

Alabama Food Security and Access During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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General Overview Brief

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Background

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected people across the globe, disrupting food access and security. To understand how food systems and security have been impacted, an online survey was launched for five weeks in Alabama beginning June 29th through social media, media coverage, and community partners. A total of 1,290 Alabamians responded. This brief provides a summary of their responses, including reported food security, perceived impacts, concerns related to food access, and food behaviors.

COVID-19 Decreases Food Security, Job Stability and Food Access

Based on a standardized set of USDA questions, food insecurity has increased by 52% since the coronavirus outbreak (25% of the respondents reported experiencing food insecurity in the last year, and 38% reported experiencing food insecurity since the World Health Organization declared a pandemic on March 11th, 2020) (Figure 1).

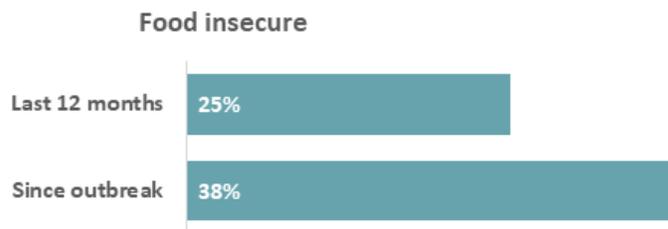


Figure 1. Percent of respondents experiencing food insecurity in the last 12 months and since the coronavirus outbreak.

Key Findings

1. Respondents reported a 52% increase in food insecurity since the coronavirus outbreak began in Alabama (from 25% to 38%).
2. 45% of respondents with jobs experienced a job disruption or loss.
3. Respondents said the most helpful actions for meeting their food needs would be increased trust in the safety of going to stores, more or different food in stores, and extra money to help pay for food or bills.
4. Respondents worried most about food becoming unaffordable or unavailable.
5. Alabamians are using a variety of strategies to adapt: a majority of respondents are at least somewhat likely to buy foods that don't go bad quickly (80%); buy different, cheaper foods (76%), and stretch the food they have by eating less (57%).

- 45% of respondents with jobs indicated they experienced a job disruption, including being furloughed (10%), having a reduction in hours (28%), or losing their job (16%).
- Since the outbreak, people accessed food differently. Grocery delivery increased by 49% and reported use of programs that give food, such as food pantries, increased by 44%.
- The % of people reporting that “someone brings me food” more than doubled from 10% to 24% since the outbreak.
- Among respondent households, 31.6% indicated a food allergy, 43.2% indicated a food sensitivity, 49.5% included someone who needs to avoid foods for a health condition, 9.8% included at least one vegetarian or vegan, and 5.4% reported a religious restriction. 53% reporting a special diet said the outbreak has affected their ability to meet these needs.

"If pandemic unemployment ends, I won't be able to afford food."

-- Alabama survey respondent

• This survey evaluated a variety of impacts related to food from the coronavirus outbreak. Figure 2 shows the frequency of those occurrences; 78% said they reduced grocery trips to avoid exposure “usually” or “always.”

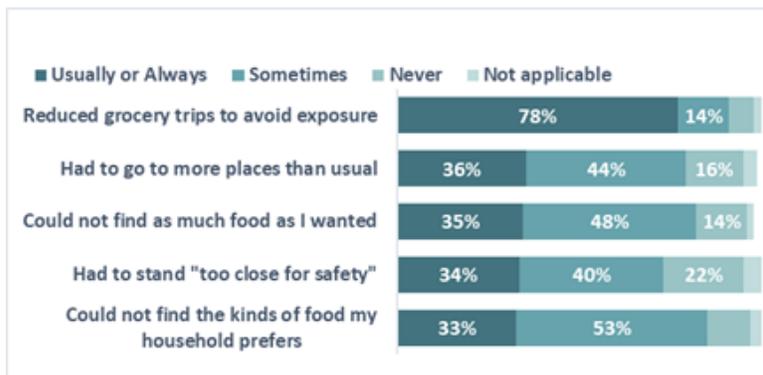


Figure 2. Top five impacts from the coronavirus outbreak. The majority of respondents indicated that these happened “sometimes,” “usually,” or “always.”

Alabamians Worry About Food, Forced To Adapt

• Respondents reported a variety of techniques that would be helpful during the outbreak. The top two responses were about the safety of the shopping experience and variety of food that is available; additionally, 88% of Alabamians said that more money would be helpful and 85% would value more trust in the safety of food (Figure 3).

• 65% of respondents said that information about food assistance programs would be at least somewhat helpful.

• Of respondents who reported using government or other food and financial assistance programs, 48% were new recipients of SNAP benefits, 23% were new WIC recipients, and 48% began visiting a food pantry since the outbreak.

• While 80% of respondents who reported using SNAP agreed the benefits were easy to use, 51% said they were not enough to meet their household food needs.

"Our one small grocery is not stocked so I have to drive 40 miles to get most of my groceries."

-- Alabama survey respondent



Figure 3. Top six most helpful items to make it easier for households to meet their food needs during the coronavirus outbreak.

• Of respondents indicating that extra money would be helpful, on average they reported that they need \$142 extra per week to meet their food needs.

• Respondents expressed a variety of worries about food during the outbreak, especially food becoming more expensive, there not being enough food in the store, and there not being enough food to feed everyone (Figure 4).

"I am one of those people who makes too much for assistance, but not enough to get by. I live paycheck to paycheck with nothing left over. It's been very difficult to keep my household running."

- Alabama survey respondent

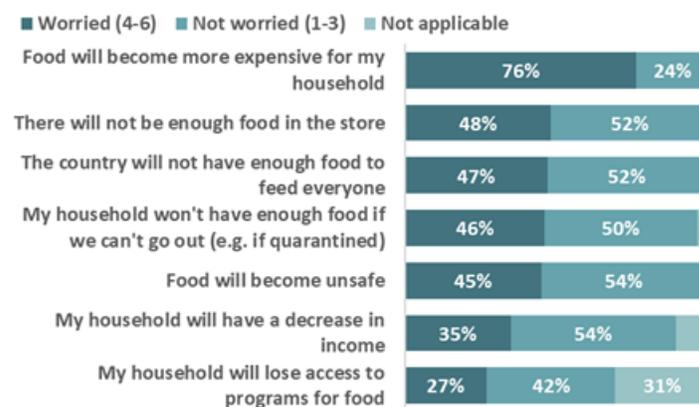


Figure 4. Level of worry for the household as it relates to coronavirus on a scale from 1 (not worried) to 6 (extremely worried).

• The top three strategies respondents reported that they would use if they had trouble affording food are buying foods that don't go bad, buying different or cheaper foods, and eating less (Figure 5).

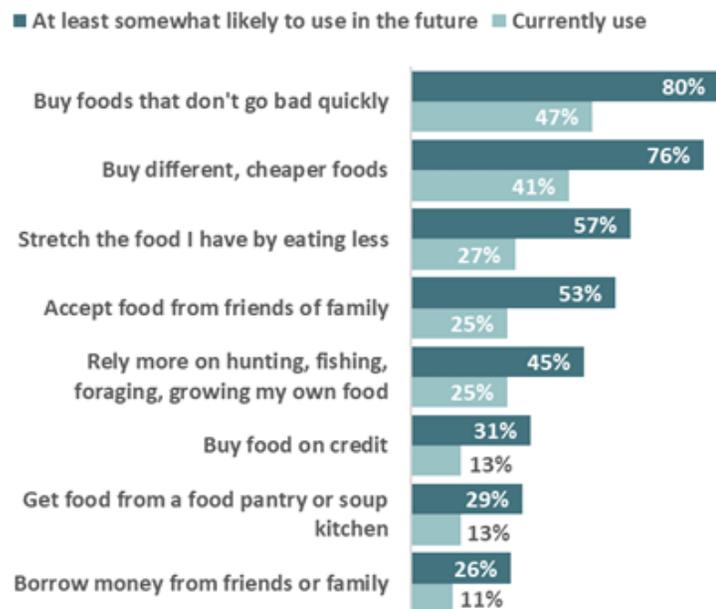


Figure 5. Strategies that respondents are currently using, or are at least somewhat likely to use in the future (includes "somewhat likely," "likely," and "very likely").

Food-related Behaviors are Changing

• Eating behaviors have changed in a variety of ways. About one-third of respondents reported eating less of certain types of foods, including fruits and vegetables, processed and red meats, and fish and seafood (Figure 6). Half of respondents reported instances of emotional and stress-induced eating during the outbreak.



Figure 6. Percent of respondents who reported "eating less," "eating the same amount," or "eating more" of foods since the outbreak.

"We have planted a small garden, as we usually do, but I am preserving more this year."

- Alabama survey respondent

• Respondents generally felt their households were reacting differently to the coronavirus outbreak than an "average US household" (Figure 7). While 89% said they had been cooking more, only 65% thought that the average household did this. Generally, respondents felt they were wasting less food since the coronavirus outbreak, and that the average household was throwing away more food comparatively.

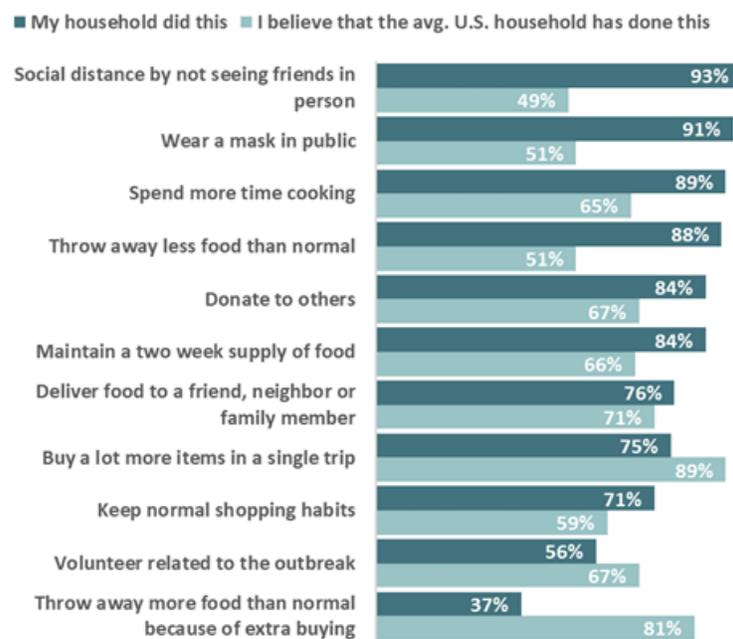


Figure 7. Comparison of self-reported behavior to the expected behavior of the average U.S. household.

"I do not believe that Alabama citizens are taking this pandemic seriously. I feel outraged that I am following protocols while those around me are doing exactly as they please. They are endangering my life."

- Alabama survey respondent

Perceptions Related to Coronavirus

• The majority of households reported distancing and avoiding seeing friends in person (93%) and wearing a mask in public (91%), while only half thought that the average U.S. household did these things (Figure 7).

- Respondents generally felt that average people should take action to prevent the spread of coronavirus and that it would affect people like them. Responses were slightly more divided regarding whether the U.S. should prioritize the economy over public health when it comes to COVID-19 (Figure 8).

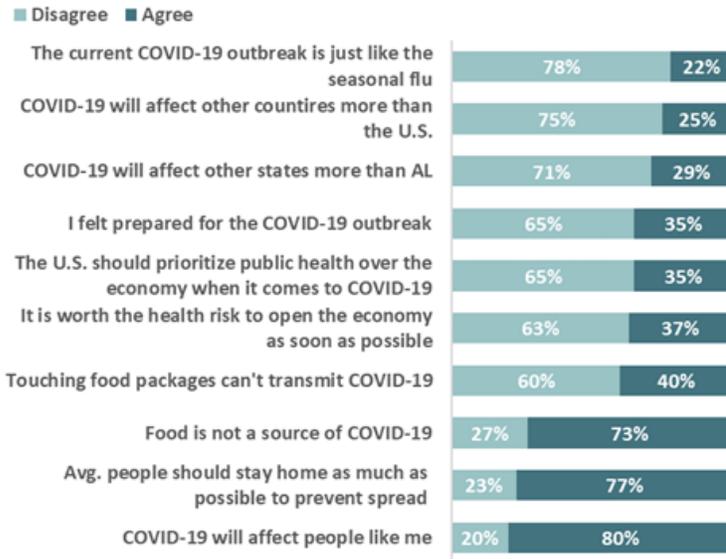


Figure 8. Agreement with statements regarding the COVID-19 outbreak. This was a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The categories were grouped accordingly ("Disagree" includes 1, 2, and 3 while "Agree" includes 4, 5, and 6).

- The majority of respondents (65%) didn't feel prepared for coronavirus (Figure 8).
- The majority (72%) knew at least one person with symptoms of or diagnosed with the coronavirus, while 21% said they themselves had to quarantine in their homes due to coronavirus.

"I think we were unprepared as a country for the supply chain for food and personal items being impacted by a pandemic. We need to take steps to prepare better for next time."

- Alabama survey respondent

Respondent Demographics

Compared to the state of Alabama, respondents were:

- Higher income (50% had a household income between \$50,000 and \$150,000, compared with 39% for Alabama)
- More formally educated (65% had a degree higher than high school, compared with 32% for Alabama)
- Less racially diverse (79% of respondents were white, compared with 69% for Alabama; 13% of respondents were Black, compared with 27% for Alabama)
- Mostly female (84% female, compared with 52% for Alabama)
- More rural (62% of respondents lived in a rural zip code, compared with 43% for Alabama)

Acknowledgements

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About NFACT

The National Food Access and COVID Research Team (NFACT) is a national collaboration of researchers committed to rigorous, comparative, and timely food access research during the time of COVID. We do this through collaborative, open access research that prioritizes communication to key decision-makers while building our scientific understanding of food system behaviors and policies. To learn more visit nfactresearch.org.