

Coronavirus pandemic worsens food insecurity for low-income adults

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As states started closing schools and issuing stay-home orders in March because of the coronavirus, four out of 10 low-income Americans were already struggling to afford enough food for their households, say

University of Michigan researchers.

And only 18% of them were able to stock up enough [food](#) for two weeks, they say.

Using data from a national survey of low-income adults in mid-March, Julia Wolfson and Cindy Leung of the U-M School of Public Health measured household food [security](#)—the lack of consistent access to food—and challenges to meeting [basic needs](#) due to COVID-19.

"Our study shows that a robust, comprehensive policy response is needed to mitigate [food insecurity](#) as the pandemic progresses, particularly expansion of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Benefits, robust unemployment benefits, and ensuring access to food for children eligible for free and reduced price [school](#) lunches through the summer and beyond," said Wolfson, assistant professor of health management and policy.

"Doing so will allow us to better support the needs of the population as the spread of COVID-19 continues."

The study, published in the journal *Nutrients*, found that 44% of low-income adults in the United States are food insecure and 20% have marginal food security, while 36% are food secure. Among those with low food security, 41% report not having enough food to feed themselves or their family, 36% report not having enough money to pay rent/mortgage and half report not having enough money to pay their bills.

Individuals with low or very low food security are more likely to be black or Hispanic, to have children in the home and have less than a college education. They are also more likely to rent their homes, not have [health insurance](#) or Medicaid, and are more likely to be receiving

SNAP benefits.

Social and [economic policies](#) to promote social distancing such as school closures and stay-at-home orders exacerbate food insecurity risk for low-income adults by limiting access to school meals, causing business closures and loss of jobs or income, Wolfson and Leung say.

Food insecure individuals may also have less flexibility in their jobs to allow them to earn income while staying home, or may be at higher risk of losing their jobs completely thereby decreasing—or eliminating—their incomes, they say.

The study found that less than one in five of low-income adults with low food security say they are able to comply with initial public health recommendations of purchasing two weeks of food at a time.

"Food is a core determinant of health and food insecurity is associated with numerous poor health outcomes," said Cindy Leung, assistant professor of Nutritional Sciences at the School of Public Health. "This study highlights the growing number of families facing food insecurity in the wake of COVID-19 who need additional support with food, finances, and child care."

More information: Julia A Wolfson et al. Food Insecurity and COVID-19: Disparities in Early Effects for US Adults, *Nutrients* (2020). [DOI: 10.3390/nu12061648](https://doi.org/10.3390/nu12061648)

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