



Chapter

4

Food Systems and Nutrition



May 2021

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Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has [led](#) to millions of Americans experiencing food insecurity. While many are experiencing it for the first time due to pandemic-related economic impacts, communities that had relatively high rates of food insecurity before COVID-19 [continue](#) to observe high rates during the pandemic. Higher rates of food insecurity [exist](#) in Black, Latino, and Native American communities, who were also [hit hardest](#) by COVID-19, while facing higher rates of chronic disease.

These inequities highlight the [connections](#) between access to affordable, nutritious foods and health outcomes, including obesity and diabetes (both of which are risk factors for COVID-19 complications). COVID-19 recovery offers an opportunity to address those inequities and improve access to nutritious foods. Federal, state, and local investments in nutrition programs, as well as policies that streamline their expansion, are necessary to bounce forward from this crisis.

Below is a list of federal COVID-19 relief resources allocated to states, territories, and localities for food systems and nutrition as of March 30, 2021:

Emergency Food Assistance Program (Department of Agriculture)	\$844,200,000
Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (Department of Agriculture)	\$283,057,000
Child Nutrition/National School Lunch Program (Department of Agriculture)	\$6,695,637,000
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) State Administration (Department of Agriculture)	\$100,000,000
SNAP Contingency Reserve (Department of Agriculture)	\$15,810,000,000
Coronavirus Food Assistance Program 1 (Department of Agriculture)	\$10,556,752,000
Coronavirus Food Assistance Program 2 (Department of Agriculture)	\$13,271,746,000
Congregate Meals (Administration for Community Living)	\$80,000,000
Home-Delivered Meals (Administration for Community Living)	\$808,000,000

Opportunities to Bounce Forward and Address Food Security and Nutrition

Nutritional Benefits

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an [increased](#) demand for food assistance across the nation. To help accommodate this need, the federal government has provided investments and legislative provisions in some of the largest nutritional assistance programs, primarily Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). President Biden [signed](#) an executive order on Jan. 22, 2021, directing the Department of Agriculture to expand SNAP benefits to low-income families by 15% through September 2021. Additionally, the [American Rescue Plan Act](#) (ARPA), signed into law March 11, 2021, allocates \$390 million for WIC to be used for outreach, innovation, and program modernization. ARPA also provides the secretary of agriculture with authority and funding to temporarily boost the Cash Value Voucher (CVV) up to \$35 per month for women and children for a four-month period during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) also allowed the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and states to have greater funding and flexibility in the implementation of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). [The Continuing Appropriations Act 2021](#) extended a number of these flexibilities approved under the FFCRA and permits state SNAP agencies to adopt certain options without Food and Nutrition Service approval. Below are options made available to states:

- Extend certification periods for up to six months and adjust periodic report requirements for some or all households.
- States may use their periodic reporting procedures to recertify some or all participating households with recertification periods set to expire on or before Dec. 31, 2021, including cases where certification periods or periodic reporting requirements were extended.
- Waive initial and recertification interviews for households that are eligible for expedited service to complete an interview prior to approval, provided that an applicant has been identified and an attempt has been made to contact the household for an interview.

Supply Chain Issues

Along with demands for nutritional benefits, the early stage of the pandemic was met with [concerns](#) in the country's food supply chain for various reasons, such as farmers getting ill with the virus and panic-buying at grocery stores. To help provide relief to farmers and producers, on April 17, 2020, USDA [announced](#) a \$19 billion COVID-19 food assistance relief program to provide crucial support to ranchers and farmers. The two major elements of the program are to provide direct support, up to \$16 billion, to farmers and ranchers, as well as USDA purchasing up to \$3 billion in fresh produce, dairy, and meat from regional and local distributors. The 2021 American Rescue Plan Act also includes direct payments and loan assistance to farmers, including farmers who are members of groups that have been socially disadvantaged in USDA programs.

Food Bank Distribution

The COVID-19 pandemic saw a significant increase in demands for food bank services. According to Feeding America, [55%](#) more people than before the pandemic are being served by food banks across the country, requiring more flexibility to address the high demands. USDA waived certain distribution requirements on federal commodities that were distributed by food banks through programs such as the [Emergency Food Assistance Program](#) (TEFAP) or the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP).

Food Insecurity Rates in the United States

- In 2019, [35.2 million people](#) (about 1-in-10) lived in food-insecure households, defined as experiencing uncertainty of having enough food to meet the needs of all household members due to insufficient money or other resources for food. Emerging research indicates that food insecurity is increasing during the pandemic, with Northwestern University [finding](#) that food insecurity has doubled.
- 1-in-4 households with children [experienced](#) food insecurity in 2020. Rates of food insecurity among Black households with children during the pandemic were [nearly double](#) those of White households with children.

These waivers allowed distribution agencies to take an innovative approach to accommodating social distancing, such as using drive-through models where recipients receive a box of TEFAP food that is placed directly in their vehicle by staff. Other flexibilities include waiving signature requirements when applying for picking up food for home consumption.

“Feeding America sees an important opportunity for food banks to partner with state and local public health agencies and other cross-sector partners to address food and nutrition insecurity broadly as well as to reduce disparities.”

*- Jodi Romero, Senior Manager of Public Policy and Governmental Relations,
Feeding America*

As policies and programs to improve food security and nutrition are implemented, policymakers should consider:

- How to prioritize food and nutrition investments in communities that were on the verge of or already experiencing high rates of food insecurity prior to COVID-19.
- Whether to extend or make permanent temporary protections, waivers, or program expansions beyond the national public health emergency.
- How to expand innovative program and service delivery models, such as mobile, drive-through, or online food distribution services, including SNAP benefits to be used for online grocery orders.
- How to streamline enrollment in SNAP and WIC programs, such as by taking a “No Wrong Door” approach to social services enrollments.
- Exploring ways to [support SNAP and WIC vendors](#) to increase access to healthy foods in food deserts. This could include allowing SNAP and WIC benefits to be used at farmers markets or providing financial assistance in the form of loans, grants, or tax credits to small food retailers located in food deserts.
- Engaging state and territorial health officials to support these efforts, including by working with communities on health impact assessments; developing partnerships with SNAP program as part of advancing health equity; and exploring opportunities for collaboration between SNAP education and WIC sites for state and territorial health agencies that have WIC.

Conclusion

The pandemic has exacerbated food security challenges and highlighted the interconnectedness between access to nutritious foods and health outcomes. There have been numerous efforts at the national and state level to improve food security and harness new federal funding to “bounce forward” from COVID-19. This chapter is the fourth in a [series of products](#) that challenge state and territorial leaders to not only limit the impact of the pandemic, but work across sectors to rebuild systems that create a healthier, more equitable post-COVID-19 world.