

Food pantries essential for reducing hunger among middle-class in 2020

October 21 2021



Community food services played a critical role in helping Americans meet their food needs, especially during the first five months of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to researchers in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences. Credit: Ismael Paramo via Unsplash

Food pantries, soup kitchens, and other community food services played

a critical role in helping Americans meet their food needs, especially during the first five months of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to new research by a team of economists in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences. They found that middle-class Americans benefited the most from these services, demonstrating a key role these programs can play in times of crisis.

"In the early days of the pandemic, workers who suddenly lost their jobs and had limited savings found themselves in a dire situation," said Stephan Goetz, professor of agricultural and regional economics and director of the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development (NERCRD). "As a result, there was an urgency to the crisis that couldn't be solved with [government programs](#) that typically involve an application process and eligibility based on income. In contrast, community-based food services provide immediate access to food, and our research in fact shows that their beneficial impact was greater during the early phase of the pandemic across all income classes."

The study, which was published online this month in the *Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, focused on the presence of community-based food services within states rather than on government-sponsored food-assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Community food services, as defined by the North American Industrial Classification System, collect, prepare, and deliver meals to the needy and include soup kitchens, food banks and pantries, and free-meal delivery programs. Early in the pandemic, long lines of cars waiting for food even in relatively wealthy states such as New Jersey drew national media attention to the importance of food pantries and related services.

The researchers found that food insufficiency increased across all income classes during the pandemic, but especially for lower- and middle-income households. The beneficial effect of community food

services was significant when all income classes were considered over the 21-week survey period, and the effect was greatest in the first five months among those households earning between \$50,000–74,999 per year before the pandemic, said Zheng Tian, NERCRD Research Associate and lead author of the study. Tian suggested that this was probably the first time people in this income bracket had difficulty meeting their food needs.

"Lower-income households likely had prior experience with food insufficiency, and therefore may have already been receiving SNAP benefits when the pandemic struck," Tian said. "But for those whose pre-pandemic earnings exceeded SNAP eligibility limits, our findings indicate that community food services offered critical short-term emergency relief while they waited for access to government assistance programs."

The researchers analyzed the extent to which the presence of community food services alleviated pandemic-related food insufficiency during a 21-week period on a state-by-state basis beginning in April 2020. To measure food insufficiency, they examined data from the U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey (HPS), a national survey administered online to a randomly selected representative sample of US households. The goal of the ongoing survey is to better understand the pandemic's social and economic effects on households across the country. Respondents are asked dozens of questions, including whether they sometimes or often did not have enough food, both in the previous week and prior to the onset of the pandemic.

Using responses to those questions, the researchers developed a measure to capture changes in household food insufficiency status that could be attributed to the pandemic. They computed the measure for all income classes and each class individually. They then correlated this measure with the number of community food services per 10,000 people in each

state in 2019, prior to the pandemic. Through [statistical analysis](#), they modeled over the 21-week period how the presence of community food services mitigated reported household food insufficiency across all income classes, while controlling for other factors that are also correlated with food insufficiency, such as poverty, racial composition, initial claims for unemployment insurance, and daily new coronavirus cases per capita.

The study is one of very few to examine the effectiveness of community food services in the U.S. This is ironic, said Goetz, because these types of services started in the U.S. and were later adopted by other countries, where they have been studied more extensively. The study also raises several policy-related questions.

"Do our findings mean that the federal government should be subsidizing community [food](#) services? Not necessarily, because we don't know if they are as efficient as SNAP, or if they are more effective on a per-dollar basis, and that's an area for future research," Goetz said. "But what we have established is that they're critical for communities to have in place, especially in the early phases of a major economic shock, such as a [pandemic](#)."

More information: Zheng Tian, Claudia Schmidt, and Stephan J. Goetz, The Role of Community Food Services in Reducing U.S. Food Insufficiency in the COVID-19 Pandemic (2021). [DOI: 10.22004/ag.econ.313316, jareonline.org/preprint-online/](#)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Food pantries essential for reducing hunger among middle-class in 2020 (2021, October 21) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-10-food-pantries-essential-hunger->

[middle-class.html](#)

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.