The Impact of Coronavirus on Vermonters Experiencing Food Insecurity

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. 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.

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. ¾ of respondents experiencing food insecurity are already buying different, cheaper foods or eating less to make their food last.
5. ¾ 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.

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).

Figure 1. Specific USDA food security questions, which classify respondents as experiencing food insecurity or not.
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2 April 2020

Higher Food Worry and Coping Strategies

- 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.

Table 1. Program Participation Among Respondents Experiencing Food Insecurity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Participation</th>
<th>12 months before coronavirus</th>
<th>Since coronavirus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SNAP (formerly food stamps)</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School food</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food pantry</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WIC</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meals on Wheels</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

“... 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 2. Average experiences and challenges since the coronavirus 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).

“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).
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)

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.

“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