

Employment and Food During Coronavirus

Meredith T. Niles ¹
 Farryl Bertmann ¹
 Emily H. Morgan ¹
 Thomas Wentworth ¹
 Erin Biehl ²
 Roni Neff ²

¹ University of Vermont, Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences
² Johns Hopkins University, Center for a Livable Future

Introduction

Between March 15th and April 11th, more than 78,000 Vermonters filed unemployment claims, with a projected unemployment rate of 22.9%.³ This brief includes the experiences and perspectives of food and coronavirus specifically for Vermonters who have been furloughed, had a loss of hours or income, or lost their job. This brief is part of a three-part series highlighting the results from an online survey launched in Vermont on March 29th (less than a week after the order to “Stay home, stay safe”) through Front Porch Forum, social media ads, media coverage, and community partners. The survey

was open for two weeks and received a total of 3,251 responses. For detailed information on the full results from all respondents or from those who are experiencing food insecurity, please see the separate briefs dedicated to those topics. Additional analyses are ongoing and future articles will explore these topics in greater detail.

Job Loss Affecting Significant Portion of Vermonters and Families

- 45% of respondents with jobs experienced some type of job disruption or loss. 19.7% had a reduction in hours or income, 9.3% had been furloughed, and 15.5% had lost their job since the coronavirus outbreak.
- Households with children were significantly more likely to have experienced a loss of income/reduction in hours.
- Respondents with lower levels of formal education were significantly more likely to have had a loss or disruption of their job since the coronavirus outbreak.
- Households with lower incomes were significantly more likely to have experienced a job loss or disruption since the coronavirus outbreak.

Key Findings

1. 45% of respondents with jobs experienced some type of job disruption or loss. 19.7% had a reduction in hours or income, 9.3% had been furloughed, and 15.5% had lost their job since the coronavirus outbreak.
2. 38.5% of respondents experiencing job loss or disruption since the outbreak were classified as food insecure.
3. Respondents experiencing job disruption or loss were significantly more likely to be already implementing food purchasing or eating changes and concerned about food access compared to those who did not experience a change in employment.
4. Respondents with job disruption or loss were significantly more likely to need higher amounts of money per week to help meet their basic needs if they could no longer afford food (\$100 with a reduction in hours/income, \$107 furloughed, \$158 with job loss, compared to \$82 with no job impact).

“I fear that one month from now my answers would reflect a greater negative impact from coronavirus on our food security than now. I lost my job March 13 and the financial effects will be hitting harder in April and beyond.”

- Vermont survey respondent

³ <https://vermontbiz.com/news/2020/april/16/weekly-unemployment-claims-fall-total-over-78000>

Links Between Job Loss/ Disruption and Food Insecurity

- 38.5% of people experiencing job loss or disruption since the outbreak were classified as food insecure (30.7% loss of hours/income, 35% furloughed, 50.7% job loss compared to 13.5% no job impact) (Figure 1).
- The top sources of food for respondents affected by job disruption or loss were grocery stores (84.3%), restaurant delivery (50.7%), and specialty stores (e.g. coops, health food stores, or ethnic food markets, 39.2%).
- On average, people with job loss or disruption were more likely to face challenges with food access since the coronavirus, including affordability and the amount and types of food in stores (Figure 2).

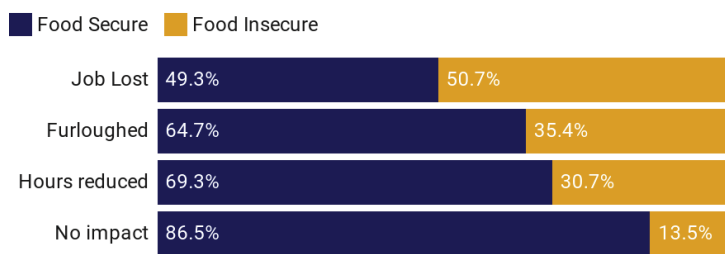


Figure 1. Food security status by job disruption/loss.

Job Loss/Disruption and Higher Food Anxiety

Compared to respondents who did not experience a change in employment, those with job loss or disruption were:

- Significantly more likely to indicate that more trust in store and delivery safety, additional money for food, and more food in stores would be helpful (Figure 3).
- Significantly more likely to express anxiety and concern over a number of issues related to food and coronavirus including quantity, cost, and safety of food (Figure 4).

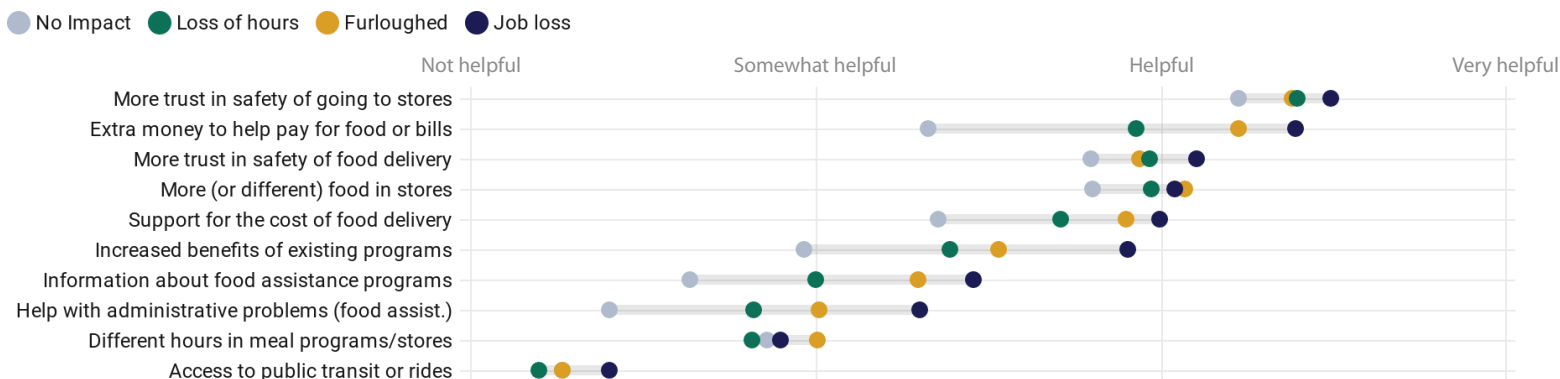


Figure 3. Perceived level of helpfulness for a variety of potential strategies by job disruption category.

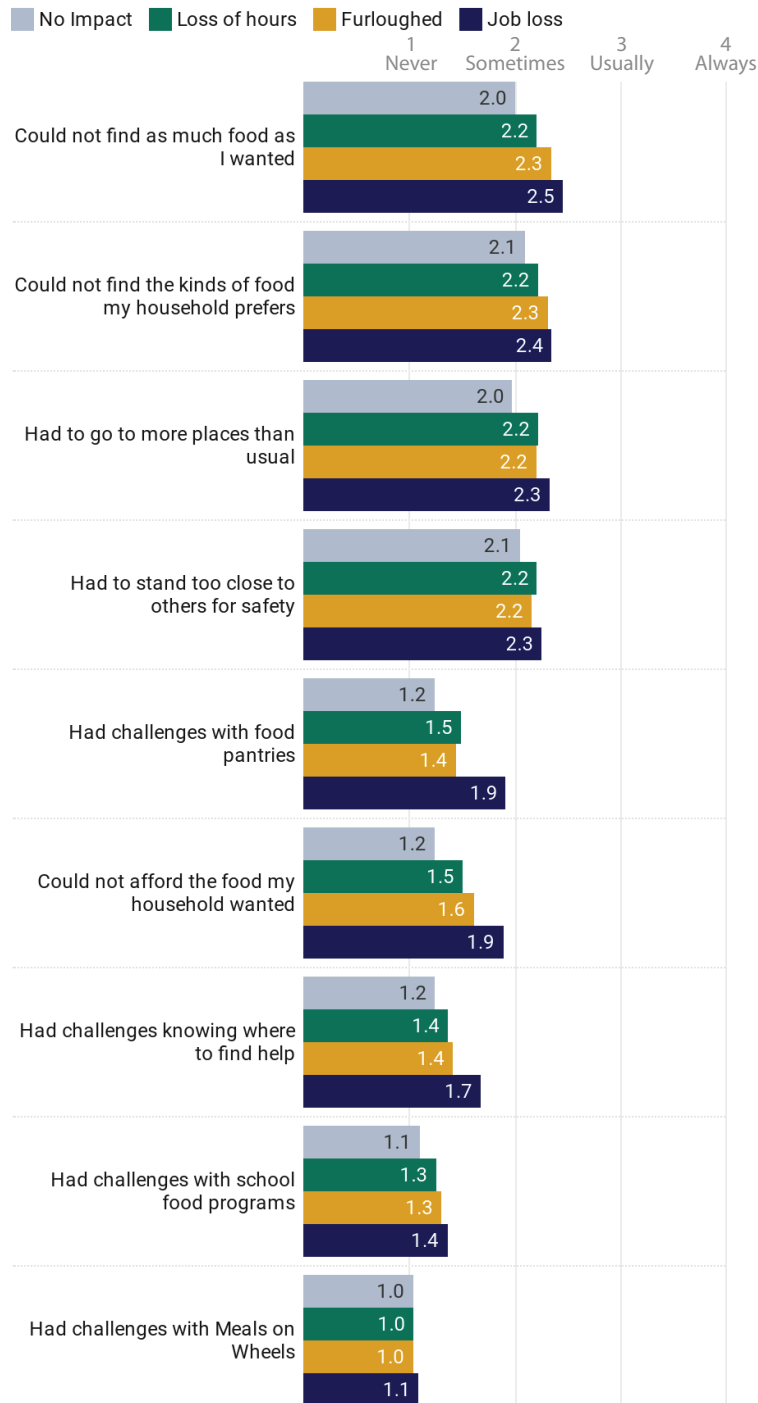


Figure 2. Household challenges with food by job disruption.

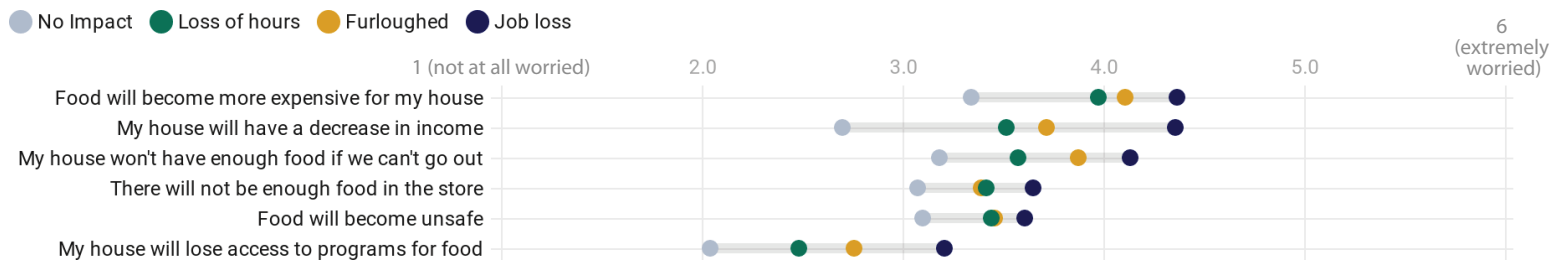


Figure 4. Average level of worry related to food and coronavirus compared by job disruption categories.

Shifting Food Intake and Types

Compared to respondents who did not experience a change in employment, those with job loss or disruption were:

- Significantly more likely to already be utilizing coping strategies because they had trouble affording food (Figure 5), such as:

- Buying food that won't go bad as quickly (69.1% with reduction in hours/income, 75.7% furloughed, 79.1% with job loss, compared to 61.6% no job impact).
- Buying different or cheaper food (46.0% with reduction in hours/income, 54.7% furloughed, 57.5% with job loss, compared to 29.8% no job impact).
- Eating less (30.7% with reduction in hours/income, 40.2% furloughed, 49.3% with job loss, compared to 12.0% no job impact).

- Significantly more likely to utilize future coping strategies if they have trouble affording food (Figure 6).

- Significantly more likely to need more money per week to meet their basic needs if they couldn't afford food in the future (\$158 with job loss, \$107 furloughed, \$100 with reduction in hours/income, compared to \$82 no job impact).

Current strategies

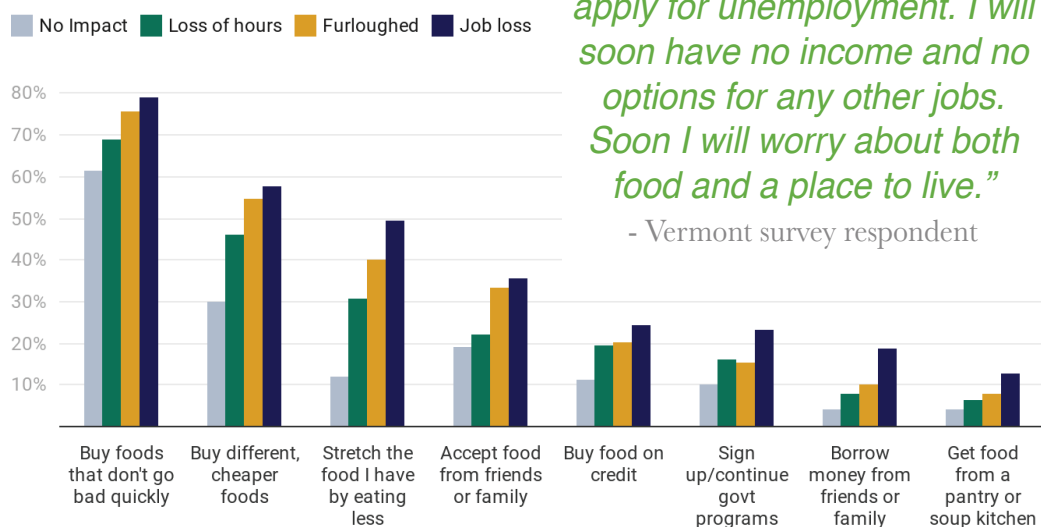


Figure 5. Current strategies utilized by different job disruption categories.

“My business was forced to shutdown. I am a business owner and therefore cannot apply for unemployment. I will soon have no income and no options for any other jobs. Soon I will worry about both food and a place to live.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Future strategies

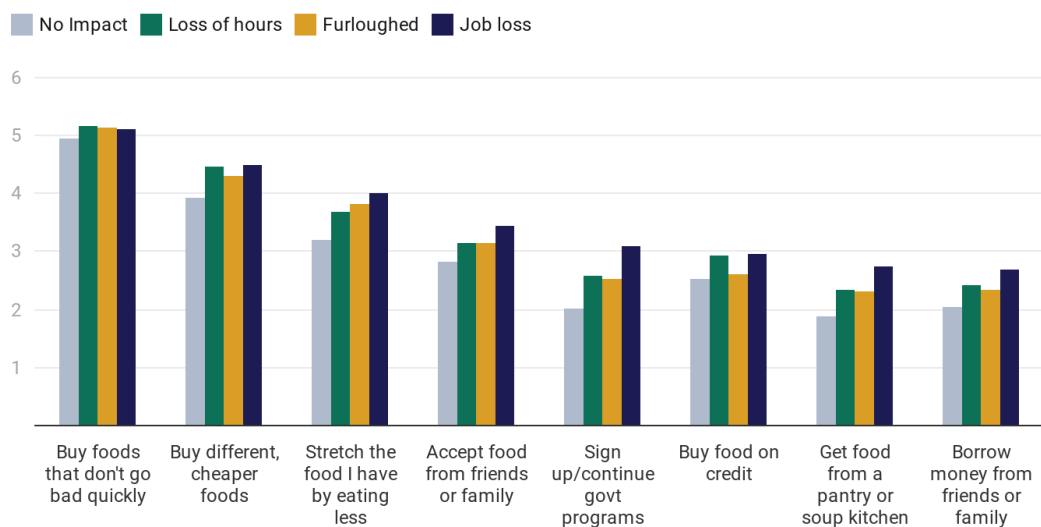
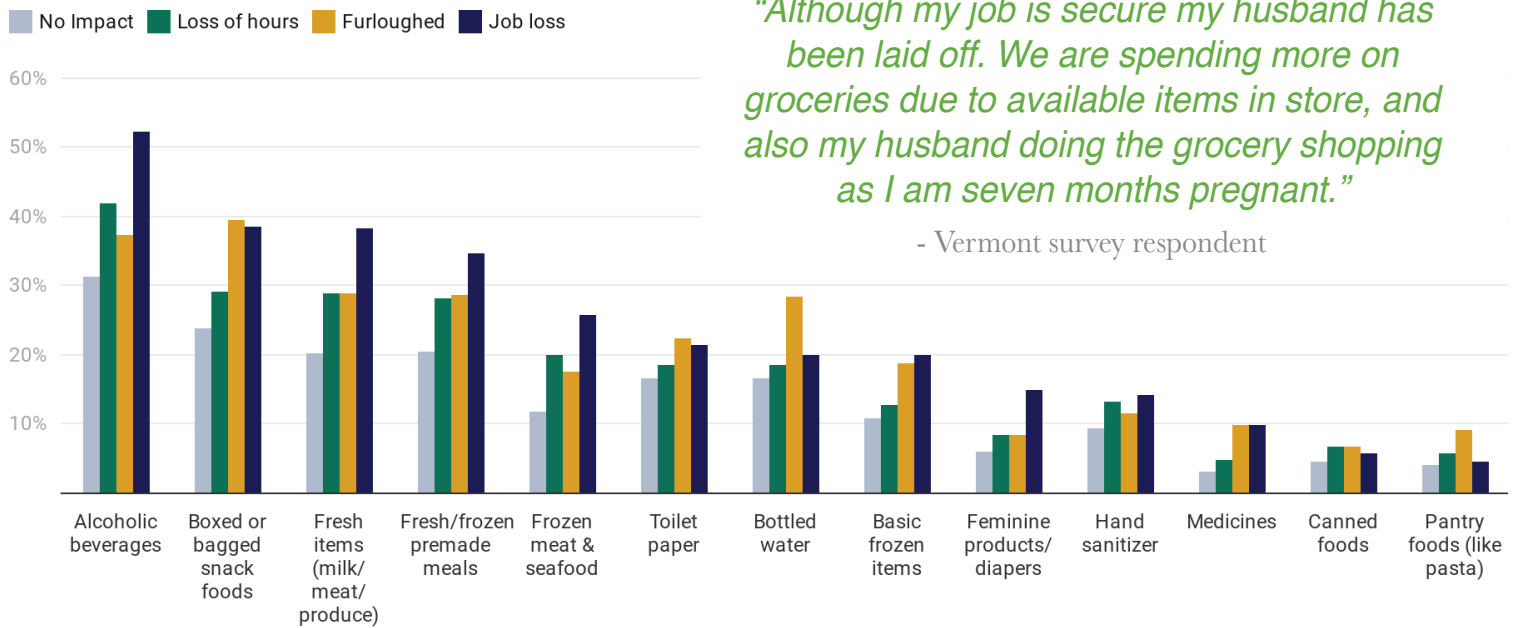


Figure 6. Future potential strategies to be utilized by different job disruption categories. Numbers indicate an average on a scale of 1=very unlikely, 2=unlikely, 3=somewhat unlikely, 4=somewhat likely, 5=likely, 6=very likely.



“Although my job is secure my husband has been laid off. We are spending more on groceries due to available items in store, and also my husband doing the grocery shopping as I am seven months pregnant.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Figure 7. Percentage of respondents by job disruption category indicating they had “bought less” of a given product.

Households with Job Loss or Disruption Purchase Less Food

Compared to respondents who did not experience a change in employment, respondents with job loss or disruption were:

- Significantly less likely to buy alcohol, basic frozen goods, snack foods, feminine care products/diapers, fresh items, premade or frozen meals, hand sanitizer, and medicines than respondents without a job disruption.
- Significantly more likely to buy bottled water, canned goods, and pantry foods as compared to respondents without a job disruption (Figure 7).

Limited Interest in Food and Agriculture Jobs

There was limited interest in seeking additional hours or new jobs in agriculture or food processing among those with job disruption or loss. About one in six respondents with reduced hours/income indicated some interest in the sector compared to nearly one third of those who experienced a job loss.

“-I am a cashier in a small supermarket--I see alot of large orders of groceries for families--costs alot!!! I know I will have a job as long as I stay healthy--I wear a mask and we have the plexi-glass shield now- hopeful we will all get thru this!!”

- Vermont survey respondent

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank many community partners for assisting with the dissemination of the survey including: Community College of Vermont, Farm to Institution New England, Front Porch Forum, Hunger Free Vermont, Representative Welch’s staff, Rural Vermont, Salvation Farms, Senator Sanders’ staff, Senator Leahy’s staff, Support and Services at Home (SASH), University of Vermont, University of Vermont Extension, VT Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, VT Department of Agriculture, VT Department of Children and Families, VT Department of Health, VT Farm to Plate Network, VT Foodbank, VT Retail and Grocers Association, VT Sustainable Jobs Fund. We thank The University of Vermont College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and Office of the Vice President of Research for funding.

This research team intends to replicate this study in Vermont, other states, and nationally through future surveys. If you are interested in collaborating on this effort, or if you have any other questions about this research please contact Dr. Meredith Niles at mtniles@uvm.edu.