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The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Access in Rhode Island: Elevating Stakeholder Voices

August 19, 2021

Sarah Amin, PhD, MPH

University of Rhode Island

Department of Nutrition & Food Sciences

Outline

The Need: Diet-related Disparities & Food Insecurity in RI

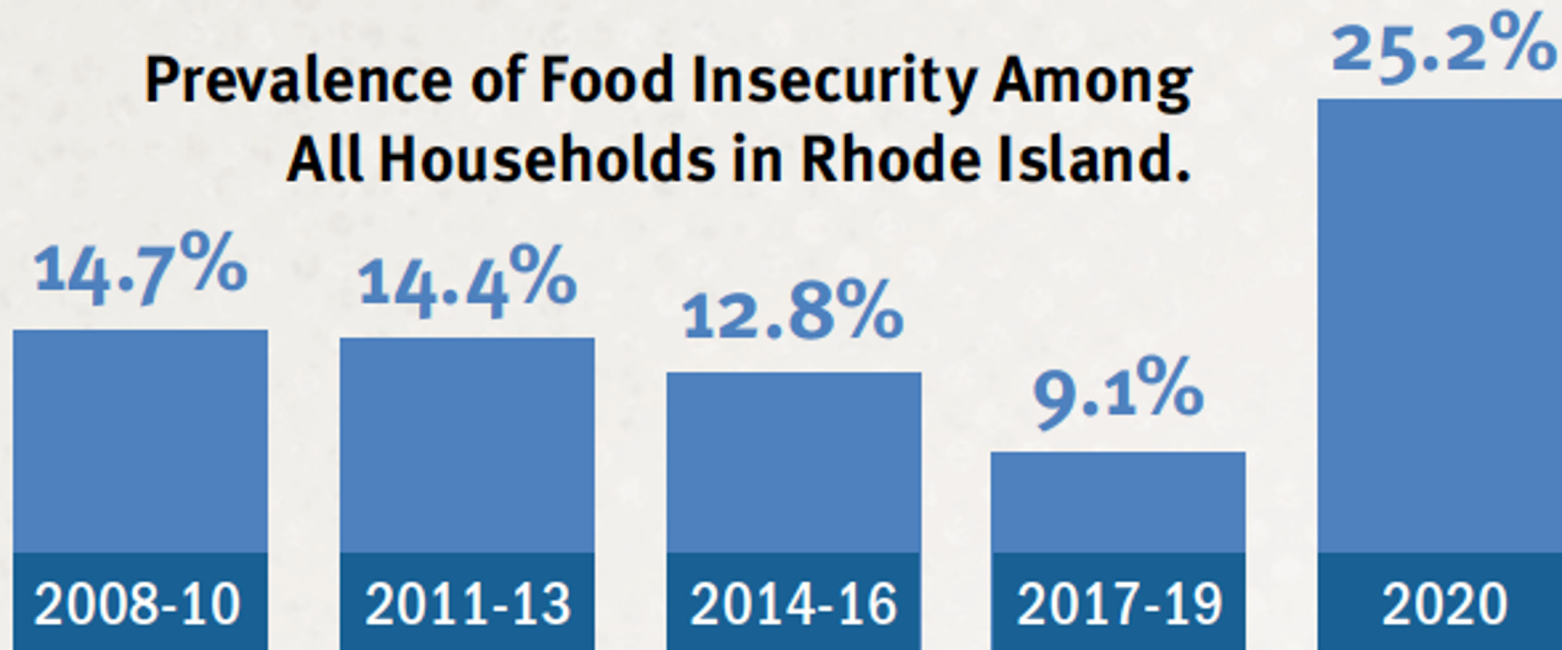
The Process: from Study Design to Analyses

Main Findings: Stakeholder Successes & Challenges Around Food Access

Recommendations from Stakeholders & A Call to Action



Food Insecurity is an Issue in RI Now More Than Ever: COVID-19 Impact

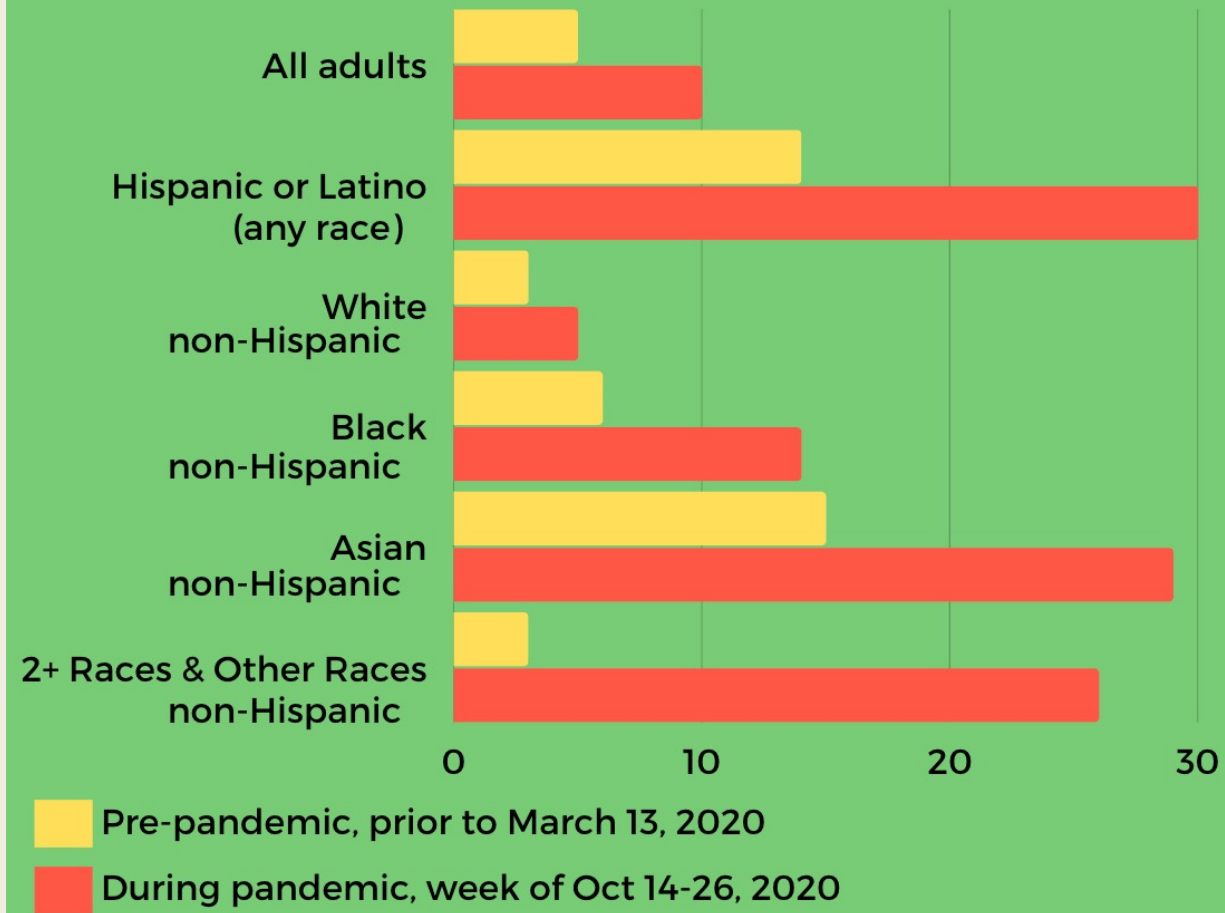


Food insecurity in Rhode Island reached a record level in 2020.



RHODE ISLAND COMMUNITY
FOOD BANK

Percentage of RI Adults who Self-Reported Sometimes or Often Not Having Enough to Eat Pre-Pandemic and in the Last 7 Days



www.census.gov/data/tables/2020/demo/hhp/hhp17.html

Study Snapshot

- Study Team:

- Principal Investigator: Sarah Amin, PhD, MPH
- Co-Investigators: Alison Tovar, PhD, MPH; Kim Gans, PhD; Kate Balestracci, PhD, RD; Margaret Read, MA
- Graduate Research Assistant: Fatima Tobar, BS

Research Goal:

To assess the impact that COVID-19 had on food access

- Study conducted from September 2020-November 2020
- Key informant interviews conducted with 25 RI local and state food access stakeholders
- Report published in April 2021

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”
~State Agency



This material was funded by USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - SNAP. This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

The Process

Interview Guide Development

- Team brainstorm
- Questions from NOPREN COVID-19 Qualitative Database*
- Three Sections (9 questions):
 - Scope of Work
 - Organizational Success and Challenges
 - Impact on Health Disparities

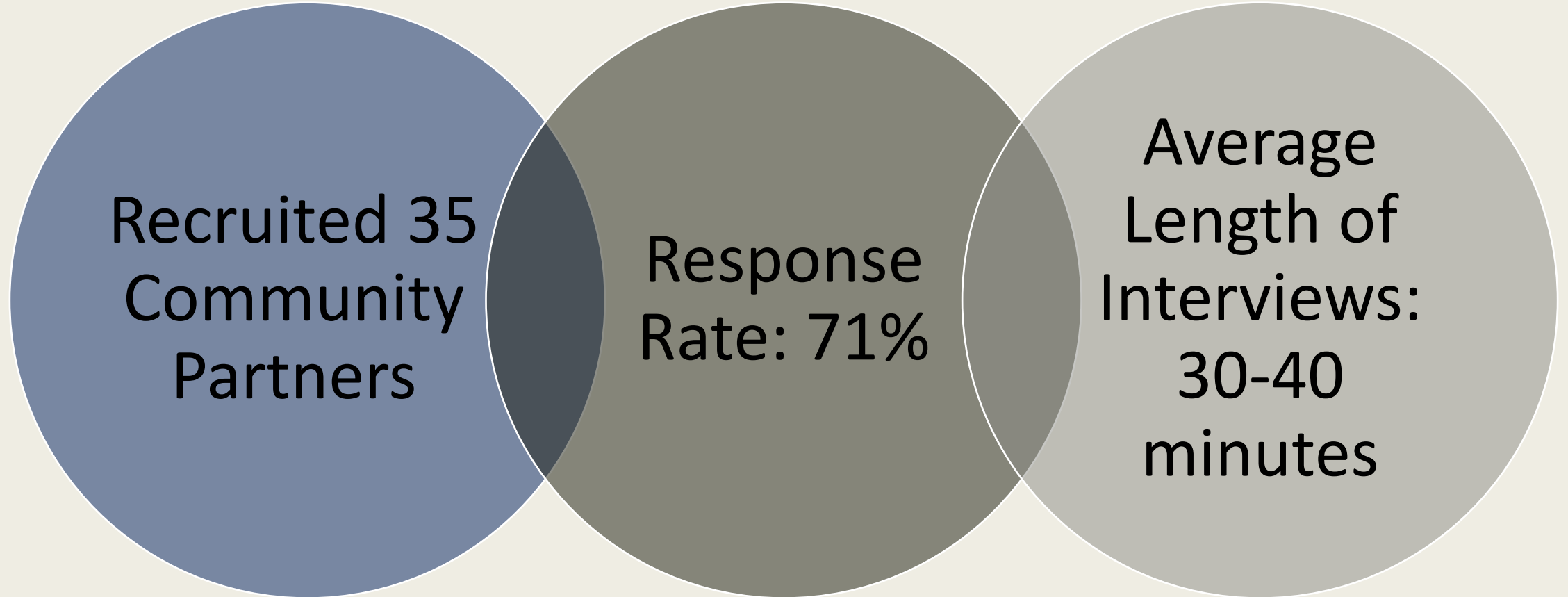
Recruitment & Data Collection

- List of 35 community partners mostly from RI COVID-19 & Food Access Working Group
- Email invitation with 1 follow-up
- Verbal consent to participate
- Zoom Interview

Data Analysis

- Transcripts transcribed professionally
- Content Analysis:
 - Codebook generated with *a priori* codes
 - Data coded in NVivo
 - Identified other emergent codes
 - Iterative process until saturation was reached

Results: Overview



Results: Types of Food Access Stakeholders

| Community Partner Type | n (%) |
|--|--------|
| State Agency | 7 (28) |
| Health Equity Zone (HEZ) | 5 (20) |
| Nonprofit Organization | 5 (20) |
| Food Pantry | 3 (12) |
| City Agency | 2 (8) |
| Home-delivered Meal Program | 1 (4) |
| Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) | 1 (4) |
| Food Pantry | 1 (4) |

Results:

Demographics of Interviewees

| Demographic Characteristics of Community Partner Interviewees | % |
|---|------|
| Work Experience (years) | |
| ≥ 10 | 30.3 |
| 4-9 | 27.2 |
| 1-3 | 36.4 |
| <1-3 | 6.1 |
| Sex | |
| Female | 81.8 |
| Male | 15.2 |
| Non-Binary | 3.0 |
| Race | |
| Black or African-American | 12.1 |
| White | 81.8 |
| Non-Specified | 6.1 |
| Ethnicity | |
| Non-Hispanic/Latinx | 18.2 |
| Hispanic/Latinx | 12.1 |
| Not Specified | 69.7 |

*Number of interviewees (n=33) was higher than partners interviewed (n=25) due to more than one member from the organization participating.



Organizational Challenges

Organizational Challenges

Increase in individuals facing food insecurity

Lack of cultural and dietary diversity in food relief responses

Insufficient funding, time, and organizational resources

Cultural sensitivity of communication methods

Amplified inequalities in marginalized communities

Impact of social distancing and isolation on socioemotional health

Challenge: Food Insecurity

- Disparities & Inequalities

“And then certainly for our families that are undocumented, it just gets worse and worse and worse, and so I think you’ve seen a lot of effort throughout the state to put resources to families, especially just dollars to families who are undocumented or just are not able to access state level or federal level food resources.”-City Agency

“We know the ZIP Codes that are going to be hard hit by this pandemic and its ripple effects. So, for me, the crisis revealed the crisis. And unfortunately, it’s our communities of color, it’s our lower-income communities, it’s our homebound, it’s the folks who were struggling before.”-State Agency

Challenge: Food Insecurity

- Meeting the needs of populations who were food insecure for the first time
- Reaching high-risk populations during COVID-19

“A lot of our clients might be in the at-risk group and might not have felt safe and secure to come and collect food from us. So, I think that’s probably significantly reduced their access to healthy food, just fear or inability to leave the house or not having friends or family to come and act as a proxy for them and collect their food for them.”-Food Pantry

“I think a lot of people moved into a food insecure space and never would have saw themselves as being that and don’t always know how to access public resources. “Oh, is this when I sign up for SNAP? What is SNAP? How does that work? Oh, wait. I have a three-year-old. I can sign up for WIC?...There’s a learning curve for people who have the potential to enter food distribution programs or food access programs that wouldn’t normally know how to do that.”-City Agency

Challenge: Lack of Cultural and Dietary Diversity in Food Responses

- Not being able to meet the culturally needs of several populations in the state

"We found that culturally appropriate or diverse food was an issue. **We think of food in terms of perhaps the standard, American definition of food, but many ethnic populations don't eat that way.** And we have to be sensitive and understanding of [that]." -State Agency

"We have this organization that is doing meal deliveries and we support that, but you know, keeping dietary health, cultural kind of preferences...is really important, because there will be people that get a food box donation and people will just throw the food out sometimes, because it's not to what they like. **Food is very personal, and I think that is something that continues. It's a challenge to try to feed people, but also allow them to have the options and opportunities to make their own decisions as well,** which is, I think, a big challenge and something that we've seen come to the forefront too as well with this pandemic."-HEZ

Challenge: Insufficient Resources

- Challenges related to time, preparation, & required organizational resources for providing food
- Constraints on state budgets and general lack of funding

“I think the **challenge is still the financial support that we want to achieve and are not yet able to achieve just because of constraints on the state budget and lack of sufficient stimulus funding to do the type of work that we want to do...**We know through the work that we’ve done...where the needs are and when they can’t be supplied via a federal grant programwe are constrained in our ability to do so. And frankly that’s frustrating.”-State Agency

“...especially the height of the pandemic, **we had to maintain all those commitments to our funders. At the same time, we were being asked to manage food distribution, so we were essentially working two or three jobs in a day. I would say we were putting in 15-, 20-hour workdays. We didn’t sleep. We just kept going.** And that meant that we were out in the field doing work, so we had to maintain our own personal protection. We were setting up food distribution sites, communicating, doing a lot of backend spreadsheet work and trying to keep track of where food is going and who needs what. It was extremely challenging.”-City Agency



Organizational Successes

Organizational Successes

Enhanced collaboration & communication

Opportunities for federal, state, foundation funding and waivers

Implementation of culturally relevant practices

Success: Enhanced Collaboration & Communication

- Enhanced collaboration led to coordinated responses and increased reach

“We were **working hard to bring in large amounts of food to locations within a neighborhood** and then having organizations come and pick up from that location. So, then you needed people with cars or vans who could come and pick a large amount of food up and turn it around and distribute it. **We were taking every single city vehicle that we could and turning it into a food delivery system for kids...** -City Agency

“We had a big group coming together, talking about what everybody is doing and how do we better coordinate all of these various services?...Rhode Island is small and then communities [are] smaller and then people doing food work is smaller. We all came together to do a lot of this work and **collaboration together**. I talked about surging emergency foods, which we did, pursuing the federal waivers, which we did, creating the new programs.”
-State Agency

Success: Enhanced Collaboration & Communication

- Innovative programs were devised by community organizations in a time of need

“We created a grocery certificate program. We started working with [nonprofit organization], and reached out to the Spanish-speaking community, which there’s a large, quite, invisible sometimes Spanish-speaking community in [city]. We now have a person who staffs the market who is fluent in Spanish, and we have been identifying households that are really in need. So we’ve been distributing \$50.00 worth of certificates that people can spend at the market. And then we have somebody, Spanish is her first language, somebody onsite who can guide those new shoppers through understanding how to use the certificates.”-HEZ Representative

Success: Implementation of Culturally Relevant Practices

- Working alongside communities to discuss dietary and cultural preferences.

“Thank God for all the social media, because I can put something up on Facebook and get answers. I went live and said look, I really want to help you in [city]. I don’t know what you people want to eat. You’re very different. You’re not like the Cape Verdeans in [city]. It’s about having the willingness to ask that question, and I’m not trying to be offensive. I want to know what you like, treat you with empathy, and serve you where you live.”-Nonprofit

**“When I am with my Dominicans, I know they want fried salami. I know ox feet are supposed to go to the Liberians. Very, very important, because good intentions miss that all the time. And how can I help you in your space instead of trying to come into your space and convince you to eat with me.”
-Nonprofit**

Recommendations from Stakeholders

(1) Enhanced collaboration and communication among state-level and “boots on the ground” leadership is urgently needed.

(2) Strategies and efforts to promote food access during COVID-19 must be culturally sensitive, language appropriate, and reach all audiences in need.

(3) Federal leadership should better coordinate with states around food access and solicit ongoing feedback around the implementation challenges of federal food assistance programs and waivers.

A Call to Action & Next Steps

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Contact Information



Sarah Amin, PhD, MPH

Director of Community Nutrition Education
(EFNEP & SNAP-Ed)

Assistant Professor

Department of Nutrition & Food Sciences
University of Rhode Island

Providence, RI

E-mail: sarah_amin@uri.edu