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Discrimination and safety concerns are barriers to accessing healthy food for food-insecure young adults

New study in the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics indicates interventions of specific relevance to COVID-19, including expanded food assistance services, are needed to improve the accessibility of healthy food for young adults

Philadelphia, July 19, 2021 – University of Minnesota School of Public Health researchers recently completed a study to determine how food-insecure young (emerging) adults (18–29 years of age) adapted their eating and child feeding behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers also sought to identify barriers to food access and opportunities to improve local access to resources for emerging adults. Their [study results](#) are published in the [Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#).

The steep rise in food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted Black, Indigenous, and persons of color across the United States. Emerging adulthood is a time of particular vulnerability for experiencing food insecurity and when young people may begin providing meals for their own children. It is a public health concern that food insecurity among emerging adult populations has the potential to negatively impact the health trajectories of multiple generations.

Researchers used data from the COVID-19 Eating and Activity over Time (C-EAT) study, which collected survey data from 720 emerging adults from April to October 2020 and included interviews with a diverse subset of 33 food-insecure respondents.

The study found:

- Nearly one-third of emerging adults surveyed experienced food insecurity in the past year.
- A disproportionately high prevalence of food insecurity and food insufficiency among emerging adults living with children and those who identified as Black, Indigenous, or a person of color.
- Many food-insecure emerging adults made changes to their eating and feeding behaviors to cope during the pandemic — and several of the changes, such as consuming more fast food and processed foods or increased sporadic eating, could lead to negative health consequences.
- Food-insecure emerging adults reported concerns regarding the implementation of measures used to reduce COVID-19 transmission in food retail stores and other notable barriers to local food access (e.g., reduced store hours, neighborhood safety concerns).
- Interview participants of diverse ethnic/racial backgrounds commented on how food access had been recently impacted by racial justice uprisings and reported several forms of discrimination experienced while shopping in food retail stores. Concerns about discrimination and xenophobia, including excessive monitoring and verbal harassment, influenced how households managed shopping for food.
- Barriers to accessing food assistance were also themes among the comments made by food-insecure emerging adults. Most services were provided in line with guidance for preventing COVID-19 transmission, but factors limiting eligibility for benefits and access to emergency food assistance were identified along with some concerns about food quality, physical distancing, and physical safety at food pantries.

“Our findings show an urgent need for research to address how the processes of racism that are embedded in the policies and practices of society and institutions are directly contributing to food insecurity,” said study lead Nicole Larson, PhD, MPH, RDN, Senior Research Associate, Division of Epidemiology and Community Health, School of Public Health, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA. “The findings also support recent calls for expanding federal food assistance benefits for postsecondary students as the comments made by many emerging adult participants indicated that both students and workers were not eligible for adequate benefits to meet their food needs.”

Dr. Larson remarked that even among households that reported receiving federal food assistance (e.g., SNAP), there were multiple emerging adults who reported needing to obtain food from local food pantries or distribution sites. The study results also highlighted the importance of ensuring that information about emergency food assistance sites is broadly distributed through multiple communication channels and varying the open hours of sites to address the needs of emerging adults who may need to visit outside of regular daytime hours.

“It is heartbreaking to learn about the high levels of food insecurity so close to home. It is incumbent upon all of us to work toward eliminating food insecurity and ensuring that all people have access to adequate amounts of healthful foods. As health care professionals, advocates, researchers, and members of society, we all have a role to play. We need to work now to prevent a widening of disparities following this global pandemic,” added principal investigator Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD, MPH, RD, Division Head and McKnight Presidential and Mayo Professor, Division of Epidemiology and Community Health, School of Public Health, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA.

Notes for editors

The article is “Barriers to Accessing Healthy Food and Food Assistance During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Racial Justice Uprisings: A Mixed-Methods Investigation of Emerging Adults’ Experiences,” by Nicole Larson, PhD, MPH, RDN, Tricia Alexander, Jaime C. Slaughter-Acey, PhD, MPH, Jerica Berge, PhD, MPH, Rachel Widome, PhD, MHS, and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD, MPH, RD (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2021.05.018>). It appears online in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* published by [Elsevier](#).

The study was funded by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.

Full text of this article is available to credentialed journalists upon request. Contact Eileen Leahy at +1 732 238 3628 or andjrnmedia@elsevier.com to obtain copies. Journalists who wish to interview the authors should contact Nicole Larson, PhD, MPH, RDN, at larsonn@umn.edu.

An accompanying podcast and information specifically for journalists are located at www.jandonline.org/content/mediapodcast. Excerpts from the podcast may be reproduced by the media; contact Eileen Leahy to obtain permission.

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