

Food Security Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Following a Group of Vermonters During the First Year

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Background

We surveyed a cohort of Vermonters three times during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic to understand the impacts of the pandemic on food security and food access. The surveys were conducted in March/April 2020, June 2020, and March/April 2021. A total of 441 Vermonters responded to all three surveys. This brief shares changes in their experiences between March 2020 and March 2021. Demographics of our respondents were comparable to Vermont average demographics on race, ethnicity, and income distributions, but our respondents were more likely to have a college degree and to identify as female (Table 1).

CHARACTERISTIC	VERMONT POPULATION	SURVEY POPULATION
White, non-Hispanic	92.6%	92.3%
BIPOC and/or Hispanic	7.4%	3.9%
Household Income:		
Less than \$25,000	19.6%	17.5%
\$25,000 to \$49,999	22.1%	22.2%
\$50,000 to \$74,999	18.8%	16.1%
\$75,000 to \$99,999	14.0%	15.0%
More than \$100,000	25.4%	23.6%
College degree or higher	37.3%	69.4%
Female	50.7%	78.7%

*Note that ~4% of respondents to the survey did not provide data on race/ethnicity

Table 1. Demographics of the survey population compared to the Vermont population

Key Findings

1. Food insecurity rates increased during the pandemic and remained above pre-pandemic levels a year after the start of the pandemic.
2. 31.6% of respondents experienced food insecurity at some point in the first year of the pandemic. Of those, 46.9% were food insecure before the pandemic, but over half (53.1%) were newly food insecure. Of the respondents who experienced food insecurity at any point during the pandemic, 61.9% were still food insecure in March 2021.
3. People without a college degree, those with a job disruption, households with children, women, and younger people had greater odds of experiencing food insecurity in March 2021.
4. Fewer respondents were using federal food assistance programs and food pantries in March 2021 compared to earlier in the pandemic.
5. More than half of respondents (54.2%) reported suffering a job disruption (i.e. job loss, reduction in work hours or income, furlough) since March 2020 and 18.4% were still experiencing a job disruption in March 2021.
6. Vermonters today are less concerned about food becoming more expensive and possible loss of food assistance programs compared to earlier in the pandemic.

Food Security Outcomes

Food insecurity rates increased during the pandemic and remain above pre-pandemic levels a year after the start of the pandemic (Table 2).

- Food insecurity rates dropped by 24.5% between March 2020 (24.1%) and March 2021 (18.2%) but were 22.9% higher than pre-COVID levels (14.8%).
- 31.6% of respondents experienced food insecurity at some point since the start of the pandemic. Of those, 46.9% were previously food insecure and 53.1% were newly food insecure.
- Food insecurity rates varied by demographic characteristics (Figure 1).

TIME PERIOD	FOOD INSECURE
Year prior to COVID-19	14.8%
Anytime during COVID-19	31.6%
March 2020	24.1%
May/June 2020	17.4%
Anytime during July 2020-Feb 2021	20.8%
March 2021	18.2%

Table 2. Percent of respondents experiencing food insecurity prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Note that food insecurity prevalence corresponds with different time frames.

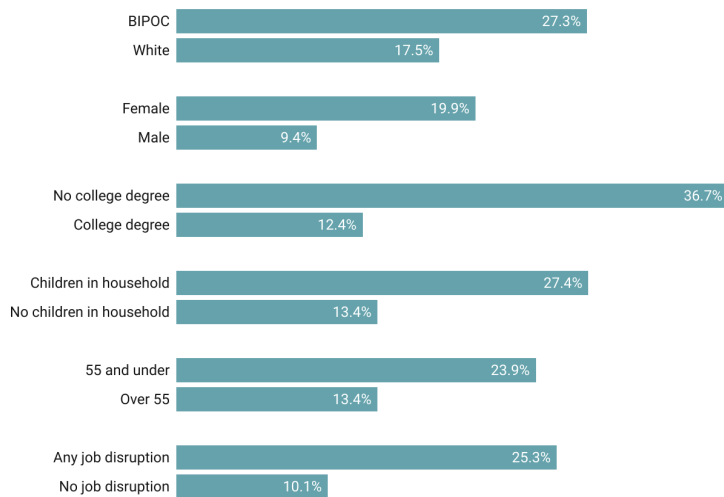


Figure 1: Percentage of respondents experiencing food insecurity in March 2021 by demographic characteristics

Respondents with greater odds of experiencing food insecurity in March 2021:

- 2.4x greater odds – women (compared to men)
- 4.1x greater odds – people without a college degree (compared to respondents with a college degree)
- 3x greater odds – people who experienced a job disruption at any time during the COVID-19 pandemic (compared to respondents with no job disruptions)
- 2.4x greater odds – households with children (compared to households without children)
- 2x greater odds – people under 55 (compared to people over 55)

Who is Still Experiencing Food Insecurity?

Respondents' food security status fluctuated over the course of the pandemic. Of the respondents who experienced food security at any point since the start of the pandemic, 61.9% were still food insecure in March 2021. Compared to respondents who were food insecure at some point during the pandemic but no longer food insecure in March 2021, those who were still food insecure in March 2021 were more likely to be experiencing a job disruption in March 2021 (2.4x greater odds) and to have been food insecure before the pandemic started (2.6x greater odds). 53.8% of respondents experiencing food insecurity in March 2021 also experienced food insecurity prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Job Disruptions and Unemployment

More than half of respondents (54.2%) reported suffering a job disruption (i.e. job loss, reduction in work hours or income, furlough) since March 2020 and 18.4% were still reporting a job disruption in March 2021. The share of respondents was highest during the first few months of the pandemic and leveled off by July. Since July 2020, approximately 18-21% of respondents were reporting a job disruption each month.

The most common type of job disruption was a loss of hours or income followed by job loss (Table 3). The duration of these job disruptions varied with 42.3% of respondents experiencing a job disruption lasting more than 6 months since June 2020 (Figure 2). More than 1 in 5 respondents (21.8%) received unemployment at some point since March 2020.

TYPE OF JOB DISRUPTION	SHARE OF RESPONDENTS
Job Loss	28.8%
Loss of Income/Hours	54.1%
Furloughed	6.5%
Other	22.0%

Table 3. Among respondents with a job disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic, percent of respondents that experienced different types of disruptions. Note that respondents could indicate multiple job disruptions.

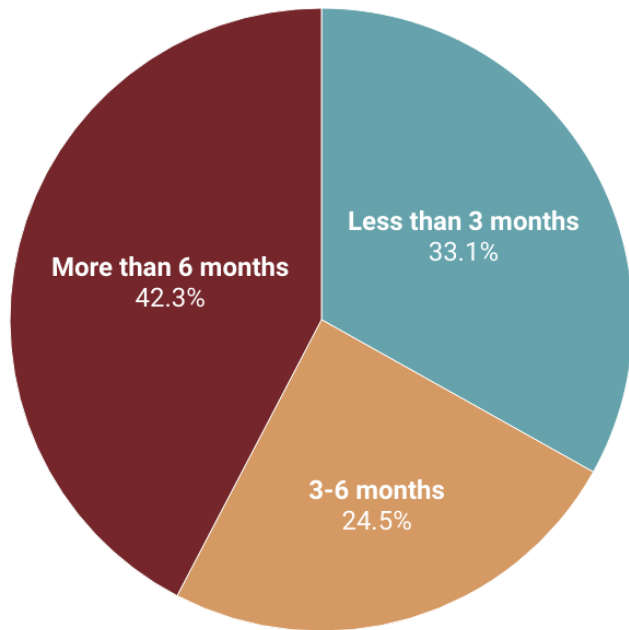


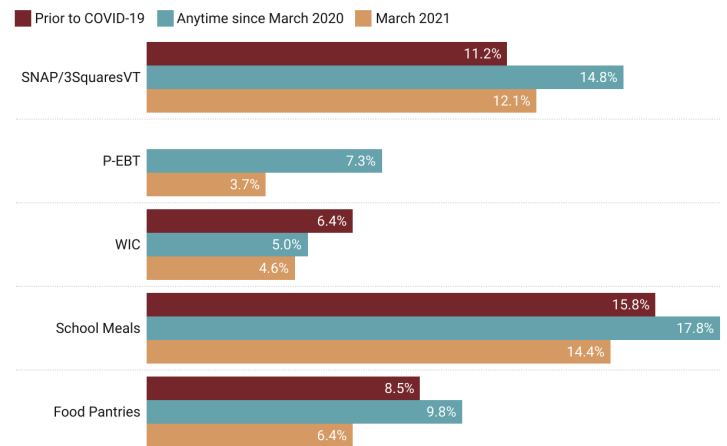
Figure 2. Duration of job disruptions reported in March 2021 since June 2020.

Food Assistance Program Use

Among this sample of Vermonters, participation in food assistance programs increased during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic, except for the Special Sup-

plemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). However, by March 2021 participation in all programs had declined compared to earlier in the pandemic:

- 18.2% decrease in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/3SquaresVT)
- 49.3% decrease in Pandemic-EBT
- 8.0% decrease in WIC program
- 19.1% decrease in school meal programs
- 34.7% decrease in the use of food pantries



Note: Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) did not exist prior to the pandemic.

Figure 3. Change in food assistance program use during the COVID-19 pandemic

Concerns About Food Access Are Decreasing

On average, respondents are less concerned about food becoming more expensive and not being able to afford food or access food assistance programs compared to in March and June 2020 (Figure 4). Respondents who were

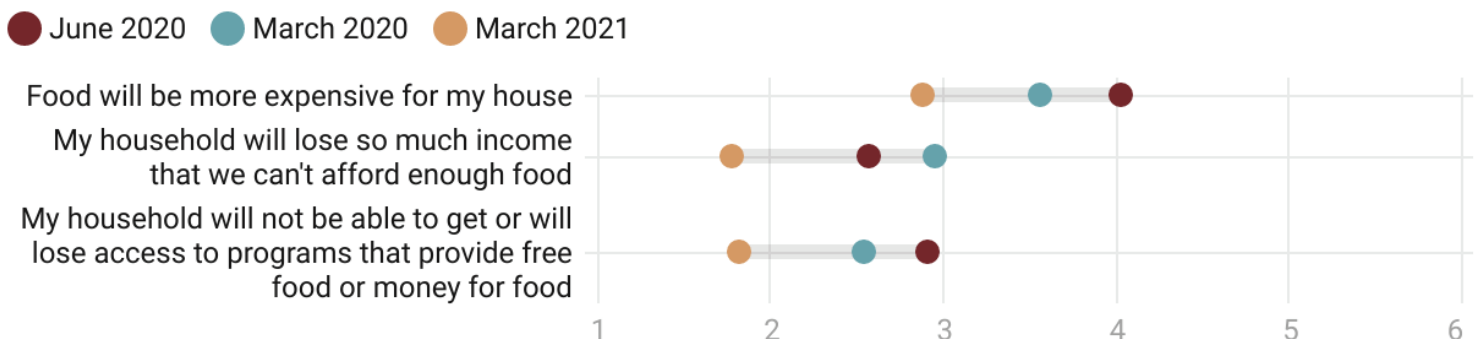


Figure 4. Average level of worry reported by all respondents in March 2020, June 2020, and March 2021. Concern ranges from 1 (not at all worried) to 6 (very worried).

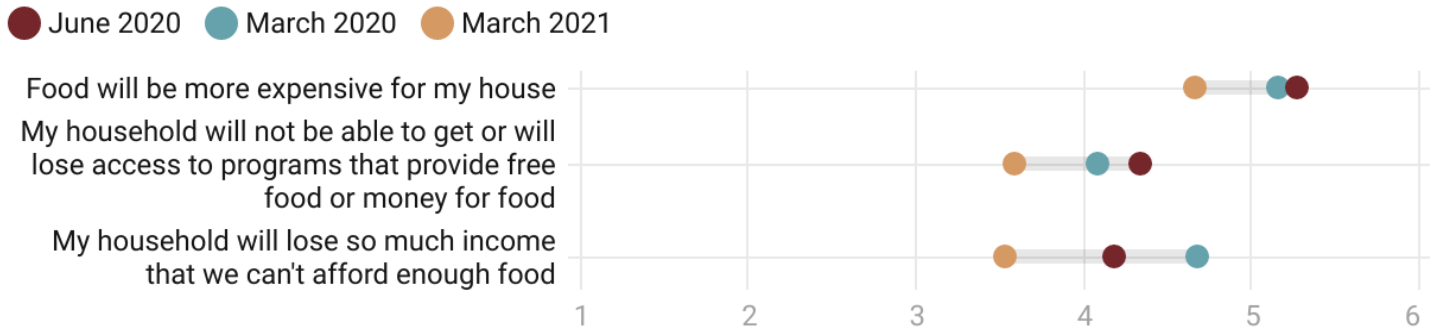


Figure 5. Average level of worry reported by respondents who were food insecure in March 2021. Concern ranges from 1 (not at all worried) to 6 (very worried).

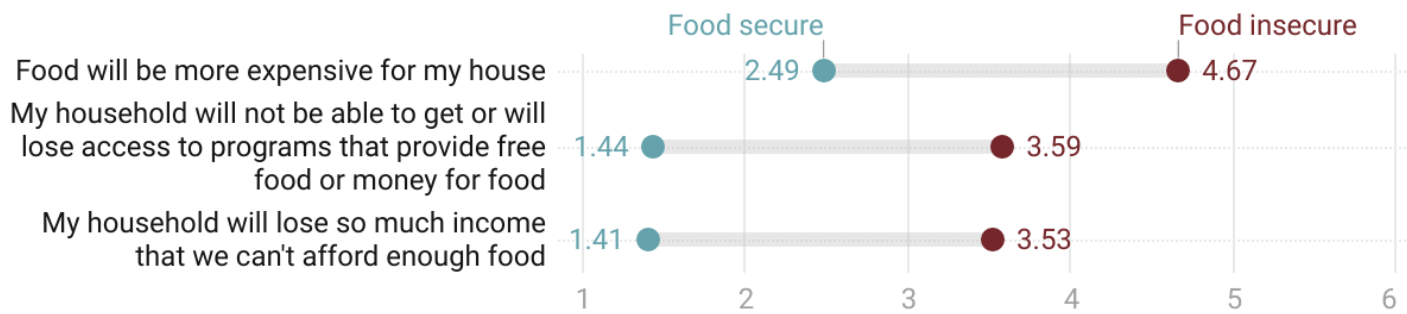


Figure 6. Average level of worry reported by respondents in March 2021 by food security status. Concern ranges from 1 (not at all worried) to 6 (very worried).

still experiencing food insecurity in March 2021 were also less concerned about food becoming more expensive and not being able to afford food or access food assistance programs as compared to in March and June 2020 (Figure 5). However, food insecure respondents were more concerned about food access challenges in March 2021 than food secure respondents. When comparing the different categories of concern, both food secure and food insecure respondents are most worried about food becoming more expensive (Figure 6).

Acknowledgments

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