

Health & Fitness

COVID Increased Atlantic County's Food Insecurity, Research Says

Here's how much food insecurity spiked during the pandemic and lockdown, according to Stockton University research.

By Josh Bakan, Patch Staff
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New Stockton University research shows a spike of food insecurity in Atlantic County associated with the coronavirus pandemic. (Shutterstock)

GALLOWAY, NJ — New Stockton University research shows a spike of food insecurity in Atlantic County associated with the coronavirus pandemic. Research from the William J.

Hughes Center for Public Policy also indicates prevalent food insecurity in the area before the COVID-19 lockdown.

Economic conditions following the lockdown, which began in March, increased food insecurity throughout New Jersey. But the lockdown hit Atlantic County especially hard because of the outsized impact on closures in the area's casinos and hospitality industry, according to the research paper by Stockton student Garrett Bolton.

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Atlantic County's unemployment rate rose to 33.8 percent in April — more than double that of the state (16.3 percent) and nation (14.7 percent). In June, the county county experienced the highest year-over-year unemployment rate increase in the United States: 379 percent, according to the paper.

The number of county residents receiving food stamps in April was 8 percent higher than in April 2019. Expenditures from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) ranked eighth in Atlantic County among New Jersey's 21 counties.

But food stamp usage data doesn't fully reflect hunger in the region. Many casino and hospitality workers did not qualify for food stamps because enhanced unemployment benefits raised income above the eligibility threshold, according to the report. A number had to rely on food pantries.

“Thousands of people (were) out of work and relying on unemployment to keep a roof over their head and food on the table but finding it difficult to do both,” the report said. “Food pantries have been the go-to resource for those who cannot buy groceries.”

By the end of June the Community Food Bank of New Jersey (CFBNJ) had distributed nearly 70,000 emergency meal kits statewide. Atlantic County was one of their main targeted areas, with Atlantic City casino workers receiving more than 3,000 meal kits.

Between January and June, Atlantic County also had proportionally the highest rate of calls to the NJ 211 hotline for information on food assistance, according to the report.

“Behind all the statistics in this report is a portrait of real people grappling with the challenge of providing enough food for their families,” said John Froonjian, executive director of the Hughes Center.

The Hughes Center undertook the student research as a follow-up to a Stockton University poll in March. The poll found that, even before the lockdown, a significant percentage of Atlantic County residents struggled with food insecurity.

Nearly one in five residents said they had run out of food and did not have money to buy more right away, while 14 percent had skipped a meal because they could not afford to buy food, according to the poll. Among those with children, 17 percent had skipped a meal so that their children could eat.

“The Hughes Center [poll](#) showed that food insecurity was a problem in Atlantic County before the pandemic struck, when times were still good," Froonjian said. "Our new research shows that the coronavirus lockdown created a food security crisis.

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**Patch has partnered with Feeding America to help raise awareness on behalf of the millions of Americans facing hunger. Feeding America, which supports 200 food banks across the country, estimates that in 2020, more than 54 million Americans will not have enough nutritious food to eat due to the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. This is a Patch social good project; Feeding America receives 100 percent of donations. [Find out how you can donate in your community or find a food pantry near you.](#)*

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