

The Covid-19 pandemic: implications for food and nutrition (in)security

This issue of Revista Ciência & Saúde Coletiva features 18 articles on the theme of food and nutrition security. It covers a broad spectrum that includes a paper on the interface between food and health and original studies on the diagnosis of food and nutrition insecurity using various methodological approaches, contexts and topics.

Brazil is one of a group of countries – a little over a hundred – that acknowledges the right to food as a human right, either through national legal and normative frameworks or by signing international treaties. This commitment is implemented by the development of public policies to promote, protect and provide means by which all people can feed themselves with dignity.

The debate on health, nutrition and food security could not be scrutinized at a more opportune moment. This issue is launched at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic that has given rise to increased food and nutrition insecurity for individuals, families and communities.

The impacts of Covid-19 on food and nutrition security will be diversified, since they result from aspects related to risk factors identified thus far for the worst clinical prognosis of coronavirus infection. These include obesity and other chronic diseases, as well as the different forms of malnutrition that are exacerbated in the context of a health emergency.

Family income is associated with food and nutrition security. There is solid evidence that social and economic policies aimed at increasing the income of Brazilian families have resulted in a reduction in hunger and child malnutrition^{1,2}. In 2018, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), 25.3% of the Brazilian population lived in poverty or extreme poverty. These are families whose experience of food insecurity is nothing new, however their vulnerabilities are accentuated with Covid-19. The requisite measure of social isolation, when added to the instability in the employment and income of families, can cause a reduction in access to food and, consequently, lead to a worsening in the quality of food consumed, and even hunger. For this reason, measures aimed at ensuring emergency income are among the first to be advocated for social protection and the promotion of food and nutrition security.

The response of public authorities does not occur with the expediency that the situation demands. In tandem with this, there are initiatives to provide emergency food and meals in poor and peripheral communities in urban centers, as a result of initiatives of solidarity among equals. It is worth highlighting the contributory role that civil society and social control organizations have played in food and nutrition security policies in Brazil. It is a voice that, once again, manifests itself in a proactive way in the defense of the empowering of strategic programs, such as the National School Food Program (PNAE), the Food Acquisition Program (PAA), as well as Public Services such as food banks and sponsored low-budget restaurants, in order to guarantee the Human Right to Adequate Food in times of Covid-19.

With respect to consumers in general, the pandemic has added a new population group that now experiences the sensation of food insecurity, either for fear of food shortages or for concern about health safety. Actions that guarantee food supply – the central point of the food chain – and health education focused on best hygiene practices, both in the home and in retail food outlets, are important.

In global terms, the debate surrounding the need for a food system that promotes health and social justice, ensures greater ecological resilience for the planet and is aligned with the objectives of sustainable development is gaining momentum³. This is a pressing agenda that must decidedly not be neglected in the post-pandemic phase.

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