







# Hunger, Poverty, and Health During COVID-19

## SPOTLIGHT: Young Adults

Although young adults have been spared from the worst of the health effects of the pandemic, the lack of access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for college students and disproportionately high unemployment rates put them at high risk for hunger and long-term economic hardship.

**FIGURE 1: Young Adults Prior to and During COVID-19**

Prior to COVID-19			During COVID-19		
					
<b>Hunger</b>	<b>Poverty</b>	<b>Health</b>	<b>Hunger</b>	<b>Poverty</b>	<b>Health</b>
1 in 3 college students	Poverty rate had been increasing most rapidly in this age group	Food insecurity linked to worse mental health	Higher than other age groups	Higher rates of unemployment and lower college enrollment	Worse mental health compared to other age groups

Source: Food Research & Action Center 2021 ©

### Prior to COVID-19

**Hunger:** While food insecurity rates<sup>1</sup> for young adults overall were not significantly higher than the national average of 10.5 percent, about 1 in 3 college students experienced food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> First-generation students and students of color were at higher risk.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, nearly half of students who were eligible for SNAP prior to COVID-19 did not receive benefits, in part because of certain eligibility limitations on college students and challenges navigating the enrollment process.<sup>4</sup> Students who are enrolled less than half-time can qualify for SNAP, while students enrolled more than half-time must meet additional criteria, such as working at least 20 hours a week or having a dependent younger than 6 years old.<sup>5</sup>

**Poverty:** Young adults ages 18 to 24 are not prioritized for social safety net programs, which has contributed to a greater

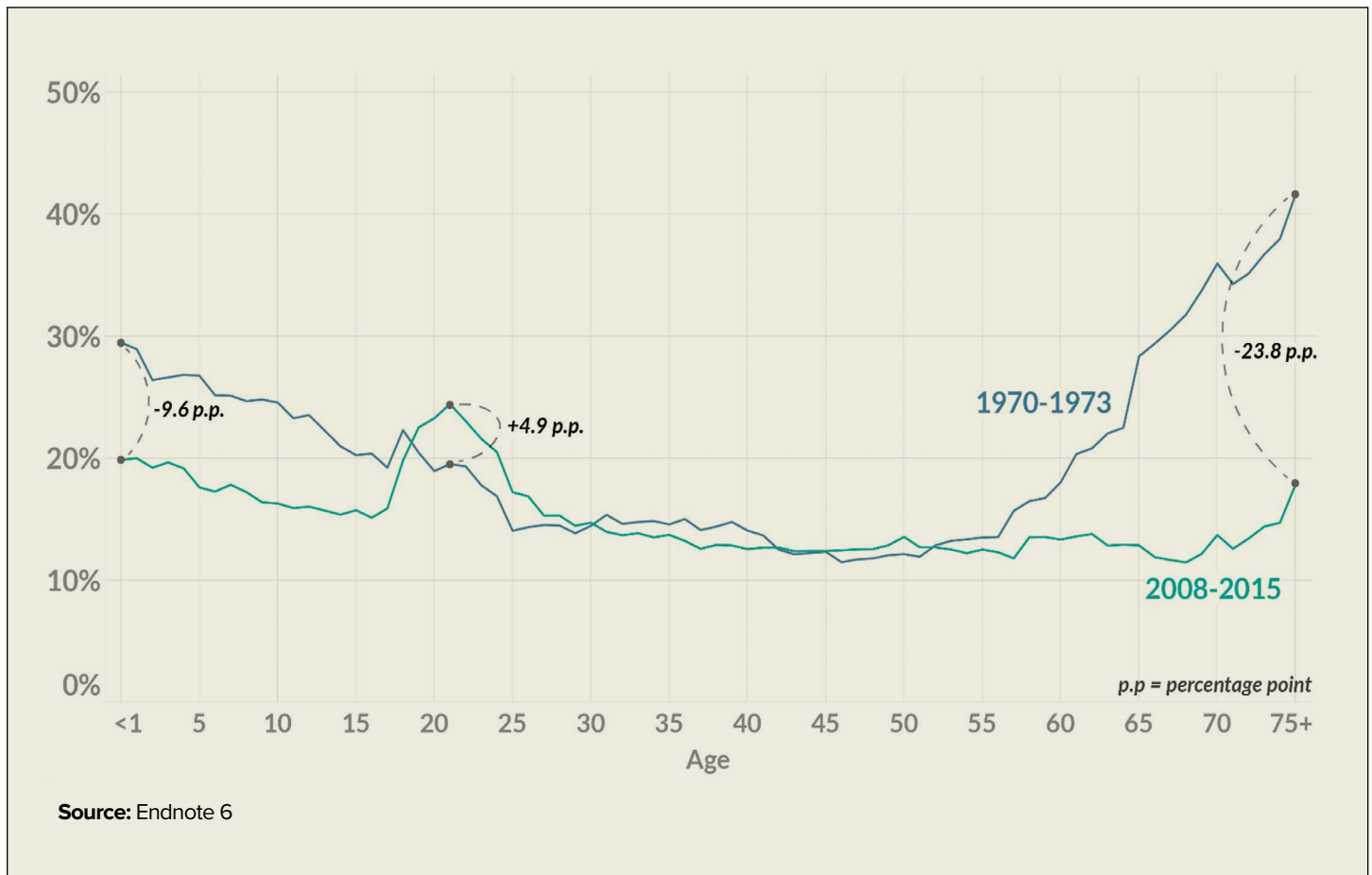
increase in poverty among young adults in recent decades compared to any other age group. Between 1970–1973 and 2008–2015, poverty decreased by 9.6 percentage points for infants and by 23.8 percentage points for adults 75 and older. Meanwhile, poverty increased for 21-year-olds by 4.9 percentage points<sup>6</sup> (see Figure 2).

**Health:** While young adults are generally healthy, those who experience food insecurity are more likely to have a chronic disease<sup>7</sup> and suffer from depression, anxiety, and/or suicidal ideation.<sup>8</sup>

### During COVID-19

**Hunger:** Food insufficiency rates have been higher for young adults compared to the national average throughout the pandemic. As of late March 2021, food insufficiency

**FIGURE 2: The Increased Percentage of Young Adults in Poverty, 1970–1973 to 2008–2015**



among adults ages 18–24 was 10.1 percent, higher than the national average of 8.8 percent.<sup>9</sup>

While there is no nationally representative data for food insecurity among college students, one study in Texas in May 2020 found 35 percent of students surveyed were food insecure. Students were more likely to be food insecure if they had experienced housing instability or a loss of income.<sup>10</sup> The extra requirements for college students to qualify for SNAP benefits were not waived until the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, which was passed in December 2020.<sup>11,12</sup>

**Poverty:** While young adults have been spared from high COVID-19-related morbidity and mortality, social distancing

measures have severely impacted employment and educational opportunities for this age group.

Adults ages 18–24 have experienced some of the highest rates of unemployment during COVID-19.<sup>13</sup> For example, between February 2020 and April 2020, employment among young adults ages 21–24 fell by 23 percentage points compared to a decline of 13 percentage points for adults ages 35–44. This downward trend in employment for young adults was 4.5 times greater than during the Great Recession.<sup>14</sup>

Fewer young adults enrolled in college in 2020 compared to 2019. Community colleges, which serve primarily low-income students, have seen the steepest declines in enrollment (-19

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percent) compared to public and private four-year institutions (-11 percent and -9 percent, respectively). The racial and ethnic student groups with the largest declines have been Native Americans (-10 percent) and Black Americans (-8 percent).<sup>15</sup> Students who take time off are less likely to finish college, particularly students with low incomes, are from rural areas, or represent racial and/or ethnic minorities.<sup>16</sup> College graduates have more employment opportunities and higher earnings, which translates to higher food security and better health outcomes throughout life.<sup>17</sup>

**Health:** Compared to other age groups, a higher proportion of young adults have reported poorer mental health since the start of the pandemic, including anxiety, isolation, depression, increased substance use, and suicidal ideation.<sup>18</sup>

## Impact of the Federal Nutrition Programs

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a key resource for young mothers: it improves nutritional and health outcomes for mothers, infants, and young children. SNAP is another key resource for reducing food insecurity, financial hardship, anxiety, and depression.<sup>19</sup> For college students, the anti-hunger and anti-poverty impacts of SNAP help students complete school; individuals with a college degree are in better overall health and have longer life expectancies.

Furthermore, there are 2.1 million single mothers in college, and the majority of single parents in college are women of color.<sup>20</sup> The American Rescue Plan, which passed in March 2021, includes eligibility exemptions to expand access to certain college students during COVID-19; these should be made permanent.<sup>21</sup> The Plan also provides funding for improving WIC outreach, which should include coordinating efforts on college campuses. In addition, the Plan extends eligibility for at-risk young adults from 18 to 24 years old to receive meals at homeless and youth-serving shelters;<sup>22</sup> this too should be made permanent.

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](#).

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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.

**Read more:** [Reducing Food Insecurity Among College Students](#)

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> 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.
- <sup>2</sup> Nagata, J. M., Palar, K., Gooding, H. C., Garber, A. K., Whittle, H. J., Bibbins-Domingo, K., & Weiser, S. D. (2019). Food Insecurity Is Associated With Poorer Mental Health and Sleep Outcomes in Young Adults. *J Adolesc Heal.* 65(6):805-811.
- <sup>3</sup> Laska, M. N., Fleischhacker, S., Petsoulis, C., Bruening, M., & Stebleton, M. J. (2020). Addressing College Food Insecurity: An Assessment of Federal Legislation Before and During Coronavirus Disease-2019. *J Nutr Educ Behav.* 52(10):982-987.
- <sup>4</sup> Larin, K., St. Pierre, M., Boretti, N., Rider, J., & Yoder, S. (2018). *Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits.* Available at: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/696254.pdf>. Accessed on April 14, 2021.
- <sup>5</sup> Treisman, R. (2019). *New SNAP Rule Impacts College Students By Limiting Benefits And Adding Confusion.* Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/21/789295697/new-snap-rule-impacts-college-students-by-limiting-benefits-and-adding-confusion>. Accessed on December 30, 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> Hawkins, J. (2019). *The Rise of Young Adult Poverty in the U.S.* Available at: <https://gspp.berkeley.edu/faculty-and-impact/news/recent-news/poverty-among-young-adults-is-on-the-rise>. Accessed on April 14, 2021.
- <sup>7</sup> Nagata, J. M., Palar, K., Gooding, H. C., Garber, A. K., Bibbins-Domingo, K., & Weiser, S. D. (2019). Food Insecurity and Chronic Disease in US Young Adults: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health. *J Gen Intern Med.* 34(12):2756-2762.
- <sup>8</sup> Nagata, J. M., Palar, K., Gooding, H. C., Garber, A. K., Whittle, H. J., Bibbins-Domingo, K., & Weiser, S. D. (2019). Food Insecurity Is Associated With Poorer Mental Health and Sleep Outcomes in Young Adults. *J Adolesc Heal.* 2019;65(6):805-811.
- <sup>9</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). Household Pulse Survey Data Tables. U.S. Census Bureau. Available at: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html>. Accessed on April 14, 2021.
- <sup>10</sup> Owens, M. R., Brito-Silva, F., Kirkland, T., Moore, C. E., Davis, K. E., Patterson, M. A., Milketinas, D.C., & Tucker, W. J. (2020). Prevalence and Social Determinants Of Food Insecurity Among College Students During The COVID-19 Pandemic. *Nutrients.* 12(9):1-17.
- <sup>11</sup> 116th U.S. Congress. H.R. 133 - Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021. (2021). Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/133/text>. Accessed on April 22, 2021.
- <sup>12</sup> Holden, L. (2021). *Reducing Food Insecurity Among College Students.* Available at: <https://frac.org/blog/reducing-food-insecurity-among-college-students>. Accessed on April 22, 2021.
- <sup>13</sup> Laska, M. N., Fleischhacker, S., Petsoulis, C., Bruening, M., & Stebleton, M. J. (2020). Addressing College Food Insecurity: An Assessment of Federal Legislation Before and During Coronavirus Disease-2019. *J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2020;52(10):982-987.
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- <sup>18</sup> Fernandez, M. E. (2021). *COVID-19 Mental Health Crisis is Hitting Young Adults.* Available at: <https://www.heart.org/en/news/2021/03/05/covid-19-mental-health-crisis-is-hitting-young-adults>. Accessed on April 22, 2021.
- <sup>19</sup> Hartline-Grafton, H. (2017). *Hunger and Health – The Role of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in Improving Health and Well-Being.* Available at: <https://frac.org/research/resource-library/snap-public-health-role-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-improving-health-well-being-americans>. Accessed on April 22, 2021.
- <sup>20</sup> Kruevelis, M., Reichlin Cruse, L., & Gault, B. (2017). *Single Mothers in College: Growing Enrollment, Financial Challenges, and the Benefits of Attainment.* Available at: <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/student-parent-success-initiative/single-mothers-in-college-growing-enrollment-financial-challenges-and-the-benefits-of-attainment/>. Accessed on April 22, 2021.
- <sup>21</sup> Holden, L. (2021). *Reducing Food Insecurity Among College Students.* Available at: <https://frac.org/blog/reducing-food-insecurity-among-college-students>. Accessed on April 22, 2021.
- <sup>22</sup> Baker, J. (2021). *FRAC Hails Senate Passage of American Rescue Plan Act, Further Strengthening SNAP, Pandemic EBT, and Other Relief Provisions.* (FRAC press release). Available at: <https://frac.org/news/frachailssenatepassageofamericanrescueact>. Accessed on April 22, 2021.