Eakinomics: Food Adequacy and COVID-19

As noted in a recent Eakinomics, Tara O’Neill Hayes published a piece on the U.S. metrics of food adequacy, namely “food insecurity” and “food insufficiency.” The bottom line was this: “Official metrics estimate 10.5 percent of Americans (35.2 million) were food insecure in 2019, including 4.1 percent (9 million) who were considered to have very low food security and 3.7 percent who were estimated to be food insufficient.”

But what happened in 2020 with the arrival of COVID-19 and the recession? The coverage of lines at food banks, after all, is how many people (myself included) began wondering about the extent of this problem. Hayes has a new piece that takes on the issue.

One important issue to stress at the outset is that the historical numbers are drawn from the annual Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, conducted by the Census Bureau each December. In contrast, our insights during the pandemic are drawn from the newly launched biweekly Census Household Pulse Survey, first conducted from April 23 to May 5, 2020. In December, 10.5 percent of Americans were classified as food insecure, while 4.1 percent were reported to have very low food security. In contrast, the first Pulse survey indicated that only 50 percent of Americans had enough of all types of food and 8.1 percent were classified as food insufficient. So, the Pulse survey seems prone to showing less food adequacy.

It got worse: “Two months later (according to the results of the May 7-12 survey), the share of people reporting having enough of the types of food wanted fell 24 percent, while the number reporting “sometimes” or “often” not having enough to eat increased by 31 percent and 22 percent, respectively.”

What are we to make of this? “Prior to the pandemic, food insecurity was relatively low and falling. With millions of people losing their jobs during the pandemic, one would expect food insecurity rates to rise given the correlation between food security and income. In an effort to prevent that from happening, Congress quickly passed numerous relief measures that included direct payments, enhanced unemployment benefits, and more generous nutrition assistance than had ever before been provided. Nevertheless, despite the trillions of dollars in assistance provided over the past year, reports of rising food insecurity persist.”

Hayes devotes considerable attention to the data in an attempt to unravel this puzzle. But her bottom line remains: “A closer look at the data…reveal sharp inconsistencies with historical trends, making it difficult to assess the true toll of the pandemic on food insecurity and insufficiency in the United States. Most surprising is the alleged rise in food insufficiency as the unemployment rate has fallen. It is unclear if the number of individuals without enough to eat is truly rising, particularly at the rate indicated, or if the data are unreliable.”