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The Impact of Coronavirus on Vermonters Experiencing Food Insecurity

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Introduction

This brief is part of a three-part series highlighting the results from an online survey launched in Vermont on 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. The survey was open for two weeks and received a total of 3,251 responses. This brief provides a summary of results from respondents experiencing food insecurity. Food insecurity was measured using the USDA’s validated six-item household food security survey module.³ Respondents were classified as food insecure if their answers indicated they experienced low or very low food

security either in the 12 months before the coronavirus outbreak (n=541) and/or since the coronavirus outbreak (n=705). Excluding the overlap in these categories, a total of 817 respondents (27.1% of all respondents) experienced food insecurity sometime in the last 12 months. For detailed information on the full results from all respondents or from those who experienced a job disruption, please see the separate briefs dedicated to those topics. Additional analyses are ongoing and future articles will explore these topics in greater detail.

Majority Express Challenges with Food Access

- Overall, 84.2% of respondents experiencing food insecurity in the year before coronavirus remained food insecure during the coronavirus outbreak.
- Respondents experiencing food insecurity expressed a number of food disruptions and concerns since the outbreak. For example, 82.8% of respondents experiencing food insecurity said they couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals (Figure 1).

Key Findings

1. Respondents experiencing food insecurity were more likely to be people of color, female, live in households with children, and live in larger households.
2. 84.2% of respondents who experienced food insecurity at some point in the year before the coronavirus pandemic remained food insecure during the early days of the outbreak.
3. The majority of respondents experiencing food insecurity are not utilizing food assistance programs.
4. 2/3 of respondents experiencing food insecurity are already buying different, cheaper foods or eating less to make their food last.
5. 2/3 of respondents experiencing food insecurity with a job had job disruption or loss since the coronavirus outbreak.
6. Vermonters are helping each other – there was a reported doubling in the percentage of people receiving their food via delivery from other people.

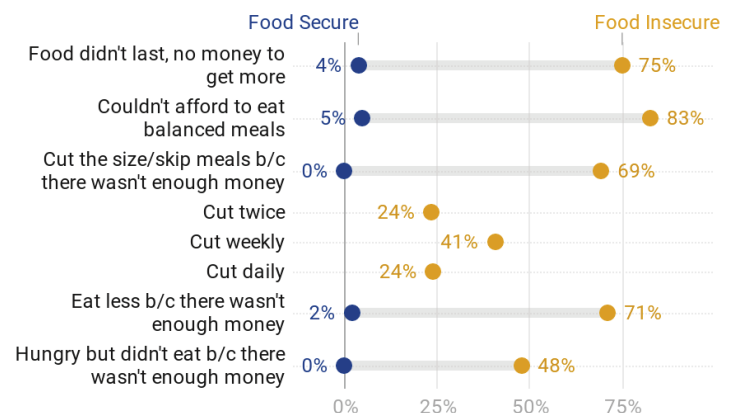


Figure 1. Specific USDA food security questions, which classify respondents as experiencing food insecurity or not.

³ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/media/8282/short2012.pdf>

- The majority of respondents experiencing food insecurity are not participating in food assistance programs (Table 1).
- Respondents experiencing food insecurity reported using their own vehicles, walking/biking, or someone delivering their food as the top most common means of transportation to obtain food. Since the coronavirus outbreak, there was a doubling in having others bring them food (from 12.8% to 25.2%).
- Compared to food secure respondents, respondents experiencing food insecurity reported greater frequency of various challenges related to food access since coronavirus, including finding the amount and types of food needed, food affordability, and food pantry access (Figure 2).

Table 1. Program Participation Among Respondents Experiencing Food Insecurity

Program Participation	12 months before coronavirus	Since coronavirus
SNAP (formerly food stamps)	27.5%	20.9%
School food	23.4%	21.2%
Food pantry	23.1%	15.7%
WIC	14.2%	10.5%
Meals on Wheels	2.6%	1.8%

“These [school meal pickups/delivery] have been such a tremendous blessing. The crew that puts it together, heroes, each of them.”

- Vermont survey respondent

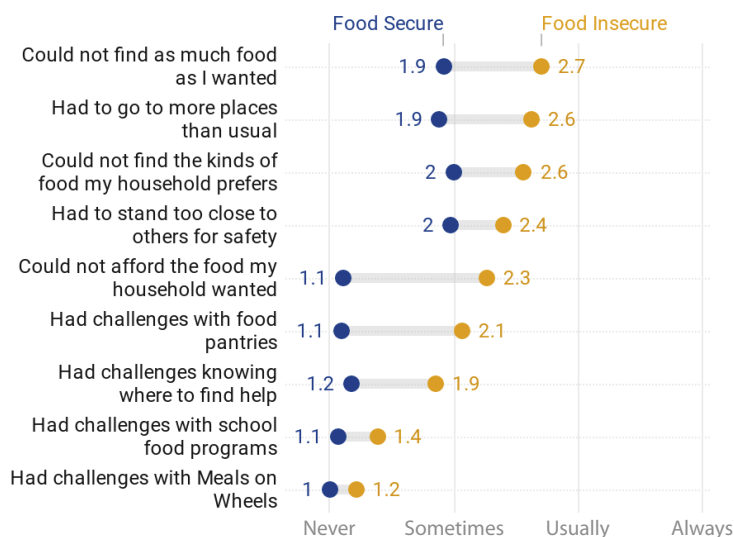


Figure 2. Average experiences and challenges since the coronavirus between food secure and food insecure respondents.

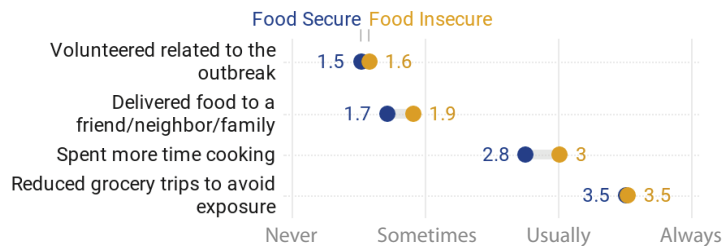


Figure 3. Behavioral changes since the coronavirus between food secure and food insecure respondents.

- Respondents experiencing food insecurity were more likely to be cooking more often since the coronavirus outbreak (Figure 3).
- For respondents experiencing food insecurity, the top food sources since the coronavirus were grocery stores (75.9%), restaurant delivery (44.1%), and convenience stores (40.3%).
- Households experiencing food insecurity were less likely to use a farm CSA/local farmstand or specialty store (e.g. coop, health food store, ethnic market) but not less likely to use a farmers’ market in the past year compared to food secure households. With the closure of farmers’ markets in Vermont, this could indicate that this population may have limited ability to access fresh, local Vermont products.

Higher Food Worry and Coping Strategies

- Respondents experiencing food insecurity were significantly more likely to find any potential assistance strategy to be helpful, with the most helpful strategies being: additional money for food/bills, greater trust in the safety of stores, and increased benefits for government programs (Figure 4).

“I would like to see SNAP benefits expanded to home-delivery such as local CSAs and maybe mail-order like Amazon Pantry or Blue Apron. The food shelf has been a great resource, but they do not have basics like flour, butter or milk most days, mostly carbs and grocery store leftovers.”

- Vermont survey respondent

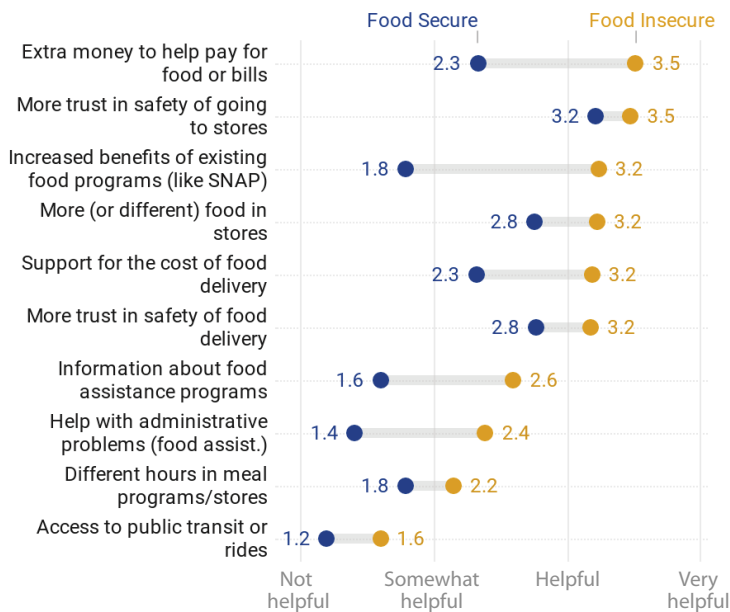


Figure 4. Average perceived level of helpfulness for a variety of potential strategies between food secure and food insecure respondents.

Compared to those who did not experience food insecurity in the past year, those who did:

- Were significantly more likely to express worry and anxiety over a number of potential coronavirus and food access concerns, especially the potential increased cost of food (Figure 5).
- Were significantly more likely to already be utilizing (and likely to utilize in the future) coping strategies because they had trouble affording food (Figure 6).
 - 77.6% are buying foods that would last longer;
 - 66.7% are buying different, cheaper foods, and;
 - 65.8% are eating less.
- On average, indicated that an extra \$110 per week would help them meet their needs (compared to \$101 per week for food secure respondents).

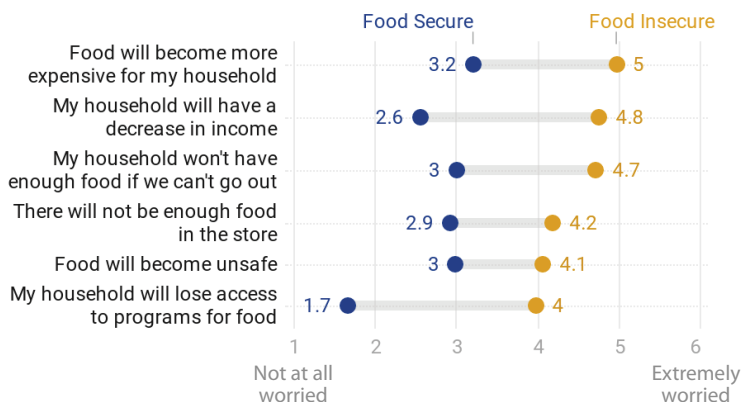


Figure 5. Average level of worry related to food and coronavirus among food insecure and food secure respondents.

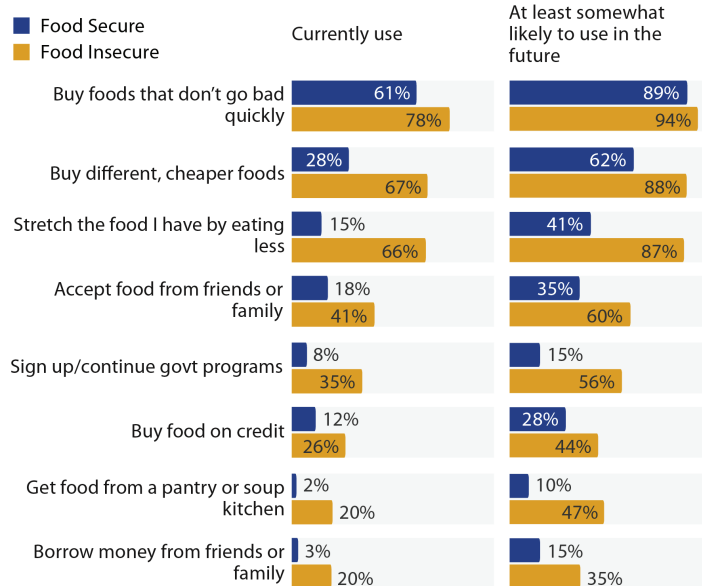


Figure 6. Current and potential future strategies to be utilized compared between food secure respondents and respondents experiencing food insecurity.

“I’m forced to spend money we can’t afford to spend on canned goods from Amazon because there [is] no way to use our EBT assistance remotely while staying home. I’d be happy to pay a reasonable delivery charge if we could at least use the help we’ve been provided with from VT SNAP towards the cost of fresh groceries.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Buying Less, Shifts in Purchasing

Compared to food secure respondents, respondents experiencing food insecurity were:

- Significantly more likely to have bought less of all items.
- Significantly more likely to buy bottled water, feminine care products/diapers (which may not be available through food assistance programs), medicine, and toilet paper (Figure 7).

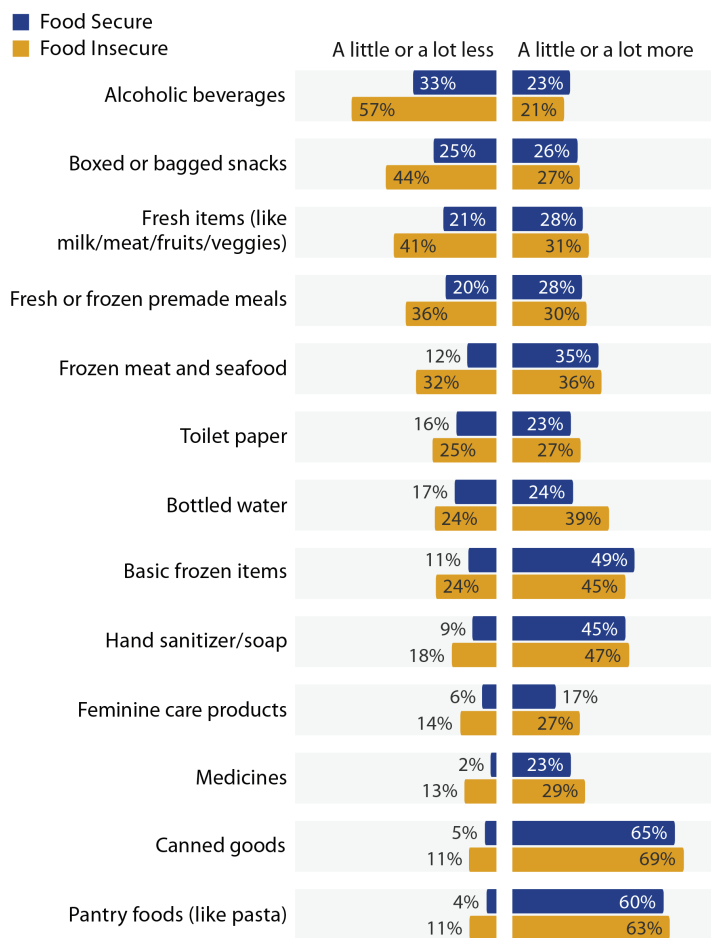


Figure 7. Changes in buying patterns compared between food secure respondents and respondents experiencing food insecurity. This figure does not include those that indicated they were buying “the same” amount of a product.

Job Loss and Job Seeking

- 66.1% of respondents experiencing food insecurity with a job experienced job disruption or loss since the coronavirus outbreak.
 - 12.5% were furloughed (compared to 7.8% of food secure respondents)
 - 24.0% had a reduction in hours (compared to 18.2% of food secure respondents)
 - 29.6% lost their job (compared to 9.9% of food secure respondents)

“The schools in our area reached out to us and brought us a few meals for our kids. The timing was being worked out, but they were kind and it was nice to know that someone was trying to help.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Certain Households More Likely to Experience Food Insecurity

Compared to all respondents, food insecurity was more common among:

- Households with children (30.3% compared to 20.7% with no children)
- Larger households
- People of color (49.0% compared to 25.2% white).
- Female respondents (27.6% compared to 17.7% male)
- Low-income households

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.