

Food Security and Assistance Programs in Vermont Before and During COVID-19

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Background

The National Food Access and COVID research Team (NFACT) sought to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by surveying a cohort of Vermonters at three time points over the first year of the pandemic. The surveys were conducted in March/April 2020, June 2020, and March/April 2021. The demographics of the 441 Vermonters who responded to all three surveys are comparable to average Vermont demographics on income, but the respondents were more likely to have a college degree and to identify as female. This brief explores how the use of food assistance programs varied within this population and changed over the course of the pandemic.

Key Findings

1. The number of Vermonters using food assistance programs grew by 86.7% between March 2020 and March 2021 from 24.8% to 46.4%.
2. Vermonters using food assistance programs were more likely to have lower incomes and education levels, to have children, or to have experienced job disruption during the pandemic than those that did not use food assistance programs.
3. BIPOC/Hispanic Vermonters were more likely to use community-based food assistance programs (compared with federal food assistance programs) than non-Hispanic white Vermonters.
4. Worries about the qualifications, logistics, and stigma involved in using food programs grew between May/June 2020 and March 2021.
5. Experiences and perceptions of food assistance program use vary significantly between individuals using federal programs, community programs, or a combination of the two.
6. There are significant demographic differences between groups of people using federal programs, community programs, or a combination of the two.

| Federal | Community |
|---|--|
| Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/3SquaresVT) | Food pantries/soup kitchens |
| Women, Infant and Children (WIC) Program | Support from family and friends in the form of food or money |
| School food programs (including breakfast and lunch) | Vermont Farmer to Families Food Box* |
| Meals on Wheels | Free community restaurant meal programs (e.g. Everybody Eats)* |
| Pandemic-EBT/school meal replacement benefits* | |
| Summer feeding programs (like the YMCA or library) | |

*Added to the survey in March/April 2021

Table 1: Categorization of the food programs included in the surveys

Participation in Food Assistance Programs Throughout the Pandemic

Overall use of food assistance programs has varied, but steadily increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-pandemic use (30.3%) of programs was higher than in the first month of the pandemic in March 2020 (24.8%) (Figure 1). However, rates of food program use increased by 86.7% between March 2020 (24.8%) and March 2021 (46.4%).



Figure 1: Percentage of respondents using food programs over the course of the pandemic

The proportion of food insecure respondents using food assistance programs dropped immediately at the start of the pandemic, from 70.3% at any point in the year before the COVID-19 pandemic

to 47.6% in March 2020. However, as with the general population, food assistance program use increased for food insecure households throughout the pandemic. Between July 2020 and March 2021, the percentage of food insecure households using food programs was consistently greater than pre-pandemic participation levels (Figure 2).

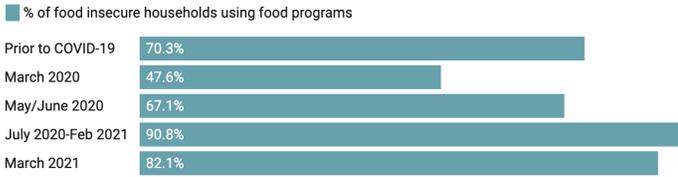
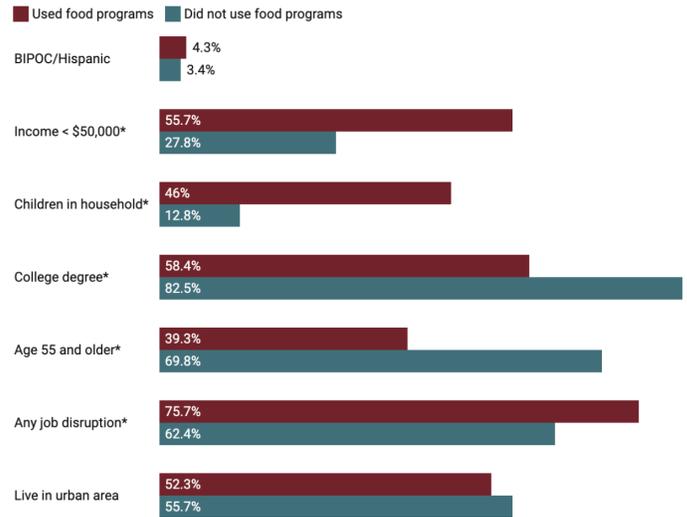


Figure 2: Percentage of food insecure households using food programs over the course of the pandemic

Who Uses Food Assistance Programs?

There are statistically significant differences in the demographic makeup of Vermonters using food assistance programs since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and those who have not used food programs (Figure 3). Overall, people with lower incomes, without college degrees, or who experienced job disruptions were significantly more likely to use food assistance programs. Additionally, older individuals and families with children in the household were more likely to use food assistance programs.



* statistically significant (p < 0.05) differences exist between those using food programs and not using food programs for these demographic factors

Figure 3: Demographics of individuals using food assistance programs during COVID-19 versus those not using food assistance programs

Who Uses Federal Versus Community Programs?

We categorized food assistance programs as federal or community programs (Table 1).

BIPOC/Hispanic respondents were more likely to use community programs than non-Hispanic white respondents. Around half (48.2%) of BIPOC/Hispanic respondents used community programs

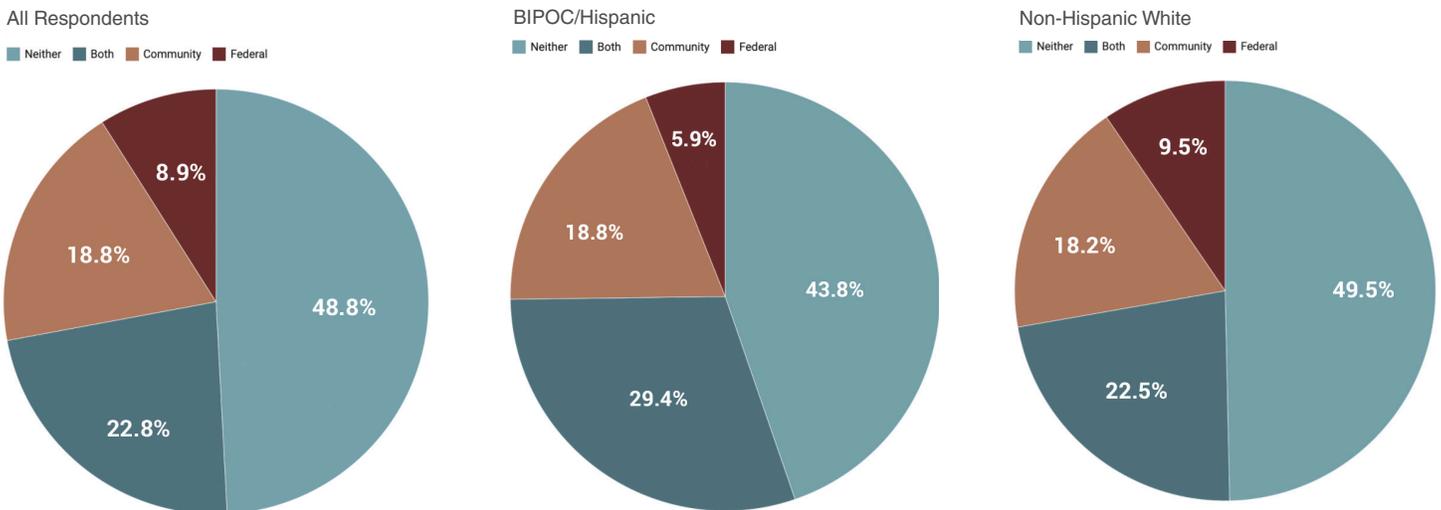
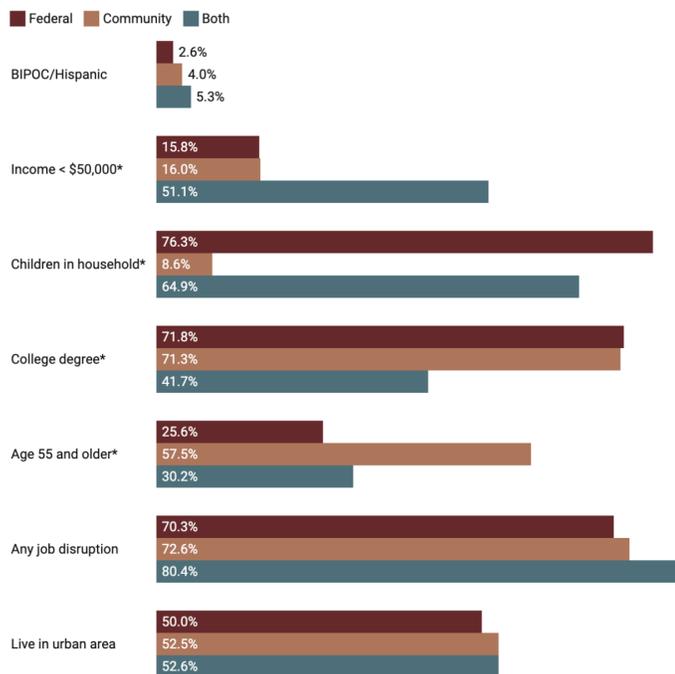


Figure 4: Percentage of all respondents, BIPOC/Hispanic individuals, and non-Hispanic white individuals using each type of food program

either on their own or in combination with federal programs. In contrast, only 40.7% of non-Hispanic white respondents utilized community programs.

Demographics varied significantly across groups using only federal programs, only community programs, or a combination of both (Figure 5). Very few households using only community programs had children compared to those using federal programs, potentially because of the federal WIC program and school feeding programs. A significantly larger proportion of individuals using a combination of federal and community programs had an income less than \$50,000 and no college degree compared to those using only one type of program.



* statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) differences exist between the three groups

Figure 5: Demographics of individuals using only federal programs, only community programs, or a combination of both

Perceptions and Experiences with Food Assistance Programs

In the second and third surveys (May/June 2020 and March 2021), respondents who reported they used food assistance programs were asked about their perception of these programs and their experiences using them. Between June 2020 and March 2021, worries about using food assistance programs grew among respondents (Figure 6).

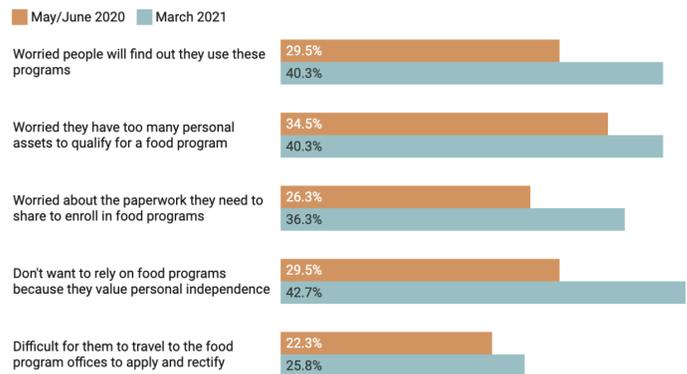


Figure 6: Changes in perceptions and experiences with food assistance programs

Implications and Future Research

This research provides insight into how food assistance programs have supported Vermonters during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings help to reveal the gap between the support provided by food assistance programs and the needs of the Vermont community. The data may also help explain why some people who may benefit from food assistance programs do not participate in programs offering support. Future research could compare the perceptions and experiences reported for each food assistance program to gain a better understanding of trends in participation and efficacy. More research is needed to examine the efficacy of these programs in alleviating food insecurity among those who participate over the short and longer-term as the pandemic continues to evolve.

Acknowledgements

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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.

