

Vast Expansion in Aid Kept Food Insecurity From Growing Last Year

Despite the economic downturn, government figures for 2020 show no overall rise in hunger of the sort typical in past recessions. But some groups still suffered.



Households that experienced a rise in food insecurity included those with children, those with Black Americans and those in the South. Jim Wilson/The New York Times



By Jason DeParle

Published Sept. 8, 2021 Updated Sept. 11, 2021

As 20 million jobs vanished at the start of the coronavirus pandemic and traffic jams formed outside food banks, many experts warned that the twin crises of unemployment and disease would produce soaring rates of hunger.

But huge expansions of government aid followed, and [data released on Wednesday](#) suggests the extraordinary spending achieved a major goal: Despite shuttered businesses and schools, food insecurity remained unchanged from prepandemic levels. That result defied past experience, when recessions caused food hardship to spike.

“This is huge news — it shows you how much of a buffer we had from an expanded safety net,” said Elaine Waxman, who researches hunger at the Urban Institute in Washington. “There was no scenario in March of 2020 where I thought food insecurity would stay flat for the year. The fact that it did is extraordinary.”

The government found that 10.5 percent of American households were food insecure, meaning that at some point in the year, they had difficulty providing enough food to all members of the home because of a lack of money. It also found that 3.9 percent experienced “very low food security,” meaning the lack of resources caused them to reduce their food intake. That was statistically unchanged from the previous year.

Food insecurity did rise among some groups, including households with children, households with Black Americans and households in the South. The gap between Black and white households, which was already large, widened further, with 21.7 percent of Black households experiencing food insecurity, compared with 7.1 percent of white households. That is a gap of 14.6 percentage points, up from 11.2 points in 2019, before the pandemic struck.

Black households suffered disproportionately from job losses and school closings during the pandemic and had fewer assets with which to buffer a crisis.

Still, the overall pattern — of hunger constrained — contrasted sharply with the country's experience during 2008, when nearly 13 million additional Americans [became food insecure](#) at the start of the Great Recession. Last year, 38.3 million Americans lacked food security, a level far below the 50.2 million Americans in that situation at the Great Recession's peak.

As President Biden pushes a \$3.5 trillion plan [to further expand the safety net](#) over Republican opposition, the report on Wednesday from the Agriculture Department provided fodder for both sides. Supporters said it showed the value of increased aid, while critics said the unchanged rates of food hardship showed that further spending was not necessary.

The aid expansions reflected in Wednesday's report occurred early in the pandemic last year. They include the first round of stimulus checks and expanded unemployment benefits, which passed with support from both parties and President Donald J. [Trump](#).

Several large rounds of aid followed, most recently in a \$1.9 trillion spending package in March that President Biden championed. It included [a program of monthly payments to most families with children](#) that Democrats hope to make permanent.

Understand the Infrastructure Bill

- **One trillion dollar package passed.** The Senate passed a [sweeping bipartisan infrastructure package](#) on Aug. 10, capping weeks of intense negotiations and debate over the largest federal investment in the nation's aging public works system in more than a decade.
- **The final vote.** The final tally in the Senate was 69 in favor to 30 against. The legislation, which still must pass the House, would touch nearly every facet of the American economy and fortify the nation's response to the warming of the planet.
- **Main areas of spending.** Overall, the bipartisan plan focuses spending on transportation, utilities and pollution cleanup.
- **Transportation.** About [\\$110 billion would go to roads, bridges and other transportation projects](#); \$25 billion for airports; and \$66 billion for

railways, giving Amtrak the most funding it has received since it was founded in 1971.

- **Utilities.** Senators have also included \$65 billion meant to connect hard-to-reach rural communities to [high-speed internet](#) and help sign up [low-income city dwellers who cannot afford it](#), and \$8 billion for Western water infrastructure.
- **Pollution cleanup:** Roughly \$21 billion would go to cleaning up [abandoned wells and mines](#), and Superfund sites.

“A lot of us warned that those further expansions were unnecessary and this provides additional support that that was true,” said Angela Rachidi, a hunger expert at the American Enterprise Institute. She said that progressives were pushing a narrative of exaggerated hardship to justify continued spending increases.

In an economic crisis, food is often the first expense that a family with money troubles will cut. Unpaid rents risk eviction, but grocery purchases can be incrementally reduced and meals stretched.

Though poverty and food insecurity are related, they are not synonymous. The poorer a household is, the more likely it is to experience food insecurity, but most of those suffering from food insecurity are not poor.

Among households disclosing their incomes, 34 percent were poor while 32 percent had incomes greater than 185 percent of the poverty line (about \$26,000 for a family of four), according to an analysis by Craig Gundersen, an economist at Baylor University.

“There are a lot of Americans in precarious situations,” Mr. Gundersen said. “People are working, but one car repair or sick kid can send them into food insecurity.”

The remarkable images of food lines at the pandemic’s start cast a spotlight on food hardship, while the large expansion of aid that followed turned the United States into a laboratory for antihunger policy. Among the lessons learned during the pandemic, researchers said the new report supported at least four.

As aid rose, food insecurity fell.

The relationship between higher spending and lower hardship may sound obvious. But some social problems prove difficult to address through federal aid. Congress has approved about \$46 billion in emergency rental relief, but only a small portion has reached families in need.

Wednesday's report added to a growing body of research showing the opposite: that aid has led to quick reductions in food hardship. "This is not an intractable problem," Mr. Gundersen said.

Last year, the Brookings Institution found that a summer program that replaced school meals with electronic benefit cards [led to substantial reductions in child hunger](#).

Likewise, researchers at the University of Michigan, analyzing Census Bureau surveys, found the 2021 stimulus checks [brought immediate reductions in food hardship](#). Most recently, a study by researchers at Columbia University [found the same pattern](#) after the introduction of the child tax credit in July, but only among households with children — the group eligible for the monthly payments.

"We now have definitive evidence that food hardship is responsive to government aid," said H. Luke Shaefer, a University of Michigan researcher who studied the stimulus checks. "The effect is crystal clear."

While Wednesday's report was based on data collected in December 2020, Mr. Shaefer said other surveys showed hardship had continued to fall. "We could potentially be at the lowest level of food insecurity ever recorded, because of the government transfers," he said.

Schools play a vital role.



Before the pandemic, school meals accounted for as much as 7 percent of economic resources among low-income households, according to one study. Max Whittaker for The New York Times

While food insecurity fell overall, it rose among households with children — to 7.6 percent last year, from 6.5 percent in 2019. One likely explanation is the widespread closure of schools, a reminder that they play a large, if often overlooked, role in delivering food aid.

Before the pandemic, Judith Bartfeld, a researcher at the University of Wisconsin, found that school meals account for as much as 7 percent of economic resources among low-income households. That financial contribution approached the impact of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, the main federal antihunger program, which provided more than 10 percent of household resources but is larger and more visible.

“One of the big lessons from the pandemic is the critical role that school meals play as part of the nutrition safety net,” Ms. Bartfeld said. “The value of school meals became transparent when the meals disappeared.”

School closures may have also increased food hardship indirectly, by making it hard for parents to return to work.

Among the pandemic-era programs is one that replaced the value of lost school meals with electronic benefit cards. Research found it reduced food hardship, though many states issued the aid after significant delays. Congress extended the program during the summers of 2020 and 2021, and the Biden administration wants to make the summer electronic benefit program permanent, to combat the rise in hunger that typically comes with the closure of schools.

Most states participated in the summer program this year with the significant exception of Florida, where Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, has declined to seek the \$820 million the state could receive in federal aid.

The gaps between Black and white Americans are large.

The longstanding disparities in food insecurity between Black and white households had been narrowing in recent years. But last year, they widened again. Though the share of white households suffering food insecurity fell by 0.8 percentage points, it rose by 1.6 points in Hispanic households and by 2.6 points in Black households.

One reason may be the nature of the recession, which disproportionately hurt Black workers, many of them in low-wage service jobs. It is also possible that Black and Latino families faced greater barriers than whites families in gaining access to government aid.

A third potential explanation may be that Black families entered the recession with far fewer assets than white households and less access to credit, both of which can buffer food hardships.

“This is the most disturbing part of the story,” said Ms. Waxman, the Urban Institute researcher. “Whatever we did wasn’t enough to support Black families during this period.”

Charity plays an important but limited role.

The crisis thrust the United States’ unusual network of private food banks into the spotlight. Able to respond more quickly than the government, they played a highly visible role in emergency aid. Feeding America, the national association of food banks, reported a 44 percent increase in meals served.

But food banks are often among the first groups to call for expansions of government aid, arguing they can only complement the much larger public programs. Feeding American said SNAP, formerly known as food stamps, provides about nine times as many meals as food banks.

The San Antonio Food Bank [is among the places where lines stretched for miles](#) in the spring of 2020. It went from feeding 60,000 people a week in early March to 120,000 in late April. It is still feeding about 90,000.

But Eric Cooper, who runs the group, said the crisis reinforced both the financial fragility of the average household and the limited role that private charities can play.

“It was the federal expansions that pulled people out of our parking lots and into grocery stores, which is where people should get their food,” he said. “We’re so small — the safety net is much larger.”