

Federal Food Policy Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented spikes in unemployment as well as widespread school closures. As a result, COVID-19 has exacerbated already limited access to resources and sources of food for food insecure households in the United States. In order to better understand the extent to which COVID-19 has magnified issues of limited food access, this article summarizes trends in food insecurity, nutrition assistance program participation and the food policy responses that have been implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

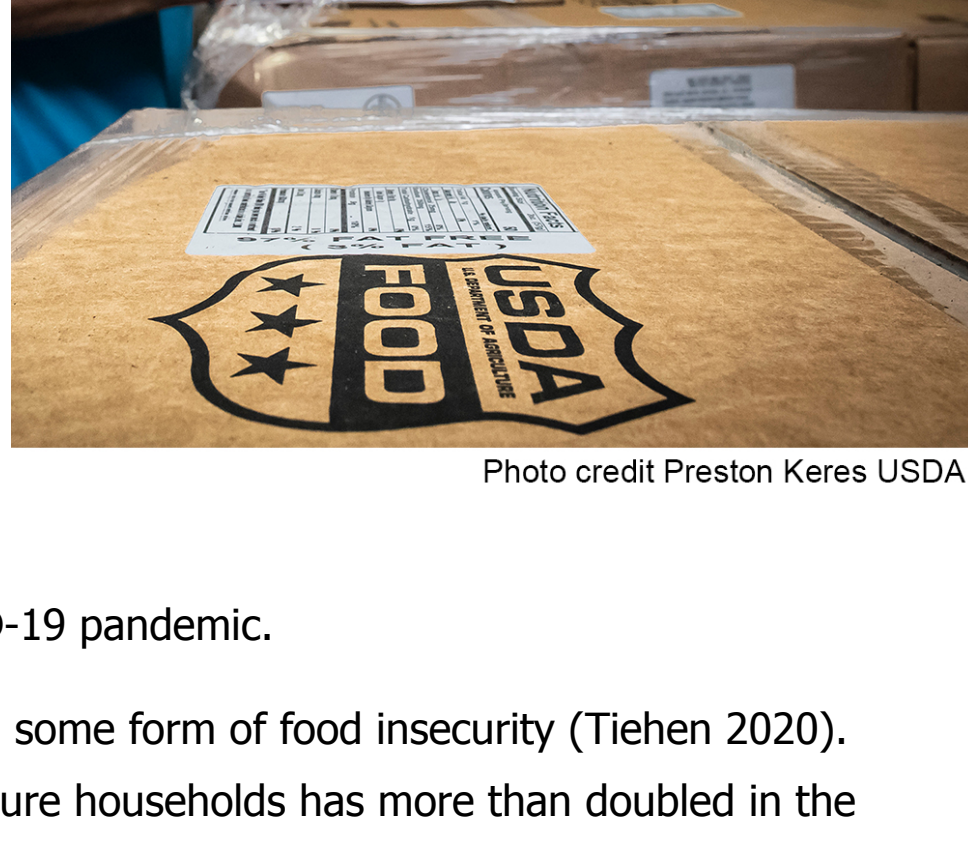


Photo credit Preston Keres USDA

In 2018, 11% of Americans reported experiencing some form of food insecurity (Tiehen 2020). Alarmingly, the estimated proportion of food insecure households has more than doubled in the aftermath of COVID-19. The weekly Household Pulse Survey (HPS), conducted by the US Census Bureau, indicates that 25.2% of respondents and 29.6% of respondents with children experienced conditions of food insecurity between April 23 and June 30, 2020 (Schanzenbach and Tomeh 2020).

In FY 2019, one in four US residents participated in one of USDA's 15 nutrition assistance programs (Tiehen 2020). The largest of these programs, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provided benefits to 11% of Americans in FY 2019 (Tiehen 2020). In addition to SNAP, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) served over 5.6 billion free and reduced price meals to eligible school children. These three programs accounted for 85.5% of USDA's food and nutrition assistance expenditures in FY 2019.

Nutrition assistance programs post-COVID-19

The widespread closure of schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has generated large changes in the number of meals served by the NSLP and the SBP. Despite emergency policy provisions, which allow for pickup/delivery of free and reduced price meals, USDA's preliminary national data reveal a 32.3% decline in the number of free and reduced price meals served in March and April of 2020, relative to March and April of 2019 (USDA-FNS 2020a; 2020b).

Figure 1 illustrates the number of free and reduced price meals provided monthly via the NSLP and SBP from January 2018 through April 2020. Comparisons of March and April of 2020 in contrast to March and April of 2019 illustrate drastic reductions that are not common to other year-over-year comparisons.

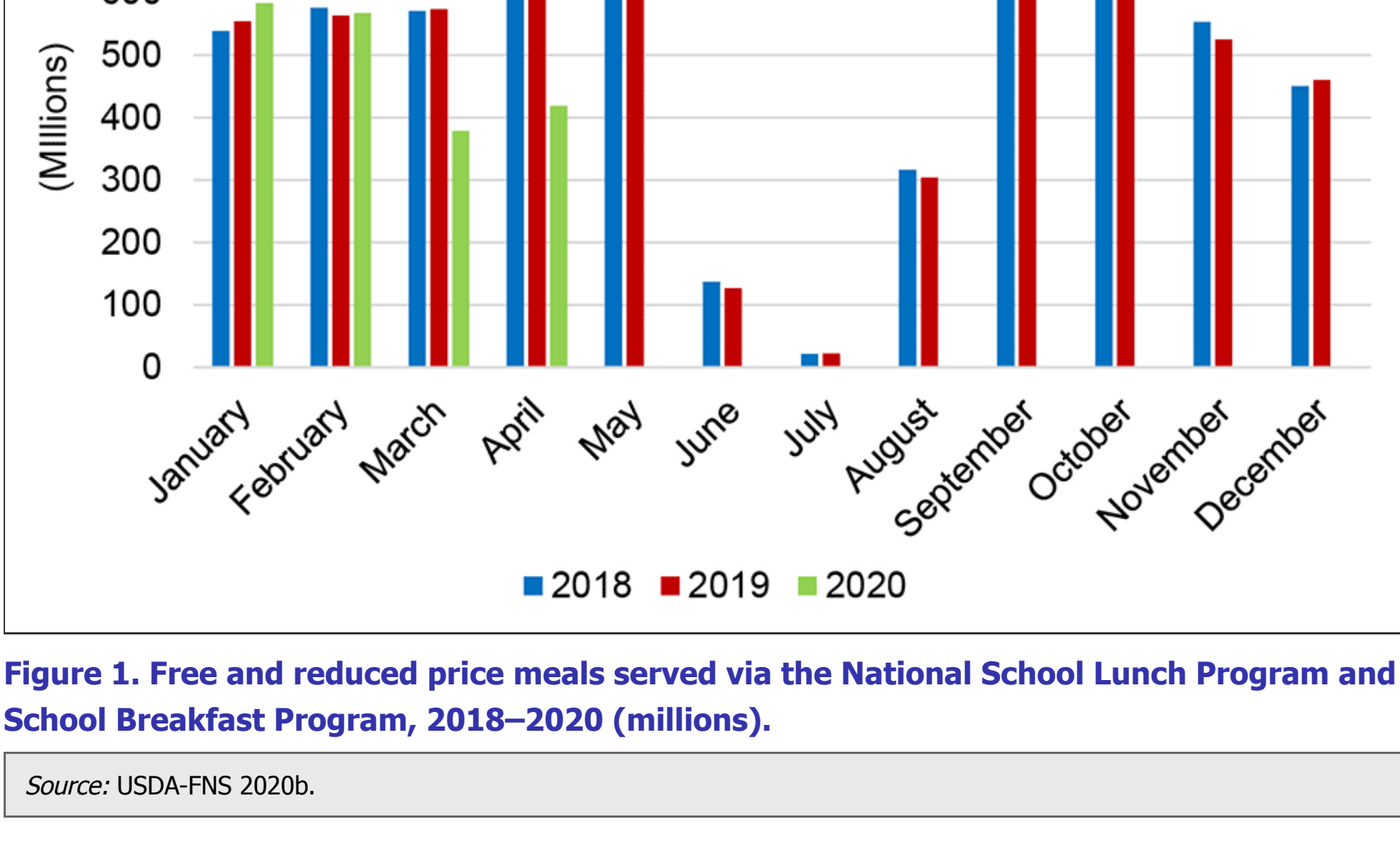


Figure 1. Free and reduced price meals served via the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program, 2018–2020 (millions).

Source: USDA-FNS 2020b.

In response to the challenges associated with providing NSLP and SBP meals to children when schools are closed, the Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 provides states the opportunity to apply for Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT) benefits, which provide the value of foregone school meals on an EBT card (Gersten-Paal 2020). Similar to SNAP benefits, P-EBT benefits can be used to purchase food items at EBT authorized retailers. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen challenges in implementation, only 18 states were approved for P-EBT by the end of April; and, of those, it appears only five distributed P-EBT benefits by the end of April 2020. To date, all 50 states have been approved for P-EBT with approval dates ranging from early April to mid-August.

Preliminary USDA data indicate increased participation in the SNAP program following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of participating households increased 9.1% in March and April 2020 relative to March and April 2019 (see figure 2). Furthermore, the average benefit amount also increased from roughly \$120/person in February of 2020 to \$140/person and \$180/person in March and April of 2020, respectively (see figure 3).

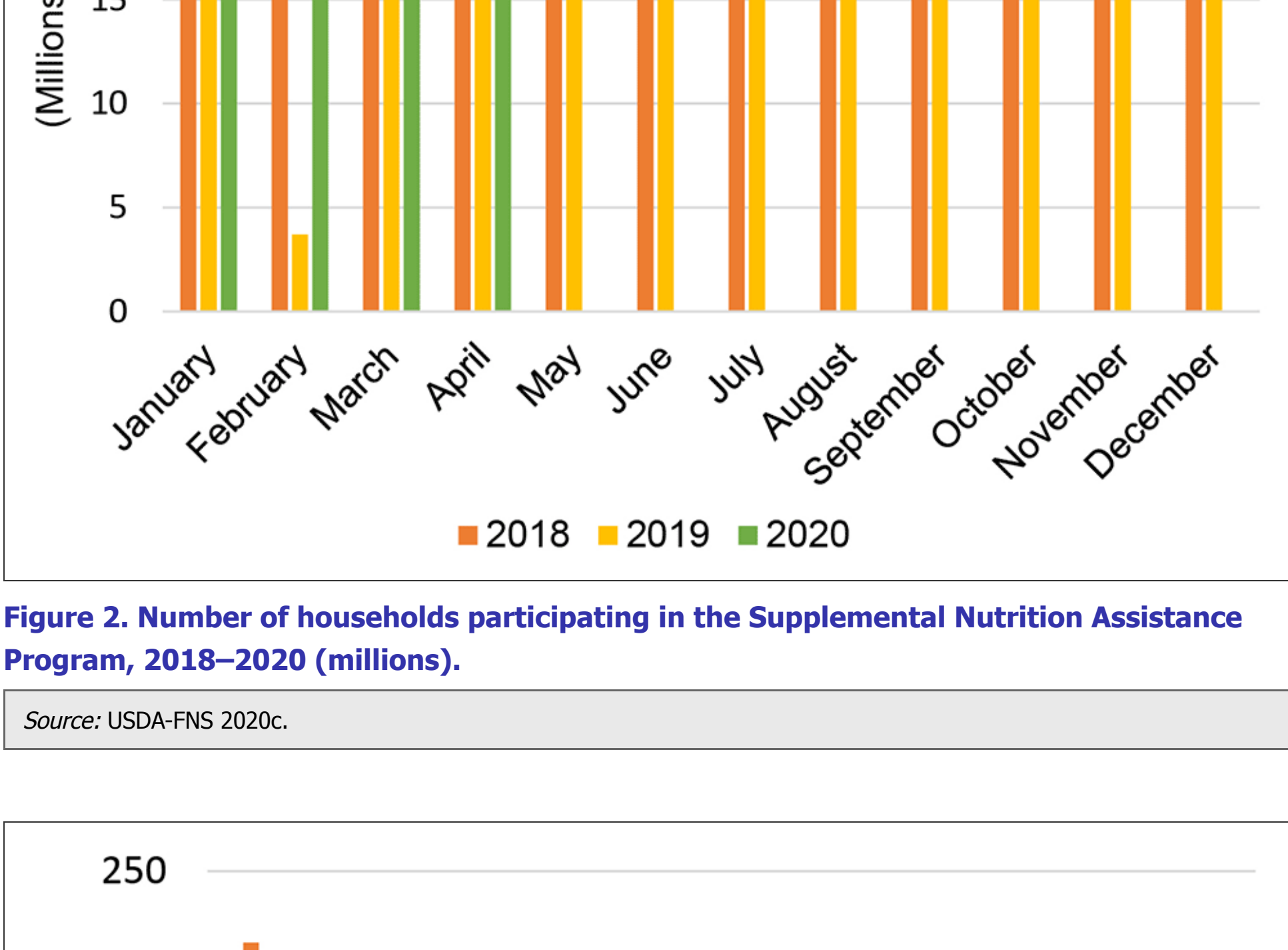


Figure 2. Number of households participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, 2018–2020 (millions).

Source: USDA-FNS 2020c.

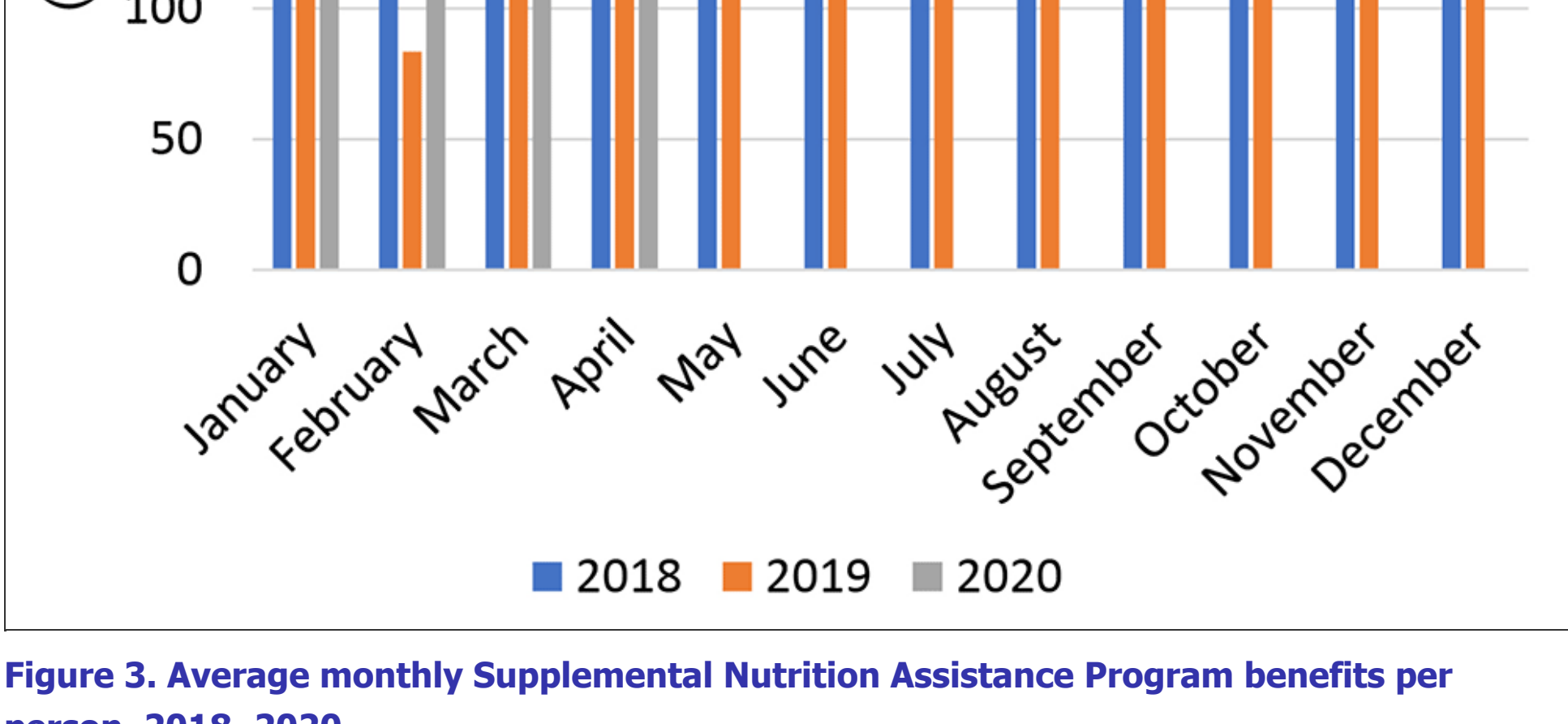


Figure 3. Average monthly Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits per person, 2018–2020.

Source: USDA-FNS 2020c.

The USDA has warned that SNAP recipient and benefit data are likely to include P-EBT benefits and participant counts for some states. However, only five states issued P-EBT benefits by the end of April 2020. Furthermore, we would expect increased enrollment and higher per person benefit amounts due to the changing economic climate and the policy provisions that have been enacted in response to the pandemic.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 provides several additional state options to SNAP policy. Most notably the emergency provisions include Emergency Allotment (EA) benefits, the widespread ability to use SNAP benefits for online grocery purchases, extended re-certification timelines, and the temporary waiver of work requirements for Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents (ABAWD).

EA benefits allow states to provide SNAP beneficiaries with the maximum SNAP benefit amount according to their household size, which effectively increases the household's benefit amount by 30% of their net income (Shahin 2020a). According to the USDA, an additional \$2 billion per month in SNAP benefits have been issued via EA benefits.

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, the use of SNAP benefits for purchasing groceries online was in pilot and was only available in select areas of the United States. In response to the pandemic, USDA rapidly expanded the ability to use SNAP benefits when purchasing groceries online. SNAP benefits can currently be used to purchase food online in 44 states and the District of Columbia (USDA-FNS 2020d). Interestingly, despite widespread adoption of the pilot, Amazon and Walmart remain the predominant retailers that accept SNAP as a form of payment when purchasing groceries online. Of the 44 states, only six have an additional participating retailer outside of Amazon and Walmart.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 also allows states to apply for extended SNAP-eligible certification periods for households with certifications set to expire in March, April, May and/or June of 2020. Effectively, this increases the length of time households can receive benefits without going through the re-certification process, which is generally required every six months. Furthermore, in some states, extended certification periods are available for households with certifications set to expire in July, August and September as well (Gersten-Paal 2020).

The suspension of ABAWD work requirements also increases the length of time that affected households can receive SNAP benefits. Under normal circumstances, ABAWDs can only collect SNAP benefits for three months over a three year period unless they are engaged in work activity (Shahin 2020b). Given the high unemployment rates, this time restriction was suspended on April 1, and will remain suspended until the end of the month after COVID-19 is declared to no longer be a public health emergency (Shahin 2020b).

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic fallout have placed a strain on the resources available to US households for buying and/or receiving food. Due to the economic downturn associated with the pandemic, and the emergency policy provisions put into place, we have seen growth in the number of SNAP participating households and the amount of benefits allotted to SNAP beneficiaries. However, there have been significant challenges in providing free and reduced price meals via the NSLP and the SBP to children at risk for food insecurity. Hopefully, P-EBT benefits have successfully increased food access for free and reduced price eligible children who did not receive school meals due to school closures.

Ultimately, we are left with the resounding question of whether or not the various forms of aid that have been extended to food insecure families have been enough? Figure 4 presents the projected percent of food-insecure US households, as surveyed by HPS, from May 5 to July 21, 2020.

Unfortunately, the national average remained relatively flat throughout this period and has consistently hovered around 23%.

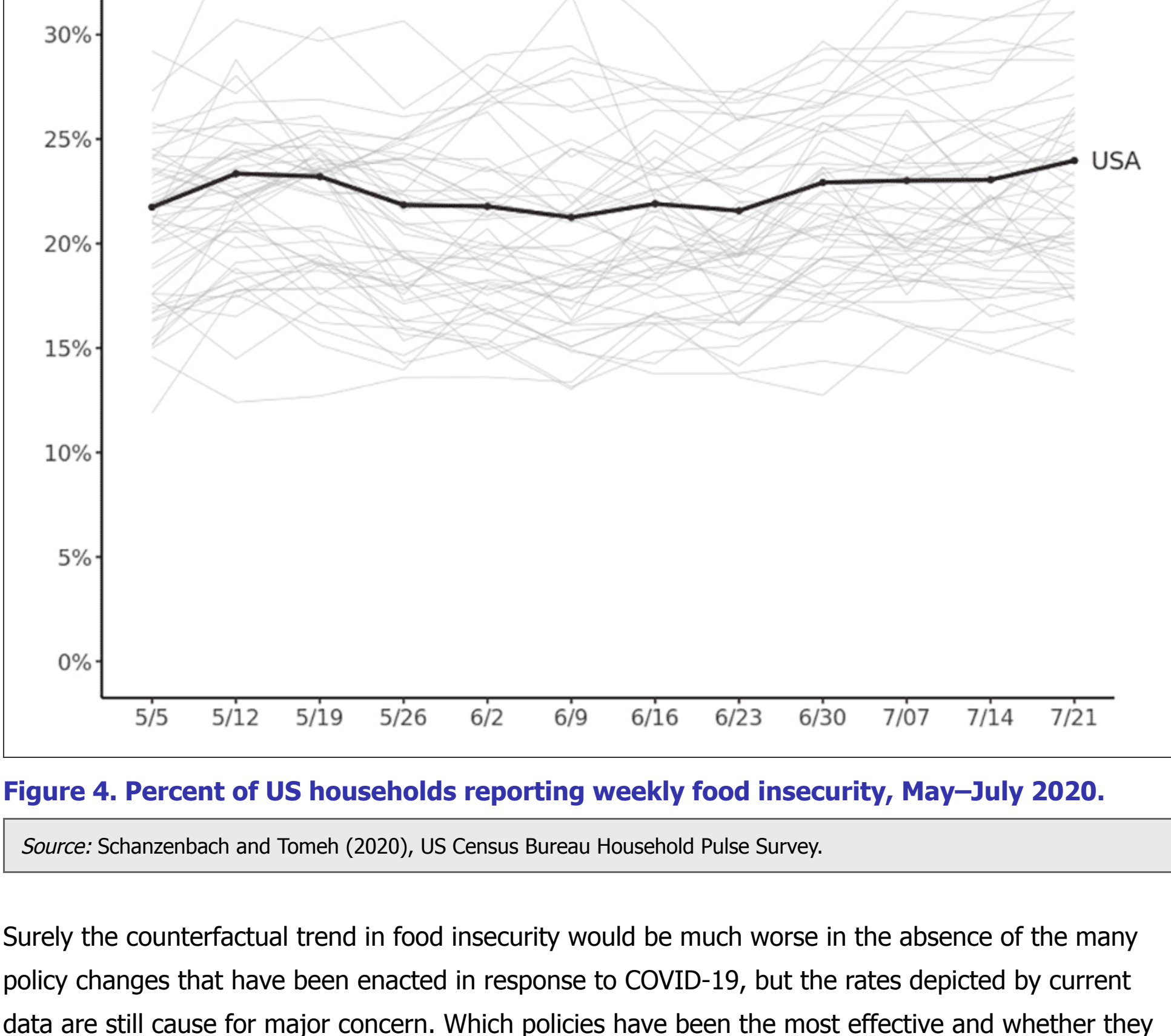


Figure 4. Percent of US households reporting weekly food insecurity, May–July 2020.

Source: Schanzenbach and Tomeh (2020), US Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey.

Surely the counterfactual trend in food insecurity would be much worse in the absence of the many policy changes that have been enacted in response to COVID-19, but the rates depicted by current data are still cause for major concern. Which policies have been the most effective and whether they have provided enough aid to families during these unprecedented times, largely, remains an open question.

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