

Food Assistance Program Participation among US Households during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Survey Overview

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, food assistance programs adapted quickly and in unprecedented ways to meet the challenges of high unemployment, disruptions in the food supply, and school closures. Supported by US Department of Agriculture’s COVID-19 program-specific waivers, some programs relaxed their eligibility criteria, while others improvised on delivery modalities or temporarily increased benefits.¹ To examine food assistance program participation and participant experiences during the first few months of the pandemic, we collected online survey data in July-August 2020 from a sample of 1,510 adults, representative of the US population. This brief provides preliminary findings related to participation in key food assistance programs, namely, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC), School Food Programs, as well as emergency food assistance provided through Food Pantries.

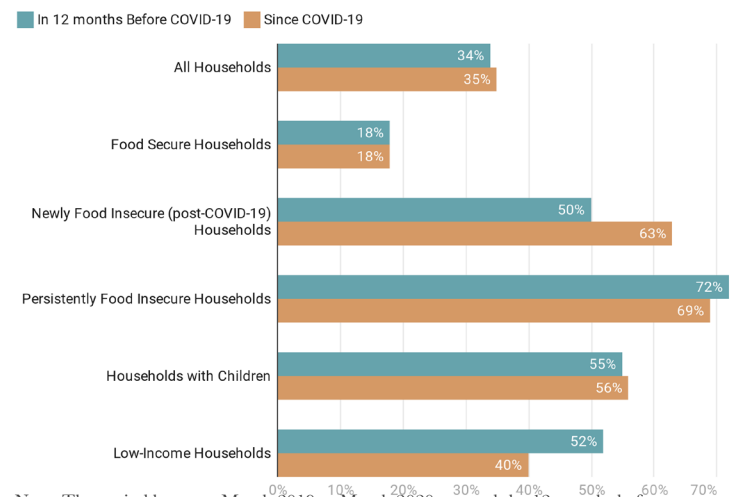
Increase in Food Assistance Program Use Among Newly Food Insecure Households

Compared to the overall sample, more than half of households with children under the age of 18 participated in food assistance programs at both time points, as did lower-income households (those making \$50,000 or less in the previous year). Food assistance program participation was highest among households classified as persistently food insecure, with 72% participating in at least one program prior to the pandemic and 69% doing so in the four months since the pandemic. The greatest increase (26%) in food assistance program participation was observed for newly food insecure households (Figure 1). Further, food assistance program participation was higher in households that experienced job disruptions during the pandemic (52%) compared to those that did not experience such challenges during the pandemic (25%).

Key Findings

1. More than half of households with children, and those with job disruption, participated in food assistance programs.
2. Compared to the 12 months prior to COVID-19, SNAP participation increased by 31% in households that became newly food insecure. More than 40% of respondents from SNAP participating households indicated their benefits were inadequate to meet their household’s food needs.
3. WIC participation increased by 50% in households with persistent food insecurity. More than half of WIC participants were not able to fully redeem their benefits due to lack of WIC approved foods during the pandemic. WIC participants would like to use their benefits for online purchases, an option currently not available to them.
4. Participation rates in school meals during the first four months of the pandemic slightly declined overall, but did not change in low-income households. Limited hours, inconvenient locations, as well as meals running out before the next pick up day were identified as major challenges.
5. Food pantry use increased by two-thirds among newly food insecure households and households with job disruptions during COVID-19. Long lines and limits on frequency of visits to the pantry were identified as challenges.

Figure 1. Households’ Participation in Any Food Assistance Program by Food Security Status and Household Demographics Before and Since the Pandemic (%)



Note: The period between March 2019 to March 2020 covered the 12 months before COVID-19. The period from March 2020 onwards refers to ‘since COVID-19’. Food assistance programs described here include government programs (SNAP, WIC, and National School Lunch Program) and emergency food assistance programs (i.e. food pantries).

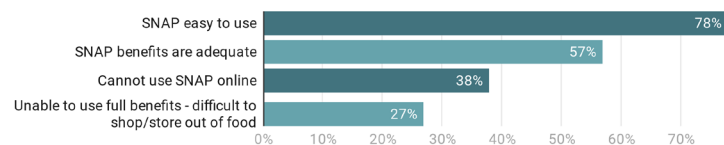
SNAP Participation Falls for Some, Increases for Newly Food Insecure

In our sample, 24% of households reported participating in SNAP in the year prior to COVID-19, and 20% reported participating in SNAP since COVID-19 (a decline of 17% during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic). Our findings are based on respondent reported household SNAP participation, and are different than estimates from the most recent USDA administrative data which show an increase in household SNAP participation in April 2020 compared to April 2019.² The decline in reported participation in SNAP during the pandemic in our sample could be partially attributable to the shorter duration of 4 months considered since the start of the pandemic (compared to 12 months prior to the pandemic). Further, some households in our sample are likely to have lost their SNAP eligibility because they were receiving unemployment insurance benefits, potentially increasing their income beyond the SNAP eligibility threshold.³ However, households that became newly food insecure increased SNAP use by 31%, from 28% prior to COVID-19 to 38% since the pandemic.

Majority Think Snap is Easy to Use, but Have Concerns About Adequacy of Benefits and Their Use

When asked about their experience using SNAP, more than one in four participants said they could not use their full benefits because of COVID-19 related difficulties in shopping or stores running out of food items (Figure 2). Only 57% of the participating households thought the SNAP benefits they received were adequate to meet the family needs, despite USDA's issuance of emergency supplements to SNAP households that normally receive less than the maximum benefit.¹ Households with children and those with persistent food insecurity reported more barriers for participation in the program, potentially contributing to lower rates of participation. Since the pandemic, USDA has allowed SNAP beneficiaries to pay for online purchases using SNAP benefits,¹ but nearly 40% of SNAP participants in our sample reported that they could not pay for online groceries using their benefits. Lack of ability to cover the delivery cost with SNAP benefits⁴ and lack of access to reliable internet can make it difficult for families to use the flexibility afforded to them.

Figure 2. Level of Agreement^a about Participant Experiences Related to Using SNAP During COVID-19



^aIncludes respondents who strongly agreed or agreed with the statement.

Despite these challenges, the majority of SNAP participants (78%) indicated that they found the program easy to use.

“I need my next renewal of food stamps to be online and by phone only. I do not feel comfortable using public transportation.”

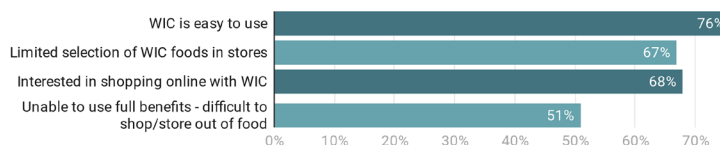
WIC Participation Increases, Especially for Persistently Food Insecure

In our sample, among households with children under the age of 5, WIC participation increased slightly during COVID-19, with 29% of households reporting participation since the pandemic, compared to 24% doing so in the 12 months prior. A larger increase (50%) was seen among households that experienced persistent food insecurity, with WIC participation going from 20% to 30%. Recognizing the new challenges that emerged during the pandemic, the USDA has allowed states a number of waivers that granted flexibility for WIC participation, including a waiver allowing WIC agencies to issue benefits remotely so participants do not have to pick up their benefits in person, a waiver allowing participants to enroll or re-enroll in WIC without visiting a clinic in person, and waivers allowing for substituting certain food package items in case of limited availability.¹

Most WIC Participants Find it Easy to Use, but Face Challenges with Food and Store Selection

Three out of four respondents who used WIC since COVID-19 agreed that WIC benefits are easy to use (Figure 3). Nonetheless, two-thirds reported challenges with a limited selection of WIC-approved foods in stores. More than half said they were not able to use their full benefits because of COVID-19 related difficulties in shopping and lack of availability of WIC items in stores. Over two-thirds of WIC participants expressed interest in being able to use their benefits online.

Figure 3. Level of Agreement^a about Participant Experiences Related to Using WIC During COVID-19



^aIncludes respondents who strongly agreed or agreed with the statement.

“A lot of WIC items have been sold out everywhere making it hard to get the stuff.”

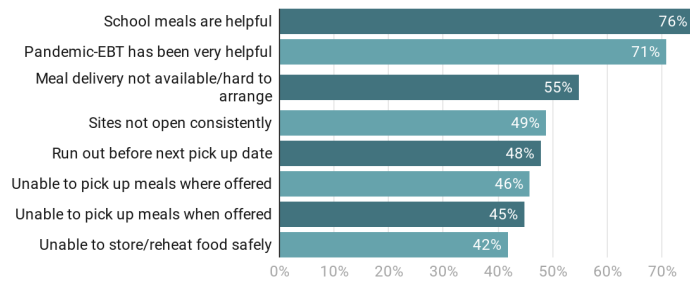
School Meal Participation Drops

School meal participation rates reported by households with school-age children in our sample dropped from 29% in the 12 months prior to the pandemic to 25% since the outbreak. However, this drop did not occur among low-income households. During school closures, many school authorities across the US were able to provide meals to children in their community using summer meal program supported by USDA child nutrition COVID-19 waivers.¹ These waivers allowed meals to be served in non-group settings to support social distancing, to be served outside of traditional times, with provision for parents to pick the meals for their children, and exempted states from the meal pattern requirements.

School Meals and P-EBT are Helpful, but Pick-up, Delivery, and Storage Challenging

Most households that used the school meal program found it helpful (76%), but not without challenges, including difficulties with location (46%) and timing (45%) of operation of distribution sites, households running out of meals before the next pick up day (48%), and lack of feasible delivery options (55%) (Figure 4). Since April 2020, states started providing a novel benefit called P-EBT (pandemic electronic benefits transfer) to households whose children were eligible for free- and reduced-price school meals, with the aim of covering the cost of school meals during pandemic related school closures. As of August 2020, all states were approved to provide P-EBT benefits in the range of \$250 - \$450 per child to qualifying households. Most households (71%) in our sample found P-EBT very helpful.

Figure 4: Level of Agreement^a about Participant Experiences Related to Using School Meals During COVID-19



^aIncludes respondents who strongly agreed or agreed with the statement.

“[Schools meals and P-EBT] Helped out a lot for my kids”

Food Pantry Use Increases, Especially for Newly Food Insecure

Among our respondents, 15% of households reported using food pantries in the year prior to COVID-19, and 16% reported using them since COVID-19. However, since the pandemic, food pantry use increased by 67% (from 18% during the 12 months prior to COVID-19 to 30% during the pandemic) for newly food insecure households and to a lesser extent (from 32% to 36%) for those with persistent food insecurity. One in four households experiencing COVID-19 related job disruption reported using a food pantry compared to only 1 in 10 households that did not experience any job disruptions.

Figure 5: Level of Agreement^a about Participant Experiences Related to Using Food Pantries During COVID-19



^aIncludes respondents who strongly agreed or agreed with the statement.

Majority Find Food Pantries Helpful, but Have Challenges with Food Availability and Pantry Restrictions

Survey respondents identified major barriers to using food pantries during the pandemic, including limits to how frequently one can visit the pantry (57%), long lines and wait times (57%), and inconvenient food pantry hours (42%). Concerns related to availability of preferred foods (43%), quality (38%), and limited ability to prepare the foods offered (42%) were also identified by respondents as barriers to making use of food pantries. Despite issues experienced with food pantries, the majority (77%) of households that used food pantries found them helpful.

“While the food is very helpful and appreciated, sometimes all you can get is canned foods, and you can't live off of green beans”

Policy Implications

- Even with the flexibilities offered through USDA waivers for program implementation during the early months of COVID-19, overall food assistance program participation rates in this sample remained at pre-pandemic levels. Maintaining and enhancing pandemic-related program waivers and supports, such as additional benefits, flexibility in program enrollment and recertification, and waiving or covering delivery costs could further alleviate food insecurity.
- Our data suggest that there are additional financial needs among food insecure households which may be alleviated through expanded benefits in food assistance programs or additional economic relief packages.
- Over 1/4 of SNAP recipients had food access challenges in stores in our sample—advancing online delivery options may provide additional food access for SNAP participants. WIC participants are also interested in the same flexibility to pay for online purchases using WIC benefits.
- Additional innovation in program delivery for school meals and expanding implementation of such practices could further meet the needs of parents re-entering workforce while their children are still not attending physical school on a regular basis.
- Our data suggest that many food pantry participants experienced challenges with food availability and access. Providing government food assistance program information at food pantries may enable participants to receive additional help that may not be met by food pantries.

Survey Approach

We surveyed 1,510 US adults in July/August 2020 using the Qualtrics online panel. Survey participants reflect the US adult population by race. We oversampled those with lower incomes to support further insights, then adjusted so that analyses reflect the national income distribution in 2019. Limitations of surveys like this one may include underrepresentation of groups including those: with low literacy or unable to take survey in English/Spanish, without cell phone or Internet, those facing high pandemic demands, and those with low trust of surveys. Additionally, responses may be influenced by factors such as aspiration, social desirability, misunderstanding, or rushing to complete.

Glossary

Low-income households: Households with annual income less than \$50,000 per year.

USDA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, oversees food assistance program benefits.

SNAP: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formally known as Food Stamps). An income-based program that provides financial benefits to supplement food budgets of low-income families.

WIC: Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children provides supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant and postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age five.

P-EBT: Pandemic-Electronic Benefits Transfer provides assistance to households with children who are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals during COVID-19 school closures

Food insecure households: Food insecurity was measured using the USDA's validated six-item household food security survey module.⁵ Respondents who answered affirmatively to two or more of the food insecurity questions were considered food insecure. Respondents who were food insecure both in the 12 months prior to the pandemic (March 2019-March 2020) and since the pandemic (since March 2020) were classified as having persistent food insecurity. Those who were food secure but became food insecure since the pandemic were classified as becoming newly food insecure. The food secure category includes households who were food secure since COVID, regardless of their food security status prior to the pandemic

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About NFACT

This research is conducted as part of The National Food Access and COVID research Team (NFACT), which is implementing common measurements and tools across study sites in the US. NFACT is a national collaboration of researchers committed to rigorous, comparative, and timely food access research during the time of COVID. We do this through collaborative, open access research that prioritizes communication to key decision-makers while building our scientific understanding of food system behaviors and policies. A series of briefs from this survey are available at www.nfactresearch.org to learn more or contact Dr. Meredith Niles at mtmiles@uvm.edu.

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