

# Food Security Status and Food Purchasing Behaviors

FINDINGS FROM A SAMPLE OF MAINE RESIDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



## OVERVIEW

The increase in food insecurity among U.S. households since the onset of COVID-19 is well-documented. Older adults may face unique challenges to food access due to reliance on congregate meal programs, preexisting health conditions that increase risk of infection while food shopping, and lack of equipment or skills needed to shop for food online. This survey was conducted among Maine residents to better understand changes in the food security status and food purchasing behaviors of older adults during the pandemic.

This brief summarizes the results of an online survey conducted among Maine residents from May 13th to May 31st, 2020, distributed through several programs and agencies, which targeted older adults but included a broad range of ages. Respondents were asked questions concerning food security, food purchasing behavior, health conditions, and sociodemographic characteristics for the 12-month period prior to the onset of COVID-19 and the 30 days prior to taking the survey. Of the 399 total respondents, 344 completed the food insecurity questions and were included in analyses.

The majority of respondents were white (74.1%), female (64.5%), and had completed a bachelor's degree or higher level of education (65.4%). Many respondents (30.2%) did not report household income, but of those who reported, most (78%) reported earning over \$50,000 annually. Respondent ages ranged from 26 to 91, with a median age of 70. This sample had a greater proportion of women and was generally older, higher income, and more highly educated than the general population in Maine.

## IMPLICATIONS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In exploratory analyses, respondents with certain health conditions and/or disabilities showed a greater prevalence of food insecurity. This suggests the need to further explore the impact of disability status on food security, particularly during COVID-19.
- Many respondents cited the need for additional trust in going to the grocery store or using delivery services in order to meet food needs. Addressing this concern and communicating how customers are being kept safe may be important for helping consumers return to preferred dietary and food purchasing behaviors.
- Finally, availability of grocery delivery and food (both quantity and type) were commonly cited problems. The impact of COVID-19 on the food supply chain merits further study, both for what those impacts are and how they may be affecting household food security and food purchasing behavior.

# KEY FINDINGS

## HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY STATUS

Household food security was measured using the USDA's six-item food security survey module. Respondents were categorized as food secure if their responses indicated high or marginal food security. Those with responses indicating low or very low food security were categorized as food insecure. In this sample, household food security was high, with little change following COVID-19.

## DIFFICULTY WITH HOUSEHOLD ACTIVITIES

Respondents were asked whether or not they had health conditions that made it difficult to complete certain household activities (yes or no). Sixty-eight respondents (20%) reported difficulty with at least one of the following activities: running errands, walking or climbing stairs, concentrating or remembering, and shopping at the store. Exploratory data analyses showed lower food security status in these households during COVID-19.

## FOOD PURCHASING BEHAVIORS

Survey respondents were asked whether they had used various food sources in the 12 months before COVID-19 and in the past 30 days (yes or no). Usage fell significantly across most food sources, with the largest declines in restaurants or cafeterias and farmers' markets. Notably, more respondents reported using takeout and grocery delivery in the 30 days prior to the survey's administration compared to the 12 months before COVID-19.

## CHALLENGES DURING COVID-19

Respondents were asked how often (never, sometimes, usually, or always) they had challenges procuring food or had to change how they procured food. A majority reported sometimes, usually, or always altering shopping behavior, spending more time cooking, or having trouble finding the types or amount of food that they preferred. More than 1 out of 6 respondents reported challenges using grocery delivery to get food.

## RESPONDENT NEEDS

The survey asked respondents what would have helped their households meet their food needs in the 12 months before COVID-19 and in the past 30 days. Trust using grocery services (at the store or via delivery), variety of food, and availability of food were the changes most frequently cited as likely to help respondents meet their household food needs.

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## PREVALENCE OF HOUSEHOLD FOOD INSECURITY

**6%** in the past 30 days during COVID-19

**6%** in the 12 months prior to COVID-19

## FOOD INSECURITY IN THE PAST 30 DAYS ACCORDING TO RESPONDENT-REPORTED DIFFICULTY WITH HOUSEHOLD ACTIVITIES

**13%** of respondents who reported difficulty with at least one household activity were food insecure

**33%** of respondents who reported difficulty running errands were food insecure

**24%** of respondents who reported difficulty concentrating or remembering were food insecure

## DIFFERENCES IN SOURCES OF HOUSEHOLD FOOD PURCHASES BEFORE COVID-19 AND IN THE PAST 30 DAYS

**99%** decrease in proportion of respondents getting food from restaurants or cafeterias

**71%** decrease in proportion of respondents getting food from a farmers' market

**233%** increase in proportion of respondents getting food from grocery delivery

## CHALLENGES OR CHANGES IN PROCURING FOOD IN PAST 30 DAYS

**83%** reduced grocery trips

**78%** spent more time cooking

**67%** could not find preferred foods

## WHAT WOULD HAVE HELPED HOUSEHOLDS MEET FOOD NEEDS IN THE PAST 30 DAYS

**42%** reported that having more trust going to stores would have helped them meet food needs

**39%** reported that more or different food in stores would have helped meet food needs

**21%** reported that greater availability of food delivery would have helped meet food needs