



Food Security

Liz H. Snyder, PhD, MPH¹

Current Status/Trends

In a public health emergency, important questions to ask include: Has food production/distribution been limited? Is the community able to physically and economically access food? Is the food supply safe to eat? And, what additional threats increase the risk of food insecurity?

Availability and Demand: Upwards of 95% of Anchorage's food supply is shipped from outside the state, with the remaining percentage sourced from wild harvest and/or local agricultural production; this is unlikely to change significantly in the near future. An early surge in pandemic-related "panic buying" initially depleted store shelves, but there is no readily available evidence that shipments of food into the state have been significantly diminished. The most recently available consumer price index for food in Anchorage (the two months ending in Feb. 2020) increased by 1.1 percent over the previous periodⁱ. Food has not been identified as a likely source of SARS-CoV-2 infectionⁱⁱ. Online grocery shopping has increasedⁱⁱⁱ, as has demand for locally-grown foods (e.g., milk and potatoes)^{iv}. The cost-effectiveness for restaurants to offer socially distanced dine-in service remains unknown, and the continuation of curbside pick-up and delivery is anticipated.

Food Insecurity: The percentage of Anchorage residents who are food insecure (~12% pre-pandemic^v) is predicted to have grown, given the increase in unemployment insurance applications (e.g., +1,345% increase in Anchorage in the last week of March, as compared to March 2019)^{vi}, and an estimated 75% increase in food assistance demand on the Food Bank of Alaska (half of their partner organizations are located in Anchorage/MatSu Borough) paired with an estimated client base increase of 30%. Half of the food for the food bank is now purchased from the Lower 48 (increasing from a pre-COVID-19 baseline of 20-30%)^{vii}.

School Meals: The closure of schools has impacted students who rely on free or reduced meals. Currently, twenty-six (of 83) schools are serving as meal pick-up locations, and school buses are being used as mobile food pantries. Still, only a quarter of the 27,000 school meals typically served are being provided in Anchorage^{viii}.

Food Assistance: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWD) work requirements are suspended (effective April 1, 2020), and SNAP renewal requirements are suspended through at least June 2020^{ix}. As of April 22, 2020, the USDA has increased SNAP benefits by 40% (i.e., individual households are seeing a 40% increase in food assistance support), and those households previously eligible for less than the maximum benefit will be brought up to the maximum^x. Food distribution sites have been expanded in Anchorage, partnerships with local businesses have enabled emergency food deliveries to vulnerable populations, and restaurants are donating extra food supplies while they last^{xi}.

Food Access: People with limited transportation may have additional challenges in accessing food. The People Mover fixed-route bus service was suspended on April 8, 2020, while AnchorRIDES is providing free limited service to essential locations for bus riders; allowing only one rider (plus personal care attendant) at a given time^{xii}. Preliminary results of first-round Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) surveys indicate that a large majority of Anchorage respondents are encountering challenges in getting needed items, including food. Approximately 25% of respondents judged the statement "Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my household has had more difficulty than usual in getting needed items, food, or services" to be "very true", and an additional 47% selected "somewhat true"^{xiii}. The next DHSS survey remains open (as of 4/26/20), and asks questions like "Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I ate less than I felt I should because..." Results of the current UAA and Ivan Moore study at the request of the Municipality of Anchorage (MOA) will provide additional food security insight.

Recommended Indicators/Metrics for Monitoring

¹ Associate Professor of Public Health; Director of the Food Research, Enterprise, and Sustainability Hub (FRESH), Division of Population Health Sciences, University of Alaska Anchorage

Increased unemployment, increased requests for emergency food assistance, and increased challenges in obtaining food are all warning signs of increased food insecurity in Anchorage (and across Alaska). Local indicators important to monitor include:

- Availability and demand
 - Frequency and extent of store shelves depletion
 - Changes in port activity (e.g., frequency in shipments, composition of shipments, source of shipments)
 - Changes in local food production and capacity
 - Changes in state policies affecting local food production (e.g., permit fees)
 - Development of food production and/or distribution bottlenecks
 - Applicability of federal COVID-19 funding to expanding local food business (e.g., ability to waive business license fees or farmers market fees)
 - Characteristics of individuals and businesses receiving relief funding
- Food insecurity and food assistance
 - Emergency food demand, and from which populations
 - Emergency food donation rates
 - Unemployment benefit application rates
 - Unemployment duration rates
 - SNAP/WIC application rates
 - Changes in vendor acceptance of SNAP/WIC benefits
 - School food pick-up/delivery program participation
 - Results of state and muni food security surveys now and over time
- Food access
 - Development and locations of food price hot spots (i.e., elevated food prices)
 - AnchorRIDES capacity to meet demand; ridership characteristics
 - Utilization of People Mover alternatives
 - Prevalence of food businesses going cashless (i.e. only accepting cards and online payment)
- Food and food worker safety
 - Proportion of COVID-19 infections affecting food system workers (can impact continuity of services)
 - Adherence to social distancing guidelines at grocery stores and farmers markets

Given Alaska's location at the geographic end of the food supply chain and heavy reliance on importation, monitoring for early signs of potential disruptions to food imports is critical, including:

- State and/or country food export bans
- Disruptions along the food supply chain in the Lower 48 (e.g., meat packing plants closing) or decreased demand (resulting in decreased dairy production) that could impact Alaska
- National policies regarding food waste and distribution

Applications of Recommended Indicators/Metrics

Collected data can be used to:

- Inform decisions on how relief funding is distributed
- Develop outreach and communication strategies to benefit at-risk populations
- Improve ongoing emergency food services
- Develop inclusive policies/programming (e.g., incentives for vendors to accept SNAP/WIC benefits; improved public transportation options for those most in need; ensuring relief funding is communicated across diverse communities)
- Anticipate and mitigate secondary impacts of the pandemic

Additional Support Available from UAA, if Requested

- Inventory additional ongoing food security-related data collection efforts conducted by Anchorage organizations and agencies
- Conduct primary data collection on food-related issues of particular interest (from recommendation list above, or others identified by the MOA)
- Monitor food system disruptions that could affect food importation to Alaska
- Review and adapt USDA^{xiv} and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)^{xv} inventories of COVID-19 interventions and policies designed to minimize impacts to food security

-
- ⁱ US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2020, April). Consumer Price Index, Anchorage area – February 2020. https://www.bls.gov/regions/west/news-release/consumerpriceindex_anchorage.htm
- ⁱⁱ CDC. (2020, April). Food safety and Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). <https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/newsletter/food-safety-and-Coronavirus.html>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Collins, A. (2020, April). Digital grocery orders are up as Alaskans hunker down, but some shoppers say the job isn't worth it anymore. *Alaska Public Media*. <https://www.alaskapublic.org/2020/04/10/digital-grocery-orders-are-up-as-alaskans-hunker-down-but-some-shoppers-say-the-job-isnt-worth-it-anymore/>
- ^{iv} Associated Press. (2020, April). Food producers seeing increased demand for Alaska products. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/alaska/articles/2020-04-06/food-producers-seeing-increased-demand-for-alaska-products>
- ^v Feeding America. (2017). Food insecurity in the Anchorage Borough. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2017/overall/alaska/county/anchorage>
- ^{vi} Luhrs, J. (2020, May). The first wave of benefit payments. *Alaska Economic Trends*. <https://labor.alaska.gov/trends/may20.pdf#cover>
- ^{vii} Davis, H. (2020, April). Community food resources feel the strain during COVID-19 pandemic. *KTUU*. <https://www.ktuu.com/content/news/Community-food-resources-feel-the-strain-during-COVID-19-pandemic-569616181.html>
- ^{viii} Lester, M. (2020, April). School bus teams bring meals to students in need during the coronavirus shutdown. *Anchorage Daily News*. <https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/anchorage/2020/04/01/school-bus-teams-bring-meals-to-students-in-need-during-the-coronavirus-shutdown/>
- ^{ix} Food Bank of Alaska. (2020, April). COVID-19 SNAP updates. <https://www.foodbankofalaska.org/help/snap-the-new-food-stamps/>
- ^x USDA. (2020, April). USDA increases monthly SNAP benefits by 40%. <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/04/22/usda-increases-monthly-snap-benefits-40>
- ^{xi} Minemyer, D. (2020, April). Bean's Café using surplus foods donated from Anchorage restaurants to feed city's hungry. *KTUU*. <https://www.ktuu.com/content/news/Beans-Cafe-using-surplus-perishable-foods-donated-from-Anchorage-restaurants-569775491.html>
- ^{xii} Municipality of Anchorage (MOA). (2020, April). People Mover. <https://www.muni.org/Departments/transit/PeopleMover/Pages/COVID19TransitInformation.aspx>
- ^{xiii} Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS). (2020, April). AKFAMILY Survey Results: Preliminary Highlights. <http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/wcfh/Documents/mchepi/COVID%20survey%20results.pdf>
- ^{xiv} USDA. (2020, April). USDA actions to respond to COVID-19. <https://www.usda.gov/coronavirus>
- ^{xv} FAO. (2020, April). Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). <http://www.fao.org/2019-ncov/en/>