

The Impact of the Coronavirus on Child Food Insecurity



April 22, 2020 | For questions or information, contact research@feedingamerica.org.



KEY FINDINGS

- Households with children are more likely to be food insecure. In 2018, 11.2 million children (1 in 7), lived in a food-insecure household.
- As closures caused by the coronavirus lead to a rise in unemployment and poverty, more people will experience food insecurity.
- A significant rise in unemployment over the year (+7.6 percentage points) and a corresponding rise in child poverty (+5.0 percentage points) would result in a total of 18.0 million children (1 in 4) experiencing food insecurity.

INTRODUCTION

As closures and social distancing orders meant to limit spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) extend across the country, the impact is being felt in communities large and small. While changes taking place are disrupting the lives of nearly everyone in some way, food-insecure individuals – who numbered over 37 million (11.5%), including over 11 million children, in 2018¹ – will face particular challenges. With unemployment soaring – approximately 22 million workers filed for unemployment benefits within the last four weeks² – the number of people who experience food insecurity is likely already increasing.

¹ Coleman-Jensen, A., et al. (2019). [Household Food Security in the United States in 2018](#). U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service.

² Department of Labor. (2020, April 16). *Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims* [Press Release]. Retrieved from <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OPA/newsreleases/ui-claims/20200632.pdf>



ESTIMATING THE INCREASE IN NEED

Feeding America's *Map the Meal Gap* study can be used to predict changes in food insecurity based on projected annual changes to unemployment and poverty. An earlier brief entitled [The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity](#) focused on projections for food insecurity for the overall population. Those analyses have been expanded here to include a separate look at food insecurity among children.³ Prior to the current crisis and for as long as food insecurity has been measured, households with children are more likely to be food insecure.⁴ For more information pre-coronavirus, see the *Map the Meal Gap* report on child food insecurity [here](#).

The tables in this brief display three potential scenarios, depicting increasing severity of changes to annual poverty and unemployment rates and the changes to food insecurity for children that may result. Scenarios A and B represent the same changes to poverty and unemployment that occurred during the Great Recession after one year and two years, respectively, while Scenario C portrays a more severe picture.

Table 1 displays the underlying assumptions around annual changes to unemployment and poverty and the food insecurity rate increase that would result. For example, in Scenario C, if unemployment increases by 7.6 percentage points in 2020 from its base in 2018 (from 3.9% to 11.5%) and child poverty increases by 5.0 percentage points (from 16.2% to 21.2%), child food insecurity would increase by 9.3 percentage points (from 15.2% to 24.5%). This would be an unprecedented increase in food insecurity among children and would be the highest level since food insecurity began being measured in 1996.

³ For the purposes of this brief, the term “child food insecurity” is used to indicate children living in food insecure households which is consistent with how it is used in *Map the Meal Gap* and in, for example, Table 1B in Coleman-Jensen et al. (2019).

⁴ Coleman-Jensen, A., et al. (2019). [Household Food Security in the United States in 2018](#). U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service.

Table 1: Projected unemployment, child poverty and child food insecurity rate changes by scenario

| Impact on key variables | Scenario A | Scenario B | Scenario C |
|--|------------|------------|------------|
| Increase to unemployment rate (% pts) | 1.1 | 4.5 | 7.6 |
| Increase to child poverty rate (% pts) | 1.6 | 3.9 | 5.0 |
| increase in child food insecurity rate (% pts) | 1.6 | 5.8 | 9.3 |

Source: calculations by Dr. Craig Gundersen.

Note: The percentage point changes are relative to 2018 base rates of 3.9% unemployment, 16.2% child poverty, and 15.2% child food insecurity.

As seen in **Table 2**, under these three scenarios, the indicated increases would result in a total of between 12.4 million and 18.0 million children living in food-insecure households. Already, one in seven children in the U.S. is food insecure. Under Scenario C, that number would jump to one in four.

It is important to note that individuals and households with different characteristics experience food insecurity at different rates. For example, households are more likely to be food insecure if there are members of a minority race/ethnicity, specifically African American, Latino and American Indian. Households headed by a single parent experience food insecurity at significantly higher rates, especially when the head is female, as do households where a child or parent is disabled.^{5,6}

Table 2: Projected changes to child food insecurity by scenario

| Food insecurity projections | Scenario A | Scenario B | Scenario C |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Child food insecurity rate, pre-COVID-19 (2018) | 15.2% (1 in 7) | 15.2% (1 in 7) | 15.2% (1 in 7) |
| <i>Projected increase to child food insecurity rate (%)</i> | <i>11%</i> | <i>38%</i> | <i>61%</i> |
| Projected child food insecurity rate | 16.8% (1 in 6) | 21.0% (1 in 5) | 24.5% (1 in 4) |
| | | | |
| Food-insecure children, pre-COVID-19 (2018) | 11.2 M | 11.2 M | 11.2 M |
| <i>Projected increase to number of food-insecure children</i> | <i>1.2 M</i> | <i>4.2 M</i> | <i>6.8 M</i> |
| Projected number of food-insecure children | 12.4 M | 15.4 M | 18.0 M |

Source: Pre-COVID-19 rates and numbers are taken from [Household Food Security in the United States in 2018](#). All other figures are based upon calculations by Dr. Craig Gundersen.

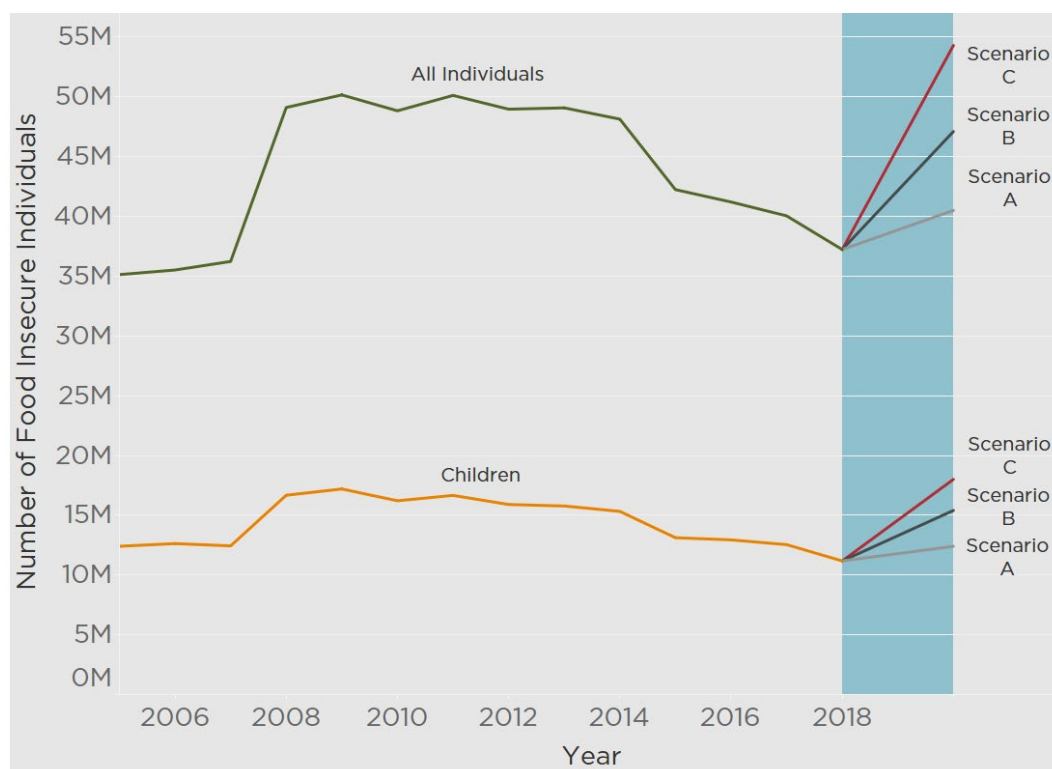
⁵ Coleman-Jensen, A., et al. (2019). [Household Food Security in the United States in 2018](#). U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service.

⁶ Coleman-Jensen A., & Nord, M. (2013). Food Insecurity among Households with Working-Age Adults with Disabilities. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service: Washington, D.C.

Ultimately, the impact of the coronavirus crisis on food insecurity will depend on the speed with which transmission of the virus can be controlled and closures and social distancing orders are relaxed. The longer that the shutdown goes on, the more likely it is that high levels of unemployment will persist, and more people will face food insecurity.

Figure 1 displays food insecurity numbers for the three scenarios alongside historic trends for children and for all individuals. As noted previously, Scenarios A and B reflect the same changes to poverty and unemployment rates that occurred during the Great Recession, which has been a common point of comparison for the currently unfolding crisis. However, the current recession has moved with much greater speed than the last, and many experts are predicting larger increases to unemployment rates than seen during the Great Recession.⁷ Scenario C would involve significant increases to both unemployment and poverty that would result in food insecurity reaching the highest rate and number in the 25 years it has been measured.

Figure 1. Food Insecurity Trends and Projections, All individuals and Children



Source: Pre-COVID-19 numbers are taken from [Household Food Security in the United States in 2018](#). All other figures are based upon calculations by Dr. Craig Gundersen.

⁷ WSJ Survey: Coronavirus to Cause Deep U.S. Contraction, 13% Unemployment. (2020, April 8). *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/wsj-survey-coronavirus-to-cause-deep-u-s-contraction-13-unemployment-11586354400>

THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

There have been a number of proposals for federal, state, and local responses to the COVID-19 crisis that will aim to bolster the economy and provide direct support to those who have been most affected. These responses have the potential to mitigate the depth and breadth of hardship that could otherwise result.

Federal nutrition programs, especially the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), continue to be an important first line of defense against food insecurity for millions of people and will become particularly critical during this period of acute need. Policies responding to this crisis have included additional federal food purchases and SNAP benefits for some families as well as flexibility in program operations to adjust to changing local environments as local SNAP offices and schools close and individuals are limited in their mobility.⁸

As social distancing efforts continue, more states have been approved to provide online purchasing of food to SNAP Households through approved retailers.⁹ Unique to the current crisis, schools are closed in most parts of the country, which has disrupted not only learning but access to meals that are typically provided during the school day.¹⁰ In

response to these closures, a new program called Pandemic-EBT (P-EBT) has been created, which gives money to families whose children would have otherwise received free or reduced-price school meals to replace the value of those meals. States must choose to operate this new program and submit a plan to USDA for approval. This will be provided on an electronic benefits transfer (EBT) card and is available to families in areas where school are closed for at least five consecutive days.¹¹



⁸ For information visit <https://www.feedingamericaaction.org/learn/legislation/>.

⁹ Food and Nutrition Service. (2020, April 6). *FNS Launches the Online Purchasing Pilot*. Retrieved from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/online-purchasing-pilot>

¹⁰ Map: Coronavirus and School Closures. (2020, April 7). Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures.html>

¹¹ Feeding America has provided a checklist and information on nationwide and state waivers here: <https://www.feedingamericaaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Child-Nutrition-Covid-19-Checklist-and-Information.pdf>

FEEDING AMERICA'S RESPONSE

While swift federal action to increase investment in federal programs including SNAP will be key to help individuals weather the current crisis, many are turning to charitable food assistance in an effort to make ends meet. In and out of times of crisis, charitable programs can help supplement the food budgets for federal program recipients, while for households with incomes that exceed federal program eligibility limits, charitable programs may be the only option.

Feeding America and its 200 member food banks are working in communities across the country in response to the COVID-19 crisis, adapting service models to minimize risk of transmission while helping those in need. In this time of uncertainty, the Feeding America network is working to ensure that this pandemic does not perpetuate inequity or deepen the burdens often borne disproportionately by at-risk populations and low-income people. One such at-risk group is children, and there are several ways food banks are addressing child food insecurity specifically during this time. Some food banks are working with school districts to implement drive-thru food distributions at schools that are closed. Others have converted existing School Pantry and Backpack programs, and are now distributing to-go meals to kids and families. Others still are working with community partners to activate summer and after-school sites to distribute meals to children.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Feeding America network served over 40 million people each year, many of whom will experience more severe levels of need in the coming months. The sharp decline in the economy is also leading to an increase in the number of new individuals – both adults and children – experiencing or at heightened risk of food insecurity. Food banks are already reporting increased demand, while facing operational challenges, including declines in volunteers and food donations. The high demand for charitable food assistance is expected to remain at elevated levels for the foreseeable future.

