

‘Food insecurity is a silent problem’: Hungry Mass. households doubled during pandemic

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By Tonya Alanez and Jack Lyons Globe Staff, Updated August 22, 2021, 5:47 p.m. [Email to a Friend](#) [Share on Facebook](#) [Share on Twitter](#) [Print this Article](#) [View Comments](#)



The number of Massachusetts households lacking enough food to get by doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a recent study from Project Bread.

More than half a million residents, more than a quarter of them children, who are eligible for SNAP, or food stamps, don't receive benefits for the nation's No. 1 anti-hunger program, according to the research by Project Bread, a Boston nonprofit that works to end hunger in the state.

“The cycle of hunger, it definitely is real,” said Erin McAleer, president and CEO of Project Bread, which surveyed more than 800 Boston residents in partnership with the city's Office of Food Access and UMass Boston's Center for Survey Research.

“A lot of people who are working low-wage jobs assume they're not eligible,” McAleer said. “That's just frankly not true. There's a lot of people who are working and who are not making enough to get by.”

Even though SNAP enrollment surged during the pandemic — it was 27.5 percent higher in June 2021 than it was in May 2019 — it remains significantly underutilized, the study found.

There is still a pool of 659,340 people who are eligible but not enrolled, largely composed of people who don't know about or understand the program, assume they are not eligible, shy away from the stigma, or think they are taking benefits away from someone who might need them more, the study showed.

As for those who might think taking advantage of the benefits is taking away from someone else perhaps in worse need, the program was designed to grow during downturns and retract when the economy improves, McAleer said.

The study proposes two immediate policy changes.

On the federal level, SNAP benefits should be increased to provide enough for people to get by. On the state level, people who are eligible for Medicaid should automatically be eligible for SNAP.

In response to "pandemic-fueled food insecurity," this week, the USDA announced the largest permanent increase in benefits since the program's inception. Beginning in October, more than 950,000 Massachusetts residents will see their benefits increase on average by \$36 per person each month.

"Food insecurity is a silent problem," said Catalina Lopez-Ospina, director of Boston's Office of Food Access. "We need to normalize this conversation."

Acting Mayor Kim Janey recently announced \$1.9 million in community grants from the federal stimulus package to improve food access.

Before the pandemic, 8.2 percent of Massachusetts households were experiencing food insecurity, according to Project Bread. The hunger crisis peaked in the early stages of the pandemic, with 19.6 percent of households estimated to be food insecure in spring 2020, the study showed.

"The coronavirus pandemic fueled a hunger crisis unlike any other in our lifetime," according to Project Bread.

Going hungry has long-lasting consequences, especially in growing children, McAleer said. From February through June this year, the average percent of food insecure households with children was 15.9 percent. By July, it had inched back up to 17.2 percent.

The pandemic made it harder for Amber Holden, a mother of three who lives in Jamaica Plain, to feed her family because schools that provide meals were not always open.

"At school, they would get breakfast and lunch, so the food would last longer in the house," Holden said by phone Wednesday.

But now, the \$535 she gets in SNAP benefits each month runs out by the second week, Holden said. The situation will get better when school resumes — Holden can share the duty of providing meals and have time to find a job — but by seeking employment, Holden will have to find child care for her 4-month-old son.

“Ideally I would love to spend more time with him,” she said, “but it’s getting to the point where I need to go to work for my baby to keep a roof over our heads.”

“As a mom, I have to put my wants aside to take care of [my children’s] needs,” she added. “Right now, they need food in their bellies.”

Hungry children don’t focus well in class, visit the nurse’s office more, have poorer test scores, lower graduation rates, and fewer adult successes, said McAleer, of Project Bread.

Hungry adults face more chronic disease and higher mortality, advocate said.

Not only are people of color in Massachusetts disproportionately affected by food insecurity but minority households are recovering from the pandemic significantly slower than white households, according to the study.

From December to May, one in seven white households with children experienced food insecurity. For Black and Latino households with children, the rate was one in three.

Jessica Hernandez, 44, of Lowell, has relied more on food pantries during the pandemic in part because the conventional shopping experience has become more difficult for people from low-income backgrounds.

“Everything is more expensive. What was a dollar is now \$3, \$4,” Hernandez said. “And sometimes, you need pasta, and the pantry’s more likely to have it than the store.”

It’s hard for some to concede that they are struggling to feed their families, and others think they’ll be viewed as freeloaders living off the system or as immigrants who failed at the American Dream, advocates said.

Several first-time visitors to Greenfield’s Center for Self-Reliance seem uncomfortable asking for food, said Charles Cox, 52, a visitor at the food pantry for years.

“It’s more of a shame thing they put on themselves,” the Greenfield resident said by phone. “It’s something they didn’t want to do.”

The majority of people who started using the pantry during the pandemic are still showing up for food, Cox said.

In Boston, the new community grants will pay for “destigmatization activities” and “a more just food system.”

“In Boston, we know food access is essential for our residents’ well being,” Janey said in a statement. “As we continue to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, I urge local nonprofits and Boston residents to apply for this grant funding to help expand food access, as well as support education about food assistance resources.”

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