

Food Access in Connecticut: One Year into the COVID-19 Pandemic



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In Collaboration With:



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Study Overview

In April and May 2021, the Institute for Hunger Research & Solutions at Connecticut Foodshare surveyed over 1,000 people from throughout Connecticut to understand changes in food access and food security in the state one year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We targeted low-income households and people of color in order to reach those most at risk for food insecurity and job disruptions due to COVID-19. We then used statistical tools to create estimates representative of Connecticut's population.

Study goals:

1. Identify the prevalence of food insecurity
2. Identify gaps and disparities in food access
3. Expand upon the results of an August 2020 survey of Hartford and Tolland Counties

Our findings are consistent with the USDA's finding that our most vulnerable neighbors have experienced the greatest changes in food insecurity since the pandemic.

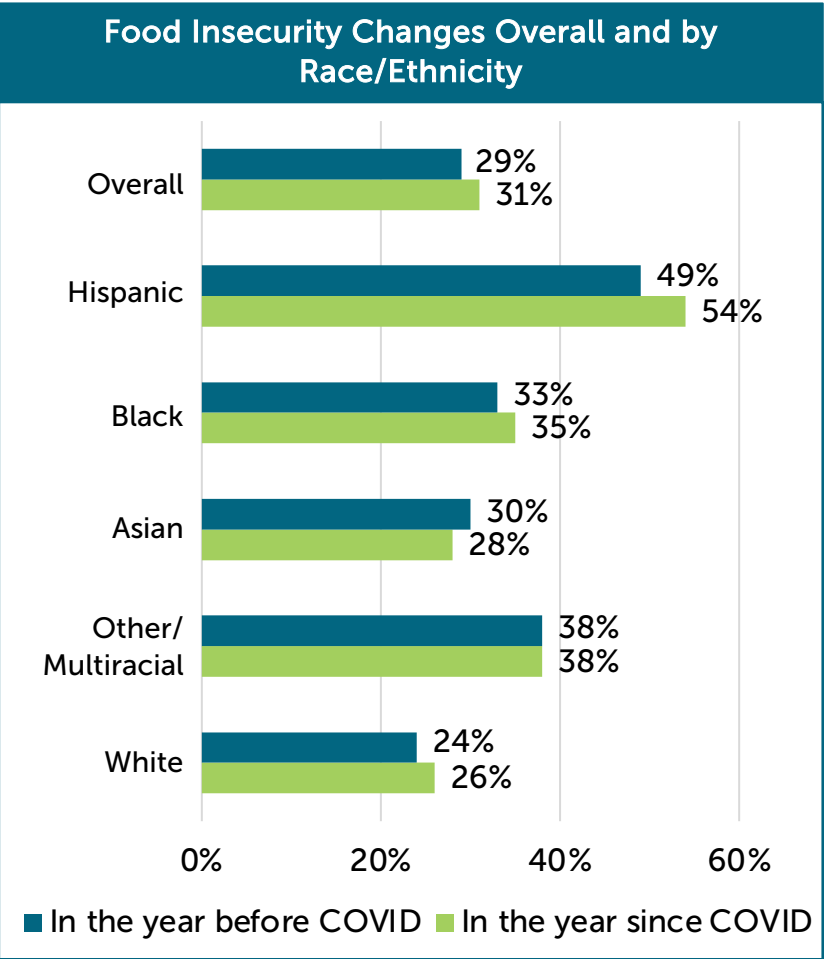
Food Insecurity Findings

Food insecurity rates rose slightly but significantly, and racial disparities have persisted throughout the pandemic.

Similar to the USDA's findings on national food insecurity trends in 2020, the survey showed that though the overall food insecurity rate did not change greatly, respondents of color experienced higher rates of food insecurity than their white counterparts:

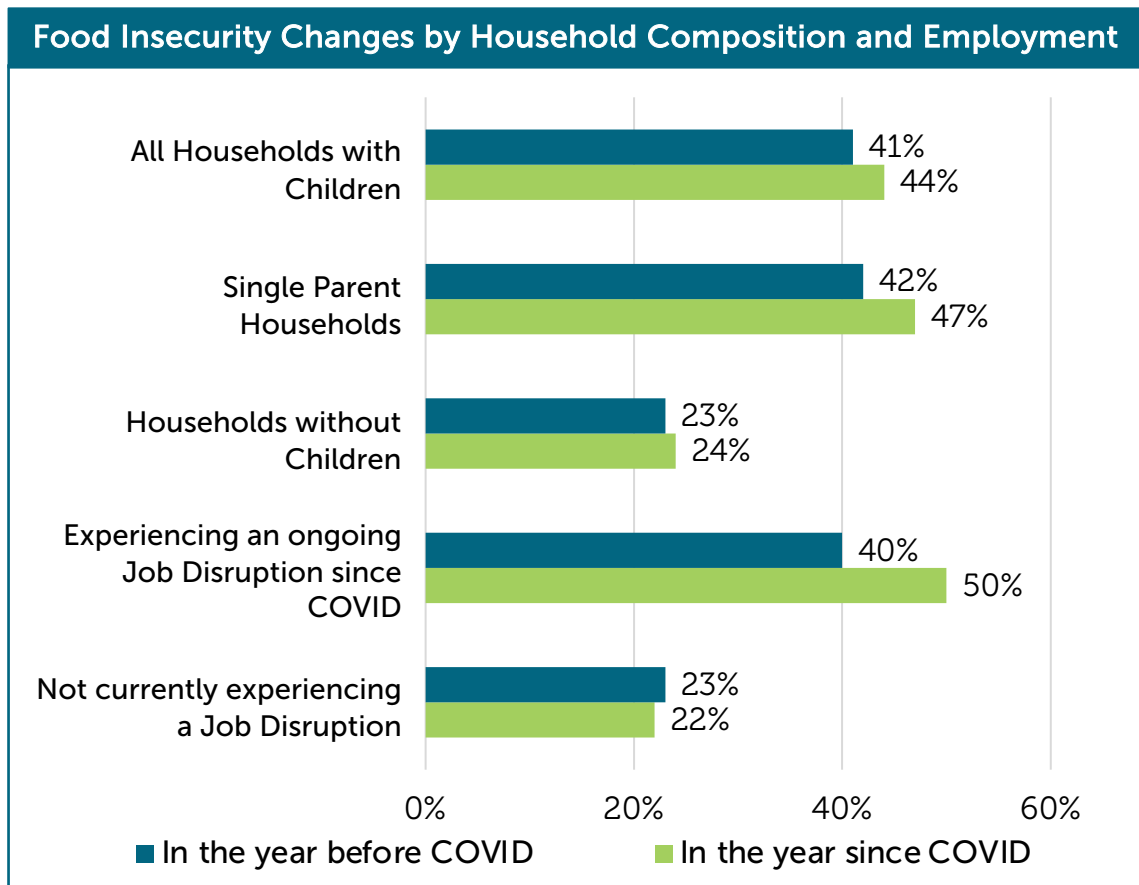
Hispanic	54%
Multiracial	38%
Black	35%
Asian	28%
White	26%

Before the COVID-19 crisis, 40% of people of color in the state were food insecure, compared to 24% of white residents. This disparity has persisted throughout the pandemic, with **43% of people of color and 26% of white respondents experiencing food insecurity one year later.**



Households with children, especially single parent homes, as well as people who have experienced a job disruption are more likely to be food insecure.

- 44% of households with children experienced food insecurity one year after the onset of COVID-19, compared to 24% of households without a child under the age of 18.
- Half (50%) of households who experienced a job disruption such as job loss or a cut in hours were food insecure, while less than a quarter (22%) of households not currently experiencing a job disruption were food insecure.



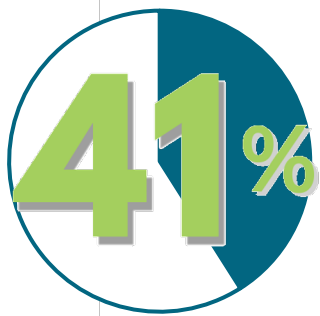
"I definitely did feel insecure with my job and family; however, there was no significant financial change. It was more of a mental worry."

- New Haven County Resident

Rates of Job Disruption

Though an estimated 44% of Connecticut residents experienced a job disruption during the pandemic, those still experiencing a job disruption one year later has fallen 27%. One year since the onset of COVID, approximately one third of Connecticut residents (32%) were still experiencing a job disruption. However, this improvement has not been felt equally.

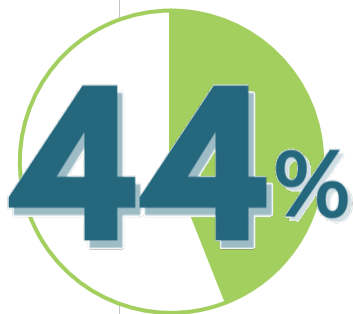
Experiencing an ongoing Job Disruption



Households with Children



Households without Children



Households of color



White households

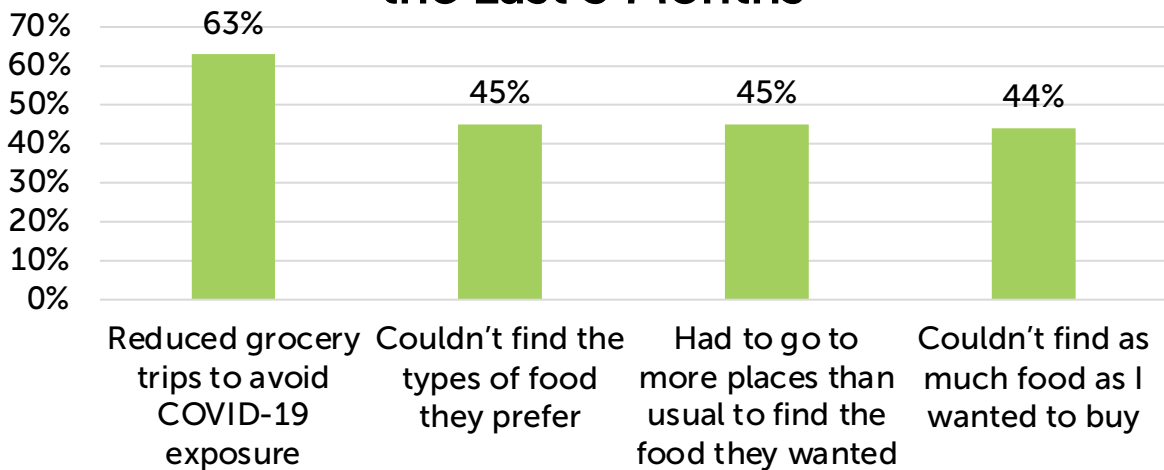
What is a job disruption?

In this study, a job disruption was defined as a person in the household losing their job, having their hours reduced, or being furloughed.

Accessing Food: Challenges & Strategies

Households used different coping strategies to access food. About 3 out of 5 respondents reported reducing their visits to the grocery store to minimize COVID-19 exposure during the past 3 months. To cope with these changes in shopping and food access, over half of respondents (53%) were buying foods with a longer shelf-life.

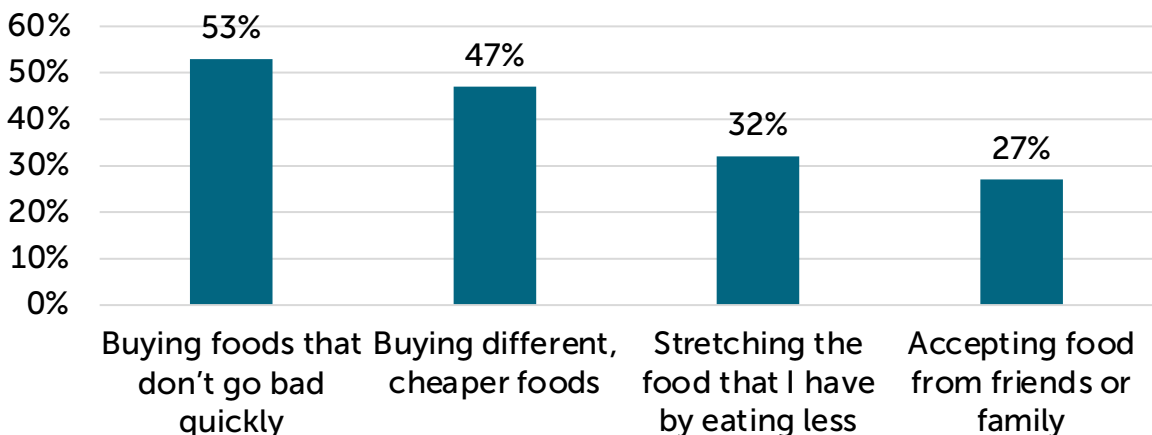
Challenges with Trying to get Food in the Last 3 Months



"Price increases are the biggest driving factor. We switched to a lot of less expensive and lower quality foods."
- Dad of two kids, Groton



Strategies Currently being used to Afford Food



Food Program Use

Federal Food Assistance

- Overall, **22% of respondents received SNAP** (formerly called food stamps) over the past 3 months.
- 90% said that SNAP benefits were very helpful for their household.
- 44% said they had to seek additional food assistance, such as going to a food pantry, because their SNAP benefits run out before they receive more.

"The SNAP benefits I received before the pandemic were hardly worth the aggravation. The increases in response [to the pandemic] have made it a genuine help."

- Senior citizen, Glastonbury

Food Pantries and Food Banks

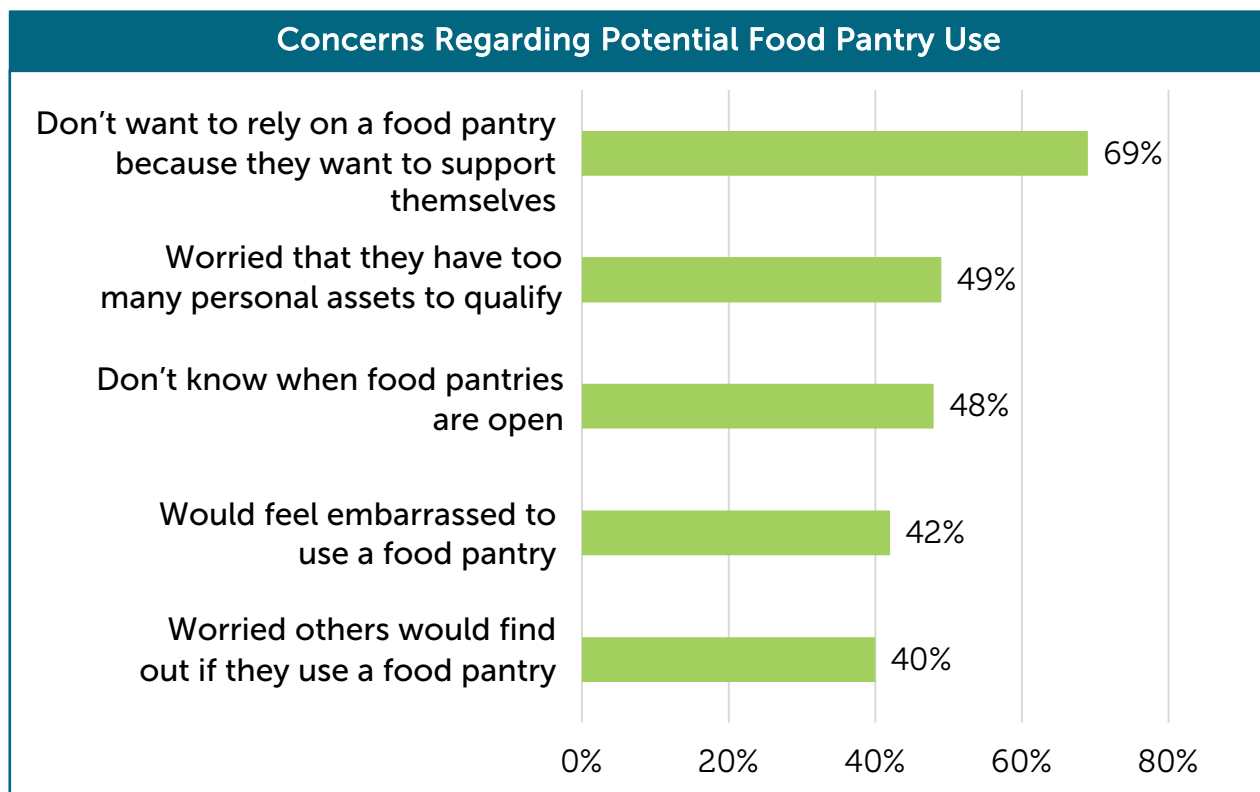
While use of food pantries was low, those receiving charitable food did so on a chronic basis.

- Overall, **14% of respondents received free food from a pantry**, food bank or Mobile program during the past 3 months.
- 29% of pantry-goers were getting half or more of their groceries from a food bank or food pantry.
- Half of pantry-goers (50%) are visiting a food pantry or food bank at least once a month.



Barriers to Food Pantry Use

Respondents prefer self-reliance and mention other concerns about going to food pantries.



93% of food pantry users would recommend food pantries to others in need of food, 83% say the pantry made them feel welcome.

People of color face challenges with accessing food pantry services.

- 32% of Hispanic respondents said that staff at the food pantry don't speak their language.
- 41% of people of color report that the food pantry gives them food they don't know how to prepare.



1-in-3 people of color (33%) are worried they may experience discrimination when visiting a food pantry.



Executive Summary

Although overall food insecurity rose only slightly in the year since the onset of the pandemic, it did increase for households with children, households of color, and unemployed households. The differing experiences during the economic recovery underline persistent disparities that leave the most vulnerable populations in need of support. To meet this need, the continuation of funding for federal and state assistance and a targeted expansion of food programs to our most vulnerable neighbors. As emergency response is no longer needed and pantries can re-open their physical doors to clients, these programs can take steps to expand outreach, reduce the stigma of seeking help, create a welcoming environment for all visitors, and promote personal dignity and empowerment in their pantries.

Programmatic Recommendations

Federal and state food assistance programs should receive **continued funding** to support families still struggling with food insecurity, such as those still experiencing a job disruption.

Expanded resources offered by food programs should be **targeted toward the groups most likely to be experiencing food insecurity**: families with children, people of color, and households with employment concerns. Examples include providing wrap-around services (ie: job training) or creating spaces for children to play while visiting the pantry.

Pantry environments should be **family-friendly** and **reflect clients' cultural makeup**. This may require having bilingual staff or volunteers on site and/or posters and signs in multiple languages. Programs should ask clients for their food preferences and offer foods that are culturally relevant.

Food programs can expand their outreach to target people who are food insecure but not currently seeking assistance by **simplifying the enrollment process**, promoting services via social media, and training volunteers and staff to **reduce stigma**.

Food assistance programs and policymakers should **engage with the people they serve** to better understand what their community needs most.

"I wish there were community gardens in urban and suburban areas so people could collectively grow fresh vegetables and fruit."

"I think what would really help is some free classes people can take to learn how to shop better. Going through this outbreak causes people to need to be more careful with money, and most people don't know how."



**For more information, contact
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