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Food Security in the COVID-19 Era

Dana I. Allison

The University of Vermont

Alex Cohen

Elena Dansky

Willie Dong

Helen Gandler

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Dana I. Allison, Alex Cohen, Elena Dansky, Willie Dong, Helen Gandler, Luke Hallgarth, Sarah Kendrick, A Carmola, M Bridges, TV Delaney PhD, and JK Carney MD



Introduction

- Food insecurity is defined as lack of consistent access to sufficient or nutritious food.ⁱ The state of Vermont is not immune to food insecurity, with a rate of 11.3% of households in 2018, closely tailing the national average of 11.5% for that year.ⁱⁱ The Covid-19 pandemic created an unprecedented shift in daily life, exacerbating food insecurity for some, while precipitating food insecurity for those previously unaffected.
- A study focusing on food insecurity in Vermont from March to April 2020 found a 32.3% increase in food insecurity, with 35.5% of food-insecure households being previously food-secure.ⁱⁱⁱ This change highlighted not only the incidence of food insecurity, but also acknowledged growing demographic changes seen by newly food insecure households.
- This study aims to assess community perspectives on food access and affordability in the state of Vermont during the Covid-19 pandemic. These data will then provide guidance for future action to combat current and future food insecurity.

Methods

Study Population

- Eligible participants were Vermont residents of at least eighteen years old with no other demographic exclusion criteria

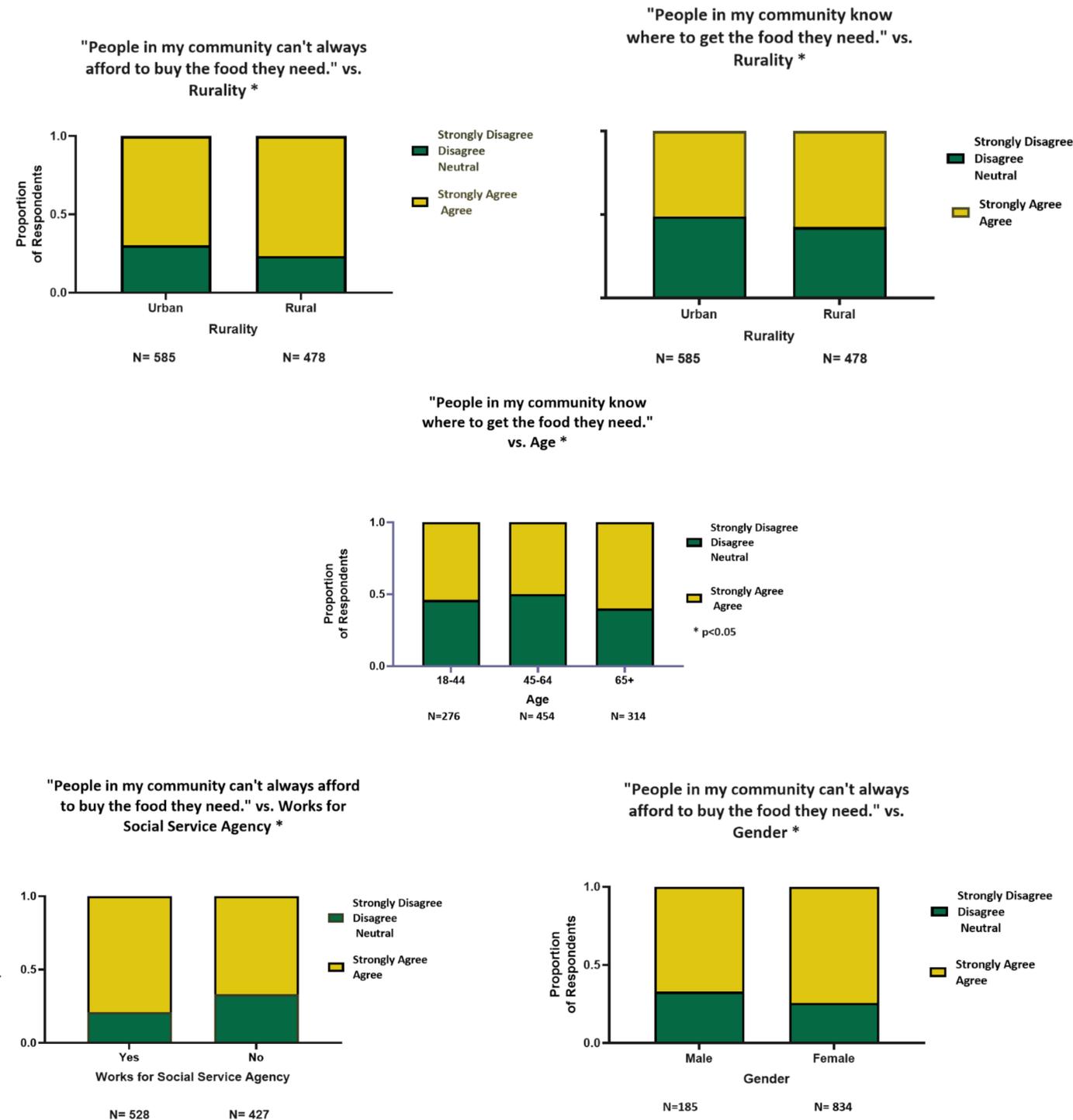
Survey & Distribution

- An electronic cross-sectional survey was distributed by multiple United Way agencies in Vermont, Vermont Department of Health, and word of mouth. For food security participants answered the following two items on a scale with the options: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree:
 - "People in my community can't always afford to buy the food they need."
 - "People in my community know where to get the food they need."

Statistical Analysis

- Statistical analyses were performed using the IBM SPSS Statistics Data Editor. Answers to the food security questions were divided into two groups: 'Strongly Agree/Agree' and 'Strongly Disagree/Disagree/Neither Agree nor Disagree (Neutral)'.
 - Chi-squared tests were used to identify associations between the answers and characteristics.
 - Participants who chose 'prefer not to answer' were not included in the analysis specific to that question. Results with a p-value of <0.05 were considered significant.

Results



Discussion/Conclusion

- Age, gender, occupation, and rurality were all found to have an impact on food security in the setting of Covid-19 in Vermont. Here, we focus on the implications of rural vs. urban living.
- Rural environments were found to have a decreased belief in community food affordability, while also having a perceived increase in knowing where to obtain food. As such, efforts should focus on addressing food affordability.
- A 2018 survey of Vermont farms found that 15% and 16% of lost berries and vegetables were thought to be salvageable.^{iv} A study comparing supermarket produce to farmers' markets produce in North Carolina calculated an average savings of 17.9% at farmers' markets.^v Utilizing this waste could simultaneously increase food and financial security to rural areas.
- Urban respondents had greater concern for food availability than affordability. Currently, the University of Vermont is providing food security information to campus groups.^{vi}
- To create increased awareness in Burlington at large, the authors suggest expanding this to local organizations. Establishing a delivery service from food pantries could supply an efficient way of improving access to food.
- Further studies are needed to follow the continuation of Covid-19 and its impact on food security in Vermont.

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