



# Charitable Food Use Increased Nearly 50 Percent from 2019 to 2020

## Findings from the December 2020 Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey

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Long lines at food banks have been among the most visible signs<sup>1</sup> of the economic disruption and material hardship experienced across the US during the COVID-19 pandemic recession. We analyzed data from the December 2020 round of the Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS), a nationally representative survey of more than 7,500 adults ages 18 to 64, and compared those data to results from the December 2019 round to examine the change in charitable food use over the past year. For this analysis, charitable food use includes the use of free groceries or free meals. We also examined the characteristics and circumstances of people who sought charitable food during 2020, and we asked people who reported they had not used charitable food if they were aware of a place to find these resources in their community and how comfortable they would be seeking this assistance. We find the following:

- Adults' reported household use of charitable food in the past 12 months grew almost 50 percent between December 2019 and December 2020, from 13.2 percent of nonelderly adults to 19.7 percent, or almost in one in 5 adults. That translates to about 13.1 million nonelderly adults who newly reported accessing charitable food in 2020 when compared with 2019.<sup>2</sup>
- Use of charitable food between 2019 and 2020 has increased across all racial and ethnic groups we examined. Rates of increase were similar for white adults (28.9 percent) and Black adults (29.4 percent), but there were large disparities in charitable food use between white and Black adults before the pandemic (Waxman, Joo, and Gonzalez 2019). The increase was particularly pronounced for Hispanic/Latinx\* adults (89.2 percent) and for non-

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\* We use the term "Hispanic/Latinx" 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.

Hispanic/Latinx adults who are not Black or white (87.4 percent; this includes adults who identify with other racial or ethnic categories, such as Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and any other race or more than one race).

- Adults who identify as Black or Hispanic/Latinx were almost three times more likely than white adults to report accessing charitable food during 2020 (33.0, 33.3, and 12.5 percent, respectively), likely reflecting both higher rates of need before the pandemic and the recession's significant impact on households of color.
- Almost one in four adults (23.6 percent) living with children accessed charitable food in 2020 compared with about one in six adults (16.5 percent) in households without children.
- Adults with a disability or who live with a household member with a disability (38.8 percent) were more likely to seek charitable food assistance than adults with no disability in the household (16.3 percent): nearly 4 in 10 did so in 2020.
- Adults who are noncitizens or who live with any noncitizen relatives (34.2 percent) were more likely to seek charitable food assistance in 2020 than adults living in households where all family members are citizens (18 percent).
- Among adults who reported not using charitable food in 2020, about half (49.3 percent) knew of a community resource for charitable food, and a little more than half (52.9 percent) reported they were not at all or not too comfortable seeking charitable food assistance if they had a need.

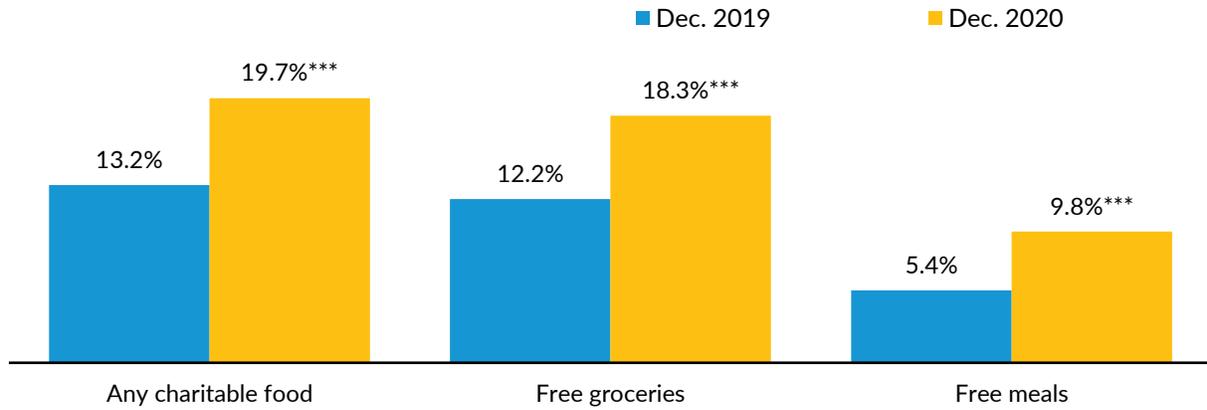
## Results

*Between December 2019 and December 2020, self-reported household use of charitable food in the past 12 months among adults ages 18 to 64 increased almost 50 percent.*

In December 2020, 19.7 percent of adults reported that their households received charitable food in the past 12 months, up from 13.2 percent of adults in 2019 (figure 1). That translates into about 13.1 million more adults reporting that their households received charitable food in 2020 relative to 2019. Charitable food use in the past 30 days increased by more than half (52.8 percent), with 16.2 percent of adults reporting household use in December 2020 versus 10.6 percent in December 2019, indicating that elevated use of charitable food persisted as 2020 drew to a close (figure 2).

FIGURE 1

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Household Use of Charitable Food in the Past 12 Months, December 2019 and December 2020



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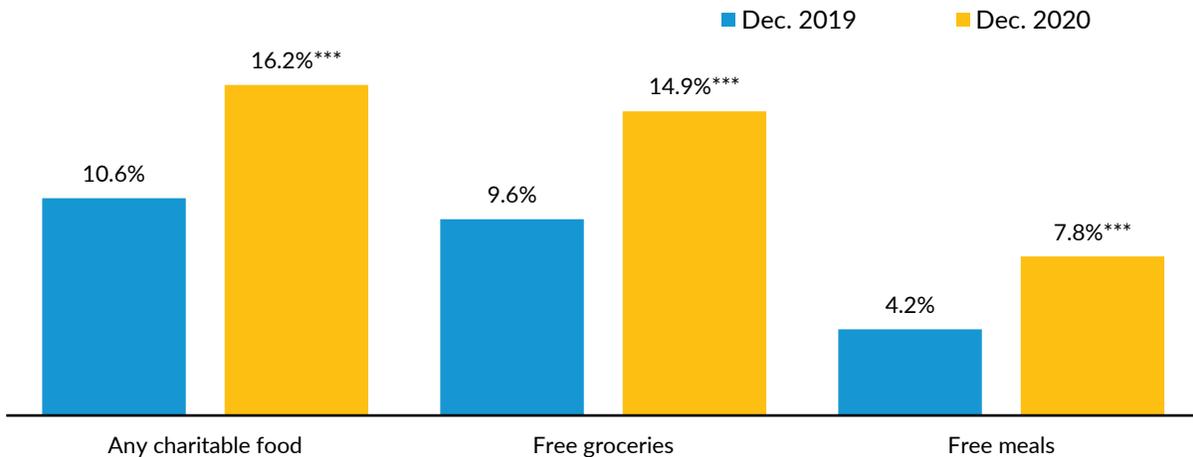
Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2019 and December 2020.

Notes: Estimates are regression adjusted. Charitable food estimates in 2019 are based on responses from the randomly selected half of the 2019 sample that received charitable food questions that are consistent with the questions in 2020.

\*/\*\*/\*\* Estimate differs significantly from December 2019, at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

FIGURE 2

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Household Use of Charitable Food in the Past 30 Days, December 2019 and December 2020



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2019 and December 2020.

Notes: Estimates are regression adjusted. Charitable food estimates in 2019 are based on responses from the randomly selected half of the 2019 sample that received charitable food questions that are consistent with the questions in 2020.

\*/\*\*/\*\* Estimate differs significantly from December 2019, at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

Adults across all racial and ethnic groups we examined reported increased receipt of charitable food between December 2019 and December 2020, but the increases were pronounced among Hispanic/Latinx adults and among non-Hispanic/Latinx adults who are not Black or white (i.e., those who identify as Asian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, or some other race or more than one race).

As shown in table 1, the number of adults accessing charitable food across all racial and ethnic groups we examined increased significantly from 2019 to 2020, but the increase among Hispanic/Latinx adults (15.7 percentage points, or 89.2 percent) was much larger than the increase among white adults (2.8 percentage points, or 28.9 percent). Moreover, Black and Hispanic/Latinx adults were almost three times as likely as white adults to have accessed charitable food in 2020 (33.0 percent, 33.3 percent, and 12.5 percent, respectively). These gaps likely reflect both disparities in food insecurity that existed even before the pandemic (Odoms-Young and Bruce 2018) and the disproportionate impact the pandemic and related recession have had on communities of color (Karpman, Zuckerman, and Kenney 2020).

Assessing changes between 2019 and 2020 among adults who report identities other than white, Black, or Hispanic/Latinx (such as Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, or “some other race” or “more than one race”), is more challenging because of small sample sizes. In 2019, the use of charitable food assistance among white adults and adults who do not identify as white, Black, or Hispanic/Latinx was similar (9.7 percent and 11.1 percent, respectively). This pattern was also observed in similar survey data from 2018 (data not shown).<sup>3</sup> In 2020, however, the use of charitable food among adults who do not identify as white, Black, or Hispanic/Latinx (20.8 percent) was significantly higher than for white adults, and this group experienced a larger increase in charitable food use between 2019 and 2020 (9.7 percentage points, or 87.4 percent) compared with white adults (2.8 percentage points, or 28.9 percent).

**TABLE 1**  
**Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Household Use of Charitable Food in the Past 12 Months, by Race and Ethnicity, December 2019 and December 2020**

	December 2019	December 2020	Percentage-point change	Percent change
White	9.7%	12.5%***	2.8	+28.9%
Black	25.5%	33.0%**	7.5	+29.4%
Hispanic/Latinx	17.6%	33.3%***	15.7^^^	+89.2%
Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, or “some other race” or “more than one race”	11.1%	20.8%***	9.7^^^	+87.4%

**Source:** Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2019 and December 2020.

**Notes:** Estimates are regression adjusted. Charitable food estimates in 2019 are based on responses from the randomly selected half of the 2019 sample that received charitable food questions that are consistent with the questions in 2020. The terms “white” and “Black” refer to adults who do not identify as Hispanic or Latinx. Sample sizes for December 2019 and December 2020 are as follows: white, N=2,440 and 4,578; Black, N=447 and 979; Hispanic/Latinx, N=750 and 1,625; other, N=226 and 555.

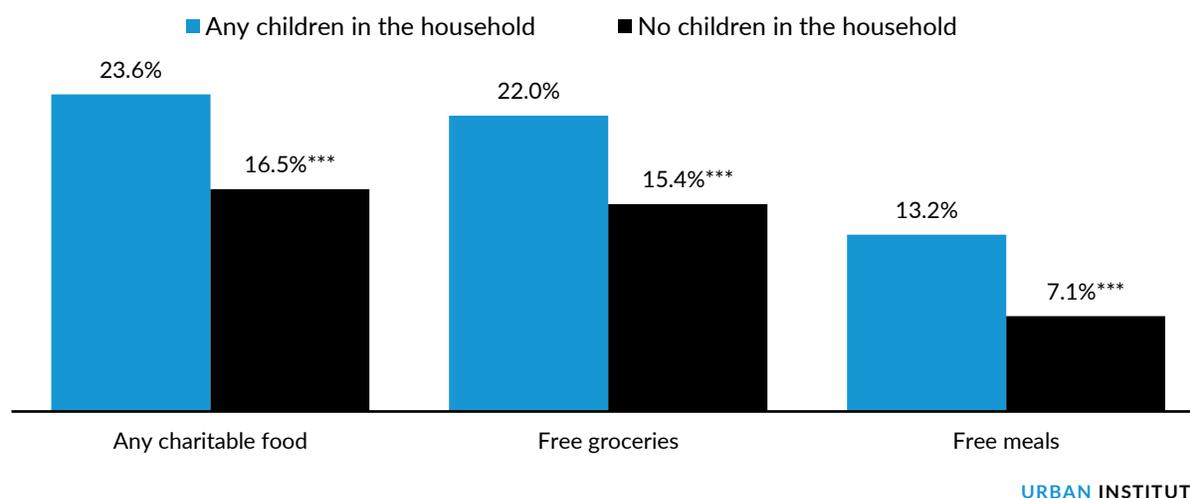
\*/\*\*/\*\*\* Estimate differs significantly from December 2019 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

^^/^/^^^ Estimate differs significantly from white adults at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

Almost one in four adults living with children accessed charitable food in 2020 compared with about one in six adults in households without children.

Adults living with children were more likely than those without children to report use of any charitable food in the household in 2020 (figure 4). Families with children have faced significant material hardship, particularly food insecurity,<sup>4</sup> throughout the pandemic, which may have been exacerbated by disruptions in school meals associated with school closures and reduced availability of child care that offers meals.

**FIGURE 4**  
**Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Household Use of Charitable Food in the Past 12 Months, by Presence of Children under Age 19 in the Household, December 2020**



Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2020.

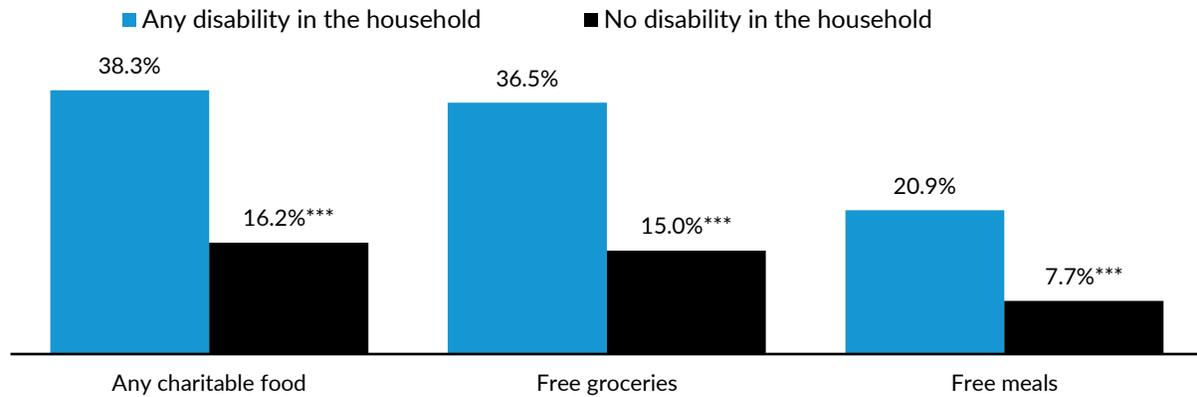
Notes: \*/\*\*/\*\* Estimate differs significantly from adults with children in the household at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

Nearly 4 in 10 adults with a disability or who live with a household member with a disability reported charitable food use in the prior 12 months.

We examined the rate of charitable food assistance among adults who reported that they or a household member have a disability.<sup>5</sup> A disability can be an important risk factor for food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen and Nord 2013). Some people living with disabilities may also be at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 or experiencing more severe forms of COVID-19 because of underlying medical conditions,<sup>6</sup> and efforts to avoid contracting the virus may diminish access to food resources as well. For example, if individuals living with disabilities or living with someone who has a disability need to avoid public transportation, cannot afford grocery or meal delivery, or experience greater isolation and less support of friends and family, their food hardship may increase. In 2020, adults with a disability or living with a household member with a disability<sup>7</sup> were more than twice as likely to access charitable food assistance as adults in households where no one had a disability (38.8 percent versus 16.3 percent; figure 5).

FIGURE 5

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Household Use of Charitable Food in the Past 12 Months, by Presence of a Household Member with a Disability, December 2020



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2020.

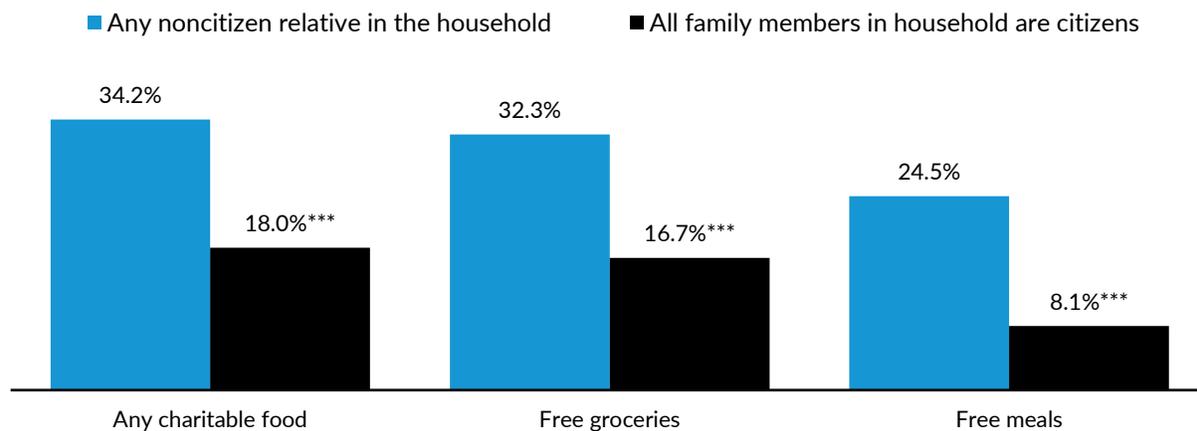
Notes: \*/\*\*/\*\* Estimate differs significantly from adults with a disability or living with a household member with a disability, at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

*Adults who were noncitizens or who lived with any noncitizen relatives were more likely to seek charitable food assistance in 2020 than adults living in households where all family members were citizens.*

In 2020, 34.2 percent of adults who were noncitizens or lived with any noncitizen relatives in the household reported use of charitable food compared with 18 percent of adults living in households with all citizen family members (figure 6).

FIGURE 6

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Household Use of Charitable Food in the Past 12 Months, by Household Citizenship Status, December 2020



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2020.

Notes: \*/\*\*/\*\* Estimate differs significantly from adults living in households with any noncitizen family member at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

Among adults who did not access charitable food in 2020, about half were aware of a place they could go in their community to access charitable food, and a little more than half said they weren't comfortable seeking charitable food assistance if needed.

In a year when a significant number of individuals first sought charitable food, it is useful to consider whether adults who did not access these resources know how to do so if needed. We asked all adults who reported they had not accessed charitable food in the past 12 months two additional questions: First, we asked whether they were aware of a place in their community where they could get free groceries or meals if they needed help getting food for their household. About half (49.3 percent) of adults knew of a community resource for charitable food, and about half (50.5 percent) said they did not. We then asked how comfortable they would feel getting free meals or groceries from a food pantry or similar place community if they needed help. A little more than half of adults (52.9 percent) who did not use charitable food in the past year said they were not at all or not too comfortable seeking such assistance if needed (table 2).

**TABLE 2**  
**Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Awareness and Comfort in using Charitable Food, among those Reporting No Charitable Food Use in the Past 12 Months, December 2020**

	All adults
<b>Awareness of place in community to obtain charitable food</b>	
Yes, is aware	49.3%
No, is not aware	50.5%
<b>Comfort in getting charitable food</b>	
Not at all/not too comfortable	52.9%
<i>Not at all comfortable</i>	18.4%
<i>Not too comfortable</i>	34.5%
Somewhat/very comfortable	46.6%
<i>Somewhat comfortable</i>	32.9%
<i>Very comfortable</i>	13.8%
<b>Total adults reporting no charitable food use</b>	5,486

**Source:** Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2020.

**Notes:** Estimates are not shown for the 0.2 percent of adults who did not report whether they were aware of a place to obtain charitable food and the 0.5 percent of adults who did not report whether they are comfortable getting charitable food.

## Discussion

Reports from food banks across the country have suggested a large increase in the demand for charitable food assistance during the pandemic,<sup>8</sup> and the results of the 2020 WBNS confirm that trend. The growth in charitable food use may be related to several factors, including the loss of jobs and job-related income among many households (Acs and Karpman 2020); the closure of schools and day care settings and ensuing loss of children's regular access to meals in those settings (Gupta, Gonzalez, and Waxman 2020); supply-chain disruptions that contributed to food shortages and rising food prices; an increased supply of

charitable food provided in response to the pandemic; and a heightened awareness of available resources because of the shift to large, community-wide food distributions. Charitable food assistance may have been among the few supports that adults excluded from certain pandemic relief programs (such as unauthorized noncitizens and citizens whose spouses are not citizens) could access when experiencing economic hardship (Bernstein et al. 2020).

Although charitable food use increased across all racial and ethnic groups in 2020, there were striking increases among Hispanic/Latinx adults and among adults reporting other identities, such as Asian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, or some other race or more than one race. Hispanic/Latinx adults have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting recession (Krogstad and Lopez 2020). Some adults who are noncitizens or have a noncitizen in their household have been excluded from some pandemic assistance programs<sup>9</sup> and may have had few options for coping with increased hardship. Further, other data from the WBNS indicate that some of these households avoided benefits they may have been eligible for because of persistent concerns about public-charge rules (Bernstein et al. 2021). Indigenous communities have also been hit hard by the pandemic (NPR, RWJF, and T.H. Chan 2020) and had high food insecurity rates even before it began (Jernigan et al. 2016). And although Black adults did not experience as dramatic an increase in use of charitable food, this may be partly because they already had high rates of need even before the pandemic.

## Data and Methods

This brief draws on data from nationally representative samples of adults ages 18 to 64 who participated in the Urban Institute's WBNS, including 7,694 adults who participated in the December 2019 round of the survey and 7,737 who participated in December 2020. The WBNS is an internet-based survey designed to monitor changes in individual and family well-being as policymakers consider changes to federal safety-net programs. For each round of the WBNS, we draw a stratified random sample (including a large oversample of adults in low-income households) from the KnowledgePanel, a probability-based internet panel maintained by Ipsos that includes households with and without internet access. Survey weights adjust for unequal selection probabilities and are poststratified to the characteristics of nonelderly adults based on benchmarks from the Current Population Survey and American Community Survey. Participants can complete the survey in English or Spanish. For further information on the survey design and content, see Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez (2018).<sup>10</sup>

We estimated changes between December 2019 and December 2020 in the share of adults reporting that their households received charitable food in the past 12 months and in the past 30 days. Estimates for 2019 are limited to the randomly selected half of the 2019 survey sample (3,863 adults) who received charitable food questions that were consistent with the charitable food questions asked in 2020. The remaining half of the 2019 sample (3,831 adults) were asked charitable food questions that have been used in the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement; we exclude this group when estimating charitable food receipt in 2019 for this brief.

Estimated changes between 2019 and 2020 are regression adjusted to control for any changes in the demographic characteristics of the adults participating in each round of the survey. We control for a respondent's gender, age, race and ethnicity, primary language, educational attainment, family size, chronic health conditions, residence in an urban or rural area, internet access, homeownership status, family composition, and census region; the presence of children under age 19 in the respondent's household; whether the respondent participated in both the 2019 and 2020 survey rounds; and how long the respondent has been a member of the KnowledgePanel. We also tested the significance of the differences in the 2019-to-2020 percentage-point changes by race and ethnicity, controlling for these characteristics.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sam Van Pykeren, "These Photos Show the Staggering Food Bank Lines Across America," *Mother Jones*, April 2020, <https://www.motherjones.com/food/2020/04/these-photos-show-the-staggering-food-bank-lines-across-america/>.
- <sup>2</sup> We multiplied the estimated 6.5 percentage-point change in charitable food use between December 2019 and December 2020 by the projected number of adults ages 18 to 64 in 2020. We used national population predictions available from the US Census Bureau. These files give population projections by race, ethnicity, and sex of all ages from 2016 to 2060 based on estimated birth rates, death rates, and net migration rates over the time period. Using the "Main Series" file, we summed the 2020 population projections for all 18- to 64-year-olds to arrive at 202,620,917 nonelderly adults in 2020. See US Census Bureau, "2017 National Population Projections Datasets," US Department of Commerce, last revised February 20, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/2017/demo/popproj/2017-popproj.html>. The 95 percent confidence interval for the estimated increase in the number of adults receiving charitable food (13.1 million) between 2019 and 2020 is (9.9 million, 16.3 million).
- <sup>3</sup> In 2019, there were smaller sample sizes by race and ethnicity that received the same question wording as 2020 because of testing of alternate formats for this item. As a result, the 2019 sample for adults not identifying as white, Black, or Hispanic/Latinx was particularly small. To further explore our hypothesis that the 2020 increase among adults identifying as Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, or "some other race" or "more than one race" was meaningful, we also examined similar data from the 2018 WBNS for respondents in this category. In 2018, charitable food use was assessed using only a measure for the prior 30 days, so we compared the 30-day results for both 2018 and 2020. We observed that the rate of charitable food use for adults not identifying as white, Black, or Hispanic/Latinx was not statistically different from the rate for white adults, similar to the pattern observed in 2019. Taken together, data from 2018 and 2019 suggest that before the pandemic, charitable food use was comparable for white adults and for adults not identifying as white, Black, or Hispanic/Latinx, but this pattern has shifted during the past year.
- <sup>4</sup> Alex Harwin and Yukiko Furuya, "Where Families are Feeling Pandemic Impacts the Worst," *Education Week*, January 2021, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/where-families-are-feeling-pandemic-impacts-the-worst/2021/01>.
- <sup>5</sup> We define respondents or their household members as having a disability if they reported "a physical or mental condition, impairment, or disability that affects their daily activities or that requires them to use special equipment or devices such as a wheelchair, TDD, or communication device." For this measure, we define household as the respondent and any other relatives or nonrelatives who are living with them.
- <sup>6</sup> "COVID-19: People with Disabilities," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last updated February 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-disabilities.html>.
- <sup>7</sup> Adults with a disability or living with any relatives or nonrelatives with a disability made up about 15.5 percent of the sample in 2020.

- <sup>8</sup> “Nine Months Later, Food Banks Continue Responding to Rising Need for Help,” Feeding America, December 22, 2020, <https://www.feedingamerica.org/about-us/press-room/nine-months-later-food-banks-continue-responding-rising-need-help>.
- <sup>9</sup> Julia Gelatt, Randy Capps, and Michael Fix, “Nearly 3 Million U.S. Citizens and Legal Immigrants Initially Excluded under the CARES Act Are Covered under the December 2020 COVID-19 Stimulus,” Migration Policy Institute newsroom, January 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/cares-act-excluded-citizens-immigrants-now-covered>.
- <sup>10</sup> The 2019 and 2020 WBNS survey instruments are available at “The Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey,” Urban Institute, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/health-policy-center/projects/well-being-and-basic-needs-survey>.

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