

An assessment of food insecurity in New Mexico during COVID-19

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Food insecurity disproportionately affects low-income populations. COVID-19 has the potential to exacerbate inequalities to food access especially in at-risk populations. The state of New Mexico has one of the highest rates of poverty in the United States. The aim of this study is to assess food insecurity status during COVID-19 by counties in New Mexico. This is a qualitative study that utilized information from a cross-sectional survey developed and piloted by the National Food Access and COVID Research Team (NFACT), adapted for use in New Mexico. It was used to assess participants' experiences with food access-related concerns and challenges since the COVID-19 outbreak began on March 11, 2020; surveys were available in English and Spanish. Descriptive statistics of respondents were calculated and reported as frequencies and percentages. Specific data regarding challenges affording food was extracted from the survey and separated by counties of New Mexico: rural (population $\leq 20,000$), urban (population between 20,000–99,000), and metro (population $\geq 100,000$). Food insecurity among each county was defined by scores of high/marginal food security (0–1), low food security (2–4), and very low food security (5–6). Food insecurity was further analyzed by extracting five key food insecurity-related open-ended questions from the survey that associated food security of the last 12 months as compared with during the pandemic. Out of 129 rural, 249 urban, and 730 metro county participants, urban New Mexican counties had the highest percentage of food insecurity in all counties (45.8%). Food access utilization changed pre- and post-pandemic. Use of food pantries/soup kitchens, school food programs, and Summer Feeding Programs increased, while utilization of food assistance programs WIC (54.72% to 45.28%) and SNAP (50.48% to 49.52%) decreased during COVID-19. An additional factor of food insecurity was observed with 46.77% of participants reported cutting the size of their meals or skipping meals, however, 21.31% attributed this event due to a lack of funds. Additionally, no participants scored in the very low food security range (5–6). Normal access to food was disrupted during the pandemic. Usage of food assistance programs (FAPs) decreased during the pandemic, while alternative methods to access food increased (food pantry/soup kitchen usage, and school food programs). It is apparent that we need to adapt to increase food security status for all during the pandemic. Improving the effectiveness of FAPs to include a policy to expand benefits during an economic downturn is a potential method. Benefits can be augmented by removing food selection bias, expanding purchase options by offering online shopping, and increasing the amount of authorized stores. Additionally, benefits can be expanded to include those who do not normally qualify for FAPs, a recurring issue that was identified by surveys.

Reference

1. Rogus S, Coakley K, Martin Sh, *et al.* (2022) *Current Developments in Nutrition* 6(1).