



# Food Insecurity Edged Back up after COVID-19 Relief Expired

## Findings from the September 11–28 Coronavirus Tracking Survey

*Elaine Waxman, Poonam Gupta, and Dulce Gonzalez*

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Food insecurity decreased early in the pandemic between late March/early April and mid-to-late May, after stimulus checks were released to many Americans and a \$600 weekly supplement to unemployment benefits was implemented. However, food insecurity edged back up the month after the unemployment benefit boost expired. In September 2020, one in five adults reported their households had experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days, an increase of 1.7 percentage points since May 2020, according to new data from the Urban Institute’s Coronavirus Tracking Survey.<sup>1</sup> Nearly four in ten adults who reported they or a spouse or partner lost a job at some point during the pandemic reported being food insecure in the September survey, which was fielded just over one month after the weekly supplement to unemployment benefits expired at the end of July. Black and Hispanic/Latinx\* adults, two groups who have experienced significant negative economic and health impacts from COVID-19, continued to experience food insecurity at rates approximately twice that of white adults. Parents with children under age 19 had similar rates of food insecurity in May and September, while adults not living with children experienced a statistically significant increase over the same period.

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\* The term “Hispanic/Latinx” is used throughout this report to reflect the different ways in which people self identify. The US Census Bureau uses the term “Hispanic.” Also, the terms “white” and “Black” in this report refer to adults who do not identify as “Hispanic/Latinx.”

In this brief, we examine how food insecurity in the US has changed across the first six months of the pandemic. Using data from the most recent wave of the Coronavirus Tracking Survey, a nationally representative survey of nonelderly adults conducted September 11–28, 2020, we compare food insecurity in September versus early in the pandemic in late March/early April and in May, after major relief legislation was passed. We find the following:

- Though household food insecurity decreased between March/April (22 percent) and May (17.9 percent) 2020, the share of adults reporting food insecurity in the past month edged back up from May to September (from 17.9 percent to 19.6 percent), after major relief programs for households expired. Emergency SNAP allotments enacted last spring increased monthly benefits for many, but not all, households and likely buffered rising food insecurity over the last several months.
- In particular, food insecurity rates have increased among those who reported their families experienced a job loss during the pandemic. Among those who said they or a spouse/partner lost a job, the food insecurity rate is nearly four in ten (37.1 percent), up from 33.6 percent in May and roughly the same level as in March/April (37.3 percent), the period just after the initial wave of job losses.
- Significant racial/ethnic disparities in food insecurity remain. In September, Hispanic/Latinx adults (30.5 percent) and Black adults (28.2 percent) reported food insecurity at rates roughly double that of white adults (14.7 percent); these gaps have been consistent across the data collection periods.
- In September, adults living with at least one noncitizen family member were significantly more likely to be food insecure (26.6 percent) than those in families where all members are citizens (18.8 percent), a trend consistent throughout the pandemic.
- Parents with children under age 19 had similar rates of food insecurity in May and September. Parents with children continued to report higher rates of food insecurity than those without children, although adults not living with children experienced a statistically significant increase in food insecurity between May and September.
- Many adults and their families continue to turn to charitable food assistance, such as food pantries and free meal programs, as a coping strategy. More than one in five adults with low incomes (20.8 percent) and nearly one in four adults (23.3 percent) who report they or a spouse lost a job or were laid off during the pandemic sought food assistance from charitable sources in the prior 30 days.<sup>2</sup>

## Background

The onset of the pandemic brought with it a significant wave of job loss and economic fallout in March, resulting in high rates of material hardship and food insecurity.<sup>3</sup> Congress acted quickly to provide financial assistance to many families through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act<sup>4</sup> and the

Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act,<sup>5</sup> although assistance diminished by the end of the summer. A \$600 weekly supplement to unemployment benefits expired at the end of July, and the Administration and Congress failed to reach agreement on a new round of stimulus payments or other economic relief. Although unemployment rates improved somewhat by early September and more economic activity resumed,<sup>6</sup> the country continued to struggle with a significant economic recession amidst concerns about a potential second COVID-19 wave.<sup>7</sup>

Notably, federal nutrition programs offered many families important assistance during the first six months of the pandemic. Congress suspended SNAP's three-month time limit for participants ages 18 to 49 who are not living with children. It authorized states to use emergency allotments to provide maximum benefits to eligible households, which were automatically approved for all states for the first two months of the pandemic. States are able to request extensions of this allotment as long as the federal government and state have declared a public health emergency.<sup>8</sup> However, the maximum SNAP benefit has not been increased during the pandemic; this means that almost 40 percent of SNAP recipients with the lowest incomes who were already receiving maximum benefits received no additional assistance during this period.

The Families First Act also initiated Pandemic EBT (P-EBT), a new program that allowed states to supplement families' food budgets for the value of school meals missed when schools are closed, and in October Congress extended P-EBT through fiscal year 2021.<sup>9</sup> A subsequent brief will explore food insecurity data for families with children in greater detail.

In this brief, we consider the trends in food insecurity among adults in the US during the pandemic, how September food insecurity levels vary across demographic groups, and the use of charitable food assistance.

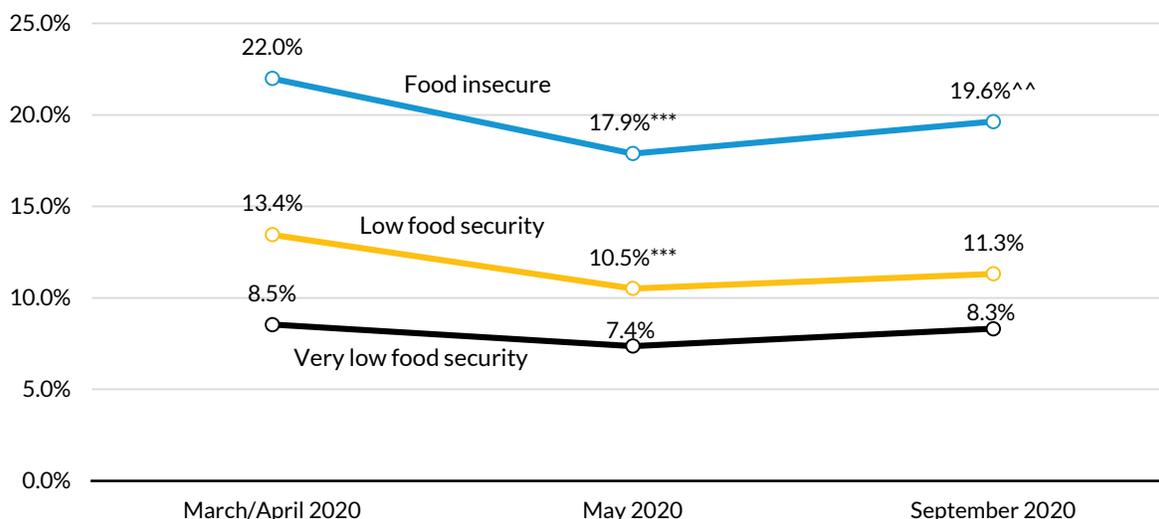
## Results

*Though food insecurity declined between March/April and May 2020, overall food insecurity edged back upward between May and September, with one in five adults (19.6 percent) reporting in September that their households experienced food insecurity during the prior 30 days.*

In September 2020, 19.6 percent of adults ages 18 to 64 reported they experienced food insecurity in the prior 30 days, representing a 1.7 percentage point increase from May's rate of 17.9 percent. Although food insecurity moderately improved early in the pandemic between March/April (22 percent) and May (17.9 percent), those gains were partially eroded in September (figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Who Experienced Household Food Insecurity in the Past 30 days, March/April through September 2020



Sources: Health Reform Monitoring Survey, quarter 1 2020. Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, waves 1 and 2. The surveys were conducted March 25–April 10, May 14–27, and September 11–28, 2020.

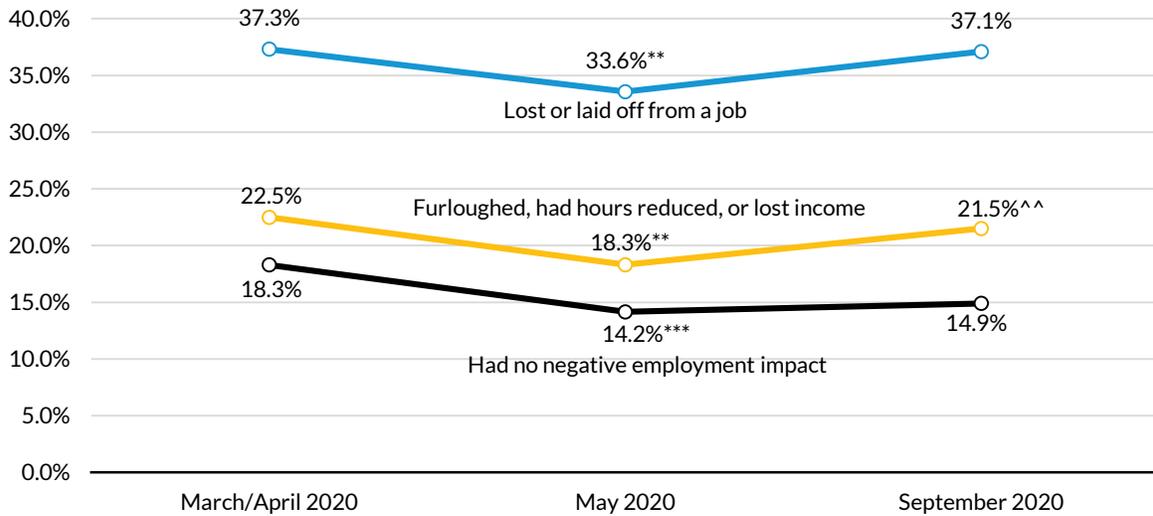
Notes: \*/\*\*/\*\* Estimates differ significantly from March/April 2020 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests. ^/^^/^^^ Estimates differ significantly from May 2020 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

*Food insecurity decreased between March/April and May 2020 but again increased between May and September among adults whose families have experienced significant economic impacts during the pandemic.*

Nearly four in ten adults (37.1 percent) who reported they or their spouse or partner lost a job or was laid off experienced food insecurity in the 30 days before the September survey. Food insecurity among these households reduced in May after pandemic economic assistance programs were implemented but increased again in September to roughly the same level seen early in the pandemic. More than one in five adults (21.5 percent) who reported their families experienced other negative employment impacts were food insecure in September, returning to a level similar to March/April after improving in May. Other negative economic impacts include a child under age 19 losing a job, someone in the family being furloughed or having reduced work hours, or someone in the family losing earnings or income from a job or business. For both categories, estimates may include adults whose families lost and then regained jobs, hours, or income since March and adults whose family employment or income has not recovered. Among adults who reported their family had not experienced job loss or other negative consequences of the pandemic recession, the food insecurity rate for the prior 30 days was 14.9 percent, similar to the level in May (figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Who Experienced Household Food Insecurity in the Past 30 days, by Whether Someone in the Family Lost Work or Work-Related Income March/April through September 2020



Sources: Health Reform Monitoring Survey, quarter 1 2020. Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, waves 1 and 2. The surveys were conducted March 25–April 10, May 14–27, and September 11–28, 2020.

Notes: \*/\*\*/\*\* Estimation differ significantly from March/April 2020 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

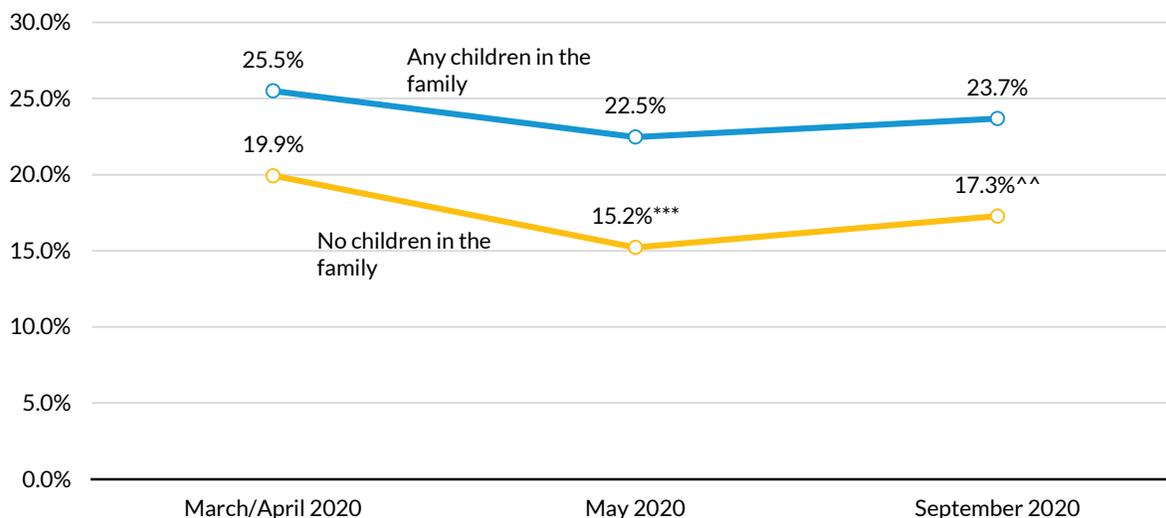
^^/^^/^^ Estimation differ significantly from May 2020 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

*Parents living with children under age 19 are consistently more likely to be food insecure than adults not living with children in the household, but the latter group experienced an uptick in food insecurity between May and September.*

Parents with children living in the household continued to experience higher rates of food insecurity overall, with nearly one in four parents (23.7 percent) reporting food insecurity in the 30 days before the September survey, compared with 17.3 percent of adults not residing with children. However, adults without children experienced a 2.1 percentage point increase in food insecurity between May and September 2020, while rates among parents were similar over the two time periods (figures 3 and 4).

FIGURE 3

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Who Experienced Household Food Insecurity in the Past 30 Days, by Presence of Children Under Age 19 in the Family, March/April through September 2020



Sources: Health Reform Monitoring Survey, quarter 1 2020. Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, waves 1 and 2. The surveys were conducted March 25–April 10, May 14–27, and September 11–28, 2020.

Notes: \*/\*\*/\*\* Estimates differ significantly from March/April 2020 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests. ^/^^/^^^ Estimates differ significantly from May 2020 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

*Significant racial/ethnic disparities in food insecurity have persisted throughout the pandemic, with Black and Hispanic/Latinx adults far more likely to be food insecure than their white counterparts.*

Hispanic/Latinx adults’ and Black adults’ household food insecurity rates reported in September were 30.5 and 28.2 percent, respectively, approximately double that of white households (14.7 percent; figure 4). Communities of color have experienced persistently high rates of food insecurity since the beginning of and before the pandemic. Black and Hispanic/Latinx adults are also much more likely to experience very low food security, which represents the most severe form of food hardship, such as skipping meals or going a whole day without food. More than one in ten (10.9 percent) Hispanic/Latinx adults and Black adults (10.7 percent) reported very low household food security, compared with 6.9 percent of white adults (data not shown).

Unfortunately, the survey sample size does not allow us to examine food insecurity rates for other racial and ethnic groups, such as Asian American, Pacific Islander, Alaskan Native, or Native American adults, nor non-Hispanic/Latinx adults who are more than one race. Overall, this group of adults and their households had food insecurity rates that were not statistically higher than those of their white counterparts (18.3 percent), but this grouping can mask significant variation among communities and the survey does not reach enough members of certain communities to capture their experiences. Other reports have shown the pandemic has exacerbated food insecurity among Asian American (FRAC 2020) and Native American (Feeding America 2015; Jernigan et al. 2016; NPR, RWJF, and T.H. Chan 2020)

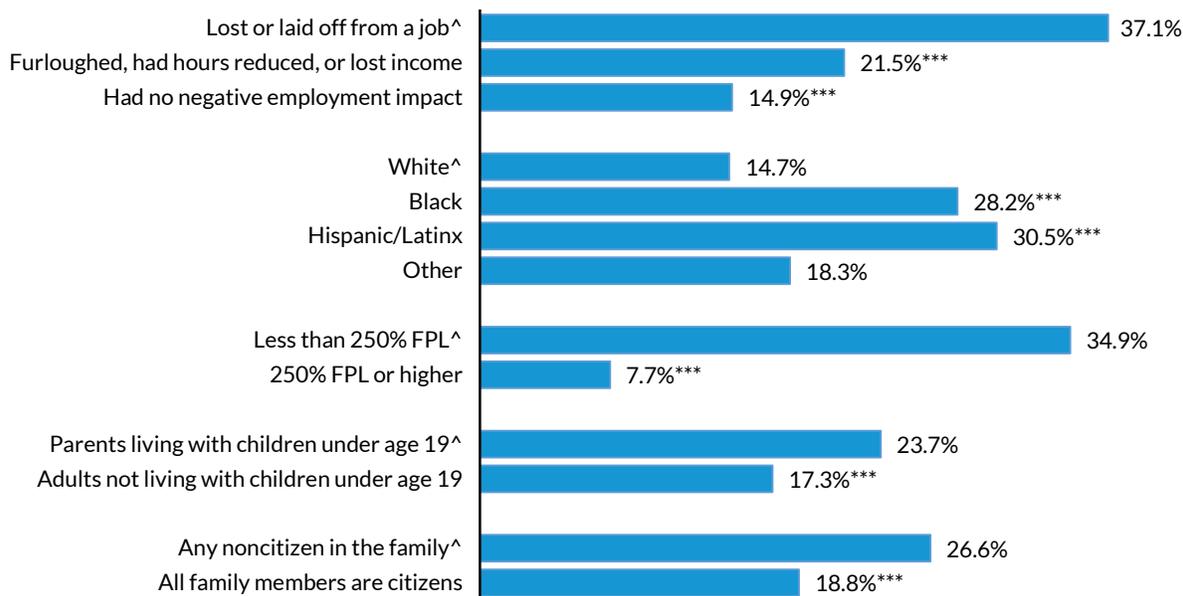
populations, and prior studies have documented high rates of food insecurity among indigenous communities before the pandemic.

Overall, food insecurity is also associated with lower incomes. More than one in three adults (34.9 percent) with prepandemic family incomes below 250 percent of the federal poverty level reported household food insecurity in the past 30 days, compared with only 7.7 percent of adults with higher family incomes (figure 4).

*Families with at least one noncitizen member are significantly more likely to be food insecure than those where all family members are citizens.*

In September 2020, more than a quarter (26.6 percent) of adults with at least one noncitizen member in the family reported food insecurity in the prior 30 days, compared with 18.8 percent of adults where all family members are citizens (figure 4). This trend has persisted among families with noncitizen members across all three data collection points (data not shown for March/April and May).

**FIGURE 4**  
**Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Who Experienced Food Insecurity, Overall and by Prepandemic Family Income, Race/Ethnicity, and Presence of Own Children Under Age 19 in the Family, September 2020**



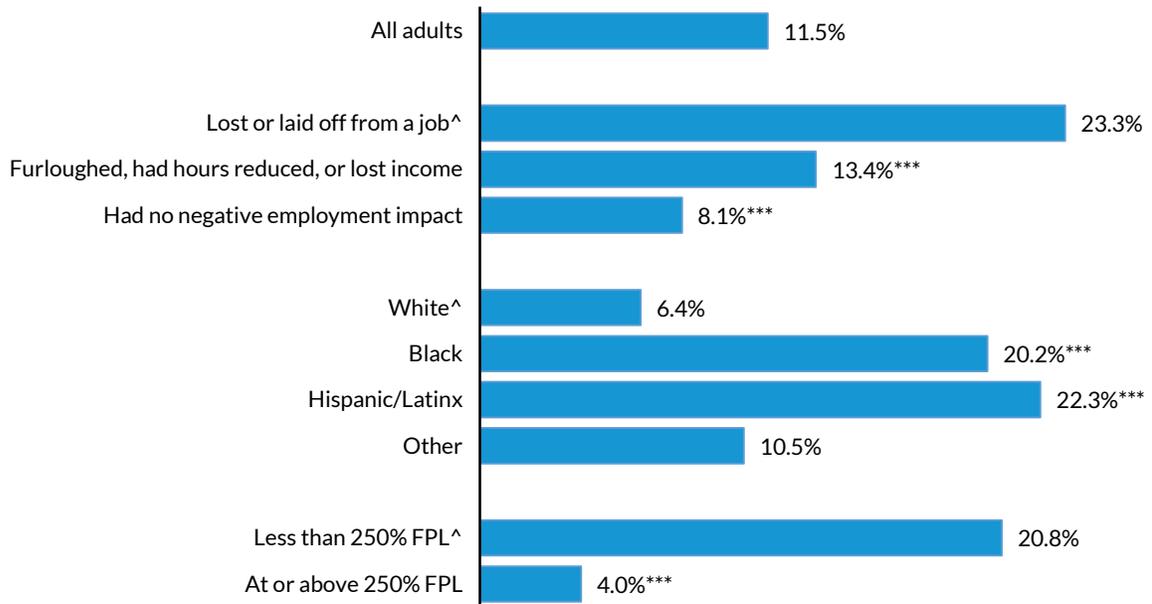
**Source:** Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2. The survey was conducted September 11–28, 2020.

**Notes:** FPL is federal poverty level. “Other” includes non-Hispanic/Latinx adults who are not Black or white or are more than one race. \*/\*\*/\*\* Estimates differ significantly from reference group (^) at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

*Charitable food assistance is a common coping strategy for many families, especially those who have lost work or work-related income during the pandemic.*

Overall, more than one in ten adults (11.5 percent) reported receiving charitable food in the 30 days before the September survey. However, rates of charitable food assistance are markedly higher among adults whose families experienced job loss during the pandemic (23.3 percent)<sup>10</sup> and families with lower incomes (20.8 percent). Black and Hispanic/Latinx adults' households are more than three times as likely to seek charitable food assistance as white families, which reflects the significant racial and ethnic disparities in food insecurity (figure 5).

**FIGURE 5**  
**Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Receipt of Any Charitable Food, Overall and by Impact of the Pandemic on Family Employment, Race/Ethnicity, and Family Income, September 2020**



**Source:** Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2. The survey was conducted Sept. 11–28, 2020.  
**Notes:** FPL is federal poverty level. “Other” includes non-Hispanic/Latinx adults who are not Black or white or are more than one race. \*/\*\*/\*\* Estimates differ significantly from reference group (^) at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

## Discussion

After improving between March/April and May 2020, following significant economic assistance for many families, food insecurity rates increased again between May and September 2020, after the weekly \$600 unemployment supplement expired, absent other economic relief. The increase was moderate but statistically significant. Many factors may influence households' ability to afford consistent access to a nutritious diet, including an unequal economic recovery<sup>11</sup> impacting many groups who are already at high risk of food insecurity, such as Black and Hispanic/Latinx households and households with low incomes. Adults who report their households experienced negative economic impacts during the pandemic recession have been particularly hard hit, and their food insecurity rates have returned to levels similar to those seen early in the pandemic before economic assistance was

widely available. An earlier Urban analysis (Karpman and Acs 2020) of May survey data found that adults whose families lost work or work-related income but were receiving unemployment benefits saw a decline in food insecurity from early in the pandemic, while those who had applied but not yet received benefits by May did not. The enhanced unemployment benefit loss, coupled with the likelihood that many people have already spent their stimulus checks, could have reduced the resources available to meet basic needs in September.

Federal nutrition programs have provided an important buffer for many families during this period,<sup>12</sup> including emergency SNAP allotments provided in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act that have allowed states to boost the program's monthly household benefit to the maximum allowable amount. However, Congress has not taken action to raise the maximum benefit during this recession, which means that the nearly four in ten SNAP households who were deemed to have zero net income available for food and therefore the highest need did not receive any benefit boost during this recession (USDA 2019). This lack of action to raise the maximum benefit contrasts with the approach taken during the Great Recession, when the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act boosted the typical SNAP household benefit by about 16 percent. Research has indicated that this policy lever played an important role in reducing food insecurity during this period (Nord and Prell 2011).

The persistent and large disparities in food insecurity between households of color and white households intersect with disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color and should raise significant alarm. In addition, families with at least one noncitizen continue to experience higher rates of food insecurity compared with families where all members are citizens. This trend may relate to the exclusion of noncitizens and many mixed-status families from some pandemic assistance programs, as well as the ongoing chilling effects of the public charge rule and the challenging immigration climate (Bernstein et al. 2020).

## Data and Methods

This brief uses data from the Urban Institute's Coronavirus Tracking Survey, a nationally representative internet-based survey of nonelderly adults designed to assess how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting adults and their families and how those effects change over time. A total of 4,352 adults ages 18 to 64 participated in the first wave of the tracking survey, which was fielded May 14–27, 2020, and 4,007 adults participated in the second wave, which was fielded September 11–28, 2020. Respondents for both waves were sampled from the 9,032 adults who participated in the most recent round of the Health Reform Monitoring Survey (HRMS), which was fielded March 25 through April 10, 2020. About 89 percent of the participants in the second wave of the tracking survey also participated in the first wave, providing a sample of 3,564 adults represented in all three rounds of data collection. This group constitutes the analytic sample for the estimated changes in food security between March/April, May, and September 2020 described in this brief.

The HRMS sample is drawn from Ipsos's KnowledgePanel, the nation's largest probability-based online panel. The panel is recruited from an address-based sampling frame covering 97 percent of US

households and includes households with and without internet access. Participants can take the survey in English or Spanish.

The Coronavirus Tracking Survey includes an oversample of Black and Hispanic/Latinx HRMS participants. Survey weights adjust for unequal selection probabilities and are poststratified to the characteristics of the national nonelderly adult population based on benchmarks from the Current Population Survey and American Community Survey. We also adjust the September tracking survey weights to address differential nonresponse among participants in the March/April HRMS. Because nonresponse in the September survey is greater among HRMS participants experiencing negative employment effects and material hardship during the pandemic and these effects differ based on demographic characteristics, we adjust the weights so that work status and employment and hardship outcomes reported in March/April among the September sample are consistent with the outcomes reported among the full March/April HRMS sample both overall and within key demographic subgroups. These adjustments make the September tracking survey sample more representative of the sample initially drawn in March/April and mitigate nonresponse bias in estimated changes over time in the pandemic's impact.

The margin of sampling error, including the design effect, for the sample of adults in the second wave of the tracking survey that participated in all three rounds of data collection is plus or minus 2.1 percentage points for a 50 percent statistic at the 95 percent confidence level. Additional information about the March/April 2020 HRMS and the questionnaires for the HRMS and first and second waves of the Coronavirus Tracking Survey can be found at [hrms.urban.org](https://hrms.urban.org).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Our estimate of household food insecurity is based on the six-item short form of the US Department of Agriculture's Household Food Security Survey Module and uses a 30-day reference period. Respondents with two-to-four affirmative responses are defined as having low household food security, and respondents with five-to-six affirmative responses are defined as having very low household food security. These groups are jointly defined as food insecure. Affirmative responses include reporting that it was often or sometimes true that the food the household bought didn't last, and the household didn't have money to get more; it was often or sometimes true that the household could not afford to eat balanced meals; adults in the household ever cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food; meals were cut or skipped for 3 or more of the past 30 days; the respondent ate less than they felt they should because there wasn't enough money for food; and the respondent was ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food.
- <sup>2</sup> The estimated share of adults in families experiencing job loss who reported receiving charitable food in the past 30 days differs slightly from the estimate in a companion brief using the September tracking survey data (Karpman, Zuckerman, and Kenney 2020) because of differences in the samples used for each brief. Our analysis for this brief focuses on the subset of the September tracking survey sample that participated in all three rounds of data collection (March/April, May, and September), whereas estimates for the other brief are based on the full September survey sample. Each sample is weighted separately to be nationally representative of the nonelderly adult population.
- <sup>3</sup> Elaine Waxman, "More Than One in Five US Adults Experienced Food Insecurity in the Early Weeks of the Pandemic," *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, April 28, 2020. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/more-one-five-us-adults-experienced-food-insecurity-early-weeks-pandemic>.

- 4 Families First Coronavirus Response Act, Pub. L. No. 116-127, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/pandemic/ffcra-employee-paid-leave>.
- 5 Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Pub. L. No. 116-136, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/748>. See Coronavirus Supplemental Appropriations Summary, US Senate, Committee on Appropriations, March 31, 2020, [https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Coronavirus%20Supplemental%20Appropriations%20Summary\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Coronavirus%20Supplemental%20Appropriations%20Summary_FINAL.pdf).
- 6 “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey,” US Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed October 21, 2020, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsatabs.htm>.
- 7 Noah Higgins-Dunn, “Coronavirus Cases Grow in More Than Half of U.S. States Pushing Nationwide Number Higher,” CNBC, September 22, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/22/coronavirus-cases-grow-in-more-than-half-of-us-states.html>.
- 8 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “States Are Using Much-Needed Temporary Flexibility in SNAP to Respond to COVID-19 Challenges,” October 8, 2020, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/states-are-using-much-needed-temporary-flexibility-in-snap-to-respond-to>.
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- 10 See note 2.
- 11 Heather Long, Andrew Van Dam, Alyssa Fowers, and Leslie Shapiro, “The COVID-19 Recession is the Most Unequal in Modern U.S. History,” *Washington Post*, September 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/business/coronavirus-recession-equality/>.
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## About the Authors

**Elaine Waxman** is a senior fellow in the Income and Benefits Policy Center. Her expertise includes food insecurity, nutrition, the food assistance safety net, and social determinants of health disparities, as well as broader issues affecting families and communities with low incomes. Waxman is part of the leadership team coordinating Urban's From Safety Net to Solid Ground initiative. Before joining Urban, Waxman served for six years as vice president for research and nutrition at Feeding America, where she oversaw research on food insecurity and nutrition, federal nutrition programs, the intersection of hunger and health, and the circumstances and experiences of individuals seeking charitable food assistance. She received her MPP and PhD from the University of Chicago, where she is currently a lecturer at the School of Social Service Administration.

**Poonam Gupta** is a research analyst in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where she focuses on social safety net policy. She works on several projects related to federal nutrition programs and food insecurity. Gupta holds BAs in public health and Spanish from the Johns Hopkins University and an MSPH in international health from the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health.

**Dulce Gonzalez** is a research analyst in the Health Policy Center. Before joining Urban, she interned at the Georgetown University Center for Children and Families, where she conducted qualitative and quantitative analyses on Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program, and the Affordable Care Act. Gonzalez has also worked at the nonprofit organization Maternal and Child Health Access, where she evaluated health and well-being outcomes for women in the Welcome Baby Program, a perinatal home visiting program. She received her MPP from Georgetown University.

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500 L'Enfant Plaza SW  
Washington, DC 20024

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