Gaps in Food Access
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MASSACHUSETTS

A REPORT BY
The Greater Boston Food Bank

IN COLLABORATION WITH
NFACT National Food Access and COVID Research Team

GENEROUSLY SUPPORTED BY
HUNGER TO HEALTH COLLABORATORY
STOP & SHOP

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Food Insecurity on the Rise in Massachusetts

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity in Massachusetts increased 55% from 2019 to 2020. At the time of our survey, 30% or 1.6 million adults were experiencing food insecurity. Similar to national data, food insecurity rates during the pandemic were highest among adults with children and people of color:

- 42% of households with children
- 58% of Latinx adults
- 45% of Black adults
- 26% of Asian adults
- White adults had the lowest level of food insecurity at 24%

FIGURE 1.
Food insecurity rates among Massachusetts adults, overall and by race/ethnicity and adults with children (measured using the 6-item USDA Household Food Security Survey module).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>12 months before COVID-19</th>
<th>During COVID-19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Multiracial</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households with children</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households without children</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gaps in Food Assistance Use

Roughly half of adults experiencing food insecurity were using either Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or food pantries during the pandemic. Among the food insecure, those who used food pantries were more likely to also be using other forms of food assistance; 72% reported using SNAP, 55% of those with children under 5 reported using WIC, and 61% with children under 18 reported using school meals. Even those who were using multiple food assistance programs often times still felt that their food needs were not fully met.

**FIGURE 2.**
Food assistance use among adults experiencing food insecurity.

- **Adults using food pantries**: 27% before COVID-19, 32% during COVID-19
- **Adults using SNAP**: 32% before COVID-19, 46% during COVID-19
- **Adults using either food pantries or SNAP**: 46% before COVID-19, 55% during COVID-19
- **Adults with children under 5 receiving WIC**: 33% before COVID-19, 35% during COVID-19
- **Adults with children receiving free or reduced-priced school meals**: 30% before COVID-19, 37% during COVID-19

“Along with max SNAP benefits and Pandemic-EBT at least for a couple of months we felt food secure. Without both, we still struggle toward the end of the month. We have both been out of work during the pandemic with three children at home. It has been a very hard year.”

– Mother, Hampden County
During COVID-19

Pantry use increased among all racial/ethnic groups during the pandemic; 30% of those who used a pantry during the pandemic did so for the first time.

Most pantry users (77%) learned about the pantry from friends, family, or online searches, with very few being referred by formal outreach programs. On average, they visited a pantry once or twice per month and 47% said at least half of their groceries came from a pantry during the pandemic.

FIGURE 3.
Food pantry use among Massachusetts adults, overall and by race/ethnicity and adults with children.

12 months before COVID-19
During COVID-19

Overall
Latinx
Black
Asian
Other/Multiracial
White
Households with children
Households without children

“Extremely grateful for the extra pandemic assistance. My SNAP feeds me one meal a day for about two weeks, give or take. I have to ask friends and family for food assistance because SNAP just doesn’t give enough, ever, to survive on. I just can’t survive without the help of others.”
– Single mom, Salem

“I never realized food pantries supplied fresh fruit and vegetables. Now that comes in handy more than ever!”
– First-time food pantry user, Worcester
Key Barriers to Food Pantry Use: Self-Reliance, Stigma, and Awareness

The most commonly reported barriers to using pantries included a desire for self-reliance, lack of knowledge about pantry hours, stigma, and concern over having too many assets to use a food pantry. However, those that were able to overcome these barriers and use food pantries were satisfied with their experience: 89% felt welcome, 89% would recommend pantries to others, 80% felt the food aligned with their cultural beliefs, 77% said it was what they liked to eat, and 75% felt the food was of good quality.

“I have been using food pantries since I was young. My mother taught me how to do it. They are very helpful when you’re having a hard time. I have met people in my life who are embarrassed and think that it’s only for homeless or poor people. Honestly it’s for anyone who is looking to add food to their house if they’re having a hard time and can’t afford to go to the grocery store.”
– Single mother, Malden

Key Barriers to SNAP Use: Eligibility Concerns, Self-Reliance, and Stigma

Fifty-four percent of those facing food insecurity have not used SNAP during the pandemic. The majority (71%) knew what SNAP was and how to apply. However, most worried they were ineligible and half were worried about the paperwork they would need. The majority did not want to rely on SNAP and wanted to support themselves instead.
**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

Food insecurity has been steeply on the rise during the pandemic in Massachusetts. People of color and families with children have been disproportionately impacted. Despite the increasing number of people turning to food pantries and SNAP for the first time, only 55% of those experiencing food insecurity were using food pantries or SNAP. The most common barriers to using food pantries or SNAP were a desire for self-reliance, a sense of stigma, lack of awareness, and concerns about eligibility. However, those that visited food pantries or received SNAP had positive feedback.

Policymakers and hunger relief organizations should target resources to families with children, and people of color. We should promote use of state and federal food and financial assistance programs (such as SNAP, WIC, school meals, stimulus checks, unemployment benefits), and decrease stigma associated with food insecurity. However, without continued and expanded policies to alleviate poverty, the hunger crisis will continue to plague those most disadvantaged during the economic recovery.

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**Programmatic and Policy Recommendations**

**Goals**

1. **Decrease stigma around accessing food assistance**
2. **Decrease inequities in food access**

**Programmatic Recommendations**

Anti-hunger efforts should include:

- A public awareness campaign aimed to reduce stigma and share existing resources for food and financial assistance programs in addition to targeted outreach. This effort should involve multiple sectors including health care, school systems and retailers.

- Enhancing community engagement with communities of color to better ameliorate food insecurity and ensure equitable food distribution, including:
  - Amplifying voices of diverse individuals seeking help during COVID-19 to mitigate concerns around discrimination.
  - Increasing access to bilingual staff or volunteers on site and/or posters and multilingual materials.
  - Ensuring all people know they are welcome, and no photo identification is needed at food pantries.
  - Training anti-hunger organization staff and volunteers on implicit bias and how to distribute food in a way that ensures dignity.

- Continuing to develop distribution methods that decrease stigma, such as home delivery, farmers market-style and curbside distributions.

- Promoting equitable data collection and data-informed food access investments.

GBFB will continue to analyze data on the prevalence of food insecurity among communities of color to ensure we are closing the gaps.

**Federal and State Policy Recommendations**

- Support current Biden-Harris policy changes and implementation.
- Federal and state policies should continue to prioritize funding and extend food and financial assistance policies and infrastructure investments to equitably reduce food insecurity and poverty. Policymakers should continue the elevated funding and increase access to:
  - The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP),
  - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),
  - Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).
- Key to reducing the gaps in access should include reducing administrative burden and barriers for those applying for benefits. Policymakers should also implement a long-term funding strategy for the continuation of Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) and universal school meals.
- In Massachusetts, continue to prioritize funding at increased levels for Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP), Healthy Incentives Program (HIP) and continue to invest in our food assistance infrastructure.
- In addition, policies aimed to reduce poverty and the burden of unemployment will be key in ensuring equitable economic recovery.
Glossary

**SNAP—Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program**
SNAP provides nutrition benefits to supplement the food budget of needy families so they can purchase healthy food and move towards self-sufficiency.

**P-EBT—Pandemic-EBT**
P-EBT provides food support to help families with children to buy healthy food during the pandemic.

**WIC—Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC)**
WIC provides federal funding to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk.

**TEFAP—The Emergency Food Assistance Program**
TEFAP is a federal program that helps supplement the diets of low-income Americans by providing them with emergency food assistance at no cost. USDA provides 100% American-grown USDA Foods and administrative funds to states to operate TEFAP.

**MEFAP—Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program**
MEFAP ensures a consistent supply of quality nutrient dense foods and locally grown fresh produce to a statewide network of nearly 1,000 Massachusetts emergency food providers.

**HIP—Healthy Incentives Program**
HIP helps SNAP clients buy more fruits and vegetables for their household.

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“Food assistance has been enormously helpful, because one of my two part-time jobs was eliminated because of COVID. At first it felt strange to use, but it has made up the difference in my lost wages and we don’t have to compromise on what we feed our family. I’m enormously thankful.”

— Mother of four, Worcester

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**For additional information:** data@gbfb.org

**Learn more at:** GBFB.org/data

**About GBFB**
The Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB) is the largest hunger-relief organization in New England and among the largest food banks in the country. In response to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, GBFB distributed the equivalent of nearly 82 million meals in 2020 through its network of 600 dedicated food distribution partners and programs in the 190 cities and towns across Eastern Massachusetts. A member of Feeding America, the nation’s food bank network, GBFB’s mission is to end hunger here and it is committed to providing at least three healthy meals a day to everyone in need. To learn more visit GBFB.org.

**About NFACT**
This research was conducted as part of the National Food Access and COVID Research Team (NFACT). NFACT is a national collaboration of researchers committed to rigorous, comparative, and timely food access research during the time of COVID-19. 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. To learn more visit www.nfactresearch.org.