



## SUMMARY

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 24 million adults reported that their households sometimes or often lacked sufficient food in the last seven days.<sup>1</sup>
- Rhode Island (RI) saw a record-breaking increase in food insecurity in 2020 compared to previous years.<sup>2</sup>
- Throughout this time, there were many organizational challenges that arose, specifically those related to food insecurity, cultural relevance and lack of overall resources; however, there were also many success stories including the enhanced collaborations, new initiatives and communication.
- These challenges and successes can help inform future food access efforts during times of emergency and beyond.

## OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to:

1. Assess the impact COVID-19 had on food access in RI
2. Document challenges encountered
3. Identify promising practices and policy solutions

## METHODS

### Participants:

- Virtual interviews (n=25) were conducted with 33 key stakeholders from 23 community organizations located throughout RI during September to November 2020. The organizations chosen primarily serve low-income and racial/ethnic minority populations (see Table 1).
- A structured interview guide was created and used to capture organizations' scope of work, success and challenges related to COVID-19, the impact seen on health disparities, as well as recommendations to mitigate some of the challenges present during COVID-19.

### Data Analysis:

- All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded in NVivo QSR International Pty Ltd. (released in March 2020) with a priori codes to guide the analysis. An inductive and deductive approach was used to identify themes.

## RESULTS

Table 1. Representation of Types of Community Partners Interviewed

Community Partner Type	n (%)
State Agency	7 (28)
Health Equity Zone (HEZ)*	5 (20)
Nonprofit Organization	5 (20)
Food Pantry	3 (12)
City Agency	1 (8)
Home-delivered Meal Program	1 (4)
Federally Qualified Health Center	1 (4)

\*local community collaborative

- Approximately 64% of those interviewed were agencies that reside in core cities where poverty is more concentrated.
- Preliminary findings suggest that organizations experienced both successes and challenges as they struggled to meet Rhode Islander's food needs (see Table 2).

Table 2. Successes and Challenges within Rhode Island

Successes	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhanced collaboration between new and existing partnerships among stakeholders</li> <li>• Increased effective communication among community stakeholders and the populations they serve</li> <li>• Increases in new initiatives to support food access needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unemployment</li> <li>• Lack of culturally relevant foods</li> <li>• Insufficient resources (i.e. funding, personal protective equipment, technology)</li> <li>• Exacerbation of existing food access challenges connected to transportation and food storage needs</li> </ul>

Financial challenges faced by community organizations to better serve their community.

"I think the challenge is still the financial support that we want to achieve and are not yet able to achieve just because of constraints on the state budget and lack of sufficient stimulus funding to do the type of work we want to do."  
- State Agency

"We were grateful to have that infrastructure in place at the community level so that we could jump in and help assist [the HEZ] because we knew they were the boots on the ground."  
-State Agency

Enhanced communication and cooperation between organizations was a success.

"...at first a lot of the communication coming out of the state, related to food and not related to food, was only coming out in English. That does not work for our residents."  
- City Agency

A city agency within RI discusses the cultural barriers residents faced.

## CONCLUSION

- Our findings highlight the need to ensure a coordinated response through strategic leadership that has a focus on vulnerable racial/ethnic populations to ensure access to culturally appropriate food during emergency situations.
- Recommendations from stakeholders included better state coordination with federal leadership and less restrictive federally funded programs.
- Future studies should look at temporal effects of a pandemic on food access and response through longitudinal studies.
- Given the importance of food access during a nation-wide pandemic, further research is needed to assess other individual states' response during a crisis.

Scan this QR code to read the report "The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Access in Rhode Island: Elevating Stakeholder Voices".

