

Before the pandemic, **4.4 million** people in Canada and over **37 million** in the United States (USA) were food insecure. These numbers have increased since the outbreak of COVID-19, with particular incidence among Black, Latino, Indigenous, and single female-headed households.

Today, in the **United States** more than 20% of Black and Latino families report not having enough to eat, double the rate compared to Whites. Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) have suffered **disproportionately high incidences** of hospitalization and death from COVID-19, shedding light on the recurrent issue of lack of public health support, which is all the more pertinent in a pandemic situation.

Canadian Indigenous women **have reported racism and neglect** in childbirth during the pandemic. Measures implemented in Canadian hospitals have ignored the needs of Indigenous women, aggravating their long-standing situation of inequality across the country. Medical consultations have been moved online; however, only 24% of homes in Indigenous communities have adequate Internet connection, leaving many pregnant indigenous women unable to receive the care they need. In addition, fear of discrimination and mistreatment in hospitals, coupled with the dread of contracting COVID-19 and transmitting it to older persons in multi-generational households, have led indigenous women to avoid public health centers as much as possible. This has resulted in pregnancy problems and even the death of some babies.

In the **USA**, the pandemic drew attention to the dire situation of migrant workers in the industrial food system. Following border closures, many agricultural workers have not been entitled to any kind of benefits. Millions of jobs were lost in restaurants and other catering establishments, equally affecting many undocumented workers who are not entitled to unemployment benefits. Agricultural and other food systems workers have been highly exposed to the virus. In **Canada**, it was reported that companies failed to provide protection, leaving safety at the workplace in the hands of workers themselves. What's more, in many food production and processing sectors, employees are being prevented from organizing collectively to protect their rights.

Serious COVID-19 outbreaks were recorded in food processing and meatpacking plants in the **USA**, where employees are mostly migrants and refugees. According to **data** gathered by FERN (May 2021), at least 1,443 meatpacking and food processing plants and 407 farms and production facilities confirmed cases of COVID, with a total of at least 90,075 workers affected, nearly two-thirds of them in the meatpacking sector. As for **Canada**, the **closure of major meat processing plants due to infections and the death of workers**, such as the **Cargill plant** in Alberta (which processes 36% of all Canadian meat) meant that livestock production lost its main marketing channel.

Many people have been left without jobs and forced to resort to food aid. This situation is compounded by the fact that, in 2019, the Trump administration had cut \$4.5 billion in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, commonly known as food stamps. There have been multiple reports of racial discrimination in food distribution, and tensions and conflicts have multiplied over the past year.

Measures put in place by Trump's government in March 2020 to support food producers equally discriminated against Black people. Only 0.1% targeted small-scale food production, which is where all of the Black population's production is located. This situation stems from an openly racist institutional framework, which became all the more evident with the Pigford lawsuit, in which several farmers filed class action lawsuits accusing the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) for discriminating against Black farmers in the distribution of loans, as well as failing to investigate complaints of widespread systemic racial discrimination. A new bailout plan set in motion by the new president, Joe Biden, intends to right this wrong. The plan aims to redress historical discrimination against black farmers by providing financial, legal and technical assistance, along with cooperative development.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES

In the face of the crisis suffered over the last year, various civil society actors in the USA have self-organized to help families and supply them with food. In a country where public support is very limited, the population is dependent on volunteerism and multiple charitable spaces.

The organization Why Hunger has supplied food to more than one million families and organized an international campaign (Rapid Response Fund) to support the most disadvantaged communities and Indigenous Peoples in eight countries, and to denounce human rights violations. The organization also supports the Black Food Sovereignty movement, which seeks to combat the systemic and institutional racism suffered by the black community.

→ [Watch Northwest Harvest video](#)

