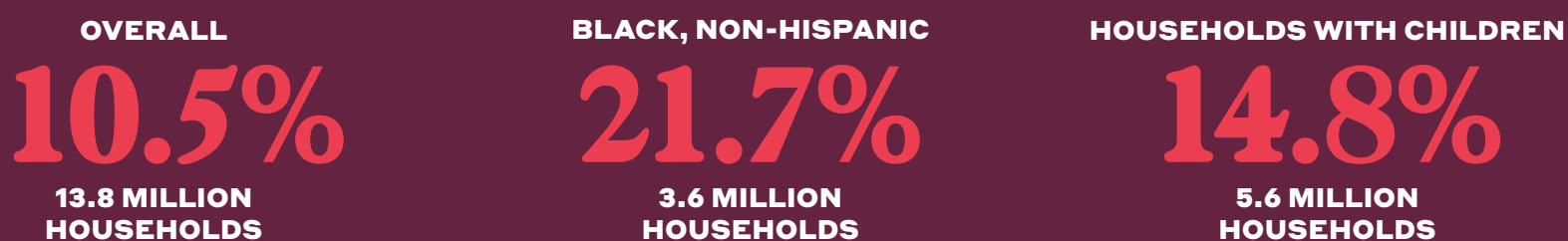


Improving Food and Nutrition Security During COVID-19, the Economic Recovery, and Beyond

SEPTEMBER 2021

Food security, defined as socially acceptable access “at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life,” presents a critical public health challenge. Studies have reported either consistent or worsening food insecurity during COVID-19, and USDA data showed lower food security specifically among Black, non-Hispanic households, and households with children, due to the pandemic. Both populations have historically had lower than average rates of food security. While food security is critical, nutrition security - consistent access, availability, and affordability of nutrition and high quality foods and beverages that promote well-being and prevent (and if needed, treat) disease - is essential as well. Diet-related diseases, such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and some cancers, are the leading causes of poor health, and have been shown to increase the risk for severe illness, hospitalization, or death from COVID-19. A recent Rockefeller Foundation report estimated that the “hidden” cost of diet and the food system is about \$1.1 trillion in direct and indirect costs, with obesity and overweight costing \$359 billion, other non-communicable diseases like hypertension and diabetes costing \$604 billion, and food insecurity costing \$146 billion. Communities of color disproportionately bear these costs.

USDA 2020 Household Food Insecurity Rates





BPC's bipartisan Food and Nutrition Security Task Force believes that the enormous investments by the federal government, charitable food system, food industry, nonprofit organizations, and other stakeholders in addressing the alarming increase in need for food assistance caused by COVID-19 and its impact on our economy were pivotal in stemming what could have been an even more dramatic increase in food insecurity and other adverse impacts on our society.


Recommendations

The Task Force makes the following federal policy recommendations to increase food and nutrition security:


Elevate Food and Nutrition Security Within the Federal Government

-  Develop a standardized federal definition for “nutrition security” in consultation and collaboration with stakeholder groups.
-  Elevate policy issues related to food and nutrition security by hosting a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, Hunger, and Health in early 2022.






Strengthen Health Care and Community Connections

-  Given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color, older Americans, and people with obesity and diet-related chronic conditions, enact and implement programs targeting these populations that address the linkages between health care and the community and social determinants of health.

Enhance Emergency Food Assistance

-  Maintain program flexibilities, increase investments in emergency food assistance, and support and incentivize the distribution of foods to families with a focus on increased access to nutritious foods and improved dietary quality.

Recommendations Across Federal Food and Nutrition Programs

-  Extend through the public health emergency or beyond the COVID-19-related nutrition program flexibilities and waivers that provide access to key federal food and nutrition assistance programs. Ensure federal agencies have the authority to grant needed waivers and flexibilities during times of future economic downturns, recessions, and public health emergencies.
-  Support an increase in accessibility, availability, and intake of fruits and vegetables in all forms in federal feeding programs, such as SNAP, WIC, P-EBT, Summer EBT, and USDA Emergency Food Distribution programs, to improve nutrition security.
-  Ensure the necessary technology infrastructure to modernize service delivery and provide equitable access to federal nutrition programs and program components.
-  Ensure all individuals, especially those who are at disproportionate risk of food and nutrition insecurity, have equal access to affordable nutritious foods to promote health. Examine and address the social determinants of health and their impact on food and nutrition security during COVID-19.
-  Provide funding for federal research and programs that address food and nutrition security impacted by COVID-19 and to prevent adverse outcomes during future public health emergencies.

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TABLE 1. Overview of Key COVID-19 Related Changes to Select Federal Food Assistance Programs

Program	Eligibility Pre-COVID	Description	COVID Related Actions
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	Households earning below monthly income limits or participants of certain other government assistance programs, with categorical limits on eligibility or benefit timeframes in some states	Cash-like benefits through electronic benefit transfer cards (EBT) for low-income participants to purchase food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15% increase in monthly SNAP benefits through September 30, 2021 • Waivers for states to provide temporary, emergency SNAP benefits • Temporary suspension of work and work training requirements • Waivers for in-person requirements and funding for SNAP online purchasing
School Meals and Summer Food Service Program	Children in low-income households or households eligible for certain other governmental assistance program and children who are migrants, runaway, homeless or in foster care receive free or reduced-price nutritious meals, with low-cost paid meals available to other students	Cash and commodity assistance to elementary and secondary schools, and nonprofit service institutions to provide breakfast, lunch, and snacks to eligible students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waivers of certain school meal requirements given school closures and social distancing requirements, including allowing for free meals through the 2021-22 school year • Established Pandemic-EBT, a supplemental grocery benefit for low-income families to replace the value of school meals during extended school closures • Public-private partnerships, such as the Emergency Meals to You program, in which food boxes were mailed to rural students unable to obtain school meals due to school closures
Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)	Infants and children enrolled in eligible day care centers and child care homes, and adults above the age of 60 or chronically-disabled persons at nonresidential adult-care centers	Cash and commodity assistance to certain care centers to provide nutritious meals and snacks to eligible populations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided emergency relief funding for CACFP to continue operating • Expands eligibility for CACFP at emergency homeless shelters from age 19 to age 25
Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)	Pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age 5 with low household incomes and at nutrition risk	Supplemental nutritious foods, nutrition education/counseling and breastfeeding promotion and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waivers of physical presence requirement for enrollment and reenrollment, and some administrative requirements • Temporary boost to Cash Value Voucher for fruits and vegetables from \$9-11/month to \$35/month • Funding to modernize the program

Many federal food and nutrition assistance programs saw increased participation, and the federal government granted enhanced flexibilities and created new programs to bolster efforts to combat food and nutrition insecurity.

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