



COVID-19

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Food insecurity during pandemic prompts tribes to bolster food sovereignty

BY: **JENIFFER SOLIS** - JANUARY 21, 2022 6:45 AM



Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) staff work in the warehouse on the Lummi reservation in Washington state. (U.S. Department of Agriculture photo).

Almost half of Native American and Alaska Native survey respondents have experienced food insecurity during the pandemic, according to a new report released by Native-led food research organizations.

Among American Indian and Alaska Native respondents, the [survey found](#) that nearly half (48%) indicated that sometimes or often during the pandemic the food in their household didn't last long enough, and they didn't have money to get more.

Another 37% of individuals said that in at least one month during the coronavirus pandemic, they or other adults in their household cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food, while 34% of people said they ate less than they felt they should because there wasn't enough money for food.

The survey asked households in tribal communities across the country about the resources used to obtain food between March 2020 and April 2021, and garnered more than 500 respondents representing a wide diversity of tribal communities, including tribes in Nevada.

Self-identified Nevada-based tribal members who responded to the survey included those from the Fort McDermitt Paiute Tribe, the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, the Shoshone-Paiute Tribes of Duck Valley Indian Reservation, the Walker River Paiute Tribe, the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California, and the Yerington Paiute Tribe.

The report, “Reimagining Hunger Responses in Times of Crisis: Insights from Case Examples and a Survey of Native Communities’ Food Access During COVID-19,” was released by the Native American Agriculture Fund (NAAF), the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) and the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative (IFAI) at the University of Arkansas.

“This report illuminates the challenges of food security in Indian Country and the Tribally driven solutions needed to address those challenges head-on,” said Toni Stanger-McLaughlin, CEO of NAAF. “It is critical that we understand how hunger affects the communities that we directly serve to identify ways to successfully work together to repair America’s broken food system.”

Food in Indigenous communities was sourced directly from the land before the federal government relocated Native Americans to reservations and started shipping in commodities like white flour, lard and other processed non-native foods.

Health problems related to food and nutrition have since plagued Native American communities, which now have among the highest rates of diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure in the United States.

The pandemic has only worsened food and nutrition issues for Native communities. The survey found that more than half (54%) of respondents sometime or often couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals during COVID-19.

Food insecurity among households with children also grew during the pandemic. Analysis found that the rate of food insecurity for households with children increased from 13.6% in 2019 to 14.8% in 2020. Overall, about 28% of households with children under 18 surveyed reported having “very low food security,” significantly higher than the 18% households with no children that reported “very low food security.”



We are getting back into our cultural ways of planting and bringing back our traditional foods.

– Amber Torres, chair of the Walker River Paiute Tribe

Native American communities, however, remain resilient in the face of disproportionately high rates of poverty, hunger, unemployment,

and poor health, both before and during COVID-19.

In response to reports of rising hunger and slow “[agonizingly bureaucratic](#)” federal government responses, tribal governments pivoted to strengthening food security systems to meet the immediate and long-term nutritional needs of their communities.

Amber Torres, chair of the Walker River Paiute Tribe in Nevada, recounted how the tribe navigated food security during the pandemic. Much of the reservation is a food desert, meaning food supply chain disruptions and rising food prices quickly decreased access to food for the community during COVID-19.

“Stores were running out of food and toiletries,” Torres said. “We’re 40 miles away from the nearest Walmart. So once we’d get to the store there was absolutely nothing there.”

Soon after, tribal leadership created a community store and designed a food delivery program for tribal members so they could avoid leaving the reservation during the deadly pandemic.

When COVID-19 began sweeping through Nevada, the tribe implemented a food sovereignty program, using funds from the CARES Act to build self-reliance and long-term food security.



📷 Schurz Elementary School students picking pine nuts from cones at the Annual Pinenut Festival Powwow on the Walker River Paiute Tribe reservation in September, 2019. (Photo courtesy of Walker River Paiute Tribe).

“We are getting back into our cultural ways of planting and bringing back our traditional foods,” Torres said. “We are looking to extend our food sovereignty program into planting our own pine nut trees so we can harvest for years to come,” she said, adding that climate change and overharvesting have [contributed to their decline on public lands](#).

Torres also worked with the Inter-Tribal Council of Nevada and the Food Bank of Northern Nevada to create the first food pantry on tribal lands in Nevada. According to the survey, the use of food

pantries or food banks has tripled from before COVID-19, evidence of the food hardship native families face.

During the pandemic, almost half (47%) of survey respondents reported receiving food assistance from their tribal government, an increase of 481% compared to the year before COVID-19.

Researchers said the data shows that any attempts to solve food insecurity among tribal nations must center tribal sovereignty in food systems and tribal driven solutions.

The survey also showed that Native communities have returned to their roots because of the pandemic-related supply chain disruptions and inflation. About half of respondents turned to home gardening, sharing or trading food, fishing, foraging, and seed collecting all of which have increased.

“The pandemic really opened our eyes to access,” Torres said. “We need to make sure, as a sovereign nation, to take care of ourselves and our constituents. What are we doing to make sure we have food security on our reservation?”

The report was undertaken to help fill a lack of data on the scale of food insecurity in Indian Country.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) issues an annual household food security report based on data collected by the Census Bureau through the annual Food Security Supplement to the Current Population Survey. However, last year the report did not offer clear data on food insecurity among Native Americans, because the Census Bureau failed to collect enough data to analyze.

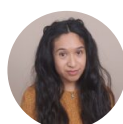
Researchers say accurate data is essential to track progress and secure resources to help alleviate food insecurity in tribal nations. Data also helps inform the best policy initiatives to tackle hunger in Native communities.

“For far too long, Native communities have not been properly counted. Numbers have been combined with other groups, essentially rendering people invisible and you can’t make good policy with that,” said Luis Guardia, president of FRAC.

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