

COVID-19 and Food Insecurity Impacts: A Follow Up Vermont Study

Meredith T. Niles¹
 Anna L. Josephson²
 Farryl Bertmann¹
 Emily H. Belarmino¹
 Roni Neff³

Food insecurity remains high and food assistance program use increases significantly

¹ University of Vermont
² University of Arizona
³ Johns Hopkins University

Background

We followed up with Vermonters who answered a March/April 2020 survey about food security, to find out how they were doing in June. Our previous research suggested that food insecurity in Vermont rose 33% in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second survey in late May and early June was completed by 1,236 Vermonters. This brief shares changes in their experiences and perspectives between March and June. Demographics of our respondents were comparable to Vermont average demographics on race, age, and income distributions. We weight our data on sex and college degree, so that the results are representative of the Vermont state population.

“The increased snap benefit has been so incredibly helpful.”

- Survey respondent

Food Security Outcomes

- Nearly 1 in 4 Vermont respondents (23%) were classified as food insecure in the last 30 days.
- Food insecurity rates have dropped by 22% since March, but still remain significantly above pre-COVID levels.
- Respondents with greater odds of food insecurity in June 2020 include:
 - Younger people (compared to older respondents)
 - 4X greater odds - People of color (compared to white respondents)
 - 3.8X greater odds - People without a college degree (compared to respondents with a college degree)
 - 3.5X greater odds - People who suffered a job loss, (especially those still out of work at the time of the survey) (compared to respondents without a job loss)
 - 2X greater odds - Households with children (especially under 5) (compared to households without children)
 - 1.8X greater odds - Women (compared to men)

Job Loss and Unemployment

Table 1. Percent of respondents with job disruptions in the last 30 days and at the time of the survey in June 2020.

Job Disruption Category	Last 30 Days Before Survey	Survey Date
Job Loss	16.50%	20.6%
Furlough	11.10%	10.3%
Loss of Hours	27.80%	30.6%

* Note that respondents could indicate multiple job disruptions.

Key Findings

1. Nearly 1 in 4 respondents (23%) were classified as food insecure in June, a reported 22% decrease since March, but higher than before COVID-19.
2. People of color, those without a college degree, those with a job loss, households with children, women, and younger people had greater odds of experiencing food insecurity.
3. The majority of respondent households had experienced some job loss or disruption in the last 30 days, and were still experiencing job changes at the time of the survey.
4. People receiving unemployment were significantly more likely to be using multiple food assistance programs compared to others.
5. Respondents significantly increased use of food assistance programs since March.
6. Vermonters today have greater concerns about food becoming more expensive and possible loss of food assistance programs compared to June.
7. Vermonters today are facing fewer perceived challenges in food access and have fewer worries about food availability compared to March.

- More than half of respondents were unemployed, furloughed, or had their work hours reduced in the last 30 days and still at the time of the survey (Table 1).
- 1 and 5 respondents were receiving unemployment (19.8%).

“Food prices have gone up. I am much less likely to use the food pantry because of the increased number of people who need help. I try to find other ways to cut down but mostly have just increased my debt and maxed out credit.”

- Survey respondent

Food Assistance Program Use

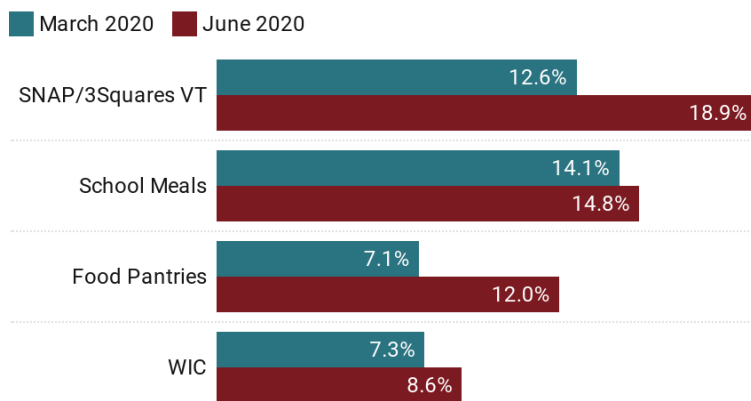


Figure 1. Increase in food assistance program use between March 2020 and June 2020.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant increase in the use of food assistance programs (Figure 1):

- 68% increase in the use of food pantries
- 49% increase in SNAP/3SquaresVT
- 17% increase in Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program

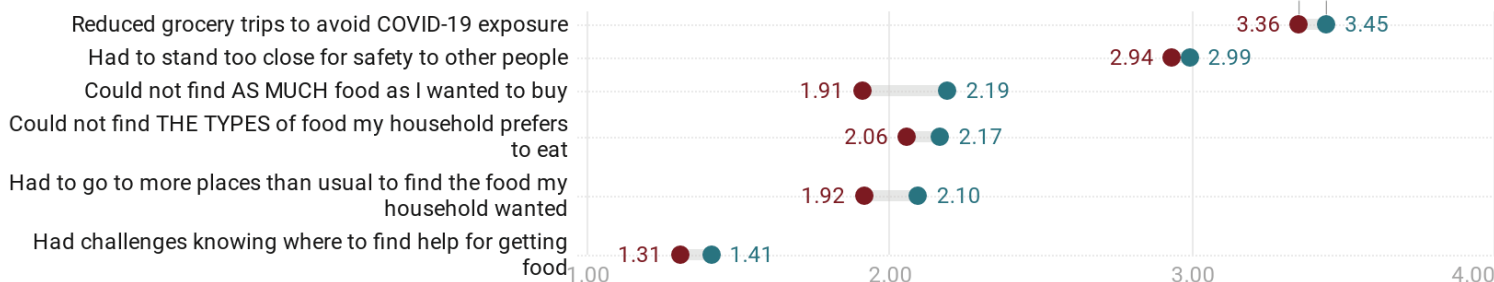


Figure 2. Average challenges for food access in March and June 2020. Scale includes: 1= Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Usually, 4= Every time.

Who’s Using Food Assistance Programs?

- Respondents with greater odds of using food pantries in June 2020:
 - 5.6X greater odds - People without a college degree
 - 2.7X greater odds - People of color
 - 2.2X greater odds - Households with children
 - 1.8X greater odds - People receiving unemployment
 - 1.7X greater odds - People out of work
- Respondents with greater odds of using SNAP/3SquaresVT in June 2020:
 - 4.3X greater odds - People without a college degree
 - 3.6X greater odds - People suffering a job loss in the last 30 days
 - 2.5X greater odds - Households with children
 - 1.8 X greater odds - Women
 - Younger people
- Respondents with greater odds of using WIC in June 2020:
 - 3.3X greater odds - People without a college degree
 - 2X greater odds - People receiving unemployment
 - Younger people

Food Security Improvements

People who experienced food insecurity in March demic, but are no longer classified as food insecure were more likely to:

- Indicate fewer challenges in knowing where to find help (e.g. are more aware of where to find help for food in June compared to March)
- Were 30% less likely to be using SNAP in June as compared to March 2020, compared with those who still experienced food insecurity
- Have reduced worry about being able to feed their household if they can’t leave home
- Have reduced worry about food assistance programs going away

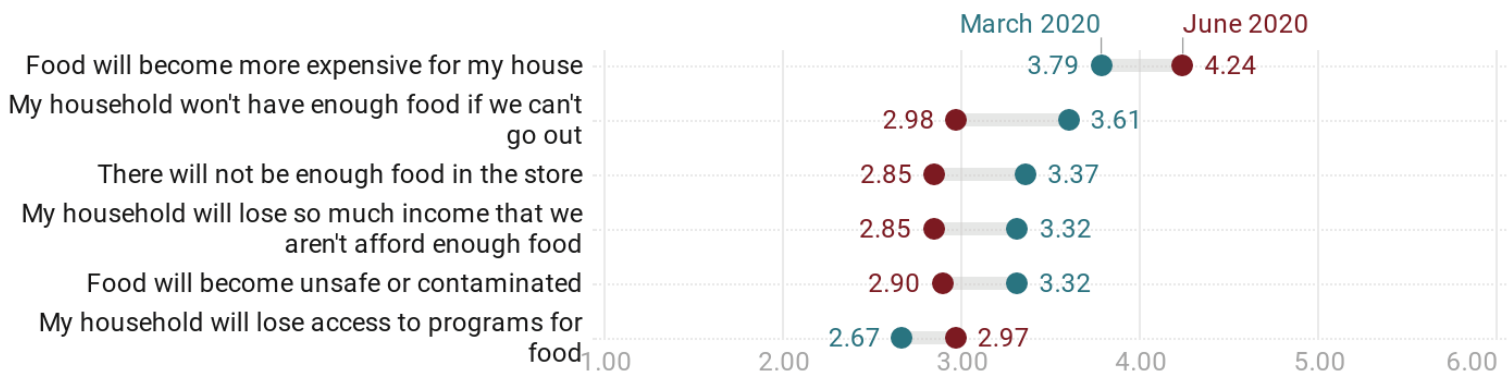


Figure 3. Average level of worry reported by respondents between March and June 2020. Concern ranges from 1 (not at all worried) to 6 (very worried).

Fewer Food Access Challenges Reported

- Overall, respondents indicated on average, fewer challenges for food access in June 2020 compared to March 2020 (Figure 2).
- Many respondent concerns on average have decreased between March 2020 and June 2020 (Figure 3).
- Increased concerns were reported for food becoming more expensive (11.9% average increase) and losing access to programs for food (11.2% average increase) between March and June 2020.

“...Shopping has become easier, once the stores had a method of distance, etc. In the beginning shopping was rather chaotic and fearful, with the unknown. I am purchasing more with each shopping visit, but going to the stores much, much less.”
- Survey respondent

Implications and Future Work

- Food insecurity among Vermonters remains consistently higher during COVID-19 than previous years of state level data (11.3% in 2018).
- People who have experienced job loss and disruption during COVID-19 may be especially vulnerable as unemployment benefits change.
- Vermonters are increasingly using emergency food to help with constraints on food access.
- While overall concerns about food access have been reduced since March 2020, Vermonters are more concerned than before about potential loss of food assistance programs and increasing food costs.
- Inequities in food security were found by race, sex, education, and family status; Vermont programs should prioritize and tailor food access and food assistance programs to address food acquisition challenges within food insecure subgroups.

- Knowing where to find help for food assistance was positively associated with improved food security outcomes
- Future research will continue to track the same Vermonters over time, as well as representative samples to understand the changing COVID-19 situation and its impact on food security and systems.

“Thankfully, this outbreak happened in the spring of the year when food starts to grow in Vermont. What happens if this comes again in the fall of the year?”
- Survey respondent

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank many community partners for assisting with the dissemination of the first survey including: Community College of Vermont, Farm to Institution New England, Front Porch Forum, Hunger Free Vermont, Representative Welch’s staff, Rural Vermont, Salvation Farms, Senator Sanders’ staff, Senator Leahy’s staff, Support and Services at Home (SASH), University of Vermont, University of Vermont Extension, VT Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, VT Department of Agriculture, VT Department of Children and Families, VT Department of Health, VT Farm to Plate Network, VT Foodbank, VT Retail and Grocers Association, VT Sustainable Jobs Fund. We thank the following for funding: University of Vermont- College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Office of the Vice President of Research, and the Gund Institute for Environment; University of Arizona- College of Agriculture and Life Science; Johns Hopkins University- Center for a Livable Future through a directed research grant. We would also like to thank Emily Barbour and Thomas Wentworth for their assistance with the survey dissemination and analysis.

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. Visit www.nfactresearch.org to learn more or contact Dr. Meredith Niles at mtniles@uvm.edu.