OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH
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ResearchReport

# Food Insecurity in Connecticut

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## Issue

Provide general information on food insecurity nationally and in Connecticut and policy options to help residents obtain food during the COVID-19 pandemic that other states have implemented or may be considering.

## Summary

Food insecurity refers to a household's limited or uncertain access to adequate nutrition. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the prevalence of food insecurity in the U.S. had continued its downward trend following the Great Recession. According to a recent U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) report, approximately 13.7 million U.S. households (i.e., 10.5%) experienced food insecurity at some point during 2019. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of U.S. households experiencing food insecurity has significantly increased. Examples of policy options for addressing hunger in Connecticut include using federal emergency funds and making changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

## Food Insecurity

The USDA differentiates the severity of a household's food insecurity as either:

1. low food security – the household obtained enough food to avoid substantially disrupting their eating patterns or reducing food intake by using a variety of coping strategies, such as eating less varied diets, participating in food assistance programs, or getting food from community food pantries; or
2. very low food security – the normal eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake was reduced at times during the year because they had insufficient money or other resources for food.

Estimated state-level prevalence rates of low food security during the three-year period of 2017-2019 ranged from 6.6% in New Hampshire to 15.7% in Mississippi; an estimated 12.9% of Connecticut households experienced low food security (margin of error 2.34). During the same period, estimated prevalence rates of very low food security ranged from 2.6% in New Hampshire to 7.0% in Louisiana; an estimated 4.5% of Connecticut households experienced very low food security (margin of error 1.30).

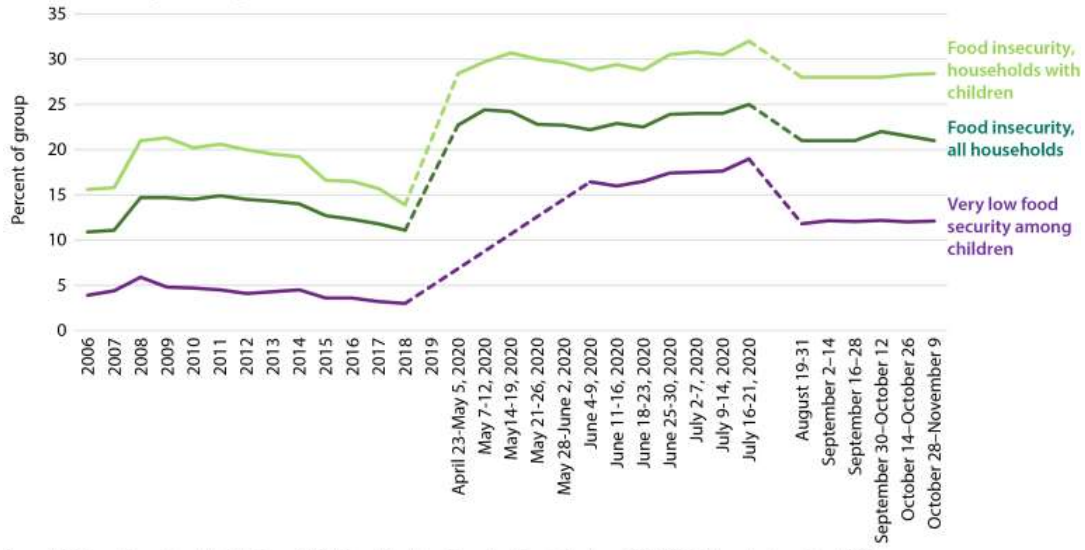
According to USDA, rates of food insecurity were higher than the national average (10.5%) for the following groups:

- Households with children (13.6%), especially if headed by a single individual (28.7% women; 15.4% men);
- Individuals living alone (13.0% women; 12.8% men);
- Black, non-Hispanic households (19.1%);
- Hispanic households (15.6%); and
- Households with incomes below 185% of the federal poverty level (FPL) (27.6%; the FPL was $25,926 for a family of four in 2019).

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of U.S. households experiencing food insecurity has significantly increased. A new report issued by the Brookings Institution shows that food insecurity rates have declined since the summer due to federal income support, declining unemployment as states have reopened their economies, and some children returning to school in some states (expanding access to school meal programs). Nevertheless, food insecurity among all households and households with children remains elevated over 2019 levels and levels reported during the Great Recession (see Figure 1 below).

FIGURE 1.

Food Insecurity Among Households and Children




Source: U.S. Census Bureau (Household Pulse Survey) 2020b; Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement 2006-2018; Schanzenback and Tomeh 2020.
Note: Food insecurity measures assess whether households have enough money for adequate food consumption. For additional details, see the technical appendix to Bauer et al, 2020.
Updated November 26th, 2020: Incorporated additional multipliers for the sufficiency to security conversion, so that respondents with children are using different multipliers than respondents overall. In effect, food insecurity rates for respondents overall have changed.

THE HAMILTON PROJECT BROOKINGS

A recent study by the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics at the University of Illinois projected an increase of 17 million Americans who are food insecure in 2020 using Map the Meal Gap, an interactive model developed for Feeding America, a nationwide network of more than 200 food banks, and combining the data with projected unemployment numbers. The report finds the states hardest hit with food insecurity by COVID-19 are the same states as pre-pandemic (Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Louisiana, and New Mexico). In addition, the study found that the pandemic disproportionately affected certain other states. For example, Nevada, with an economy emphasizing the service industry and tourism, was projected to jump from 20th to eighth highest food insecurity rate by state.

Tables 1 and 2 below utilize the study's full set of projections for Connecticut's total population and its child population. The results show approximately 148,000 additional individuals (4.1% of the state's population) are estimated to have become food insecure in 2020 compared to 2018. Table 1 shows elevated levels of food insecurity across all counties in 2020, ranging from 12.8% of the population in Tolland county to 17% of the population in New London county.

**Table 1: Projected Food Insecurity by County, 2018 - 2020**

| County | Total Population | 2018 | | 2020 | | Change 2018-2020 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | # Food Insecure | % Food Insecure | # Food Insecure | % Food Insecure | # Food Insecure | % Food Insecure |
| Fairfield | 944,350 | 93,270 | 9.9% | 132,170 | 14.0% | 38,900 | 41.7% |
| Hartford | 894,730 | 105,050 | 11.7% | 141,990 | 15.9% | 36,940 | 35.2% |
| Litchfield | 183,030 | 17,890 | 9.8% | 24,760 | 13.5% | 6,870 | 38.4% |
| Middlesex | 163,370 | 15,770 | 9.7% | 21,760 | 13.3% | 5,990 | 38.0% |
| New Haven | 859,340 | 104,390 | 12.1% | 139,370 | 16.2% | 34,980 | 33.5% |
| New London | 268,880 | 31,670 | 11.8% | 45,700 | 17.0% | 14,030 | 44.3% |
| Tolland | 151,270 | 13,980 | 9.2% | 19,350 | 12.8% | 5,370 | 38.4% |
| Windham | 116,540 | 13,900 | 11.9% | 18,640 | 16.0% | 4,740 | 34.1% |

Source: *Food Insecurity During COVID-19, October 2020, See appendix*

However, the results show an even greater negative impact by the pandemic on the food insecurity of Connecticut's children, with approximately 53,000 more children (7% of the state's children) becoming food insecure in 2020. Table 2 shows elevated levels of children's food insecurity across all counties in 2020, ranging from 19.2% of children in Middlesex county to 26% of children in New London county.

Table 2: Projected Food Insecurity in Children by County, 2018 - 2020

| County | Total Child Population | 2018 | | 2020 | | Change 2018-2020 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | # Food Insecure | % Food Insecure | # Food Insecure | % Food Insecure | # Food Insecure | % Food Insecure |
| Fairfield | 216,910 | 26,940 | 12.4% | 42,150 | 19.4% | 15,210 | 56.5% |
| Hartford | 190,570 | 29,300 | 15.4% | 42,710 | 22.4% | 13,410 | 45.8% |
| Litchfield | 34,390 | 4,650 | 13.5% | 6,810 | 19.8% | 2,160 | 46.5% |
| Middlesex | 30,100 | 3,950 | 13.1% | 5,780 | 19.2% | 1,830 | 46.3% |
| New Haven | 176,930 | 28,520 | 16.1% | 40,750 | 23.0% | 12,230 | 42.9% |
| New London | 53,210 | 8,930 | 16.8% | 13,860 | 26.0% | 4,930 | 55.2% |
| Tolland | 27,010 | 3,250 | 12.0% | 4,830 | 17.9% | 1,580 | 48.6% |
| Windham | 23,520 | 3,990 | 17.0% | 5,620 | 23.9% | 1,630 | 40.9% |

Source: *Food Insecurity During COVID-19, October 2020, See appendix*

# Examples of Policy Options to Address Hunger During the COVID-19 Pandemic

## *FEMA-Funded Restaurant Meal Delivery for Seniors*

Connecticut could use public assistance grant funding from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to develop a meal delivery program for at-risk populations and seniors, replicating a program implemented in California. According to the Network for Public Health Law, California was the first state to use FEMA public assistance funds, which are available to communities recovering from a federally declared disaster or emergency, in this way during the pandemic.

California's Great Plates Delivered Program delivers restaurant meals to individuals who are at least 65 years old or are at high-risk for COVID-19 and between 60 and 64 years old. Recipients must have income below 600% of the federal poverty limit and cannot be receiving any other nutrition assistance (e.g., SNAP benefits). Local governments administer and fund the program but are partially reimbursed by FEMA (75%) and state funds (18.75%). According to program guidance, the program serves the dual purpose of helping seniors and at-risk adults stay home and stay healthy while also providing economic stimulus to local restaurants.

According to FEMA, Connecticut has received at least $431,000 in public assistance grant funding for costs associated with emergency protective measures in response to COVID-19 (e.g., non-congregate sheltering).

## *Encourage Retailers to Seek Approval for Online SNAP Purchasing*

Beginning June 3, the Department of Social Services (DSS) implemented online purchasing for SNAP participants at retailers that have received federal approval to accept online orders from customers using SNAP electronic benefit transfer (EBT) benefits. Amazon, Walmart, and certain ShopRite stores have received USDA approval. In most states, Amazon and Walmart are the only participating retailers. The state could encourage and assist other retailers with applying for federal approval and meeting USDA requirements.

## *Spread Out SNAP Benefit Distribution Over More Days Per Month*

Public health researchers at Columbia University have mapped data on SNAP benefit distribution schedules and participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. They note that at times during the pandemic, food stores have experienced lower inventories due to bulk purchasing and an increase in at-home meal consumption. They argue that areas with large SNAP populations in states with fewer than 10 SNAP distribution days are concerning because "there will be more surge buying by SNAP shoppers on SNAP distribution days in those states." Connecticut currently distributes SNAP benefits over three days in the beginning of the month. The state could increase the number of days over which it distributes SNAP benefits.

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