



# **The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Waste and Food Security**

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## **Executive Summary**

What is the impact of COVID-19 on food waste and food security?

How does food waste affect food security?

Why should people care about food waste and food insecurity?

How can food retailers help solve the food waste crisis during the coronavirus pandemic?

Why are food retailers throwing away tons and tons of edible food rather than donating to food banks and charitable organizations?

Are food retailers still donating unsold food and nearly expired food to the community?

How does brand responsibility play a role in the food industry?

What do consumers and brands need to know about socially responsible actions that they can undertake to reduce food waste and improve food security?

The following report details my findings and my recommendations for consumers, food retailers, and small or big brands.

## **Problem Statement**

Food waste and food security persisted before the pandemic, but the pandemic further exacerbates the situation. Grocery stores throw away billions of pounds of food every year, tons, and tons of edible food in the U.S. are lost or wasted—a problem that has exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic. While some grocery stores donate to food banks and other charitable organizations, there's a lot that just ends up in the landfills. Food waste has contributed to the global hunger crisis, consumers and grocery stores are panic buying and stockpiling, much of the food purchased by households is discarded as food waste, because of improper storage of these household food items and lack of cooking skills among consumers. When food is lost or wasted, all the resources that are used to produce the food including water, land, energy, labor and capital go to waste. Food does not properly decompose, the disposal of food loss and waste in landfills, leads to global greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to climate change.

Simultaneously, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated significant challenges to food security. Certain vulnerable groups living in the United States face additional barriers and risks such as children, older adults, and immigrants in the United States illegally when it comes to nutrition and health amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the issue of food insecurity has significantly impacted American families with children. Fortunately, food retailers such as Target, Walmart, Costco, Kroger, and Starbucks have partnered with Feeding America to provide food assistance around the nation. What's more, car dealers have partnered with local banks to end the hunger crisis. However, it is not enough, more small or big brands need to collaborate with local or global organizations to feed Americans to end the hunger crisis by collecting canned or packaged food. It is extremely important for small or big brands to step up to fight against food loss and waste. Reducing food loss and waste can improve food security and environmental sustainability, and requires the attention and actions of all, from food producers to food supply chain stakeholders, to food industries, retailers, and consumers.

## Background

According to CBS News, one in three families with kids is experiencing food insecurity during the pandemic, especially low-income families with kids, double the rate since 2018. Food insecurity is defined as a lack of sufficient food for maintaining a healthy and active life, as well as a lack of resources to obtain more food. According to Feeding America, the largest hunger-relief organization in the United States, estimates that 42 million people in America face food insecurity during the pandemic, including 13 million children. Researchers at Northwestern University estimate that food insecurity rates have more than doubled, now impacting as many as 23% of U.S. households this year (Picchi, 2020).

Physicians, researchers, and food policy experts highlight the need for accessible, healthy food to combat poor health in vulnerable populations. Food insecurity and poor nutrition are associated with several chronic illnesses that put people at higher risk for the more severe complications of COVID-19 (Balch, 2020). According to Urban Institute, although food insecurity improved early in the pandemic after the release of stimulus checks and supplements to unemployment benefits, food hardship levels edged back up the month after major relief programs for households expired. Food insecurity rates have increased among those who reported their families experienced a job loss during the pandemic, many adults and their families sought food assistance from charitable organizations such as food pantries and free meal programs. “More than one in five adults with low incomes (20.8 percent) and nearly one in four adults (23.3 percent) who report they or a spouse lost a job or were laid off during the pandemic sought food assistance from charitable sources in the prior 30 days.” (Waxman et al., 2020).

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United States (FAO), 690 million people today are hungry and three billion cannot afford a healthy diet. Hunger has been on the rise for the past five years, and the COVID-19 pandemic is threatening the food security of up to an additional 132 million people. Food loss and waste is the decrease in quantity or quality of food by farms, inadequate storage, bad infrastructure and trade logistics, inadequate facilities, retailers, and consumers. Food continues to be lost and wasted, COVID-19 aside, however, each year about 14% of the world’s food is lost, food loss valued at \$400 billion annually-about the GDP of Austria. Even worse, food loss and waste generate eight percent of global greenhouse gas emissions.

A lot of people have health problems and COVID-19 pandemic has significantly infected the whole family. These challenges strained the family's financial resources, and they sought out food assistance from food banks. However, according to Time, food banks across our nation are fighting to keep up with the demand, demand for food banks has surged amid the pandemic, feeding hundreds of thousands of families amid a pandemic is difficult because they need to distribute significantly more food with much less physical contact, to mitigate the chance of spreading COVID-19 between volunteers and food recipients. Many food charities have also cut down on the number of volunteers they can accommodate, and the age ranges of volunteers they can accept (Vesoulis, 2020). "Food banks all over the country are facing an unprecedented set of circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic – less food donations, less volunteers, and an increased number of people facing hunger," according to Carrie Calvert, vice president of government relations, agriculture & nutrition at Feeding America.

According to U.S. Department of Agriculture, there is some legal protection for those who donate food to help those in need under the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, provides limited liability protection for people who make good faith donations of food and grocery products to nonprofits that feed the hungry, that act also provides limited liability protection for those who distribute food and groceries, such as food banks. However, grocery chains still throw away billions of pounds of food every year, businesses may not be aware of the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, so that's probably the reason why many large corporations are hesitant to donate some items in terms of food safety because they may fear getting sued.

However, America's largest grocery retailer Kroger directed a record one-year total of 640 million meals to individuals and families struggling with hunger to fight food insecurity in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic, including foods and funds donated to Feeding America local food banks. Kroger has been continuously battling food waste in helping redirect more healthy food to individuals and families struggling with hunger, and direct charitable grants to organizations that help end hunger in our communities. Kroger reduces the amount of food waste in its grocery stores, safe, wholesome meat, produce, eggs and dairy products are donated to local food banks that have the capacity to safely handle and distribute fresh food.

Reducing food lost or wasted means more food for all, less greenhouse gas emissions, less pressure on the environment, and increased productivity and economic growth. Actions are required globally and locally to maximize the use of

the food we produce. According to the United Nations from celebrating the first ever observance of the International Day of Awareness of Food Loss and Waste, “the introduction of technologies, innovative solutions (including e-commerce platforms for marketing, retractable mobile food processing systems), new ways of working and good practices to manage food quality and reduce food loss and waste are key to implementing this transformative change.”

## Recommendations

1. Change the U.S Food environment to discourage waste by consumers
2. Strengthen consumers’ motivation, opportunity, and ability to reduce food waste
3. Leverage and apply research findings and technology to support consumers in food waste reduction

## Consumers

1. **Preplan and write your shopping list** before going to the grocery store and buy only the things needed for those meals. Look in your refrigerator and cupboards first to see what needs to be used up and plan upcoming meals around it to avoid buying food you already have. Buy just 1 to 2 weeks-worth of groceries at a time. Be careful when buying in bulk, especially with items that have a limited shelf life. Buying more than you need can create unnecessary demand and temporary shortages.
2. **Purchase “ugly” fruits or vegetables** if available that are often left behind at the grocery store but are safe to eat. “Ugly” produce has imperfections but are not damaged or rotten. Consumers tend to reject unattractive produce because they think it’s less tasty or nutritious, and this leads to immense food waste. In fact, “ugly” fruits and vegetables are safe and nutritious and can sometimes be found at discounted prices.
3. **Avoid impulse purchases**, the pandemic has shaped so much of our lives, including the way people shop for groceries, from how often people shop to how much they spend, to which products they buy. In fact, research shows that American consumers’ average weekly grocery spending increased by 17% during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consumers are exposed daily with all the brand messages and products; it is crucial to think about how our choices impact our world.

4. **Support your community** by providing donated untouched food to food banks that would have otherwise gone to waste to those who might not have a steady food supply. Millions of people have been suffering the compounded economic and social impacts of the pandemic. Homeless, hunger, and poverty is rampant across the country. Consumers can make a difference by organizing their family, friends, or community group to help them collect and donate food on a larger scale.
5. **Step up to fight food waste and food security.** No one should experience daily hunger and undernourishment, especially not in a world where billions of tons of edible food are wasted each year. Pandemic's economic fallout has had a devastating and disproportionate impact on the rights of low-income people who were already struggling. Unemployment and related economic changes made it more difficult for many U.S. households to obtain adequate food. Individuals should be giving back to the community by volunteering in food banks to help those in need.

## **Food Retailers**

1. **Be aware of the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act**, the act is to encourage donation of food and grocery products to non-profit organizations for distribution to individuals in need.
  - a. Protects grocery stores or individuals from liability should the product donated in good faith later cause harm to the recipient
  - b. Standardizes donor liability exposure. Grocery stores or their legal counsel do not need to investigate liability laws in 50 states
  - c. Set a floor of "gross negligence" or intentional misconduct for persons who donate grocery products. Gross negligence is defined as "voluntary and conscious conduct by a person with knowledge (at the time of conduct) that the conduct is likely to be harmful to the health or well-being of another person."
2. **Modify or eliminate traditional store practices that increase waste.** Over the years, supermarkets have embraced high cosmetic standards for fruit and vegetables, leading them to reject even marginally imperfect-looking food (e.g., too short, long, big, small, or uneven in shape, too red or not red enough, and so on). To curb this food waste, grocery chains should start experimenting with selling "wonky" vegetables at discount prices.
3. **Make a positive impact on raising awareness about the impacts of food waste and inspiring people to waste less.** Small or big brands should be

working for a future without food loss or waste by halving food waste in their operations, by inspiring consumers to rethink their relationship with leftover food and partnering with others for global reform of the food system. They should clarify and communicate information on food safety, food date labels, and food donations.

4. **Team up with consumers.** Food waste by consumers has escalated with rising disposable incomes. Changing habits is a long-term endeavor, but food retailers can play a crucial role in educating consumers to cut household waste. Supermarkets can share food stories that feature waste reduction tips and recipes to utilize leftovers. Food retailers can also organize “waste less” campaigns, for example, U.S. Kroger’s initiative “Zero Hunger, Zero Waste” uses crowdsourcing to interact with consumers and gather ideas for food waste and hunger prevention.
5. **Collaboration with farmers, food processors, non-profit organizations, and social ventures** in the broader food ecosystem will help food retailers achieve their food waste goals. One of the pillars of brand responsibility is brands being committed to social good, and as food retailers take up a deeper interest in their communities’ well-being, they can share the goal of reducing food waste and create a robust relationship with their suppliers and customers.

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