

Pandemic Impacts on Migrant Food Security in Nanjing, China

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant disparities in food security, particularly among migrant populations in urban settings. Migrant workers, often occupying precarious, low-paying jobs, experienced disruptions to their food access due to job losses, mobility restrictions, and social exclusion during the pandemic. This policy brief highlights key findings from MiFOOD research conducted in Nanjing during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which revealed heightened levels of food insecurity among migrant households. Migrants were less likely to access online food systems due to technological barriers and exclusion from government aid programs. This brief provides recommendations to enhance food security resilience, including improving access to affordable food, supporting employment, and leveraging technology for equitable food access.



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Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted food systems, especially for vulnerable populations like urban migrants. Food insecurity, defined as the lack of consistent access to enough food for an active and healthy life, worsened for many households globally during the pandemic. In China, urban migrants—who constitute a large proportion of the population in cities like Nanjing—faced significant challenges in maintaining food security during this period. China's *hukou* system, which categorizes residents as either local or non-local based on their household registration, plays a critical role in shaping access to social services, employment, and food resources. This policy brief examines how the pandemic affected the food insecurity of migrant households in Nanjing and outlines recommendations for addressing these impacts in future.

Key Challenges

1. Food Insecurity Among Migrants

Migrant households without local *hukou* experienced significantly higher levels of food insecurity compared to local households. Data from the survey revealed that migrant households had an average Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) score of

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6.86, compared to 4.33 for local households. The HFIAS measures access to food, with higher scores indicating greater food insecurity. Additionally, migrant households scored higher on the Household Hunger Scale (HHS), which measures the severity of hunger. Migrant households were more likely to experience insufficient food quantities and poor food quality during the pandemic. These households were forced to reduce the number of meals per day, with some skipping meals altogether to stretch their limited resources. The survey found that nearly 20% of migrant households often worried about running out of food, compared to only 6% of local households.

2. Social Protection Programs

Migrants without local *hukou* in Nanjing are not eligible for the same level of government assistance as their local counterparts. During the pandemic, while some local residents received food aid and income support, many migrants were left out, leaving them more vulnerable to food shortages.

3. Vulnerability to Job Loss

Migrant workers in Nanjing are heavily concentrated in low-wage sectors, such as construction, manufacturing, and service industries. These sectors were among the hardest hit by the pandemic lockdown, resulting in job losses and reduced incomes for migrant households. A significant number of migrants were laid off or faced reduced working hours, further limiting their ability to purchase food and meet basic needs. As a result, many migrant households experienced prolonged periods of food insecurity, with little hope of recovery in the short term.

4. Challenges in Accessing Affordable Food

Migrants in Nanjing often live far from affordable food sources such as wet markets and supermarkets. This geographical isolation, combined with transportation restrictions during the lockdown, made it difficult for many migrant households to access affordable food. The surge in food prices during the pandemic further strained household budgets, pushing more migrants into food insecurity. In addition, the shift to online food purchasing during the pandemic disproportionately affected migrant households, as many lacked the technological literacy or resources to take advantage of these systems. While online food purchasing became a lifeline for many urban residents, migrants were often excluded due to limited internet access, unfamiliarity with online platforms, and financial constraints.

Recommendations

1. Improve Access to Affordable Food

There is a need to invest in measures that increase migrant access to affordable food sources during crises, particularly in urban areas. One approach is to expand food distribution networks to underserved neighbourhoods, ensuring that migrants can access essential food supplies during crises. Additionally, governments could implement price controls on staple foods or provide food vouchers to low-income households, including migrants.

2. Leverage Technology for Equitable Food Access

To bridge the digital divide, affordable and accessible platforms for online food purchasing tailored to low-income migrants are desirable. Initiatives could include providing digital literacy training, subsidized internet access, and mobile payment options for migrants who are unfamiliar with online shopping platforms. Ensuring that all residents can participate in the digital economy is critical for improving food access during future crises.

3. Enhance Resilience Against Future Shocks

Investing in community-based food security programs can help build resilience among migrant populations. These programs could include urban agriculture initiatives, community kitchens, and food cooperatives that allow migrants to access fresh, affordable food even during periods of economic uncertainty. Supporting local, migrant-led initiatives would not only improve food security but also foster social cohesion between migrant and local communities.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities faced by migrant populations in urban China, particularly in terms of food security. While the *hukou* system plays an important role in managing urban populations and services, the pandemic exposed areas where migrants may need additional support to ensure their well-being during crises. Ensuring that all urban residents have access to affordable food, regardless of their *hukou* status, is vital for building a more resilient food system.

By focusing on increasing food access, fostering digital inclusion, and supporting community-based initiatives, policymakers can enhance food security for migrants and other vulnerable groups. These efforts will not only benefit migrants but also strengthen the overall resilience of urban food systems, making them more adaptable in the face of future crises.

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