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FOOD PANTRIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A SURVEY OF VISITORS TO FEEDING WISCONSIN NETWORK PANTRIES



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BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on households' ability to meet their food needs, in Wisconsin and nationwide. Prior to the pandemic, around one in ten households in Wisconsin were food insecure – they didn't have the food they needed, or were uncertain about whether they would be able to get the food they needed, due to lack of resources. This includes 3.5 percent of households with severe levels of food hardship – they sometimes or often didn't have enough food. [1] During the pandemic, this jumped dramatically: Over the April 2020-January 2021 period, over 8 percent of Wisconsin households reported sometimes or often not having enough food in the past week, a rate that slowly inched up from around 7% each week in the early months of the pandemic to 9% in the fall and winter, and has since been declining. [2] While official estimates of food insecurity for 2020 are not yet available, Feeding America estimates that over one in eight people in Wisconsin, including almost one in five children, lived in food insecure households in 2020. [3] Because these estimates are based on models that do not capture the effects of lost access to school meals, the actual rates may be even higher.

Food pantries have long been a critical resource, and their importance became increasingly visible during the pandemic. Survey data collected by the Census Bureau shows that, in a typical week during the pandemic, around 4% of households in the state received free food from either a food pantry, a religious organization, or some other community program [4] Over the course of 2020, Wisconsin's six regional Feeding America foodbanks provided 79 million pounds of food via a statewide network of food programs, an increase of 62% over the previous year. Anecdotal reports from around the state indicate widely varying demand, both across pantries and over time, in part reflecting the ebb and flow of public supports such as stimulus payments, unemployment benefits, FoodShare increases, and Pandemic EBT for families missing out on school-based free meals.

Concurrent with rapidly increasing food hardships and a spike in demand for emergency food, pantries were faced with restructuring their delivery models to conform to pandemic safety constraints, pivoting from using largely choice-based models to pre-packed food boxes. Traditional food sources were disrupted, while new sources of food, including food sourced directly from growers through a variety of federal and state programs, became available. Over the course of the pandemic, emergency food has been distributed not only through traditional food pantries, but through mobile distributions. Income-based eligibility thresholds have been expanded, and pantries collected less information about participants than was typical in pre-pandemic times.

The unprecedented spikes in food hardship, and the rapid shift in food pantry operations and sourcing, has created an urgent need to better understand the circumstances, experiences and needs of pantry clients. To begin filling this gap, Feeding Wisconsin partnered with UW-Madison to implement a rapid-response survey to learn about the circumstances and experiences of pantry clients around the state during fall 2020. The intent of the research was not only to inform food pantries about their own clientele, but more generally, to provide insight into the circumstances and experiences of a broad group of people around the state who were struggling to make ends meet during the height of the pandemic.

This report provides a summary of the characteristics, circumstances, and experiences of Feeding Wisconsin network clients who responded to the survey. We draw on what we learned from the survey to suggest some broader conclusions about food hardships and the role of food pantries in Wisconsin both during the pandemic and more broadly.

[1] Authors' analyses of 2017-2019 Current Population Survey – Food Security Supplements.

[2] Authors' analyses of U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey data.

[3] Feeding America. 2021. The Impact of the Coronavirus on Local Food Insecurity in 2020 and 2021. https://www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Local%20Projections%20Brief_3.31.2021.pdf

[4] Authors' analyses of U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey data.

RESEARCH APPROACH

Survey Process

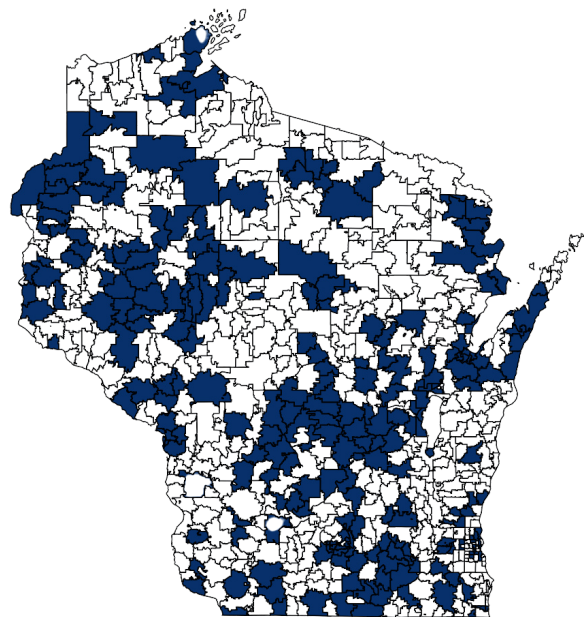
The purpose of the project was to provide broad information about the circumstances and experiences of households visiting Feeding Wisconsin-affiliated food pantries and mobile food distributions during fall 2020. [5] This was, by design, a rapid-implementation no-contact approach intended to take a pulse on the current situation. The research team developed a voluntary online client survey, with the scope of the survey emerging from a collaborative process involving input from the research team, Feeding Wisconsin leadership, and key staff at affiliated regional food banks. The survey was implemented on-line in conjunction with the University of Wisconsin Survey Center. Feeding Wisconsin and their affiliated regional food banks notified pantry clients about the survey via flyers shared with network-affiliated pantries and distributed alongside food boxes and mobile food distributions around the state. The project used a passive recruitment strategy – flyers were provided to pantries, and pantries that chose to distribute the flyers did so by simply including them alongside food. To reach a geographically diverse group of clients, flyers were provided to all pantries affiliated with any of Feeding Wisconsin's six regional food banks, although not every pantry opted to distribute them. To reduce language barriers, the flyer was printed in English and Spanish, and the online survey could be completed in either English or Spanish. It could be completed on either a smartphone (the flyers included a scannable link to the survey) or a computer. The survey required some form of online access, which limited availability for some regions or homes. [6]

Sample

A total of 709 legitimate responses were collected, including 652 complete surveys and 57 partial surveys. Respondents were automatically screened out if they indicated a household member had already completed the survey; if the respondent was under age 18; or if they indicated they had not heard about the survey via a recent visit to a food pantry or mobile food distribution site. 52 respondents successfully completed the screener questions but did not provide further survey responses, and are not included in the numbers above. The final sample included respondents from 65 out of Wisconsin's 72 counties, and the pantries and food distribution sites they had visited spanned the service area of all six regional food banks (see Figure 1). The majority of respondents were from sites affiliated with Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin (41%) and Second Harvest Food Bank of Southern Wisconsin (34%), with smaller shares from Feed My People Food Bank (14%), Second Harvest Heartland (7%), Channel One Regional Food Bank (3%), and Second Harvest Northern Lakes Food Bank (2%). 61%

of respondents received the flyer from a fixed pantry location, 35% from a pop-up/mobile food distribution site, and 4% with food delivered to their home. For the remainder of this report, we refer to all households in our sample as food pantry clientele; this includes visitors to mobile food distribution sites as well as visitors to traditional food pantries.

Figure 1. Residential Zipcodes of Respondents to the Feeding Wisconsin Client Survey



Note: Figure shows residential zipcodes with one or more survey respondents (in blue). Final sample includes 709 respondents in 65 of 72 counties in Wisconsin.

[5] The survey was funded by a grant from the Food Security Initiative, a program created by Governor Tony Evers using Wisconsin's federal CARES Act funding and administered by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP).

[6] A small number of clients (8) contacted the UW Survey Center and asked to do the survey by phone. While this had not been offered as an option on the recruitment flyers, the survey center was able to accommodate the few people who contacted them.

While there is considerable geographic diversity in the respondents, this was a convenience sample – limited to clients who received a flyer, had access to the internet to complete the survey, and had the time, capacity, and interest to participate. Respondents are not necessarily representative of all pantry clientele. The current results are intended to provide a broad-brush look at food pantry clientele during the height of the pandemic; they should not be interpreted as precise estimates of all pantry clients. To assess how representative our sample is of all pantry clients statewide, we compared characteristics of our sample to a sample drawn from the Census Pulse Household Survey (see text box).

Respondent Demographics: Who is in the Sample?

Household Composition

A wide variety of household types were represented in the sample. 22% of respondents described the people in their households as couples with children (not necessarily minor children), 10% single parents with children (not necessarily minor children), 22% couples without children, 14% extended family living together, 7% friends or acquaintances, 24% people living alone, and 1% some other arrangement. Household sizes ranged from 1 to 13 people, with an average size of 2.8 people.

We used the reported ages of all household members to divide the households into three main types: 22% of respondent households include only seniors (age 65 and older), 33% include one or more adults with minor children, and 45% include working-age adults with no children. Based on the comparison to the benchmark sample, we believe that households with children are underrepresented in our sample, and that adult-only households – both working-age and seniors – are overrepresented. Because of that, the tables and figures in the report generally describe these three household types separately.



Comparison to Benchmark Sample

The Census Pulse Household Survey, collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, has been administered online to random samples of adults weekly since early in the pandemic. From that sample, we created a benchmark sample of all respondents from Wisconsin during June-December 2020 who reported receiving free food from a food pantry or community program during the past week. Because the Census Bureau surveys a random sample of people in each state, and provides weights to statistically adjust for differences in response rates, the benchmark sample that we created provides a reasonable if rough approximation of characteristics of pantry clients in Wisconsin during fall 2020. While that sample has a longer time period (beginning in June, as compared to October for the Feeding Wisconsin survey); includes people receiving free food from any pantry or community program (not limited to the Feeding Wisconsin network of pantries and mobile distribution sites); relies on respondents in the broader sample to self-identify as having received free food; and captures different information about respondents and their households than the Feeding Wisconsin survey, it nonetheless provides a useful reference point. By comparing the characteristics of our sample to this benchmark sample, we can get a general idea of how representative our sample is of food pantry clientele in the state.

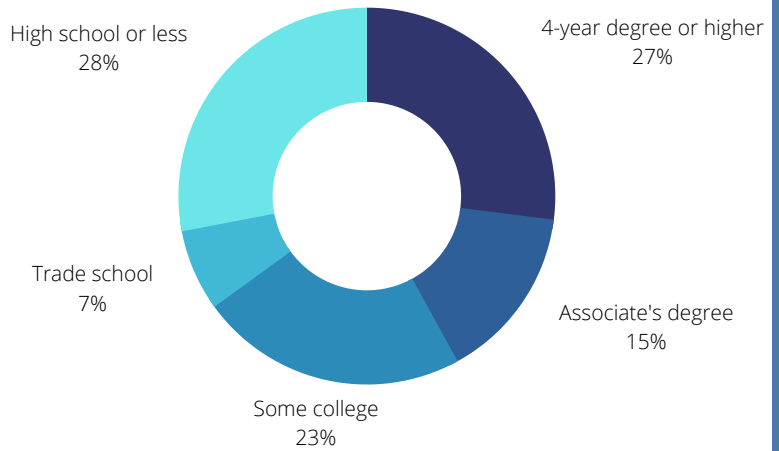
This comparison shows that the experiences and economic circumstances are broadly similar in the two samples, but that demographics (specifically household composition and race) are different. From this comparison, we estimate that households with children and with racial and ethnic minority members were less likely than other eligible households to participate in the Feeding Wisconsin survey, but that participation did not differ substantially by employment, education, home ownership, or extent of food and economic hardships. Respondents' experiences and economic circumstances, therefore, may be more representative than are their specific demographics (race and household composition).

We present most of our our results separately for households with children, working-age households without children, and senior-only households, since their representation in our sample may differ from their overall representation among households eligible for this survey.

Education

Respondents come from households that vary widely in education levels. Household education – measured in this survey as the highest education level in the household, not the education of the respondent – included high school or less (28%), trade school (7%), some college (23%), an Associate's degree (15%), and a four-year college degree or higher (27%) (see Figure 2). If education levels were available for all household members, the education distribution would show comparatively fewer people at the high end of the education range. [7] The education levels in our sample are broadly compatible with the benchmark sample of pantry clients, although the two cannot be directly compared because of differences in how education is measured (household versus individual).

Figure 2. Highest Household Education Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients



Note: Figure shows the highest household education level among respondents to the Feeding Wisconsin Client Survey.

Race and Ethnicity of Respondent

The sample had relatively limited racial and ethnic diversity. 84% identified themselves as non-Hispanic white, 3% as non-Hispanic black, 6% Hispanic, 3% American Indian, 2% Asian, and 4% other/multiple races. Based on a comparison to the benchmark sample, this reflects disproportionate representation of non-Hispanic whites relative to other groups; on the race and ethnicity dimensions the sample is not representative of the makeup of statewide pantry clients. One important reason for this is that we had very limited survey participation in Milwaukee.

Gender of Respondent

Around three-quarters of respondents (78%) were female. We did not ask about the gender of other household members, so this is not an estimate of the gender distribution of all pantry clients; it just describes those who filled out the survey on behalf of their households.



[7] As an example: authors' analyses of the American Communities Survey show that approximately 29% of adults in Wisconsin have a 4-year college degree, but 41% of households include a household member with a 4-year college degree.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Food Hardships and Barriers to Meeting Food Needs

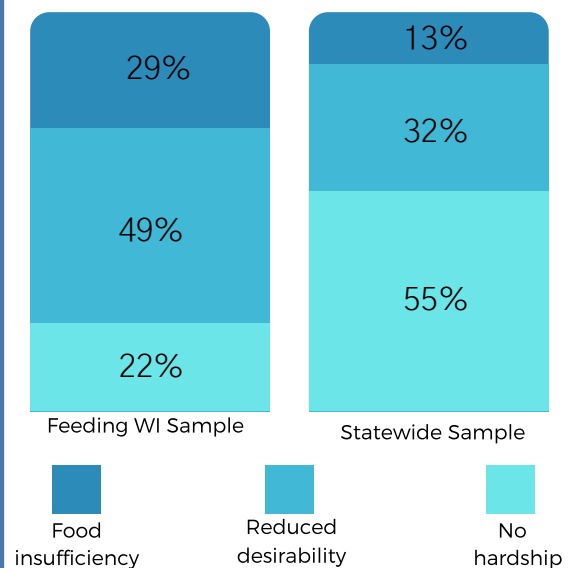
Food hardships were common, especially among households with children. Over one-third of these households reported child hunger – the children were sometimes or often not eating enough because the household could not afford food. While lack of money was the most frequent barrier to meeting food needs, other barriers related to food pantry limitations, transportation, health and mobility, and lack of school meals were also important.

We asked respondents about food hardships and barriers to getting food. This included questions about the extent to which households had the food they needed in the past 30 days; whether the children were not eating enough because they could not afford food; and whether a variety of barriers like transportation, health, or lack of money had made it difficult to get the food they needed.

One-quarter of all respondents indicated that, in the past 30 days, their household had enough of the kinds of foods that they wanted to eat; 53% reported reduced desirability (enough food but not always the kinds they wanted); and 21% reported food insufficiency (sometimes or always did not have enough to eat). Food insufficiency – the measure included here – is a more severe level of food hardship than food insecurity, another commonly used measure (see text box).

Food hardships were especially common among households with children: only 22% of these households reported their household had enough of the kinds of food they wanted; approximately half (49%) reported reduced desirability; and 29% sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat in the past month. For comparison, statewide during the same period, 55% of all households with children (not limited to pantry visitors) had enough of the kinds of food they wanted, 32% reported reduced desirability of household food, and 13% sometimes or often didn't have enough to eat (see Figure 3). [8]

Figure 3. Household Food Hardships of Households With Children Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients and Statewide



Note: The statewide sample includes all Wisconsin households with children (regardless of food pantry use) from the Wisconsin sample of the Census Household Pulse Survey, October-December 2020. Food hardships in the Feeding Wisconsin sample refer to what best describes food eaten in the past 30 days, while food hardships in the Census Pulse sample refer to the past 7 days.

Measuring Food Hardships

Researchers measure food hardships in a variety of ways. In this survey, we used the food insufficiency measure to assess household food hardships. Respondents were asked to choose which response best describes the food eaten in their household in the last 30 days: *enough of the kinds of food we wanted; enough, but not always the kinds of food we wanted; sometimes not enough to eat; or often not enough to eat.* Households are described as “food insufficient” if they sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat.

We also measured child hunger. Respondents were asked whether, over the past 30 days, it was often, sometimes or never the case that the *children were not eating enough because we just could not afford enough food.* We describe households as reporting child hunger when this was sometimes or often the case.

Another commonly used measure of food hardship is food insecurity – a broader measure than food insufficiency. Households are considered to be food insecure if they have uncertain access to the food they need. Food insecurity is measured with a series of questions, rather than a single question, and was not measured in this survey. Food insecurity is more widespread than food insufficiency: Over the several years preceding the pandemic, around 3.5% of households in Wisconsin reported food insufficiency, while around 10% were food insecure.

[8] Comparison to analysis of households with children in Census Household Pulse Survey, Wisconsin sample, October-December 2020.

We also specifically asked about food hardships among children in the household. 37% of respondents with children reported child hunger: the children sometimes or often were not eating enough because they could not afford food (see 'Measuring Food Hardships' text box). Notably, respondents more frequently said that their children were not eating enough than that their household as a whole did not have enough food - perhaps because children were particularly impacted by loss of school meals, or because the lack of food was more salient when focusing on children. This question specifically asks if the condition was ever experienced over the past 30 days, rather than what best describes the overall 30-day period. [9]

Food hardships were also common among working-age childless households in our sample, with 22% reporting enough of the kinds of food they wanted, 55% reporting reduced desirability, and 23% sometimes or often not having enough food. Among senior-only households, food hardships were less widespread: 37% of these households had enough of the kinds of foods they wanted, 57% had enough but not always the kind of foods they wanted, and 6% sometimes or often didn't have enough to eat (see Table 1). [10]

Table 1. Household Food Hardships in Past 30 Days Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients

Food hardship	Households with children	Working-age households without children	Senior-only households
No hardship	22%	22%	37%
Reduced desirability	49%	55%	57%
Food insufficiency	29%	23%	6%

We asked all households about whether a variety of factors made it difficult to get the food they needed. In the survey respondents could select as many barriers as they experienced. Almost all households (86%) reported at least one barrier. The most common barrier listed was lack of money, cited by 71% of all respondents. Next, 41% of all households said that limits on how often they could use food pantries were a barrier. Other barriers included mobility or health problems (35%), limited food options at stores (28%), lack of transportation (19%), and loss of school meals (12%). The latter was a more widespread barrier, of course, for households with children (30%). Table 2 shows how common different barriers were for each of the household types.

Table 2. Barriers to Meeting Household Food Needs Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients

Food access barriers	Households with children	Working-age households without children	Senior-only households
Transportation	16%	22%	19%
Mobility/health	28%	39%	37%
Limited options at stores	32%	27%	22%
Lack of money	73%	78%	51%
Food pantry limits	48%	43%	27%
Loss of school meals	30%	4%	2%

Note: Table shows the percent of all respondents who reported various difficulties in getting the food their household needed during the past 30 days.

[9] Research often finds that children are shielded from household food hardships. This differs from our finding. The household food insufficiency question and the child hunger question are each worded differently (see Measuring Food Hardships text box), and this could influence how frequently each condition is reported. The high rate of child-specific food hardships compared to household food hardships, using questions similar to ours, is also evident in the Census Household Pulse Survey.

[10] Food insufficiency in our sample is broadly consistent with food insufficiency in our benchmark sample described earlier. In that sample, 22% of WI households receiving free food from pantries or community programs were food insufficient, similar to 21% in the Feeding WI sample. Rates were also similar for households with children in both samples, and for all households with a senior in both samples. However, food insufficiency is measured over different time periods (past 7 days vs past 30 days), so the measures are not exactly comparable.

Making Ends Meet

Food hardships coexist with broader economic challenges. Working-age pantry clients with and without children reported widespread difficulty meeting expenses and paying their bills, and one-fifth of households with children were a month or more behind on housing payments. Food assistance not only provides food, it also helps free up scarce resources for other needs.

We asked clients how difficult it was to meet their expenses and pay their bills, such as housing, utility, medical, or other bills, as well as how easy or hard it was compared to this time a year ago. This provides a broader picture of their ability to make ends meet than what we can learn from the food hardship questions alone.

As with food hardships, difficulty meeting expenses and keeping up with bills was most widespread among the client households with children: Almost all reported at least some difficulty, including 21% who found it a little difficult, 38% who found it somewhat difficult, and 37% who found it very or extremely difficult. Working age childless households also reported high rates of difficulty, with over 90% reporting some level of difficulty and one-third who found it very or extremely difficult. Difficulties were widespread but less severe among the senior-only households (see Table 3).

Table 3. Current Difficulty in Meeting Expenses and Keeping Up With Bills Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients

Difficulty level	Households with children	Working-age households without children	Senior-only households
Not difficult	4%	8%	21%
A little difficult	21%	26%	39%
Somewhat difficult	38%	34%	25%
Very/extremely difficult	37%	32%	15%

Most found it harder to pay bills and meet expenses than a year ago – and this, too, was especially true for households with children (see Table 4). 83% of these households found it harder than a year ago to cover their expenses, as did 73% of working-age childless households. Senior-only households reported less change: about half found it more difficult than last year. The range of responses to this question reflects the different circumstances facing food pantry clients, with some facing COVID-19-related impacts or other acute challenges, and others for whom pantries are part of an ongoing strategy to meet their basic needs.

Table 4. Difficulty in Meeting Expenses Compared to a Year Earlier Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients

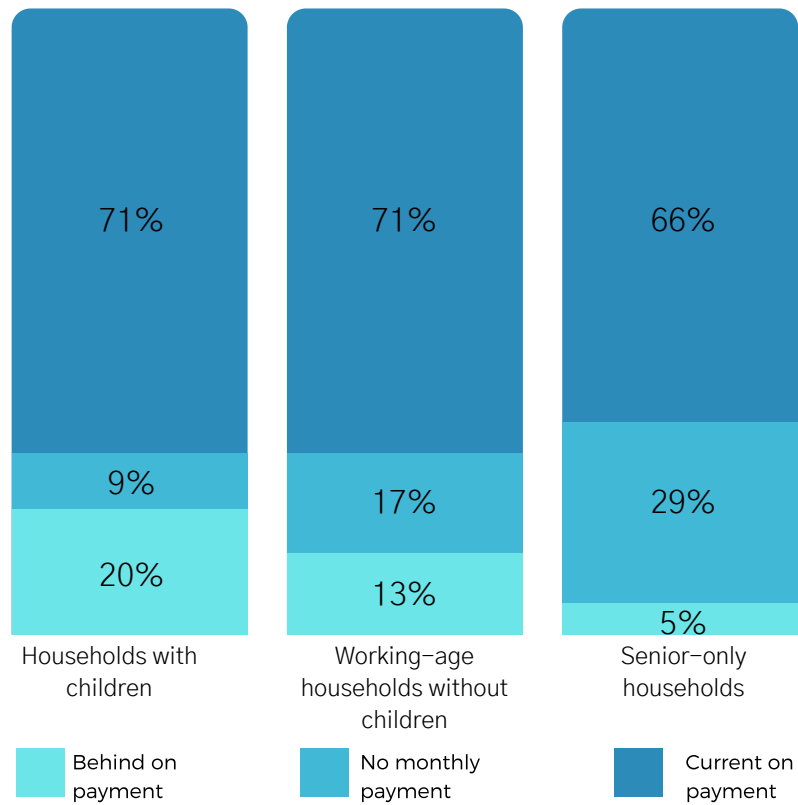
Difficulty level	Households with children	Working-age households without children	Senior-only households
Easier now	3%	3%	5%
About the same	14%	24%	47%
Harder now	83%	73%	49%

As a more concrete indication of keeping up with expenses, we also asked respondents whether they were behind on housing payments. 14% of all respondents were one or more months behind, including 5% of senior-only households, 13% of childless working-age households, and 20% of households with children (see Figure 4). Almost one-third of the senior-only households did not have regular housing payments; this was much less common among the working-age households with and without children.

We asked respondents to share comments on their challenges and experiences in meeting their food needs. Many commented on the link between meeting their food needs and broader challenges in making ends meet. They explained that receiving food at pantries or from FoodShare made it easier to keep up with other recurring expenses by freeing up money that would otherwise be spent on food. For many, the challenge in making ends meet is ongoing, and receiving food has ripple effects that help stabilize their broader situation.

"Sometimes buying food means other financial obligations have to suffer."

Figure 4. Status of Housing Payments Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients



Note: Figure shows the share of respondent households who are one or more months behind on rent or mortgage; who have no regular housing payments; and who are current on monthly payments.

"Being able to get some of my food at the food shelf helps out a lot. I do not have to spend a lot of money to buy groceries at a store. I don't have to struggle so much trying to figure out how to pay bills or how am I going to get something to eat."

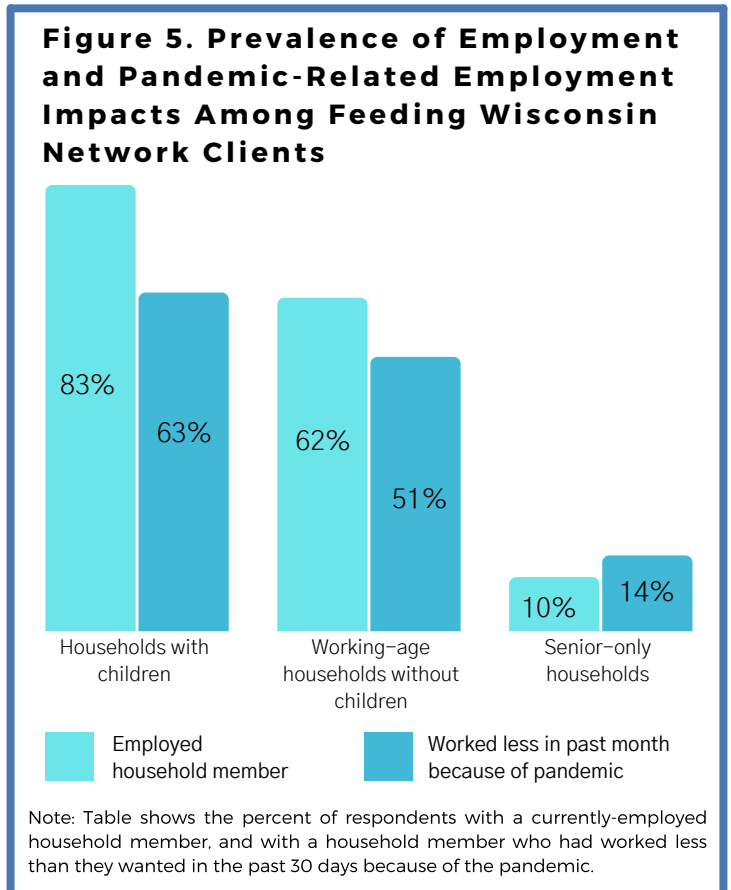
"These distributions make a small but noticeable difference in our financial security week-to-week."

Employment and Pandemic-Related Employment Impacts

Employment was common among working-age households, particularly those with children – but pandemic-related work impacts were widespread as well. Work impacts arose from job losses and furloughs, concerns over COVID-19 workplace risks, and pandemic-related health and caregiving needs. Households that experienced income losses from the pandemic had higher rates of food hardships and difficulty making ends meet than other households.

Over half of the respondents in our sample had at least one currently-employed household member (58%). This varied widely across household types – from 10% of senior-only households, to 62% of working-age childless households, to 83% of households with minor children (see Figure 5).

While employment was common among working-age households with and without children, the pandemic nonetheless had widespread impacts on their employment and earnings. Over half of these respondents said that someone in their household had worked less than they wanted in the past month due to the pandemic, including 63% of households with children and 51% of working-age childless households (Figure 5). Employment and pandemic-related impacts often occurred together: almost two-thirds (64%) of currently-employed households had experienced pandemic-related employment impacts in the past month.



Households reported a range of pandemic-related work losses, arising from layoffs and furloughs, concerns about job-related COVID-19 risks, COVID-19 illness and caretaking for sick household members, and caring for children while schools were closed. In the survey respondents could select as many reasons for work losses as they experienced. Among households with children, 33% had a household member who had worked less than they wanted or hadn't worked because they had been furloughed or laid off, and 7% because they had less work available. 28% of households with children had a household member who had worked less or did not work due to concerns about getting COVID-19 at work, 33% were caring for kids while schools were closed, and 13% worked less than they wanted because they were sick with or caring for someone with COVID-19. These barriers were broadly similar for working-age childless households, with the exception of caring for children who were out of school, which is generally not relevant to this group (see Table 5).

Pantry clients with recent work impacts stemming from the pandemic were experiencing food and other hardships more acutely than other clients whose circumstances may be more stable, and this was especially true for households with children. Among working-age households with children, 39% of those who had employment impacted by the pandemic reported not having enough to eat, compared to 12% among pantry clients without recent COVID-19-linked work impacts. Those whose employment had been impacted were also much more likely to be behind on housing payments (24% vs 12%), and to find it very or extremely difficult to pay their bills (45% vs 23%).

Household Income

Pantry clients had variable but low current incomes; the average incomes for working-age households were about equal to the federal poverty line for their household size.

We asked about household income in the past 30 days, with income reported in ranges. The most common income for each of the household types was \$1000-\$2000, and the large majority of households reported income below \$3000 in the past month (see Figure 6).

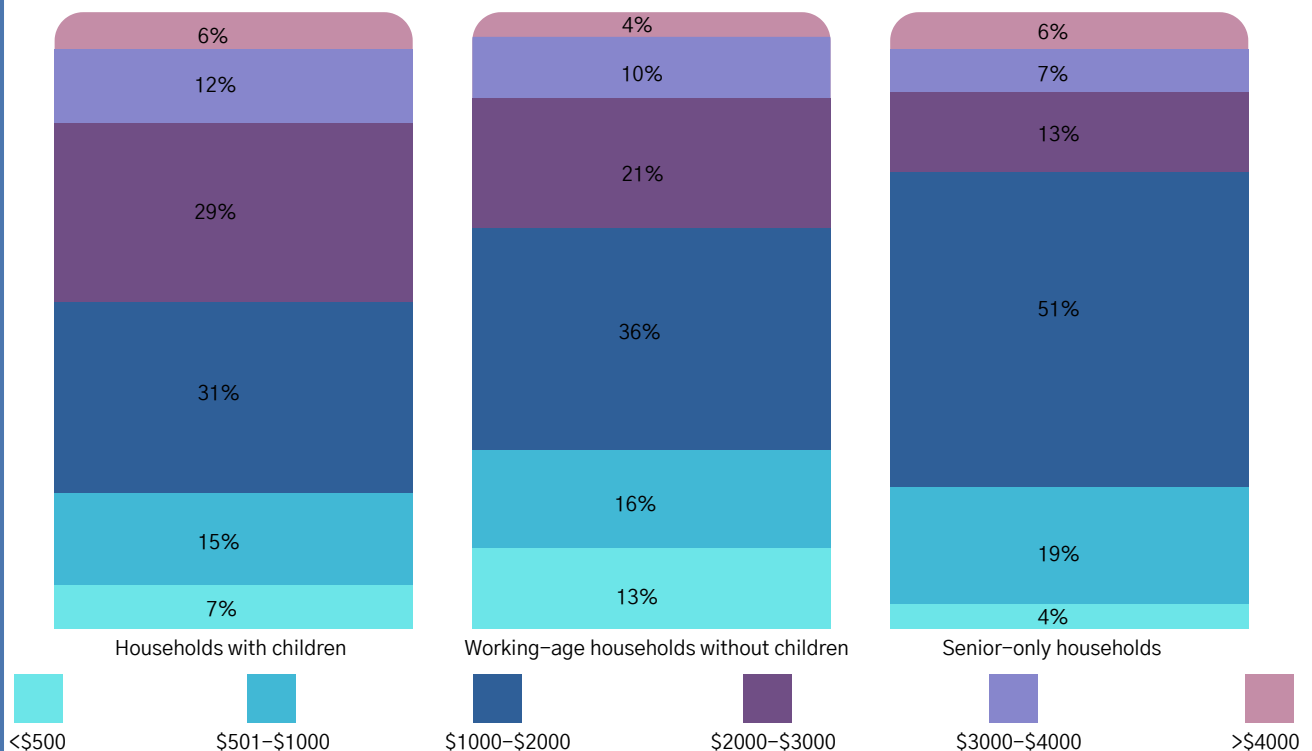
Table 5. Pandemic-Related Work Impacts Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients

Reasons for working less	Households with children	Working-age households without children
Layoff/furlough	33%	26%
Less work/hours available	7%	6%
Concerns about COVID-19 at work	28%	26%
Sick with or caring for someone with COVID-19	13%	9%
Caring for child(ren) while schools closed	33%	2%

Note: Table shows the prevalence of various pandemic-related reasons for household members working less than they wanted in the past 30 days, among all respondents.

With incomes estimated at the midpoint of the reported ranges, the average household income in the past month for all respondents was around \$1800. To compare incomes in different sized households, we divided incomes by the federal poverty line based on household size to estimate households' income-to-poverty ratio. As an example, a household with income equal to the federal poverty line has an income-to-poverty ratio of 1. The average income-to-poverty ratio was around 0.9 for households with children (meaning on average, their income was just below the poverty line); the ratio was around 1.15 for working-age households with children, and 1.4 for senior-only households. While these estimates are rough - they are based on incomes reported in broad ranges - they are nonetheless useful as ballpark estimates, and they confirm that, across household types, pantry recipients have quite low current needs-adjusted incomes.

Figure 6. Monthly Household Income Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients



Note: Total household income was reported in ranges, and includes income from jobs, net income from business, pensions, social security, and other money income.

Income and Food Sources

In addition to food from the food pantry, pantry clients variously reported income from a job, income from social insurance programs, support from other food assistance programs, and informal supports. Working-age pantry clients, particularly households with children, relied on a wide range of income and food sources; senior-only households were much more limited in their sources of support, which were largely confined to Social Security retirement income and sometimes FoodShare.

To learn more about how pantry clients package their resources, we asked about income sources, food sources, and informal supports over the past month. We divided these sources into four categories: employment or self-employment; social insurance (Unemployment Compensation, Social Security retirement benefits, disability benefits); food assistance (FoodShare, free meals at school, free meals for children on non-school days, the Women, Infants and Children supplemental nutrition program [WIC], the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations [FDPIR], other tribal food distributions, and Meals on Wheels or other home-delivered no-cost meals); and informal support (food or money from a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious organization, and food or financial help from family or friends). These sources varied considerably across household types (see Table 6).

Table 6. Income and Food Sources Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients

	Households with children	Working-age households without children	Senior-only households
Jobs or self-employment	76%	50%	9%
Social insurance	42%	62%	96%
Social Security retirement income	14%	31%	93%
Disability income	21%	38%	12%
Unemployment Compensation	14%	9%	----
Food assistance	77%	40%	48%
FoodShare	38%	35%	42%
Free school meals	50%	1%	----
Free meals on non-school days	30%	1%	----
WIC	17%	1%	----
Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations	4%	4%	2%
Other tribal food distributions	4%	1%	1%
Meals on Wheels or similar	1%	2%	5%
Informal food or financial support	42%	36%	12%
Religious organization	12%	14%	8%
Family/friends	36%	26%	5%

Note: Table shows the share of respondents whose household received various income and food resources in the past 30 days.

Almost all the senior-only households in our sample reported social insurance income (96%) – usually Social Security retirement income (93%), and occasionally disability income (12%). Income from a job was uncommon (9%). Almost half received some form of food assistance (48%), most commonly FoodShare (42%). Other food sources played a very limited role. Informal supports were infrequent in this group (12%).

Income sources were much more diverse among working-age childless households. Half of this group had income from a job; 62% had some form of social insurance income (38% disability-related income; 31% Social Security retirement income, 9% Unemployment Compensation). [11] 40% received at least one kind of food assistance, most commonly FoodShare (35%). Informal supports were much more common than among senior-only households (36%), including 14% receiving food or financial support from a church or religious institution, and about one-quarter (26%) getting informal support from family or friends.

Finally, three-quarters (76%) of households with children had income from a job or self-employment in the past month. Social insurance income was less common than in the other groups (42%): 21% reported disability income, 14% reported Unemployment Compensation and the same share reported Social Security retirement income. On the other hand, food assistance was much more common (76%). School meals were widespread: half reported their children had gotten meals at school in the past month, and 30% reported meals from the school district on days when kids were not in school. 38% of households with children received FoodShare and 17% received food from WIC. Informal supports were also fairly common (42%), with 12% reporting food or money from a religious organization and 36% reporting food or financial help from family or friends – the highest share among any of the three household types.

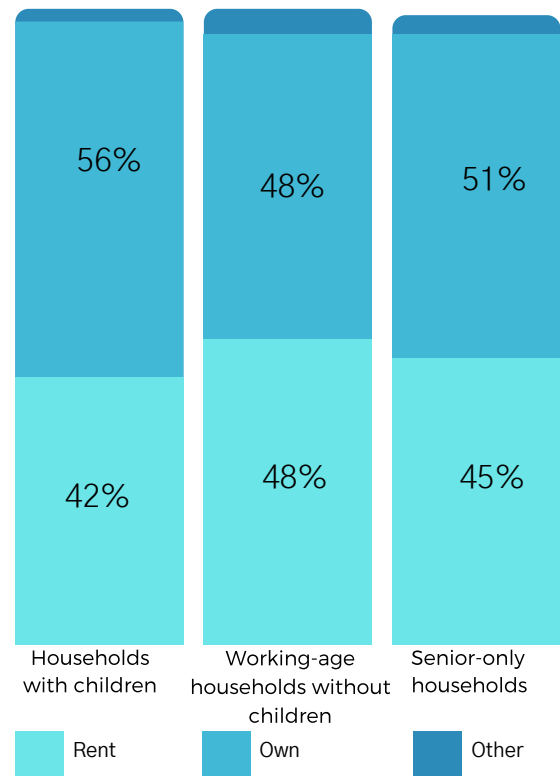
Housing

Pantry clients included both renters and home owners. Among households with children, those who rented their home were particularly likely to report hardships related to food, housing payments, and keeping up with bills; for other household groups, hardships were more similar between renters and owners.

Just over half of respondents owned their own home, 45% were renters, and 3% had some other housing arrangement – a pattern that closely matches the benchmark sample. This was fairly similar across the 3 household groups (see Figure 7).

Among households with children, food and other hardships were much more common among renters than home-owners. For instance, looking specifically at households with children, 43% of renters reported sometimes not having enough to eat, compared to 18% of home owners. Almost half of renters with children (47%) found it very or extremely difficult to pay their bills, compared to 32% of owners; and 25% of renters with children were at least a month behind on housing payments, compared to 16% of those who owned their homes. Among childless and senior-only households, hardships were much more similar for owners and renters.

Figure 7. Housing Situations Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients



Note: Figure shows the percent of respondents' whose home is owned by someone in the household, rented by a household member, or with some other arrangement.

[11] More than one-quarter of these households have someone 65 in the household in addition to one or more working-age adults.

Work-Limiting Disability or Health Condition

Work-limiting disabilities and health conditions were common among pantry visitors. Households with a member with a disability or work-limiting health condition were more likely than other households to report food hardships, more likely to have high levels of difficulty in keeping up with expenses, and frequently cited mobility and health issues as barriers to meeting their food needs.

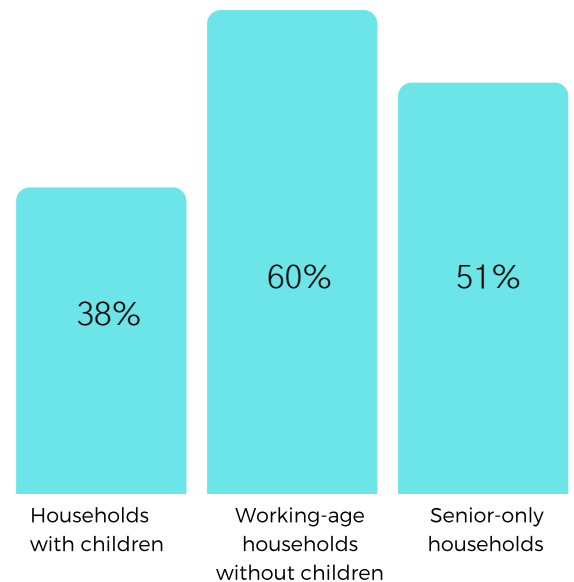
Work-limiting disabilities and health conditions were very common among pantry clients: Just over half of respondents (51%) indicated that someone in their household had a disability or health condition that limits their ability to work. Health limitations and disabilities were most common in working-age childless households (60%), followed by senior-only households (51%), and somewhat less common in households with children (38%).

The high rate of work-limiting disabilities and health conditions among pantry clients is consistent with growing evidence that disability is a major risk factor for food insecurity. Among pantry clients in our sample, 56% of those with a household member with a disability or work-limiting health condition cited mobility or health issues as a barrier to meeting their food needs. Food hardships were more common among households reporting disabilities or work-limiting health conditions as compared to other households in our sample (26% vs 18%), and this was especially true for households with children (41% reported food insufficiency, compared to 23% of households with children without a household member with a disability).

In addition to food hardships, respondents with a household member with a disability or work-limiting health condition were more likely than other households to report that it was very or extremely difficult to keep up with their bills (38% vs 21%). They were also much more likely than other households to be receiving FoodShare (49% vs 26%).

Respondents frequently mentioned health expenses as a contributing factor to their need for food assistance (e.g., cost of health insurance, medical and dental bills, special dietary needs).

Figure 8. Disabilities And Work-Limiting Health Conditions Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients



Note: Figure shows the share of respondents with an adult household member who has a disability or health condition that limits their ability to work.



Pantry Usage

Pre-Pandemic Experience with Food Pantries

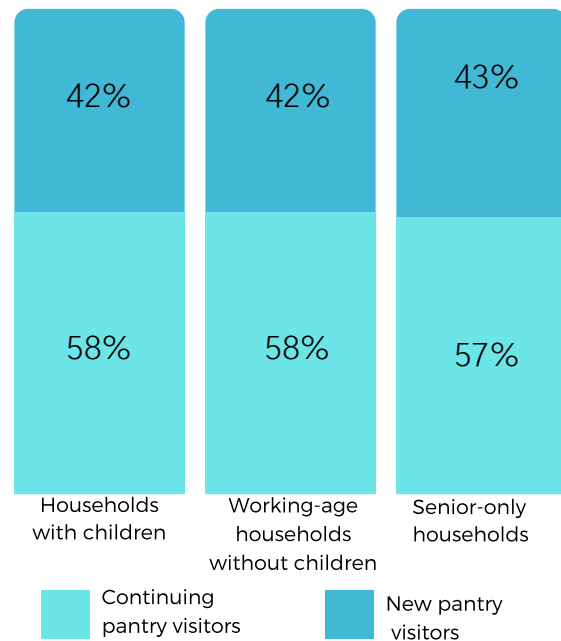
While the pandemic led to a surge in demand at food pantries, pantries have also continued to serve existing clients: over half of respondents had visited a pantry prior to the pandemic. Compared to those with prior food pantry experience, visitors who were new to food pantries since the pandemic were less likely to have a disability or work-limiting health condition, and somewhat more likely to own their home and to have a college degree. They were much less likely to be connected to social insurance or food assistance programs, and more likely to have experienced pandemic-related job impacts.

Over half of respondents (58%) had visited a pantry at some point prior to the pandemic. This was similar for senior-only households, working-age childless households, and households with children (see Figure 9). We refer to households that report pantry use before the pandemic as continuing visitors, and households with no prior use as new visitors – though the ‘continuing’ visitors were not necessarily active pantry clients in the months leading up to the pandemic. The distinction between new and continuing visitors is helpful in understanding the kinds of households for whom the pandemic may have served as a catalyst for seeking assistance.

Although there were many commonalities between the new and continuing visitors in our sample, there were also some differences (see Table 7). For instance, new visitors were more likely to have a household member with a four-year college degree (33% vs 23%), more likely to own their home (61% vs 44%), more likely to have monthly household income over \$2000 (45% vs 31%), and far less likely to have a household member with a work-limiting disability or health condition (36% vs 62%).



Figure 9. Pre-Pandemic Experience Visiting Food Pantries, Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients



Note: New pantry visitors are respondents whose household never visited a food pantry prior to the pandemic.

Among working-age households and households with children, new visitors were less likely than continuing visitors to have income from social insurance programs (44% vs 61%) or FoodShare (20% vs 48%). However, they were also more likely to report job impacts due to the pandemic (65% vs 50%).

Overall, these differences are consistent with the pandemic causing economic shocks and hardships among households that have traditionally been less vulnerable. The differences are also consistent with pantries using less stringent eligibility rules during the pandemic to ensure those in need could access support.

Frequency of Visits

Although people refer to pantries as part of the ‘emergency’ food system, for many households pantries are a frequent – not incidental – source of food.

Almost all respondents – both new and continuing clients – had made multiple pantry visits over the course of the pandemic. Only 5% indicated this was their first visit since March 2020 when the pandemic started; 30% reported 2-5 visits, 32% 6-10 visits, 14% 11-15 visits, and 19% 16 or more visits to a pantry. 11% of respondents indicated that the pantry they most recently visited was in a different county from where they lived. Continuing pantry clients were the most frequent visitors, with over one-quarter (26%) reporting 16 or more visits, as compared to 10% of new users. This is consistent with having an ongoing influx of new users over the course of the pandemic.

Table 7. Household Characteristics of New and Continuing Clients of Feeding Wisconsin Network Pantries

	New pantry clients	Continuing pantry clients
All Households		
Household member with 4-year college degree	33%	23%
Homeowner	61%	44%
Disability or work-limiting health condition	36%	62%
Monthly income >\$2000	45%	31%
Working-age Households		
Employment income	71%	53%
Social insurance income	44%	61%
FoodShare	20%	48%
Employment impact from pandemic	65%	50%

Note: New pantry clients are respondents whose household had never visited a food pantry before the pandemic.

Working age households with and without children were more frequent visitors than senior-only households (see Table 8): 22% of households with children and 20% of working-age childless households reported 16 or more visits since the start of the pandemic, as did 12% of senior-only households.

Table 8. Number of Pantry Visits Since Start of Pandemic, Among Feeding Wisconsin Network Clients

Visits during pandemic	Households with children	Working-age households without children	Senior-only households
1	7%	5%	1%
2-5	31%	30%	28%
6-10	29%	32%	36%
11-15	11%	13%	23%
16+	22%	20%	12%

Note: Table shows the total visits that respondents' households have made to any food pantries, March 2020 – October/November 2020.

Types of Food Pantries

Mobile or pop-up food distribution sites, which were widespread during the pandemic, were particularly effective in reaching households without past experience visiting food pantries. On many dimensions, however, visitors to mobile/pop-up distribution sites were quite similar to visitors to traditional pantries.

Food pantries around Wisconsin include traditional pantries at regular, fixed locations, as well as mobile or pop-up food distribution sites. 61% of survey respondents had most recently gotten food from a fixed-location pantry, 35% from a pop-up or mobile distribution site, and 4% had most recently had free food delivered to them.

Clients of fixed and mobile/pop-up food distribution sites pantries were similar across many dimensions (see Table 9): they were roughly as likely to live alone or with others; to have children or seniors in the households; and they had similar education levels. Clients of both pantry types had similar average needs-adjusted incomes, similar rates of food insufficiency, similar rates of current employment, and reported similar rates of COVID-19-related income losses.

There were, however, some differences across pantry types. Clients visiting mobile/pop-up distribution site reported much lower rates of work-limiting disability and health conditions (40% vs 57%). Those visiting mobile distribution sites were also less likely to receive FoodShare (30% vs 41%). The most notable difference is in past pantry use: 65% of those visiting mobile/pop-up distribution sites reported no food pantry use prior to the pandemic, compared to only 29% of clients visiting fixed-location pantries. The pop-up sites that were prevalent during the pandemic appear from these numbers to have been particularly effective at reaching people not accustomed to using food pantries, but who in many ways are similar to people using traditional pantries.



Table 9. Household Characteristics of Visitors to Pop-up/Mobile Food Distribution Sites and Traditional Food Pantries in Feeding Wisconsin Network

	Pop-up/ mobile pantries	Traditional pantries
Child in household	33%	34%
Working-age member	74%	79%
Lives alone	24%	23%
College degree	26%	27%
Employed household member	58%	57%
Worked less due to pandemic	47%	46%
Disability or work-limiting health condition	40%	57%
Income over \$2000	43%	35%
Average income: poverty ratio	1.2	1.1
Food insufficient	29%	33%
FoodShare	30%	41%
No prior pantry use	65%	29%

Note: Respondents are classified based on the kind of pantry they most recently visited.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

While the presence of food insecurity has been a long-standing focus for many researchers, policymakers, and communities, the issue has taken on new prominence since the start of the pandemic. Research from the Census Bureau throughout the pandemic documented striking levels of week-to-week food hardships, and lines at food pantries and food distribution sites became staples of the daily news. In Wisconsin, the state's six regional Feeding America food banks provided 79 million pounds of food via a statewide network of food programs in 2020, an increase of 62% over the previous year. Nonetheless, food insecurity is not a new issue, and food pantries have long played a critical role in supporting vulnerable households, in Wisconsin and nationwide. The research described in this report provides a broad-brush look at the circumstances and experiences of households visiting traditional food pantries and pop-up/mobile food distribution sites in the Feeding Wisconsin network during fall 2020.

This study – like past research on food pantries – shows clearly that there is no 'typical' food pantry client. While incomes are low and food hardships and economic hardships are widespread, pantries serve visitors who vary widely across dimensions spanning housing status, education, disability, needs-adjusted income, employment, food hardships and barriers, and sources of income and food resources.

A shortcoming of our sample is the limited racial and ethnic diversity, and in particular an underrepresentation of black and Hispanic pantry visitors. Understanding the experiences and circumstances of visitors of all race and ethnicity groups who access food pantries is essential to a full understanding of the role of food pantries and food distribution sites. This is particularly true in light of the profound disparities in food hardships during the pandemic. For instance, over the June-December 2020 period in Wisconsin, 7.5% of white households with a child reported the children weren't eating enough in the past week because they couldn't afford enough food, as did 27.4% of Hispanic and 40.7% of black households with children. [12]

The research reported here was conducted during the height of the pandemic, and the pandemic contributed to vulnerabilities for many client households. Households new to pantries since the start of the pandemic – over 40% of client households in our sample – were more likely than continuing clients to have experienced pandemic-related work impacts (though impacts were widespread in both groups). At the same time, new visitors were less likely to have other characteristics often associated with economic hardships, or to have a current connection to social insurance or food assistance programs. The pop-up/mobile food distributions that proliferated during the pandemic appear to have been particularly effective at reaching people without past pantry experience, compared to traditional pantries. This may reflect greater anonymity and reduced stigma associated with these sites, less paperwork, increased convenience, or other factors.

While the pandemic has clearly impacted need, it is equally apparent that the needs served by food pantries go well beyond pandemic impacts and well beyond emergencies. For the large majority of visitors, pantries and food distributions were a frequent rather than an incidental or emergency source of food, and more than half of clients had visited pantries before the pandemic. One indication of the central role that visitors ascribe to pantries is that limits on pantry visits was listed second only to lack of money as a barrier to meeting food needs. Respondents' comments highlighted the fundamental connections between food and other needs: while for some visitors, pantries and food distributions prevented them from going hungry, others framed the role of pantries as freeing up resources to pay other bills and expenses. For many households, food and other expenses are in tension for scarce resources, not just in times of emergency but on an ongoing basis, and pantries help to provide slack. In short, food insecurity coexists with broader economic challenges, not as a standalone problem.

While in the immediate sense food pantries provide food, our findings highlight the vital role they play not only in addressing food insecurity but in providing a measure of economic security to vulnerable households. Ensuring food pantries have the capacity to continue meeting community needs is essential. At the same time, provision of free food does not address root causes of hunger. Solutions to food hardship require identifying and tackling the structural foundations of food insecurity – which extend well beyond simply lack of food and which both precede and will outlast the pandemic.

Food security rests on four pillars: opportunities for economic security; vibrant food systems; robust federal, state, and local nutrition programs; and strong emergency food networks. [13] Strengthening the food security foundation across all four pillars, including but not limited to the emergency food system, can help create meaningful and lasting gains in food security in Wisconsin and beyond.

[12] Authors' analyses from the Census Household Pulse Survey.

[13] Wisconsin Food Security Consortium. 2008. Ending Hunger in Wisconsin.

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