



FAST FACTS



COVID-19, Food Systems, and Obesity

OBESITY is a complex chronic disease in which abnormal or excessive accumulation of body fat impairs health. Adult obesity rates have more than doubled since the 1980s — in the U.S. today, obesity affects over 42% of adults and 18% of youth.¹ Obesity and its related complications are major drivers of rising healthcare costs, diminished health-related quality of life, and the recent decline in U.S. life expectancy. This fact sheet is part of a series designed to provide basic information about the science of obesity and current strategies to address it.

Food Insecurity and COVID-19

Because of the impact of COVID-19 on unemployment and the food delivery chain, many Americans are now experiencing food insecurity.² Disruption of the food delivery chain may increase reliance on corner stores and increased intake of ultra-processed foods, which have been shown to cause obesity.³

- Seniors, racial minorities, and those with chronic illnesses like diabetes and obesity are at a high risk for severe COVID-19 illness and are more likely to experience food insecurity.^{4,5}
 - The Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System found that 35% of food insecure adults had obesity compared to 25% of food secure adults⁶
 - A healthful diet is especially important for those who are vulnerable to severe COVID-19 infection. Foods high in saturated fat and sugar may increase inflammation, and poor nutrition may compromise the immune system⁷
- Families with children are more likely to be food insecure. The rates of childhood food insecurity are projected to increase as much as 61% if poverty and unemployment continue to rise as a result of the pandemic.⁸
 - Children who experience food insecurity are more likely to experience poor health, lower academic achievement, and behavioral problems⁹
 - Food insecurity can lead to obesity, and hunger can lead to undernutrition. Although the evidence is inconsistent, children who experience food insecurity may be more likely to develop obesity than their peers⁹
 - The COVID-19 pandemic has increased reliance on federal food systems, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and school-based nutrition programs⁵

Inequities and Disparities in the Food System Workforce

The wages, benefits, and working conditions of the essential workers along the food supply chain—including farm workers, workers in meat processing plants, grocery clerks, and food and package deliverers—do not reflect their essential status. A significant portion of workers in the food delivery system are people of color and are the subjects of structural racism. Many workers receive low or poverty-level wages, lack suitable housing, are not provided with health insurance and sick leave, and lack the proper equipment to do their job safely.¹⁰

- The average hourly wage for a food system worker in 2015/2016 was between \$9.30 and \$14.00.¹¹
 - Racism and sexism are prevalent in the food system workforce. Women and people of color are paid less than their male or white counterparts¹¹
- Food system workers are more likely to experience food insecurity than workers in other industries.¹⁰ Disruption of the food supply and high levels of unemployment associated with the COVID-19 pandemic increases the risk of food insecurity and hunger among food system workers.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated rates of food insecurity in vulnerable populations and has exposed some families to food insecurity for the first time.
- Many of the environments that produce food insecurity can also produce obesity.
- Workers within the food system often experience suboptimal working conditions, poor health, and poverty, all of which contribute to food insecurity, susceptibility to COVID-19, and disruptions of the food supply chain.
- The pandemic has highlighted vulnerabilities within the food supply chain. Local food supply chains, sustainable food production, and increased consumption of plant-based foods may mitigate some of these problems.

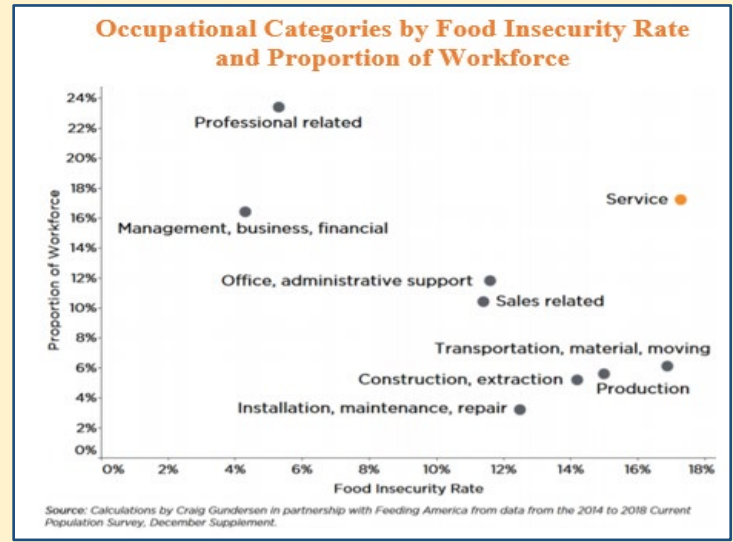
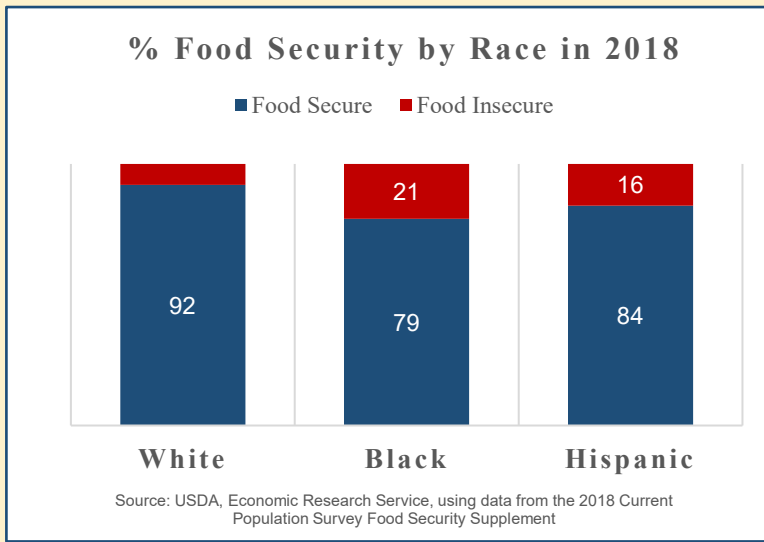
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Food Insecurity in America

Before COVID-19, food insecurity in America was trending downwards. Now, food insecurity is projected to increase by 1-5% as a result of the pandemic. This change is most likely to affect the groups that experienced high rates of food insecurity before the pandemic: people of color, the elderly, those with disabilities, and service industry workers.^{4,12}



Addressing Factors beyond Food Security

The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly illustrated the fragility and disruption of our food supply chain, from field to fork. The pandemic and its impact on food systems highlight the inequities suffered by workers in the food production system and have exacerbated the food environments that lead to obesity, undernutrition, and micronutrient deficiency. Solutions include addressing the social factors that contribute to the vulnerability of the workforce, improved utilization of local food supply chains and prioritization of sustainable systems.

- Consumers are increasingly relying on local food systems during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²
 - Local food supply chains are more agile and less likely to be disrupted by food transportation restrictions and the closure of processing plants¹²
 - The implementation of local food systems in communities can increase employment and income, as well as reduce energy use and greenhouse gas emissions¹³
- Food system experts recognize that sustainability in food production is imperative.¹⁴ Increased consumption of plant-based diets can mitigate climate change, improve nutrition, and decrease human contact with animals that may be vectors of infectious disease.¹⁵

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