



New Census/USDA Data on Food Insecurity¹ During COVID-19 Reflect Impact of Expansions to the Social Safety Net

Key takeaway: Expansions made to the social safety net during COVID-19, including the federal nutrition programs, mitigated a large spike in hunger during the pandemic, but household food insecurity remained high at 10.5 percent in 2020.

Key findings in 2020:

- Over 38 million Americans lived in households that struggled against hunger.
- One in 10 households (10.5 percent) in America experienced food insecurity.
- The rate of food insecurity for households with children increased from 13.6 in 2019 to 14.8 percent in 2020.
- Black (21.7 percent) and Latinx (17.2 percent) households were disproportionately impacted by food insecurity in 2020, with food insecurity rates triple and double the rate of White households (7.1 percent), respectively.
- In rural areas, 11.6 percent of households experienced food insecurity.
- The very low food security rate was 3.9 percent.

See Table 1 for comparisons of food insecurity rates in 2019 and 2020.

About the data: Annual estimates of food insecurity are released every year from the Census Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS). Surveyed participants were interviewed in December 2020 about food insecurity in the prior 12 months.

Why did food insecurity stay the same? The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) points to research showing the positive effects of federal programs on reducing food insecurity during COVID-19, particularly among those who lost employment or income during the pandemic. It also is possible that these rates slightly underestimate the extent of the hunger problem in the U.S. during COVID-19. [The majority of research](#) has found large increases in food hardship during COVID-19. USDA recommends that “more research is needed to understand the dynamics of food insecurity and other food hardships in U.S. households during the pandemic.” Overall, however, the data point to the effectiveness of the social safety net in reducing hunger; therefore, continued investments in these programs can help further reduce food insecurity.

¹ According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, “[food insecurity](#)” means “households were, at times, unable to acquire adequate food for one or more household members because they lacked the money and other resources for food.” Throughout COVID-19, the U.S. Census Bureau also has been collecting data on “food insufficiency” to measure hunger. However, “food insecurity” and “food insufficiency” data are collected from two surveys with different methods and therefore cannot be directly compared. See FRAC’s [Food Insufficiency dashboard](#) and [Defining Food Insecurity During COVID-19](#).

Table 1: Rates of Food Insecurity (FI) and Very Low Food Security (VLFS) Prior to COVID-19 (2019) and During COVID-19 (2020)

Category	Group	2019 (%)		2020 (%)	
		FI	VLFS	FI	VLFS
All households		10.5	4.1	10.5	3.9
<i>With child(ren)</i>	Children < 18 years old	13.6	3.9	14.8	3.8
	Children < 6 years old	14.5	3.7	15.3	3.3
	Married-couple families	7.5	1.4	9.5	1.9
	Single mother	28.7	9.6	27.7	8.2
	Single father	15.4	5.9	16.3	5.5
<i>Without child(ren)</i>	Without children	9.3	4.2	8.8	4.0
<i>With older adult(s)</i>	At least one adult over 65 years old	7.2	2.6	6.9	2.5
	Older adult living alone	8.7	3.5	8.3	3.4
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	White (not Latinx)	7.9	3.3	7.1	3.0
	Black (not Latinx)	19.1	7.6	21.7	8.0
	Latinx	15.6	4.9	17.2	5.0
	Other (not Latinx)	9.5	4.0	8.8	3.6
<i>Household income-to-poverty ratio</i>	Under 1.00	34.9	15.5	35.3	14.4
	Under 1.30	33.0	14.1	33.1	13.0
	Under 1.85	27.6	11.2	28.6	10.8
	1.85 and over	5.1	1.7	4.9	1.6
<i>Geography</i>	Urban (inside metropolitan area)	10.3	4.0	10.0	3.8
	Rural (outside metro area)	12.1	4.6	11.6	4.5