

Not Enough to Eat:

COVID-19 Deepens America's Hunger Crisis

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Prior to COVID-19, even in the midst of a strong economy with a record streak of job growth and low unemployment rates, in 2018 nearly 8 million (4 percent) American adults reported that members of their households sometimes or often did not have enough to eat. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey (collected April 23, 2020 through July 21, 2020), during COVID-19, that number has surged to 26–29 million, or 11 percent of adults. Who are the hungry in America today? This report provides a description of who didn't have enough to eat.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) widely used food insecurity rate includes a range of those experiencing food hardships, including those who lack enough money for food and those who couldn't afford to eat balanced meals. About 1 in 4 adults are estimated to be food insecure during COVID-19. This report goes a step deeper to highlight the subset of this group who are experiencing severe food insecurity, meaning they reported they sometimes or often didn't have enough food (see sidebar).

Not surprising, groups that are most likely to not have enough to eat are those that typically disproportionately experience poverty: Black and Latinx families, those with less than a college education, and children. Approximately 1 in 5 Black and Latinx adults report they do not have enough to eat. What is more surprising is the extent of hunger. It's not just the poorest families who are facing this struggle; among those who don't have enough to eat, 1 in 4 have usual incomes above \$50,000 per year. During this crisis, many have become unemployed, others who have kept their jobs have seen their earnings decrease due to reduced hours, and others are expecting to lose earnings in the next month. The economic shocks they have experienced have pushed many into hunger — potentially for the first time.

Food Insecurity vs. Not Enough to Eat

The measure investigated here — sometimes or often not enough to eat — is a more severe measure than the concept of “food insecurity” that is also tracked by USDA.

Food insecurity is a measure indicating that a family did not have consistent, dependable access to enough food to live an active, healthy lifestyle. Food insecurity has not been measured directly during COVID-19; using available data we can estimate that food insecurity is 25 percent for adults overall, and 32 percent for those with children.

Eleven percent of adults and 14 percent of those with children report that they sometimes or often don't have enough to eat during COVID-19. The share reporting they don't have enough to eat closely tracks with the share identified by USDA as having Very Low Food Security (VLFS), meaning that the food intake of some household members was reduced and normal eating patterns were disrupted due to lack of resources.

Research has already found that the following have reduced hunger and other measures of food hardship: Payments from the new Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) program, which provides resources to families who lost access to free or reduced-price school meals, lifted 2.7–3.9 million children out of hunger in the subsequent weeks¹ since the pandemic began; and evidence from the prior recession shows that increasing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps) benefits helped people and the economy, reducing food insecurity and also stimulating the local economy.² In the face of continued high rates of hunger, Congress should turn to these proven programs — continuing to provide P-EBT payments as long as schools aren't following their normal schedules, and increasing maximum SNAP benefits by 15 percent.

Who Doesn't Have Enough to Eat?

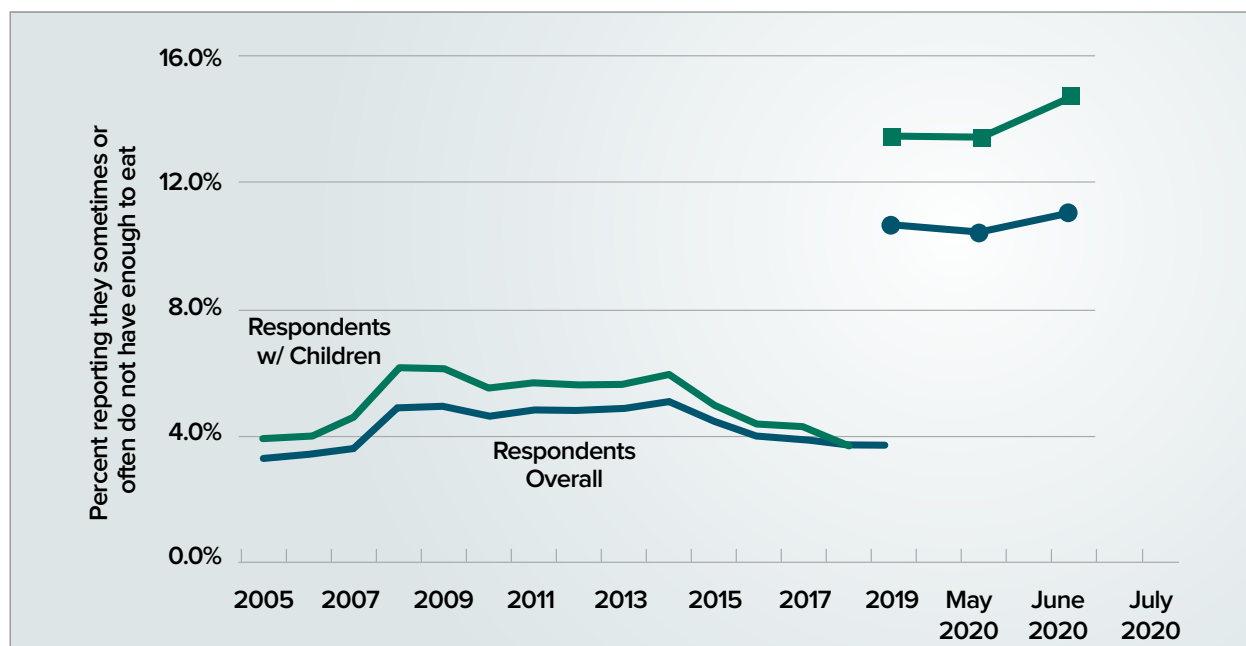
Each year, USDA collects a detailed survey on households' experiences with food access, including asking respondents to choose which statement best describes the food eaten in their homes in the last year: enough of the kinds of foods we want to eat; enough, but not always the kinds of food we want; sometimes not enough to eat; or often not enough to eat. In 2018, 3.7 percent of respondents overall and with children reported that they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat as shown in Figure 1.

During COVID-19, the Census Bureau has been asking one question, drawn from the larger set of annual USDA questions, in which respondents choose among the same options to describe

the food available during the past week. Overall, between 10.2 and 11.0 percent of respondents report that they don't have enough food. Rates are higher among those with children. In May and June, 13.6 percent of respondents with children said that they didn't have enough food. In July, that number was 14.4 percent.³

Figure 1 also shows that the share reporting they don't have enough to eat increases during economic recessions. In 2008, the first year of the Great Recession, the share without enough to eat increased by just over one-third overall and for respondents with children compared with the prior year. The COVID-19 recession has been

Figure 1. Share of Adults (Overall and With Children) Reporting Their Household Sometimes or Often Does Not Have Enough to Eat: 2005–2018 and May–July 2020



characterized by a larger and more rapid increase in unemployment rates than the Great Recession, which explains some of the reasons why the rate of those reporting not enough to eat has spiked so high in recent months. Of course, widespread closures of schools and child care centers that usually provide meals to children is also a contributing factor.

The shares without enough to eat during COVID-19 are disproportionately high among Black and Latinx respondents — especially among those with children. As shown in Figure 2, more than 1 in 5 Black and Latinx adults with children reported in July that they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat. Note that even prior to COVID-19, in 2018 there were stark disparities across groups with Black respondents more than three times as likely as white and Asian respondents who reported not having enough to eat. Every group has seen their rates of hunger more than double between 2018 and today, with rates quadrupling among Latinx respondents (overall and with children). Across every group, respondents with children in their homes are more likely to report that they don't have enough to eat. A similar pattern holds across education levels (not shown), with 16 percent lacking enough to eat among those with a high school diploma or less, 10 percent among those with some college, and 3 percent among those with a college degree or

More than 1 in 5 Black and Latinx adults with children reported in July that they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat.

more. For respondents with children, the rates are 21 percent (high school or less), 13 percent (some college) and 4 percent (college degree). Rates of hunger are consistently high across all adult age levels, and are lower among older adults.

The share reporting not enough to eat varies predictably by annual income — with rates much higher among those with the lowest incomes. During COVID-19, 28 percent of those with usual incomes below \$25,000 per year reported not having enough to eat (compared with 11 percent in 2018). The share declines across groups of usual annual income but is still reasonably common among those with higher income levels — 1 in 4 of those reporting not having enough to eat had usual incomes above \$50,000 per year. Although across the board every group experienced job losses during COVID-19, those with lower levels of usual income were more likely to lose their jobs.

Figure 2. Share of Adults (Overall and With Children) Reporting Their Household Sometimes or Often Does Not Have Enough to Eat, by Race/Ethnicity: 2018 and July 2020

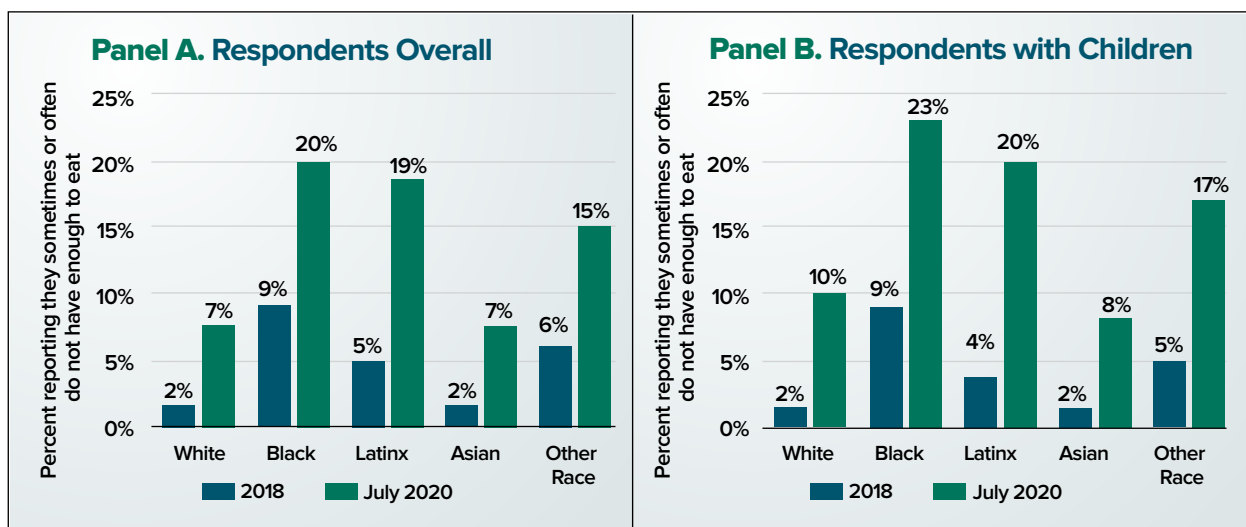
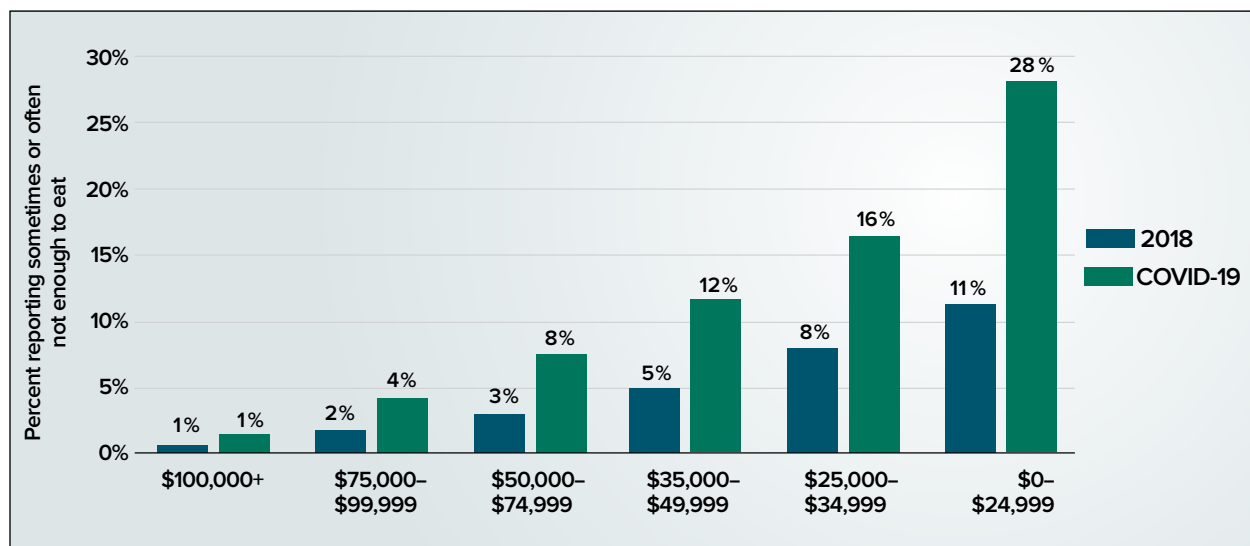


Figure 3. Share of Adults Overall Reporting Their Household Sometimes or Often Does Not Have Enough to Eat, by Usual Annual Income: 2018 and May–July 2020

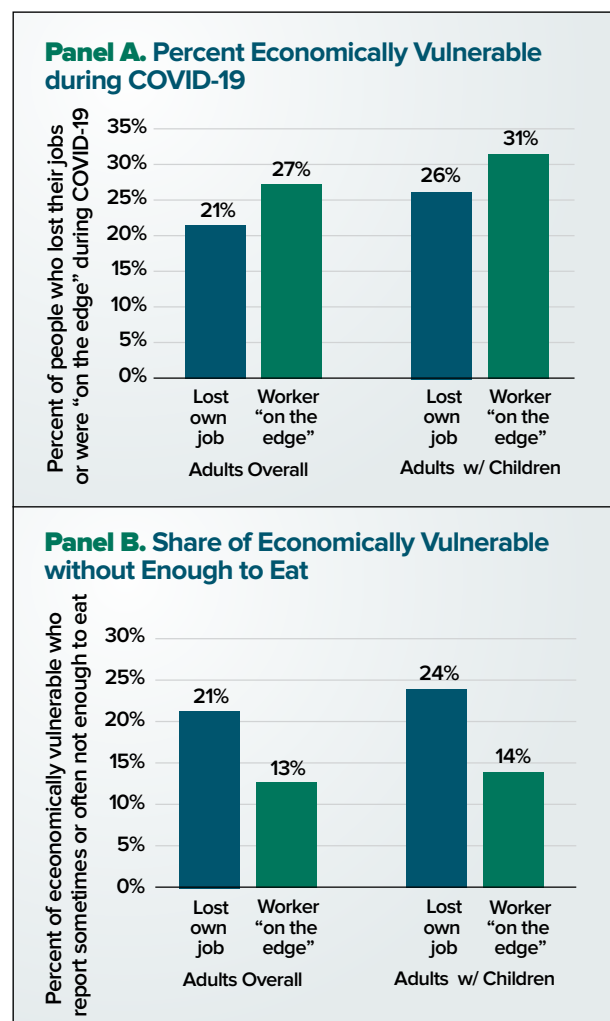


Families Don't Have Enough to Eat because of the COVID-19 Economy

A deeper dive into the data shows how vast the economic distress of COVID-19 has been — and how closely it is tied to not having enough to eat. Panel A of Figure 4 shows the share of adults who have become economically vulnerable during COVID-19. Twenty-one percent of adults report having become unemployed themselves during COVID-19 — though to be sure, some of those are expecting to be recalled back to their old jobs when the situation improves. Another 27 percent are workers “on the edge”: while they themselves are working, they have either experienced a loss of income due to another household member’s job loss, fewer hours worked or other types of reductions, or expect to experience a loss of job and/or income in the next month. Among workers on the edge, 90 percent report they have already experienced a loss of income, and half report that they both have already lost income and still expect to lose more. Those with children are more likely to have lost a job, or to be an employed worker on the edge.

Panel B of Figure 4 shows the rate of reporting not enough to eat among those made economically vulnerable during COVID-19. Overall, 21 percent of those who lost their jobs during COVID-19 report not having enough to eat. Workers have not been

Figure 4. Economic Vulnerability During COVID-19



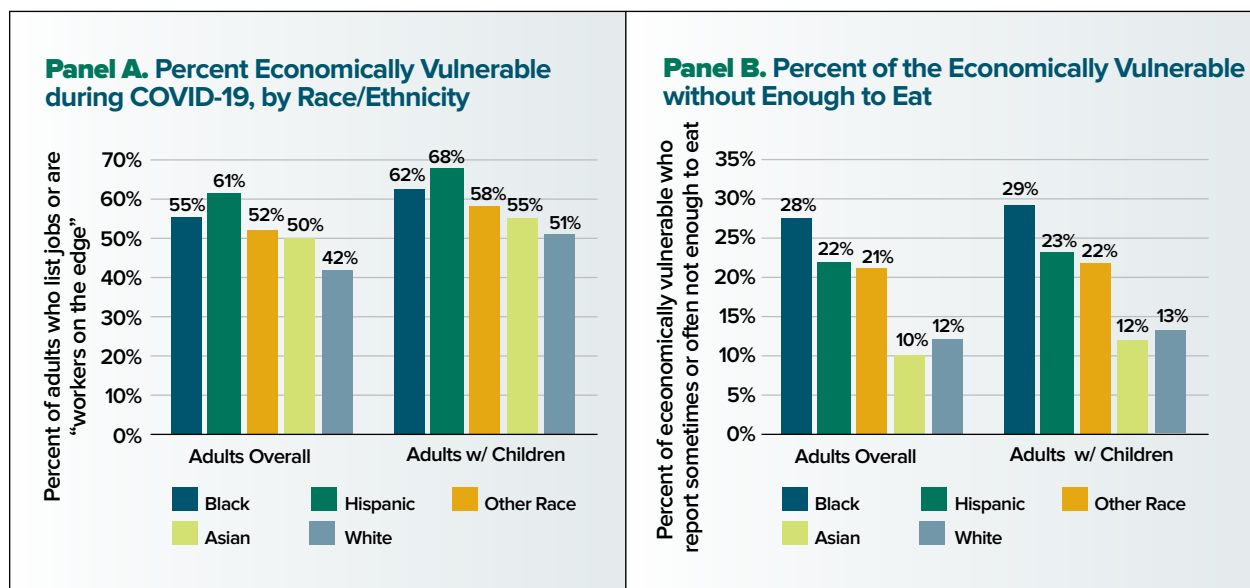
spared: 13 percent of those who are themselves still working, but are on the edge due to household income losses, or who expected losses, report not having enough to eat.

As has consistently been the case throughout this analysis, those with children are worse off. Not only are they more likely to have experienced job losses or income losses, but, conditional on experiencing these, they are more likely to not have enough to eat. The impact on children is further compounded by children’s loss of meals in schools and childcare sites.

Figure 4 shows the high rates of economic vulnerability overall, but job losses have been higher for Black and Latinx households, as well as for those with lower levels of education. Job losses have also been higher in some service sectors, such as food service and travel.⁴ Figure 5 separates the measures

of economic vulnerability — among those who either lost their own job, or lost or expect to lose household income — by race and ethnicity. A majority of Black and Latinx respondents have experienced economic vulnerability, with much higher rates than whites. Asian respondents and those in the “other race” category fall in between. Economic vulnerability results in not having enough to eat at substantially higher rates for Black and Latinx respondents. Among the economically vulnerable, 28 percent of Blacks, 22 percent of Latinx, and 21 percent of the other race group report not having enough to eat overall, with 29, 23, and 22 percent, respectively, among those with children. Similar patterns hold across income level and education — with those usually earning less or with lower levels of education losing jobs and incomes at higher rates, and with economic vulnerability resulting in not having enough to eat at higher rates.

Figure 5. Economic Vulnerability During COVID-19, by Race/Ethnicity



Despite how stark these numbers are, they would surely be worse if not for the historic relief efforts from Congress. Between topping up Unemployment Insurance benefits, providing Economic Impact Payments, creating P-EBT, and implementing smart reforms to SNAP, Congress took helpful steps at the beginning of the pandemic to buffer the

impact of the economic shock; however, this is not enough. Too many have not received relief payments adequate to weather the current economic storm, and Congress has not yet adopted or extended policies known to alleviate effectively food hardship — and do so in a targeted and temporary manner.⁵

Who Doesn't Have Enough to Eat During COVID-19?

We have seen that Black and Latinx populations, and those with lower levels of education, are more likely to not have enough to eat and have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 economic shock.

Figure 6 shows population characteristics of those without enough to eat during COVID-19. As shown in Panel A of Figure 6, 42 percent of those without enough to eat are whites, followed by 27 percent Latinx, 22 percent Black, 3 percent Asian, and the remainder comprising other races. As shown in Panel B, 61 percent have an education level no higher than a high school diploma, with 30 percent having some college, and 9 percent with a college degree or more. As shown in Panel C, 44 percent have usual incomes less than \$25,000 per year; one-third have usual incomes between \$25,000 and \$49,999, and 23 percent have usual incomes above \$50,000 — many of whom have seen large drops in their incomes at this time.

In 21 states and the District of Columbia, more than 1 in 10 adults overall report not having enough to eat.

Women disproportionately do not have enough to eat, and have been more likely to lose their jobs during COVID-19. Of those without enough to eat, 54 percent overall are women, and among those with children who lack adequate food, 60 percent of them are women. Those age 60 or older without enough to eat are also more likely to be women (58 percent).

In 21 states and the District of Columbia, more than 1 in 10 adults overall report not having enough to eat, as shown in Figure 7, Panel A. As always, rates are worse for those with children. In 38 states and the District of Columbia, more than 1 in 10 adults with children say they don't have enough to eat.

Figure 6. Characteristics of Those Without Enough to Eat

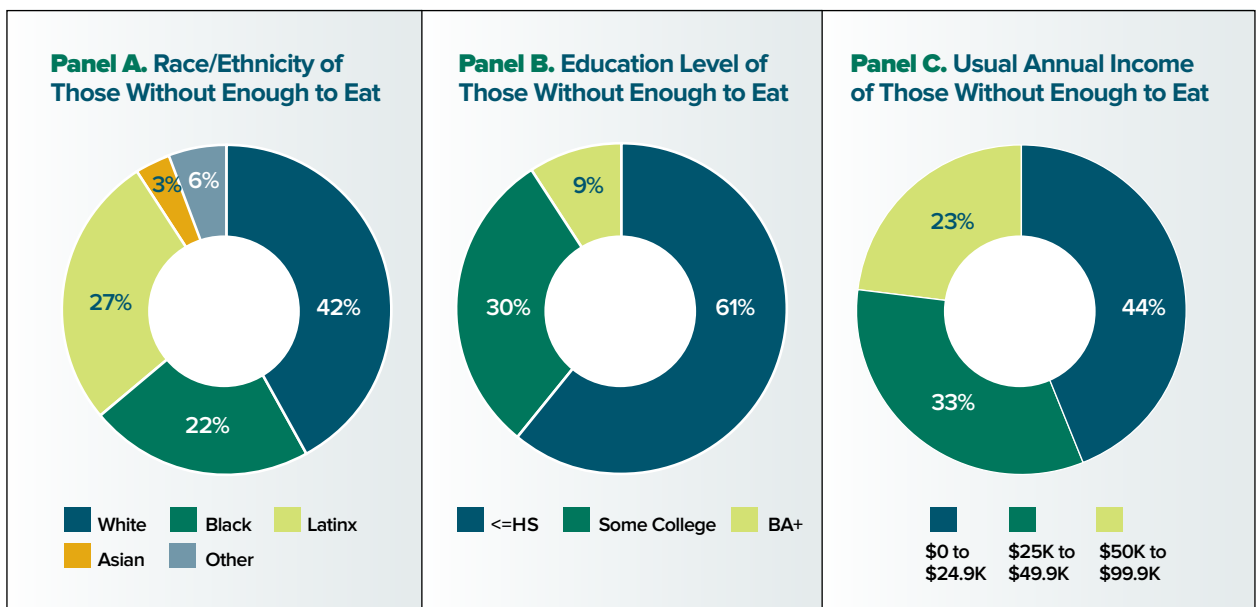
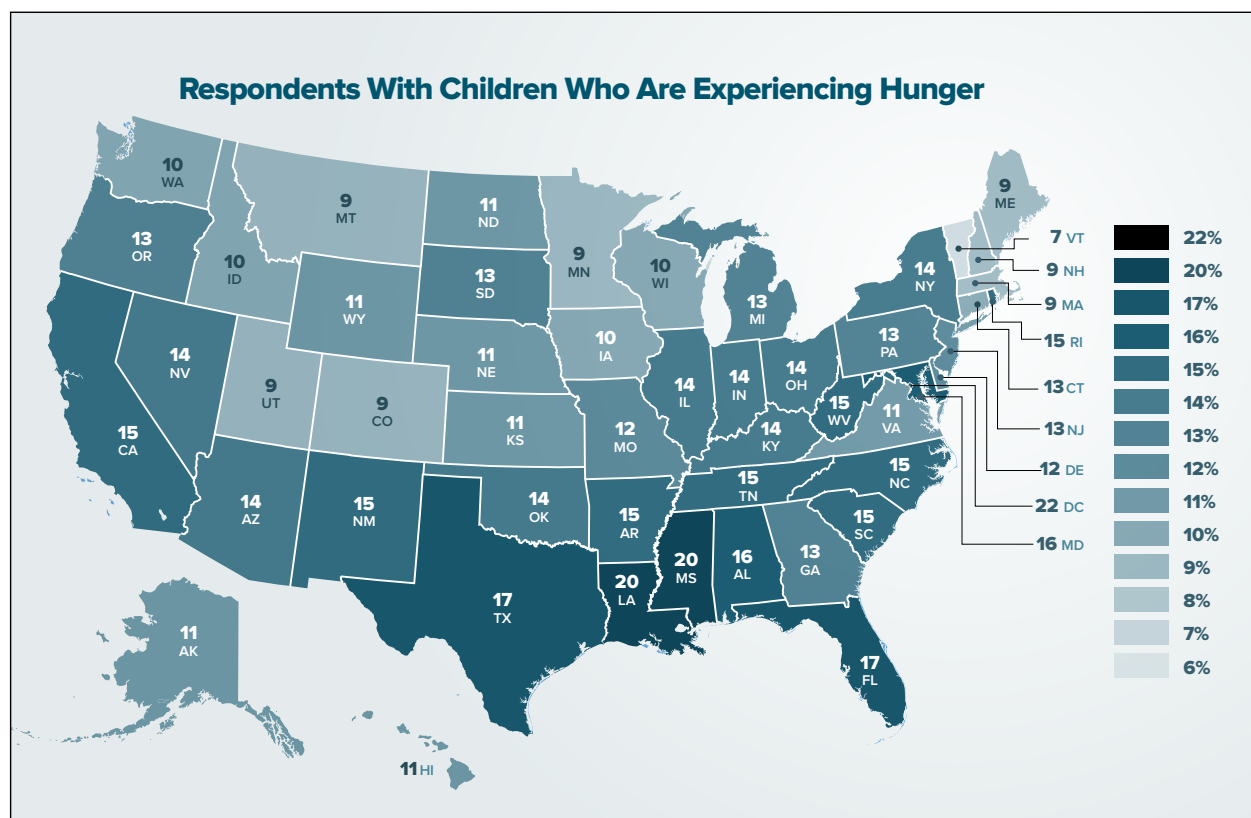
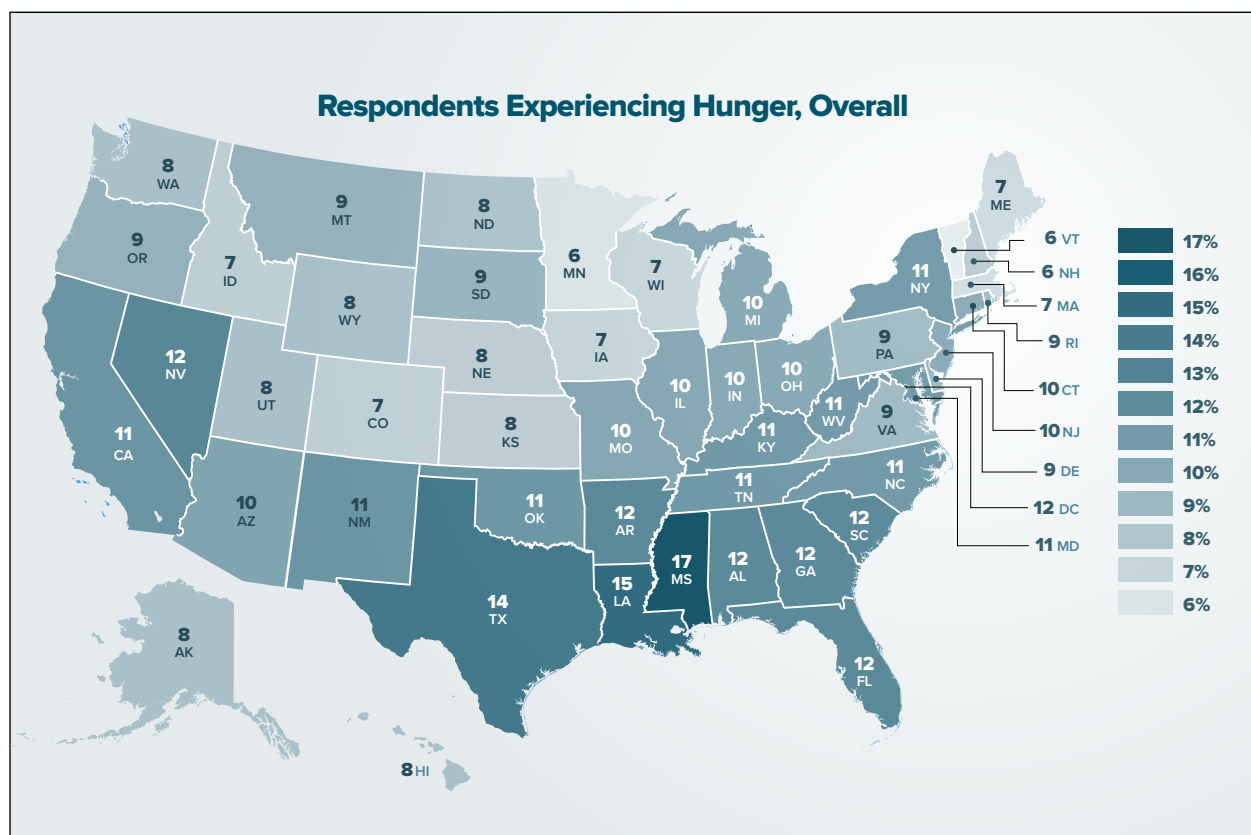


Figure 7. Percent Reporting Not Enough to Eat, by State



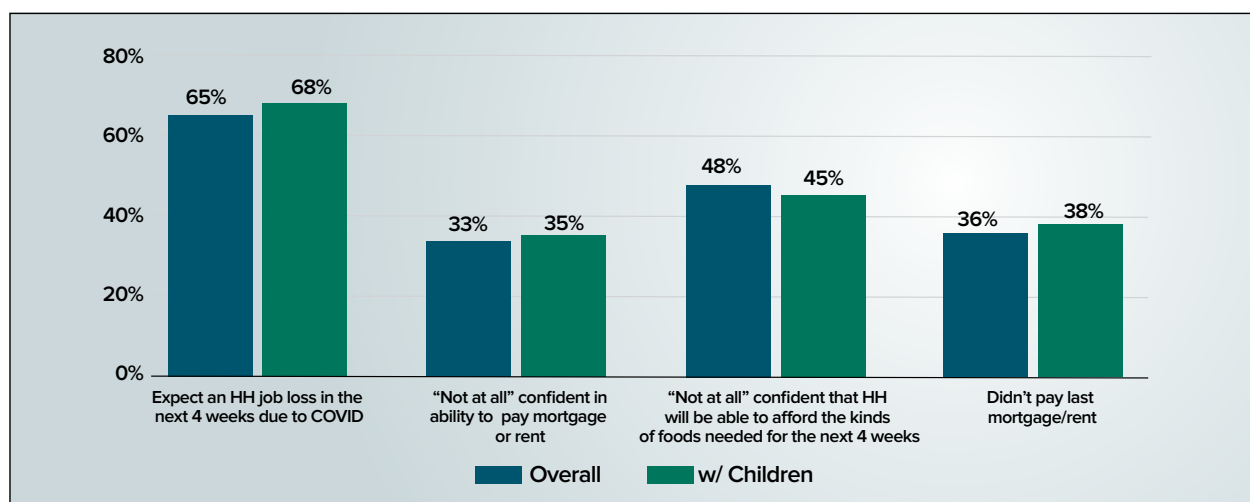
Food is Key, but It's About More than Food

Those who report not having enough to eat are also experiencing other aspects of economic turmoil. As shown in Figure 8 below, a majority of those without enough to eat say they expect to lose employment income in the next month. One-third say that they are not at all confident that they can make their next housing payment, and nearly half are not at all confident that they can afford the food they need over the next month. More than one-third report that they did not make their last housing payment. More than 80 percent of those without enough to eat reported experiencing bad mental health symptoms at least half of the days in the prior week, including nervousness/anxiety, inability to stop worrying, little interest in doing things, and feeling down, depressed

or hopeless. Rates of bad mental health symptoms among those without enough to eat are 20 to 30 percentage points higher than those among the population overall.

In addition to being more likely to not have enough to eat, others have found that death rates from COVID-19 are higher for Black and Latinx people of all ages — with differences in death rates much higher for those at younger ages, including death rates 10 times higher among Black individuals between the ages of 35 to 44 years old, and seven times higher for those who are 45 to 54 years old. Rates for Latinx people are slightly lower than for Black people, but still well above white death rates.⁶

Figure 8. Widespread Economic Distress among Those Without Enough to Eat



Conclusion

During COVID-19, far too many Americans report that they do not have enough to eat. This is not a problem limited to certain populations or regions. Approximately 1 in 5 Black and Latinx adults say they do not have enough to eat, as do 1 in 14 white and Asian adults. In the vast majority of states more than 1 in 10 adults with children don't have enough to eat. Most have been pushed into this state by job loss. Many others are still employed, but have lost hours or earnings, as well as other supports, which have pushed them into hunger. Across the board, those with children are more likely to not have enough to eat.

Congress has a number of proven policies that it can adopt to help struggling families get enough to eat. In particular, increasing maximum SNAP benefits and extending the P-EBT program, which provides benefits to those who lost access to free or reduced-price school meals, are two of the most effective food assistance policies.⁷ Congress should, without delay, act to increase maximum SNAP benefits by 15 percent and extend P-EBT payments, so that fewer people in America will go without enough to eat.

Endnotes

- ¹ Bauer, Lauren, Abigail Pitts, Krista Ruffini, and Diane Schanzenbach. “The Effect of Pandemic-EBT on Measures of Food Hardship,” Brookings Institution, July 30, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-effect-of-pandemic-ebt-on-measures-of-food-hardship/>
- ² Schanzenbach, Diane, Lauren Bauer, and Greg Nantz. “Twelve Facts about Food Insecurity and SNAP,” The Hamilton Project, Brookings Institution, April 2016. https://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/files/twelve_facts_about_food_insecurity_and_snap.pdf
- ³ Differences between May and June are not statistically significant, but July rates are statistically higher than those in May and June. The Census Household Pulse is collected online, while the annual survey typically is collected through a telephone survey. Research suggests that reported rates of food hardship are lower in surveys collected in person or via telephone compared to those collected online, possibly due to respondents’ social desirability bias when responding to a live interviewer (Karpman, Michael, Stephen Zuckerman, and Dulce Gonzalez. 2018. “The Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey: A New Data Source for Monitoring the Health and Well-Being of Individuals and Families.” Washington: Urban Institute).
- ⁴ Montenovio, Laura, Xuan Jiang, Felipe Lozano Rojas, Ian M. Schmutte, Kosali Simon, Bruce A. Weinberg, and Coady Wing. “Unequal Employment Impacts of COVID-19.” Econofact, June 1, 2020. <https://econofact.org/unequal-employment-impacts-of-covid-19>
- ⁵ Bitler, Marianne, Hilary Hoynes, and Diane Schanzenbach. “The social safety net in the wake of COVID-19.” Forthcoming, *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*.
- ⁶ “Race gaps in COVID-19 deaths are even bigger than they appear” by Tiffany Ford, Sarah Reber, and Richard V. Reeves, Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/06/16/race-gaps-in-covid-19-deaths-are-even-bigger-than-they-appear/>
- ⁷ Hoynes and Schanzenbach argue for an automatic 15 percent increase in maximum SNAP benefits during recessions as an automatic stabilizer. See Hoynes, Hilary and Diane Schanzenbach, “Strengthening SNAP as an Automatic Stabilizer,” in Boushey, Heather, Ryan Nunn, and Jay Shambaugh, eds., *Recession Ready: Fiscal Policies to Stabilize the American Economy*. The Hamilton Project and Washington Center on Equitable Growth.