

# Addressing Food Insecurity in Pittsburgh's Hill District: Post COVID-19 Challenges in a Low-Income, Predominantly African American Community

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## BACKGROUND

- Food Insecurity: the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. It is a fundamental social determinant of health associated with poor nutrition, obesity, and other chronic diseases.<sup>1</sup>
- The Hill District, a low-income, predominantly African American neighborhood in Pittsburgh, is a Healthy Food Priority Area (HFPA). In 2020, census tract data from the City found that while about 12% of Pittsburgh residents reside in HFPA, more than a third of the city's Black residents live in these areas.<sup>2</sup>

## OBJECTIVES

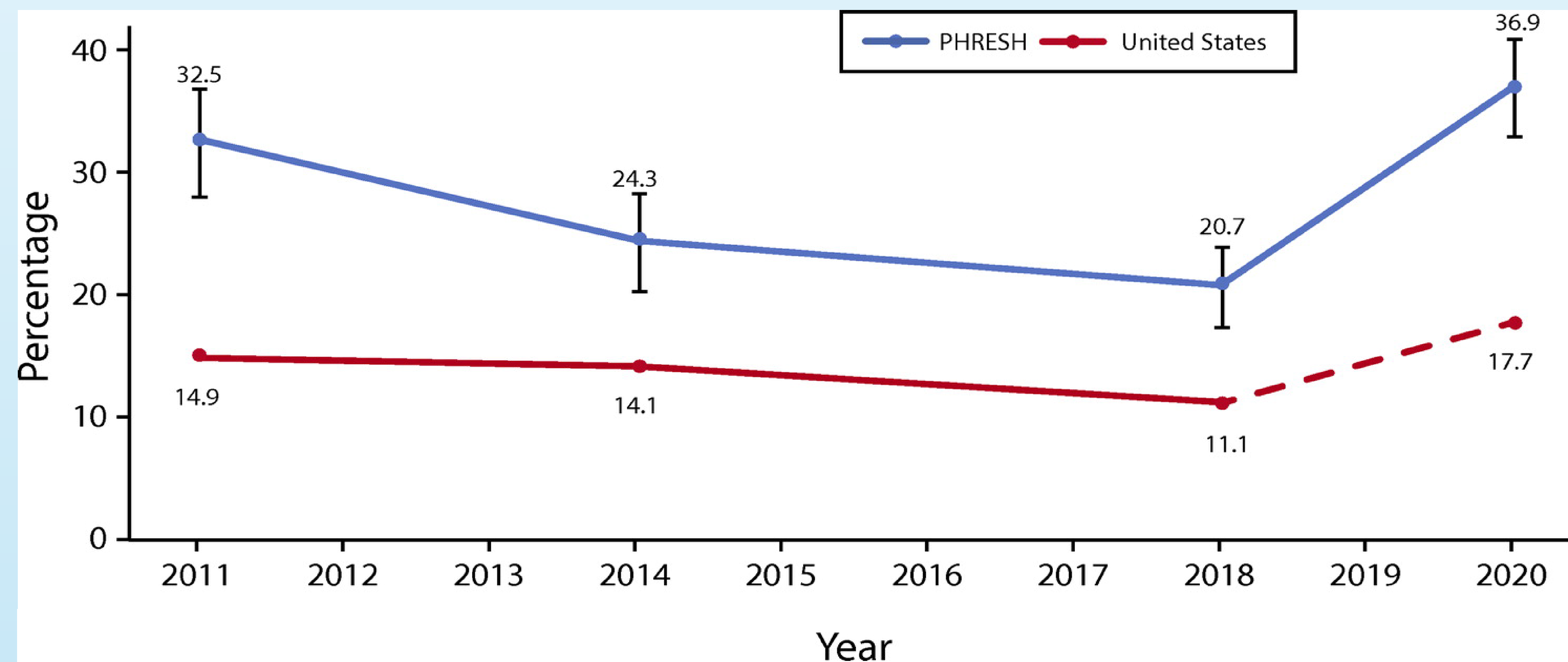
- Examine the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on food insecurity in the low-income, racially isolated neighborhoods of Hill District and Homewood.<sup>3</sup>
- Highlight the work of my internship placement, the Neighborhood Resilience Project (NRP), in addressing food insecurity in Pittsburgh's Hill District.

## METHODS

- The Pittsburgh Hill/Homewood Research on Eating, Shopping, and Health (PHRESH) cohort is a long-standing study of two food deserts in Pittsburgh. In 2020, 605 residents within the cohort completed a follow-up survey, having participated in up to five prior data collection waves (2011-2018). The study examined COVID-19's impact on food insecurity and assistance, comparing local and national trends.<sup>3</sup>
- Food insecurity was measured using the validated 6-item Adult Food Security Survey Module, capturing experiences over the past 30 days.<sup>3</sup>

## RESULTS

- Figure 1 illustrates that food insecurity rates among PHRESH participants were consistently twice as high as in the general U.S. population across all years. Both groups experienced elevated rates in 2011, followed by steady declines through 2018, when 20.7% of PHRESH participants were food insecure. However, by May 2020, food insecurity in the PHRESH sample spiked to 36.9%, a nearly 80% increase ( $t = 7.63$ ;  $P < .001$ ), which widened a pre-existing disparity. Nationally, food insecurity also rose, reaching 17.7%, a 60% increase from 2018. Despite these increases, participation in SNAP (52.2%) and use of food banks (35.9%) did not change significantly during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1.** Food insecurity in the PHRESH cohort remains higher than U.S. rates, with sharp increases in both groups in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

## DISCUSSION

- COVID-19 widened food insecurity in the Hill District and Homewood, reversing steady improvements in reducing disparities compared to the broader U.S. population.<sup>3</sup>
- SNAP and food bank use remained unchanged, highlighting barriers like enrollment, access, stigma, and limited local food options.<sup>3</sup>

## PUBLIC HEALTH SIGNIFICANCE

- COVID-19 has disproportionately affected racial/ethnic minority groups and marginalized populations in the U.S., highlighting deep-rooted inequities.<sup>5</sup>
- Food insecurity threatens to exacerbate racial inequities, particularly for African Americans who already faced elevated rates before the pandemic, with structural racism recognized as the root determinant of these inequities.<sup>6</sup>

## CONCLUSION

- COVID-19 has exacerbated existing disparities in food insecurity, highlighting gaps in current policy responses. Policymakers should consider strategies such as flexible SNAP enrollment, expanded benefits, and targeted support for communities most vulnerable to food insecurity.
- Providing greater support for local organizations like NRP can better address social determinants of health and help build sustainable, equity-driven solutions.

## LOCAL NUTRITION AND FOOD ACCESS SERVICES AT NRP

<b>Free Lunches:</b> Monday-Friday, at 12:30pm Bag Lunches Saturday at 11:00am	<b>Grocery Drives:</b> Monday and Tuesday at 3:00pm, first come first serve
<b>Food and Clothing Pantry:</b> Monday, Wednesday, and Friday 11:00am - 12:00pm, 1:00 - 3:00pm	<b>Hot Dinner:</b> Every Wednesday at 4:30 p.m.

All are welcome!

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**Figure 2.** Food access services at NRP.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 3.** 2024 Metrics: Total Meals and Food Items Distributed at NRP.<sup>4</sup>

## REFERENCES/ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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