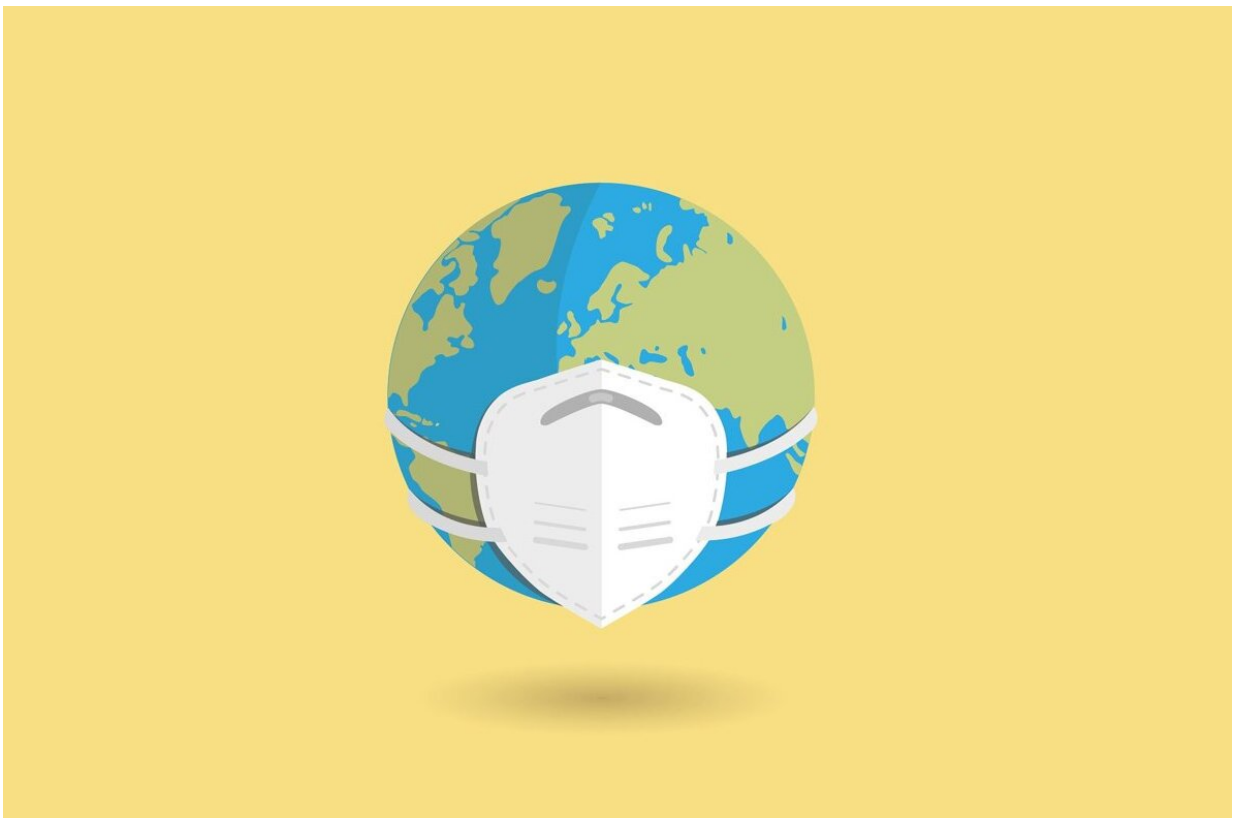


Study: Effect of COVID-19 pandemic on food insecurity and inability to pay rent hit immigrant families hardest

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Although families with immigrant mothers experienced higher rates of food insecurity and inability to pay rent during the pandemic than other

groups, they reported less participation in economic impact payments (EIP) in the form of stimulus checks and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)—two programs designed to provide stopgap financial support, according to a new study in *JAMA Health Forum* from researchers at the Dornsife School of Public Health and Children's HealthWatch.

The team surveyed 1,396 caregivers in Boston, Baltimore, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, and Little Rock of families with children under age four before the [pandemic](#) from Jan. 2018 through March 2020, with a follow-up survey administered Sept. 2020 through June 2021. The researchers asked about child and [household food insecurity](#), rent or mortgage struggles, their participation status in EIP and SNAP, and demographics.

Among families with mostly low incomes surveyed across the five cities, those with immigrant mothers were 63% more likely to experience household food insecurity and 21% more likely to report being behind on paying their rent or mortgage than families with U.S.-born mothers. Despite this greater need, a majority (96%) of families with U.S.-born mothers utilized SNAP or EIP, and only 74% of those with immigrant mothers participated in at least one of the programs.

Compared to before the pandemic, the number of families with young children behind on rent or mortgage more than doubled from 18% to 41%, and families experiencing food insecurity increased from 21% to 34%, according to the new data.

"Our results show that SNAP and the federal government's [stimulus](#) checks played a major role in reducing household hardships like food insecurity and inability to afford rent during the pandemic, but too many [immigrant families](#) were restricted or unable to use these programs," said lead author Félice Lê-Scherban, Ph.D., an associate professor in the Dornsife School of Public Health. "Many lawfully present immigrants

were prohibited from benefits, while many of those who qualified were afraid to participate after facing [anti-immigrant rhetoric](#) related to benefits."

The relief packages passed by Congress between March 2020 and March 2021—which designated trillions of dollars in aid to support the U.S. economy and respond to hardships felt by individuals and families—included streamlined access to higher benefit amounts for SNAP recipients and EIP payments.

According to [data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture](#), SNAP enrollment increased from 36 million people in 2019 to 44 million in 2020. Additionally, the IRS issued three stimulus checks to more than 92% of U.S. households during the pandemic ranging from \$600 to \$1400 per adult and \$500 to \$1400 per child.

"Our data shows that the design of the stimulus checks and SNAP programs during the pandemic failed to address racial inequities that originated long before the pandemic," said Lê-Scherban.

"For example, families with any members without [social security numbers](#) were ineligible for the first round of stimulus checks, which meant that three million U.S. citizens and lawfully present immigrants in mixed immigration-status families were unable to receive the initial stimulus support. After that first check, other restrictions were still in place, shutting out many others who were lawfully in the United States and would benefit from this resource."

The researchers found that families who received stimulus checks alone or both SNAP and stimulus checks were over 20% less likely to experience food insecurity. Although receiving only SNAP was not significantly associated with changes in [food insecurity](#) during the pandemic, the researchers say this may be due to the program design.

Although SNAP benefits are traditionally highest for those of lowest income level, the initial change to SNAP during the pandemic paid out the highest benefit to all recipients. In doing so, those already receiving the maximum benefit did not experience an increase at the start of the pandemic. Benefits also may have been insufficient to address greater financial need during the pandemic.

"This is a call to action for policies that are more equity-driven to ensure benefits reach all families who need it, particularly Black, Latino, immigrant, and other marginalized groups," said Lê-Scherban.

"Especially in times of crisis, inclusive policy design is as important as rapid deployment of relief. Otherwise we lose the opportunity to reduce inequities and instead risk making them even larger."

Many [studies](#) demonstrate the critical importance of nutrition on early childhood development and life-long health. A 2016 [report](#) by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities cites benefits from SNAP contributing to improvements in child health, better performance in school, and long-term health and economic benefits.

The authors say that future research should explore how other policy changes, such as increases in SNAP [benefits](#), a more inclusive stimulus check alongside programs like Child Tax Credit payments may reduce disparities in household hardships. Although the data in this study is not nationally representative, it does contribute to the few data points available on the long-term effect of COVID economic relief programs on reducing hardships among populations most at risk.

More information: Félice Lê-Scherban et al, Changes in material hardship and among families with young children associated with federal relief program participation by race, ethnicity, and nativity, *JAMA Health Forum* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jamahealthforum.2023.0508](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamahealthforum.2023.0508)

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