

SPOTLIGHT: Households With Low Income

FIGURE 1: Low Income Communities Prior to and During COVID-19

| Prior to COVID-19 | | | During COVID-19 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Hunger | Poverty | Health | Hunger | Poverty | Health |
| Triple the national rates of hunger | 2019: 11% of all households were below the official poverty level | High rates of chronic disease | Triple the national rates of hunger | Half of households have difficulty paying for regular expenses and experience slower job recovery | COVID-19 deaths correlated with county-level poverty and with income inequality |

Source: Food Research & Action Center 2021 ©

Prior to COVID-19

Hunger: In 2019, 34.9 percent of households with an income below the Federal Poverty Line (FPL) were food insecure¹ compared to 5.1 percent of households with incomes equal to or above 185 percent of the FPL.²

Low-income households are more vulnerable to the economic drivers of food insecurity: negative income shocks, high food prices, and instability in housing.³ In addition to low income, households with low wealth or few assets (assets could be owning a home or holding other financial investments or savings) are at a higher risk of food insecurity because assets help buffer the effects of income shocks.^{4,5}

Poverty: In 2019, the Official Poverty Measure was 10.5 percent, while the Supplemental Poverty Measure, which accounts for cost of living and receipt of government assistance, was slightly higher at 11.7 percent.⁶

Health: At an individual level, the immediate effects of poverty may result in poor housing conditions, lack of access to healthy foods, and inadequate health care, which lead to poor health. In the long term, the stress of living in poverty can result in chronic inflammation and disease. At the community level, neighborhood poverty and income inequality are also associated with higher rates of poor health outcomes and mortality.⁷

During COVID-19

Hunger: Food insufficiency peaked among low-income households in January 2021 at 35 percent, compared to 11 percent of all households. As of March 2021, 32 percent of households with an income less than \$25K experienced food insufficiency in the prior week compared to 9 percent of all households.⁸

Poverty: As the pandemic has stretched on, low-income Americans have been more likely to have trouble paying bills, rent, and have had to rely on government food assistance and food charity.⁹ As of March 2021, 53 percent of households earning less than \$25K a year found it sometimes or very difficult to pay usual household expenses, compared to 29 percent of households overall.¹⁰ The recovery in job growth has been the lowest for low-wage earners. As of February 2021, employment was still 30.4 percent lower for low-wage workers (earning <\$27K per year) than in January 2020 compared to a decline of only 2.1 percent for high-wage workers (earning >\$60K/year).¹¹

Health: There is little data on COVID-19 cases and deaths by household income. However, racial disparities in COVID-19 cases and deaths were found to be larger in counties with lower median incomes.¹² Greater income inequality at the county level has been associated with higher rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths.^{13,14}

There are many reasons to believe income would be correlated with COVID-19 cases. Essential workers are more likely to have low wages. Stay-at-home orders also increase time in poor housing conditions for low-income individuals, which may increase the risk of COVID-19 exposure if houses are overcrowded. Increased time in the home following shelter-in-place orders can expose families to other health risks if there are environmental contaminants like mold, pests, or extreme temperatures.¹⁵

Impact of the Federal Nutrition Programs

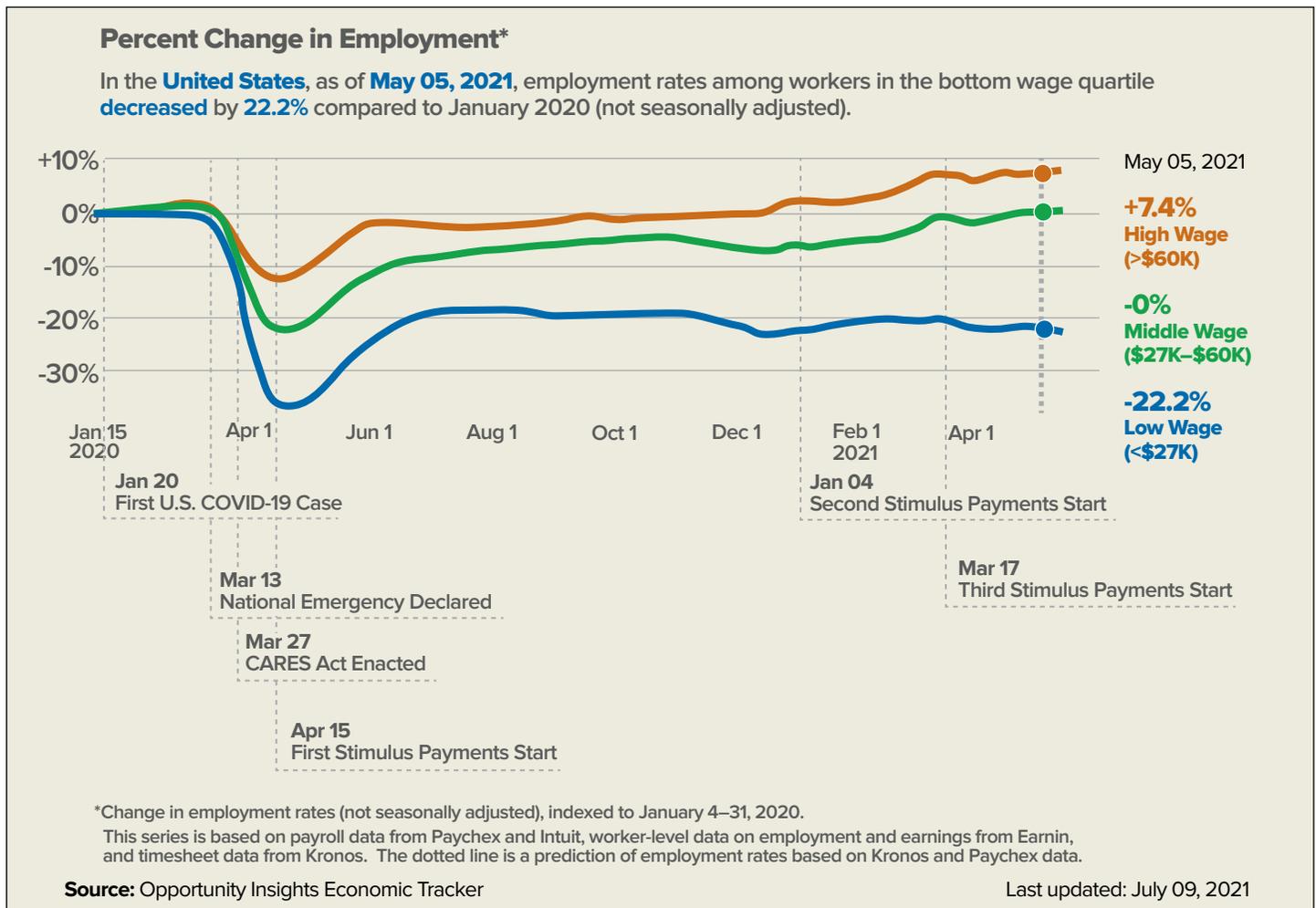
The federal nutrition programs are proven anti-poverty programs. In 2019, the estimated number of people who were lifted out of poverty were as follows: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): 2.5 million; National School Lunch Program: 1.2 million; and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children: 230,000. Using data from 2013 to 2016, the School Breakfast Program lifted 620,000 individuals out of poverty each year.¹⁶ During the Great Recession, SNAP was more likely than any other program to distribute resources to households in deep

poverty, or income below 50 percent of the FPL, reducing deep poverty by 16.6 percent (about 3.4 million people).^{17,18} Even more striking, SNAP reduced extreme poverty (income of less than \$2 per person per day) among households with children by 48 percent in 2011 when benefits were expanded by 13.6 percent.¹⁹ To limit the depth and duration of hardship, it is important to extend and expand SNAP benefit boosts until economic conditions show sufficient recovery and to improve SNAP eligibility and access.

Gains in program access and benefit adequacy during COVID-19 provide important best practices for strengthening and expanding the federal nutrition programs. The Biden administration and Congress must continue to invest in these critical programs. In addition, FRAC supports a broad range of policies to address the root causes of hunger, poverty, and poor health. For current recommendations, see FRAC's [Action Center page](#).

Want to learn more? This brief summarizes information from the report [Hunger, Poverty, and Health Disparities During COVID-19 and the Federal Nutrition Programs' Role in an Equitable Recovery](#). See [FRAC's COVID-19 dashboard](#) for the full report and additional statistics on hunger during the pandemic.

FIGURE 2: Households With Low Incomes Have Been Slower to Recover Jobs



Endnotes

- ¹ Food insecurity is the inability to acquire adequate nutritious food due to a lack of resources. Official estimates for food insecurity are measured through the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement. Note, however, that official estimates for 2020 will not be available until September 2021. The Census Household Pulse Survey was developed to collect data quickly and frequently during COVID-19 and measures food insufficiency, which they define as “sometimes” or “often” not having enough to eat. Food insufficiency is more severe than food insecurity. See [Defining Food Insecurity and Measuring it During COVID-19](#) for more details.
- ² Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbitt, M. P., Gregory, C., & Singh, A. (2020). *Household Food Security in the United States in 2019*. Available at: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=99281>. Accessed on April 14, 2021.
- ³ Norris, C., Berning, J., Cleary, R., & Pena, A. (2020). *Food Insecurity Among Immigrant Populations In The United States*. Available at: <https://ideas.repec.org/p/ags/aaea20/304558.html>. Accessed on April 14, 2021.
- ⁴ Shobe, M. A., Narcisse, M. R., & Christy, K. (2018). Household Financial Capital and Food Security. *J Poverty*. 22(1):1-22.
- ⁵ Moulton, S., Loibl, C., Haurin, D., & Edmunds, C. (2019). *Symposium On Housing Tenure And Financial Security - Food Insecurity among Older Adults in the US: The Role of Mortgage Borrowing*. Available at: <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/research-areas/working-papers/food-insecurity-among-older-adults-us-role-mortgage-borrowing>. Accessed on April 14, 2021.
- ⁶ Fox, L. (2020). *The Supplemental Poverty Measure: 2019 Current Population Reports*. Available at: <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-272.html>. Accessed on April 14, 2021.
- ⁷ Price, J. H., Khubchandani, J., & Webb, F. J. (2018). Poverty and Health Disparities: What Can Public Health Professionals Do? *Health Promot Pract*. 19(2):170-174.
- ⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). Household Pulse Survey Data Tables. Available at: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html>. Accessed on April 14, 2021.
- ⁹ Parker, K., Minkin, R., & Bennett, J. (2020). *Economic Fallout From COVID-19 Continues To Hit Lower-Income Americans the Hardest*. Available at: <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/09/24/economic-fallout-from-covid-19-continues-to-hit-lower-income-americans-the-hardest/>. Accessed on April 14, 2021.
- ¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). Household Pulse Survey Data Tables. Available at: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html>. Accessed on April 14, 2021.
- ¹¹ Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Hendren, N., Stepner, M., & the Opportunity Insights Team. (2021). Track the economic impacts of COVID-19 on people, businesses, and communities across the United States in real time. Available at: <https://www.tracktherecovery.org/>. Accessed on April 14, 2021.
- ¹² Adhikari, S., Pantaleo, N. P., Feldman, J. M., Ogedegbe, O., Thorpe, L., & Troxel, A. B. (2020). Assessment of Community-Level Disparities in Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Infections and Deaths in Large US Metropolitan Areas. *JAMA Netw Open*. 3(7):e2016938.
- ¹³ Yu, Q., Salvador, C. E., Melani, I., Berg, M. K., Neblett, E. W., & Kitayama, S. (2021). *Racial residential segregation and economic disparity jointly exacerbate COVID 19 fatality in large American cities*. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8013888/>. Accessed on April 14, 2021.
- ¹⁴ Liao, T. F. & De Maio, F. (2021). Association of Social and Economic Inequality With Coronavirus Disease 2019 Incidence and Mortality Across US Counties. *JAMA Netw Open*. 4(1):e2034578.
- ¹⁵ DeLuca, S., Papageorge, N., & Kalish, E. (n.d.). *The Unequal Cost of Social Distancing*. Available at: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/from-our-experts/the-unequal-cost-of-social-distancing>. Accessed on April 14, 2021.
- ¹⁶ Warren, L., Fox, L., & Edwards, A. (2020). *The Supplemental Poverty Measure in the Survey of Income and Program Participation*. Available at: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sipp/tech-documentation/source-accuracy-statements.html>. Accessed on April 28, 2021.
- ¹⁷ Moffitt, R. A. (2013). The Great Recession and the Social Safety Net. *Ann Am Acad Pol Soc Sci*. 650(1):143-166.
- ¹⁸ Tiehen, L., Jolliffe, D., & Smeeding, T. (2015). *SNAP Matters: How Food Stamps Affect Health and Wellbeing*. (Chapter: The Effect of SNAP on Poverty). Stanford University Press, 2015.
- ¹⁹ Shaefer, H.L. & Edin, K. (2013). Rising Extreme Poverty in the United States and the Response of Federal Means-Tested Transfer Programs. *Soc Serv Rev*. 87(2):250-268.