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Report: Atlantic County residents experiencing spike in food insecurity amid COVID-19 pandemic

Sep 16, 2020



Press archives

Atlantic County residents are experiencing a spike in food insecurity due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, according to a student research paper published today by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

Garrett Bolton, a student at the university, found that economic conditions following the March lockdown threatened food security across the state, but Atlantic County was especially hard hit because of the outsized impact of business closures on the casino industry and the regional hospitality economy, according to a news release from the school.

In April, Atlantic County's unemployment rate rose to 33.8%, more than double that of the state, which sits at 16.3%, and the national, 14.7%, rates, according to the release. In June, the county experienced the highest year-over-year unemployment rate increase at 379% of any county in the U.S., according to the paper.

The number of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, recipients receiving food stamps began increasing at the time it usually decreases as businesses gear up for summer tourism, according to the release. The number of county residents receiving food stamps in April was 8% higher than in April 2019, and SNAP expenditures in Atlantic were 8th highest among the 21 counties in the state.

But food stamp usage data did not fully reflect the impact on hunger in the region, according to the research. Many casino and hospitality workers did not qualify for food stamps because enhanced unemployment benefits raised income above the eligibility threshold. A number were forced 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 FoodBank of New Jersey had distributed nearly 70,000 emergency meal kits statewide, according to the report. One of the main areas targeted for help was Atlantic County, 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 March Stockton University Poll that found that even before the lockdown, a significant percentage of Atlantic County residents struggled with food insecurity, according to the release. Nearly one in five residents said they had run out of food and did not have money to buy more right away, while 14% had skipped a meal because they could not afford to buy food, according to the poll. Among those with children, 17% 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. Our new research shows that the coronavirus lockdown created a food security crisis,” Froomjian said.

The new research by Bolton, a political science major from Hamilton Township, Mercer County, aimed to document the effect of economic conditions on food insecurity after Gov. Phil Murphy ordered business closures that resulted in layoffs. Hughes Center Research Associate Alyssa Maurice contributed to the report with data analysis.

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