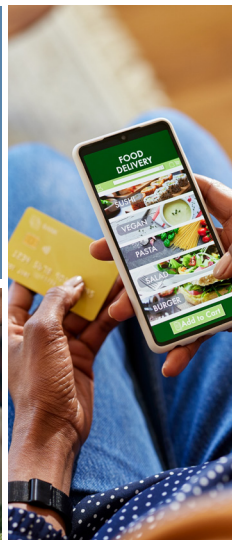


Local Food Systems Response to COVID

Consumer Food Insights 3.0



Food Security in the Post-Pandemic Food Environment

Highlights from nationwide survey of food behavior

- **Sample size** = Over 4,500 respondents
- **Timeline** = Conducted Winter 2023 and captures behavior in 2 time periods (October 2022 & October 2023) with questions about broader changes since the pandemic began
- **Objective** = Understand changes in U.S. consumer food behavior during and after COVID-19
- **Focus** = Implications for local and regional food systems

Terms

- **Food secure:** households had access, at all times, to enough food for an active, healthy life for all household members.
- **Food insecure:** households are uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, at some time during the year, enough food to meet the needs of all their members because they had insufficient money or other resources for food.

Food Security in the Post-Pandemic Food Environment

Early in the COVID-19 era, food insecurity increased as households experienced income losses and other food access issues that emerged because of the pandemic. A previous Consumer Food Insight¹ found that in 2020, 47% of respondents reported that the food they purchased often (18%) or sometimes (29%) did not last or that they did not have enough money to get more. For 28%, someone in their household cut their food intake because there was not enough money for food at some time in the 12 months prior to September 2020.² (See the previous [Consumer Food Insight](#) on this topic for more information). In response to heightened risk of food insecurity, emergency food assistance was dispensed to US households at historically high rates.³

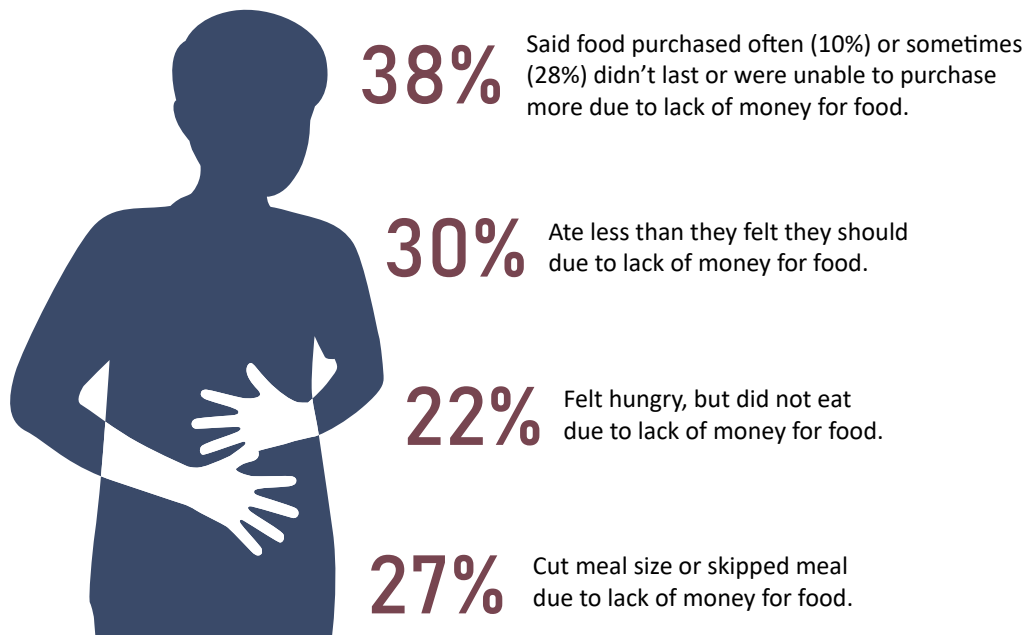
1 This previous survey iteration was a different sample of 5000 U.S. households, but both survey samples are representative of the U.S. population based on age, income, and race/ethnicity. See <https://lfscovid.localfoodeconomics.com/consumer-food-insights/> for analysis on previous survey data.

2 These food insecurity rates for U.S. households are substantially higher than were found in other sources such as: Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbitt, M.P., Gregory, C.A., Singh, A. 2021. "Household Food Security in the United States in 2020". ERR-298, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

3 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (USDA ERSa). 2023. "Total spending on USDA's food and nutrition assistance programs fell in FY 2022, but still higher than before the pandemic". Data Products: Chart Gallery. Web Accessed: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=106756>

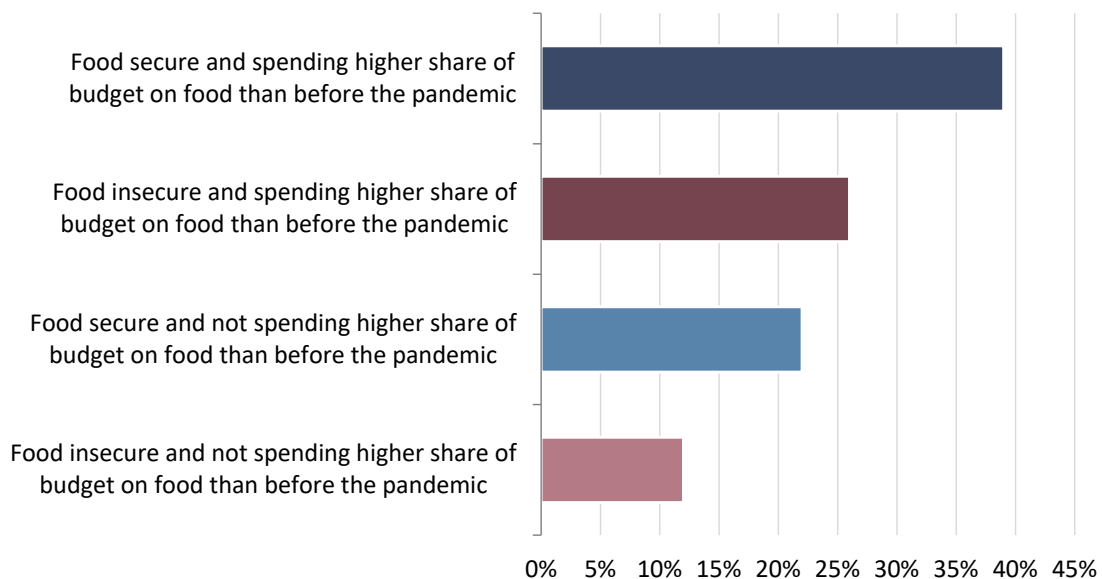
Although it might be assumed that these rates would fall as the US returns to a “new normal,” the most recent survey, which asked about households’ food security experiences in the 12 months prior to October 2023, found these numbers to be quite similar. Figure 1 details food insecurity statistics as reported by households in the most recent survey.

Figure 1. Food Insecurity Statistics for October 2022 to October 2023



While incidence of very low food security decreased from 18% to 10%, most indicators decreased slightly (by 1-2%) or not at all. The finding that food insecurity has not decreased is in line with a recent USDA Economic Research Service report⁴ showing the prevalence of food insecurity increased from 2021 to 2022, likely due to a combination of pandemic-era food assistance ending and rising food price levels.

Figure 2. Percentages of Food Insecure and Food Secure Respondents Who Reported Spending a Higher Budget Share on Food Than Before the Pandemic



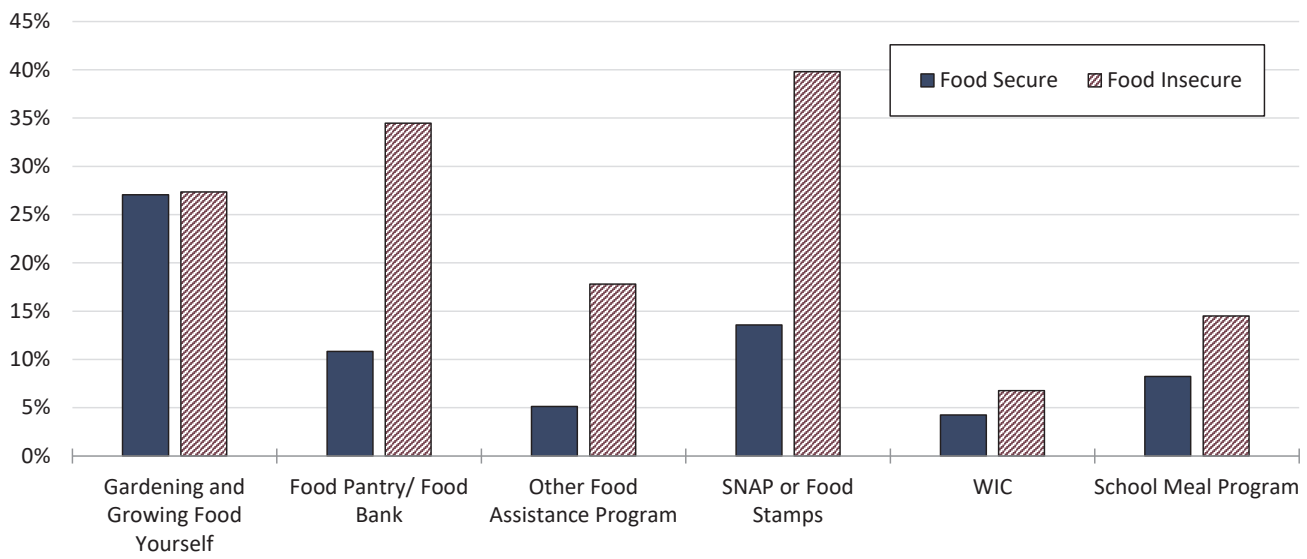
4 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service (USDA ERS). 2023. “Trends in prevalence rates of food insecurity and very low food security in U.S. households, 2001-22”. *Food Security in the U.S: Key Statistics and Graphics*. Web Accessed: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/key-statistics-graphics/#trends>

Indeed, 68% of food insecure respondents reported spending a higher share of their budget on food in 2023 than they did before the pandemic. This sentiment was felt by food secure respondents as well. Of food secure respondents, 64% reported spending a higher share of their budget on food (when comparing categories reported in Figure 2).

Food Acquisition Strategies in 2023

To better understand how food insecure households were acquiring food in 2023 and make comparisons to pandemic-era acquisition strategies, Figure 3 illustrates how respondents obtained food in October 2023.

Figure 3. Percentages of Food Secure and Food Insecure Households that Used Various Food Acquisition Strategies in October 2023



Among food insecure populations, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was the most used non-market food acquisition strategy, followed by food pantry and/or food bank utilization. For food insecure populations, utilization rates for both strategies increased since we surveyed consumers in the fall of 2020. SNAP utilization increased from 34% to 40% of food insecure households, and food pantry utilization increased from 26% to more than 34%. It is worth noting that utilization rates of SNAP and food pantries by food secure populations also increased. This may signal that these food assistance methods are not only being used more but are also helping some households to be food secure. Since the time of the 2020 survey, changes were made to allow SNAP benefits to be used at a broad variety of online food retailers, which may be contributing to increases in utilization rates.⁵ Usage of other food assistance programs stayed about the same, and the percentage of respondents who reported gardening stayed the same for food secure populations but decreased for food insecure populations by about 8%.

Usage of WIC (The Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants and Children) and School Meal Programs decreased compared to our survey sample from 2020 and are clearly being utilized less than SNAP and food pantries/food banks overall. This is likely a result of our current survey sample having fewer households with children on average. Of food insecure households with children, 27% reported using the school meal program and 9% reported using WIC in October 2023.



27%

of food insecure households with children used a school meal program.

⁵ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS). 2023. "Snap Online Purchasing Pilot". Web Accessed: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/online-purchasing-pilot>

Modernization of WIC in 2024

In the above findings, respondents reported low utilization rates of WIC among food insecure families with children. While not all food insecure families with children are eligible for WIC, previous studies have found that WIC was reaching about half of eligible households.⁶ To help reach more eligible households, the USDA is modernizing WIC in 2024 by making it easier for families to apply and stay enrolled. To learn more and track progress of WIC modernization, visit the WIC Modernization Dashboard at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/data-research/data-visualization/wic/modernization>.

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Authors:

Mackenzie Gill and Dawn Thilmany

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⁶ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS). 2024. "WIC Modernization". Web Accessed: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/modernization>