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About 14 Million Children in the US Are Not Getting Enough to Eat

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Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, food insecurity has [remained persistently elevated](#) at record levels. Though food insecurity among households with children [decreased from April to June](#), it is still far above its Great Recession peak. In fact, new data show that an unprecedented number of children in the United States are experiencing food insecurity and did not have sufficient food as of late June.

Since the first week in June, the US Census Bureau has asked households that reported having insufficient food whether it was often, sometimes, or never true that in the last 7 days the children (under 18 years old) living in your household “were not eating enough because we just couldn’t afford enough food.” 16.5 percent of households with children reported that it was sometimes or often the case that the children were not eating enough due to a lack of resources during the week of June 18-23 2020, 5.5 times the 2018 rate of 3 percent (the most recent annual data from the Current Population Survey).

These high rates of child food insecurity should not be confused with the even higher share of food insecure households with children ([27.5](#) percent); these households may but do not necessarily have food insecure children because parents buffer children from deprivation if able. This means that last month, in about two-thirds of food insecure households with children, there was evidence of child food insecurity.

Accounting for the number of children in these households, I find that 13.9 million children lived in a household characterized by child food insecurity in the third week in June, 5.6 times as many as in all of 2018 (2.5 million) and 2.7 times as many than did at the peak of the Great Recession in 2008 (5.1 million). During the week of June 19-23, 17.9 percent of children in the United States live in a household where an adult reported that the children are not getting enough to eat due to a lack of resources.

Trends in Food Insecurity Experienced by Children

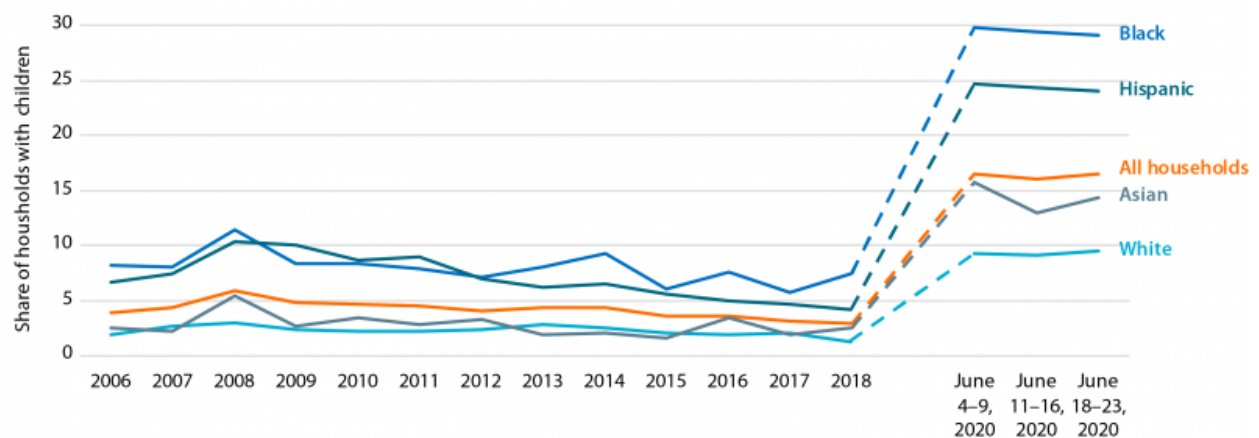
In the late April Survey of Mothers with Young Children (by The Hamilton Project and Future of the Middle Class Initiative at Brookings), I [found](#) that 17.4 percent of mothers with children 12 and under reported that since the pandemic began, “the children in my household were not eating enough because we just couldn’t afford enough food.” Until June, there were no other surveys assessing rates of child food insecurity in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last month, the Census Bureau added a new question to the Household Pulse Survey (CHHPS) to address this knowledge gap. Beginning the week of June 4, households that reported having insufficient food were asked whether it was often, sometimes, or never true that in the last 7 days the children (under 18 years old) living in your household “were not eating enough because we just couldn’t afford enough food.” This is a substantively similar question to the one posed in the Survey of Mothers with Young Children and in the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (FSS).

Figure 1 compares weekly estimates of household child food insecurity in June 2020 against the same question asked annually in the FSS, overall and by race/ethnicity. From the first week in June to the third, there has not been a statistically significant change in reported rates of child food insecurity, overall or by race/ethnicity.

In June 2020, around 16 percent of households with children reported that their children were not eating enough over the last week due to a lack of resources. While the overall rate is the highest on record, Black and Hispanic children are experiencing food insecurity at even higher and extremely alarming rates. About three in ten Black households with children and one in four Hispanic households with children did not have sufficient food due to a lack of resources in June 2020, while white households with children reported a child food insecurity rate just under 10 percent.

FIGURE 1.
Share of Households with Children in which the Children Are Food Insecure by Race/Ethnicity, 2006–20



Source: Census Household Pulse Survey 2020 (Waves 6-8); Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement 2006-18; author’s calculations.
 Note: Surveys have been weighted to be representative of households with children, overall and by race/ethnicity. In the CHHPS (2020 datapoint), respondents were asked “Please indicate whether the next statement was often true, sometimes true, or never true in the last 7 days for the children living in your household who are under 18 years old. “The children were not eating enough because we just couldn’t afford enough food.” In the FSS, respondents were asked “Now I’m going to read you several statements that people have made about the food situation of their children. For these statements, please tell me whether the statement was often true, sometimes true, or never true in the last 12 months for (your child/children living in the household who are under 18 years old). ‘(My/Our child was/The children were) not eating enough because (I/we) just couldn’t afford enough food.’ Was that often, sometimes, or never true for (you/your household) in the last 12 months?” Food insecurity statistics for race/ethnicities not shown were imprecisely measured.



Child Food Insecurity and Household Resources

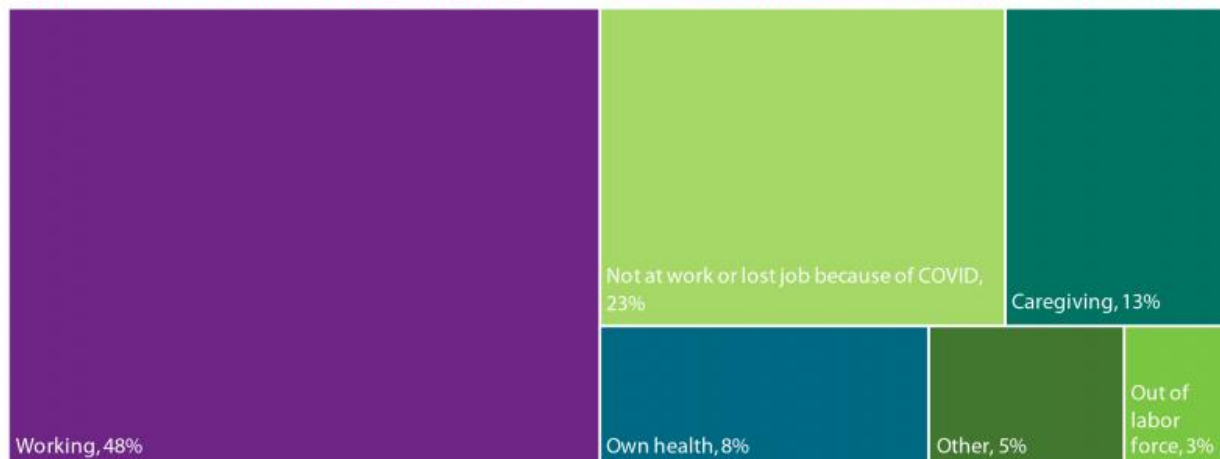
Food insecurity is a concept meant to capture not only a dearth of food, but whether there are insufficient financial resources in the household to make additional food purchases. Food

insecurity rates can be predicted by the unemployment rate, which [explains](#) upwards of 65 percent of the increase in food insecurity among households with children that has occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. [Research](#) also shows that holding a low-wage job, limited access to credit, and having little savings to draw on predict food insecurity, in addition to job loss. Figure 2 shows the distribution of employment statuses among respondents to the CHHPS during the week of June 18 to June 23 who reported that their children did not have sufficient food due to a lack of resources. For those who were not currently working for pay (shades of green), respondents are grouped by the reason that they provided for why they were not working.

About half of the respondents whose children did not have sufficient food were working for pay but their earnings were not sufficient to meet the basic needs of their household. Another quarter either lost their job or were temporarily not at work due to the pandemic while 13 percent who were not working because they were taking care of children who were not at school or in childcare, eldercare, or caring for someone suffering from coronavirus. Eight percent of respondents were not at work for health-related reasons, including having contracted the coronavirus. The remaining 8 percent were early retirees, otherwise out of the labor force, or had an “other” reason for not working.

FIGURE 2.

Main Reason for Not Working Among Households Characterized by Child Food Insecurity



Source: Census Household Pulse Survey 2020 (Wave 8: June 18-23); author's calculations.

Note: Those who are not at work or lost a job due to COVID are the sum of those who said they were subject to a reduction in business or furlough, layoff, or temporary or permanent employer closure due to COVID. Those who are caregivers reported that the main reason they were not working was because they were caring for children not at school or childcare, eldercare, or caring for someone suffering from COVID. Those who were not working primarily due to their own health were because of health or disability, who were sick with COVID, or who were concerned about getting or spreading COVID. Out of the labor force includes early retirees and those who do not want to work at this time.



Among those reporting that their children did not have enough food, 78 percent reported a household-level loss of income since the pandemic began. Those households that reported that a child did not have sufficient food due to a lack of resources also report being pessimistic about their circumstances changing: just 17 percent of households where the children were food insecure reported being moderately (15 percent) or very confident (2 percent) that their household would be able to afford the kinds of food they needed for the next month, compared with two-thirds of food sufficient households. It is not surprising, then, that 57 percent report being nervous, anxious, worried, down, depressed, or hopeless more than half of or nearly every

day in the past week, almost twice the rate for households not characterized by child food insecurity.

Conclusion

In this piece, I present new evidence that almost 18 percent of children in the US did not have sufficient food as recently as the third week in June. The level of needs merits a substantial and immediate public investment. [Three waivers](#) to allow meal sites more flexibility for the summer of 2020 are a necessary but not nearly sufficient federal response to the crisis of food insecurity among children in the United States.

The federal nutrition assistance programs that provide resources to purchase food directly to families, specifically the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program) and Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT), must be expanded and extended to address the critical national problem.

I have [repeatedly](#) called for at least a [15 percent](#) increase to the SNAP maximum benefit; increasing the value of SNAP in response to evidence of surging food prices and unprecedented levels of food insecurity among all households and among children is warranted. Given the persistence of high levels of household food insecurity and evidence presented herein of widespread child food insecurity, I emphasize “at least.” A 32% increase to the SNAP maximum benefit would bring benefit levels for a family of four with school age children to be in line with the [Low-cost food plan](#).

Congress introduced two new programs at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that merit expansions: SNAP Emergency Allotments (EAs) and P-EBT. EAs should be reauthorized to explicitly provide EAs to households eligible for the maximum benefit, which would allow [5 million children](#) to benefit from additional resources to purchase food for households that have thus far been excluded from the program.

[Research](#) shows that in a typical year, families cannot absorb the loss of the value of school meals in the transition from the school year to the summer. Meanwhile, an experimental [pilot program](#) for providing EBT during the summer has been proven to dramatically reduce food insecurity and very low food security among children. P-EBT, which provided a grocery voucher to families to replace the value of lost school meals, should be extended through summer 2020 and the 2020–21 school year, and continue into the future every summer. Children 5 and younger should be made eligible for this program.

Around 14 million children require immediate nutrition assistance, and there are effective policy levers to pull.