



2020 STATUS REPORT on Hunger in Rhode Island

The Impact of COVID-19

MAJOR FINDINGS



★ **One in four households** in Rhode Island lacks adequate food.

★ Underlying medical conditions that increase the risk of severe illness from COVID-19 are prevalent among food insecure Rhode Islanders.

★ Demand for food assistance at member agencies of the Food Bank grew by 26 percent in the wake of the pandemic.

★ Government aid is critical to protecting vulnerable families from hunger.



COVID-19 Creates an Economic Crisis

The outbreak of COVID-19 paralyzed Rhode Island's economy. In March 2020, businesses were shut down and schools were closed to stop the spread of the virus. Thousands of people were furloughed from work or permanently laid off.

As the economy slowly begins to rebound, unemployment remains high. In September, Rhode Island's unemployment rate was 10.5 percent with 59,000 people out of work, up from 3.4 percent in February when just 19,000 were unemployed.¹ Job losses are concentrated among low-paid workers. **Households with an annual**

income below \$40,000 are twice as likely to have an adult who lost work than the overall population.²

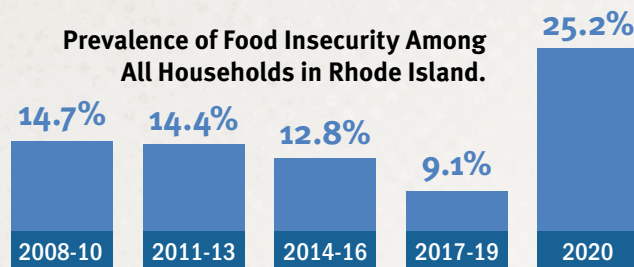
The CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act, passed by Congress in March, gave extra financial assistance to laid-off workers, adding \$600 per week to their unemployment insurance compensation. These supplemental benefits ended in July, even though the economic downturn is expected to last far into 2021.

Food Insecurity Soars as the Economy Declines

The pandemic recession left an unprecedented number of Rhode Islanders without the means to feed their families. During July and August 2020, a random sample of 2,100 households were surveyed as part of the RI Life Index, an initiative of Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and the Brown University School of Public Health. Researchers found that **25 percent of households were worried about having adequate food.**³ This is the highest level of food insecurity recorded in Rhode Island in twenty years.

Today, one in four Rhode Island households cannot meet their basic food needs. Before the pandemic, food insecurity was on the decline, from a high point of 14.7 percent in 2010 down to 9.1 percent in 2019, decreasing gradually as the economy recovered from the Great Recession.⁴ The pandemic drastically reversed this positive trend.

Prevalence of Food Insecurity Among All Households in Rhode Island.

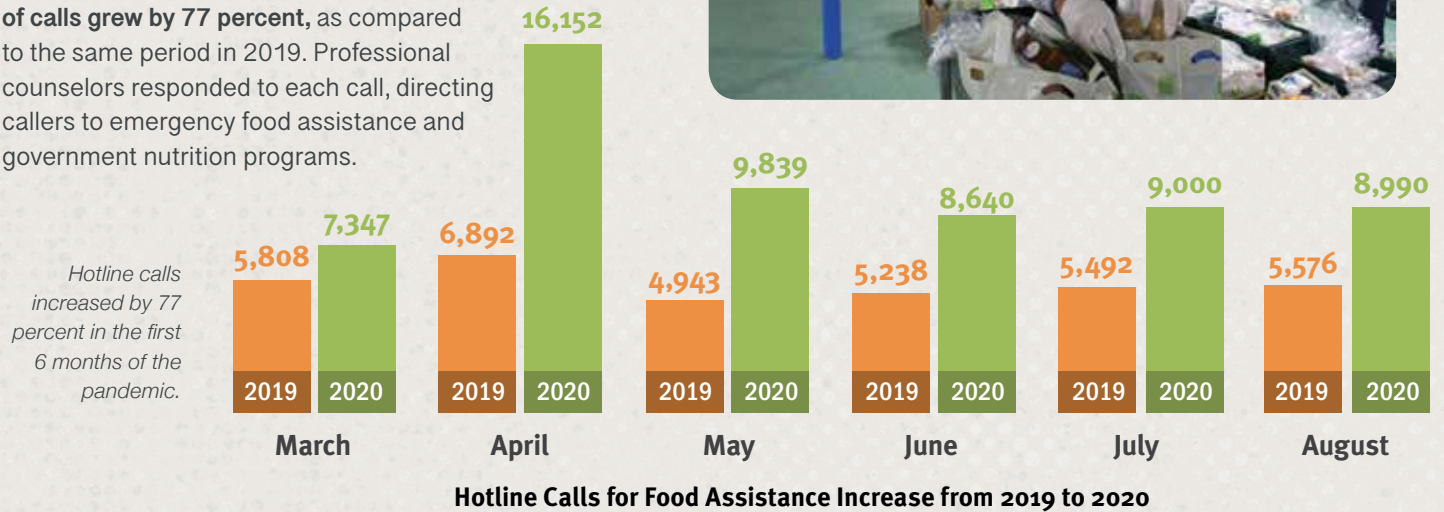


Food insecurity in Rhode Island reached a record level in 2020.

The current health emergency is also deepening long-standing racial and ethnic disparities. Black and Latinx Rhode Islanders have been hard hit by the Coronavirus and are overrepresented among cases and hospitalizations from COVID-19. At the same time, they are experiencing higher levels of food insecurity, as demonstrated in results from the RI Life Index. Where 21 percent of White households lack adequate food, 36 percent of Black households and 40 percent of Latinx households are food insecure.

Hotline Calls for Food Assistance Increase

The United Way of Rhode Island's 2-1-1 hotline received nearly 60,000 calls for food assistance between March and August 2020, with over 16,000 calls in April alone.⁵ **The number of calls grew by 77 percent**, as compared to the same period in 2019. Professional counselors responded to each call, directing callers to emergency food assistance and government nutrition programs.

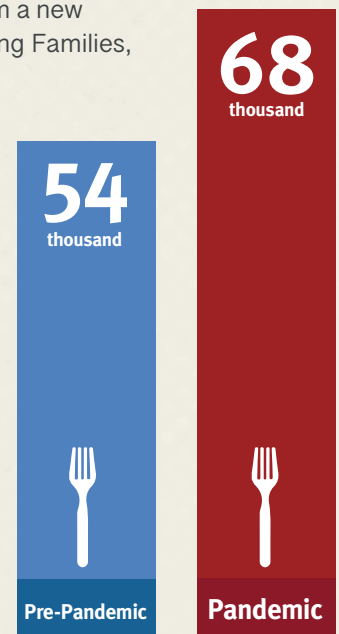


Food Assistance Expands to Meet High Need

Before the pandemic, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank served 53,700 people monthly through its statewide network of 159 member agencies. There was an immediate surge in demand for food assistance after the outbreak of COVID-19. The Rhode Island Emergency Management Agency (RIEMA) was activated and, in coordination with the Food Bank,

established additional distribution sites throughout the state. In April, these sites and member agencies of the Food Bank served 67,900 people. **To meet the growing need, the Food Bank increased its food distribution by 1.6 million pounds (45 percent)**, including 330,000 meals supplied by FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency).

Rhode Island also benefited from a new federal program, Farmers Feeding Families, which was established by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in April. The program granted \$3 billion to farmers nationwide to provide boxes containing fresh produce, meat, and dairy items to people in need. **The Food Bank received over 33,000 Farmers Feeding Families boxes** (approximately 700,000 pounds of food), including food sourced from local growers by Farm Fresh RI. The program is expected to run out of funding in December 2020.

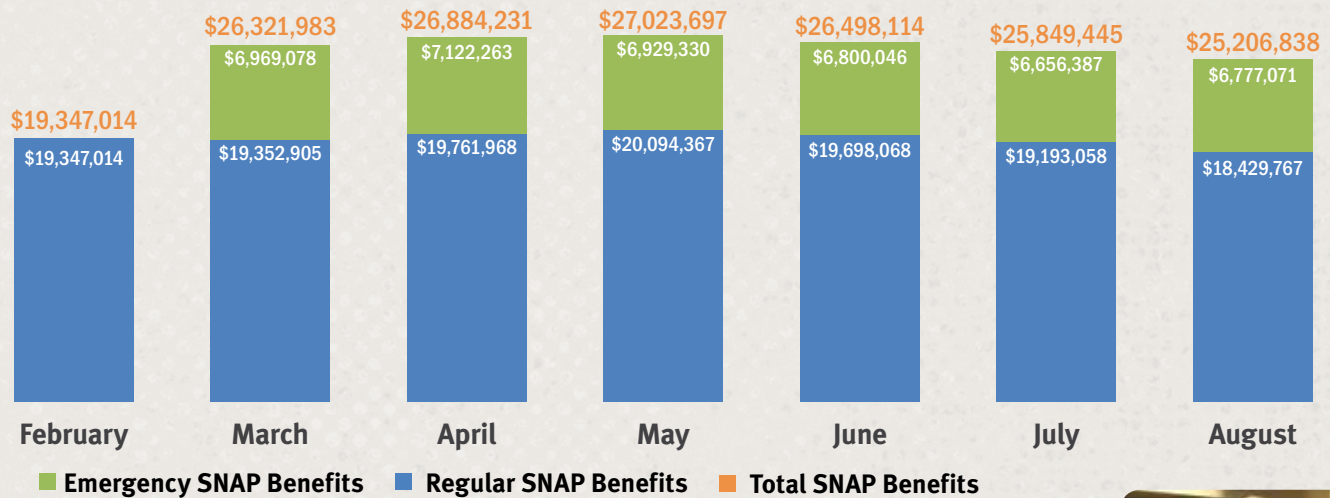


Rhode Islanders Receiving Emergency Food Assistance Through the Food Bank's Network

Federal Nutrition Programs Protect Families from Hunger

SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) is the country's largest anti-hunger program. Each month, approximately 80,000 low-income households in Rhode Island receive SNAP benefits for the purchase of food at authorized retail stores.⁶

The CARES Act expanded SNAP benefits for all households to the maximum allowed level (\$646 for a family of 4). **SNAP benefits in Rhode Island rose by 35 percent, boosting the buying power of low-income families.** These emergency benefits are expected to continue through the end of 2020.

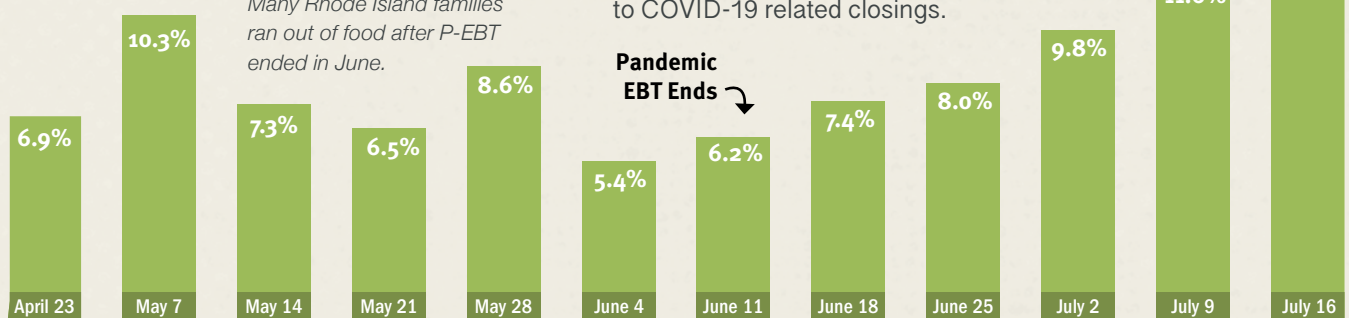


Children Miss Out on School Meals

After the pandemic closed schools across the United States, over one-third of low-income parents reported that their children were not eating enough.⁷ Normally, school lunch and breakfast are a critical source of nutrition for children from low-income households. **During a regular school day in Rhode Island, 52,000 children receive free or reduced-price lunch and 28,000 participate in the School Breakfast program.**⁸

As an alternative during the pandemic, schools began offering all students free meals, which parents could pick up for their children, but participation was relatively low. Schools distributed 2.3 million "Grab 'n Go" meals from March to the end of the school year, less than half of the free and reduced-price meals served to students when schools are open.⁹

Many Rhode Island families ran out of food after P-EBT ended in June.



U.S. Census Bureau weekly Household Pulse Survey Food insecurity Results in Rhode Island.

To provide additional assistance to families with children, the USDA created a new program, Pandemic-Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT). Through this program, the Rhode Island Department of Human Services issued debit cards to low-income parents or added benefits to their SNAP EBT cards for the purchase of groceries. The program provided \$26.5 million in benefits over a three-month period (April through June 2020).¹⁰

When P-EBT ended in June, many households in Rhode Island were left without adequate food. From April to July, the U.S. Census Bureau conducted a weekly Household Pulse Survey, which asked households whether they had enough to eat in the last seven days. The survey revealed a significant upward trend in food insufficiency, week after week, beginning in late June.¹¹

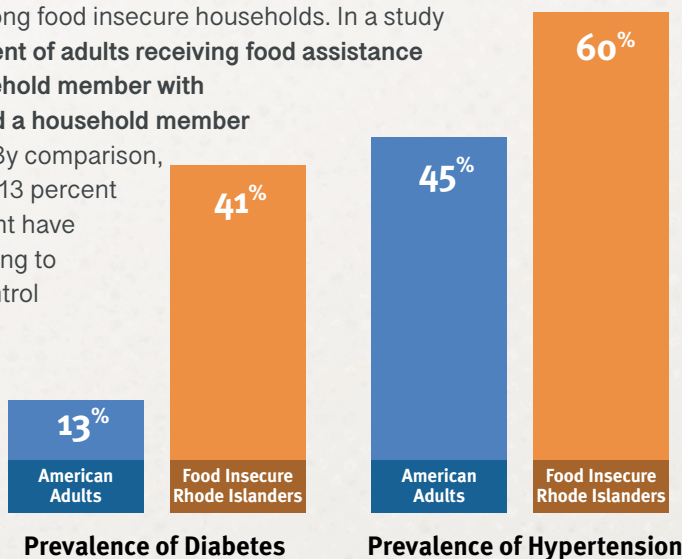
Fortunately, P-EBT was re-started by Congress in September. Benefits will continue through the current school year for children studying remotely and young children who are unable to attend child-care due to COVID-19 related closings.



Diet-Related Diseases Make COVID-19 More Dangerous

Type 2 diabetes mellitus and hypertension increase a patient's risk of severe illness from Coronavirus disease.¹² These same medical conditions are common among food insecure households. In a study conducted in 2019, **41 percent of adults receiving food assistance in Rhode Island had a household member with diabetes and 60 percent had a household member with high blood pressure.**¹³ By comparison, among all American adults, 13 percent have diabetes and 45 percent have high blood pressure, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹⁴

Food Insecure Rhode Islanders have high rates of diabetes and hypertension putting them at risk for severe complications from COVID-19.



Summary

COVID-19 struck Rhode Island's economy with the biggest shock since the Great Recession, leaving thousands of families in dire need of food. The state mounted a comprehensive emergency response to ensure that those most at risk for hunger were fed. At the same time, the Food Bank boosted food distribution through its statewide network of food pantries and meal sites, where demand quickly reached record levels.

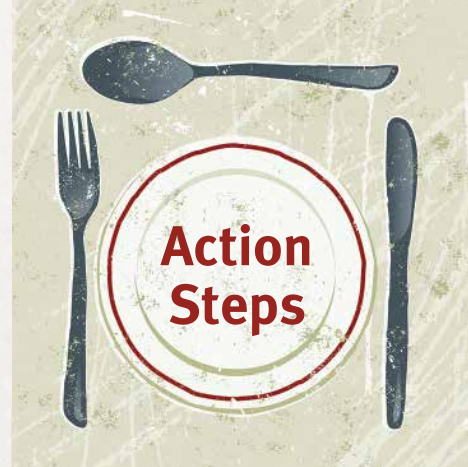
Critical assistance was also provided by the federal government. During the six-month period from March to August, low-income families in Rhode Island received over \$175 million in SNAP and P-EBT benefits for the purchase of food at supermarkets and grocery stores.

Despite these efforts, food insecurity persists in Rhode Island, affecting one in four households. Black and Latinx Rhode Islanders experience even higher rates of food insecurity, exacerbating already existing health and economic disparities.

There is no end in sight to the current crisis, and yet key government programs have already been cut back. More government assistance is needed to prevent evictions, bankruptcies, and widespread hunger. Rather than reducing federal aid, Congress should issue more relief and reinforce the national nutrition safety net so that families can survive the long-term economic fallout from the pandemic.



For Endnotes, please visit the Food Bank website at rfoodbank.org/status-report



★ **Urge Rhode Island's Congressional Delegation to pass another COVID-19 relief bill that brings back supplemental unemployment compensation and boosts SNAP benefits through this economic downturn.**

★ **Petition the USDA to provide P-EBT to all children from low-income families when schools are closed for summer vacation.**

★ **Advocate for the Department of Human Services to implement a comprehensive SNAP outreach program to help newly unemployed Rhode Islanders enroll.**

★ **Contact state legislators and tell them to support the Governor's call for increased funding for the Food Bank.**

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RHODE ISLAND COMMUNITY
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OUR MISSION

To improve the quality of life for all Rhode Islanders by advancing solutions to the problem of hunger.

OUR VISION

We envision a state where no one goes hungry.



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2020

STATUS REPORT ON HUNGER IN RHODE ISLAND

Endnotes

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2. **Monetary Policy Report**, Federal Reserve Board, June 2020.
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5. **2-1-1 Report**, United Way of Rhode Island, October 2020.
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8. **School Breakfast Scorecard: School Year 2018-2019**, Food Research and Action Center, February 2020.
9. **Child Nutrition Programs Report**, Rhode Island Department of Education, October 2020.
10. **P-EBT: Approval of Rhode Island's State Plan Amendment**, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, April 2020.
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12. **Coronavirus Disease 2019**, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020.
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14. **Diabetes Report Card 2019** and **Facts about Hypertension**, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020.