

RESEARCH BRIEF

A Year of Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Racial and Ethnic Minorities Have Been Hardest Hit

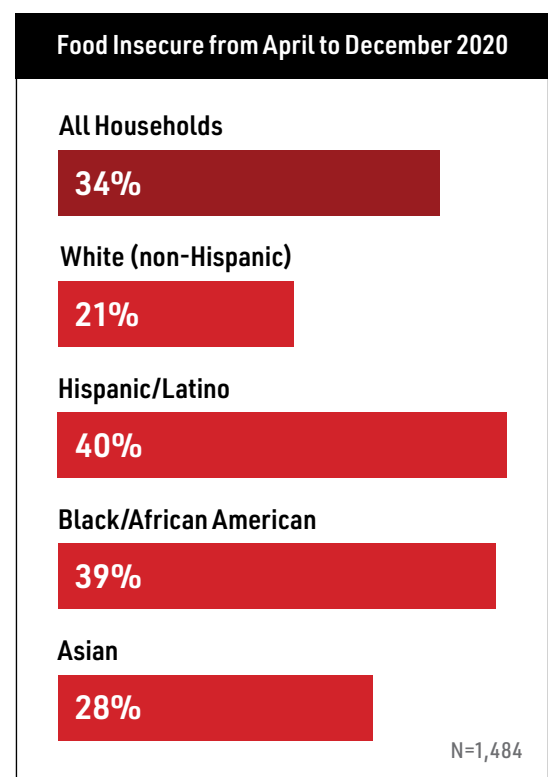
Before the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the U.S. and Los Angeles (LA) early in 2020, food security was already a challenge for many households. **In a 'typical' year, food insecurity — which is a disruption in regular eating because of limited money or other resources — affects 1 in 10 households in the U.S.** (Economic Research Service, 2019). In LA County, food insecurity has traditionally been monitored among low-income households (< 300% of the Federal Poverty Line) only, and the proportion that experienced food insecurity at some point throughout *an entire year* was: 31% in 2011, 29% in 2015, and 27% in 2018 (LAC DPH, 2017, 2018).

Since April of 2020, when the pandemic took hold in LA County and the collateral damage of school closures, job losses, and economic and social stress affected many Angelenos, rates of food insecurity spiked. Drawing on data from the Understanding Coronavirus in America Survey, our team found that **34% of all LA County households (approximately 1.2 million households) experienced food insecurity between April and December of 2020.** We also found marked racial and ethnic disparities in food insecurity during the pandemic. **Non-Hispanic White Angelenos had the lowest rates of food insecurity from April to December 2020 at 21%, compared to 40% of Hispanic/Latinos, 39% of African Americans, and 28% of Asians.**

Racial and ethnic minorities have long experienced health and economic disparities, including disparities in food insecurity. During the pandemic these inequities have been exacerbated with minorities more likely to experience financial hardships, unemployment, illness and severe health outcomes from COVID-19 (Owen et al., 2020; Couch et al., 2020; Ambrose, 2020). It is likely that greater exposures to health and economic strains are driving the higher rates of food insecurity in these communities (de la Haye et al., 2020).

Food insecurity is a public health issue that is critical to address and prevent. The experience of hunger is often top-of-mind, but food insecurity also leads to a host of other negative physical and mental health outcomes for children and adults; including poor nutrition, worse general health, anxiety and depression, and a higher risk for obesity, diabetes, and hypertension (Dhurandhar, 2016; Gundersen & Ziliak, 2015). Ensuring all LA County residents can be food secure — particularly racial and ethnic groups being unequally impacted by COVID-19 — will be an important public health priority as we begin our recovery from this pandemic.

This research brief is an update to two public reports on the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity in LA County released in July and September 2020.



Authors

Kayla de la Haye, PhD, Assistant Professor of Preventive Medicine, University of Southern California

Sydney Miller, PhD Student, Department of Preventive Medicine, University of Southern California

Htay-Wah Saw, PhD, Research Associate, Dana and David Dornsife College of Letters Arts and Sciences, Center for Economic and Social Research (CESR) Survey Research Center (SRC), University of Southern California, Institute for Social Research (ISR), University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

Arie Kapteyn, PhD, Professor and Director, Center for Economic and Social Research (CESR), Dana and David Dornsife College of Letters Arts and Sciences, University of Southern California

Michelle Livings, PhD Student, Spatial Sciences Institute, Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, University of Southern California

Wändi Bruine de Bruin, MSc, PhD, Provost Professor of Public Policy, Psychology, and Behavioral Science, Sol Price School of Public Policy, Dornsife Department of Psychology, Schaeffer Center for Health Policy and Economics, and Center for Economic and Social Research, University of Southern California

John Wilson, PhD, Professor and Founding Director, Spatial Sciences Institute; Professor of Sociology, Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, Preventive Medicine, Keck School of Medicine, Civil & Environmental Engineering, Viterbi School of Engineering, and the School of Architecture, University of Southern California

Kate Weber, MS, Director of the USC Dornsife Public Exchange, University of Southern California

Alison Frazzini, MPH, Sustainability Policy Advisor, Health Equity and Food Systems, Chief Sustainability Office, County of Los Angeles

Marianna Babboni, BS, USC Dornsife Public Exchange, University of Southern California

Research Team

This brief report was prepared in coordination with the Los Angeles County Emergency Food Security Branch as part of a strategic partnership on food insecurity between L.A. County and the USC Dornsife Public Exchange. We are grateful for the expert advice of the Emergency Food Security Branch's staff and leadership, particularly Gary Gero and Alison Frazzini. This project was supported by the USC Dornsife Emergency Fund and by the Keck School of Medicine of USC COVID-19 Research Fund through a generous gift from the W. M. Keck Foundation. We would also like to acknowledge the University of Southern California for providing the funding for Los Angeles surveys under USC's Understanding Coronavirus in America project, as well as the USC Dornsife's Center for Economic and Social Research, which administers the surveys and provided support for the data analysis.

Disclaimer

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Los Angeles County, the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, the Keck School of Medicine, or the University of Southern California as a whole.

Research Methods

This report is based on data from the Understanding Coronavirus in America tracking survey, administered by the USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research (CESR). Respondents are members of CESR's Understanding America Study (UAS) probability-based internet panel who participated in tracking survey waves conducted between April 1 and December 23, 2020. All respondents are 18 years or older, and sampling is representative of all households in LA County. The survey is conducted in English and Spanish. All results are weighted to CPS benchmarks, accounting for sample design and non-response. The weighted sample size for this report is 1,484. Participants were recruited for the UAS internet panel using an ABS household sample; methodological details for the UAS panel are available at <https://uas-data.usc.edu>. The Understanding Coronavirus in America Tracking Survey has been funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the University of Southern California, and many others who have contributed questions to individual waves or sets of waves.

References

- Ambrose, A. J. H. (2020). Inequities during COVID-19. *Pediatrics*, 146(2). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-1501>
- Couch, K. A., Fairlie, R. W., & Xu, H. (2020). Early evidence of the impacts of COVID-19 on minority unemployment. *Journal of Public Economics*, 192, 104287. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104287>
- de la Haye, K., Miller, S., Livings, M., Bruine de Bruin, W., Wilson, J., Weber, K., & Frazzini, A. (2020). *The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County: April to July 2020*. Dornsife Public Exchange, University of Southern California. <https://publicexchange.usc.edu/food-insecurity-april-to-june/>
- Dhurandhar, E. J. (2016). The food-insecurity obesity paradox: A resource scarcity hypothesis. *Physiology & behavior*, 162, 88-92.
- Economic Research Service. (2020). *Food Security in the U.S.: Key Statistics and Graphics*. United States Department of Agriculture. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx/>
- Gundersen, C., & Ziliak, J. P. (2014). Childhood food insecurity in the US: trends, causes, and policy options. *The Future of Children*, 1-19.
- Gundersen, C., & Ziliak, J. P. (2015). Food insecurity and health outcomes. *Health affairs*, 34(11), 1830-1839.
- Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LAC DPH). (2017). *Food Insecurity in Los Angeles County*. Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology. https://admin.publichealth.lacounty.gov/chronic/docs/LA%20Health_FoodInsecurity_finalB.pdf
- Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LAC DPH). (2018). *2018 Los Angeles County Health Survey – Topics & Data*. Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology. <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/ha/LACHSDATATopics2018.htm>
- Owen, W. F., Carmona, R., & Pomeroy, C. (2020). Failing another national stress test on health disparities. *Jama*, 323(19), 1905-1906.