BARRIERS TO SNAP

Research summary of existing barriers and the role race and ethnicity play in the experience of Boston households accessing and utilizing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

July 2021
In March 2020, the state of Massachusetts shut down to slow the spread of COVID-19. Most would not have predicted how expansive and enduring the impact of the virus would be. Then as we watched a global pandemic unfold before us, seemingly overnight, we found ourselves in a reality where more people than ever before in our lifetime were struggling to afford food.

According to the Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey, at the height of the pandemic, 19.6% of Massachusetts households—our friends, neighbors, coworkers, and families—were unsure from where their next meal would come.

While the surge in food insecurity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted residents of all backgrounds, it has disproportionately impacted minority households, representing the continuation of a trend that pre-dates the pandemic. Food insecurity is both a consequence and perpetuating agent of economic inequity and health disparities. It has lasting effects on an individual’s physical and financial wellbeing, even when experienced for short periods of time. Immediate action to counteract these disparities in food access has the potential to lay a path toward a recovery that actively advances equity.

One proven resource in helping to alleviate food insecurity is the federally-funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. The most relied upon nutrition assistance program in the nation, SNAP provides households funds to purchase food. As of May 2021, Massachusetts has seen a significant increase in SNAP participation since the start of the pandemic, with a 21.4% increase in participation in MA since February 2020. State and federal actions to remove barriers and strengthen this program have helped many people access and afford food. However, there remain too many people in MA—approximately 659,340—who are likely eligible but not enrolled. Indications that food insecurity is beginning to decline, with SNAP possibly having a role, brings urgency to dismantling any barriers that persist between those eligible but not enrolled.

SNAP ENROLLMENT WENT UP 21.4% OVER THE COURSE OF PANDEMIC

876,749 → 954,750

February 2020  May 2021
Barriers to SNAP

Project Bread worked in partnership with UMass Boston’s Center for Survey Research, and with consultation from the Boston Mayor’s Office of Food Access, to better understand how Massachusetts residents living in low-income communities utilize food resources.

Specifically, the survey objectives were to measure SNAP awareness, to understand the perceptions that may impact a person’s willingness to enroll in the program, and to learn about the experiences of residents when using SNAP benefits in order to identify common participation barriers that may contribute to SNAP’s underutilization. Prior to the pandemic, Project Bread partnered with Children’s HealthWatch to understand the State of Hunger in Massachusetts. A key finding coming out of this research showed that the recovery from the 2008 recession was not equitable. The Latino community was disproportionately impacted and was still in recovery from that prior recession when COVID-19 hit. Knowing the economic impacts of COVID-19 were likely to exacerbate this existing problem, this research also aimed to evaluate the equity of the current anti-hunger response. Through the data, we see a household’s decision to seek resources is not simple—this finding is consistent with the experience of Project Bread’s hotline counselors as they provide personalized assistance to callers from across Massachusetts.

The findings that follow reflect results from 823 individuals

Survey respondents were recruited through outreach by community based organizations who partner with the Boston Mayor’s Office of Food Access. This represents one of three distinct data sets included in the project.

For more on methodology, see page 20.
The prevalence of food insecurity in the population surveyed far exceeded the state average of 19.6%, with 79.8% reporting that in the preceding twelve months they had sometimes or often worried that food in their household would run out before they had money to buy more.

It is important to note that while this sample population is extremely relevant in helping understand the challenges faced by many in Massachusetts, it is not representative of all households statewide.

### BARRIERS TO SNAP PARTICIPATION IMPACTING HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL SURVEY RESPONDENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BARRIER</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01. Misinformation</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
<td>Reported concern about taking away resources “from others who may need them more”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02. Computer Access</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>Reported access to a computer a concern when seeking food resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03. Stigma</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>Reported concern about being judged for using SNAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04. Application Difficulties</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td>Reported concern with how difficult an application was before applying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05. Lack of awareness</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>Reported knowing little or nothing about SNAP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### KEY FINDINGS

79.8% of respondents reported sometimes or often worrying that food in their household would run out before they had money to buy more.

### BARRIERS TO SNAP

Barriers to SNAP participation impacting the highest percentage of total survey respondents

#### MISINFORMATION

A notably high barrier to participation is misinformation about SNAP and how it works. SNAP is built to expand and contract based on population needs. It is designed to scale and doesn’t “run out.” However, worry about taking away resources “from others who may need them more,” was reported as a concern for 46.4% of respondents when deciding whether or not to apply for SNAP, indicating a lack of clarity around the way the program works among potentially eligible individuals.

#### HOW TO APPLY

The logistics of applying were also a consideration for survey participants. The ability to apply without a computer and the ability to apply in a language other than English were reported as considerations when deciding whether to seek free food resources by 43% and 32.4% of respondents respectively.

#### STIGMA

38.6% or respondents reported being concerned about being judged for using SNAP indicating that the social perception of SNAP and those who use it may represent a barrier to participation.

“I was on SNAP at one point last year but I closed my account because I didn’t want to take away from someone else if they needed it more.”

Senior FoodSource Hotline caller, Dorchester

#### APPLICATION DIFFICULTIES

The application process itself may also influence a person’s decision to apply. Difficulty of the application was a concern for 36.6% of respondents.

#### LACK OF AWARENESS

The survey data indicates that one barrier to participation in SNAP may be a lack of awareness about the program. Despite survey respondents reporting they had experienced food insecurity at a rate of 79.8% in the preceding twelve months, 31.8% reported knowing a little or nothing at all about SNAP.
When looking more closely at these responses, a clear distinction appears between concerns among white respondents and concerns among Black, Indigenous, or other people of color (BIPOC) respondents.

**UNCERTAIN/RACIST IMMIGRATION POLICIES**

When looking at responses to immigration concerns, among white respondents, 24.1% reported that they were afraid applying for SNAP would affect their immigration status, a rate considerably lower than the rate among Latino respondents (30.4%) and Asian non-Latino (38.4%) respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BARRIER</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01. Uncertain/racist immigration policies</td>
<td>Reported that they were afraid applying for SNAP would affect immigration status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02. Ability to apply in a non-English language</td>
<td>Reported that the ability to apply in a language other than English affected their decision to apply for SNAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03. Stigma</td>
<td>Reported concern about being judged for using SNAP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RACIAL DISPARITIES**

Disparities in survey response percentages by race and ethnicity

Understanding that food insecurity does not exist in a vacuum, and that barriers to SNAP participation vary among different racial and ethnic groups, the results were further broken out to better understand disparities between various groups.
Another difference we saw was relative to language. Among white respondents, 26.6% reported that the ability to apply in a language other than English affected their decision to apply for SNAP, a rate that was significantly lower than that of Latino (38.5%) and Asian non-Latino (55.8%).

55.8% of Asian survey respondents reported that ability to apply in a language other than English affected their decision to apply for SNAP.

Finally, when looking at responses regarding judgment/stigma, 40.9% of white respondents reported concern about being judged for using SNAP, a rate that was significantly lower than that of Asian non-Latino (51.7%) respondents.

“This was hard for me because I was embarrassed at first.”

FoodSource Hotline caller who received over-the-phone SNAP application assistance, Framingham
SUMMARY

Again and again, this research showed that households must weigh many different considerations when deciding whether to seek assistance. And, it is clear that these considerations, like food insecurity itself, disproportionately affect households of color.

While the most common barriers included fear of taking assistance away from others, eligibility concerns, and stigma, it is important to note that almost all barriers were chosen at high rates—indicating a need for a larger look at SNAP accessibility and assistance. This also holds true when looking at responses by race and ethnicity. While some racial and ethnic groups may have indicated concerns at a higher rate, all respondent groups had a relatively high rate of concern around barriers. No group should be discounted in making SNAP more accessible.

PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations aim to show how we can equitably increase access to SNAP and ensure that anyone in Massachusetts who needs it, has the support they need to access food. Many of these recommendations are also included in the report, *The State of Hunger*, co-authored by Project Bread and Children’s HealthWatch.

01. Increase Awareness of SNAP

Large scale awareness campaigns can help to increase visibility and access for this critical program. Any awareness efforts must include information in a variety of languages and avenues and include cross-functional collaboration to best meet the dynamic and diverse needs of Massachusetts residents. Messaging in awareness efforts should address misconceptions that the public has about both the people who use SNAP and about the program. Community leaders should be engaged as trusted ambassadors and messengers.

PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Commonwealth of Massachusetts should allocate funding received from the American Rescue Plan Act to a large-scale awareness campaign intended to increase awareness and utilization of SNAP.
- Organizations with expertise in SNAP, including Project Bread, should continue to offer training and webinars to community organizations who can promote SNAP in their community.
02. 

Make it Easier to Apply for SNAP

Efforts must be made to be more accessible to the people who need it and are facing numerous difficulties trying to understand the application in real time.

PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- Organizations working with populations facing food insecurity should promote SNAP application assistance resources, including resources for individuals who do not have a computer or for whom English is not their native language, such as Project Bread’s toll-free, confidential FoodSource Hotline, available in 180 languages, as well as SNAP Outreach Partners across the state and the DTA Assistance Line. DTA should continue their efforts to make outreach materials and the Assistance Line available in multiple languages.

- DTA and the UMass Medical School’s SNAP Outreach Partner Reimbursement Project should continue recruitment to expand the number of organizations that can promote SNAP in their communities, focusing on critical access points, such as schools.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Permanently amend Massachusetts state law by passing H.1290/S.761 to allow low-income households to apply for MassHealth/Medicare Savings Program and SNAP at the same time, and begin the process for creating a Common Application for all safety net programs.

- Reduce burdensome requirements in applying, accessing or renewing SNAP benefits by reducing paperwork and minimizing other barriers such as onerous verification and recertification processes. In response to COVID-19, waivers provided flexibility in administering SNAP; federal law should be passed to make these waivers permanent and provide equitable access to SNAP.

- Mitigate bias in the operations of federal and state assistance programs through agency investments in equitable access to program benefits, and more specifically by examining existing practices for potential bias, investing in staff training and supports, and adopting inclusion as a core operational principle at all levels.

03. 

Expand SNAP

Too many individuals and families across Massachusetts are facing food insecurity, but not currently eligible for SNAP, often because of either their immigration status or because of their income. These individuals are instead having to rely on the emergency food system. Recognizing that SNAP is the most effective anti-hunger program in the nation, it is past time to ensure all those who are food insecure are eligible for the program.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Pass federal law to expand categories of immigrants eligible for SNAP without the five-year waiting period (currently, only some immigrants are eligible without a waiting period, like refugees and asylees).

- Pass federal law to increase income thresholds for eligibility for SNAP so that more food-insecure, working families can access benefits.

- Expand eligibility by eliminating the gross income test and remove the cap on shelter deductions and medical expansions.
04. Permanently Increase SNAP Benefits

SNAP benefits should reflect the real cost of a healthy diet and other expenses.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

-USDA should immediately evaluate and recommend changes to the Thrifty Food Plan, which is the basis for how SNAP benefit amounts are determined. USDA publishes food plans based on the consumer price index and the monthly amount calculated under the Thrifty Food Plan is intended to cover a household’s nutrition needs. Unfortunately, the nutrition science has not been updated for over 15 years and assumes that all food will be fully prepared at home, with families purchasing raw ingredients and making meals from scratch. This just does not match the needs or realities of most households, especially those in a high cost state like Massachusetts.

-Congress should permanently increase SNAP benefits by authorizing USDA to use the Low Cost Food Plan instead of the Thrifty Food Plan. Even with a reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan, the design flaw of SNAP would still remain. SNAP benefits would better allow for a subsistence diet, but to solve food insecurity and poverty, families need more than a subsistence diet. By passing S.2192/H.R.4077 to close the meal gap, Congress can help families access sufficient and nutritious food with the dignity of choice.

-The Massachusetts Legislature should permanently authorize and fully fund the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP). HIP allows SNAP recipients to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables directly from farmers. The amount spent is immediately added back to their EBT card to be spent at any SNAP retailer. While the program has been a tremendous success, to date it has only been authorized through the state budget. Making HIP a permanent program would ensure its long-term sustainability in serving SNAP clients.

05. Coordinate a National, Comprehensive Plan to Address Food Insecurity

PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

-The White House should hold a conference on Hunger and Nutrition. The last, and only, White House Conference on Hunger was in 1969 and led to significant expansions of the Food Stamp Program, eventually transforming it to SNAP. A White House conference has the power of coordinating a powerful comprehensive strategy of how to solve hunger by bringing together federal and state agencies, academics, individuals with lived experience, and leaders from the various sectors. The White House should host a conference as soon as possible.
We must all—especially leaders—resist harmful rhetoric and policies and instead promote a collective tone of respect for all our neighbors that confronts and takes the place of racist, xenophobic, and bigoted rhetoric that perpetuates fear and exacerbates biases.

Researchers should critically examine assumptions, research questions and methodologies, as well as the composition of research teams in order to actively deconstruct harmful practices within conventionally-designed research projects and prioritizing the inclusion and incorporation of community members themselves in order to ensure methodologies and findings reflect priorities of the community.

Researchers should promote data equity by disaggregating data and intentionally analyzing data—with attention to such things as race/ethnicity, gender, age, disability, and immigration status—to better understand the disproportionate impact policies and practices have on particular people and communities.

Congress and the Massachusetts Legislature should require USDA and the Department of Transitional Assistance to collect and disaggregate data by race/ethnicity, gender, age, disability, and immigration status as long as such data collection does not contribute to stigma.

The power of promotion
In direct response to the pandemic, Project Bread launched an awareness campaign to connect newly eligible residents to SNAP. During this time of promotion from July - Sept 2020, 80% of visitors (105,215 people) to Project Bread’s GettingSNAP.org website came to the site for the first time to learn about the program.
Project Bread contracted the Center for Survey Research at the University of Massachusetts Boston (CSR) to conduct a survey of Massachusetts residents to better understand how residents utilize food resources. The goal of the survey was to measure the awareness of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), to understand the perceptions that may impact a person’s willingness to enroll in the program, as well as to learn about the experiences of the residents when using SNAP benefits.

This survey was funded by Project Bread and the Boston Resiliency Fund. The data collection, which included mail and online surveys, was carried out by CSR in the fall of 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic and election season. Project Bread worked closely with CSR on the design of the project and the development of the survey instrument, which was available in six languages—English, Spanish, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Portuguese, and Vietnamese. The survey was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at UMass Boston.

While the entire survey included three sample sets—a random, address-based sample of households from Boston; a random, address-based sample of households from the rest of the state; and a convenience sample—we have chosen to focus on the convenience sample for the relevance and diversity of the sample.

The convenience sample which included 823 respondents came from households connected to OFA and/or their network of partners. They were contacted and surveyed entirely online. The data collected from this sample are not combined with the sample of 3,000 randomly selected addresses from Boston and rest of the state.

Project Bread

Project Bread connects people and communities in Massachusetts to reliable sources of food while advocating for policies that make food more accessible—so that no one goes hungry. We make it easier for people to access and afford food with dignity—an expert in helping you navigate your options to finally make ends meet.

Boston Office of Food Access

The Mayor’s Office of Food Access works to improve the accessibility and affordability of healthy food in Boston. We want everyone to have access to nutritious food. That food should be affordable, easy to find, and reflect the many cultures of our City. Our goal is to create food-secure communities with vibrant and inclusive food cultures. We want to reflect the diversity of the residents of Boston.

UMASS Boston Center for Survey Research

The Center for Survey Research (CSR) is an academic survey research center, established in 1971 by the University of Massachusetts Boston. CSR conducts basic and applied research that contributes to knowledge and understanding of important social issues. CSR supports public and private agencies and university scholars in carrying out high quality policy-related research.

Erin McAleer; Laura Siller; Elizabeth Greenhalgh; Miriam Avila; Raina Searles; Khara Burns; Dragan Bolcic–Jankovic, PhD; Sarah Cluggish; Jennifer Lemmerman; Leran Minc

SUGGESTED CITATION


REFERENCES

No matter what, we understand that food is a must. Project Bread helps people learn if they are eligible and apply for SNAP. Our services are free to all residents of Massachusetts through our FoodSource Hotline at 1-800-645-8333 or at GettingSNAP.org.