

Hunger in the United States

2022 STATISTICS AND FACTS

February 2024

Introduction

Millions of families in the U.S. face the daily challenge of affording nutritious food for a healthy diet, and recent data indicate a significant increase in this struggle.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the federal agency that monitors food insecurity, reported that 44.2 million people, including 7.3 million children, lived in homes that did not have adequate nutrition in 2022.

This number represents an increase of 13.5 million people from 2021 to 2022, marking the most significant rise in food insecurity since the Great Recession.

Why do we use the term food insecurity instead of hunger in the U.S.?

Understanding the term 'food insecurity' is essential before exploring the factors that led to its rise in 2022.

The USDA distinguishes between food insecurity and hunger. Food insecurity describes limited or uncertain access to nutritious food at any time during the year, whereas hunger is the prolonged, involuntary lack of food. Hunger is an outcome of food insecurity.

The USDA further categorizes food insecurity into two levels based on severity, which are:

- **Low food security:** Households reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.
- **Very low food security:** At times during the year, eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake was reduced because the household lacked money and other resources for food.

In 2022, 7.7 percent (10.2 million) of U.S. households had low food security and 5.1 percent (6.8 million) had very low food security.

COVID-19 and increased hardship

Households that were already vulnerable to food insecurity were hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic.

FOOD INSECURITY AND ITS IMPACT

FOOD SECURITY
Food security for a household means access by all members at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.

FOOD INSECURITY
Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

LOW FOOD INSECURITY
Households reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.

VERY LOW FOOD INSECURITY
At times during the year, eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money and other resources for food.

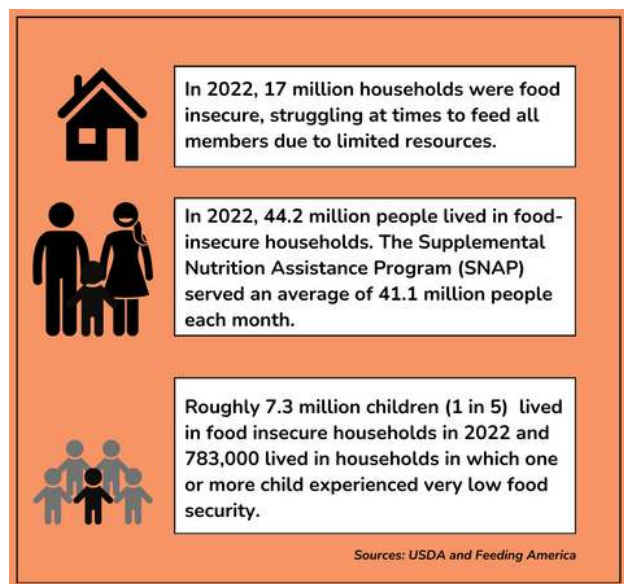
HUNGER
Individual-level physiological condition from a prolonged, involuntary lack of food. Hunger is the outcome of food insecurity.

SOURCE: USDA

Shutdowns and income loss forced many low-income households to reassess spending. Since food is the most flexible part of a budget, many turned to charitable food assistance. Feeding America reported a 90 percent increase in demand from the previous year.

In response to the growing need, Congress increased financial and nutrition assistance during the pandemic, including a boost to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, commonly known as food stamps).

The expansion of safety-net programs kept widespread food insecurity at bay. However, as these expansions were rolled back in 2022, the number of food-insecure households increased.



What causes food insecurity in the United States?

The pandemic has highlighted that food insecurity escalates when incomes decline. Poverty, deeply rooted in systemic issues like social disparities, high living costs, and economic downturns, is a fundamental cause of food insecurity.

Even during economically stable times, a job does not guarantee food security. Low-income wages often fail to cover essential living costs, forcing families to choose between necessities such as housing, healthcare, and food.

Safety-net programs can and do help bridge some of the gap. As we noted earlier, with post-pandemic reductions in programs like SNAP, food budgets were again strained, and more families struggled to make ends meet.

In 2022, the proportion of people living below the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) threshold— which accounts for living costs and government aid programs— increased, raising the SPM rate to 12.4 percent. This

marked a 4.6 percentage point increase from the 2021 rate, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Factors that impact earning capacity

Earning capacity is affected by a variety of intersecting factors, including discrimination, which also contributes to food insecurity.

It is important to note that food insecurity disproportionately affects people of color, with Black individuals being 2.4 times and Latinos 2.2 times more likely to experience food insecurity than their white counterparts in 2022.

Root causes of food insecurity in the U.S. include:

- Systemic racial discrimination and social inequities
- The prevalence of food deserts and the issue of food waste
- Escalating housing costs and rising food prices
- Disparities in education
- Chronic illnesses and healthcare accessibility

Conclusion

The uptick in food insecurity in 2022 highlights the vital role that federal nutrition assistance programs play in safeguarding against food insecurity. Yet, a sustainable solution that ensures everyone has enough requires more than temporary aid; it necessitates addressing the deeper root causes that leave too many behind.

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