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Pandemic may have left over 250 million people with acute food shortages in 2020

written by Robin Scher
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As Black and Latinx families experience disproportionate food insecurity, experts warn of famine in dozens of countries.

Beyond the questions surrounding the [availability, effectiveness and safety of a vaccine](#), the COVID-19 pandemic has led us to question where our food is coming from and whether we will have enough. According to a United Nations World Food Program (WFP) [report](#), COVID-19 might have left up to 265 million people with acute food shortages in 2020. The combined effect of the pandemic as well as the emerging global recession “could, without large-scale coordinated action, disrupt

the functioning of food systems,” which would “result in consequences for health and nutrition of a severity and scale unseen for more than half a century,” states another UN [report](#).

In the United States, “food insecurity has doubled overall, and tripled among households with children” due to the pandemic, states a [June 2020 report](#)  by the Institute for Policy Research (IPR) at Northwestern University, which relied on data provided by the [U.S. Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey](#). In a recent [interview](#) with CBS News, IPR Director Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach warned that these statistics would likely “continue to hold,” with the numbers indicating particularly dramatic rises in food insecurity among Black and Latinx families. Indeed, families of color are being disproportionately impacted. According to an analysis of new Census data by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), [22 percent of Black and 21 percent of Latinx respondents reported not having enough to eat](#), compared to just 9 percent of white people.

Globally, the effects of COVID-19 on food security are equally, if not more, severe. According to a CBS News [report](#), WFP Director David Beasley [told](#) the UN Security Council in April 2020 that the world is on “the brink of a hunger pandemic.” He added, “In a worst-case scenario, we could be looking at famine in about three dozen countries, and in fact, in 10 of these countries we already have more than one million people per country who are on the verge of starvation.”

“The number of chronically hungry people increased by an estimated 130 million last year, to more than 800 million—about eight times the total number of COVID-19 cases to date,” [wrote](#) Mark Lowcock, the under-secretary-general and emergency relief coordinator at the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and Axel van Trotsenburg, managing director of operations at the World Bank. “Countries affected by conflict and climate change are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. Empty stomachs can stunt whole generations.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) [warns](#) that climate change “is likely to diminish continued progress on global food security through production disruptions that lead to local availability limitations and price increases, interrupted transport conduits, and diminished food safety.” The same might be said about the pandemic, which has made it abundantly clear: climate resilience, food security and global health are closely intertwined.

In terms of food security, another major concern is the pandemic-related school closures that have occurred across the globe, with UNICEF reporting that more than [1.6 billion children and young people](#) have been affected. Schools provide a food lifeline for children; for so many, that is where they get their only nutritious meal of the day. In January, the UNICEF Office of Research—Innocenti, and WFP released a new [report](#) that found that more than 39 billion in-school meals have been missed worldwide since the pandemic began, with 370 million children worldwide having missed 40 percent of in-school meals.

In early 2020, when COVID-19 was still a looming specter rather than the deadly virus we’re more familiar with today, the threat of food insecurity was a practical problem. Scenes of shoppers descending on aisles to stock up on supplies were a common sight. As [CNN reported](#) in March 2020, supermarkets around the world rationed food and other products such as toilet paper and cleaning supplies, in an effort to curb stockpiling.

In Vermont, for instance, a steady increase in food insecurity since the start of the pandemic has correlated to employment levels, according to a [survey](#) conducted by the University of Vermont between March and April 2020. Approximately 45 percent of respondents “had lost their jobs, been furloughed or had their hours reduced during the pandemic,” and a further two-thirds of survey participants who recorded scarcity of food in their households “had experienced job losses or work disruptions since the outbreak of the pandemic,” according to the survey. Vermont is just one

example; the impact has been felt across the U.S. During the week before Thanksgiving in 2020, the Guardian [reported](#) that 5.6 million U.S. households “struggled to put enough food on the table,” while referring to the analysis of the Census data by CBPP.

As the pandemic continues to upend lives across the world, it has impacted the entire food supply chain. With factory and supermarket workers being [highly susceptible](#) to COVID-19, there’s been a concomitant [decline](#) in food production and a rise in prices. As Scott Faber, senior vice president of government affairs at the Environmental Working Group (EWG), [reported](#), farmers in the U.S. were already facing labor shortages prior to the pandemic, and with tightened immigration as well as the heightened risk and poor compensation associated with these jobs, “food processors and farm labor contractors may struggle to find other workers willing to risk their lives to work in meat plants, packing sheds or produce fields.”

The pandemic has exposed the weakness of the industrialized global food system, which depends on long, complex transportation chains and cross-border travel. “[T]he monstrous and unsustainable food industry known as [Big Ag](#)... relies on the horrendous [treatment](#) of laborers, a [wasteful allocation of resources](#), worldwide [environmental devastation](#)—and in a pinch, can quickly devolve into near-collapse of the entire system, as evidenced by the delays, shortages and [pressure](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the [deepening hunger crisis](#) in America,” April M. Short, a fellow at the Independent Media Institute, recently [wrote](#) in Salon. “Among the many necessary systemic changes 2020 has illuminated is the need to majorly restructure the way we cultivate and access food in our communities.”

It didn’t take the pandemic to reveal the inefficiency and injustice of our food system: globally, [a third of all food is wasted](#), while nearly [690 million people were undernourished in 2019](#)—almost 60 million more people than in 2014. But the

pandemic has underscored the matter: According to [OCHA](#), “the number of acutely food insecure people could increase to 270 million due to COVID-19, representing an 82 percent increase compared to the number of acutely food insecure people pre-COVID-19.”

And the disruption of transportation has shown that the long distances it normally takes for food to get from one place to another can be a serious liability during a crisis. “[F]ood banks are under tremendous pressure to meet the skyrocketing demand,” said a CNN article quoting from a letter Claire Babineaux-Fontenot, Feeding America CEO, and Zippy Duvall, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, [wrote](#) to then-Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue in April 2020. “At the same time, however, we are seeing literally tons of agricultural goods being discarded because of the shutdown of so much of the economy.”

Consumer demand has shifted from eating out at restaurants and food services away from home, and food supply chain operations have had to be retooled. And that impact has been felt within the transportation sector. Forbes [reported](#) that Andrew Novakovic, an agricultural economist at Cornell University, “points to a number of weak spots in the food transportation system that could be aggravated by the increased demand for food.” A shortage of truck drivers is one potential weak spot, says Novakovic. Although he concedes there is debate on this matter, Novakovic maintains that “[t]rucking companies are finding it much harder to recruit [those] long haul drivers.” China, which was the first country to be hit by the virus, offers insight into the prolonged impact of the pandemic on transportation and food systems. The lockdown in the Hubei province of China, which is home to 66 million people, led to a [shortage](#) in delivery of animal feed as well as refrigerated containers full of imported vegetables, fruit and frozen meat in February 2020, according to an article in the Conversation.

In addition to shifting consumer demand, the pandemic has also made us take a

closer look at where our food comes from and how it impacts not only the lives of food workers but also the lives of animals trapped in the food system. According to a [new public opinion survey](#) conducted by Lake Research Partners and commissioned by the animal rights group American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, “[t]he vast majority (89 percent) of Americans are concerned about industrial animal agriculture, citing animal welfare, worker safety or public health risks as a concern.” The survey also found that “85 percent of farmers and their families support a complete ban on new industrial animal agriculture facilities—almost twice the level of support expressed by the general public.” This finding shows key support for the [Farm System Reform Act](#), legislation that was introduced in 2019 by Democratic Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey that, among other reforms, seeks to put a [moratorium on new or expanding factory farms](#).

Food insecurity has long been a pressing issue, particularly for developing countries. However, as Mir Ashrafun Nahar, a research associate at the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling, [explained](#) in a Financial Express article, “the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more acute.” In response, Nahar argues for a policy-based approach that includes “subsidy based transportation systems for agriculture” to support supply chains, as well as policies aimed at cutting down on agricultural production costs in order to help farmers recover from the effects of the pandemic.

With the pandemic still affecting food supply, though, there are a number of logical measures for reducing the impact of the virus and maximizing output. “First, OSHA [the Occupational Safety and Health Administration] and the USDA must be directed to issue emergency standards that require employers to provide personal protective equipment, enough space to work without spreading the virus, and housing and transportation options that will reduce the spread of the virus,” [wrote](#) Faber.

Proposed in April 2020, Faber’s suggestions, unfortunately, remained [unaddressed](#) under the Trump administration. Faber’s relief measures

further include the expansion of USDA programs to purchase surplus commodities to offset supply chain disruption; redirecting food that might be destroyed toward food banks; and increasing the standard SNAP benefit (food stamps) by 15 percent. And, echoing Nahar, Faber also proposes adopting policies that will help to alleviate financial burdens faced by farmers and food suppliers, as well as offering subsidy support.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an intergovernmental economic group with 37 member countries, said that the pandemic “has laid bare pre-existing gaps in social protection systems” in a [report](#) published in June 2020. “While the impacts of COVID-19 are still unfolding, experience so far shows the importance of an open and predictable international trade environment to ensure food can move to where it is needed,” the OECD report states. “The biggest risk for food security is not with food availability but with consumers’ access to food: safety nets are essential to avoid an increase in hunger and food insecurity.”

Another problem is the lack of media coverage about the food insecurity being witnessed around the world, particularly during the COVID-19 era. As the Economist recently [pointed out](#), journalists in 2020 “wrote more than 50,000 articles about the canceled Eurovision song contest, but only around 2,000 about drought and hunger in Zambia.”

Fortunately, beyond the failings of a state-led response to the pandemic, some positives have emerged at a community level. With restaurants and supermarkets becoming less viable options, there has been a growth in demand and supply of local food. According to [HuffPost](#), farmers have seen “a massive rise in demand for local produce.” The result of this trend is that consumers who are able to access local food are changing their behavior toward procurement and consumption of food permanently.

Things are changing on a federal level, too. In a recent [article](#) about how the U.S. food system could be transformed during the Biden administration, New York Times food correspondent Kim Severson noted that “[h]unger relief is a pressing issue” for Tom Vilsack, who has been [confirmed](#) by the Senate to become the agriculture secretary in Biden’s Cabinet, a job the former Iowa governor also held under the Obama administration. However, while Severson notes that Vilsack has his [critics](#), President Biden has already made changes at the top, signing an [executive order](#) meant to deliver relief to families and businesses amid the COVID-19 crisis, including “expanding and extending federal nutrition assistance programs” to “[a]ddress the growing hunger crisis facing 29 million Americans.” His proposal to Congress includes a \$3 billion package to “help women, infants and children get the food they need” and “access to nutritious food for millions of children missing meals due to school closures.”

For meaningful reform to the food system to occur, change is going to have to happen at every level: from federal, state and local governments, to Big Ag, small farmers and everyday consumers. With the future looking ever more uncertain due to the climate crisis—one of President Biden’s top priorities—adapting to new ways of producing and transporting food will be key to our survival.

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