



Fact-checking Biden's claim about hunger 'sharply' dropping

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May 10, 2021

President Joe Biden credits the American Rescue Plan for helping Americans recover from the pandemic and economic fallout, including those who have experienced hunger.

"The Rescue Plan is delivering food and nutrition assistance to millions of Americans facing hunger," Biden said May 5. "And hunger is already sharply down in the United States."

Biden signed the American Rescue Plan on March 11, so we wondered if the legislation had already caused hunger to decline "sharply" less than two months later.

We found that the plan's stimulus checks and food programs have helped. But there are other factors that have eased hunger, including school reopenings, a rebounding economy and previous aid.

Fewer people say they lack food

The pandemic caused school closures and higher unemployment, driving up the numbers of people who needed help obtaining food. A Northwestern University study estimates that at one point during the pandemic, nearly 23% of households in the U.S. experienced food insecurity.

The White House cited a Washington Post article that cited data from the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey. The Census designed the survey to collect data on how people's lives have been impacted by the pandemic, initially collecting data every week and then every two weeks. One of the questions respondents are asked is whether they sometimes or often did not have enough to eat in the previous seven days. (Experts cautioned against using this survey to compare hunger from different surveys before the pandemic, but told us it is useful to compare the current survey's data during different weeks.)

Adult food insecurity in the U.S. declined 43% from December to the most recent data for April. The percentage who reported food security was 10.7% during the first two weeks in March and then fell to 8.8% later in March after the bill was signed into law.

Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, a Northwestern University economist, said the latest round of stimulus checks were a major driver in the decline in hunger between the first and second half of March.

"The economy is improving, and employment is increasing, which is also helping the numbers, but the big drop is most likely explained by the stimulus/relief payments," she said.

American Rescue Plan includes multiple provisions for food assistance

Starting in spring 2020, the federal government took action to expand food assistance as a result of the pandemic. Biden continued on that path, including the \$12 billion in food assistance in the American Rescue Plan.

Here's a look at some of the major food assistance programs:

- The American Rescue Plan maintains a 15% increase in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits through September, which provides about \$28 more per person, per month. This program is an extension of the increase from the Consolidated Appropriations Act signed by President Donald Trump in December.
- The USDA announced April 1 that it would provide \$1 billion per month in additional assistance to the lowest income households on SNAP.
- The American Rescue Plan includes \$900 million for the Women, Infants and Children nutrition program. Some of the funding includes temporarily increasing the voucher for fruits and vegetables. Many states opted into this program in March and April.
- Aid through a Pandemic-EBT program was established in March 2020 through the Families First Coronavirus Response Act to provide money for low-income families for children missing meals due to school closures. The American Rescue Plan extends the program through the summer.

Experts told us that it wasn't just the recent American Rescue Plan that contributed to the decline in hunger.

"The unemployment rate is the single biggest correlation to food insecurity in America," said Joel Berg, CEO of Hunger Free America.

Scott Winship, a scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, said like the food insecurity data, the poverty data shows a big decline in March, so that's consistent with a drop in hunger.

"The decline in food insecurity and poverty both began before President Trump signed the \$2.3 trillion December relief bill into law," Winship said. "I think the American Rescue Plan could be responsible for the more recent decline though."

The economy has also been rebounding since pandemic rules have loosened, said Michael Tanner, an expert on poverty at the libertarian Cato Institute.

"The number of people who are food insecure has declined, but we just passed this thing," Tanner said, referring to the American Rescue Plan. "The idea that is what is having the impact seems to stretch credulity a bit."

Our ruling

Biden said after the American Rescue Plan's food and nutrition assistance, "hunger is already sharply down in the United States."

The number of adults who have told the Census that they sometimes or often don't have enough food in the past week declined this spring. The decline coincided with the American Rescue Plan, signed into law in March, which included a new round of stimulus checks and food assistance programs.

But there are a lot of moving parts that have contributed to the hunger decline, including previous legislation, schools reopening and the recovering economy.

We rate this statement Mostly True.