

U.S.

# More Americans Go Hungry Amid Coronavirus Pandemic, Census Shows

Causes include higher food prices, school closings; expiration of federal jobless benefits deepens distress



Volunteers loading up vehicles in Johnstown, Pa., for the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank drive-up distribution on Aug. 5.

PHOTO: TODD BERKEY/THE TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By [David Harrison](#)

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The number of Americans who say they can't afford enough food for themselves or their children is growing, according to Census data, and it is likely to get larger now that some government benefits have expired.

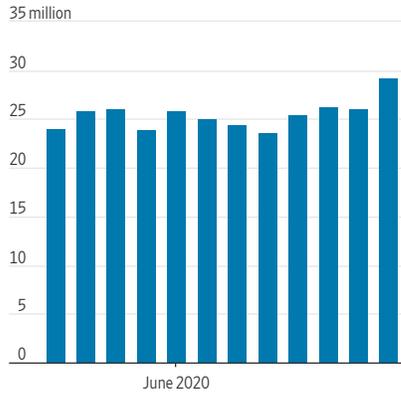
As of late last month, about 12.1% of adults lived in households that didn't have enough to eat at some point in the previous week, up from 9.8% in early May, Census figures show. And almost 20% of Americans with kids at home couldn't afford to give their children

enough food, up from almost 17% in early June.

The data come from weekly surveys conducted by the Census from April to July in which researchers asked respondents whether their households were getting enough to eat.

**Not Enough To Eat**

Adults whose households didn't have enough to eat at some point over the past week.



Source: Census Bureau

**Hungry Kids**

Share of adults with kids at home who can't afford to give their children enough food.



Source: Census Bureau

Food banks also say they have seen demand surge in the past few months. And the number of people receiving benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly known as food stamps, rose almost 16% between March and April, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a far more rapid increase than during the last recession, when the biggest one-month increase was 7.3% in September 2008.

“It is clear to me that there is a big problem here, and the problem seems to be worse than it was at the height of the Great Recession,” said Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, a Northwestern University economist.

That number is set to grow now that unemployed workers no longer receive an extra \$600 in weekly federal benefits. Talks to extend the program broke down as Democrats sought to continue the \$600 payments and Republicans wanted to spend less. President Trump is seeking to keep some of the money flowing through executive actions.

Katie Fitzgerald, chief operating officer at Chicago-based Feeding America, expects more people to show up now at the group’s network of 200 food banks or to apply for federal nutrition assistance. In most cases, the extra jobless benefits had pushed family incomes above the threshold of eligibility for food stamps.

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“We have already responded in an extraordinary way to the elevated demand,” Ms. Fitzgerald said. “Our fear is that we very much need federal supports to continue, because we may be struggling to respond if we have to go much higher than that.”

Feeding America has distributed 1.9 billion meals since March, about 50% more than normal, she said. The group expects to see demand for more than 14 billion meals through next June, more than twice the number it will be able to offer.



A food stamps sign displayed inside a Family Dollar outlet in Chicago earlier this year.

PHOTO: DANIEL ACKER/BLOOMBERG NEWS

In Virginia, the Department of Social Services is bracing for a surge in SNAP applications, said Commissioner Duke Storen. He estimates about 33,000 households could become eligible for food stamps with the expiration of extra jobless benefits. A total of 384,686 Virginia households received SNAP benefits in June, up from 333,669 in February.

“We’re trying to scrape together money for overtime and temp workers,” he said.

Congress temporarily made it easier to apply for food stamps and gave all recipients the maximum benefit allowable, regardless of whether they qualify for it. House Democrats have pushed for a 15% increase to the maximum benefit. Republicans didn’t include an increase in SNAP funding in their latest proposal but have indicated a willingness to discuss the idea.

Researchers point to several possible explanations for the rise in food insecurity related to the pandemic. First, it can take a while for laid-off workers to begin receiving unemployment benefits. Getting enough food can be a challenge during that interval.

Second, some schools and child-care facilities that provided free meals are closed. Paying for those meals can be expensive, even for parents with jobs.

Lauren Bauer, a researcher at the Brookings Institution, estimates that almost 12% of adults with kids at home who maintained their income still couldn’t afford to buy enough food for those children in the week ended July 21.

Third, supply disruptions have pushed up food prices. They rose 4.1% in July from the previous year, much faster than the overall 1% rate of inflation, according to the Labor Department. Ground beef prices jumped 15%.

Federal efforts to bolster food security have seen some success. Expanded jobless benefits reduced the likelihood of eating less due to financial constraints among households with incomes below \$75,000 by 42%, according to research by Julia Raifman and Jacob Bor of Boston University and Atheendar Venkataramani of the University of Pennsylvania.

A Brookings Institution study found between 2.7 million and 3.9 million children were kept from going hungry thanks to a program that reimbursed them for reduced-price or free school lunches they missed because schools were closed. But that program expired over the summer.

“Each of these pieces has shown to be a little bit effective, but we’re nowhere near solving the problem,” said Ms. Bauer, one of the study’s authors.



A volunteer filling lunchboxes for unemployed and homeless people at the Salvation Army center in Washington, D.C., in May.

PHOTO: YURI GRIPAS/ABACA/ZUMA PRESS

In Washington, D.C., the Salvation Army hands out around 400 grocery bags of canned beans, rice and other nonperishables every month at its Sherman Avenue center, up from 100 before the pandemic, said Indrani Bhatnagar, who runs the center. Many recipients are getting donations for the first time.

One of them is Estefani Iraheta, a mother of two who has been receiving donated food since April, when she lost her job at a restaurant. Her husband, who works at a store, has had his hours reduced.

“Every time, there are more people in line,” she said one recent morning as she stopped by the center. “We’ve never lived in a situation like the one we’re in now.”

Write to David Harrison at [david.harrison@wsj.com](mailto:david.harrison@wsj.com)

Have you or someone you know experienced food insecurity in the past six months, or have you faced a food crisis because of the pandemic? We’d like to hear from you in the form below.

Name\*

Email\*

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