

# Food Access Through School Meals and Food Pantries During COVID-19: Early Findings from Vermont

Farryl Bertmann <sup>1</sup>  
 Emily H. Belarmino <sup>1</sup>  
 Thomas Wentworth <sup>1</sup>  
 Erin Biehl <sup>2</sup>  
 Roni Neff <sup>2</sup>  
 Meredith T. Niles <sup>1</sup>

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

## 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 29 - April 12, 2020 (less than a week after the “Stay Home/Stay Safe” order). A total of 3,219 Vermonters responded with 182 providing a written answer specifically about food pantries and 828 of the respondents providing written comments to the open-ended question at the end of the survey. This brief summarizes survey findings and respondent comments about experiences with two programs during the early weeks of the pandemic: the National School Lunch Program (school meals) and food pantries.

Traditionally, Vermont has maximum household income amounts to qualify for free and reduced-priced lunch. Due to COVID-19, Vermont was provided a waiver starting on March 20 to expand meal service locations, including allowing school buses to deliver food in their service area. On March 29, another waiver was granted in Vermont, which opened free breakfast and lunches to all children aged 18 years and younger, regardless of household income. We began collecting data for this survey on the same day this second waiver was granted.

*“The local school lunch program has been very helpful! Each Monday and Thursday the school bus delivers meals for the next 2-3 days. We have had a steady stream of fresh fruit, milk, juice, bread, peanut butter and jelly, lunch meats, cereal, bagels, and the kids favorite a Trix cereal bar for each kid per week!”*

- Vermont survey respondent

## Key Findings

1. Households that participated in school meals were significantly more likely to worry that their household would lose access to programs for food and that food will become more expensive.
2. Rural food pantry use (5.5%) was significantly higher than urban pantry use (3.7%) after COVID-19, albeit with low participation overall.
3. Respondents who participated in food pantry programs were significantly more worried about food access as it related to the COVID-19 outbreak.

## Approach

The quantitative survey findings provide insight into the frequency of and associations between food-related behaviors and outcomes. Qualitative data provided in response to the open-ended question explains how, gives depth, and allows us to hear from respondents in their own words. The following brief emerged from two open-ended qualitative findings and is supported with quantitative data. Some respondents expressed concern about using nutrition assistance programs to buy groceries. Experiences and concerns with food access through grocery stores, including those pertaining to use of nutrition assistance benefits, are described in a separate brief titled “Early COVID-19 Impacts on Food Retail and Restaurants: Consumer Perspectives from Vermont.”

## School Meals and Food Pantries During COVID-19

Our results are broken into two key themes, comments addressing experiences with school meals (National School Lunch Program; NSLP) and those addressing food pantries (Vermont Foodbank and associated programs).

*“We need to keep the food pantries well-stocked. Thank you VT Food Bank for all you do!”*

- Vermont survey respondent

Table 1. Program participation among respondents experiencing food insecurity. Note that participation in the “12 months before COVID-19” is likely higher because it represents a longer time-frame that captures intermittent participation in each program.

Program	12 months before COVID-19	Since COVID-19
SNAP (formerly food stamps)	27.1%	20.8%
School meals*	50.8%	48.3%
Food pantry	23.4%	15.2%
WIC	13.9%	10.2%
Meals on Wheels	2.6%	1.9%

\*School meals usage is based only on households with children under 18.

Some Vermonters experiencing food insecurity participated in both school meals and food pantries. Their reported use of these programs was impacted in the early weeks of COVID-19 (Table 1) despite increased prevalence of food insecurity. When comparing school meals and food pantry use between urban and rural Vermonters, rural food pantry use (5.5%) was significantly higher than urban pantry use (3.7%) during COVID-19 (Table 2).

*“The school is delivering meals but we aren’t on the bus route and are avoiding all outside contact so we can’t get anything for our kids. I don’t feel comfortable giving them prepared foods that have been handled by multiple people and wish they could just give them a gallon of milk and other easily cleaned items once or twice a week.”*

- Vermont survey respondent

Table 2. Relationship between urban and rural Vermonters and the utilization of food pantries and school meals before and after the Stay Home/Stay Safe order.

	School meals*		Food pantry	
	Last year	COVID-19	Last year	COVID-19
Urban†	40.1%	26.3%	6.9%	3.7%
Rural	39.1%	32.1%	8.5%	5.5%

\*School meals usage is based only on households with children under 18.

†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.

## School Meals

Twenty-eight percent of survey respondents have children under 18 in their household. Schools in Vermont closed on March 18, 2020. Of our respondents experiencing food insecurity with children, 50.8% participated in school meals in the year before COVID-19. Participation dropped to 48.3% after Stay Home/Stay Safe order. Unprompted, many respondents commented on the school meals program. Many respondents expressed gratitude; others provided information about negative experiences, concerns that school meals were not available, and COVID-19 related worries for school meals.

*“School bus drivers are local heroes – bringing food to kids all over our county during the week.”*

- Vermont survey respondent

Several respondents expressed negative experiences with the school meals in the early weeks of COVID-19. These negative experiences include concerns about the types of foods being distributed, the variety of foods, and several respondents expressed concern about the shelf-life of the food.

Unprompted, some respondents noted that meals are not available to their children. This perception does not align with school meal delivery. As of March 20, Vermont expanded meal service locations, including allowing school buses to deliver food in their service area. The drop in utilization and subthemes was expressing that school food is not available and may need further communication and clarification of available programs. Future research will explore shifts in use and perceptions. Further, Table 2 demonstrates participation was not significantly different between households located in urban and rural settings.

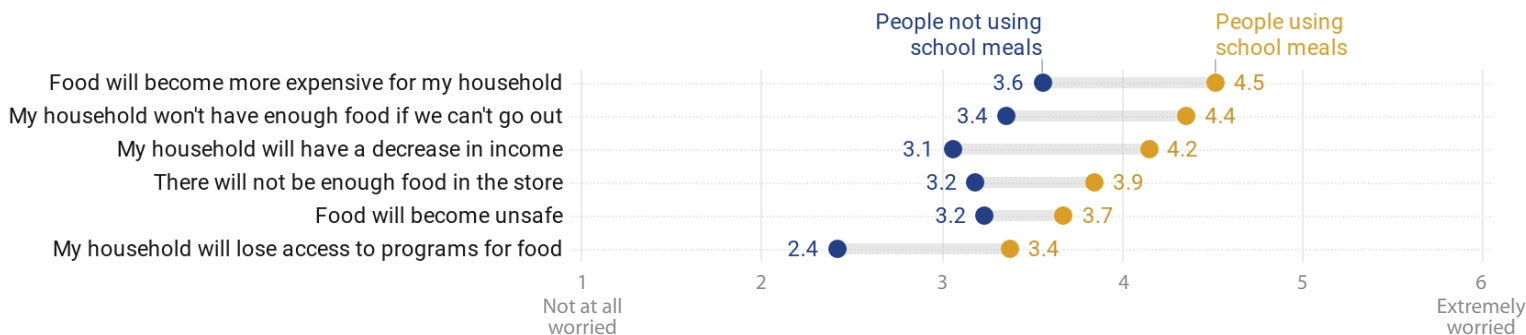


Figure 1. Relationship between worry/anxiety about COVID-19 & the use of school meals

Respondents who participated in the school meals were significantly more worried about food access as it related to COVID-19 (Figure 1). In particular, households that participated in school meals expressed considerably higher levels of worry that their household will lose access to programs for food and that food will become more expensive for their household.

## Food Pantries

*“I have appreciated the VeggieVanGo....we are eating WAY more vegetables for our meals now. I look up ways to prepare them on line.”*

- Vermont survey respondent

182 respondents provided open-ended written feedback about their experiences using food pantries. The resulting top 1000 words relating to food were then searched within the resulting text. Figure 2 is a culminating word cloud of these foods, which we then used to derive themes which inform food preferences. Overall, we identified four themes in their responses, positive experience, gratitude, receiving items that they were not seeking, and participants finding that some preferred items were not available. Finally, several individuals who are not using food pantries provided an unprompted comment expressing a new or renewed interest

Note: Although we did not ask about the specific pantry or food shelf respondents utilized, the Vermont Foodbank supports a network of 215 partner food shelves and meal sites in Vermont. The Vermont Foodbank is a member of the Feeding America national network.



Figure 2. Food item Word Cloud based on the text search query.

in supporting the emergency food system through donations of time or money at the end of the survey.

A few respondents wrote about their positive experience and gratitude for their local food pantry. Some specifically mentioned Vermont Food Bank’s VeggieVanGo program, which provides fresh produce through a mobile pantry.

*“The first time right around the beginning, I was able to get veggies, fruits, small meat packages, and cooking oil. The second time - which is closer to the end of March - they would deliver to the back door only and once I told them I only wanted veggies and fruits they said boxes were already made up according to size, so I said I would forgo the food shelf this time and save it for someone else as I will rarely eat prepared meals or boxed/canned items.”*

- Vermont survey respondent

Many respondents shared specific food items that they received but were not seeking. Several explained that their food pantry shifted from client choice to pre-packed/pre-sorted boxes. Respondents specifically mentioned that they were not seeking prepared meals, boxed and canned foods, pre-packed/pre-sorted items, fish, and pasta. Several respondents also noted that they struggled to create complete meals with the food items provided. Further, respondents commented that their food selection experience changed before and after the pandemic. Concerns about this new inability to select foods was emphasized among individuals with special dietary needs, such as food allergies and intolerances.

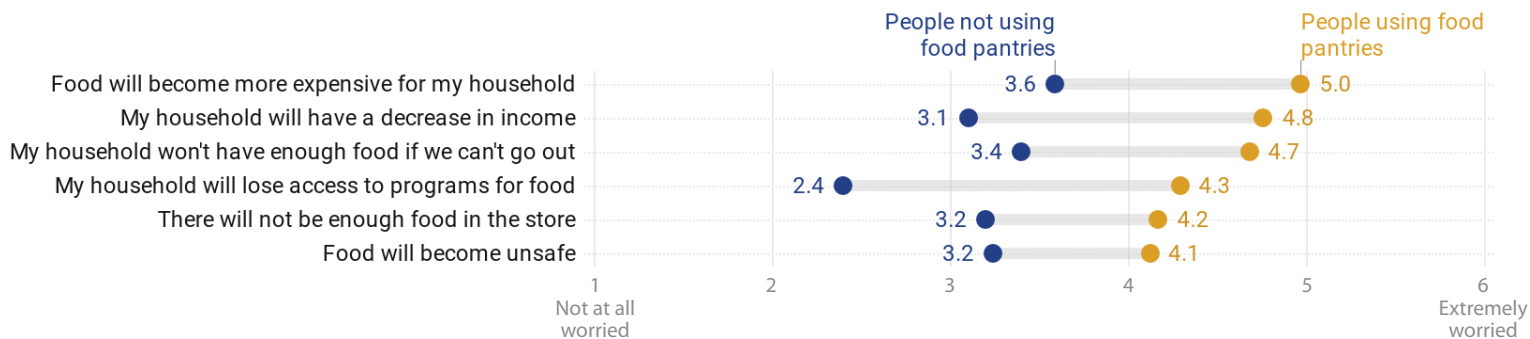


Figure 3. Relationship between worry/anxiety about COVID-19 and the use of food pantries

Many respondents listed food items that they were seeking but in short supply or not available at the food pantry. These items were meat and chicken, bread, fresh vegetables and fruit, peanut butter, “extras” like hot sauce, gluten-free options, canned goods, cereals, dairy-free alternatives, and vegetarian options.

*“[We] could not choose which items to take, so [we] ended up with a lot of food we didn't need, and didn't get some items we had wanted.”*

- Vermont survey respondent

*“[I need food that is] dairy-free. I cannot consume lactose or casein. This is medical. Also [I am] vegetarian, if I can be. No options at food pantry. Just given a box of food.”*

- Vermont survey respondent

As with those utilizing the school meals program, Figure 3 demonstrates that respondents who participated in food pantries were significantly more worried about food access as it related to the COVID-19 than respondents that did not participate in these programs. In particular, households that utilized food pantries expressed significantly higher levels of worry that food would become more expensive. They also worried that their family would lose access to food programs. Respondents generally expressed fear that food may run out, but they did not provide written comments addressing specific concerns about COVID-19 worry at food pantry distribution centers.

## 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](mailto:mtniles@uvm.edu) or visit the following link:

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

*“They prepack everything and with food allergies I can't eat most of what they give me, so I end up giving it away.”*

- Vermont survey respondent

*“I've never been scared to not have food before, which I feel very fortunate for. But, in the last two weeks, that fear definitely has struck me.”*

- Vermont survey respondent