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Food Access and Security During Coronavirus: A Vermont Study

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General Overview Brief

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Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected people across the globe, disrupting food access and security. To understand how food systems and security are impacted, an online survey was launched for two weeks in Vermont beginning March 29th (less than a week after the order to “Stay home, stay safe”) through Front Porch Forum, social media ads, media coverage, and community partners. A total of 3,251 Vermonters responded. This brief provides a summary of their responses, including reported food security, perceived impacts, concerns related to food access, and food behaviors. For detailed information on the respondents experiencing food insecurity or who experienced a job disruption, please see the separate briefs dedicated to those topics.

Coronavirus Decreases Food Security and Access

- Based on a standardized set of USDA questions, food insecurity has increased by 33% since the coronavirus outbreak (18.3% of respondents reported experiencing food insecurity in the last year, and 24.4% reported experiencing food insecurity since the first case of coronavirus was identified in Vermont on March 8th) (Figure 1).

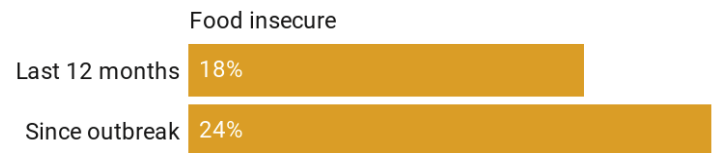


Figure 1. Percent of respondents experiencing food insecurity in the last 12 months and since the coronavirus outbreak.

Key Findings

1. Respondents reported a 33% increase in food insecurity since the coronavirus outbreak began in Vermont (from 18% to 24%).
2. 45% of respondents with jobs experienced a job disruption or loss.
3. Respondents said the most helpful actions for meeting their food needs would be increased trust in the safety of going to stores and more food in stores.
4. Respondents worried most about food becoming unaffordable and running out of food if they were unable to go out.
5. Vermonters are using a variety of strategies to adapt: a majority of respondents are at least somewhat likely to buy foods that don't go bad quickly (90%); buy different, cheaper foods (69%); and stretch the food they have by eating less (52%).

- Since the outbreak, the top sources for food were grocery stores (81%), restaurant delivery (43%), and specialty stores such as co-ops, health food stores, or ethnic markets (37%).
- The percent of people reporting that “someone brings me food” doubled from 10% to 20% since the start of the outbreak.
- Among respondent households, 24% indicated a food allergy or sensitivity, 18% included someone who needs to avoid foods for a health condition, 15% included at least one vegetarian or vegan, and 2% reported a religious restriction.

“I have been cooking meals for folks who don't know how to cook, or need support. I started an Instagram to share ideas and resources around growing/shopping for/cooking/preserving food.”

- Vermont survey respondent

- 19% of households who reported a special diet said that their ability to meet these needs has changed since the coronavirus outbreak.
- This survey evaluated a variety of impacts related to food from the coronavirus outbreak. Figure 2 shows the frequency of those occurrences; 87% said they reduced grocery trips to avoid exposure “usually” or “always” and 58% said they spent more time cooking “usually” or “always.”



Figure 3. Word cloud of foods that respondents wanted but could not find at the store.

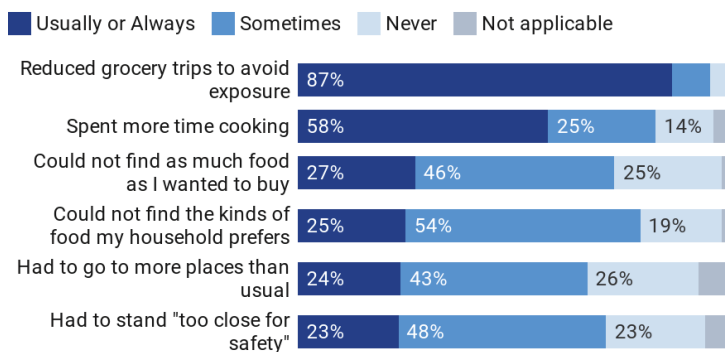


Figure 2. Top six impacts from the coronavirus outbreak. The majority of respondents indicated that these happened “sometimes,” “usually,” or “always.”

Vermonters Worry About Food, Forced to Adapt

- Respondents reported a variety of techniques that would be helpful during the outbreak. The top three responses were about the safety and variety of food that is available; additionally, 51% of Vermonters said that more money would be helpful and 43% would value support for food delivery costs (Figure 4).
- 22% of respondents said that both increased benefits from existing programs and information about food assistance programs would be at least somewhat helpful.

“I worry about the safety of the food workers at supermarkets and other food stores.”

- Vermont survey respondent

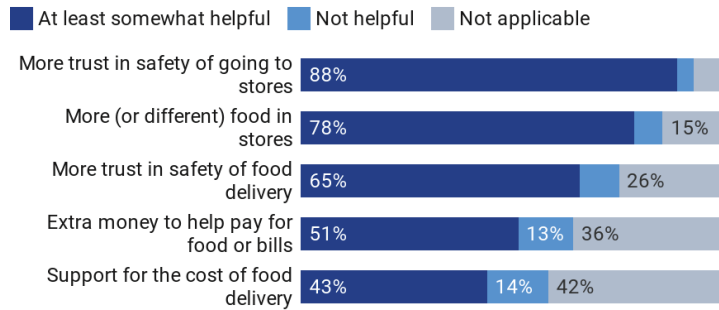


Figure 4. Top five most helpful items to make it easier for households to meet their food needs during the coronavirus outbreak (includes responses of “somewhat helpful,” “helpful,” and “very helpful”).

- Of respondents indicating that extra money would be helpful, on average they reported that they need \$106 extra per week to meet their food needs.
- Respondents expressed a variety of worries about food during the outbreak, especially food becoming more expensive, not having enough food if they can’t go out (e.g. if quarantined), and food becoming unsafe (Figure 5).

“We have been trying to find delivery of some items as my husband and I are both sick/immune compromised. The only local service is out a week... we need help in small towns.”

- Vermont survey respondent

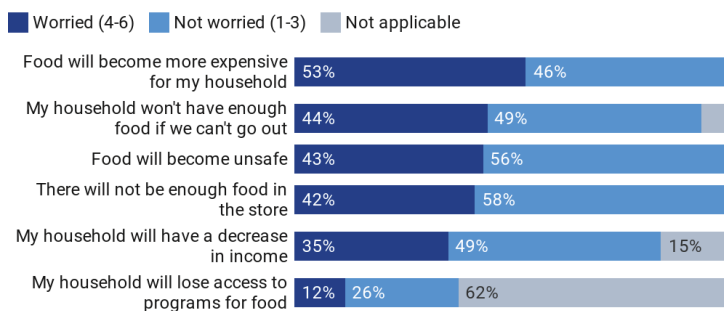


Figure 5. Level of worry for the household as it relates to coronavirus on a scale from 1 (not at all worried) to 6 (extremely worried).

- The top three strategies respondents reported that they would use if they had trouble affording food are buying foods that don’t go bad, buying different or cheaper foods, and eating less (Figure 6).
- While only 14% of respondents reported currently using government food assistance programs, one in four reported that they were at least somewhat likely to use government food assistance in the future.

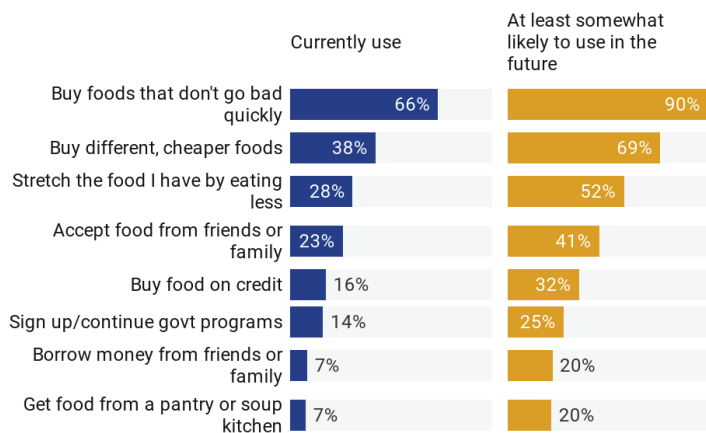


Figure 6. Strategies that respondents are currently using, or are at least somewhat likely to use in the future (includes “somewhat likely,” “likely,” and “very likely”).

Buying Patterns are Changing

- Purchasing behaviors have changed for a variety of items, and skew towards buying more (Figure 7). A majority of households are buying more canned goods (64%) and pantry foods (60%). About one in five respondents indicated that their buying was “the same” for every item.
- Respondents generally felt their households were reacting differently to the coronavirus outbreak than an “average US household” (Figure 8). Nearly half of households reported buying a lot more in a single trip, while 88% thought that the average U.S. household did this.

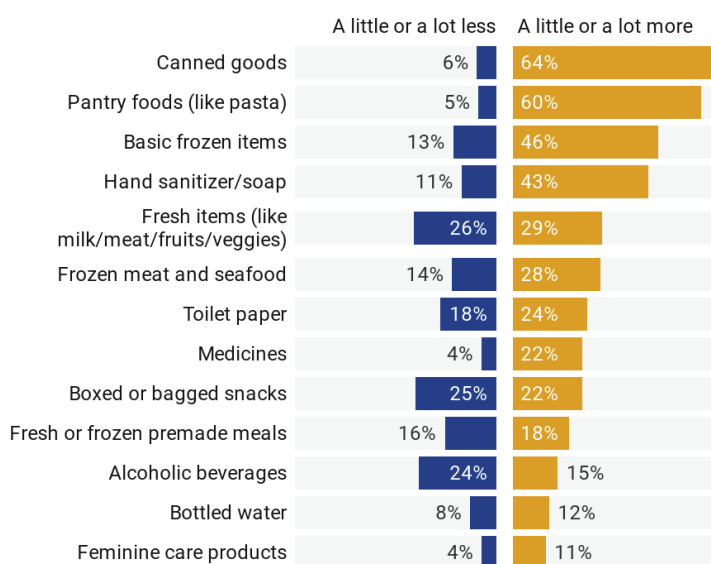


Figure 7. Changes in household buying patterns since the coronavirus outbreak. This figure does not include those that indicated they were buying “the same” amount of a product.

- Similarly, 49% said they bought a lot more items in a single trip, while 88% thought that the average household did this. Generally, respondents felt they were wasting less food since the coronavirus outbreak, and that the average household was throwing away more food comparatively.

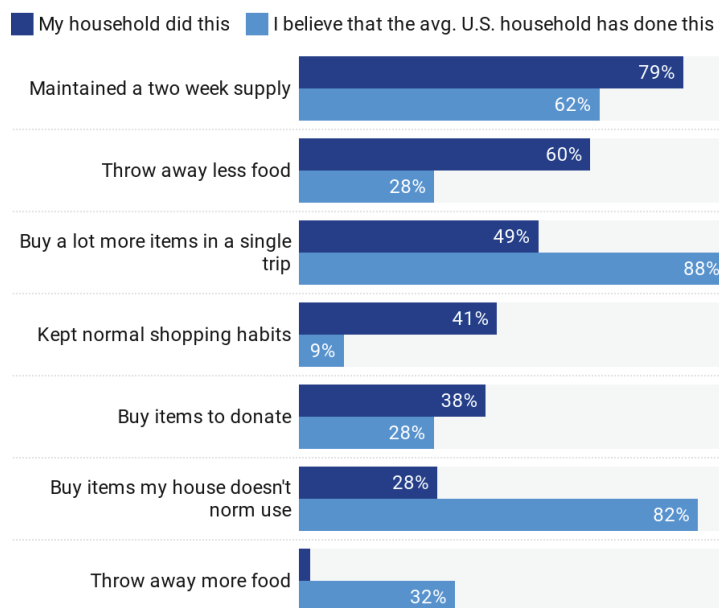


Figure 8. Comparison of self-reported behavior to the expected behavior of the average U.S. household.

“I am concerned that too many Americans are hoarding resources that those who need them cannot access them (toilet paper, baby formula, diapers, etc). People do not grasp that we are in for a long haul and we need to be conscientious of others. This won't be over by the end of April.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Coronavirus Affects Vermont Jobs and Perceptions

- Respondents generally felt that average people should take action to prevent the spread of coronavirus and that it would affect people like them. There were more divided perspectives on how coronavirus will affect Vermont versus other states. The majority of respondents didn't feel prepared for coronavirus (Figure 9).

- The majority (58%) did not know anyone with symptoms of or diagnosed with the coronavirus. Of those that did know someone, 18% said they themselves had to quarantine in their homes due to coronavirus.
- 45% of respondents with jobs indicated they experienced a job disruption, including being furloughed (9%), having a reduction in hours (20%), or losing their job (15%).

Respondents reflect the Vermont Population

- The respondent population (n=3,251) is highly representative of the Vermont population (2% margin of error). The sample population closely matched the current demographics of Vermont in terms of age, race, ethnicity, and income.
- 79% of respondents were female, compared with a state average of 51%.
- A higher proportion of respondents had formal education compared to the state average (65% with bachelor's degrees compared to 37% in Vermont).
- 86% of Vermont ZIP Codes are represented, and 40% of respondents reside in the Burlington metro area (35% of Vermont's population is in this area) (Figure 10).

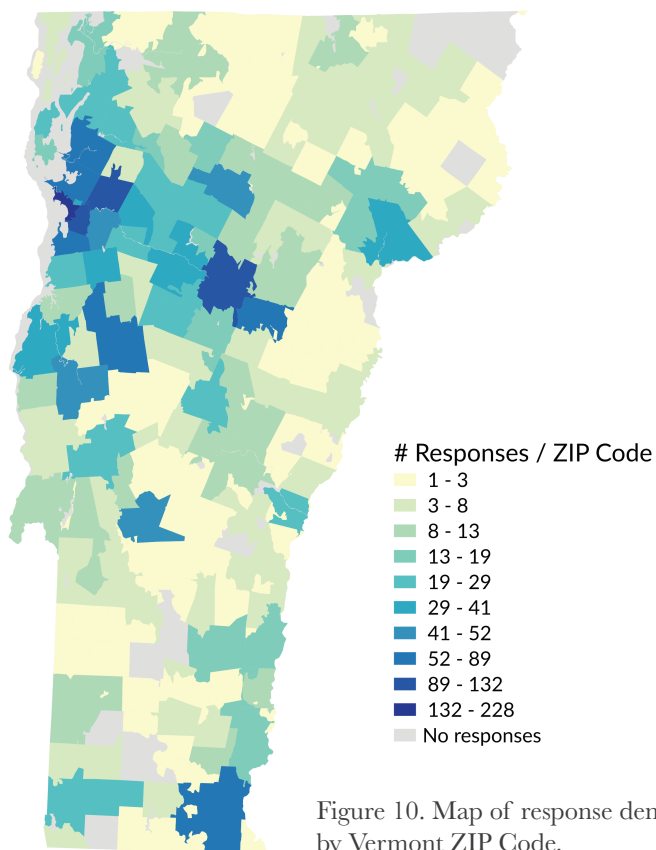


Figure 10. Map of response density by Vermont ZIP Code.

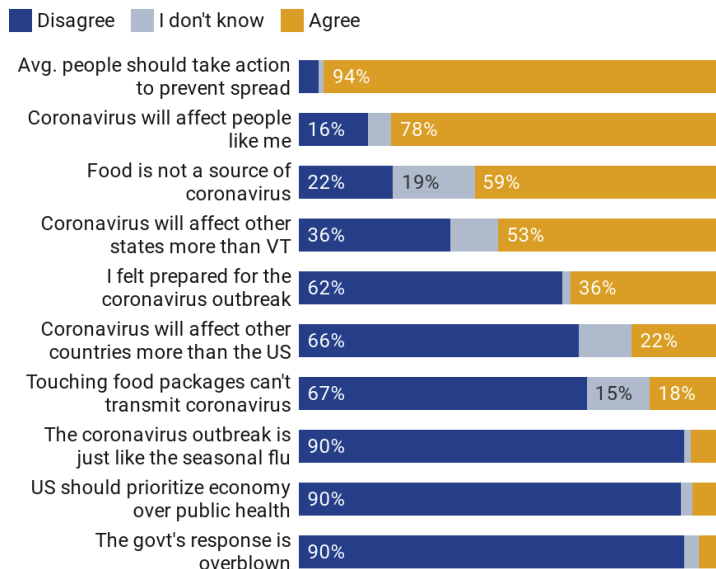


Figure 9. Agreement with statements regarding the coronavirus outbreak. This was a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The categories were grouped accordingly (“Disagree” includes 1, 2, and 3 while “Agree” includes 4, 5, and 6).

Acknowledgements

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This research team intends to replicate this study in Vermont, other states, and nationally through future surveys. If you are interested in collaborating on this effort, or if you have any other questions about this research please contact Dr. Meredith Niles at mtniles@uvm.edu.

“Going to be eating more dandelion greens than usual this spring. [Losing] my job due to coronavirus has left me with way more time for cooking. Having the time to cook has allowed me to spend less money on food.”

- Vermont survey respondent