COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the economic security and well-being of families. Since March, the economy has shed more than 13.3 million jobs – 55 percent of them lost by women – triggering widespread unemployment and sharp declines in household incomes. In mid-May 2020, almost 21 million people were unemployed. At 51.4 percent, women make up majority of those out of work or seeking employment—a historic first for the nation.

In addition to finding and sustaining employment, many families are struggling with food insufficiency, a direct consequence of lost earnings. Nationally, more than 37 million Americans, including more than 11 million children are food insecure. In households headed by single women with children, food insufficiency is three times higher than those headed by married couples — 27.8 and 8.3 percent respectively (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2019). Food insufficiency rates are highest among Black and Latino single-mother headed households compared to white single-mother households.¹

The COVID crisis has exacerbated pre-existing levels of inequality. Disparities in access to high-quality healthcare and higher rates of pre-existing health conditions has led to higher rates of COVID-related deaths and mortality for Black and Hispanic Americans (Blanchard et al. 2020).

Using data from the recently released U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey, this brief explores the impact of the decline of household income during the Pandemic on food sufficiency of families by race, gender and ethnicity.¹

¹ https://www.childtrends.org/indicators/food-insecurity
It's a She-Cession: Women Disproportionately Impacted by Job Loss during Pandemic

Women are overrepresented in the sectors hardest hit by the Pandemic: service, hospitality and leisure, health, education and childcare.

In April, women accounted for 55 percent of the 20.5 million jobs lost and 60 percent of the more than 700,000 jobs lost in March. In April alone, women’s job losses were five times higher than the total decline in women’s employment during the Great Recession. As a result of this staggering reduction in employment, women are now less than half (49.2 percent) of all workers on payroll (Hegewisch 2020).

Job losses are most extreme in sectors in which women comprise a majority of the workforce. As was the case in March, the most severe job losses were in the Leisure and Hospitality sector, where women lost 4.4 million jobs, compared with 3.7 million jobs lost by men (Hegewisch, Barsi, and Hayes 2020).

Sharp Declines in Household Income make it Harder for Families to Make Ends Meet

Since March, 4 in 10 households report being directly economically impacted by measures taken to curb the spread of COVID-19. Job loss and decline in income were the top most commonly reported impacts among those surveyed. 2 61.4 million women and 58.8 million men have experienced a loss of employment income for themselves or another household member (Census Bureau 2020). At the household level, women and men report similar levels of employment income loss in most of the groups.

More than half of all Black, Hispanic, and Multiracial Women and Men have seen a drop in employment-related Household Income. Black and Hispanic adults reported the highest levels of employment income loss, between 54.5 percent and 62.2 percent, respectively. White adults report the lowest levels of employment income loss, 43 percent.
Figure 1: Reported Loss of Household Employment Income Since March 13 by Gender and Race or Ethnicity

Source: IWPR analysis of data from U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey, Week 3 (May 14-19, 2020). Race categories are non-Hispanic; Hispanics can be of any race.

FOOD INSUFFICIENCY BY RACE AND ETHNICITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

Black Women and Men are Likely to Report not Having Enough to Eat Sometimes

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many households report low food sufficiency, defined as sometimes or often not having enough to eat in the past seven days. Among those who have experienced the loss of employment income, one in five Black women and more than one in four Black men report that their households did not have enough to eat at least sometimes in the past week (Figure 2). Over 18 percent of Hispanic women and 13 percent of Hispanic men report experiencing food insufficiency. Levels of food insufficiency are less severe for White women (7.6 percent) and men (6.5 percent) and Asian women (5.4 percent) and men (8.0 percent).
During the Pandemic and Because of the Loss of Employment Income, Women of Color Report High Levels of Food Insufficiency.

Women who have recently lost employment are at least twice as likely to report not having enough to eat compared with those who had not lost employment income. Asian and Hispanic women were nearly 5 times more likely to report not having had enough to eat compared with those who had not lost employment income. Among Black women in households without a loss of employment income since March 13, 12.6 percent report insufficient food compared with 27.7 percent in households that experienced a loss of employment income. Among White women without income loss, 4.4 percent report insufficient food in their households compared with 11.7 percent of those reporting employment income loss. Within race and ethnic groups, men report similar levels of insufficient food compared with women.

During Pandemic, Affordability Chief Cause of Food Insufficiency Among Adults

Among all adults reporting that they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat, the overwhelming majority (78.5 percent) said they could not afford to buy more food (Figure 4). A significant number (17.9 percent) also reported that the stores did not have the kind of food they wanted. Others reported that they were afraid (17.2 percent) or unable to go out to buy food (13.2 percent). Some reported that they could not get groceries or meals delivered (7.5 percent).

Source: IWPR analysis of data from U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey, Week 3 (May 14-19, 2020). Race categories are non-Hispanic; Hispanics can be of any race.

Note: Respondents could select more than one reason they had difficulty obtaining sufficient food – percentages do not sum to 100.
Community Food Programs, Banks and Schools Help Tide Families Over During the Pandemic

Families experiencing food insufficiency during the pandemic often turned to community food programs, banks and schools for meals and groceries. About 12.6 percent of the adults surveyed who reported insufficient food had accessed community food assistance in the previous week. Nearly half of these adults (47.8 percent) obtained free meals through schools or programs aimed at children. About three out of ten (29.4 percent) went to a food pantry or food bank. Nearly a quarter (23.8 percent) turned to friends or family and one in five (19.5 percent) turned to religious organizations for assistance.

Table 1: Accessing Community Food Assistance to Combat Food Insufficiency in the Last Seven Days

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ALL ADULTS REPORTING FOOD INSUFFICIENCY</th>
<th>12.6%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During the last 7 days, did you or anyone in your household get free groceries or a free meal? (Percent “Yes”)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where did you get free groceries or free meals? (Among “yes” above.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free meals through the school or other programs aimed at children</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food pantry or food bank</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-delivered meal service like Meals on Wheels</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church, synagogue, temple, mosque or other religious organization</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter or soup kitchen</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other community program</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family, friends, or neighbors</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IWPR analysis of data from U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey, Week 3 (May 14-19, 2020). Note: Respondents could select more than one source for free groceries or meals – percentages do not sum to 100.

Households are Pessimistic About Being Able to Afford Food in Near Future
Households reporting insufficient food in the past week are pessimistic about being able to afford the food needed over the next four weeks. Nearly nine out of ten (88 percent) report that they are not at all confident (46 percent) or only somewhat confident (42 percent) that they will be able to afford the food they need to feed their households over the next four weeks. Only 2 percent report being very confident that they will be able to afford the food needed by their families over the next four weeks.
Figure 5: The Large Majority of Those Who Are Food Insecure Lack Confidence in Improvements in the Next Four Weeks


POLICIES TO ENSURE THAT FAMILIES HAVE ENOUGH TO EAT

The Pandemic has exacerbated food insufficiency and insecurity for low-income and working families across the country. To support families, there is a need to expand food and nutrition assistance at the state and federal levels and funnel resources to community-based and local food programs. To decrease food insufficiency, policies should:

• Support state plans that provide an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card for households with children qualifying for free or reduced-price school meals to purchase food in the event of school closures;

• Provide emergency funding for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to meet increased demand for program benefits and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC) to provide access to nutritious foods to low-income pregnant women or mothers with young children who lose their jobs or are laid off due to the COVID-19;

• Suspend time limits on SNAP eligibility for unemployed and underemployed individuals.

• Increase funding for meals provided by senior nutrition programs housed in the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living, and

• Provide commodity supports for food banks and emergency food providers.
REFERENCES


The U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey data analyzed here collects information on food insufficiency rather than food insecurity. Asking a single question about a shorter time-frame creates a clearer picture of the impact of the crisis while allowing for rapid response data. Food insufficiency measures the share of people reporting that in the past seven days, there was sometimes or often not enough food to eat in their households. The survey uses a single question that is similar to the screener question used in the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS) to measure food insecurity. The question used in the Household Pulse survey has a modified time reference, referring to the past 7 days, rather than the past 12 months used as a reference period in the CPS-FSS. In the CPS-FSS, households that do not respond that they have “enough of the kinds of food (I/we) want to eat” receive 10 additional questions (18 for households with children) to assesses multiple aspects of a household’s access to adequate food for the adults and children living there. Households are classified as food secure if they report no food-insecure conditions or only one or two food-insecure conditions.

Respondents were asked the following question: “Have you, or has anyone in your household experienced a loss of employment income since March 13, 2020?”

Note: Respondents who answered that in the last seven days they often or sometimes did not have enough to eat. Race categories are non-Hispanic; Hispanics can be of any race.
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The Institute for Women’s Policy Research conducts and communicates research to inspire public dialogue, shape policy, and improve the lives and opportunities of women of diverse backgrounds, circumstances, and experiences. We are the leading think tank in the United States applying quantitative and qualitative analysis of public policy through a gendered lens.

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