



# Gaps in Food Access

**DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MASSACHUSETTS**



**A REPORT BY**



IN COLLABORATION WITH



GENEROUSLY SUPPORTED BY



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## ABOUT THIS SURVEY

From October 2020 to January 2021, The Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB), using an online survey company, surveyed over 3,000 Massachusetts adults to obtain timely data on food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic. We oversampled low-income adults in order to hear from those most likely in need of food assistance and used statistical methods to obtain estimates representative of the Massachusetts population.

The survey, funded by the Hunger to Health Collaboratory and Stop & Shop, conducted by GBFB in collaboration with the National Food Access and COVID Research Team (NFACT, nfactresearch.org), was undertaken to:

1. Identify the prevalence of food insecurity
2. Identify gaps and disparities in food assistance use
3. Develop data-driven recommendations to ensure that all have adequate access to food

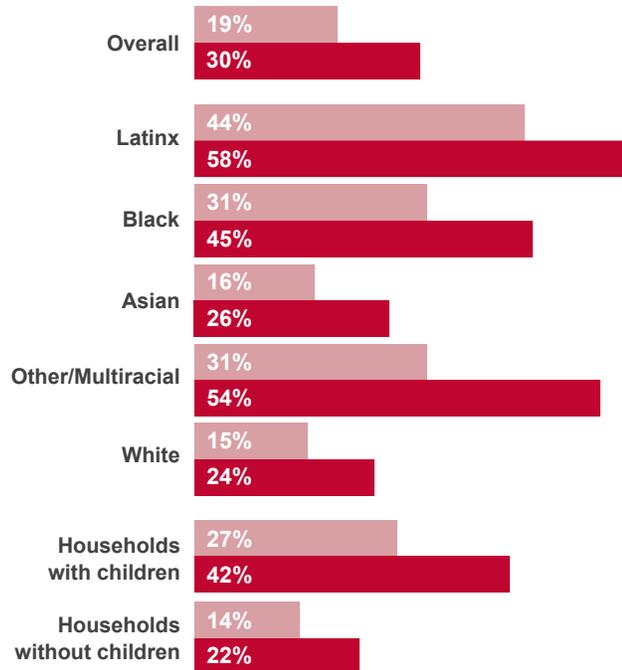
# Food Insecurity on the Rise in Massachusetts

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%

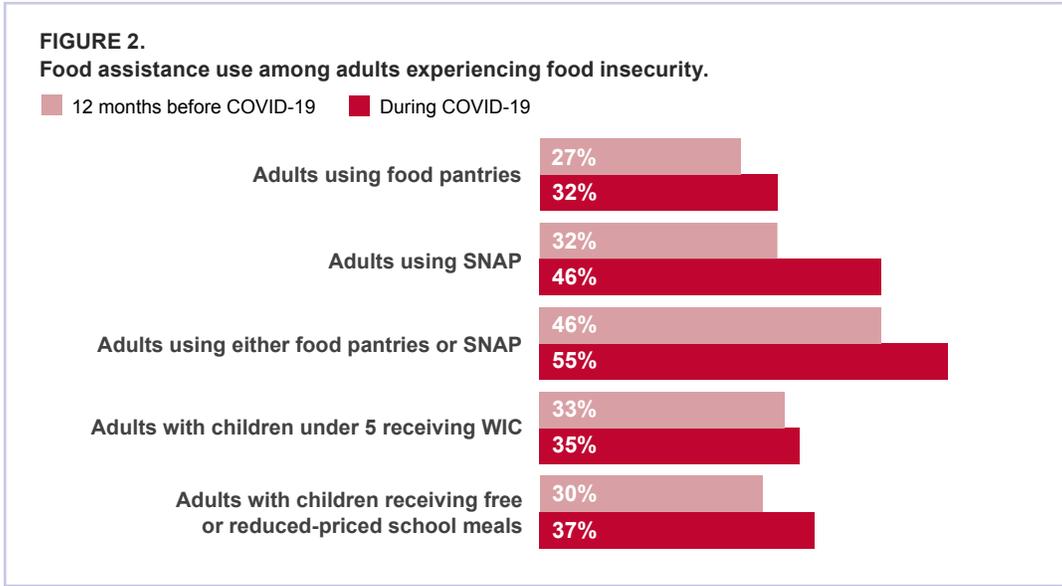
**FIGURE 1.** Food insecurity rates among Massachusetts adults, overall and by race/ethnicity and adults with children (measured using the 6-item USDA Household Food Security Survey module).

■ 12 months before COVID-19 ■ During COVID-19



# 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.



“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



## Only 1 out of 3 Adults experiencing Food Insecurity are Using Food Pantries

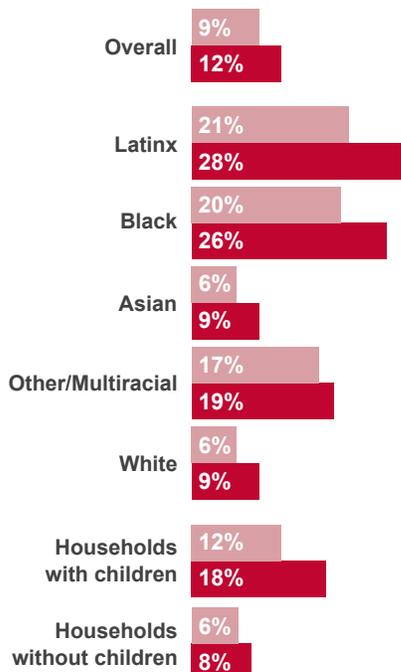


Pantry use increased among all racial/ethnic groups during the pandemic; 30% of those who used a pantry during the pandemic did so for the first time.

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



“I never realized food pantries supplied fresh fruit and vegetables. Now that comes in handy more than ever!”

– First-time food pantry user, Worcester

## Only 1 out of 2 Adults experiencing Food Insecurity are Enrolled in SNAP

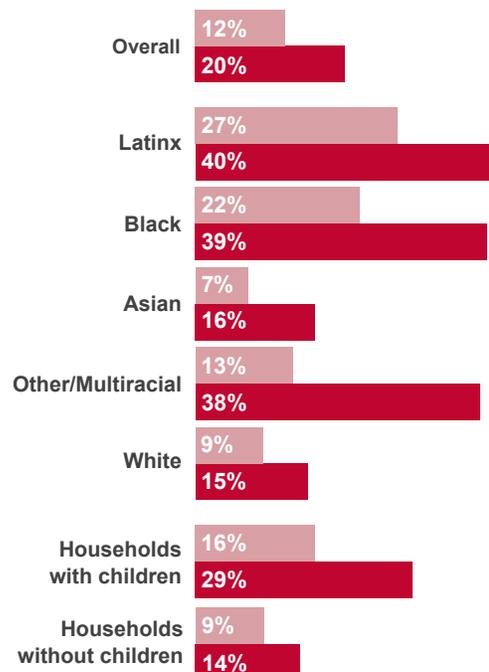


Use of SNAP was highest among adults with children, with 29% using SNAP during the pandemic, nearly double the rate from 2019. SNAP use increased among all racial/ethnic groups.

The majority (89%) of those enrolled in SNAP found it helpful. However, many found it insufficient, with 54% reporting they had to seek additional food assistance, such as going to a food pantry.

**FIGURE 4.** SNAP use among Massachusetts adults, overall and by race/ethnicity and adults with children.

■ 12 months before COVID-19 ■ During COVID-19



“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

## Key Barriers to Food Pantry Use: Self-Reliance, Stigma, and Awareness

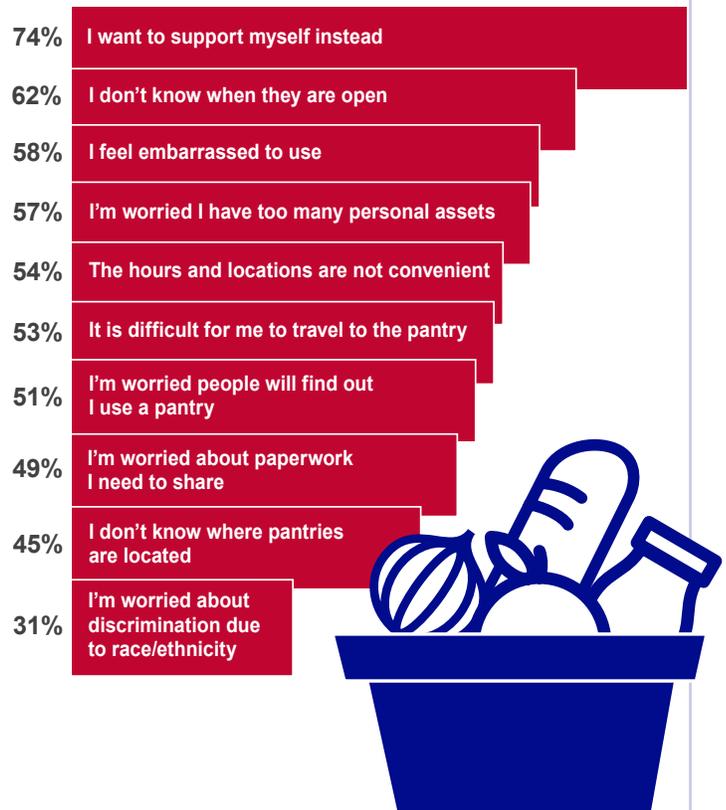
The most commonly reported barriers to using pantries included a desire for self-reliance, lack of knowledge about pantry hours, stigma, and concern over having too many assets to use a food pantry.

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 the grocery store.”

– Single mother, Malden

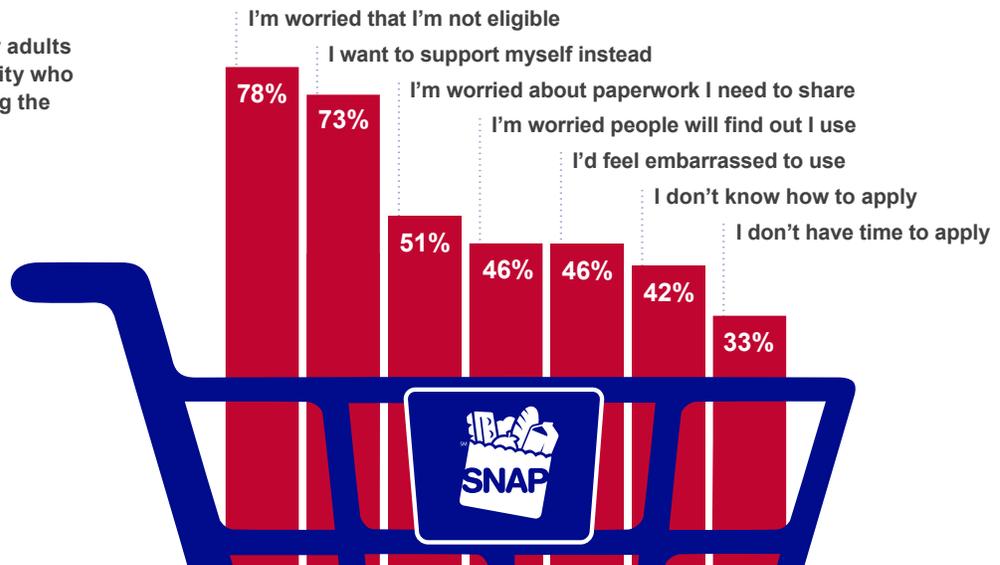
**FIGURE 5.** Food pantry barriers reported by adults experiencing food insecurity who have not used a food pantry during the COVID-19 pandemic.



## 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.

**FIGURE 6.** SNAP barriers reported by adults experiencing food insecurity who have not used SNAP during the COVID-19 pandemic.





## 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.

# 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.



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**Learn more at:** [GBFB.org/data](https://www.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](https://www.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](https://www.nfactresearch.org).

## **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.

“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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