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Fall 2021

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Recommended Citation

Cook, Christina S.; Lohani, Sandhya; Jones, Jeffery A.; Smallwood, Stacy Ph.D.; and Mayo-Gamble, Tilicia L., "COVID-19: A Driving Factor for Pre-Existing Racial Disparities in Food Insecurity" (2021). *Eagles Talking About the Public's Health*. 27.

<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/etaph/27>

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COVID-19: A Driving Factor for Pre-Existing Racial Disparities in Food Insecurity

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Commentary

In early 2020, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) spread across the United States (U.S.), ending years of declining rates of food insecurity. Food insecurity (FIS) describes the inadequate access to safe, nutritionally adequate foods and when the desirability, variety, and quality in food reduces.¹ "Access," includes acquiring food in socially acceptable ways that are not obtained through emergency food access, stealing, scavenging, or other methods.² In 2019, prior to the pandemic, more than 35 million Americans were food insecure.³ Studies indicated that these individuals consistently report poorer physical health⁴, symptoms of anxiety or depression⁵, lower self-esteem⁶, and poorer overall mental health status.^{7,8}

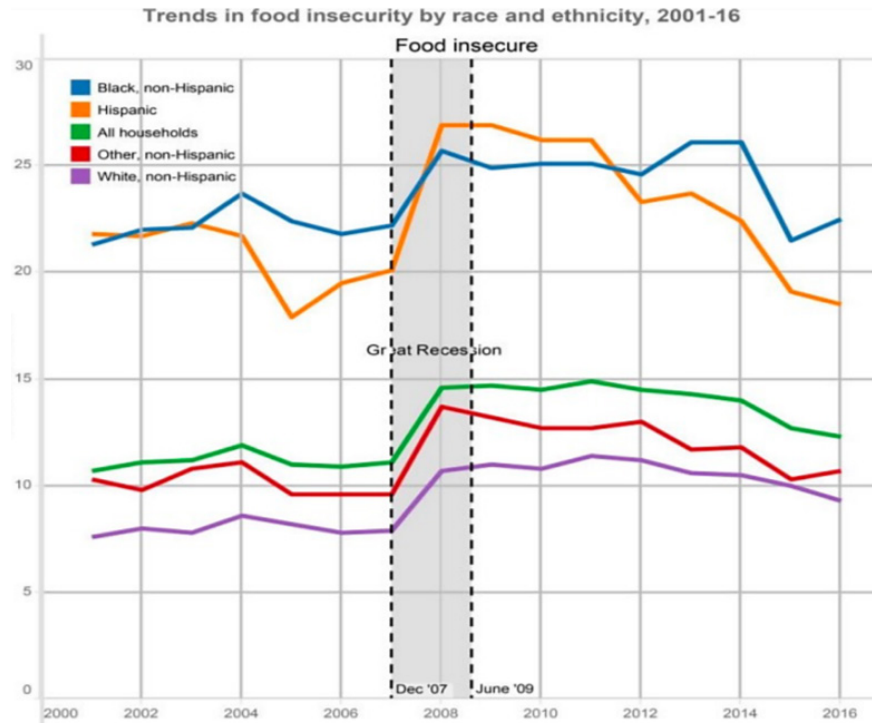
Studies throughout the world and the U.S. highlight impact of COVID-19 on FIS. Through isolation of infected individuals, quarantines of exposed people, preventive lockdowns, and concerns about disease risks posed by public space, COVID-19 has created unprecedented, widespread limitations on mobility coupled with unemployment. In the U.S., a UCLA analysis of FIS using U.S. Census data identified that food insecure households jumped from 10.5% in October 2019 to 26% by July 2020.⁹ With 64 million Americans experiencing food insecurity through July 2020, the impact has varied with 45% of households earning less than \$25,000 a year unable to afford food⁹. While 1 in 6 non-Hispanic White households have reported FIS during the pandemic, more than 1 in 3 Black households and 31% of Hispanic households are experiencing FIS.⁹

A study of U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey data for 74,413 households for a 4-week period in 2020 found that reported FIS did not differ significantly among these households by race or ethnicity.^{10,11} Among the households who do report FIS, however, there were

differences in how COVID-19 increased FIS. Asian and Hispanic households reported being more afraid to go out to purchase food with Asian households also reporting transportation problems. Black households were more likely to report lack of money to buy food, and White households were more likely to say stores lacked the foods they wanted to buy.¹

Thus, COVID-19 has increased FIS in multiple ways. Individuals who rely on public transportation and school-based feeding programs have found accessing food more difficult due to limited mobility. These constraints have been more severe for households such as single mothers and unmarried disabled individuals who have less support from a family member. The pandemic has also led to large-scale declines in jobs which in turn have made the accessibility and affordability of food more difficult for the poor and unemployed.¹² Understanding these cascading and interwoven mechanisms and how they differentially affect populations is critical in creating governmental and charitable safety nets for the on-going pandemic and future crises.

The pandemic pushed the U.S. into an economic recession, which, as history has shown, impacts those who are already disadvantaged more severely than other Americans.¹³ Many of those impacted by the pandemic were food insecure or at risk of FIS before COVID-19 and have faced greater hardship since COVID-19.¹⁴ Significant racial disparities in FIS which existed before COVID-19 have remained through the pandemic.¹¹ An analysis examining trends in FIS from 2001 to 2016 found that FIS rates for both non-Hispanic black and Hispanic households were at least twice that of non-Hispanic white households¹⁵ (See Figure 1).¹ More recently, Feeding America projected that in 2021, 21% of Black individuals



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(1 in 5) would experience FIS, compared to 11% of white individuals (1 in 9).¹³

COVID-19 has only exacerbated racially inequitable policies and systems that contribute to the disproportionate rates of FIS among non-Hispanic black and Hispanic households. It is vital that policies are implemented to ensure economic security and

secure food and housing as human rights; all of which are contributing factors to FIS risk that are affected by systemic racism.¹⁶ As public health practitioners and professionals, it is imperative that we advocate for larger, systems-level changes that provide not only relief for FIS but can also improve the social determinants for all.

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