

Politics

# Food Insecurity and COVID-19: The Fight to Feed America

Some 50 million Americans now qualify as food insecure.

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Michelle was excited to move apartments. She liked her new place, her roommates seemed nice, and most importantly for her, the neighborhood was filled with people who looked like her. But the shine didn't last long, as she discovered that her new neighborhood, in a stretch of Brooklyn's Crown Heights bordering Brownsville, was lacking in nutritious food options. She says she had to take the subway if she wanted to eat anything other than fast food. And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I'm very mindful of the food that I eat, especially produce," Michelle, who is Black and who preferred not to use her real name, told *Teen Vogue*. "I just feel like the lack of access to not just food but also healthier options hinders our well-being." Having previously lived in Harlem, in upper Manhattan, Michelle was keen to continue shopping for organic food options. But those options no longer existed. "There's only two grocery stores in the neighborhood where I'm at," she says.

Brownsville is **one of several New York City neighborhoods** that lack reliable sources of fresh, accessible food — a problem that has been exacerbated by the **job losses** and other economic strain that the pandemic has imposed on so many families. Historically, neighborhoods like Michelle's have been referred to as food deserts. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines **food deserts** as "low-income census tracts with a substantial number or share of residents with low levels of access to retail outlets selling healthy and affordable foods." Those working toward food equity have argued for **retiring the term**, as simply opening a new grocery store in a low-income area won't magically solve the underlying access issues at hand. Instead, some prefer to refer to the issue of "food insecurity," defined by the USDA as the lack of "**access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.**"

A staggering number of Americans currently qualify as food insecure. According to Feeding America, more than 35 million people in the United States faced hunger in 2019. Thanks to the pandemic, Feeding America says that figure increased to more than 50 million people in 2020.

## Communities are responding

Nonprofits and volunteers have stepped up to address this heightened need. Local mutual aid groups and food pantries are fighting on the front lines of this battle to stave off hunger.

“Hunger has been a crisis with the United States for so long,” says Apostle Alex-Eric Abrokwa-Clottey, founder and director of **INPREM Holistic Community Center** in Columbus, Ohio. “And the gap has not yet been bridged.” INPREM primarily operates as a food pantry, open to people in need from any zip code in central Ohio. A large number of the people it serves are refugees and immigrants. During the pandemic, the food pantry created a drive-by strategy for folks to have food placed in their cars for contactless pickups.

“A lot of people are out of jobs. A lot of people don’t even have a place to live. You can tell that insecurity is very, very high,” Abrokwa-Clottey says.

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## Food insecurity is growing disproportionately

It’s clear that food insecurity is everywhere, from rural areas to the nation’s largest cities. But its impact is not felt equally. Data compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau has **found** that children and people of color have been disproportionately impacted. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the rise of COVID-19 has led to a 17% national uptick in enrollment in the federal **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program**, better known as food stamps. With record unemployment and underemployment, **families with children are struggling with hunger at a rate three times higher than in 2019**, *The Guardian* reports.

“Because of the generations of systemic racism, Black and brown people are less likely to have any sort of safety net,” says Chamieka House-Osuya, who founded **The Snack Sack**, a mutual aid organization. “Often, poverty is multigenerational,” House-Osuya told *Teen Vogue*. Her organization uses the Amazon wish list feature to help families of color create a list of snacks and other hygiene necessities for their children. Donations to the Snack Sack pay for a contactless delivery of the

wish list's contents to the family's doorstep.

The number of mutual aid groups working to address food insecurity has ballooned during COVID-19. From [Patreon memberships and pod systems to local fridges](#), organizers are working to push past any government bureaucracy or other systemic barriers to help meet the needs of households that lack access to resources. Mobile markets, prepaid debit cards, and direct-to doorstep contactless delivery of fresh food have helped alleviate the hunger and stress so many communities are facing.

## **Organizers are moving beyond availability**

Organizers and health researchers agree that addressing the root causes of hunger in the United States will require systemic interventions — particularly during a massive public health crisis. As one [2020 study published in the \*Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition\*](#) put it, “The increased need is more than the existing patchwork system of emergency food provision can handle.” The study suggests increasing access to “local farming collectives, neighborhood gardens” and to “free delivery and drop-off points,” and affirms the key role SNAP plays in keeping Americans fed. Congress has already expanded SNAP benefits by some \$25 per person per month, and President Joe Biden has [called](#) to keep that extension in place as long as the pandemic lasts.

While greater federal intervention is critical, organizers say that paying attention to the specific needs and preferences of individual communities makes a huge difference too. The disparity in food access isn't merely the result of cost or availability, but includes cultural, social, and economic factors as well. “Continuing to uplift the diversity of food culture and what food means to communities, particularly to marginalized communities, has the potential to fundamentally change systems,” says Josh Trautwein, founder and CEO of [About Fresh](#), a Boston-based nonprofit that delivers healthy, affordable foods to food-insecure communities.

“Purchasing power has the most powerful influence over the types of food that we all go shopping for,” Trautwein continued. In March of 2020, About Fresh introduced Fresh Box, a food distribution program that arranges for a week's worth of prepacked produce to be delivered to your doorstep. Supported by the Boston

Resiliency fund, the organization says they delivered 130,000 boxes by the end of 2020.

One common theme emerges when talking to those working to address food insecurity: the role young people can and do play. “Often, teens and young people are the first people willing to be on the front lines, because they know that this is their future,” says House-Osuya. Trautwein offered that young people can also help support the food choices specific to their communities. “I think young people are in a position to tell the story of their food culture and heritage in a way that deconstructs the narrative that there’s not an appreciation or a culture of health or healthy eating across communities,” he said. “I would love young people to play a role in deconstructing and lifting up food culture.”

*Editor's note: This piece was corrected to reflect the total number of boxes About Fresh delivered in 2020.*

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