

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Local Food System: Early Findings from Vermont

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

¹ University of Vermont, Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences
² 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 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 comments in response to open-ended questions about worries or general remarks. This brief summarizes survey findings and respondent comments relevant to the local food system, specifically local farms and direct-to-consumer sales, home food production, foraging, hunting, and fishing. Other aspects of the local food system, such as processing and distribution are not covered.

We use quantitative data to understand the frequency of, and associations between, food-related behaviors and outcomes, and qualitative data to understand respondents’ experiences and perspectives in their own words.

Local Food System

“One of the reasons I moved to Vermont in 2019 was because of the local food supply. I am even more grateful for it now. I have recently signed up for a CSA [community supported agriculture membership] to guarantee I have a supply of food in the coming months.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Local and regional food production are important for many Vermonters (Figure 1). Sixty-nine percent of respondents purchased food directly from farmers at least one time in the year before the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly two thirds accessed food through a farmers’ market and one third purchased directly from a local farm stand or community supported agriculture (CSA) membership. Under the terms of the Stay Home/Stay Safe order, farmers’ markets were closed from March 24th through the duration of the survey period, but farmers were permitted to sell food directly to consumers through farm stands, online and phone orders, curbside pick-up, and delivery. In the early weeks of the pandemic, 15% of respondents accessed food through a farmers’ market or local farm. While the lower number is likely due in part to the executive order, it also may be linked to the limited local food options available in March and April. Both in the year prior to the start of the pandemic and in the early weeks of the pandemic, people who purchased food from local farms were more likely to be food secure (Figure 2).

Key Findings

1. 69% of respondents purchased some food directly from farmers in the year prior to the pandemic, but only 15% did in the early weeks of the pandemic.*
2. Respondents described economic, health, and safety benefits of local food production, and expressed worries about local farm viability during and after the pandemic.
3. 53% of respondents produced, foraged, hunted, or canned some of their own food in the year prior to the pandemic and 31% were engaged in these activities in the first month of the pandemic; more reported plans to grow some of their own food if they could access supplies.
4. People who purchased from local farms and/or engaged in home production were more likely to be food secure.

*Note that use of food system resources in the year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic may be higher than use in the early weeks of the pandemic in part because it reflects a longer time frame and captures intermittent use.

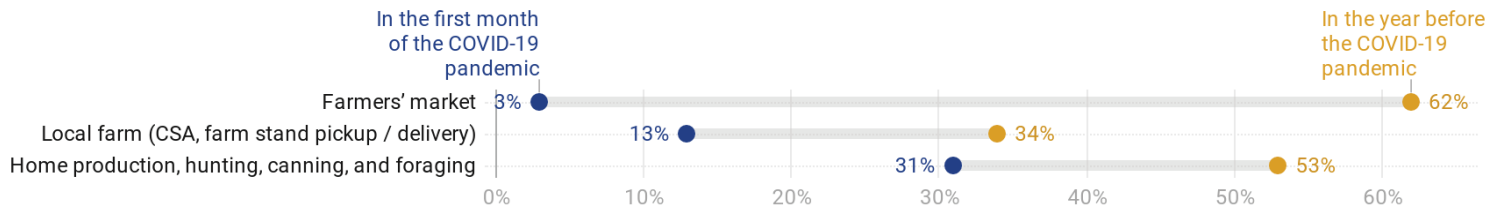


Figure 1. Use of local food system resources

Unprompted, about 4% of respondents across all income levels wrote about the importance of supporting local producers. Many of their comments related to the value of supporting local businesses, perceptions of increased safety of short supply chains, and beliefs that local foods were healthier. There was recognition that affordability of local foods could be a barrier to consumption.

“[I] haven't used the local CSA in a few years. Was very happy to get a share in this year. Not only do I like the idea that my produce is only touching a few people (as opposed to being manhandled by who knows how many in the nation), I believe my local CSA farm-workers will be more careful. Also, I think it is good to support them when they may have lost a lot of their anticipated farming business that used to provide local restaurants.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Numerous respondents expressed gratitude to local and regional producers for rapidly pivoting their direct-to-consumer business models to facilitate continued sales. Several shared concerns about the sustainability and resilience of the local food system, including the ability of farms and food businesses to operate if there are labor shortages and to withstand the economic crisis.

“Our local co-op, the CSAs, and dairy farms have made purchasing the food very easy with minimal if any contact with others... Yes, it is more expensive (and always has been) than the big grocery stores, but for the most part is of better quality and probably much more nutritious. We've always shopped with them, but now are doing so even more in an effort to avoid the grocery store.”

- Vermont survey respondent

“I am concerned about local farmers finding places to sell their produce now that the farmers' markets have been closed.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Eighty four respondents reported working in the agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting sector, and 62% shared their perspectives in written comments, describing the situation as both a challenge and opportunity. Among producers, a major concern pertained to finding markets. Several expressed particular worry about the closures of farmers' markets (which the State subsequently permitted to open on May 1st) and the loss of restaurant customers.

“We run a small farm and are experiencing a huge increase of local support for our food and also a huge increase in challenges to get food to our community (no farmers' markets, no restaurants, etc.)”

- Vermont survey respondent

“We are food producers and have lost our main buyers (i.e. local restaurants). [This has been] offset temporarily by increased retail but [we] know it won't last and [are] worried about lost income”

- Vermont survey respondent

Despite the substantial challenges to food access identified in the survey, some respondents felt that a “silver lining” of the pandemic could be a greater focus on local food systems during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. They emphasized the need to develop ways to safeguard the local food supply during crises. One respondent described the current situation as “a sneak preview of what our food systems may look like as we progress through climate change.”

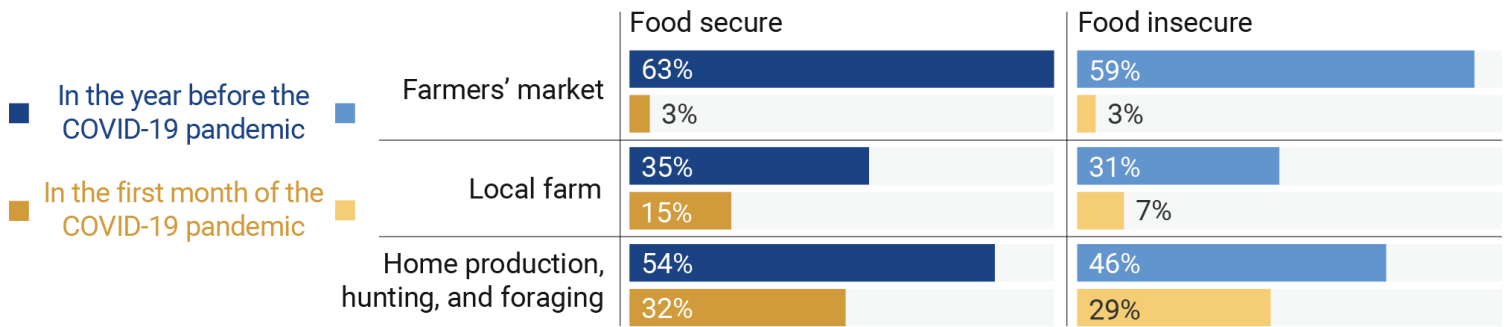


Figure 2. Food security status associated with use of various food sources

“We should be supporting our amazing local farmers in increased production and enhanced distribution of their products. We should be investing in making our already abundant local food system even stronger and more resilient. Use this crisis as [an] opportunity to transition people toward a local food economy which will benefit public health, create jobs, keep money in the local economy, and protect food supply and supply chain for future pandemics and disasters.”

- Vermont survey respondent

motivation this year in light of COVID-19. Several expressed how participation in home production and provisioning alleviated some of the worry about food access.

“I have never been more pleased to be living in rural space than right now. I have backyard chickens and 12 acres on which I can plant a garden... Even in the worst case scenario, I will be OK but recognize those without the resources I have will not be.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Home Food Production and Provisioning

“I have grown and foraged food for decades, but will be more conscientious about increasing my garden production and canning/freezing my surplus.”

- Vermont survey respondent

Half of respondents produced, foraged, hunted, or canned some of their own food in the year prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 1). Nearly one third engaged in these activities in the first month of the pandemic, which is notable given the timing at the start of the state’s growing season. Those who engaged in home production and provisioning in the year prior to the pandemic were more likely to be food secure than those who did not (Figure 2).

Without being asked, over 100 respondents shared their intentions and beliefs pertaining to home food production, hunting, and/or fishing. Many described how they regularly engage in these activities, but felt heightened

Several respondents expressed concerns about supply shortages for seeds and chicks for eggs or meat. A few shared worries related to restrictions on fishing and foraging or sharing tools at community gardens.

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 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>