

The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity in 2020 & 2021



Updated analysis of how national food insecurity levels may have increased in 2020 because of COVID-19 and new analysis of projected food insecurity levels in 2021.



Introduction

In early 2020, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) began to spread across the United States, and one of the results was an economic recession that ended years of declining rates of food insecurity – the lack of access to sufficient food because of limited financial resources. This brief provides a snapshot of food insecurity at the national level leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, what transpired in the first year of the pandemic, and what may happen in the next year and beyond.¹

KEY FINDINGS

1. Feeding America projects that 42 million people (1 in 8), including 13 million children (1 in 6), may experience food insecurity in 2021.
2. This is a slight improvement from our updated 2020 projections (45 million people and 15 million children).
3. Many people who have been most impacted by the pandemic were food insecure or at risk of food insecurity before COVID-19 and are facing greater hardship since COVID-19.
4. Significant racial disparities in food insecurity which existed before COVID-19 remain in the wake of the pandemic. Feeding America projects that 21% of Black individuals (1 in 5) may experience food insecurity in 2021, compared to 11% of white individuals (1 in 9).
5. It will likely take time for food insecurity levels to recover.



FOOD INSECURITY BEFORE COVID-19

In 2019, the overall food insecurity rate was the lowest it had been in more than twenty years.

- 1 in 9 individuals (10.9%) and 1 in 7 children (14.6%) lived in a food-insecure household.

Yet, more than 35 million people overall, including nearly 11 million children, were food insecure.

Two factors that influence food insecurity rates include unemployment and poverty, which were both at recent lows heading into the pandemic.

- The overall unemployment rate was 3.7% at the end of 2019 and the overall poverty rate was 10.5%.

However, underlying these national figures, significant disparities existed.²



1 in 12 white, non-Hispanic individuals (8.1%) lived in a food-insecure household,

Compared to:



1 in 6 Latino individuals (15.8%)



1 in 5 Black, non-Hispanic individuals (19.3%)



1 in 4 Native American individuals (23.5%)

Food insecurity is experienced in greater proportion by these racial and ethnic groups due to a number of factors – a key one being structural racism and discrimination. These disparities are also apparent in the underlying factors that contribute to food insecurity.³ While the overall poverty rate in 2019 was 10.5%, poverty among white individuals was 9.1% compared to 18.8% for Black individuals and 15.7% for Latino individuals. More research is needed to untangle the complex relationship between systemic racism and food insecurity.

FOOD INSECURITY IN 2020

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the spread of COVID-19 a global pandemic. In the days and weeks that followed, cities and states across the U.S. issued stay-at-home mandates and ordered the closure of non-essential businesses in an effort to curb transmission of the virus.

The result of the COVID-19 pandemic was the first economic recession in the United States since the Great Recession of 2007. Within weeks, tens of millions of people lost jobs or saw declines in hours worked. For the week ending March 28, 2020, the number of initial claims for unemployment insurance was nearly 7 million, a record high. The official unemployment rate for April rose to 14.7%, reflecting the largest monthly increase and the highest rate since 1948 when such data was first collected. **Before the start of the pandemic, the overall food insecurity rate had reached its lowest point since it began to be measured in the 1990s, but those improvements were being upended by the pandemic.**

To understand how COVID-19 has impacted the need for food in the United States, Feeding America, in partnership with Dr. Craig Gundersen, has leveraged our annual *Map the Meal Gap* (MMG) study, the source for local-level estimates of food insecurity. The same model that is used to estimate local food insecurity can also predict food insecurity using projected changes to variables in the model.

To predict changes in food insecurity as a result of COVID-19, we have used projected changes to unemployment and poverty, two variables that have a statistically significant and substantial effect on food insecurity estimates and are likely to be most directly affected by COVID-19.⁴ Feeding America first released food insecurity projections for 2020 in the spring of 2020, and then released updated projections in October 2020 as it became evident that economic conditions would be more positive than experts originally predicted.

Feeding America estimates that 45 million people (1 in 7), including 15 million children (1 in 5), may have experienced food insecurity in 2020.⁵



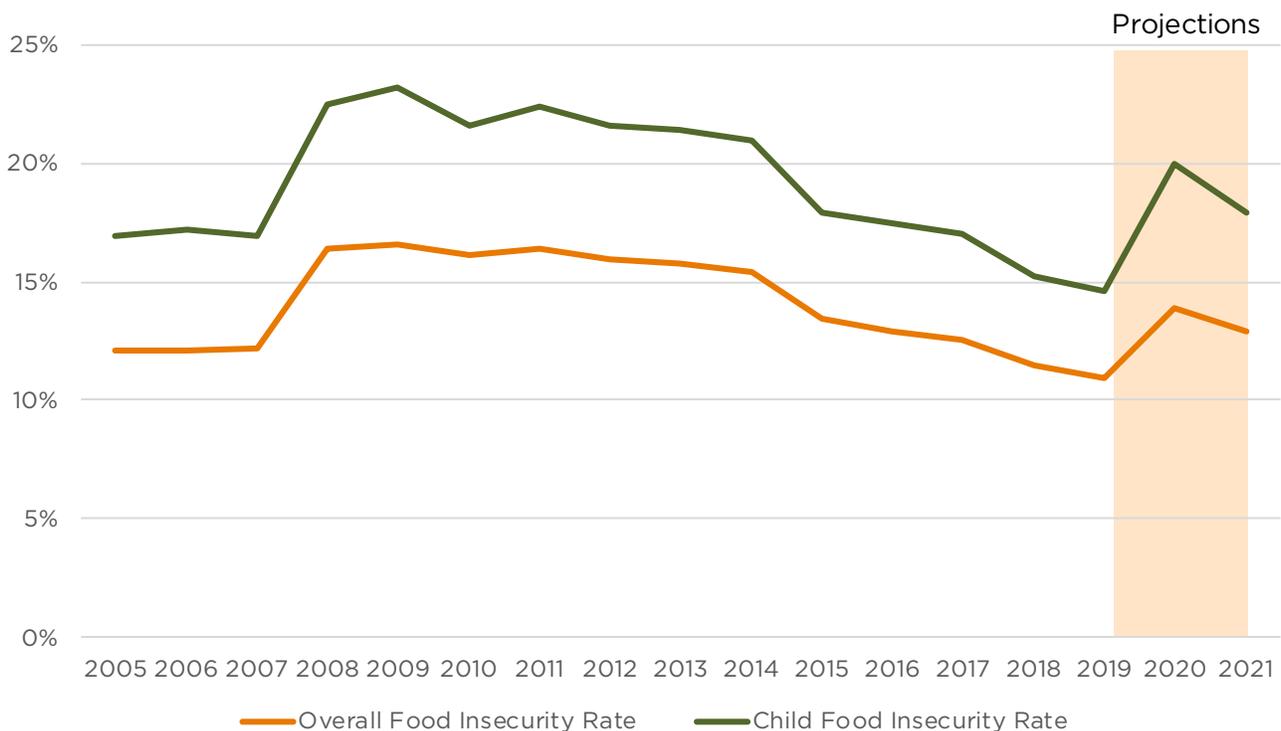
FOOD INSECURITY IN 2021

Feeding America projects that 42 million people (1 in 8), including 13 million children (1 in 6), may experience food insecurity in 2021.

This reflects an improvement relative to our updated 2020 projections, which can be attributed to the economic situation - actual unemployment and estimated poverty levels have been lower than many experts originally predicted - as well as the federal response, which has played an important role in mitigating the crisis.

While the improvements are good news, food insecurity levels that we are projecting are still elevated compared to before COVID-19. Further, the pandemic and economic crisis have not been evenly experienced across the U.S. population. Many people who have been most impacted were food insecure or at risk of food insecurity before COVID and are facing greater hardship since COVID.

Food Insecurity Trends & Projections



FOOD INSECURITY IN 2021

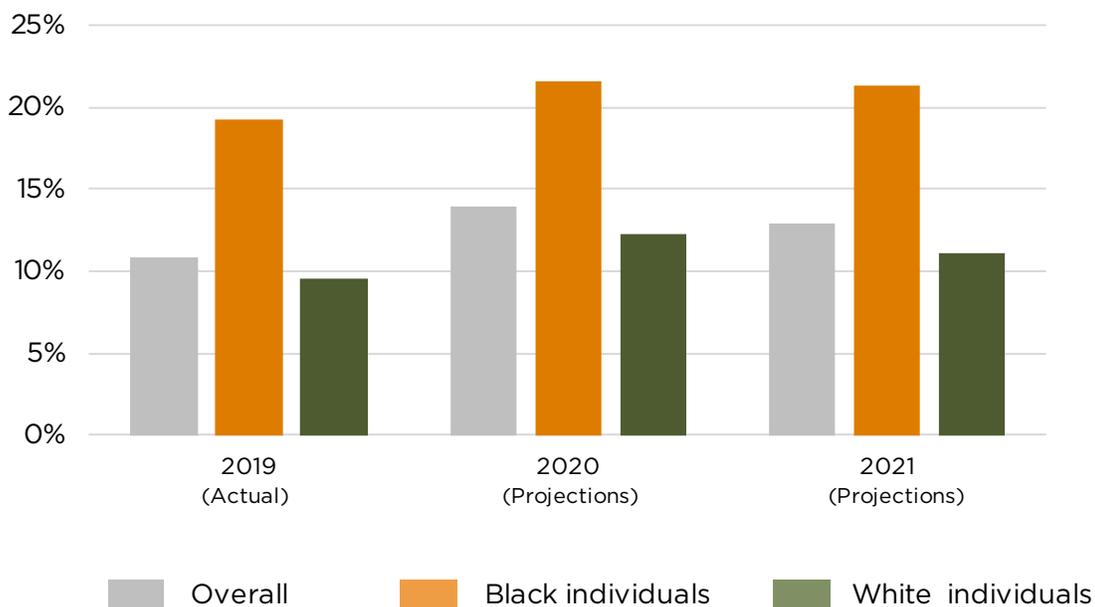
Food insecurity projections by race

As mentioned on page 2, significant racial disparities in food insecurity existed before COVID, and these have not diminished. The economic recovery is likely to be slower for communities of color overall, and for Black communities in particular. For the first time, Feeding America has projected how food insecurity levels may differ by race, for Black individuals and white individuals.

Feeding America projects that 21.6% of Black individuals (1 in 5) may have experienced food insecurity in 2020, compared to 12.3% of white individuals (1 in 8). For 2021, our projections for Black individuals are largely unchanged (21.3%, 1 in 5), but slightly improved for white individuals (11.1%, 1 in 9). (In 2019, food insecurity among Black and white individuals was 19.3% and 9.6%, respectively.)⁶



Food insecurity among Black and white individuals

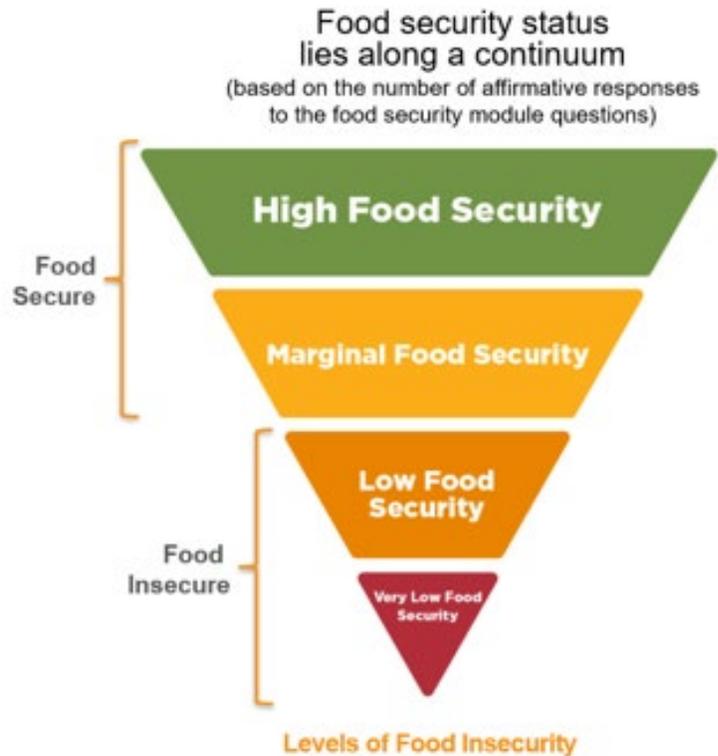


FOOD INSECURITY IN 2021

Projections of very low food security

Very low food security is the more severe range of food insecurity that involves reduced food intake and disrupted eating patterns. Like overall food insecurity, the prevalence of very low food security has likely risen since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Feeding America projects that 17 million people (5.1%) may have experienced very low food security in 2020, and 15 million people (4.6%) may experience it in 2021.



Food insecurity projections by geography



Feeding America projects that food insecurity among individuals living in rural communities may have been 14.4% in 2020 and may be 13.3% in 2021 (compared to 12.5% in 2019).

Among individuals living in urban communities, Feeding America projects that 13.1% may have experienced food insecurity in 2020 and 12.1% may experience food insecurity in 2021 (compared to 10.6% in 2019).

FOOD INSECURITY IN 2020 & 2021

National projections of food insecurity by select characteristics for 2020 and 2021

As compared to 2019 actuals

	Actuals		Projections	
	2019		2020	2021
INDICATORS/ASSUMPTIONS⁷				
Annual Unemployment Rate	3.7%		9.2%	6.7%
Annual Poverty Rate	10.5%		11.1%	12.0%
Annual Child Poverty Rate	14.4%		14.8%	16.0%
FOOD INSECURITY PROJECTIONS				
OVERALL POPULATION				
Food Insecurity				
Annual Food Insecurity Rate	10.9%		13.9%	12.9%
Number of Food-insecure People	35.2 million		45 million	42 million
Ratio	1 in 9		1 in 7	1 in 8
Very low food security (VLFS) [a subset within food insecurity]				
Annual VLFS Rate	3.7%		5.1%	4.6%
Number of people experiencing VLFS	11.8 million		17 million	15 million
Ratio	1 in 27		1 in 20	1 in 22
CHILD POPULATION				
Food Insecurity				
Annual Food Insecurity Rate	14.6%		19.9%	17.9%
Number of Food-insecure People	10.7 million		15 million	13 million
Ratio	1 in 7		1 in 5	1 in 6
Very low food security (VLFS) [a subset within food insecurity]				
Annual VLFS Rate	3.9%		5.7%	5.1%
Number of people experiencing VLFS	2.9 million		4.2 million	3.7 million
Ratio	1 in 26		1 in 18	1 in 20
BY RACE				
Food Insecurity - Black Individuals				
Annual Food Insecurity Rate	19.3%		21.6%	21.3%
Number of Food-insecure People	9.0 million		10 million	10 million
Ratio	1 in 5		1 in 5	1 in 5
Food Insecurity - white Individuals				
Annual Food Insecurity Rate	9.6%		12.3%	11.1%
Number of Food-insecure People	23.6 million		31 million	28 million
Ratio	1 in 10		1 in 8	1 in 9
BY GEOGRAPHY				
Food Insecurity - Individuals in Rural Counties				
Annual Food Insecurity Rate	12.5%		14.4%	13.3%
Number of Food-insecure People	5.4 million		6 million	6 million
Ratio	1 in 8		1 in 7	1 in 8
Food Insecurity - Individuals in Urban Counties				
Annual Food Insecurity Rate	10.6%		13.1%	12.1%
Number of Food-insecure People	29.8 million		37 million	34 million
Ratio	1 in 9		1 in 8	1 in 8



LOOKING AHEAD

It is good news that overall, food insecurity in 2020 may have been lower than originally anticipated, and that food insecurity in 2021 looks likely to improve relative to 2020. Without the response from federal and local governments and the generosity of the private sector - individuals, corporations, foundations and communities - more people would have faced hardship in the past year. Thanks to that generosity, the charitable food sector, including the 200 Feeding America member food banks, were able to rise to the occasion to provide food and benefits assistance to tens of millions of people, many for the first time. During 2020, the Feeding America network distributed 6.1 billion meals (7.5 billion pounds of food), a 44% increase over the previous year, because of the food bankers, volunteers, and partner agencies that stood on the front line to ensure their neighbors had the food they needed.

However, the pandemic is not yet over, and the future remains tenuous for people who have experienced uncertain access to enough food for their families. It is likely that it will take time for food insecurity levels to recover. After the Great Recession, it took nearly ten years, until 2018, for food insecurity to pre-recession levels, and even then, 37 million people were still at risk of hunger. While it may be likely that economic conditions will improve more quickly for some this time around, it will take continued support and public-private partnership across the government, the private sector, and the charitable food system to achieve our vision of an America where no one is hungry.



Additional Information:

- [How Feeding America is Responding to COVID-19](#)
- [Feeding America's Hub for Advocacy Resources during COVID-19](#)
- [Feeding America Research about Food Insecurity During COVID-19](#)

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Local projections for 2020 (updated) and 2021 (new) will be released between late March and April 2021.

² With the exception of Native Americans, all estimates are according [to Statistical Supplement to Household Food Security in the United States in 2019](#). *Native American* includes American Indian or Alaska Native. Due to smaller sample sizes these rates reflect five-year averages using the CPS (2015-2019) while other rates reflect 2019 data only.

³ Odoms-Young, A., & Bruce, M. A. (2018). Examining the Impact of Structural Racism on Food Insecurity: Implications for Addressing Racial/Ethnic Disparities. *Family & community health*, 41 Suppl 2 Suppl, Food Insecurity and Obesity (Suppl 2 FOOD INSECURITY AND OBESITY), S3-S6. <https://doi.org/10.1097/FCH.000000000000183>

⁴ Although MMG accounts for several economic and demographic variables, our food insecurity projections have been based on projected changes to unemployment and poverty. This is because these two variables have a statistically significant effect on food insecurity estimates and are likely to be most directly affected by COVID-19. Other variables in the model are held constant using 2019 data.

⁵ Feeding America last issued 2020 food insecurity projections in October 2020, which can be found at <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/coronavirus-hunger-research>. The USDA will release food insecurity estimates for 2020 based on the Current Population Survey in September 2021.

⁶ Feeding America's food insecurity projections by race for Black and white individuals include both Hispanic and non-Hispanic individuals. The disparities between these populations would be greater if white non-Hispanic and Latino (Hispanic) could be presented as separate categories.

⁷ The rates and assumptions listed for unemployment and poverty are relevant to projections for the overall population and for children only. Contact Feeding America for information about indicators/assumptions related to projections by race and geography.