Refugee Communities in Vermont and Food Security in Response to COVID-19

Prepared for AALV and VT Foodbank by

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Access to affordable, healthy, sufficient and preferred foods is an ongoing issue for many newcomers in the US, as it is for many other populations across the country. For resettled refugees, food insecurity has particular implications for long-term and successful adjustment to their new homes and for rebuilding their lives. Such challenges have been further intensified as a result of the ongoing pandemic. The onset of COVID-19 has exposed multiple gaps and vulnerabilities within our social, economic and political systems. Like many other ‘natural disasters’ before it, COVID-19 has not so much created a crisis as it has revealed, amplified and worsened the existing vulnerabilities that many in our societies already face. The risks and burdens that fall upon marginalized communities have become especially sharpened in this moment. COVID-19 has highlighted one area of vulnerability in particular: the multiple fault lines in food systems worldwide, which include food processing, harvesting, storage, distribution, supply chains, and access to affordable, nutritious, and adequate foods. Ongoing research at UVM and elsewhere in the US indicates that within Vermont and the US, food insecurity amongst multiple groups has risen sharply as a result of the pandemic.

This research team based at the University of Vermont began a collaboration with the Vermont Foodbank and the Association of Africans Living in Vermont (AALV) to understand whether there was a specific impact upon refugee communities in Vermont. Together, they also set out to gauge the nature of responses from community organizations and emergency food services and to explore several specific questions:

- What is the nature of food security within resettled communities?
- How has this been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What has been the response to home food delivery programs that community organizations coordinated in response to the pandemic?

The goals of this project include:

- Providing more effective interventions in emergency situations
- Providing emergency food services with recommendations for how to supply more culturally preferred, nutritious foods for refugee communities in the long-term
- Better coordination between stakeholders in the Vermont food system for immigrants

The actual research performed to undertake this study has included several components including:

- cataloguing and mapping of food distribution sites
- mapping the location of both supermarkets and smaller grocery stores in terms of population based on race and ethnic background
- inventories of specific foods provided via home deliveries
- a survey of 200 individuals within local resettled communities (including 166 households receiving deliveries). This survey was conducted between September and December 2020 and includes 28 questions regarding Demographics, Food choices and Food box deliveries

The questions themselves were written in collaboration by the research team and community partners through an iterative process to ensure appropriateness for the target populations. This included feedback from the Foodbank, AALV staff and interpreters, New Farms for New Americans, and the Family Room. Surveys were tested question-by-question and were further adjusted based on feedback received. Data collection began August 31 and concluded on December 15, 2020. Responses were entered into a database, checked for completeness and to ensure no duplication. Analysis commenced December 26, 2020. This report provides an overview of responses across a range of topics covered in the survey as well as some recommendations for interventions and further research.
2a. Refugees & Food Security

Studies suggest that a number of factors impact refugees’ food security after resettling in the United States, including previous food shortage experiences, remittances to family back home, and healthcare costs upon resettlement (Nunery & Dharod, 2017; Food Insecurity and Hunger in the U.S.: New Research, 2016; Wang et al., 2016; Wen Meng et al., 2018). Our research similarly indicates that having to navigate an unfamiliar food environment contributes to precarity amongst New Americans and explores the possibility that refugee groups are at a higher risk of food security than those born in the US. Better understanding the challenges that New Americans face while adapting to a new food environment may help to establish the basis for specialized food supports that are specifically designed for New Americans. This specialized food programming is particularly important considering that refugee groups do not always follow the same diet-related health trajectories as non-refugees from the same economic background (Dawson-Hahn et al., 2016). Additionally, some of the research we have conducted on resettlement across the US suggests that the International Rescue Committee (IRC) is one of the few agencies that explicitly addresses health and nutrition in their orientation process and considers food security in their placement planning (Bose, 2020).

Our team therefore set out to evaluate both the general context of food access and health and nutrition amongst resettled refugees in Chittenden County, Vermont, and the specific outcomes of a food delivery program meant to address those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers built on established studies by assessing the impact of incorporating culturally appropriate foods into emergency food programming. In doing so, the assessment reports how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected New American food security in Chittenden County and supplies service-providers with recommendations for how to more holistically approach food insecurity for new arrivals.

2b. Food Insecurity and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Three of the researchers involved in this study – Meredith Niles, Farryl Bertmann and Emily Morgan of the Nutrition and Food Sciences Department at UVM – have been leaders in studying the food-related impacts of COVID-19 both in Vermont and more generally in the US. Their study of 600 Vermonters since the start of the pandemic in March 2020 have revealed a number of factors important to keep in mind when considering the specific consequences for newly arrived refugees. These include the fact that 30% of Vermonters are experiencing food insecurity (three times 2018 levels), nearly a quarter are eating less healthy and fresh foods, a third have accessed food assistance programs and 15% used a food pantry, and over 70% of respondents reported anxieties regarding access to food (Niles et al, 2020a; Niles et al, 2020b).

A second group of researchers at UVM (the Consortium for Crop Genetic Heritage) have also included questions regarding COVID-19 on a Vermont population, in this case specifically surveying farmers working with the New Farms for New Americans program. Their sample of some 40 households reveal similar patterns as that of the Niles team, including the fact that nutrition is the number one factor influencing crop choice. Nearly a third of their surveyed households reported being unable to eat healthy and nutritious food during the pandemic (three times that of the general Vermont population) as well as generally having access to less food overall during this time. Smaller and older households were deemed particularly vulnerable. The team also found that farmers in their survey noted two particular moments of COVID-19 related food insecurity, the first during the initial onset of the pandemic in the first months of 2020 and the second (a larger peak) during June-July.
Given these broader conditions, the Vermont Food Bank initiated a project with the University of Vermont, the New Farms for New Americans refugee agriculture program of the Association of Africans Living in Vermont, and the New Americans Pediatrics Clinic, to collect data that to specifically examine how the pandemic has affected New Americans’ food security in Chittenden County, where nearly all of Vermont’s resettled refugees have been placed and/or currently reside. The plan of the project was two-fold:

- Survey recently arrived refugees to gain further knowledge regarding their experiences of food insecurity as a result of COVID-19
- Assess and evaluate the experience of food delivery programs meant to address various challenges arising from the pandemic

A total of 200 households were surveyed as a result of this study. Of this total:

- 55 households were recipients of a fresh vegetable box put together as a partnership between the Vermont Foodbank, Digger’s Mirth Farm and the Intervale Center.
- 111 households were recipients of home food deliveries put together by a collaboration between the Vermont Foodbank, the Family Room and AALV
- 34 households were farmers with the New Farms for New Americans program of AALV, some of whom accessed food supports but did not receive home deliveries

To assess both these deliveries and general food needs for resettled refugees, this study considers the populations’ demographic makeup, food consumption patterns, diet-related health conditions, spatial access to food, usage of food delivery services, acquisition of food supports, and ability to obtain culturally appropriate foods. The importance for food deliveries for the resettled refugee communities during COVID-19 became especially career because of two factors in particular – the disproportionate impacts because of lockdowns and closures of large institutional workplaces where many new arrivals work, and several family and kin-network based outbreaks within particular refugee populations at different points during 2020.

As part of our research, we began by examining where different access points for food are within the study area of Chittenden County and especially the towns of Burlington and Winooski. The two major refugee neighborhoods are in the Old North End of Burlington and off the Main Street Corridor of Winooski (smaller neighborhoods can also be found in Franklin Square and South Meadows in Burlington as well as in neighboring communities such as Essex Junction, Colchester and South Burlington).
3 | Mapping Food Access

Overall Population

Relationship between Food Distribution Locations and Demographic Data by Census Block Group

Burlington, Vermont and surrounding towns

Legend
- Free Food Distribution Site
- Free Food Distribution Site: <18 years old
- Small Grocery Stores
- Supermarkets

Census Block Groups
Total Population
- 0 - 935
- 936 - 1251
- 1252 - 1717
- 1718 - 2386
- 2387 - 4100

Data acquisition: VT Open Geodata Portal, AELV Food Guide, Google Maps
Map Author: Sophie Covel (sophie.covel@uvm.edu)
Black Population

Relationship between Food Distribution Locations and Demographic Data by Census Block Group

Burlington, Vermont and surrounding towns

Legend
- Free Food Distribution Site
- Free Food Distribution Site: <18 years old
- Small Grocery Stores
- Supermarkets

Census Block Groups
African American Population
- 0 - 16
- 17 - 32
- 33 - 63
- 64 - 116
- 117 - 287

Data acquisition: VT Open data portal, AVA Food Guide, Google Maps
Map Author: Sophie Clewell (sophie.clewell@umv.edu)
3 | Mapping Food Access

White Population

Relationship between Food Distribution Locations and Demographic Data by Census Block Group

Burlington, Vermont and surrounding towns

Legend
- Free Food Distribution Site
- Free Food Distribution Site: <18 years old
- Small Grocery Stores
- Supermarkets

Census Block Groups
White Population

- 0 - 822
- 823 - 1185
- 1186 - 1710
- 1711 - 2374
- 2375 - 3712

Data acquisition: VT OpenGeodata Portal, AAAV Food Guide, Google Maps
Map Author: Sophia Cleve (sophia.cleve@uvm.edu)
3a. Spatial Access to Food

Our research looked at a number of different points for food access including free food distribution sites (pantries, food shelves, community organizations), school food programs, small grocery stores and ethnic markets and supermarkets (defined in our study as more than 50 employees). Our analysis of this landscape suggests that refugees located in Burlington’s O.N.E. are better served by both small grocery stores and supermarkets than those in Winooski, whether measured by walking, driving or transit distance. Distribution sites are also more accessible within Burlington versus Winooski. We also asked two questions relating to transportation in our survey. A significant majority of respondents did report being able to get to food sources.

Are you able to get to the grocery store or food shelf when your family runs out of food?

However, nearly half of survey respondents said they mostly rely on a friend, family member, or someone else to get rides. 37.82% of respondents said they mostly have access to a personal vehicle such as a car or truck while 14% of respondents said they primarily use public transit. These findings regarding the spatial access to food sources makes the importance of food deliveries to many of these communities even more significant.
4. Results

4a. Demographics

**Gender**
- Male (27%)
- Female (73%)

**Age**
- 18-24: 3
- 25-34: 92
- 35-44: 57
- 45-54: 17
- 55-64: 12
- 65+: 7

**Community Background**
- Nepali/Bhutanese (26%)
- Somali/Somali Bantu (15%)
- Congolese (42%)
- Burmese (5%)
- Burundian (7%)
- American (5%)

**Time Spent in the US**
- 1-5 years (64.71%)
- 6-10 years (21.93%)
- More than 10 years (8.02%)
- Born in the US (5.35%)

**Household Size**
- Single (17.24%)
- Two-person (54.02%)
- Three or more (28.74%)
When asked to self-assess their own health in terms of eating, respondents answered:

**Are there any medical conditions you have related to diet?**

Beyond diabetes and heart disease (widely reported amongst both the general and the resettled refugee populations) other reported ailments include joint pain, high blood pressure and regional soreness. In a second survey conducted with regard to general health, more than 80% of the same respondents reported having satisfactory health or better.

### 4b. Current Access to Preferred Foods

We asked on our survey what respondents felt about their current access to preferred foods:

**Is there produce you would like to each which is not currently available to you in Vermont?**
Respondents consistently reported that potatoes, onions, cassava leaves, and carrots are among the top 5 vegetables that their household consumes. Several respondents also mentioned beans, celery, and broccoli.

When asked how frequently their household receives free food or goes to the foodbank, the most common answer was “once a week”.

Are you interested in free home delivery of food?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>89.95%</td>
<td>10.05%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Is there canned food that you would like to eat which is not currently available to you in Vermont?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>94.45%</td>
<td>4.55%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Is there boxed / grains (rice etc.) food that you would like to eat which is not currently available to you in Vermont?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>97.96%</td>
<td>2.04%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4c. Food Support

87% of respondents who received support from the Foodbank or another free food organization did so once or twice a week. Multiple respondents reported receiving the following food items from home food deliveries: bread, fruit, rice, pasta, frozen food, ready-cooked meals, potatoes, canned food, fruit, onion, broccoli, tomatoes, beans, carrots, cereal, apples, and cauliflower. Milk appeared in many of the responses. Four items (chicken, cheese, milk, and vegetables) appeared in almost every response.

Food listed as not wanted or accepted from deliveries:

- American salad
- Carrots
- Kale
- Chicken nuggets
- Broccoli
- Cheese
- Tumips
- Pork
- Pre-cooked meals
- Canned food
- Frozen food

The most requested items by respondents were fresh vegetables, goat meat, fish, and any type of meat (excluding pork):

- Beef
- Bread
- Plantains
- Chicken
- Halal goat meat
- Beans- Sugar
- Cabbage
- Spinach/saag
- Oil
- Ginger
- Dal
- Onion
- Potato
- Tomato
- Cilantro
- Cauliflower
- Bitter melon
- Ladyfinger
- Cucumber
- Radish
- Chili
- Basmati rice
- Green beans
- White carrots
- Daikon radish
- Garlic
- Daikon radish
- Garlic
- Pasta
- Cassava and cassava leaves
- Passionfruit
- Specific varieties of yam/potato and leaves
- Specific variety of amaranth
- Green bananas
- Bean leaves
- Squash leaves
- Sweet potato/yam leaves
- Specific peanut varieties
- Jute leaves
4d. Food Deliveries

On a scale of 1-5 (1 being least, 5 being most) how important is it to you to have food delivered to your home?

- 5 (most): 81.41%
- 4: 14.74%
- 3: 1.28%
- 2: 2.56%
- 1 (least): 0%

How do you like having groceries delivered to your house?

- I like having these deliveries, and would like to see them continue: 97.44%
- I like having these deliveries, but do not need to have them continue: 1.92%
- I do not like or need these deliveries: 0.64%

Has your fruit and vegetable consumption increased by participating in this program?

- Yes: 98.71%
- No: 1.29%
4 | Results

Did receiving the vegetable boxes impact/increase access to culturally preferred foods and/or foods you are familiar with eating?

- Yes: 91.61%
- No: 8.39%

Was receiving the boxes of local vegetables a positive experience for you and your family?

- Yes: 97.44%
- No: 2.56%

Would you recommend the vegetable home delivery boxes to others?

- Yes: 100%
- No: 0%
4 Results

4e. Sourcing

Our team also examined where food has been procured for deliveries, especially culturally preferred by specific communities. The veggie food box program was produced in partnership with the Intervale Community Farm and Digger’s Mirth, as previously noted. The Family Room program that helped put together and deliver other food supports used the following vendors to source supplies:

- **Burlington Asian Market**: produce, rice, oil, corn meal, flour, tea, pinto, lentils
- **Brixton Halaal**: corn meal, fou fou, tea, rice, oil
- **Mahuhi Community Halaal**: tea, rice
- **Everest Market**: produce, peanuts, lentil, cranberry beans, rice, oil
- **Thai Phat**: produce, rice, oil, lentils, beans
- **Central Market**: rice, oil, nuts, tea, produce

There were also some specific variations. Somali families received specific collared varieties and Bhutanese-Nepali families received bitter melon and masoor malka dal. Clients with diabetic diets received basmati and parboiled rice (for Burmese and Bhutanese-Nepali households) as well as jasmine rice (for African households). Burmese households received pinto beans while African households received kidney beans. Burmese households also received cranberry beans. All households received Swad vegetable oil for high heat cooking, as well as Asian eggplant, green beans, onions, potatoes, sweet potatoes, greens, okra, oranges, banana, ginger and garlic.

5 Discussion

Our study findings indicate that COVID-19 has significantly impacted New Americans’ food security, especially those who were relocated in the last five years. Over 80% of respondents reported that they received support from the foodbank or another free food organization, and 87% of respondents who received free food did so on a weekly basis. The size and age distribution of New American households did not give further insight into the cause of any trends in New American food security during COVID-19. Further interviews may be needed in order to understand how demographic trends in Chittenden County’s New American population may affect New American food security during the pandemic.
The survey findings suggest that the food delivery program was extremely successful; results highlighted overwhelmingly positive user feedback, interest in continued grocery delivery, and an almost unanimous consensus that the program increased respondents’ fruit and vegetable consumption as well as their access to culturally preferred foods. The success of the food delivery program suggests that home delivery is a highly effective strategy for distributing culturally appropriate food and produce to the New American community in Chittenden County. Indeed, we see it as having significant potential for being an effective food distribution method to help reduce food insecurity amongst relocated refugees immediately after resettlement. One thing to keep in mind is New Americans’ preference for less canned and frozen foods as well as prepared meals. Instead, there was a strong interest in more fresh vegetables, meat (especially goat meat), fufu, pondu, pasta, and rice.

In future, these high-interest, culturally preferred foods may be made available to food banks and other free food sources by incorporating small-scale refugee food producers into local emergency food service programs, organizations, and facilities. Though food banks and food shelves could purchase culturally preferred food items that refugee farmers are already producing in Vermont, doing so may not substantially expand the range of culturally appropriate foods available to New Americans. In the survey, the culturally preferred food items of the most interest are not items that are already being widely produced in Chittenden County – though some are being produced at a smaller scale by farmers involved with the New Farms for New Americans program and are available for some refugees via family, community and informal networks. Being able to access such foods through food support services would make them more readily and widely available. There are multiple potential ways to expand this kind of availability – including New American employees to assist with purchasing and procurement or connecting with refugee farmers to grow and source relevant foods, for example.

This survey’s findings could also further inform refugee food programming in Chittenden County by providing data for refugee agencies including AALV and USCRI-VT to help orient and prepare new arrivals to the local food landscape. This data may be of use to NFNA, for example, to help select what kinds of crops to invest in and grow in their farming program, while also be useful for case managers in conducting orientations with and assessments of the food needs of new and existing clients. The data on dietary health and the geographic accessibility of food can also inform resources such as a food guide for New Americans instructing relocated refugees how to access different food resources in Chittenden County, especially ones that provide fresh produce and culturally preferred foods.

**Recommendations**

- There remains a disconnect between food that is desired and food that is delivered. Increasing availability of preferred foods may lead to better outcomes.
- The success of the food delivery program suggests that home delivery may be a highly effective strategy for distributing culturally appropriate food and produce to the New American community in Chittenden county.
- Food delivery coupled with more integrated health and nutrition orientation following resettlement may positively impact food security for refugees.
- The Foodbank may wish to examine New American preferences for less canned food, frozen food, and pre-cooked meals or making the latter more culturally specific.
- In particular there may be ways of exploring the strong interest in more fresh vegetables, meat (especially goat meat), fufu, pondu, pasta, and rice.
Research Partners

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References Continued


