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NERCRD COVID-19 Data Brief 21-02

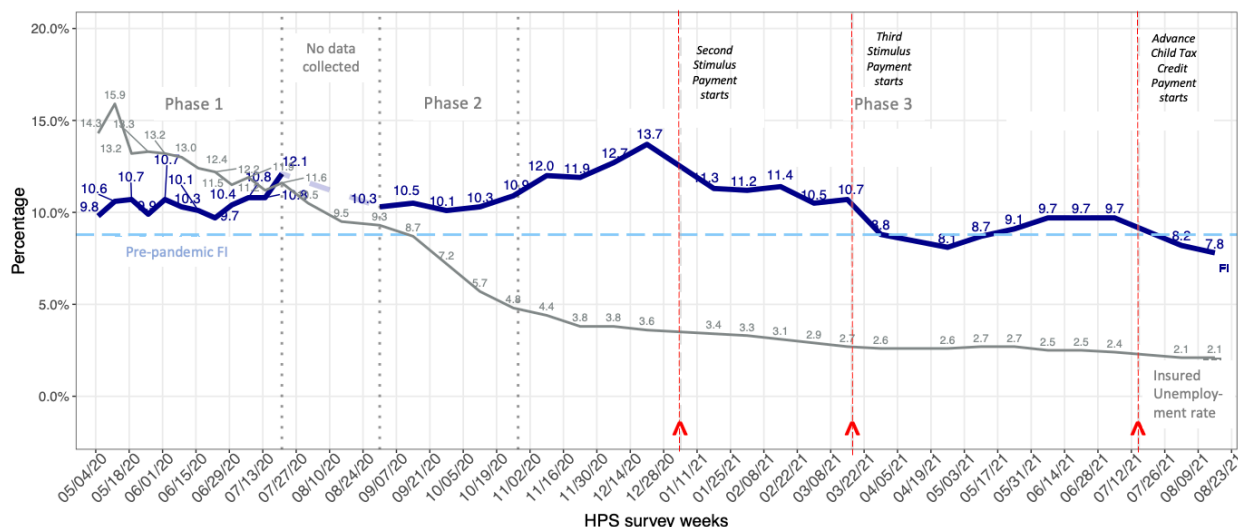
U.S. Household Food Insecurity Falls Below Pre-Pandemic Level

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NERCRD, Penn State University; September 8, 2021

Following an initial increase during the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. food insufficiency rates have fallen to levels below those in the year prior to the pandemic. At the end of August 2021, and the beginning of Hunger Action Month, the national average household food insufficiency rate has declined to a pandemic-era low of 7.8% according to the Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey (HPS; figure 1).¹ This represents a notable decline from the peak of 13.7% recorded at the end of 2020, which in turn marked a level of hunger in the U.S. not seen since the Great Recession of 2007-2008.

The HPS has been administered in three phases since April 23, 2020. Household food insufficiency is based on the reported availability of food to the household in the preceding week, scored on a four-point scale. Respondent households indicating they either did not have enough food or did not have enough of the kinds of food desired are considered food insecure for this brief. In addition, for comparative purposes, Phase I included a question referring to the household food insufficiency status “prior to March 13, 2020,” which represents the pre-pandemic period for present purposes. Figure 1 shows household food insufficiency rates over time along with the unemployment rate.

Figure 1: U.S. Food Insecurity and Insured Unemployment Rates, April 23, 2020-August 16, 2021



Source: Authors using HPS and U.S. Dept. of Labor Employment & Training Administration data.

U.S. household food insufficiency peaked at 13.7% around the end-of-year holidays in 2020. Given that Thanksgiving and the religious holidays at the year’s end involve family gatherings and higher food

¹ Based on answers to these questions: 1) Enough of the kinds of food (I/we) wanted to eat; 2) Enough, but not always the kinds of food (I/we) wanted to eat; 3) Sometimes not enough to eat; 4) Often not enough to eat.

demand, this rate may have been skewed upwards. It subsequently declined through the beginning of May 2021, only to rise again briefly to 9.7% and then to fall to its present low of 7.8%.

While household-level hunger rates exceeded the average pre-pandemic rate, the combination of federal stimulus (i.e., Economic Impact Payments), expanded eligibility and enhanced benefits for unemployment insurance, and pandemic-related changes to food and nutrition assistance programs appear to have successfully mitigated food insufficiency. In particular, the two stimulus and advance child tax credit payments are followed by immediate declines in the food insufficiency rate (Figure 1). On January 22, 2021, USDA announced a 15% increase to Pandemic-EBT benefits for families with school-age children. Changes in other federal programs, including additional actions under the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, are more complex or were implemented at different times and to different degrees by states. These observations raise the question of what will happen as several stimulus programs, including enhanced unemployment benefits, come to an end during September.

About this Series:

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Appendix: Detailed data for the U.S. Northeast

Here we present data for the northeast U.S. states. Vermont, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts had the lowest reported average FI rate over the 35-week survey period while West Virginia, New York and Maryland had the highest (table 1). Food insufficiency in the state with the highest rate was therefore about twice that in the state with the lowest rate.

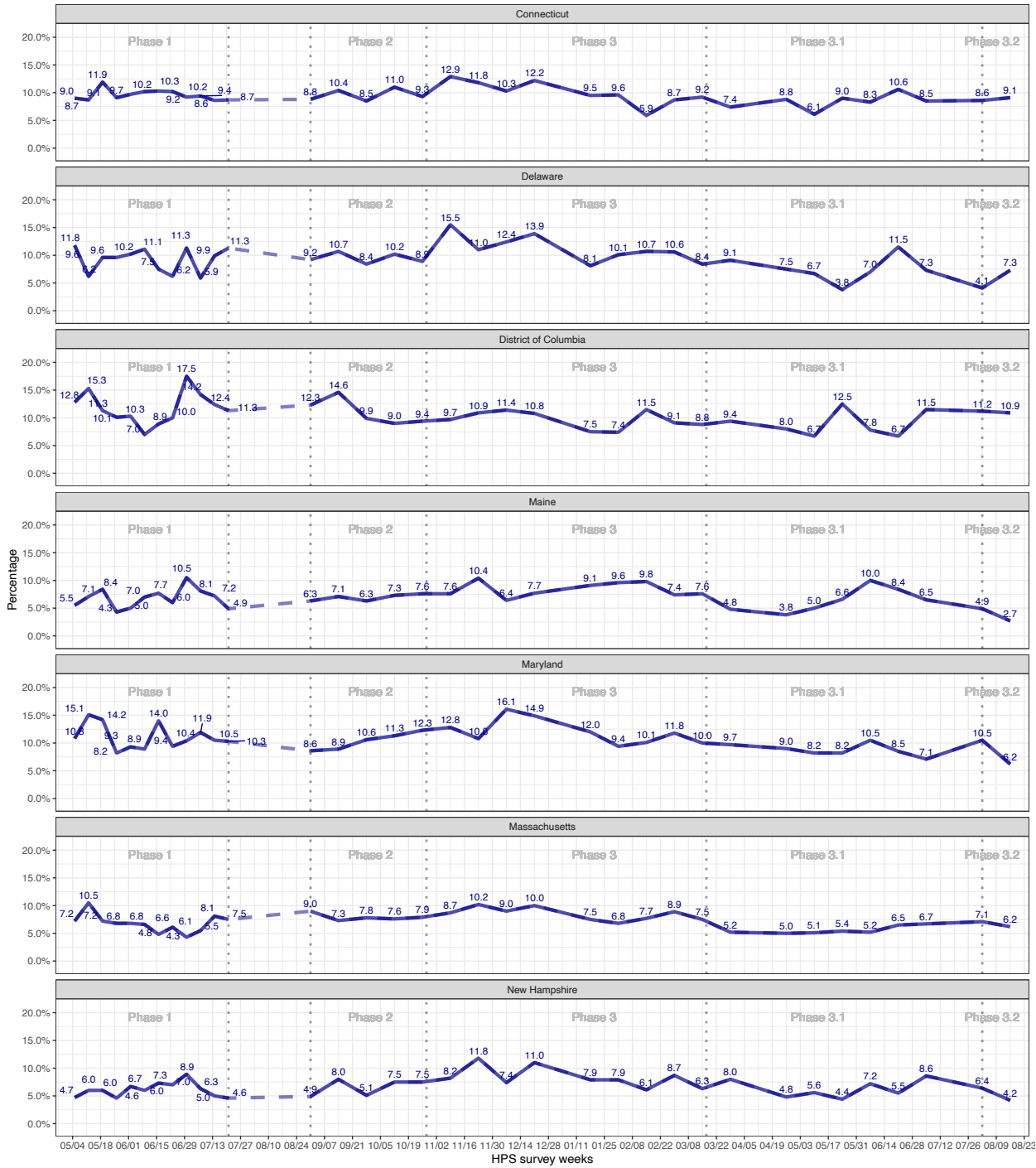
Table 1: State-wide Average Food Insufficiency Rate, 35 weeks starting May 2020

State	FI Rate
Vermont	6.02
New Hampshire	6.75
Maine	6.99
Massachusetts	7.13
Pennsylvania	8.95
Delaware	9.23
New Jersey	9.23
Connecticut	9.41
Rhode Island	9.49
District of Columbia	10.52
Maryland	10.59
New York	10.90
West Virginia	11.41

Source: Authors using HPS data.

Below are line graphs for each of the individual Northeast States

Northeast Food Insecurity Rate (%), April 23,2020–August 16,2021



Northeast Food Insecurity Rate (%), April 23,2020–August 16,2021

