

The State of Senior Hunger in America in 2019



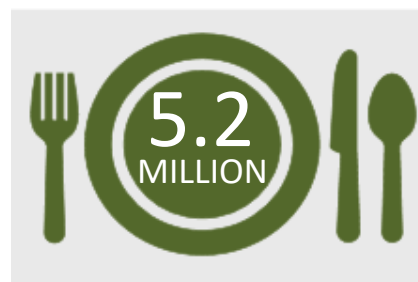
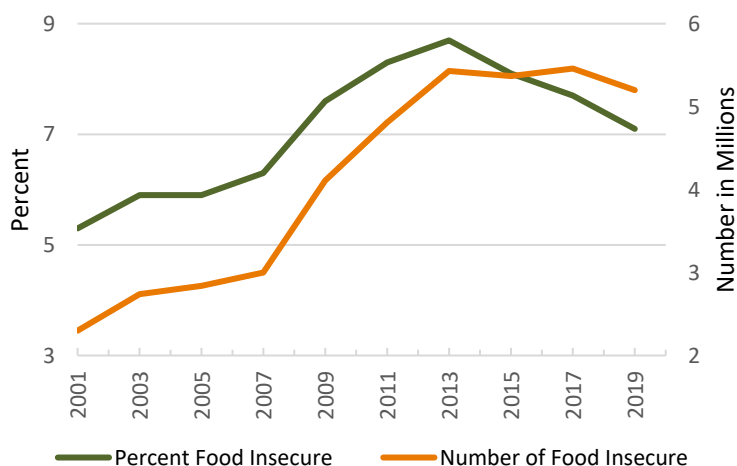
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
RELEASED AUGUST 2021

Introduction

In 2019, 5.2 million seniors age 60 and over in the United States were food insecure (1 in 14 seniors, or 7.1% of all seniors), which means having limited access to enough food to live a healthy lifestyle.¹ There were no significant changes in food insecurity among seniors from 2018 to 2019 (5.3 million in 2018 vs. 5.2 million in 2019), however seniors were still facing higher levels of food insecurity than before the Great Recession that started in December 2007. Currently, as the nation continues to confront the COVID-19 pandemic, seniors are facing unprecedented health and food access challenges. Food insecure seniors are more likely to develop nutrition-related health problems, which is particularly problematic given the unique health, financial, and nutritional challenges that can come with aging. Even with the support of existing senior hunger programs, more work must be done to address this public health crisis.

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 and older 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 seniors age 60 and older; insights into older adults age 50-59 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.

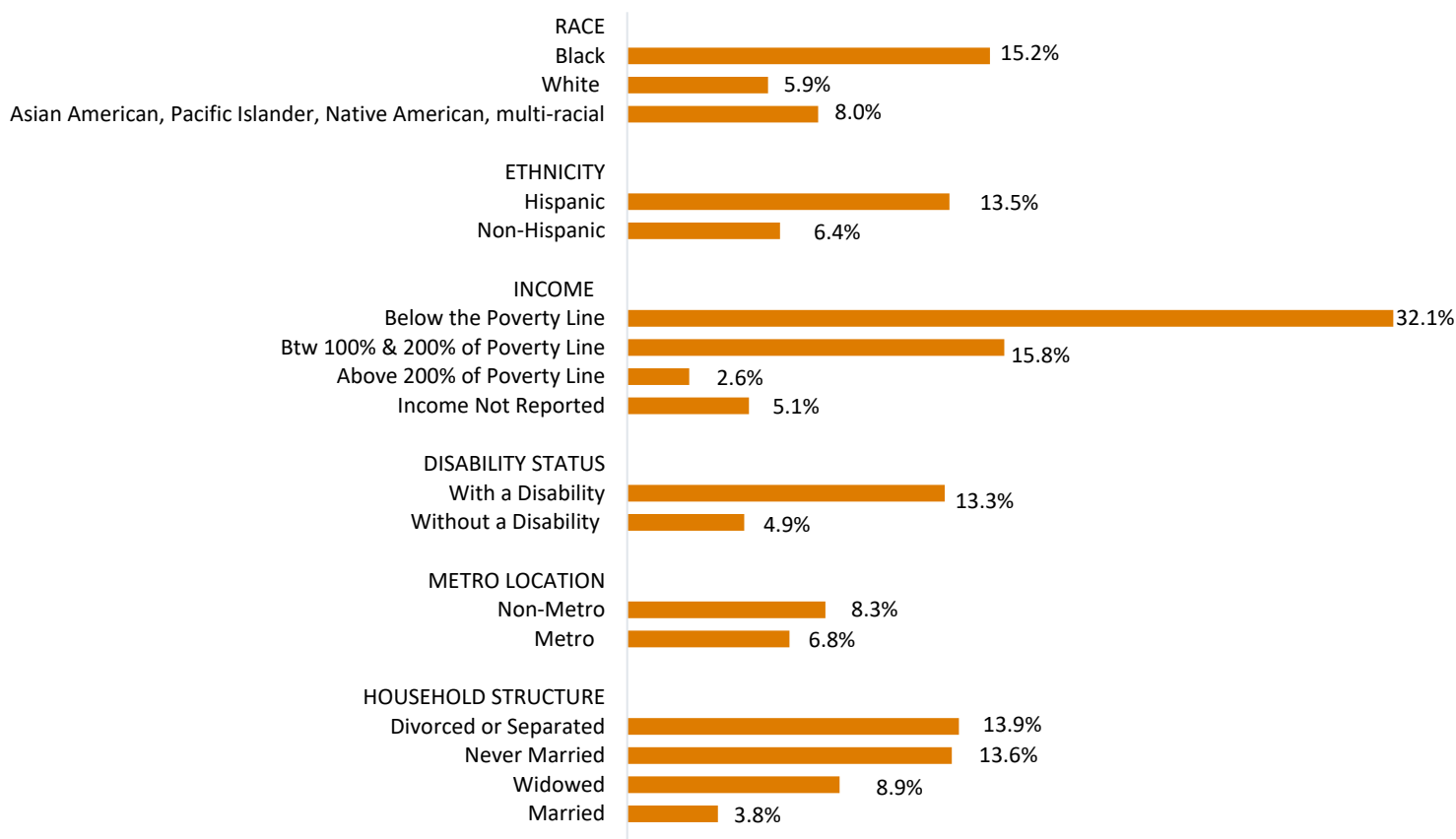
Trends in Senior Food Insecurity



seniors were food insecure in 2019

Food insecurity rates among seniors vary by demographic and socioeconomic status

Food Insecurity Rates by Select Characteristics among Seniors Age 60 and Above in 2019 (%)



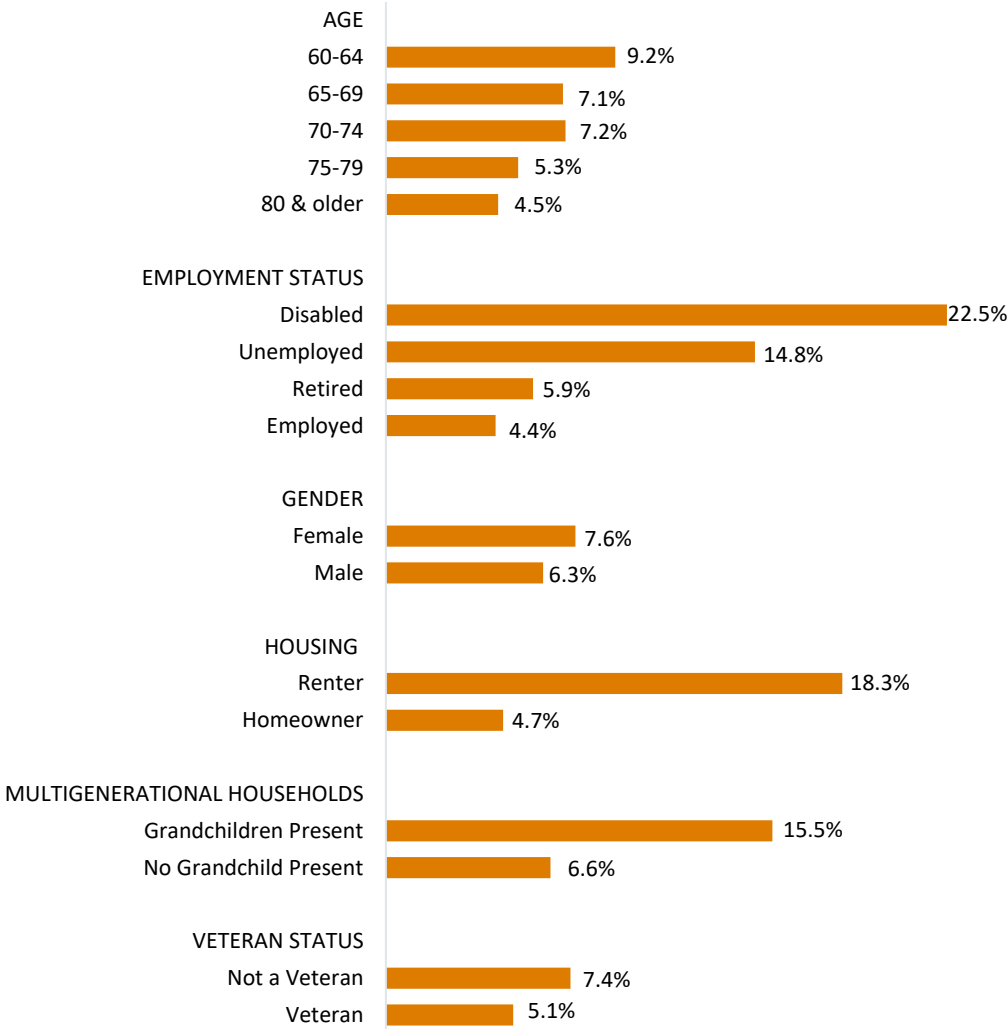
RACE/ETHNICITY People of color are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity across all age groups due to the continued impact of systemic racism and discrimination. Seniors are no exception. Food insecurity among Black seniors was more than double the rate of white seniors. While the discrepancy between seniors in the category including 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 seniors was more than double the rate of seniors 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 seniors includes both Latino and non-Hispanic seniors. Thus, the disparities between Non-Hispanic white seniors and other racial groups may be greater than what is shown through the above chart.

INCOME is a strong driver of food insecurity.² Among seniors living below the poverty line, 32.1% were food insecure. Yet, poverty alone does not determine food insecurity, and consistent with national trends, just under half (49.1%) of seniors who were food insecure had incomes above the poverty line.³ As they age, many seniors experience decreased earnings and must rely on fixed incomes. For many seniors, this income stability can protect against food insecurity, but for others, having limited income can make it difficult to make ends meet. Many low-income seniors must make spending tradeoffs in paying for housing, utilities, health care and other basic needs. These tradeoffs can lead to or worsen food insecurity.

DISABILITY Seniors with disabilities had food insecurity rates almost three times higher as those without a disability. As seniors age, they may be likely to develop health problems and disabilities, which can make traveling to stores, carrying groceries, and cooking more difficult.⁴

Food insecurity rates among seniors vary by demographic and socioeconomic status (cont.)

Food Insecurity Rates by Select Characteristics among Seniors Age 60 and Above in 2019 (%) (cont.)



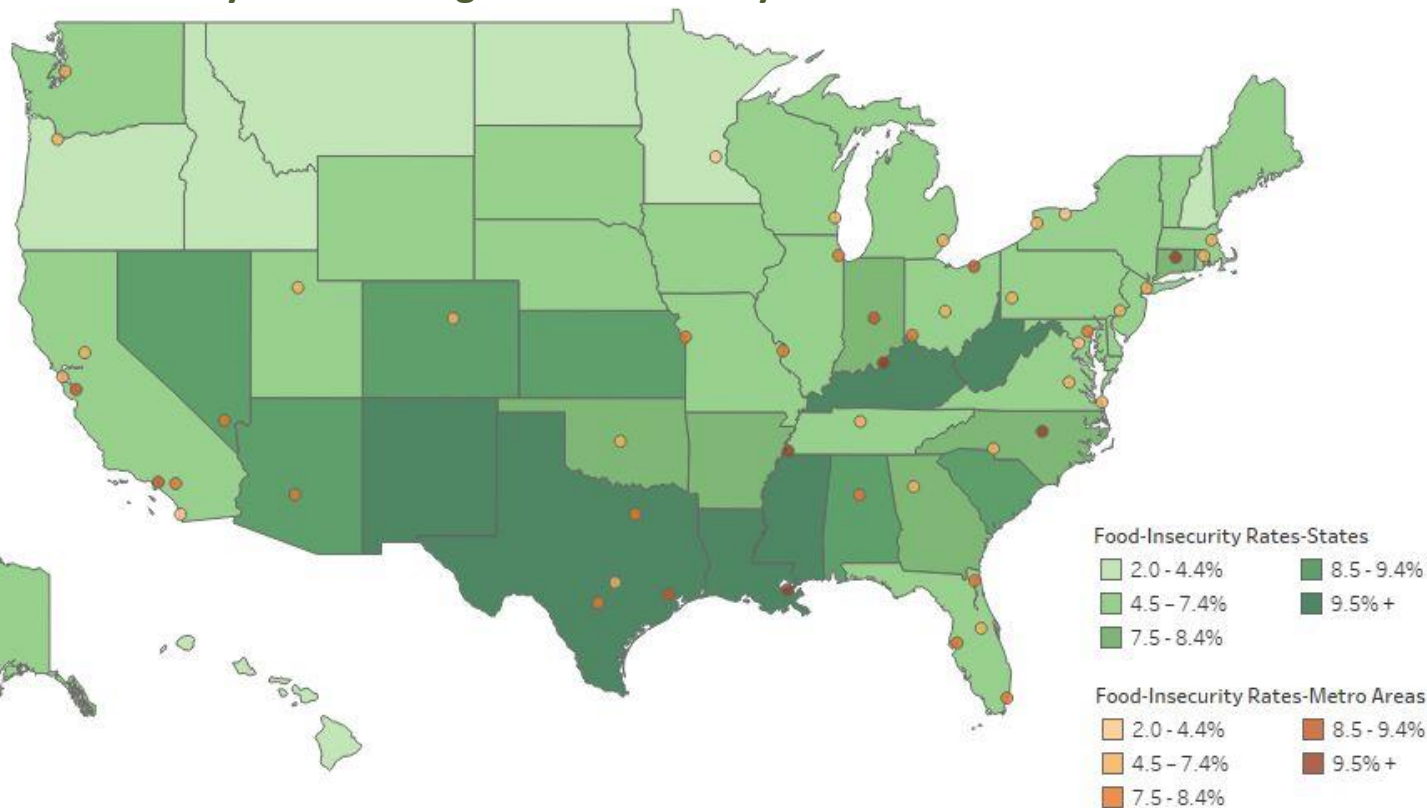
HOUSING Seniors who are renters experienced food insecurity at nearly four times the rate of seniors who are homeowners. Housing is one of many costs that can be a strain for seniors with limited financial resources. Senior renters are more likely to be cost burdened—spending more than 30% of their incomes on housing—than seniors who are homeowners.⁵

MULTI-GENERATIONAL HOUSEHOLDS The number of multi-generational households in the U.S. has increased in recent decades, and in 2018 one in five Americans lived in a multi-generational household.⁶ While this type of household structure can yield many positive benefits, seniors who reside with a grandchild experienced food insecurity at more than twice the rate of seniors in households where there is no grandchild present. Children are typically shielded from food insecurity by adults in the household, so seniors may ensure the food security of their grandchildren at the expense of their own dietary needs as they deal with the stress of caregiving responsibilities and stretch already-limited financial resources.⁷

Food insecurity rates for seniors vary by geography

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

Food Insecurity for Seniors Age 60 and Above by State and Metro Area in 2019 ^{8, 9}



Food Insecurity for Seniors by State in 2019 (%)

State	FI Rate	State	FI Rate	State	FI Rate
AL	9.4	KY	10.4	ND	3.3
AK	6.7	LA	9.9	OH	7.2
AZ	8.5	ME	6.0	OK	8.3
AR	8.2	MD	5.1	OR	4.0
CA	6.3	MA	5.5	PA	6.2
CO	9.3	MI	5.8	RI	5.3
CT	8.3	MN	2.9	SC	8.5
DE	6.5	MS	11.7	SD	5.0
DC	13.5	MO	7.3	TN	6.5
FL	6.7	MT	4.4	TX	10.4
GA	8.3	NE	4.6	UT	6.6
HI	4.2	NV	8.9	VT	4.8
ID	4.3	NH	3.2	VA	6.2
IL	7.0	NJ	6.4	WA	6.2
IN	8.0	NM	12.4	WV	9.9
IA	5.2	NY	7.3	WI	4.7
KS	8.8	NC	7.5	WY	5.7

States with the highest senior food insecurity rates

- 13.5% – Washington, DC
- 12.4% – New Mexico
- 11.7% – Mississippi

Metro areas with the highest senior food insecurity rates ¹⁰

- 13.7% – Memphis, TN
- 12.9% – New Orleans, LA
- 10.8% – Raleigh, NC

Food insecurity impacts seniors' health and nutrition

Food insecurity among seniors age 60 and older 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 seniors. 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.

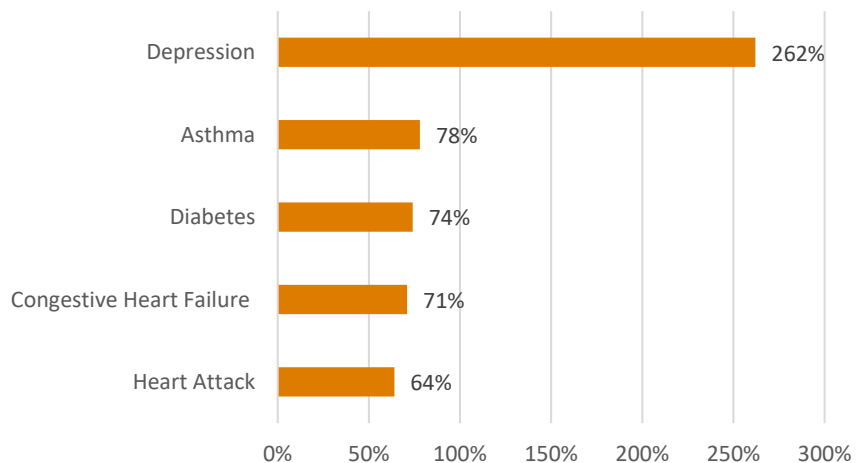
This year's *State of Senior Hunger* report series includes findings from the 1999-2016 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). The NHANES provides information about food insecurity and its health and nutrition implications for seniors. Findings show that food insecure seniors consumed lower quantities of key nutrients. For example, food insecure seniors had intake levels of iron (13.3%) and calcium (9.7%) that were lower than food secure seniors. In addition, among the senior population, food insecurity is associated with increased risk of developing negative health conditions. For example, food insecure seniors were more likely to experience depression (262%; nearly three times more likely) and asthma (78%).

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

Food insecure seniors were more likely to have chronic health conditions.

Seniors who are food insecure consumed lower quantities of key nutrients than food secure seniors.

- **Iron** intake was **13.3% less**
- **Calcium** intake was **9.7% less**
- **Protein** intake was **9.2% less**
- **Energy** intake was **8.5% less**



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

Seniors, and especially those with many of the health conditions mentioned above, are at high 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 seniors in the U.S.

What programs exist to support seniors who are food insecure?

Federal nutrition assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), serve as the first line of defense against hunger for people of all ages, including seniors. However, not every senior who is food insecure is eligible to receive these federal programs. Among seniors who do meet eligibility requirements, participation rates are lower than the overall population, which may be due to misconceptions about eligibility, limited benefit amounts, the perceived difficulty of application or recertification, and attitudes towards government assistance. 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 200 food banks serve millions of seniors annually through a variety of programs that range from traditional pantry programs to specialized meal and grocery programs designed to address the unique needs of seniors. The Feeding America food bank network employs different combinations of these programs to best meet seniors' needs in their communities.

Public programs include:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)
- The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)
- Congregate and/or home-delivered meals like Meals on Wheels
- Seniors Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP)
- Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)

Food Bank programs include:

- Mobile pantries that bring food to senior living centers, community centers, and other congregate sites
- Senior grocery boxes that provide up to a few weeks of non-perishable groceries
- Senior-specific drive-through pantries
- Grocery and meal box delivery programs
- Benefits enrollment assistance





Implications

Food security is important for individuals of every age. For seniors, obtaining adequate nutrition can be an especially critical challenge due to limited financial resources and declining health and mobility. The current state of senior hunger and the anticipated growth of the senior population underscore the important roles of the public and private sectors in addressing senior food insecurity. Given the scope and scale of the issue, along with the anticipated growth of the senior population in the coming decades, it is important that policymakers strengthen the existing safety net of public food programs as well as invest in public-private partnerships in order to reduce food insecurity and end hunger in America.

To Learn More about Senior Hunger

For the full reports released through the *State of Senior Hunger 2019* release or more information about senior hunger research, programs, and policy work at Feeding America, visit <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/senior-hunger-research> or contact research@feedingamerica.org.

About This Study

The State of Senior Hunger 2019 report series includes four reports authored by Dr. Craig Gundersen and Dr. James P. Ziliak. This brief is based on data within two reports, *The State of Senior Hunger in America in 2019* and *The Health Consequences of Senior Hunger 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>

The following people contributed to the development of this report: Hollie Baker-Lutz; Sena Dawes; Adam Dewey; Emily Engelhard; Nailene Gonzalez; Craig Gundersen; Monica Hake; Julie Hilvers; Jodi Romero; Rose Saltalamacchia; Hanna Selekman; and Mark Strayer.

Suggested citation: Hilvers, J., Gonzalez, N., & Hake M. (August 2021). *The State of Senior Hunger in America 2019: Executive Summary*. Available from Feeding America: <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/senior-hunger-research>. Full report (Ziliak & Gundersen, 2021) available at same link.

Production of *The State of Senior Hunger in America 2019* reports and accompanying materials is generously underwritten by the Enterprise Rent-A-Car Foundation.



Notes and References

- ¹ 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.
- ² 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.
- ³ Ziliak J, Gundersen C. *The State of Senior Hunger in America 2019: An Annual Report. Supplement*. Report for Feeding America. 2021.
- ⁴ Maresova, P., Javanmardi, E., Barakovic, S., Husic, J. B., Tomsone, S., Krejcar, O., & Kuca, K. (2019). Consequences of chronic diseases and other limitations associated with old age—A scoping review. *BMC Public Health*, 19(1), 1431.
- ⁵ Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. (2019). Housing America's older adults 2019. Retrieved from: https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/Harvard_JCHS_Housing_Americas_Older_Adults_2019.pdf
- ⁶ Cohn, D., & Passel, J. (2018). *A record 64 million Americans live in multigenerational households*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/05/a-record-64-million-americans-live-in-multigenerational-households/>
- ⁷ King, C. (2018). Food insecurity and child behavior problems in fragile families. *Economics & Human Biology*, 28, 14-22.
- ⁸ For a map visualizing senior 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/TheStateofSeniorHungerSeniorFoodInsecuritybyStateMetropolitanAreain2019/SeniorFoodInsecuritybyStateMetropolitanArea>
- ⁹ 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.
- ¹⁰ For the full list of metro areas, please visit <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/senior-hunger-research>

