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Forty Percent of Black and Hispanic Parents of School-Age Children Are Food Insecure

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In September 2020, one in four families with school-age children reported experiencing food insecurity in the prior 30 days;[1] among families where the parents were either Black or Hispanic, the rate was four in ten. As the recession persisted and the White House and Congress failed to agree on additional economic relief, families with school-age children also faced uncertainty around in-person school attendance and access to school meals. Fewer than one-third of parents reported that their children were receiving some type of school meals in September, suggesting that efforts to provide meals to children attending school virtually still were not reaching many vulnerable households. Approximately one-third of parents with school-age children reported that they were aware of the new Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) program, which provides electronic benefits roughly equivalent to the value of meals lost during school closures to eligible families. Among those who had heard of the program, approximately two-thirds indicated that they had received P-EBT benefits. So far, however, these benefits have largely been in response to spring 2020 school closures; most parents have not yet received benefits for the fall 2020 school term.

In this brief, we examine food insecurity among families with school-age children six months into 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 assess food insecurity in the 30 days before the survey among families with children ages 6 through 18.[2] We find the following:

- One in four (24.7 percent) families with school-age children reported household food insecurity in September; this rate rose to over one in three (36.9 percent) among families in which someone lost work or work-related income at some point during the pandemic.
- Substantial racial/ethnic disparities in food insecurity exist among parents of school-age children. Approximately four in ten families with parents who are Hispanic/Latinx* (39.1 percent) and parents who are Black (40.8 percent) reported food insecurity in the prior 30 days, almost triple the rate of families with white parents (15.1 percent).
- Coinciding with high rates of food insecurity, more than three times as many Hispanic/Latinx parents (36.9 percent) and about three times as many Black parents (29.6 percent) reported being worried about having enough to eat in the next month as white parents (9.6 percent).
- Over one in three families with school-age children currently enrolled in school (34.6 percent) reported that one or more of their children were receiving some type of school meal or meal replacement (such as grab-and-go or home delivery) when not attending school fully in person, while nearly two in three families (64 percent) reported that their children were not receiving any school-based meals. These data suggest that a significant portion of vulnerable children may not be benefiting from school-based nutrition resources amid the shifting mix of virtual and hybrid instruction.
- Approximately one in three parents of school-age children (34.4 percent) reported being aware of the P-EBT program. Among those aware of the program, 68 percent of all parents, 70.1 percent of Black parents, and 71.7 percent of Hispanic/Latinx parents reported receiving P-EBT.
- Charitable food continues to be an important resource during the pandemic, particularly for economically vulnerable households. Nearly one in seven families with school-age children (13.4 percent) reported accessing charitable food in the previous 30 days. Rates were higher for families who had lost work or income during the pandemic (20.3 percent) and for families with Black parents (24.2 percent) or Hispanic/Latinx parents (24.9 percent).

Background

Although some indicators of economic activity have improved since the beginning of the pandemic,[3] the economic fallout of the recession continues to disproportionately impact families with children.[4] Both before and throughout the pandemic, parents have consistently reported higher rates of food insecurity than adults without children.[5] In this brief, we take a closer look at families with school-age children using September survey data, a point at which many families were uncertain about how children would

*The term "Hispanic/Latinx" is used throughout this brief 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.

attend school for the fall term and faced potential challenges accessing school nutrition programs, which normally reduces food insecurity for many US families.[6]

There have been several efforts to improve the responsiveness of federal nutrition programs during the pandemic, particularly for families with school-age children. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act[7] authorized the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to grant several waivers to states for school meal services in order to provide greater flexibility during school closures.[8] These waivers have addressed the need to provide grab-and-go meals for consumption outside of school, to provide multiple meals at a time, and to permit parents and other caregivers to pick up meals without a child present, among other changes. The waivers were recently extended through the 2020–21 school year.

Additionally, through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, Congress enacted Pandemic EBT, a new program that allowed states to supplement families' food budgets by providing benefits roughly equivalent to the value of meals lost during school closures. By late summer 2020, all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands had received approval to issue P-EBT benefits to families with children eligible for free and reduced-price school meals (Neuberger et al. 2020). Most benefits were targeted to retrospectively replace meals lost during spring closures, although 18 states, the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands issued additional benefits in August/September before the program expired at the end of the federal fiscal year (CBPP 2020). In October, Congress extended P-EBT through fiscal year 2021 to assist the millions of children still losing access to free or reduced-price meals while schools bounce between remote, in-person, and hybrid teaching models.[9] Congress also directed the USDA to consider simplifying assumptions when approving state plans for P-EBT benefits; such changes would allow states to standardize benefits rather than accounting for constant changes in school status. However, USDA did not issue guidance to states on how to interpret the modifications until mid-November,[10] and no state plans had been approved by the beginning of December 2020. As a result, most students eligible for P-EBT did not receive benefits for the fall term, although they may be eligible for retrospective issuance at a later date.

More generally, Congress authorized states to use emergency SNAP allotments to provide eligible households maximum benefits, which were automatically approved for all states for the first two months of the pandemic. States could request extensions of this allotment as long as the federal and state governments had declared a public health emergency. However, the maximum SNAP benefit was not increased for the pandemic; this means that almost 40 percent of SNAP recipients with very low incomes who were already receiving maximum benefits received no additional assistance during this period (CBPP 2020).

In this brief, we look at how families with school-age children in the US are facing food insecurity six months into the pandemic, how food insecurity levels vary by the pandemic's impact on family employment and by race/ethnicity, and what families report about accessing federal nutrition programs and school meals.

Results

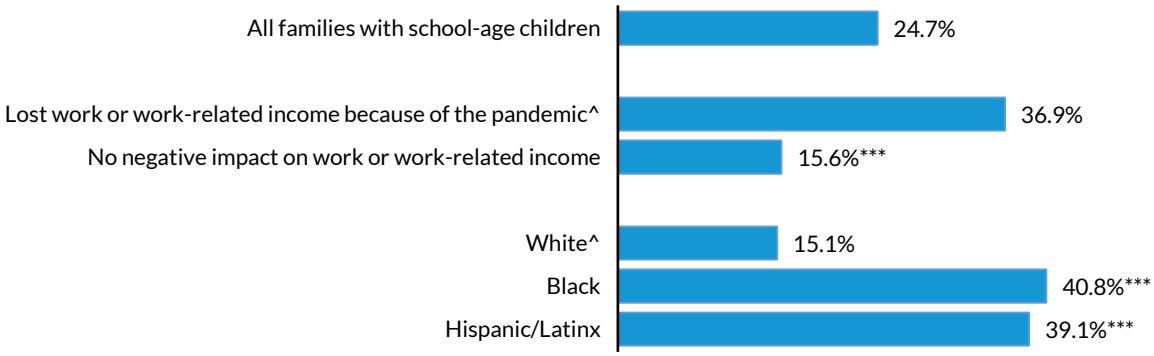
One in four families with school-age children reported experiencing food insecurity in the past 30 days; that number rose to nearly four in ten families of Hispanic/Latinx parents and just over four in ten families of Black parents.

Overall, about one in four families with school-age children (24.7 percent) reported that their household had experienced food insecurity in the 30 days before the survey (figure 1). We assessed differences in food insecurity and other outcomes among families with school-age children by the race and ethnicity of the parent responding to the survey. Food insecurity was significantly higher among families with Black and Hispanic/Latinx parents: 40.8 percent of families with Black parents and 39.1 percent of families with Hispanic/Latinx parents reported household food insecurity, rates nearly triple that of families with white parents (15.1 percent). Families with Black parents were also the most likely to report very low food security—the most severe form of hardship—in the past 30 days. Just over one in five families with Black parents (21.5 percent) reported very low food security, compared with 15.1 percent of families with Hispanic/Latinx parents and 7.4 percent of families with white parents (figure 2).

Families experiencing negative impacts to employment because of the pandemic are also struggling with household food insecurity. Among families losing work or work-related income because of the pandemic and resulting recession, 36.9 percent reported food insecurity, compared with 15.6 percent of families who did not experience a negative employment impact (figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Share of Families with School-Age Children Who Had Experienced Household Food Insecurity in the Past 30 Days, September 2020



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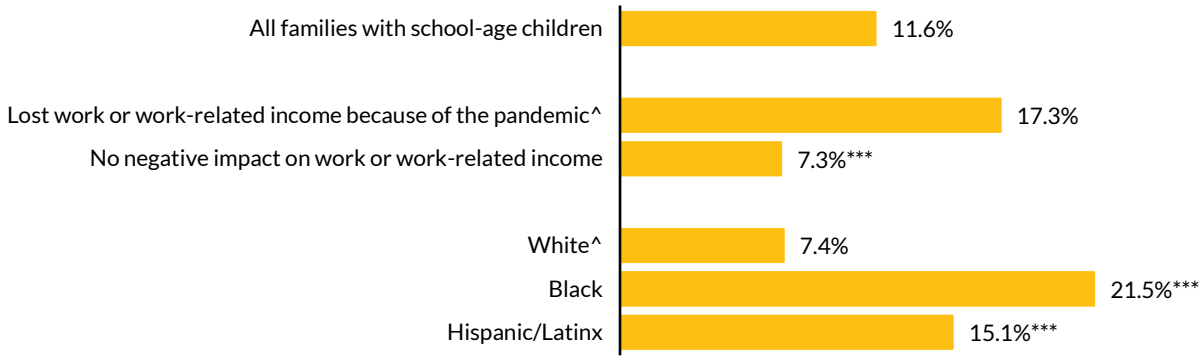
Source: Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2, conducted September 11–28, 2020.
Notes: School-age children are ages 6–18. Survey respondents are ages 18–64. Race/ethnicity is for the parent responding to the survey. Estimates are not shown for non-Hispanic adults who are not Black or white or are more than one race because of an insufficient sample size.
*/**/*** Estimates differ significantly from reference group (^) at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

FIGURE 2

Share of Families with School-Age Children Who Had Experienced Very Low Food Security in the Past 30 Days, September 2020



Source: Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2, conducted September 11–28, 2020.
Notes: School-age children are ages 6–18. Survey respondents are ages 18–64. Race/ethnicity is for the parent responding to the survey. Estimates are not shown for non-Hispanic adults who are not Black or white or are more than one race because of an insufficient sample size.
*/**/*** Estimates differ significantly from reference group (^) at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

More than three times as many Hispanic/Latinx) parents (36.9 percent and about three times as many Black parents (29.6 percent) reported being worried about having enough to eat in the next month as white parents (9.6 percent).

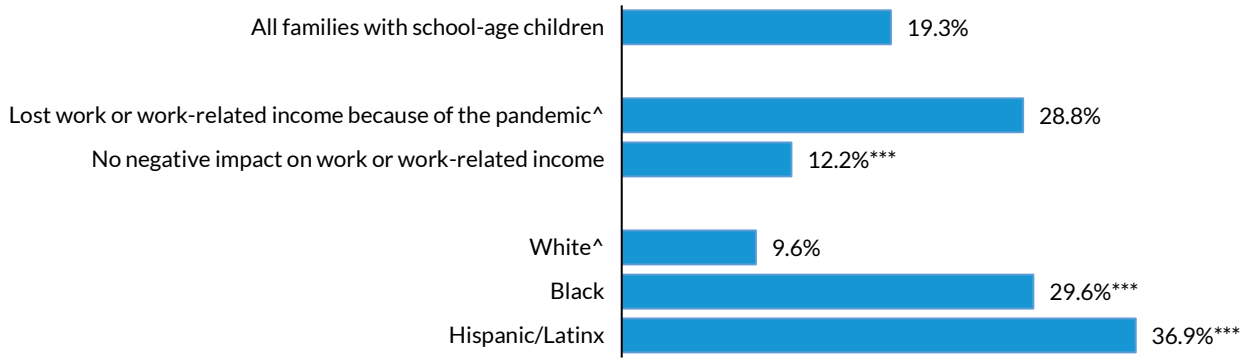
Overall, 19.3 percent of parents with school-age children were worried about having enough to eat in the next month. Among families losing work or work-related income because of the pandemic, 28.8 percent expressed this worry, compared with 12.2 percent of families not experiencing negative employment impacts. Hispanic/Latinx parents were far more worried about food in the coming month than white and Black parents: 36.9 percent of Hispanic/Latinx parents reported such worries, followed by 29.6 percent of Black parents and 9.6 percent of white parents (figure 3).

Over one-third of families with children enrolled in school reported receiving some form of school meals at the time of the September survey.

Six in ten families (59.8 percent) with children enrolled in school were not receiving school meals or any replacement for school meals (e.g., grab-and-go), while a little more than three in ten families (35.5 percent) reported they had been receiving school meals in September either in person or through alternative formats (table 1).

FIGURE 3

Share of Parents of School-Age Children Who Are Worried about Having Enough to Eat in the Next Month, September 2020



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Source: Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2, conducted September 11–28, 2020.
Notes: School-age children are ages 6–18. Survey respondents are ages 18–64. Race/ethnicity is for the parent responding to the survey. Estimates are not shown for non-Hispanic adults who are not Black or white or are more than one race because of an insufficient sample size.
*/**/*** Estimates differ significantly from reference group (^) at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

TABLE 1

Receipt of School-Based Meals among Families with Children Enrolled in K–12, September 2020

School meal status	Share of families
Children receive school meals or meal replacements	35.5%
Children do not receive school meals or replacement for school meals	59.8%
Children are homeschooled (so parent was not asked about school meals) or parent did not report whether children receive school meals	4.6%

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Source: Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2, conducted September 11–28, 2020.
Notes: School-age children are ages 6–18. Survey respondents are ages 18–64.

Over two-thirds of families with school-age children who had heard about Pandemic EBT reported receiving those benefits.

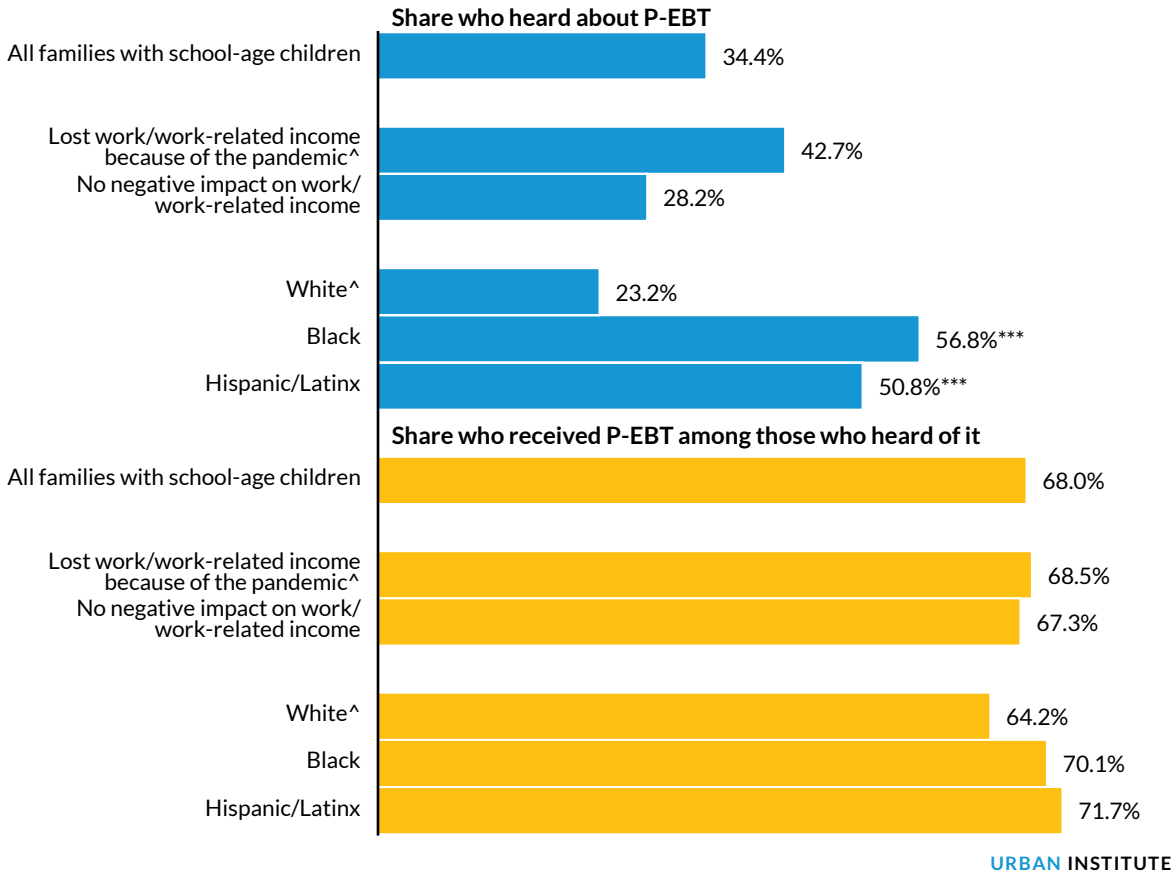
At the time of this survey, P-EBT programs had been widely implemented across the US, but the timeline and nature of implementation had varied significantly across states. Each state operated within its own constraints and had to develop its own approach to identifying eligible children and issuing benefits (Neuberger et al. 2020). The first states were approved to provide benefits in April while the last state was not approved until August.

Among families with school-age children, about a third of parents (34.4 percent) reported that they had heard about P-EBT; because of the variability in implementation, this may be an underestimate. Among those that had heard of the program, 68.0 percent reported receiving those benefits. Among families losing work or work-related income because of the pandemic, 42.7 percent of parents had

heard about P-EBT, compared with 28.2 percent of families not experiencing negative employment impacts (figure 4).

FIGURE 4

Awareness of and Participation in Pandemic EBT (P-EBT) among Families with School-Age Children, September 2020



Source: Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2, conducted September 11–28, 2020.
Notes: School-age children are ages 6–18. Survey respondents are ages 18–64. Race/ethnicity is for the parent responding to the survey. Estimates are not shown for non-Hispanic adults who are not Black or white or are more than one race because of an insufficient sample size.
*/**/*** Estimates differ significantly from reference group (^) at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

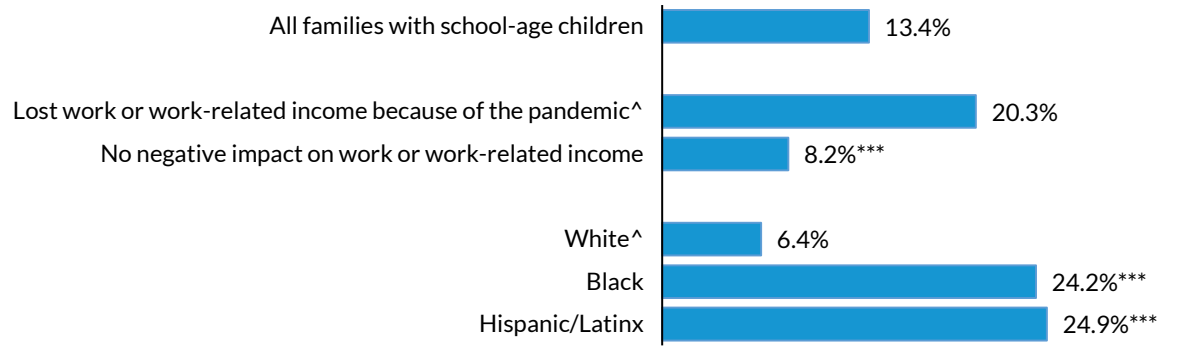
Families are also turning to charitable food to help meet their needs. Families with Black and Hispanic parents, as well as families losing work or work-related income because of the pandemic, are most likely to have received charitable food assistance in the past 30 days.

Nearly one in seven families with school-age children (13.4 percent) reported receiving charitable food assistance in the 30 days before the survey. Families with Black and Hispanic/Latinx parents reported charitable food receipt at higher rates (24.2 percent and 24.9 percent, respectively) than families with white parents (6.4 percent). Families losing work or work-related income because of the

pandemic were more than twice as likely as families who did not experience such impacts to report charitable food receipt: 20.3 percent compared with 8.2 percent (figure 5).

FIGURE 5

Receipt of Charitable Food among Families with School-Age Children, September 2020



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Source: Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2, conducted September 11–28, 2020.
Notes: School-age children are ages 6–18. Survey respondents are ages 18–64. Estimates are not shown for non-Hispanic adults who are not Black or white or are more than one race because of an insufficient sample size.
*/**/*** Estimates differ significantly from reference group (^) at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

Discussion

Families with school-age children are experiencing high rates of food insecurity six months into the pandemic, at a time when early relief programs have expired and additional economic relief packages have been delayed. Elevated food insecurity has broader implications for children beyond the immediate economic impacts. The links between food insecurity in families and child health and behavior outcomes have been widely studied, and food insecurity is associated with decreased ability to perform in school, higher levels of behavioral problems, and increased susceptibility to illness, among other challenges (Council on Community Pediatrics and Committee on Nutrition 2015). These data also point to profound and deeply concerning disparities among school-age children in Black and Hispanic/Latinx households, who were more likely to be in a food-insecure household than white children before the pandemic (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2020, table S-3) but also live in households that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. In the absence of rapid and intensive intervention, a significant portion of children of color may suffer longer-term consequences that can compound existing disadvantage.

Federal nutrition programs have been an important resource for families with school-age children, who have faced increased vulnerability during school closures and shifting patterns of attendance, including all-virtual and hybrid formats. Before the pandemic, approximately 52 percent of students nationwide were eligible for free and reduced-price meals;[11] it is unclear how many of these households have faced challenges accessing school meal alternatives. While school districts across the country have

taken advantage of new flexibility to provide alternatives to in-school meal offerings, many parents may find it challenging to arrange for grab-and-go meal pick-ups, as these are often offered at the same time that children need supervision at home for virtual attendance or when parents and other adults in the household need to work.[12]

The new Pandemic-EBT program can offer important advantages to families with school-age children by providing resources to purchase the foods their children need most at a wider variety of times and locations than is possible through food distributions. However, implementation has varied across the country, both in timeline and reach, and these variances could have affected awareness (and receipt) among families. New flexibility to use simplifying assumptions rather than individual determinations for each household could be crucial in helping states move quickly with future benefit issuance, but significant questions remain about how states can provide meaningful benefits in an uncertain and often rapidly shifting pandemic environment. Moreover, half the school year will be over before renewed P-EBT benefit plans are likely implemented, even if states move as quickly as possible. In the near term, therefore, elevated food insecurity rates will likely persist among households with school-age children, especially in communities of color.

To effectively buffer the concerning levels of food hardship among families with school-age children, multiple policy levers will be needed, and quick action is critical. The policy levers include the following:

- Re-examining the mechanisms for ensuring school-provided meals reach children when they are not onsite (i.e., studying virtually or quarantined during an outbreak). By engaging directly with parents, policymakers can determine the primary barriers for uptake and the actions needed to ensure more families can be effectively served (e.g., increased neighborhood or home delivery and more flexibility in pick-up hours).
- Maximizing the use of simplifying assumptions for P-EBT issuance to decrease data and other implementation barriers states face and to ensure benefits reach children throughout the school year. A regular source of benefits, rather than large retroactive payments, would provide the most optimal source of nutrition for children.
- Increasing the SNAP maximum benefit to ensure that the nearly 40 percent of lowest-income households and families are receiving additional resources to decrease food insecurity and increase economic mobility, as evidenced by prior implementation of this approach during the Great Recession and the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Nord 2013).
- Prioritizing nutrition interventions geared toward communities of color, and particularly families with children, to combat racial and ethnic disparities in food insecurity and the alarmingly high levels of deprivation, including very low food security.
- Implementing a new round of economic assistance to households across the US to reduce the need for families to make trade-offs between food and other basic household needs.

Data and Methods

This brief uses data from the second wave of 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 4,007 adults ages 18 to 64 participated in the second wave, which was fielded September 11–28, 2020; 91 percent of respondents completed the survey between September 11 and 17. The first wave of the tracking survey was fielded May 14–27. 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. 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 core sample of the Coronavirus Tracking Survey includes an oversample of Black and Hispanic/Latinx HRMS participants. This analysis also draws on additional oversamples of KnowledgePanel adults in households with school-age children, including Black and Hispanic/Latinx panel members who did not participate in the HRMS. Our analytic sample for this brief includes 2,239 parents living with children ages 6 to 18. We construct family-level weights to produce representative estimates for families with school-age children. These survey weights adjust for unequal selection probabilities and are poststratified to the characteristics of families with school-age children based on benchmarks from the American Community Survey. 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.

Notes

[1] 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.

[2] In defining school-age children as ages 6–18, we exclude kindergarteners who are age 5 or younger.

[3] "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," US Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed November 18, 2020; Reade Pickert, Yue Qiu, and Alexander McIntyre, "Virus at Million-Cases-a-Week Pace Poised to Temper U.S. Rebound," Bloomberg, November 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/recovery-tracker/.

[4] Jonnelle Marte, "Households with Children Taking the Biggest Financial Hit during Pandemic: New York Fed Report," Reuters, August 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-fed-parents/households-with-children-taking-the-biggest-financial-hit-during-pandemic-new-york-fed-report-idUSKCN2592MZ.

[5] USDA, "Key Statistics and Graphics, Food Security Status of U.S. Households in 2019," last updated September 9, 2020, https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx#children.

[6] Katherine Ralston and Alisha Coleman-Jensen, "USDA's National School Lunch Program Reduces Food Insecurity," USDA Economic Research Service, August 2017, https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2017/august/usda-s-national-school-lunch-program-reduces-food-insecurity/.

[7] Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-127.

[8] "Child Nutrition COVID-19 Waivers," USDA Food and Nutrition Service, last updated November 25, 2020, https://www.fns.usda.gov/programs/fns-disaster-assistance/fns-responds-covid-19/child-nutrition-covid-19-waivers.

[9] Continuing Appropriations Act, 2021 and Other Extensions Act, https://appropriations.house.gov/sites/democrats.appropriations.house.gov/files/CR1_01_SUSP_xml.2020.9.22.1803%20%28002%29.pdf

[10] "State Guidance on Coronavirus Pandemic EBT (P-EBT)," USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, last updated July 10, 2020, https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/state-guidance-coronavirus-pandemic-ebt-pebt

[11] "Table 204.10. Number and Percentage of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch, by State: Selected Years, 2000–01 through 2016–17," *Digest of Education Statistics*, National Center for Education Statistics, last updated April 2019.

[12] Cory Turner, "Children Are Going Hungry: Why Schools Are Struggling to Feed Students," NPR, September 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/09/08/908442609/children-are-going-hungry-why-schools-are-struggling-to-feed-students.

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