

Field Note | 2020-1 | July 2020

Early evidence suggests a surge in nutritional assistance use in New England during the COVID-19 pandemic

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One of the profoundly disruptive effects of the coronavirus pandemic has been increased food insecurity. In Massachusetts alone, households have reported a fourfold increase in food insecurity, from 9 to 38 percent.¹

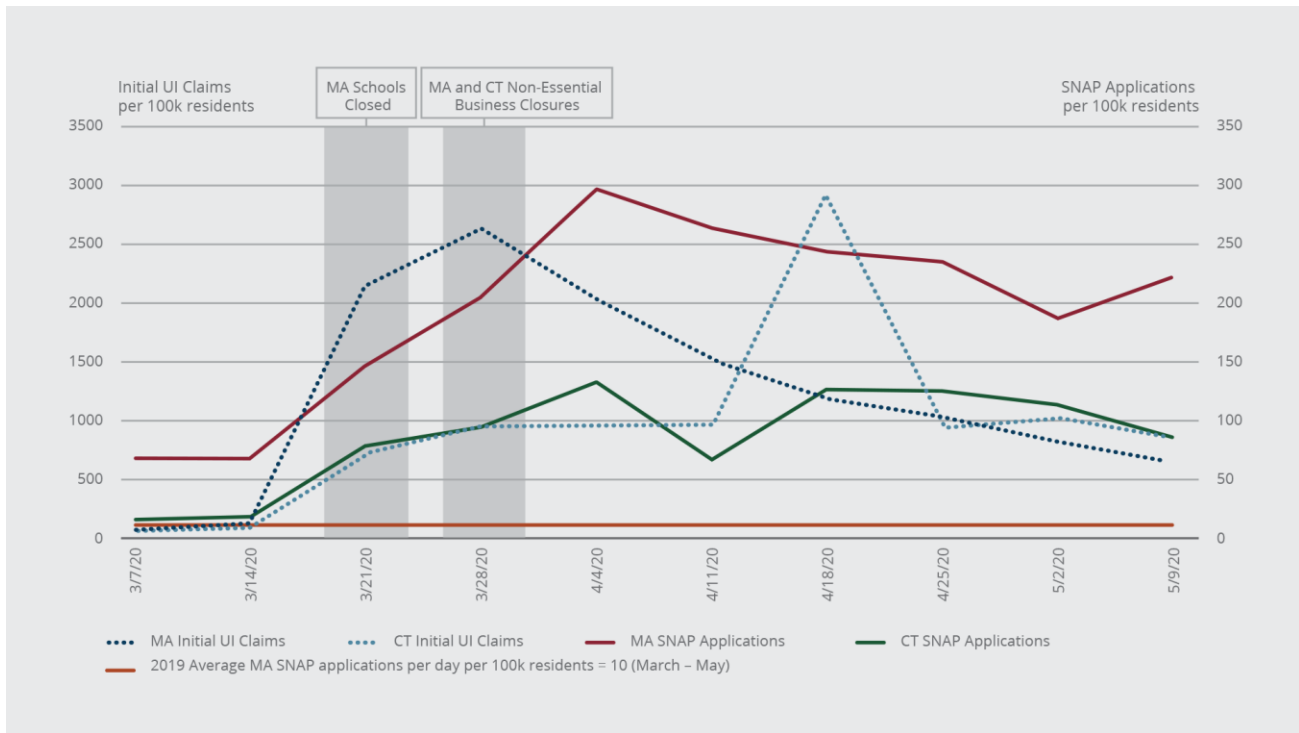
The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is part of the social safety net in place to protect people from hunger. It provides qualifying households relatively immediate means to alleviate food insecurity.² Policymakers generally recognize that households with gross monthly income at or below 130 percent of the poverty line are likely to be food insecure, and therefore such households generally qualify for SNAP. Beneficiary households receive SNAP benefits monthly through electronic debit (EBT) cards. While benefit amounts vary by income, they average about \$100 per person per month. In 2019, nearly 11 percent of people in the United States participated in the program (35 million people). Increasingly, the program benefits households with children. In the six New England states covered by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, 13.5 percent of people under the age of 18 received SNAP in 2018.

Despite the sizable number of families receiving SNAP, rules and stigma prevent some food-insecure households from participating. A variety of state guidelines exclude undocumented immigrants from SNAP and other public benefits. Some immigrants who are otherwise qualified choose not to apply for SNAP for fear that enrolling will adversely impact their immigration status.³ The move from physical stamps to EBT cards has reduced some of the stigma associated with using SNAP,⁴ but social disapproval and shaming still deter many, regardless of immigration status, through derogatory public discourse about individuals on “welfare.”⁵

SNAP receipt among eligible households varies across New England. Vermont and Rhode Island have an estimated 100 percent participation rate among eligible individuals, above the regional average of 92 percent and significantly higher than the national average of 85 percent.⁶ New Hampshire has the lowest estimated participation rate (80 percent) in the Northeast and is also significantly below the national rate.⁷ Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Maine have similar participation rates at 90 to 91 percent, and all three are significantly higher than the national average.⁸

Early evidence from two New England states with available data, Connecticut and Massachusetts, shows SNAP applications have increased dramatically since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated business closures and layoffs. (See Figure 1.) The dramatic change from mid-March shows the magnitude and immediacy of economic shock suffered in both states.

Figure 1 | SNAP Applications and Initial Unemployment Claims, March – April 2020, in Massachusetts and Connecticut



Note: Shading indicates MA school closure date (the week ending March 21), and MA and CT nonessential business closures (the week ending March 28). Connecticut SNAP application data include only online and paper applications that were submitted directly to the Department of Social Services. Applications also do not necessarily reflect the number of people approved or the number of people covered on a single application. Lines connect week-ending data points, and are not continuous across weeks. Increases beginning March 14th reflect the claims and applications submitted between the 14th and 21st, the week of MA school closures.

Sources: Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, Connecticut Department of Social Services. Printed with permission.

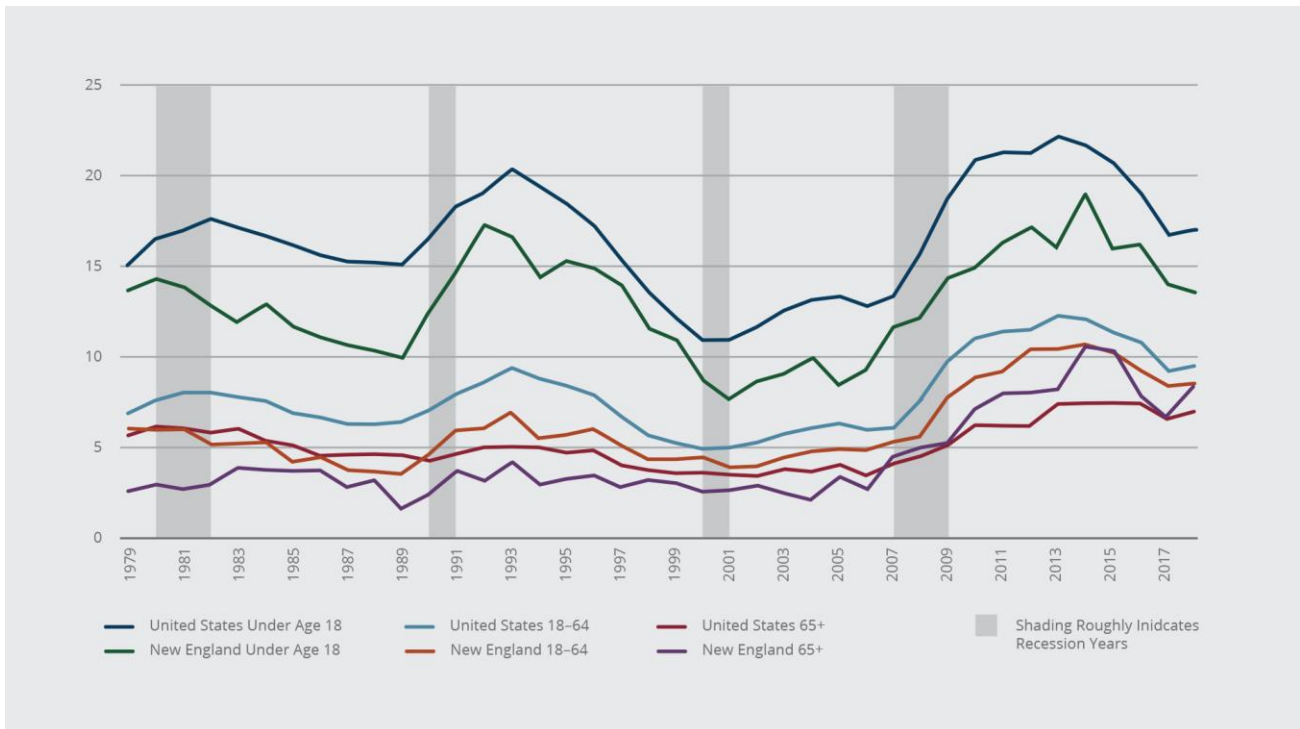
Although the large increases in March and April of 2020 are troubling, increased SNAP usage has the potential to mitigate some of the devastating impacts of food insecurity on children and families. As Figure 2 indicates, SNAP is responsive during periods of economic downturn and is especially helpful in aiding children. Additionally, SNAP policies have changed in response to COVID-19. The Families First Coronavirus Response Act, or FFCRA (March 18, 2020), gave states authority and flexibility to expand and streamline SNAP assistance during the pandemic.⁹ The law suspends SNAP’s three-month assistance time limit for able-bodied adults under age 50 without children in their SNAP household.¹⁰ It also allows states to authorize additional SNAP benefits up to the maximum benefit amount for those who had been receiving less.¹¹

The 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (March 27, 2020) also includes a \$15.8 billion appropriation for SNAP. The funding covers the

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anticipated surges in administrative and benefit costs resulting from increased need,¹² but does not expand eligibility. That limitation may prevent otherwise eligible people from receiving SNAP because the CARES Act's enhanced pandemic unemployment insurance benefit (\$600/week) is countable when determining SNAP eligibility and thus may put many unemployed persons above the income threshold, including some previous SNAP recipients.¹³ The enhanced unemployment benefits are set to expire on July 31, and unless Congress extends them or the economy has created significant jobs by that time, we expect another jump in SNAP applications at that point.

Figure 2 | Household SNAP Receipt by Year and Age Category Shading Roughly Corresponds to Recession Years



Notes: Analyses are of weighted data. Those with negative weights are omitted. Those who were not in the universe (higher income) were coded as non-recipients.

Source: Authors' analyses of Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement data downloaded from IPUMS (IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org).

Taken together, FFCRA and the CARES Act may alleviate some food insecurity, but consistent with the overall SNAP policy approach of giving states options and flexibility,¹⁴ the new legislation leaves many implementation decisions to the states. As a result, eligibility for new SNAP benefits varies by state. For example, the CARES Act enables states to provide school meal replacement assistance of around \$114 per child per month.¹⁵ In New England, only Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island had opted

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to participate in this program by the end of April, though the other New England states soon followed.¹⁶

It is also worth noting that social distancing has increased the demand for online grocery delivery services considerably,¹⁷ and this is especially the case for individuals who are disabled, older, immunocompromised, or otherwise at risk—but these individuals must shop in person if they use SNAP as their payment.¹⁸ In light of the pandemic, some states are participating in a pilot that permits online purchasing, but as of this writing, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont are the only New England states participating, while New Hampshire is currently in the planning phase to implement the change but has not yet done so.¹⁹ These state differences suggest that household access to food aid during the pandemic varies by state of residency.

Finally, recent evidence suggests unprecedented levels of food insecurity, with more than one in three Black and Hispanic Americans and families with children reporting food insecurity.²⁰ Food banks are also overburdened and are striving to meet the overwhelming levels of demand.²¹ Some food banks are pushing for further expansion of SNAP benefits to help alleviate the nation's food insecurity.

If the economy continues to lag or if economic recovery is uneven or incomplete, we may see additional surges in SNAP applications. Further, it is likely that SNAP demand, and the food insecurity that underlies it, will continue into the future as individuals and families start to navigate a way back to work in a very changed economy.

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Endnotes

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