

Food access for families with children in Maryland during first four months of the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction

This brief examines the experiences and perspectives of food insecurity among Maryland households with children during the first four months of the pandemic. Many disparities were magnified during the pandemic, and this brief covers the disparities between households with and without children. Food insecurity was measured in 903 households using the US Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) 6-item tool, in which respondents who say “yes” to two or more of the six questions are categorized as experiencing food insecurity. In this brief, households are grouped into three categories:

- **Households with food security** at the time of the survey, regardless of prior food insecurity status;
- **Households with persistent food insecurity**, both in the year before and since the pandemic began;
- **Households with new food insecurity**, classified as food secure in the year before the pandemic, but having food insecurity after the pandemic’s start.

See “Approach” section for further background details.

Key Findings

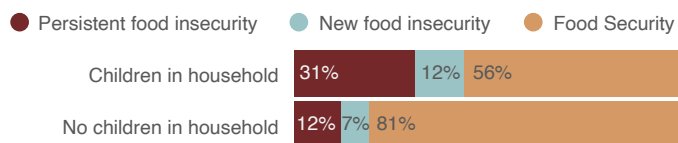
1. 75% of households with children that experienced job disruption were classified as food insecure.
2. Less than half of families with new or persistent food insecurity used food assistance.
3. Nearly half (47%) of families surveyed in Southern Maryland* experienced food insecurity – the highest rate among all regions.

*Southern Maryland includes Montgomery, Prince George’s, Charles, Calvert, and St. Mary’s Counties. Source: Maryland Department of Health

Food security and access decreased during the first four months of the pandemic

- 43% of households with children experienced food insecurity, including 12% new food insecurity (Figure 1). This is slightly lower than the percentage of food insecure households with children at the national level (Harper et al 2020). In comparison, only 20% of households without children in Maryland experienced food insecurity.
- Public transit use to obtain food dropped by half, from 34% prior to the pandemic to 17% after the outbreak in households with children. Public transit availability might have become more limited during the pandemic due to increased perceived risk of coronavirus transmission.
- Southern Maryland* had the highest prevalence of new and persistent food insecurity among households with children (47%), a 12% increase from before the pandemic.

Figure 1. Proportion of households with children who experienced food insecurity during the first four months of the pandemic



Job changes affecting food buying power

Compared to all respondents, both food insecurity and income disruption in the first four months of the pandemic were more common among households with children.

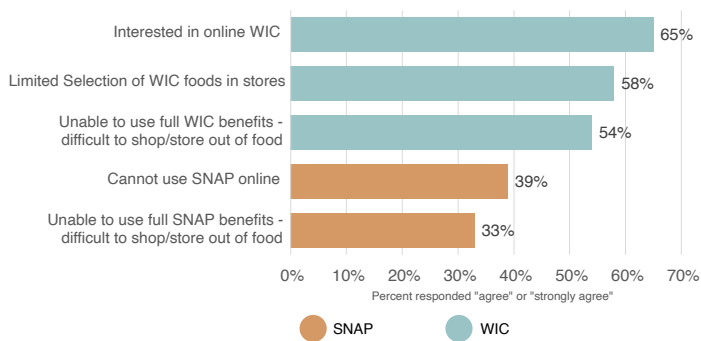
- 38% of households with children reported reduced work hours and 25% experienced job loss or furlough.
- Nearly two-thirds of households with children that reported reductions in work hours and three quarters of those that experienced job loss/furloughed experienced food insecurity.

Households Using Food Assistance

We asked respondents about their experiences with the food assistance programs the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), school lunches, and food pantries in the first four months of the pandemic.

- Among households with children experiencing food insecurity, between 35-40% used school lunches, food pantries, SNAP or WIC to get food.
- WIC participants in our survey had the greatest prevalence of new or persistent food insecurity compared to all other food assistance programs (83%). For context, 21% of households with children participated in WIC.
- Over half of WIC participants reported challenges in using their benefits during the first four months of the pandemic due to factors such as stores not having enough food or having a limited selection of WIC items.
- Around one-third of SNAP participants reported challenges in using their benefits, including not being able to use benefits online.

Figure 2. Report of SNAP and WIC challenges experienced by households with children during the first four months of the COVID-19 pandemic



Approach

We surveyed 1,045 adults living in Maryland in July/August 2020 using the Qualtrics online panel. 142 households were excluded due to incorrect zip codes or missing information on food insecurity. Survey participants reflect the Maryland adult population by race. We oversampled those with lower incomes to support further insights, then adjusted so that analyses reflect the national income, race and ethnicity distribution in 2019. Limitations of surveys like this one may include underrepresentation of groups including: those with low literacy or unable to take survey in English/Spanish, without cell phone or Internet, those facing high pandemic demands, and those with low trust of surveys. Additionally, responses may be influenced by factors such as aspiration, social desirability, misunderstanding, or rushing to complete.

Funding Statement

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About NFACT

This research is conducted as part of The National Food Access and COVID research Team (NFACT), which is implementing common measurements and tools across study sites in the US. 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. A series of summary briefs of this survey are available at www.nfactresearch.org to learn more.