

Colorado Food Insights: Food Security

Mackenzie Gill & Becca B.R. Jablonski

August 30, 2021

In both the national and Colorado sample, the share of respondents reporting food insecurity were found to be much higher during the pandemic than in 2019 ([USDA ERS 2019](#)). In this analysis, food security is defined as “not running out of food and/or being able to afford more if food ran out”. The following statistics¹ describe food security levels of Colorado households during the COVID pandemic.

- Colorado households in the survey reported that:
 - The food they purchased often or sometimes didn’t last and they did not have enough money to get more (13% and 26%, respectively. N=485).
 - These percentages indicate that Coloradans were slightly more food secure than the national sample (18% and 29%, respectively).
 - From September 2019 to September 2020, 25% reported that someone in the household cut the size of a meal or skipped a meal because there wasn’t enough money for food (compared to 28% in the national sample).
 - In the 12 months preceding September 2020, 26% of respondents ate less than they felt they should because there wasn’t enough food (compared to 30% in the national sample).
 - Finally, 22% of respondents reported being hungry at some point over the last 12 months, but didn’t eat because there wasn’t enough money for food (compared to 25% in the national sample).

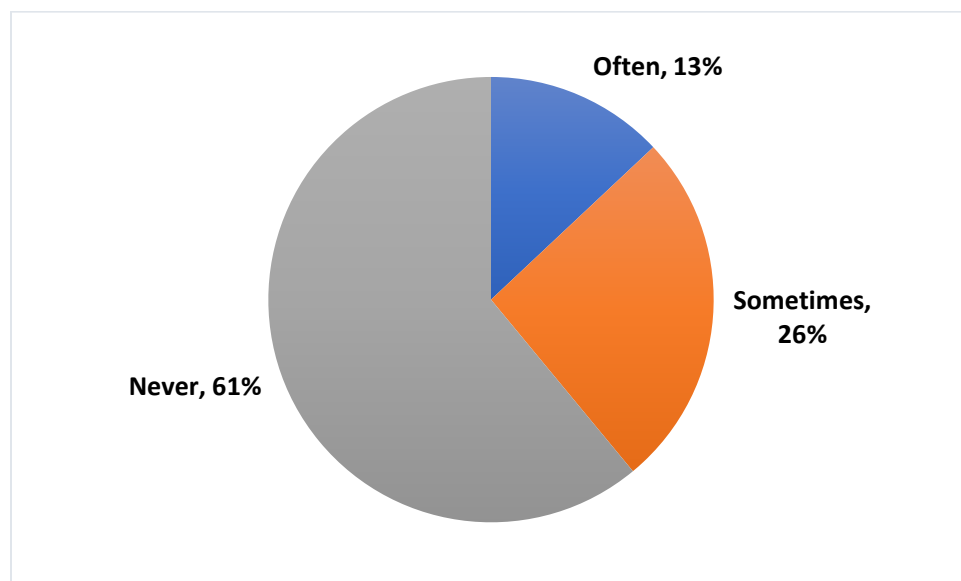
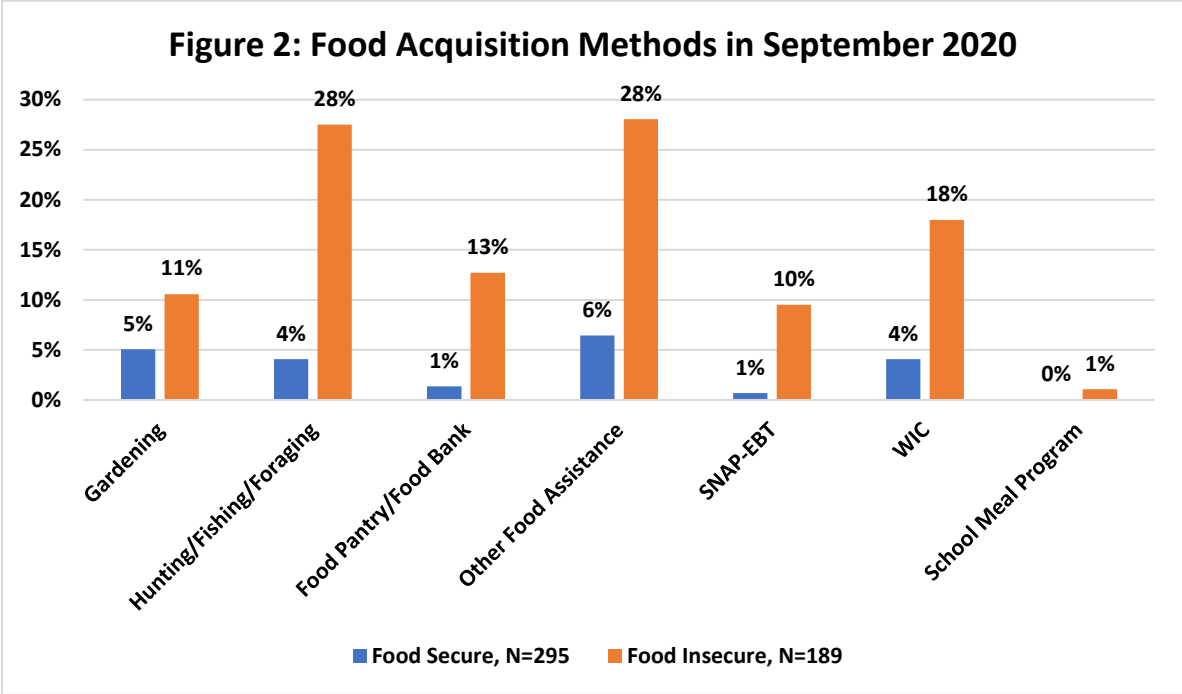


Figure 1: Food Security of Colorado Households: “In the last 12 months, the food we purchased didn’t last and we did not have enough money to get more. This was true (Often/Sometimes/Never).”

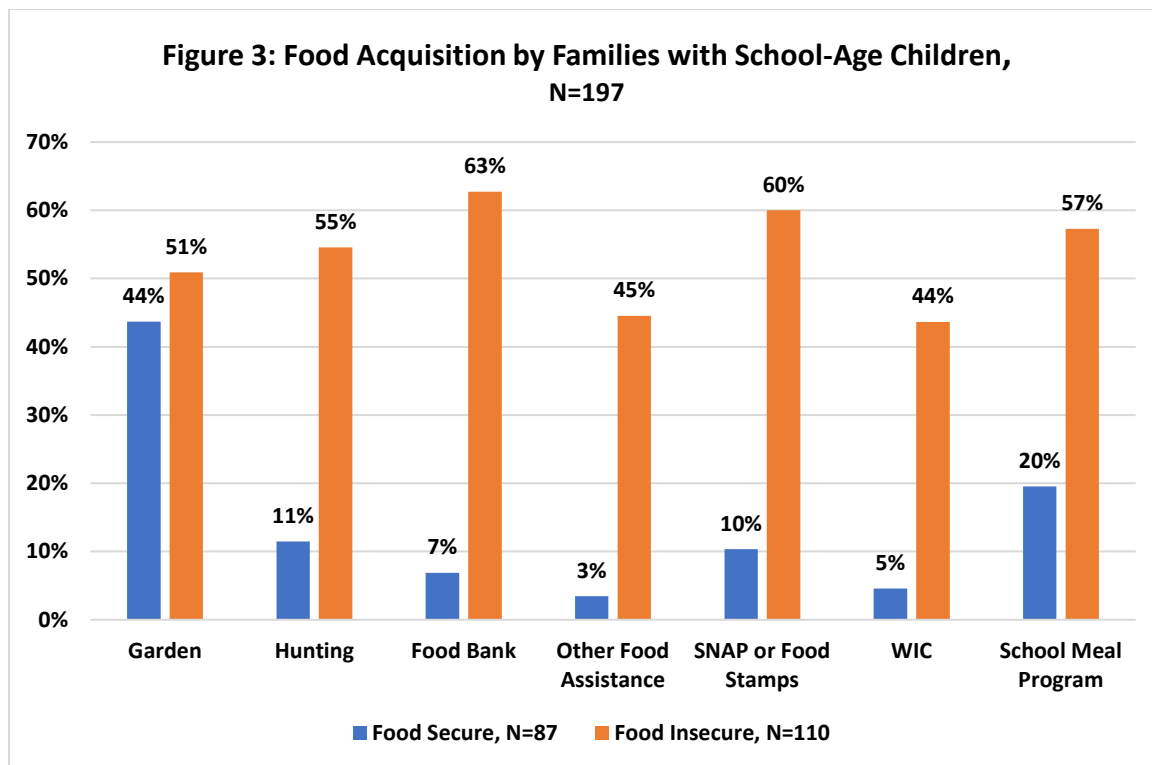
¹The questions selected to assess food security of survey respondents were based on the US Household Food Security Survey Module. This module consists of six short form questions ([USDA ERS 2012](#)).

Food Acquisition Strategies

Given the relatively high levels of food insecurity in Colorado, as well as in the U.S., it is important to understand how food insecure households acquired food during the pandemic as solutions to address food security are framed. When respondents were asked about the strategies and nutrition assistance programs from which they obtained food, the most widely used food acquisition method was the “Other Food Assistance” category, which included the Commodity Food Supplemental Program, Meals on Wheels, or “other” as possible examples. Interestingly, while fewer Coloradans reported gardening compared to the national sample (36% compared to 62%), a substantial 28% of food insecure Coloradans reported hunting, fishing, and/or foraging as a method of food acquisition.



Notably, the share of respondents using SNAP or EBT (including Pandemic-EBT dollars) in this sample is considerably lower than the national sample. Only 10% of food insecure Coloradans and 1% of food secure Coloradans reported using SNAP-EBT, while the national sample reported SNAP-EBT participation rates at 33% of food insecure and 8% of food secure respondents. If this sample is representative of the Colorado population, this may imply that efforts to increase SNAP-EBT participation may be successful in decreasing the portion of Coloradans struggling with food insecurity.



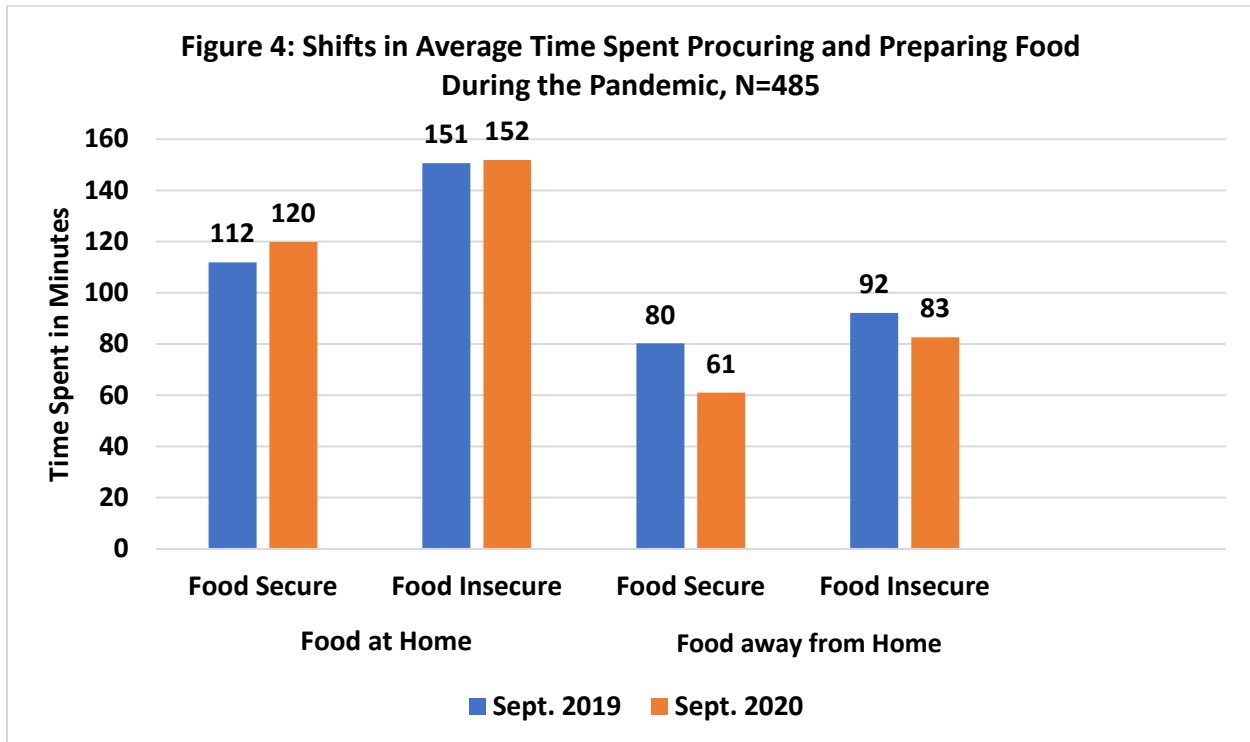
We can also examine how Colorado families with school aged children acquired food during the pandemic. First, we can notice that Colorado families reported food security at higher rates compared to Colorado households that do not have children (56% compared to 32%, respectively). We also see that food insecure families utilized all alternative acquisition methods at higher proportions compared to food secure families. The largest discrepancy between food insecure and food secure families is for participation in food banks, where 63% of food insecure families utilized food banks during the pandemic. Lastly, of the 80 Colorado families that used school meal programs, 78% reported experiencing food insecurity. However, as evident in figure 3, 20% of food secure families also participated in school meal programs. This implies that efforts to continue the school meal program during lockdowns had positive welfare implications for both food secure and food insecure families in Colorado.

Variations in Time Spent Procuring Food across Levels of Food Security

With the knowledge that certain food acquisition methods may be more time consuming than others, one may wonder if food insecure households were forced to spend more time procuring food during the pandemic. For example, longer lines at food banks are commonly observed during severe recessions, and there were [reports](#) of overwhelmed food banks during the early stages of the COVID pandemic. Examining changes in time use across levels of food security is important because the cost of time spent to prepare meals at home has been found to be higher for low-income households ([Davis and You 2010](#)). In other words, low-income households may

be less likely to spend additional time preparing food at home, which then implies that these households are more likely to have reduced dietary quality. This relationship warrants investigation into whether food insecure households experienced changes in the amount of time spent procuring and preparing food at home.

Despite this concern, we find that on average, food insecure households in Colorado did not experience significant changes in the amount of time spent procuring/preparing food at home in September 2020. This is illustrated in figure 4 below, where the sample size of food secure households is 346 and the sample size of food insecure households is 139.



The national sample yielded the same trends, and these results suggest that there may be an underlying complexity to the relationship between food insecurity and the time allocated for food preparation. One important finding is that the food insecure population had a higher proportion of essential workers, at 46%, compared to 39% of the food secure households. Many essential workers were in high demand and experienced longer work hours during the pandemic. Among other factors, this may have contributed to the food insecure population experiencing less of a shift in time spent on at-home food preparation compared to the food secure population. Further analysis on factors driving this trend may be of interest to those who want to assure essential workers are supported in future public health events.

Funding for this work was provided by the Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger.