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Impacts of the First Year of COVID-19 on Food Security in the New York's Capital Region

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Impacts of the First Year of COVID-19 on Food Security in the New York’s Capital Region

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Food security decreased among regional residents across all income groups and backgrounds

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted people's lives and food systems in the United States and worldwide, resulting in impacts on different aspects of food security. To understand how this has affected households in New York’s Capital Region, we conducted two concurrent anonymous online surveys between October 2020 and February 2021. Combined, 1049 people responded to these surveys.

We report on respondents' food security experiences since the COVID-19 pandemic started in New York State (March 7, 2020) compared to the prior year. We further explore the differential impacts of the pandemic on food security experiences by race and ethnicity, household income, job disruptions, and households with and without children.

This study was approved by the University at Albany Institutional Review Board (IRB: 20X196 and 20X296). Information on the sampling and demographics of respondents is provided at the end of this data brief.

Overall decrease in food security

Respondents were classified as experiencing *food security*, *low food security*, or *very low food security*, based on their answers to six questions of the USDA Six-Item Food Security Survey (www.ers.usda.gov).

Overall, household food security decreased from 71.9% pre-pandemic to 59.9% since the pandemic began. Though the portion of households experiencing *low food security* remained practically unchanged, the portion with *very low food security* more than doubled (Figure 1).

Key Findings

1. More than 70% of Black and Hispanic households experienced food insecurity since the outbreak began.
2. Household food insecurity among respondents experiencing job disruptions was double that of households without job disruptions.
3. Households with children were more vulnerable to food insecurity before and since the outbreak compared to households without children.
4. While increases in food security were observed across income groups, over 70% of respondents with household income below \$25,000 experienced food insecurity since COVID-19.

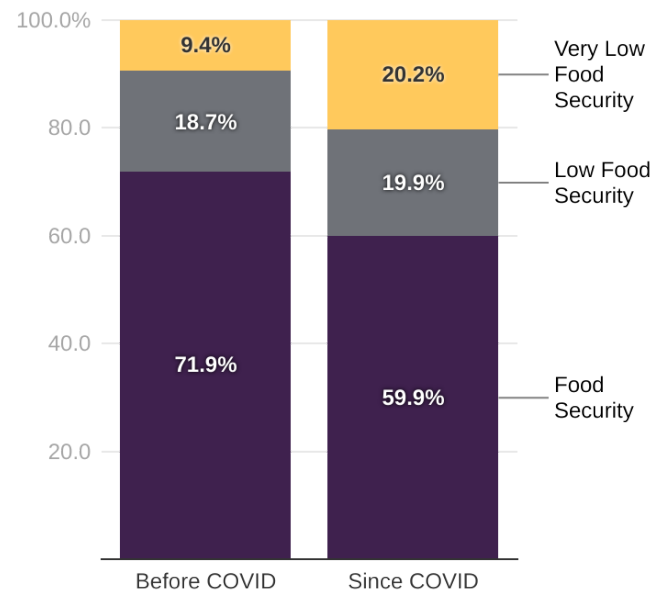


Figure 1. Households experiencing *food security*, *very low food security*, and *low food security* since the COVID-19 outbreak. (Classification based on: USDA Six-Item Food Security Survey)

Affirmative responses to questions in USDA Food Security Measure

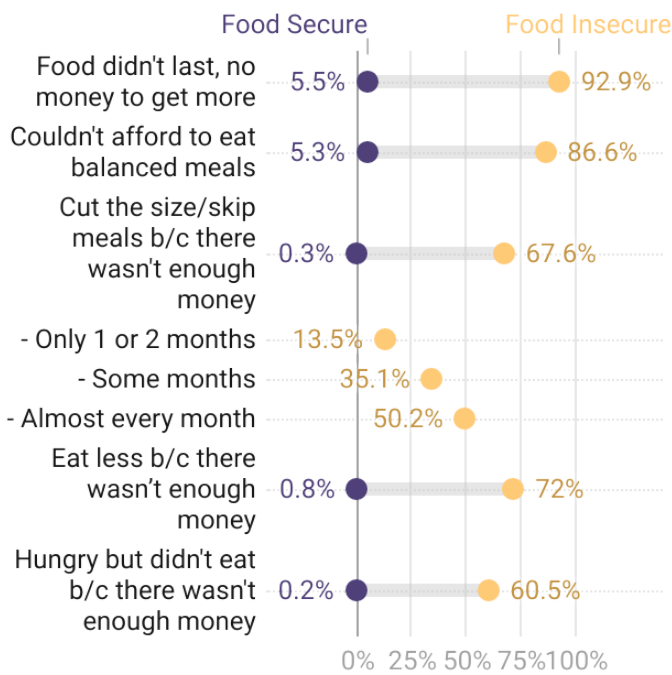


Figure 2. Responses to the adapted USDA Six-Item Food Security Survey since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak

Households with children experienced greater increases in food insecurity

Food insecurity increased in households with and without children. However, households with children were not only more likely to experience food insecurity before the outbreak, but also reported to be more affected when the pandemic started. (Figure 3)

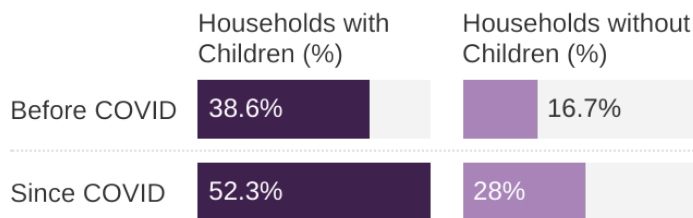


Figure 3. Respondents in households with and without children (<18-years of age) experiencing food insecurity before and since the COVID-19 outbreak started

Black and Hispanic households reported lowest food security rates

While household food insecurity increased across racial/ethnic categories, the multiracial group had the highest percentage of respondents reporting *new food insecurity*. Meanwhile, 63.5% of Non-Hispanic Black households experienced *persistent food insecurity* before and since the pandemic started (Figure 4).

In recent research, similar trends have been explained by higher unemployment spikes due to higher job losses and lower opportunities for remote employment among Hispanic, Non-Hispanic Black groups and minority populations.

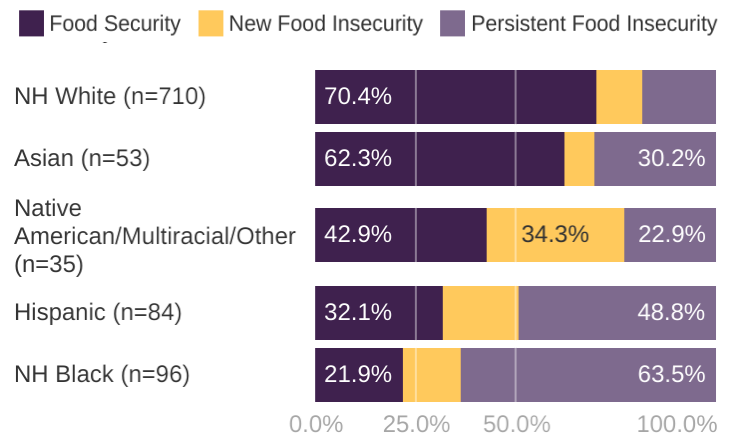


Figure 4. Percentage of respondents' households who were experiencing *Food Security*, *New Food Insecurity* or *Persistent Food Insecurity* across race/ethnicity groups

All income groups struggled to get food, but those with lower-middle income were most affected

More than 70% of those living in households with a yearly income of less than \$25,000 were experiencing food insecurity when the pandemic started. The increase in food insecurity was most pronounced among respondents in households earning \$10,000-24,999, with an increase of nearly 30% compared to pre-pandemic times.

These trends may be connected to factors such as job precarity and income eligibility for assistance programs, suggesting the need for further exploration (Figure 5).

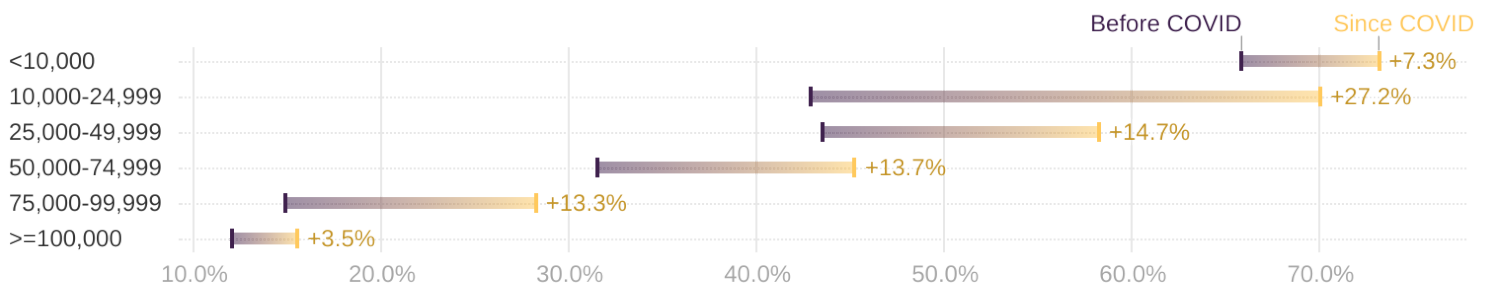


Figure 5. Change in food insecurity by income category before and since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak

Those with job disruptions experienced lower food security

Increases in unemployment rates have been associated with decreased food security and the need for food assistance in other studies.

In our survey, household food security among respondents with job disruptions (such as lost of income or job, furloughed, reduced hours or income) was half of those not experiencing any disruption (Figure 6).

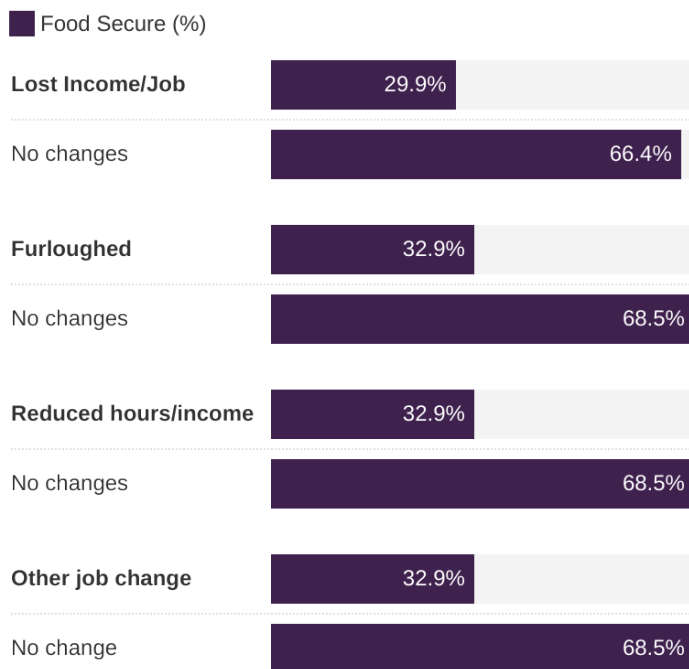


Figure 6. Percentage of respondents who were food secure since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak by type of job disruption

Challenges to food access programs increased among their users

Food pantry use among participants increased from 17.2% before the COVID-19 outbreak to 22.31% since the outbreak began. Among users, the portion experiencing challenges to food pantry utilization more than doubled (Figure 7).

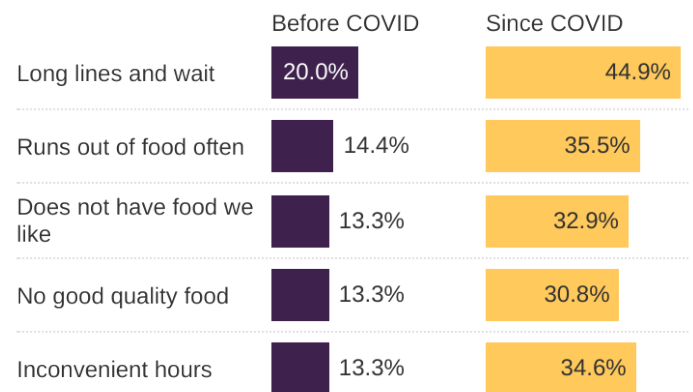


Figure 7. Challenges to food pantry utilization among food pantry users before and since the COVID-19 outbreak started

Methods and Survey Demographics

We employed a population-based sampling strategy with oversampling for those with less than median income via a Qualtrics panel (October 2020 to January 2021) in Survey 1.

To better reach out to rural and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) populations, we distributed Survey 2 via community partners and targeted Facebook ads. Survey 2 was open for five weeks (January to February 2021).

We used sampling weights based on income, after which the household income distribution of respondents became identical to that of all residents in the 11 counties in the Capital Region. This way, we can assume that our sample does not have one particular income group over- or under-represented, and our results can be generalizable for the region. The demographic characteristics of our sample are presented in Table 1.

Participation by county was as follows: Albany (34.3%), Saratoga (13.9%), Rensselaer (12.5%), Schenectady (12.5%), Greene (6.2%), and the remaining (20.6%) in Washington, Columbia, Warren, Fulton, Montgomery, and Schoharie. Respondents lived in urban (80.6%), non-urban (14.8%), and unknown (4.6%) zip codes.

Table 1. Demographics of survey respondents in the New York's Capital Region

	Survey 1 (595, 56.7%) N (%)	Survey 2 (454, 43.3%) N (%)	Total (1049, 100%) N (%)
Age Category			
18-34 years	226 (38.0)	179 (39.4)	405 (38.6)
35-54 years	190 (31.9)	180 (39.6)	370 (35.3)
55+ years	179 (30.1)	95 (20.9)	274 (26.1)
Gender			
Male	175 (29.4)	164 (36.1)	339 (32.3)
Female	410 (68.9)	285 (62.8)	695 (66.3)
Other	10 (1.7)	5 (1.1)	15 (1.4)
Income Category			
<\$10,000	57 (9.6)	20 (4.4)	77 (7.3)
\$10,000-24,999	90 (15.1)	38 (8.4)	128 (12.2)
\$25,000-\$49,999	147 (24.7)	130 (28.6)	277 (26.4)
\$50,000-\$74,999	101 (17.0)	139 (30.6)	240 (22.9)
\$75,000-\$99,999	69 (11.6)	83 (18.3)	152 (14.5)
\$100,000+	131 (22.0)	44 (9.7)	175 (16.7)
Race/Ethnicity			
Hispanic	46 (7.3)	46 (11.0)	92 (8.8)
Non-Hispanic White	458 (72.6)	300 (71.4)	758 (72.1)
Non-Hispanic Black	49 (7.8)	57 (13.6)	106 (10.1)
Asian	48 (7.6)	8 (1.9)	56 (5.3)
Native American	4 (0.6)	2 (0.5)	6 (0.6)
Others/Multiple	26 (4.1)	7 (1.7)	33 (3.1)

About NFACT

The National Food Access and COVID Research Team (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. To learn more visit nfactresearch.org.

Acknowledgements

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