Impact of COVID-19 on Food Insecurity

A Resource for Improving Measurable Impact
November 22, 2021

Food insecurity is defined as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active and healthy life.1

**Background:**

- Food insecurity among adults and children has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic due to rising levels of unemployment, poverty, and limited access to school nutrition programs because of school closures.2-5
- An estimated 14.8% of U.S. households with children under the age of 18 experienced food insecurity in 2020, translating to around 38.3 million people, including 11.7 million children, living in food insecure households.2,3,6

![Graph showing food insecurity increase from 2020 to 2021](chart.png)

- Similarly, models predict 42 million people (13%), including 13 million children (17%), will experience food insecurity in 2021 due to COVID-19.6 These alarming numbers are a public health concern because those living in food insecure households are more likely to have unhealthy dietary behaviors, putting them at greater risk for other health issues.7
- Food insecurity disproportionately affects:4,5,8-13
  - Households with children
  - Low-income households
  - Black and Hispanic households
  - College students at 2- and 4-year institutions

- Food insecurity is associated with serious health conditions, such as:14-19
  - Anemia
  - Diabetes
  - Hypertension
  - Obesity
  - Mental Health Issues
  - Developmental delays among children

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1. This statement is based on the definition provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.”
4. “Food Insecurity among College Students: 2018 National Study.”
8. “Food Insecurity among Households with Children: 2018 National Study.”
9. “Food Insecurity among Households with College Students: 2018 National Study.”
Key Texas Findings:

- Food insecurity among Texans nearly doubled from December 2018 (about 13%) to June 2021 (22%) and remains high as the pandemic continues. Some studies have shown:
  - Food insecurity in Texas remains high, even 20 months into the pandemic, as stimulus checks and other major relief legislation expire.
  - Low-income Texans, in particular, have experienced dramatic increases in food insecurity due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
  - When COVID-19 cases are high, unemployment rates increase, and the prevalence of food insecurity also increases.

- During the early stages of the pandemic from February-September 2020:
  - More than 700,000 Texans became eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
  - Over 1.5 million Texas children were approved for Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT), a program designed to provide school meals to families in the event schools are closed or operating virtually.

- Recently, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) extended several meal services through June 30, 2022. Waivers included are committed to providing safe and healthy meals free of charge to children as the pandemic continues.

- The average prevalence of food insecurity during COVID-19 is higher among Black (35.9%) and Hispanic (33.5%) Texans compared to non-Hispanic white (22.1%) Texans, and higher among Texan households with children (32.8%) compared to all Texas households (28.8%).

- In 2021, Texas has the highest projected number of people (4.78 million) living in food-insecure households compared to all other states and will have the highest estimated number of food insecure children (1.75 million).

- Two Texas counties are projected to have some of the largest food insecure populations in the nation in 2021:
  - Presidio is ranked #1
  - Zavala is ranked #8

- Additionally, Zavala County is projected to have the highest child food insecurity in the country in 2021 due to COVID-19. Other Texas counties ranking in the top 10 in the country include Presidio (#4), Starr (#9), and Brooks (#10).
**Recommendations:**

1. Support policies that facilitate increased enrollment and expansion of SNAP:\(^5\)
   a. There have historically been issues with SNAP enrollment for those who are eligible;\(^32\) therefore, policies and funding are needed to increase enrollment in SNAP as more Texans become eligible.\(^29,33\)
   b. Increase the monthly SNAP benefit by 15% or approximately $100 per month for a family of four.\(^34\)
   c. Continue to decrease food insecurity across the nation, while improving nutritional quality of food, which includes continuing COVID-19 waivers.\(^34\)

2. Support and expand the P-EBT program to ensure the benefit of replacing school meals when schools are closed or operating virtually:
   a. Expanding the P-EBT program, which was set up as a one-time benefit payment,\(^18,26\) would allow for additional payments to eligible families as the pandemic continues.
   b. Recommendations for expanding school meal plans include making temporary universal school meals permanent.\(^34\)

3. Provide additional resources to:
   a. **Food banks and food pantries:** Food banks need additional funding because of increased need due to the recession and job loss, as well as enhanced delivery methods to reduce the risk of coronavirus transmission.\(^3\)
   b. **School nutrition programs:** School nutrition needs additional funding as these programs are critical resources that have continued to provide meals during the pandemic,\(^19,35,36\) and will need further funds to address changes due to delivery methods, increased use of personal protective equipment, and loss of revenue because of the delay of in-person school openings.

**Summary:**

Food insecurity, a significant public health issue that has affected millions of Texans due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is estimated to have resulted in $6 billion in associated health care costs in Texas in 2020, and disproportionately impacts Black and Hispanic Texans.\(^2\text{-}5,28\) In Texas, for every 1% increase in food insecurity, annual healthcare costs increase by $400 million dollars.\(^28\) Texas policymakers can reduce food insecurity in Texas by supporting: SNAP expansion and enrollment, expansion of P-EBT, increased funding for food access programs (food banks, food pantries, school meal programs, etc.), and funding for coordinated food assistance efforts across the state.

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References:


32. Evans A, Jennings R, Nikah K. *The SNAP GAP: Why income-eligible individuals are not enrolling in SNAP.* October 1, 2017


