

Early COVID-19 Impacts on Food Retail and Restaurants

Consumer Perspectives from Vermont

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Introduction

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected people worldwide, disrupting food access and security. To understand how food systems and security are impacted during this pandemic, an online survey was launched in Vermont from March 29th - April 12th, 2020 (less than a week after the Governor’s Stay Home/Stay Safe order). A total of 3,219 Vermonters responded, and nearly half provided written remarks in response to open-ended questions about worries or general comments. This brief summarizes survey findings and respondent comments about food retail and restaurants. We use quantitative data to understand the frequency of beliefs and behaviors, and qualitative data

to understand respondents’ experiences and perspectives in their own words. Of note, the findings reflect early responses to and concerns with food-related risk; as more information was provided by experts, these fears may have been allayed. This will be investigated in future iterations of the survey.

Security of the Food Supply

“[I worry about] exposure of food to [the] virus along the supply chain, for instance a piece of fruit: picker, sorter, packaging, shipping, unloading, filling shelves, check out person, bagger. [There are] LOTS of hands on the stuff we buy.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Unprompted, about 5% of respondents shared their worries about the resilience of the food supply. Many expressed nervousness about COVID-19 causing a “disruption,” “breakdown,” or “collapse” of the food system leading to critical shortages or widespread illness. Respondents shared their concerns about what would happen if there were labor shortages or contamination of food between farm and table. Many people felt food system workers needed better protections, both to keep themselves safe and to avoid passing the virus on to others. Respondents also expressed gratitude towards these workers, especially farmers, farmworkers, and grocery store personnel, and highlighted their key contributions.

“I [have] greater appreciation for grocery store workers who take risks every day to provide food for the community.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Key Findings

1. Respondents worried about the risk of contracting COVID-19 through the food system and emphasized the importance of protecting worker health.
2. 87% of respondents usually or always reduced grocery trips in the early weeks of the pandemic in order to avoid exposure.
3. There was high demand for stores to support social distancing and reduce opportunities for disease transmission, as well as provide guidance around safe food acquisition.
4. Poor access to food delivery was a challenge, especially among those in rural areas and using public benefits to buy food.
5. Respondents were interested in supporting local restaurants, but were concerned about safety.
6. 88% of respondents felt that more trust in stores would be helpful and 65% reported that more trust in food delivery would be helpful.

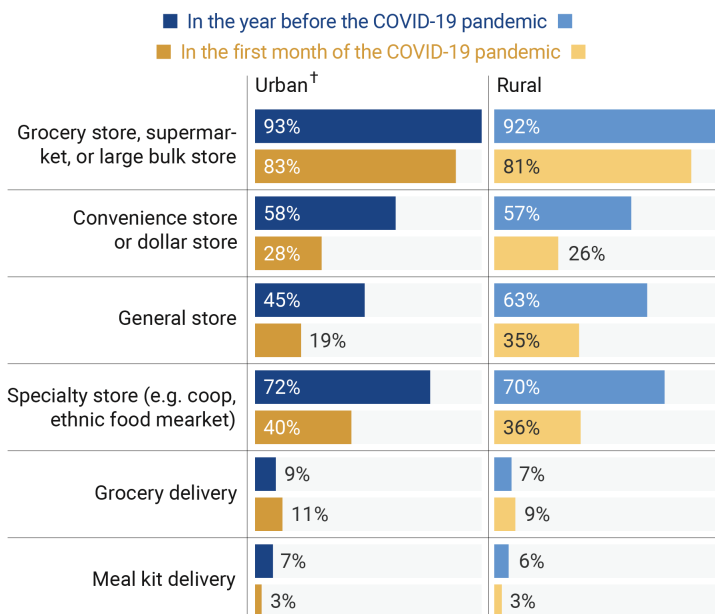


Figure 1. Use of various retail options in the year before the COVID-19 pandemic and in the first month of the pandemic

[†]Urban refers to households classified as within the Burlington metropolitan area as based on Office of Management and Budget (OMB) metro counties by the US Census bureau. This includes households in Chittenden, Grand Isle, and Franklin counties.

“I am worried for the workers - in the fields, processing plants, transportation, preparation, stocking, selling. We need to protect them as a nation/state/community so that they don't suffer for the rest of us. I am concerned about shortages of food as this pandemic unfolds...”

- Vermont survey respondent

Grocery Retail

“We need more grocery stores that offer online order and curbside pick-up. Too stressful to go to stores right now.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Although grocery stores were exempted from closures mandated in the Stay Home/Stay Safe order, respondents reported important shifts in food shopping patterns (Figure 1). Eighty-seven percent reported usually or always reducing the frequency of grocery trips in the first month of the pandemic to avoid exposure to the virus (Figure 2). With the exception of grocery delivery, use of all grocery retail channels was lower in the first weeks of the pandemic compared to the preceding year. For some retail outlets, this may have been due, in part, to normal use patterns being irregular rather than behavior changes prompted by COVID-19.

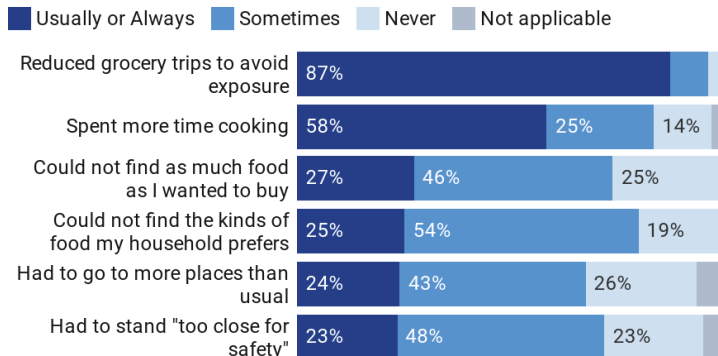


Figure 2. Top six impacts from the coronavirus outbreak. The majority of respondents indicated that these happened “sometimes,” “usually,” or “always.”

• In-person Shopping

Many respondents described high levels of worry about the safety of grocery shopping. For example, 23% said that in the first month of the pandemic they usually or always had to stand “too close for safety” to other people (less than six feet away) when getting food. Hundreds of respondents shared concerns about shopping. Individual store policies designed to support social distancing and staff safety were lauded, including limiting shopper numbers, providing staff with protective equipment, sanitizing carts, requiring all staff and customers to wear masks, and instituting one-way aisles. However, respondents commonly indicated that they felt that stores had been too slow to implement these policies or did not adequately enforce them. A large majority (88%) said that more trust in the safety of visiting stores would be helpful (Figure 3).

“Grocery stores eventually did the right thing, but were slow to implement early morning shopping for seniors, social distancing for lines, cleaning of carts and safety measures for workers.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Respondents appreciated stores that instituted limits on staple item purchases early in the pandemic because it allowed them to get more items at just one store. One in four respondents (24%) reported that in the first month of the pandemic they usually or always had to go to more stores than usual to find the food their family wanted. Those who had to go to more stores than usual were less likely to be food secure than those who did not. A few respondents noted that they would appreciate the ability to see a store inventory to support decisions about where to shop.

“I wish grocers had imposed limits on bulk purchasing much sooner than they did. It was not hard to figure out what was going on, and they could have “flattened the curve” on food and supply shortages.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Respondents were highly concerned about exposure to the virus through contact with food packaging. Many posed questions about whether and how food packages should be sanitized, and the safety of eating fresh produce.

“[I] tried to order delivery groceries but there was no available slot. I gave up there and decided instead to stretch my food until I felt I have to go to the grocery store... [I]t would be nice if there was more grocery delivery options to really limit people going out and interacting with one another. The grocery store is the only place many of us are leaving our houses for, besides to exercise/get fresh air.”

- Vermont survey respondent

“The only local [delivery] service is out [delayed] a week. This is a big problem in small towns like ours.”

- Vermont survey respondent

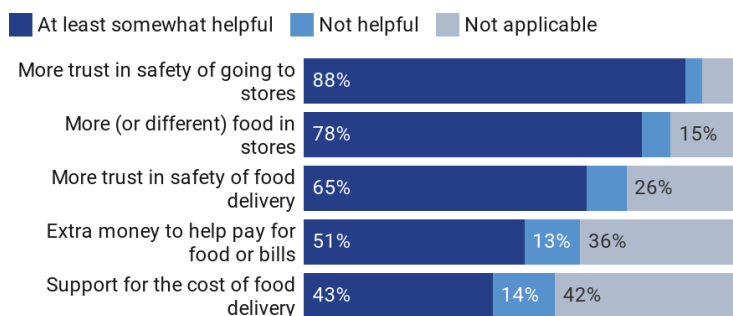


Figure 3. Top five most helpful items to make it easier for households to meet their food needs during the coronavirus pandemic (includes responses of “somewhat helpful,” “helpful,” and “very helpful”)

• Online delivery and pick-up services

“This is a scary time for me because I don't know how to get the foods my family needs without jeopardizing their safety. I'm forced to spend money we can't afford to spend on canned goods from Amazon because there [is] no way to use our EBT assistance remotely while staying home.”

- Vermont survey respondent

There was high demand for grocery delivery and pick-up services and frustration at poor access. Respondents described the closure of several delivery or pick-up services, limited availability of slots, lack of access in rural areas, and prohibitions on using benefits provided to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participants using Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards. Forty-three percent said that money to help with the cost of delivery would be helpful.

Food service industry

“We are in a financial position to order take-out food to help local businesses but aren't sure of the safety.”

- Vermont survey respondent

The Governor ordered all restaurants and bars to close on March 17th. Food and alcohol were still available for take-out and delivery from restaurants that chose to provide this service. Seventy-five percent of respondents reported eating in a restaurant in the year before the COVID-19 pandemic, but – predictably – few ate in a restaurant after March 8th (Figure 4). Use of restaurant take-out and delivery also declined, but over one third of rural residents and nearly half of urban residents continued accessing restaurant food in this way in the first month of the pandemic.

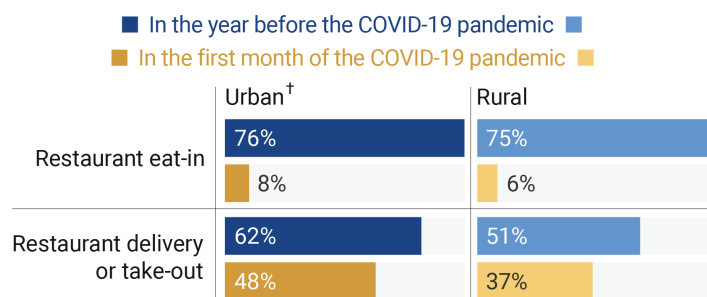


Figure 4. Use of restaurant eat-in and delivery in the year before the COVID-19 pandemic and in the first month of the pandemic

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Many respondents worried about the ability of local restaurants to survive the closure. Ordering food as take-out or delivery was described as a tangible way to support the local economy. However, multiple respondents expressed concern about the safety of ordering food from restaurants. Sixty five percent reported that more trust in the safety of food delivery would be helpful. Several people requested stricter restrictions on food service staff, and a few felt that restaurants should be closed even for delivery or take-out.

“I am glad that restaurants have been allowed to stay open with delivery and curb-side pick-up. That should both help them stay in business and assist people with food security that just plain don’t cook in their everyday lives.”

- Vermont survey respondent

“We have tried to support our local businesses buy ordering take out but I am terrified ... Maybe in the future they just won't be open at all. If someone at our local pizza place gets infected and unknowingly is working, I think my whole town would be in trouble.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Acknowledgements

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This research is being replicated in other states and nationally. If you are interested in collaborating on this effort, or you have questions about this research, please contact Dr. Meredith Niles at mtniles@uvm.edu or visit the following link:

<https://www.uvm.edu/cals/nfs/food-insecurity-impact-covid-19>