

Responding to a Global Crisis

The Challenge

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted food systems across the country, which disproportionately impacted vulnerable populations and exacerbated already existing nutrition inequities. It became harder for families from communities of color and those living on low incomes to access and afford healthy food.

HER's Role

HER swiftly adapted to address these emerging challenges. Through rapid-response funding and strategic collaborations, HER ensured *timely research* and policy recommendations to mitigate the pandemic's impact on vulnerable populations.

- Awarded \$3.25 million to support timely research examining the pandemic's effects on food security, diet quality, and child health outcomes.
- Convened a work group, in collaboration with other partners, to connect researchers, advocacy organizations, and practitioners who were evaluating strategies to protect diet quality, food security, and overall health for children and families during and after the pandemic.

Impact

- **Growing and Supporting the Field:** More than 500 researchers and partner organizations met biweekly to discuss rapidly evolving research needs addressing the broader implications of COVID-19 on food and nutrition policies and programs.
- **Innovative Research:** Funded and published five research papers and five small studies focused on evaluating new policies and programs related to the federal nutrition assistance programs including SNAP, WIC and school meals.
- **Informing Real-Time Policy Debates:** Provided timely evidence to USDA and state agencies on a new Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer program. This helped inform policy discussions about how best to deliver nutrition assistance through grocery vouchers during the summer and other times when school is not in session.
- **Influencing Congress and USDA:** Briefed dozens of USDA staff as well as members of Congress to share findings from rapid responses research on *SNAP*, *WIC*, and school meals/child nutrition programs.
- **New Forward-Thinking Work Group:** As the pandemic evolved, so did our work group. Now known as the Resilient Food Systems Work Group, we focused on the broader impacts of global, environmental change, hazards, and disasters on food and nutrition security.

Why it Matters

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented public health emergency that required federal policymakers and program administrators for USDA's federal nutrition assistance programs to reconsider, in real time, the funding and delivery of nutrition assistance programs. HER's quick, responsive research helped inform the decisionmaking of new policies and programs to ensure families could access nutritious, affordable food.

