate the impacts. From the hoarding of food early in the stages of pandemic to performative activism, coupled with a history that makes access to healthy food limited to select groups, a principal concern of many stakeholders was the lack of action by populations insulated from the worst consequences of the pandemic.

THESE CLUSTERS OF CONCERNS GATHERED INFORMED THE TYPES OF ACTIONS WE PROPOSED AND THEIR POTENTIAL TO REMEDY THE EFFECTS OF FOOD INSECURITY HEIGHTENED BY COVID-19

WHAT CAN WE DO?

1

INCREASE FLEXIBILITY & FUNDING FOR GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED NUTRITION AND RELIEF PROGRAMS WHILE INVESTING IN FOOD SYSTEM INNOVATIONS

We can work to realize this by...

- Expanding eligibility for programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/"food stamps") and Electronic Benefit Transfer (or EBT, a debit card equivalent of food stamps) to include larger percentages of the food-insecure population, to be more inclusive of those falling under national poverty line.
 - **Drawback:** Working with government-run organizations can be slow, and obtaining additional funding for programs can be difficult and time-consuming, especially in a pandemic economy. Given SNAP and EBT benefits can only be used on a small selection of goods, massively expanding the program could result in a shortage of that food for families.
- Investing in agricultural programs that focus on assessing proper child development and improving access to the nutritional components that underlie it.
 - **Drawback:** Investing in new food system programs, while promising, fails to provide immediate relief and rather invests for the long term.
- Prioritizing the USDA Coronavirus Food Assistance Program's efforts to reinvest in impacted farmers and supply chain, as well as its plan to distribute nutritious food to food banks and similar community organizations.
 - **Drawback:** Funding this program will take funding and attention away from other COVID-19 relief programs.
- Building relationships between national grocery chains and school districts to allow families who typically rely on school meals to purchase food at discount.
 - **Drawback:** Even providing a discount on food does not account for the fact that school lunches were entire free — prepared — meals for children. This action still requires families to pay.

These actions are necessary, because every **"1 in 3 people experiencing food insecurity are unlikely to qualify for most federal nutrition programs"**

- Feeding America, 2018

2

WORK TO ADDRESS & COMBAT FOOD APARTHEID

We can work to realize this by:

- Emphasizing food sustainability by incentivizing partnerships between restaurants, local food banks, and emergency shelters through increased tax deductions on the basis of donated inventory.
 - **Drawback:** Providing tax benefits and incentives for restaurants and grocery stores will reduce the governments tax revenue — revenue that could be spent on other initiatives advocated for in this guide.
- Recognizing that food apartheid is an inherently intersectional issue and incentivize nutritious grocery stores (like Whole Foods) to invest in low-income and BIPOC communities to provide quality, culturally relevant food.
 - **Drawback:** It takes years for grocery stores to open in low-income communities, and the effects of the pandemic necessitate almost immediate action.
- Establishing and provide funding for BIPOC-owned, affordable farmers markets, and fresh food markets in areas affected by food apartheid and other low-income areas.
 - **Drawback:** It is unclear how the money would be distributed in the community and could possibly have an effect of picking winners or losers in low-income communities — entrenching successful business while harming new small business.
- Recognizing that, **"racism is built into the DNA of the US food system."** (Leah Penniman, food justice activist and Black farmer) and work to undo these systemic inequalities by including more comprehensive coverage of systemic racism in food systems in school health courses.
 - **Drawback:** It takes decades for material taught to students to reach the public consciousness so the effects would reduce the suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"This idea that just because you give people the ability to grow their own food, and give up soda for water, that all of sudden it's going to make these people's conditions better? **No. We have to talk about race, we have to talk about economics, because those are the things holding people back.**"

- Karen Washington, Activist



ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY THROUGH LONGER-TERM SYSTEMIC CHANGE

We can work to realize this by:

- Advocating for a living wage to limit the prevalence of families and individuals who are not able to budget for food security. Many essential workers are working longer and more dangerous hours during the pandemic for the same pay and little to no benefits.
 - **Drawback:** Amidst the economics crisis caused by the pandemic, some states have paused increases in their minimum wage to preserve jobs according to NPR — primarily within small businesses. Job losses are a serious concern during the pandemic, and increasing wages now could hasten that.
- Increasing access to affordable and mixed housing to limit the proportion of budgets that has to be spent by families or individuals on rent or mortgages — reducing in incident of families who have to pick between food and housing.
 - **Drawback:** Local governments are anticipating substantial revenue losses due to the COVID-induced economic crisis, according to the Brookings Institute, which would limit their ability to invest substantially in affordable housing.
- Calling for affordable, quality, healthcare for all to, like housing, reduce a big strain on wallets for low-income individuals and families that often prevents full food security.
 - **Drawback:** These are reforms that would have to be done at the federal-level — at great expense. Provided the partisanship around the issue of healthcare reform, comprehensive reform would be unlikely to happen quickly — or be at the scale necessary to profoundly combat food insecurity.

86 %

of jobs in the food industry offer wages at or below the federal poverty level, according to the Food Chain Workers Alliance. This means that the very people who harvest, process, and transport our food cannot afford to buy it for themselves.

SPOTLIGHT: FOOD APARTHEID

Food apartheid is defined by **"[looking] at the whole food system and takes into account income, race, and geography [and] encompasses the social and racial inequalities that are at play in our food system. It recognizes that the systems in place are what make it difficult for people living in low-income areas to access fresh, healthy food."** The term, coined by food justice advocate Karen Washington, brings attention to the lack of affordable healthy food and overabundance of unhealthy options in low-income communities.



Karen Washington

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