

Written Testimony to Vermont House Committee on Appropriations- Fiscal Year 22 Budget Adjustment

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Good morning, my name is Meredith Niles, I live in Lincoln, Vermont, and I am an associate professor in nutrition and food systems at the University of Vermont. Today I am not officially representing the University, but am here as a scientist who has extensively studied food insecurity and hunger since the COVID-19 pandemic in Vermont and beyond.

Our team has conducted six surveys of thousands of Vermonters since March 2020, which suggest a strong continued financial need for supporting food insecure Vermonters, including through the Vermont Foodbank. Additional information including reports and policy briefs about all of the findings from our work can be found at: <https://www.nfactresearch.org/vermont-policy-briefs>. Access to the peer-reviewed publications we have published can be found at: <https://www.nfactresearch.org/vermont-publications>.

Prevalence of Food Insecurity in Vermont since the COVID-19 Pandemic

Our data show that 1 in 3 Vermont families have faced food insecurity since the pandemic. Our most recent data from 2021, finds that still 1 in 4 Vermonters are food insecure, significantly higher than before the pandemic. For context, this would be the equivalent of more than 6,000 households in Washington County Vermont. Certain kinds of Vermonters are more likely to be food insecure according to our data: women, households with children, respondents without a college degree, low-income Vermonters, and Black, Indigenous, or People of Color Vermonters.

Impacts of Food Insecurity on Vermonters

The impact of food insecurity on Vermonters has been profound, both in the short-term and in the long-term. We have found several importance changes including:

1. **Impacts on diet quality.** 50% of food insecure households reduced their fruit and vegetable intake since the pandemic, which is significantly higher than food secure households ([policy brief here](#)). In a [peer-reviewed study](#) published last year, our research group found that Vermonters using the foodbank who were food insecure, compared to food insecure Vermonters not using the Foodbank, were more likely to consume fruits and vegetables and less likely to reduce their intake.
2. **Impacts on home and wild food production.** Food insecure households are significantly more likely since the pandemic to engage for the first time or more intensely than before in home and wild food production such as gardening, hunting, fishing, foraging, raising animals for milk, meat or eggs, and preserving or canning food ([policy brief here](#)). Households engaging in home and wild food production

were more likely to eat greater amounts of fruits and vegetables, but this was only true for food secure households ([peer-reviewed study here](#)).

3. Impacts on health and well-being. Existing research suggests that food insecurity is negatively associated with many health outcomes, including increased prevalence of chronic diseases and depression. Our forthcoming work demonstrates that food insecure households have higher prevalence of anxiety and depression, and previous work has shown that food insecure households demonstrate higher levels of emotional eating and stress ([policy brief here](#)). As well, those working in the farming and food sector exhibited high levels of stress and anxiety in the first six months of the pandemic ([report here](#)).

These profound impacts demonstrate that addressing food insecurity is critical for the health and well-being of Vermonters, as well as our broader community and state.

Food Insecurity and Low Unemployment?

One question that I am frequently asked is how we still have so many food insecure Vermonters when unemployment claims are at record lows? Here's what our data show that provides some insight into this question:

First, **most food insecure Vermonters are working Vermonters**- 71% of food insecure Vermonters are employed, homemakers or retired. 73% of people using food assistance programs like the Food Bank are employed, homemakers or retired.

Second, **the pandemic set people back**. Low-income Vermonters were more likely to lose their jobs, and while 54% of Vermonters had a job disruption, only 21% received unemployment. This means many may be behind on bills and high in debt as people live paycheck to paycheck.

Finally, **the cost of food is rising fast** and wages are not rising at the same rate. Inflation is at a 40 year high, and food prices are among the highest increases.

Just because people are back to work does not mean that hunger is over. The foodbank is an important safety net that has helped Vermonters throughout the pandemic and the need continues to be strong. Please support the Vermont Foodbank to address ongoing, increased food security needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our research, I would be happy to brief the committee or any of its members further and respond to any additional questions.