

# Changes in Employment Status and Food Security among U.S. households during the first four months of the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Background

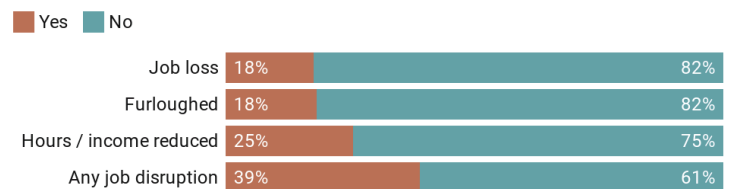
In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a sudden and severe economic downturn. Between February and May 2020, the number of unemployed individuals rose by more than 14 million, resulting in an unprecedented increase in the unemployment rate, which went from 3.8% in February to 14.4% in April.<sup>1</sup> Even though unemployment has declined in recent months, with some individuals returning to work, the rate is still much higher than it was one year ago (7.9% in September 2020 vs. 3.5% in September 2019).<sup>2</sup> Further, as of September 2020, there are 19.4 million persons unable to work due to the pandemic, as well as 6.3 million persons working only part time even though they would prefer to work more.<sup>3</sup> This brief shares preliminary findings from an online survey of 1,510 adults (18 years of age or older) living in the United States during summer, 2020.

## Changes in Employment Status

Four out of ten US households experienced a job disruption during the first four months of the COVID pandemic.

- Since the beginning of the pandemic (March 2020), 39% of US households experienced some form of job disruption (Figure 1).
- The most common change in employment status was having hours or income reduced, reported by 25% of households in our sample, followed by being furloughed (18%) and losing their job altogether (18%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Changes in employment status since the outbreak.

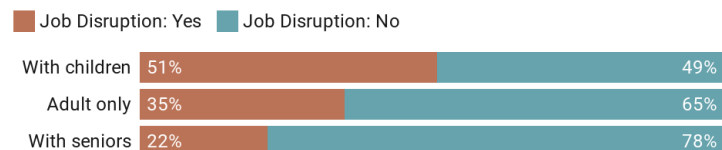


## Key Findings

1. Nearly 40% of US households were impacted by job disruption between March and July 2020.
2. Food insecurity was considerably higher among households that experienced a job disruption (55%) compared to those that did not (20%).
3. Food insecurity in households with children was significantly higher among households with a job disruption (71%) compared to households without a job disruption (31%).
4. Since the beginning of the pandemic (March 2020), households often worried about the availability, cost, and safety of food, as well as access to nutrition assistance programs, which were heightened among households that had experienced a job disruption.
5. Households with a job disruption reported greater need for financial support for food, bills, or food delivery (on average \$60 more per week), as well as the desire to learn more about food assistance programs.

- The overall rate of job disruption in this sample was similar across all income brackets (from 36% among households whose 2019 income was less than \$25,000, to 41% among households whose 2019 income was over \$100,000). Similarly, job disruptions occurred at approximately the same rate across different levels of education.
- In our sample, the rate of job disruptions differed across household types. Over half of households with children (51%) experienced a job disruption, while households without children experienced a job disruption at lower rates: 35% for adult-only households (all members between 19 and 64 years of age), and 22% for households with at least one member 65 or older (seniors) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Changes in employment status (lower cases) in the first four months of the outbreak by household type.



Note: Households with at least one child (0-18 years-old) = 'households with children.' Households without children = 'adult-only households' if all members between 19 and 64 years of age, and 'households with seniors' if at least one member was 65 or older.

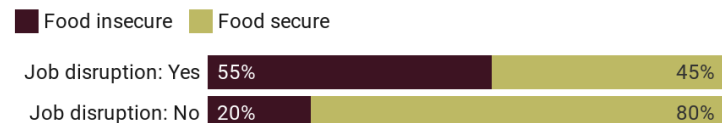
## Food Security by Changes in Employment Status

Changes in unemployment status during the first four months of the pandemic were closely linked to food insecurity

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.<sup>4</sup> We measure food insecurity using the USDA's validated six-item household food security survey module.<sup>5</sup> Respondents who answered affirmatively to two or more of the food insecurity questions were considered food insecure.<sup>5</sup>

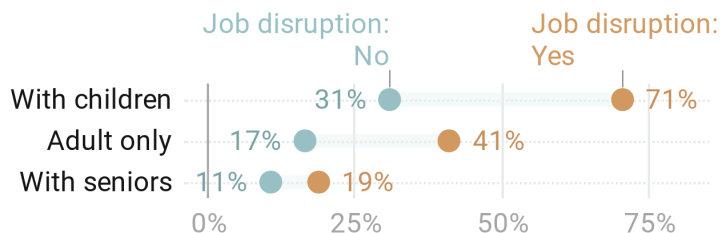
- Overall, 55% of households with a job disruption experienced food insecurity, compared to 20% of households without job disruption (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Food security by change in employment status.



- Experiencing a job disruption was associated with a marked increase in food insecurity, especially for adult-only households (from 17 to 41%) and for households with children

Figure 4. Percent of Households Experiencing food Insecurity by job disruption for different household types.



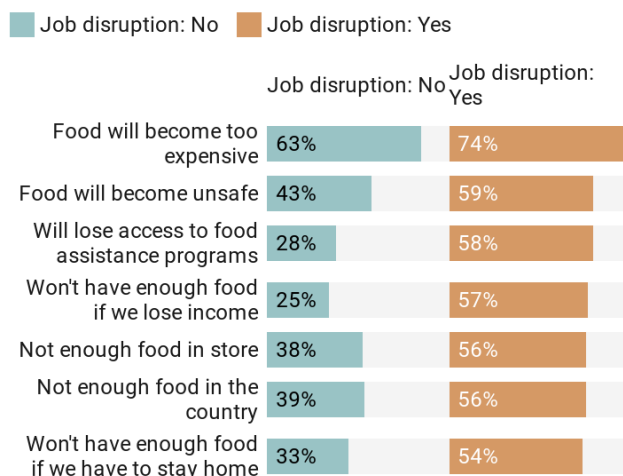
(from 31 to 71%) (Figure 4).

## Food Worries and Challenges by Changes Employment Status

US households were worried about food cost, food availability, access to nutrition assistance programs, and food safety.

- The majority of the respondents were worried about food becoming too expensive for them to afford (74% with job disruption, 63% with no job disruption) (Figure 5).
- While affordability was the main concern shared by all respondents, most households that experienced a job disruption were also worried about food availability, access, and safety (Figure 5).
- 58% of households that experienced a job disruption were concerned about losing access to food assistance programs. This concern was less prevalent among households that did not experience a change in employment status (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Food-related worries of households by change in employment status.



- Households that experienced a job disruption found getting food more challenging than households that did not experience a job disruption. Despite reporting going to more places than usual for food, they were less likely to find as much food as they wanted or their preferred kinds of food (Figure 6).
- Regardless of changes in employment status, households significantly reduced their grocery trips to minimize their exposure (Figure 6).

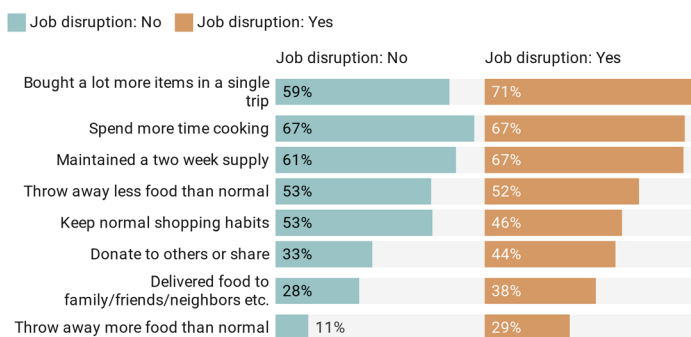
Figure 6. Food-related challenges reported by change in employment status. Frequency of challenges reported on a scale from 1 (Never) to 4 (Always).



Many US households, especially those who experienced a change in employment status, are worried about the impact of the pandemic on their food security, and relied on diverse strategies to meet their food needs.

- Between March and July, the majority of households spent more time cooking at home; maintained a two-week supply of groceries; and threw away less food than normal. These food-related behavioral changes were adopted to a similar extent by most US households in our sample, regardless of whether they did or did not experience a change in employment status (Figure 7).
- Households that experienced a job disruption were more likely to buy more items in a single shopping trip (reported by 71% with job disruption vs 59% without), while households who did not experience a job disruption more frequently maintained their normal shopping habits (reported by 53% without job disruption vs 46% with) (Figure 7).

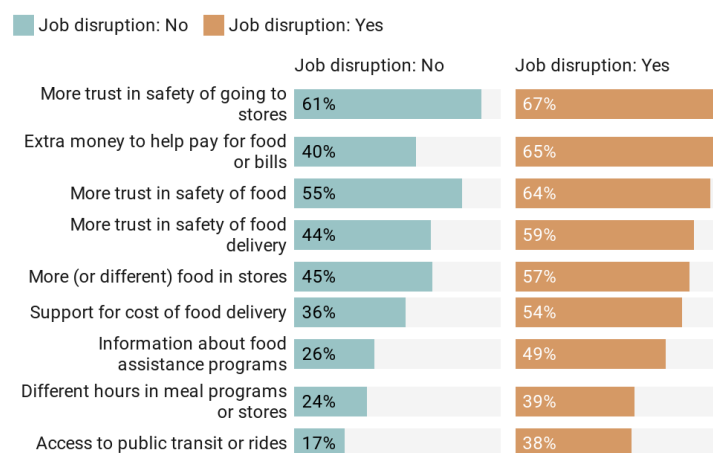
Figure 7. Food-related behavioral changes for households by change in employment status.



US households, especially those that have experienced a job disruption, reported several types of assistance that would make it easier to meet their food needs.

- Households reported that the most helpful strategies would be more trust in the safety of stores, food, and food delivery; extra money for food and bills; more (or different) food in stores; and support for the cost of food delivery (Figure 8).
- Households that experienced a job disruption were more likely to find any potential assistance strategy to be helpful compared to households that did not experience a job disruption (Figure 8).
- Compared to households that did not experience a job disruption, households with a job disruption were more interested in financial support for food or bills (65% with job disruption vs. 40% without) or food delivery (54% with job disruption vs. 36% without), and information about food assistance programs (49% with job disruption vs. 26% without) (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Helpful strategies to meet household food needs by change in employment status.

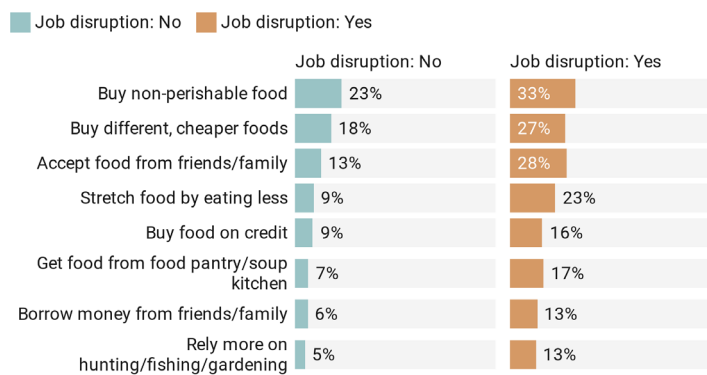


- Households that experienced a job disruption reported needing over \$60 more per week (approximately 50% more) to cover their food needs compared to households that did not experienced a job disruption (\$191 vs \$128).

Some US households, especially those that have experienced a job disruption, are engaging in a range of coping strategies to meet their food needs.

- Compared to households that did not experience a job disruption, households that experienced a job disruption more often reported relying on friends, family, the emergency food system (i.e. food pantries and soup kitchens), and credit to obtain food (Figure 9).
- Other strategies reported included buying non-perishable foods, buying different, cheaper foods, eating less, and relying more on hunting, fishing, and gardening (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Current adoption of food-related strategies by change in employment status.



## Policy Implications

- Households that experienced a job disruption (such as job loss, reduction of hours or income, or getting furloughed), especially those with children, faced considerably higher risk of food insecurity and had greater concerns about food access and security.
- Households with children that experienced a job disruption had a particularly high food insecurity rate. Assistance programs should target households with children and be tailored to their specific needs.
- Continued assistance is needed to buffer the impacts of job disruption on food insecurity since the effects of lost income can persist even after people return to work.
- Targeted communication regarding how to access food assistance programs may help reach those who have experienced any form of job disruption.

## Survey Approach

We surveyed 1,510 US adults in July/August 2020 using the Qualtrics online panel. Survey participants reflect the US adult population by race. We oversampled those with lower incomes to support further insights, then adjusted so that analyses reflect the national income, race and ethnicity distribution in 2019. Limitations of surveys like this one may include underrepresentation of groups including those: with low literacy or unable to take survey in English/Spanish, without cell phone or Internet, those facing high pandemic demands, and those with low trust of surveys. Additionally, responses may be influenced by factors such as aspiration, social desirability, misunderstanding, or rushing to complete.

## Funding Statement

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## About NFACT

This research is conducted as part of The National Food Access and COVID research Team (NFACT), which is implementing common measurements and tools across study sites in the US. 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. A series of briefs from this survey are available at [nfactresearch.org](http://nfactresearch.org). to learn more or contact Dr. Meredith Niles at [mtniles@uvm.edu](mailto:mtniles@uvm.edu).

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