

# Hunger Among Adults Age 50-59 in America in 2019



FEEDING  
AMERICA



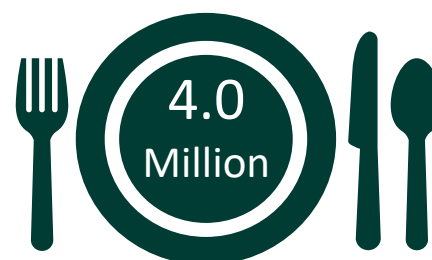
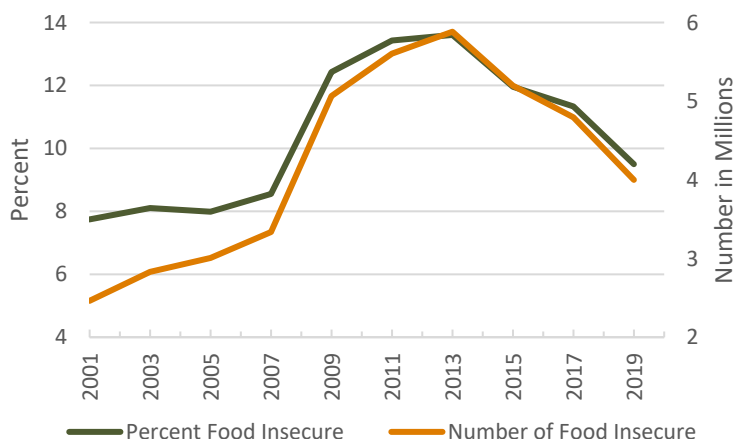
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
RELEASED AUGUST 2021

## Introduction

In 2019, 4.0 million adults age 50 and 59 were food insecure (9.5%, 1 in 11 adults age 50-59), which means having limited access to enough food to live a healthy lifestyle.<sup>1</sup> This is a substantially higher rate for adults age 50-59 - referred to henceforth as *older adults* - than the 7.1% of seniors age 60+ who were food insecure in 2019. Between 2018 and 2019, the food insecurity rate for older adults declined from 4.5 million in 2018 to 4.0 million in 2019 – a statistically significant change. Despite this recent improvement, the food insecurity rate in 2019 is still higher than before the Great Recession that started in December 2007. Given the anticipated growth of the senior population, having an understanding of the circumstances of adults in their 50s can help to better understand and serve older adults and seniors. The nation remains in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic, with dire health and economic consequences for millions of 50-59 year-olds. Older adults, especially those with front-line employment responsibilities, remain particularly vulnerable to the virus and thus their food and health security status require ongoing monitoring in the coming years.

For the fifth consecutive year, Feeding America has produced *The State of Senior Hunger in America*, an annual report series authored by Dr. Craig Gundersen and Dr. James P. Ziliak. This series aims to improve understanding of food insecurity among seniors age 60+ and adults age 50-59, how food insecurity varies by different geographies, and the circumstances and characteristics that may influence or be influenced by the experience of food insecurity. This brief focuses on adults age 50-59; insights into seniors age 60+ can be found in a companion brief and [reports](#). Note that this year's reports reflect the most recent food insecurity data available from 2019, and do not include information around changes in food insecurity due to the pandemic.

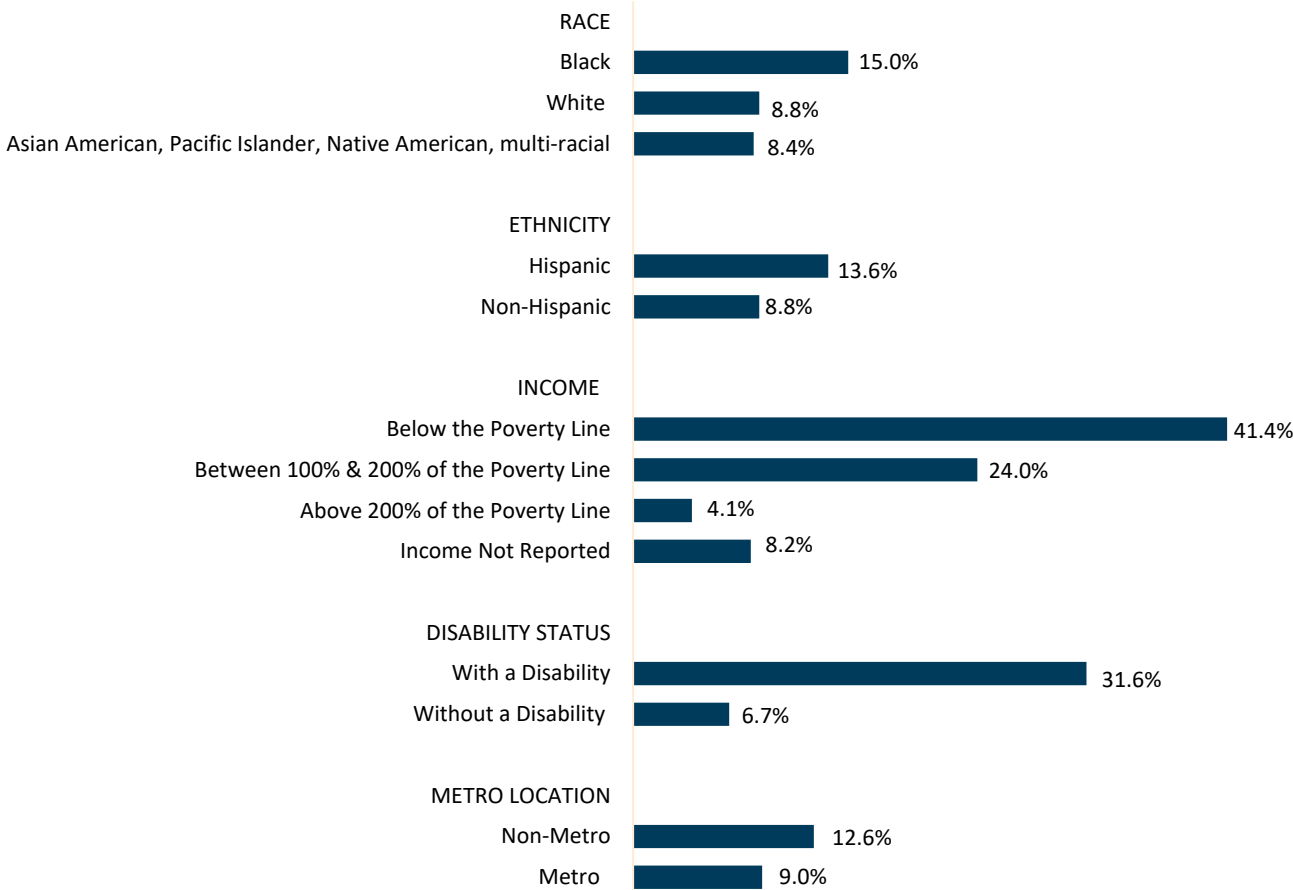
### Trends in Older Adult Food Insecurity



Older adults were food insecure in 2019

# Food insecurity rates among older adults vary by demographic and socioeconomic status

Food Insecurity Rates by Select Characteristics among Adults Age 50-59 in 2019 (%)



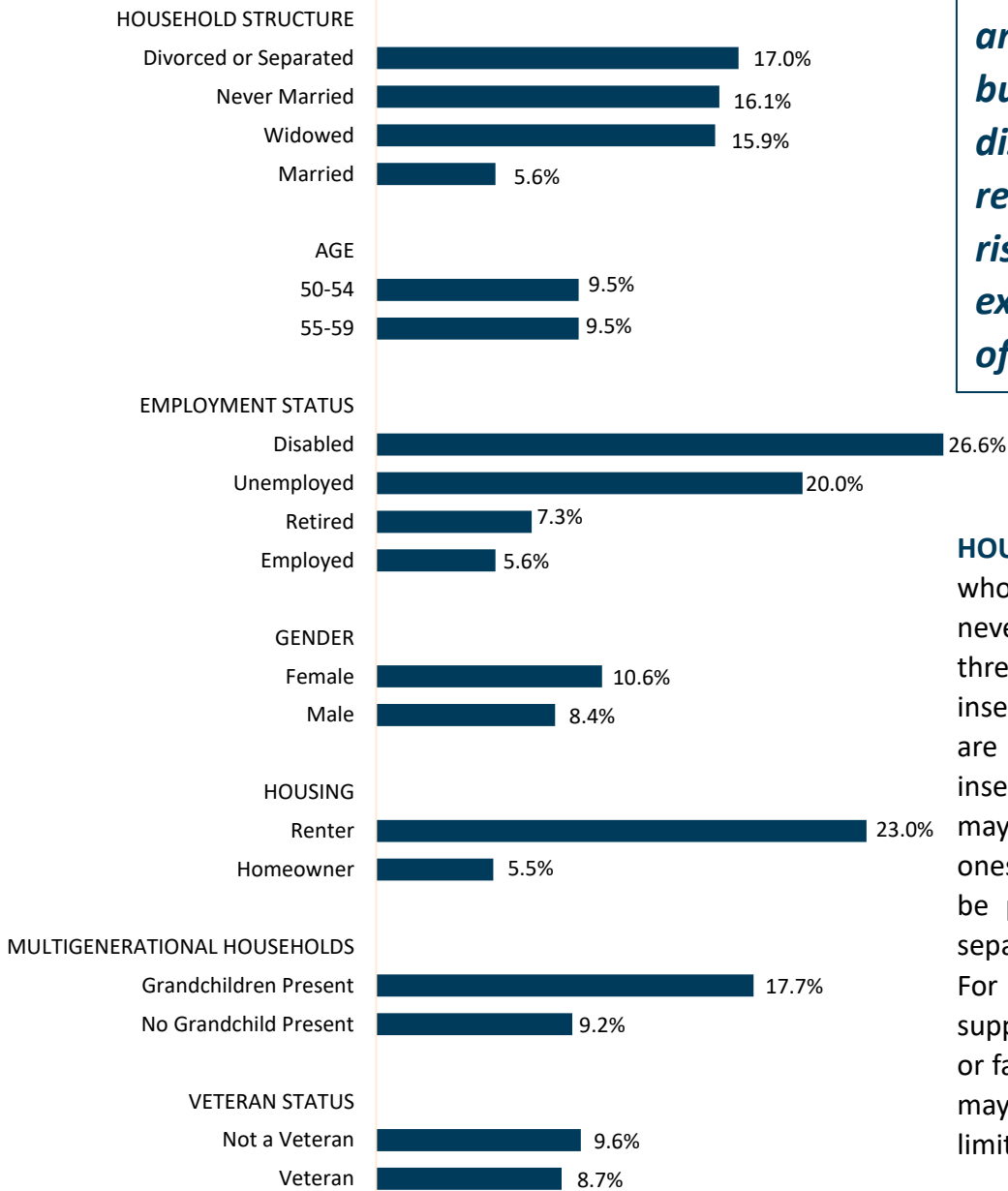
**RACE/ETHNICITY** People of color are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity across all age groups due to the continued impact of systemic racism and discrimination. Older adults are no exception. Food insecurity among Black older adults was nearly double the rate of white older adults. While the discrepancy between Asian American, Pacific Islander, Native American, and multiracial individuals appears less dramatic, differences within these groups are masked due to the lack of adequate data. Food insecurity among Latino older adults was nearly 5 percentage points higher than older adults who are not Latino. Note: In this study, food insecurity is reported separately by racial categories and ethnicity categories. For example, the rate for white older adults includes both Latino and non-Hispanic older adults. Thus, the disparities between Non-Hispanic white older adults and other racial groups may be greater than what is shown through this chart.

**INCOME** Income is a strong driver of food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> Among older adults living below the poverty line, 41.4% were food insecure. Yet, poverty alone does not determine food insecurity, and consistent with national trends, the majority of older adults who were food insecure had incomes above the poverty line (51.1%).<sup>3</sup>

**DISABILITY** One-third of older adults living with a disability were food-insecure. Disabilities can amplify income challenges, which is especially concerning for older adults who are nearing retirement age.<sup>4, 5</sup> Living with a disability may lead to higher medical costs, and even at the same income level, people with disabilities are more likely to be food insecure than people without disabilities.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, without sufficient nutritious food, disabilities and chronic health conditions can worsen and become more severe.

# Food insecurity rates among older adults vary by demographic and socioeconomic status (cont.)

**Food Insecurity Rates by Select Characteristics among Adults Age 50-59 in 2019 (%) (cont.)**



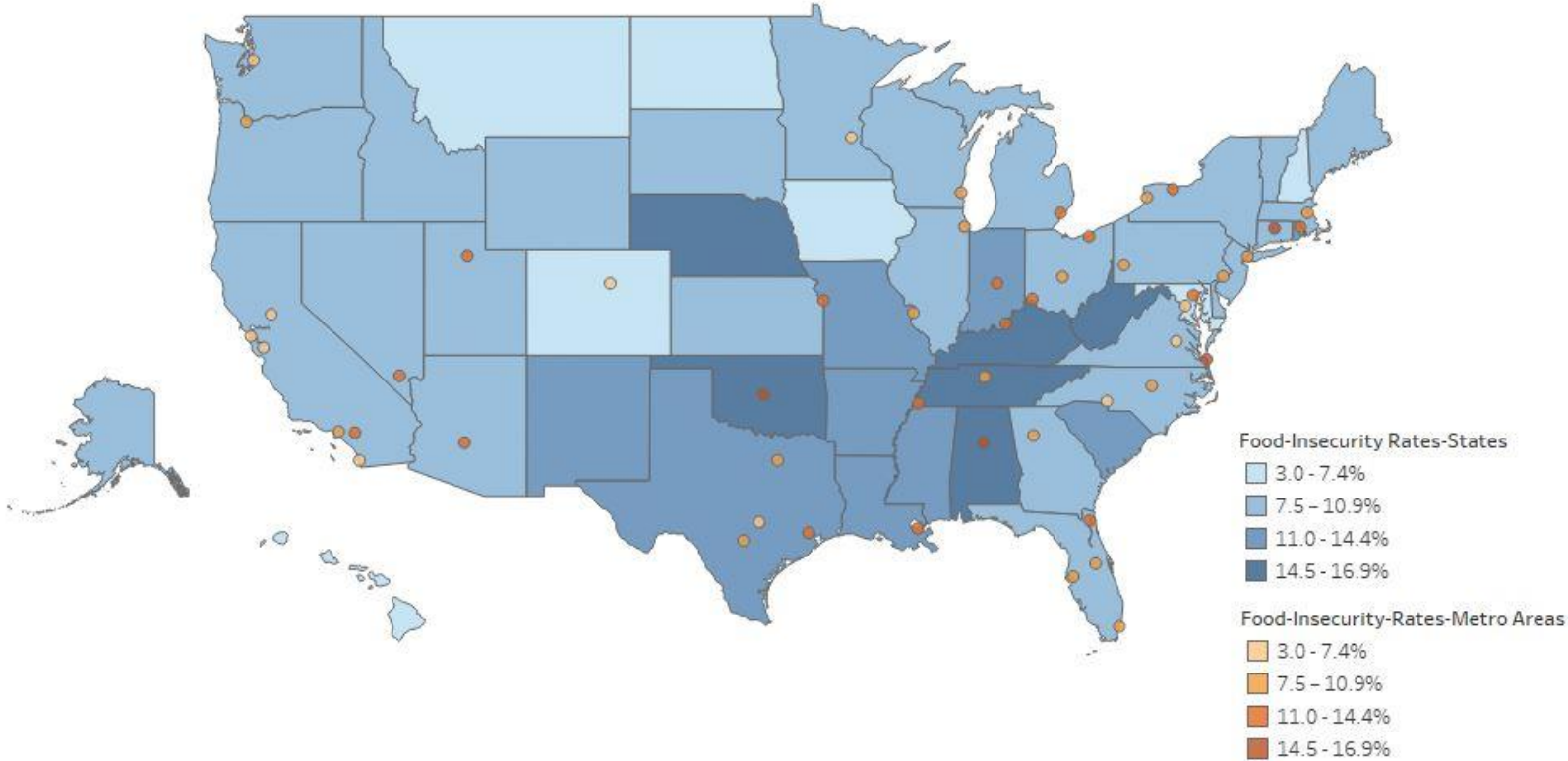
*The trends for older adults are similar to those seen among seniors age 60+, but the magnitude of the disparities is often greater, reinforcing the elevated risk of food insecurity experienced by this cohort of aging adults.*

**HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE** Older adults who are divorced or separated, or never married, or widowed were over three times more likely to be food insecure relative to older adults who are married. The elevated risk of food insecurity among single older adults may reflect the struggle to support oneself on a single income, which may be particularly great in the wake of separation from or death of a spouse. For single older adults who are also supporting children or grandchildren, or facing unemployment or disability, it may be particularly difficult to stretch limited financial resources.

# Food insecurity rates for older adults vary by geography

Across the U.S., food insecurity among older adults varies by state and metropolitan area. Every state and metro area is home to older adults who experience food insecurity.

Food Insecurity for Adults Age 50-59 by State and Metro Area in 2019 <sup>7, 8</sup>



## States with the highest older adult food insecurity rates

- 16.9% – Kentucky
- 15.7% – Oklahoma
- 15.6% – Alabama

## Metro areas with the highest older adult food insecurity rates <sup>9</sup>

- 16.7% – Oklahoma City, OK
- 16.4% – Hartford, CT
- 15.2% – Virginia Beach/ Norfolk, VA

State	FI Rate	State	FI Rate	State	FI Rate
AL	15.6	KY	16.9	ND	6.7
AK	10.7	LA	11.3	OH	10.8
AZ	10.4	ME	7.5	OK	15.7
AR	12.9	MD	4.9	OR	8.1
CA	9.9	MA	7.8	PA	9.8
CO	3.5	MI	9.6	RI	13.8
CT	10.2	MN	7.7	SC	11.7
DE	9.7	MS	13.4	SD	7.8
DC	7.8	MO	12.1	TN	14.6
FL	9.6	MT	6.5	TX	11.6
GA	9.7	NE	14.6	UT	10.0
HI	7.0	NV	10.9	VT	8.4
ID	9.0	NH	4.8	VA	8.9
IL	8.9	NJ	7.5	WA	9.7
IN	12.0	NM	12.5	WV	15.0
IA	6.0	NY	9.8	WI	8.6
KS	10.7	NC	9.0	WY	9.4

# Food insecurity impacts older adults' health and nutrition

Food insecurity among older adults living in the United States has a negative impact on their nutrition and health. Poor health can be both a cause and a consequence of food insecurity for older adults. For example, disability and disease contribute to employment instability and income challenges. In addition, inadequate nutrition can increase the negative effects of disabilities and chronic health conditions.

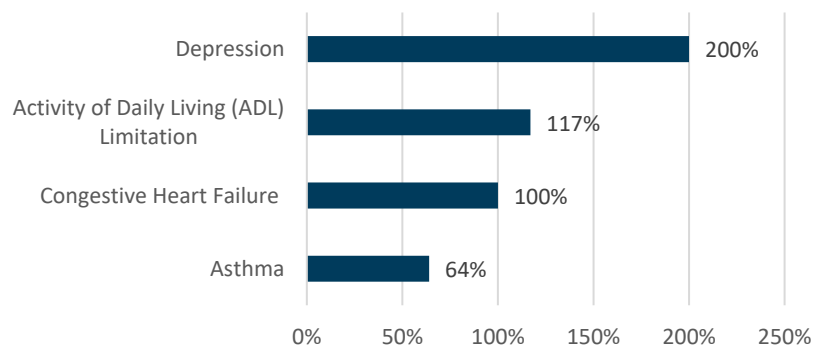
This year's *State of Senior Hunger* report series includes findings from the 1999-2016 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). The NHANES provides information about food insecurity and its health and nutrition implications for older adults. Findings show that older adults who are food insecure consume lower quantities of key nutrients. For example, older adults who are food insecure had intake levels of vitamin A (14.9%), vitamin C (12.9%), and iron (7.1%) that were lower than food secure older adults. In addition, among the older adults population, food insecurity is associated with increased risk of developing negative health conditions. For example, food insecure older adults were more likely to experience depression (200%, 2 times more likely), congestive heart failure (100%), and asthma (64%).

Food insecurity is associated with worse nutrition and health outcomes for older adults regardless of their race/ethnicity, age, gender, education, and marital status. In addition, food insecure older adults reported 3.6 more days a month of being in poor physical or mental health compared to food secure older adults.

## Older adults who are food insecure consumed lower quantities of key nutrients than food secure older adults.

- Vitamin A intake was **14.9% less**
- Vitamin C intake was **12.9% less**
- Iron intake was **7.1% less**
- Protein intake was **5.3% less**

## Older adults who are food insecure were more likely to have chronic health conditions.



## What do we know about the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity for older adults?

Older adults, and especially those with many of the health conditions mentioned above, may have increased risk for illness as a result of COVID-19. This year's reports contain analyses of the most recent food insecurity data available, from 2019, so the data do not reflect any changes in food insecurity as a result of the pandemic. In September 2021, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will release food insecurity data for 2020, the first year of the pandemic. In 2022, Feeding America will release the *State of Senior Hunger 2020* report which will include those data from 2020. Those data will help us better understand the impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity among older adults in the United States.



## What programs exist to support older adults who are food insecure?

Older adults who meet eligibility requirements can receive support from federal nutrition assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In addition, the charitable sector is an important source of food for many individuals and families at risk of hunger across the country. Feeding America and its network of 199 food banks serve millions of older adults annually through traditional pantries, meal delivery programs, benefits assistance and other programming.

## Implications

*The State of Senior Hunger in America in 2019* report series explores the extent and distribution of food insecurity among older adults in the United States. Food insecurity is more prevalent among this population of adults age 50-59 than among seniors 60 and older, signaling that many among the next wave of adults joining a growing senior population may struggle to make ends meet. Older adults face unique challenges as they may begin to experience the economic and health complications that can be associated with aging while being too young to benefit from supports available to seniors. Given the anticipated growth of the senior population and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical that policymakers protect and strengthen the existing federal nutrition programs, especially SNAP, as well as invest in public-private partnerships in order to reduce food insecurity and end hunger in America.

# To Learn More about Hunger Among Older Adults

For the full reports and research briefs released through the *State of Senior Hunger in America* in 2019 report series or more information about older adult hunger research at Feeding America, visit <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/senior-hunger-research> or contact [research@feedingamerica.org](mailto:research@feedingamerica.org).

## About This Study

The 2021 release of *The State of Senior Hunger* study includes four reports authored by Dr. Craig Gundersen and Dr. James P. Ziliak. This summary highlights key findings from two reports: *Hunger Among Adults Age 50-59 in 2019* and *The Health Consequences of Hunger among Adults Age 50-59 in the United States: Evidence from the 1999-2016 NHANES*. To access the full set of reports and references, visit <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/senior-hunger-research>

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# Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Coleman-Jensen, Alisha, Matthew P. Rabbitt, Christian A. Gregory, and Anita Singh. 2020. *Household Food Security in the United States in 2019*, ERR-275, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

<sup>2</sup> Gundersen, C., Dewey, A., Engelhard, E., Strayer, M., & Lapinski, L. (2020). *Map the Meal Gap 2020: A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2018*. Produced by Feeding America.

<sup>3</sup> Gundersen C, Ziliak J. *Hunger Among Adults Age 50-59 in 2019: An Annual Report*. Report submitted to Feeding America. 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Coleman-Jensen, A. and M. Nord. (2013). "Disability Is an Important Risk Factor for Food Insecurity." Amber Waves, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. Retrieved from: <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2013/may/disability-is-an-important-risk-factor-for-food-insecurity>

<sup>5</sup> Heflin, C. M., Altman, C. E., & Rodriguez, L. L. (2019). Food insecurity and disability in the United States. *Disability and Health Journal*, 12(2), 220-226.

<sup>6</sup> Coleman-Jensen A., Nord, M. (2013). Food insecurity among households with working-age adults with disabilities. US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service; Washington, DC. Retrieved from: [https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/45038/34589\\_err\\_144.pdf?v=0](https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/45038/34589_err_144.pdf?v=0)

<sup>7</sup> For a map visualizing older adult food insecurity data included in this year's *State of Senior Hunger in America in 2019* release, visit: <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/feeding.america.research/viz/TheStateofSeniorHungerFoodInsecurityamongAdultsAge50-59byStateMetropolitanAreain2019/Dashboard2>

<sup>8</sup> Comparable food insecurity estimates for Puerto Rico are not currently available because the Food Security Supplement (FSS) in the U.S. Census Bureau's [Current Population Survey](#) (CPS) is not administered in Puerto Rico. For other local population data on Puerto Rico, please see the Census Bureau's [Puerto Rico Community Survey](#), which is part of the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), customized for Puerto Rico.

<sup>9</sup> For the full list of metro areas, please visit <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/senior-hunge>

