

Food Security and COVID-19 in Cuyahoga County

Common Shock, Varied Impact by Municipality

September 2021

Background

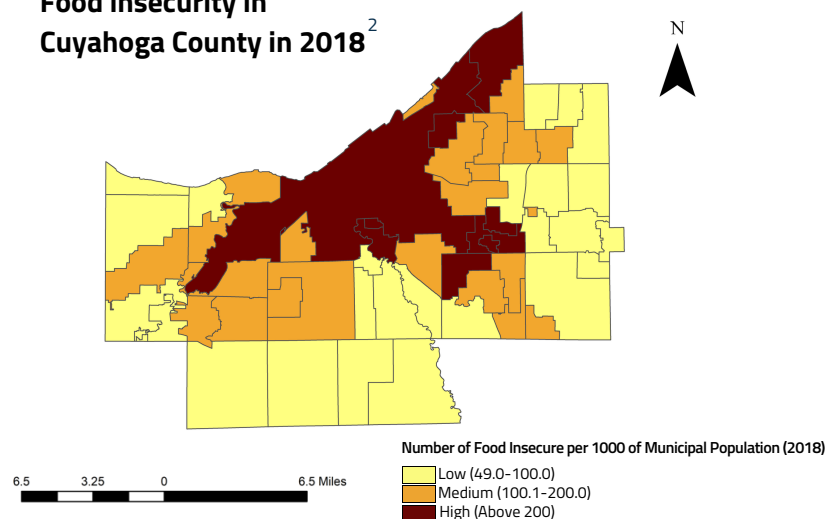
While the proportion of the food insecure population in the United States remained the same between 2019 and 2020 (10.5%), it increased significantly among Black, non-Hispanic and Hispanic households (19.1% to 21.7% and 15.6% to 17.2%, respectively)¹. The pandemic's impact on households, businesses, and the economy triggered an increased awareness of food insecurity as well as an increase in the implementation of policies and interventions at the federal, state, and local levels to address the growing rate of food insecurity during the pandemic. This research, a supplemental project of a participatory food systems modeling study, aims to explore how this common shock had an impact on efforts to reduce urban food insecurity. The study includes perspectives of community leaders (n=9), food access leaders (n=5), and government officials (n=4) representing municipalities with varying levels of pre-pandemic food insecurity.

Key Questions

How does COVID-19 impact food security differently in cities that had high, medium, and low levels of food insecurity prior to the pandemic?

What are the tradeoffs to different COVID-19 response strategies on food security among residents living in cities with different levels of food security before the pandemic?

Food insecurity in Cuyahoga County in 2018²



Pandemic Sheds Light on Enduring Problems

"Maybe it's a new group of hungry people, but people have been hungry for a long time, and why aren't they..why is this new wave of food insecurity so much more compelling than food insecurity over the long haul?"
—Food Access Leader, City with Medium Food Insecurity Pre-COVID-19

Key Findings

1. Communities with **high food insecurity prior to the pandemic** saw the **pandemic as an opportunity to address food insecurity issues** that were prevalent in their communities before the pandemic.
2. For **communities with low levels of food insecurity** at the onset of the pandemic, the **pandemic was the lens that revealed food insecurity issues** in their communities.
3. The pandemic shed light on existing disparities in food insecurity in all three groups and provides an opportunity to motivate change in terms of **economic opportunities, food security, and access to fresh and healthy food**.
4. The pandemic affirmed that **successful food system initiatives require tailored interventions** to the unique environment of each community.
5. The pace at which we achieve community vitality as we recover from the pandemic depends on the extent to which we **deploy response strategies that fully tackle the reality and root causes of food insecurity** in Cuyahoga County.

Take Action

Findings are linked to the "Menu of Actions for Community Driven Food Systems Change"³ developed by the Modeling the Future of Food in Your Neighborhood study. This decision support tool identifies five points of leverage to target food systems change to advance economic opportunity, food security, and fair access to fresh and healthy foods.

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Varied Impact Requires Tailored Efforts

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Fair Access to Fresh and Healthy Food



Quotes from Study Participants

"We live in a, what I would consider ... what academia would say is a food desert. You know there is not a major grocery store in the immediate area, in our city."

- Government Official, City with High Food Insecurity

Potential Actions from the Menu of Actions³

Provide resources for smaller food retailers to stock and sell affordable fresh and healthy foods (i.e., refrigeration, marketing) including connections to larger food retailers to support bulk buying needed to lower costs.

Nourished Neighborhoods



"We want them [community] to be healthy all the way, and it's a challenge where we are, with all the other factors that's involved, the crime that's involved that keeps people from not being healthy. And also...people who've been injured from gunshots, their mobility kind of slow. They can't do the things they used to do. And they need food, they need help, all kinds of care..."

- Food Access Leader, City with High Food Insecurity

Expand organizational support for coordinated, neighborhood-based emergency response systems to provide fresh and healthy food provisions during times of personal, community and environmental crisis (i.e., pandemic, homelessness).

Neighborhood Thriving



"During COVID, one of the biggest issues I found amongst people I know, they didn't have cars. And the food bank, you had to drive and you had to wait in your car and they would fill your car with whatever you get. When you don't have the transportation, you can't go, and to find somebody that will sit for one to five hours."

- Government Official, City with Medium Food Insecurity

Expand public transportation options.

Economic and Community Development



"So our access isn't, I wouldn't say, transportation-related or location-related; probably it would just be not an adequate household income..."

- Food Access Leader, City with Low Food Insecurity

Advocate for living wages needed for workers to meet basic needs related to food, housing, and other essential needs like health care and child care.

Social Connectivity and Policy Engagement



".. it's (food security) a policy issue...policy, talking with government, be it State government you know and then taking that all the way up to the Federal level...." - Food Access Leader_High

Develop new or coordinate with existing grassroots coalition(s) to mobilize policy changes that have direct impact on fair access to fresh and healthy foods.

Methods

Municipalities from Cuyahoga County, Ohio were divided into low, medium, and high food insecurity groups from 2018 data, then 2 cities from each group were randomly selected. Potential interview participants were identified and an interview guide was designed for data collection through a collaborative process. Eighteen participants were interviewed between March and May 2021.

References

1. Coleman-Jensen, A, Rabbitt, M. P., Gregory C. A, and Singh, A. 2021. Household Food Security in the United States in 2020, ERR-298, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.
2. Gundersen, C., Dewey A, Engelhard, E, Strayer, M and Lapinski L. 2020 Map the Meal Gap 2020: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2018. Feeding America
3. Modeling the Future of Food in Your Neighborhood Collaborative. (November 2020). Menu of Actions for Community Driven Food Systems Change. Mary Ann Swetland Center for Environmental Health, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH.

Suggested Citation: Yamoah, O., Roche, A., Athreya, B., Kahl, B., Lim, A., Mikelbank, K., Freedman, D. (2021). Food security and COVID-19 in Cuyahoga County: Common Shock, Varied Impact by City. Mary Ann Swetland Center for Environmental Health, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.

For more information, please visit:

<https://case.edu/swetland/research/modeling-future-food-your-neighborhood-foodnest-20/food-security-covid-19>

This research was supported by grants from the Foundation for Food & Agriculture Research, Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, and the Sears-Swetland Family Foundation and by time donated by members of the foodNEST 2.0 Collaborative. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of our sponsors.