

The State of Senior Hunger in 2020

In 2020, the first calendar year of the COVID-19 pandemic, 6.8% of seniors aged 60 and older in the United States (1 in 15) were food insecure, which means having limited access to enough food to live a healthy lifestyle.ⁱ Like for the overall population, the rate of food insecurity among all seniors did not change significantly from 2019 to 2020 (7.1% to 6.8%), despite the onset of the pandemic and the recession that it spurred. Many federal, local, and charitable programs expanded in response to the recession and unfolding crisis, and while ongoing research is needed, the additional investments may have helped keep more people from experiencing food insecurity. However, also like the overall population, the absence of overall changes to senior food insecurity masks the fact that food insecurity worsened for some seniors while improving for others.

Though the food insecurity rate among seniors did not increase compared to the prior year, an estimated 5.2 million seniors experienced food insecurity in 2020. While the rate of food insecurity among seniors has gradually declined over the past decade following peaks during and after the Great Recession, it remains higher than before the Great Recession began (6.3% in 2007). Furthermore, the number of seniors who were food insecure has remained elevated, a reflection of the growing size of the senior population.ⁱⁱ Additionally, some seniors experienced food insecurity at higher rates, including seniors who identify as Black, Latino, or Native American; have lower incomes; are younger (aged 60-69); have a disability; and are renters.

Food insecurity has negative effects for individuals across the age spectrum. For seniors, these effects can be particularly problematic given the unique health, economic, and nutritional challenges that can come with aging.ⁱⁱⁱ The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, as seniors have faced higher risk for illness, and many were met with new obstacles in accessing food. Especially as the senior population continues to grow in size, food insecurity is likely to remain a public health challenge for years to come.

For the sixth consecutive year, Feeding America has produced *The State of Senior Hunger in America*, an annual report series authored by Dr. James P. Ziliak and Dr. Craig Gundersen. This series aims to improve understanding of food insecurity among seniors aged 60 and older and older adults aged 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; insights into older adults can be found in a companion brief and report.

Trends in Senior Food Insecurity

5.3% 2.3 million

SENIOR FOOD INSECURITY IN 2001

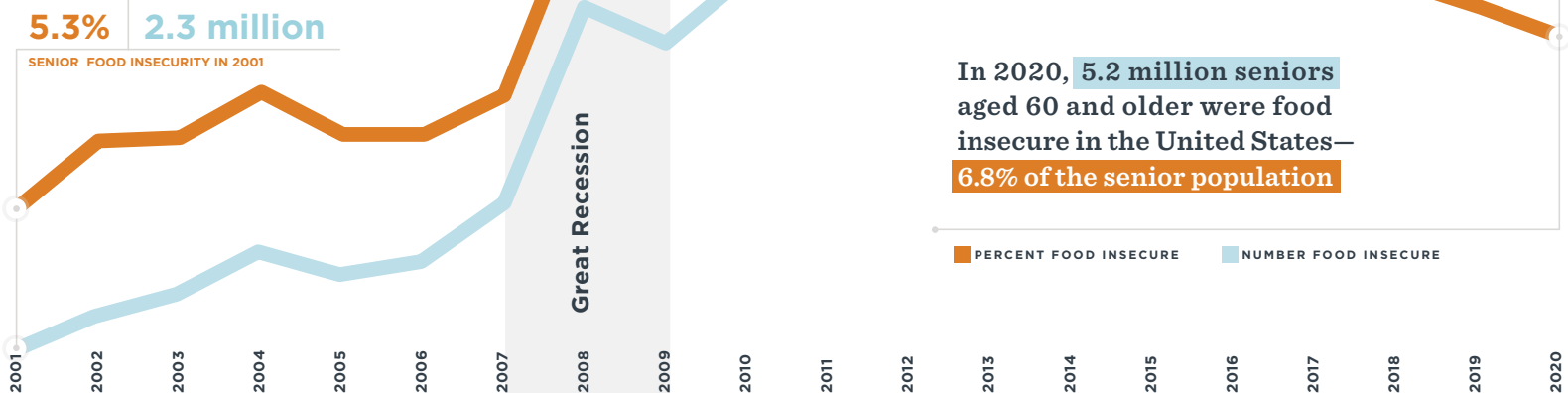
Great Recession

8.8% 5.7 million

OVERALL PEAK IN SENIOR FOOD INSECURITY

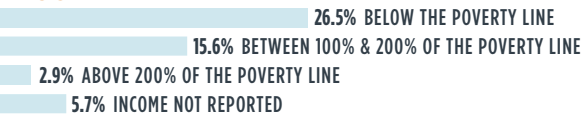
In 2020, 5.2 million seniors aged 60 and older were food insecure in the United States—6.8% of the senior population

PERCENT FOOD INSECURE NUMBER FOOD INSECURE

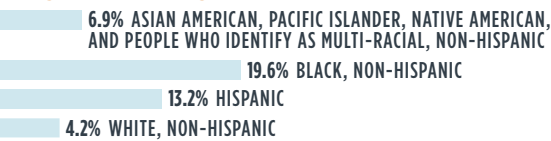


Percentages represent senior food insecurity rates by category.

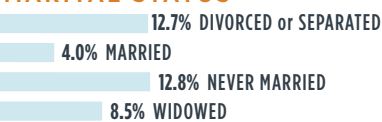
INCOME



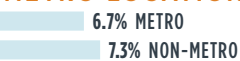
RACE + ETHNICITY



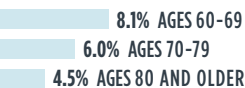
MARITAL STATUS



METRO LOCATION



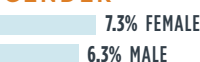
AGE



EMPLOYMENT STATUS



GENDER



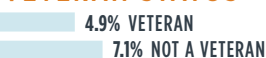
GRANDCHILD PRESENT



HOMEOWNERSHIP STATUS



VETERAN STATUS



DISABILITY



FOOD INSECURITY RATES AMONG SENIORS VARY ACCORDING TO DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIOECONOMIC CATEGORIES.

Disability

Seniors with a disability had food insecurity rates over double the rates of seniors without a disability (11.6% and 5.3%, respectively). 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.^{iv} As seniors age, they may develop health problems and disabilities, which can make traveling to stores, carrying groceries, and cooking more difficult.^v Furthermore, without sufficient nutritious food, disabilities and chronic health conditions can worsen and become more severe.

Housing

Seniors who are renters experienced food insecurity at over 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 or who are living on a fixed income. Senior renters are more likely to be cost burdened—spending more than 30% of their incomes on housing—than seniors who are homeowners.^{vi}

Income

As seniors age, many experience decreased earnings and must rely on fixed incomes. While this income stability can protect against food insecurity, having limited income can make it difficult to make ends meet. In 2020, more than a quarter of seniors (26.5%) with income below the federal poverty line (\$17,240 for a household of two in 2020) were food insecure.

While this rate is significantly higher than for seniors with higher incomes (e.g. only 2.9% of seniors with income above 200% of the poverty line were food insecure), it reflects a sizeable decrease compared to 2019. Though this study does not include assessment of the factors responsible for this or any other change, it is plausible that the emergency allotments made to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) after the pandemic

began contributed to this decline. The allotments boosted participants' benefits to the maximum amount allowed under the program, with the largest increases going to seniors who often receive the lowest benefit amounts. There is ample evidence showing that SNAP reduces food insecurity, so the expansion to the program may have helped lead to lower levels of food insecurity among seniors with lower incomes.^{vii,viii}

With all this said, poverty alone does not determine food insecurity. Of seniors who were food insecure, roughly half (51%) had incomes above the poverty line.^{ix}

Multi-Generational Households

While this type of household structure can yield many positive benefits, in 2020, seniors who reside with a grandchild experienced food insecurity at almost three times the rate of seniors in households where no grandchild is 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.^x

Race and Ethnicity

Across the age spectrum, food insecurity is experienced at disproportionate rates by many communities of color due to the continued impact of systemic racism and discrimination.^{xi,xii} Seniors are no exception. In 2020, food insecurity was more than four times as high among Black seniors and more than three times as high among Latino seniors when compared to white seniors.

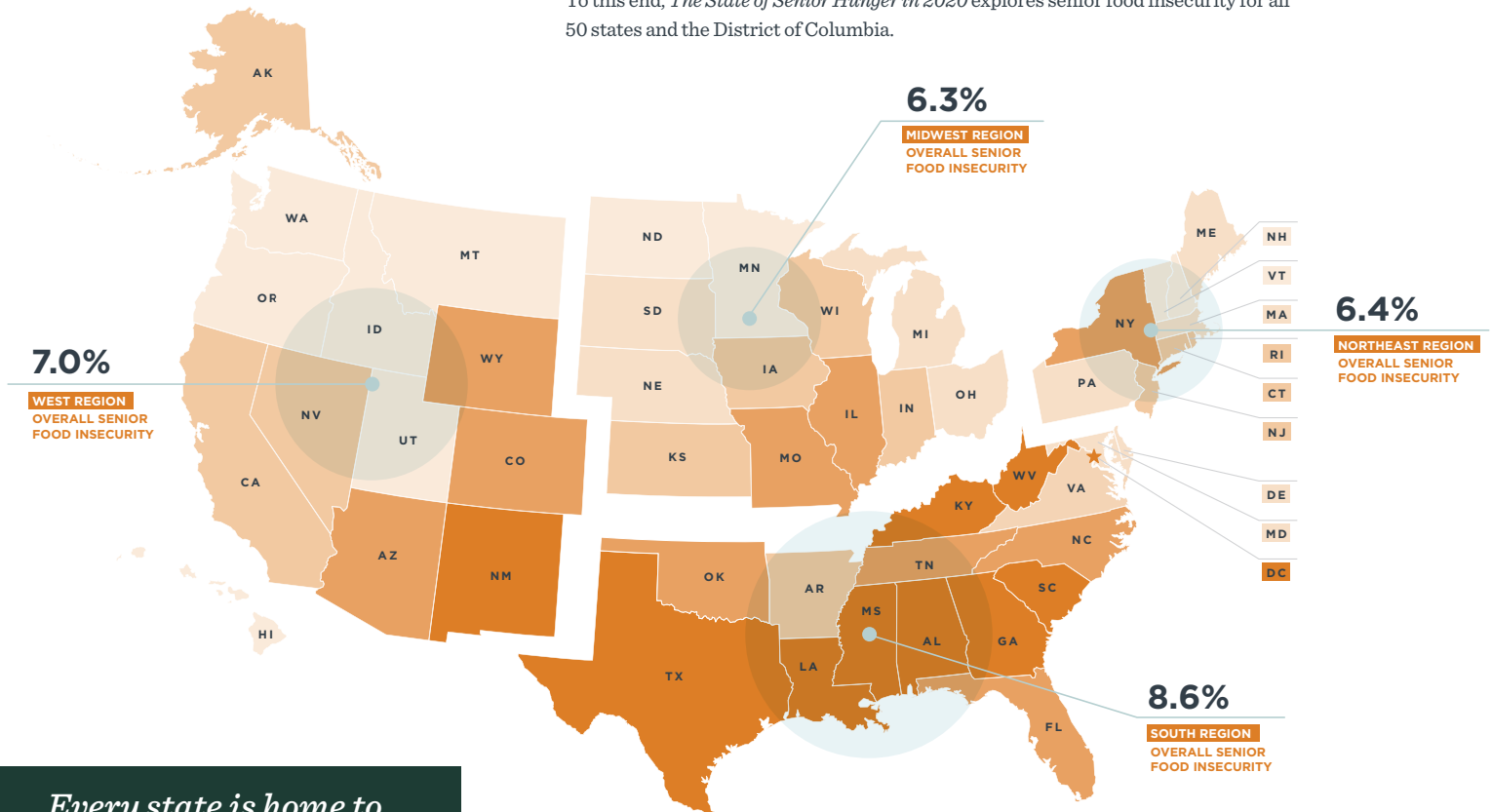
While *The State of Senior Hunger* does not include separate food insecurity estimates for other racial groups, it has been shown through other study and analysis that individuals who identify as Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and some Asian subgroups also have disproportionately high rates of food insecurity.^{xiii}

Senior Food Insecurity Varies by Geography

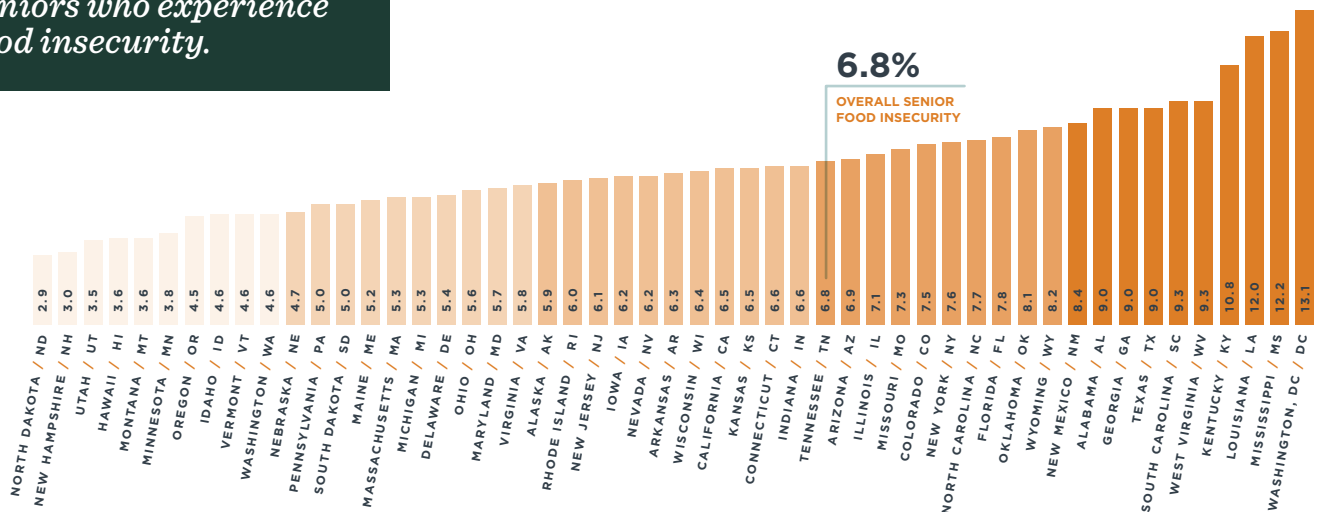
STATE-LEVEL

SENIOR FOOD INSECURITY RATES IN 2020

Nationally, millions of seniors face food insecurity. One way to better understand the need is through exploration of senior food insecurity rates across different geographies. To this end, *The State of Senior Hunger in 2020* explores senior food insecurity for all 50 states and the District of Columbia.



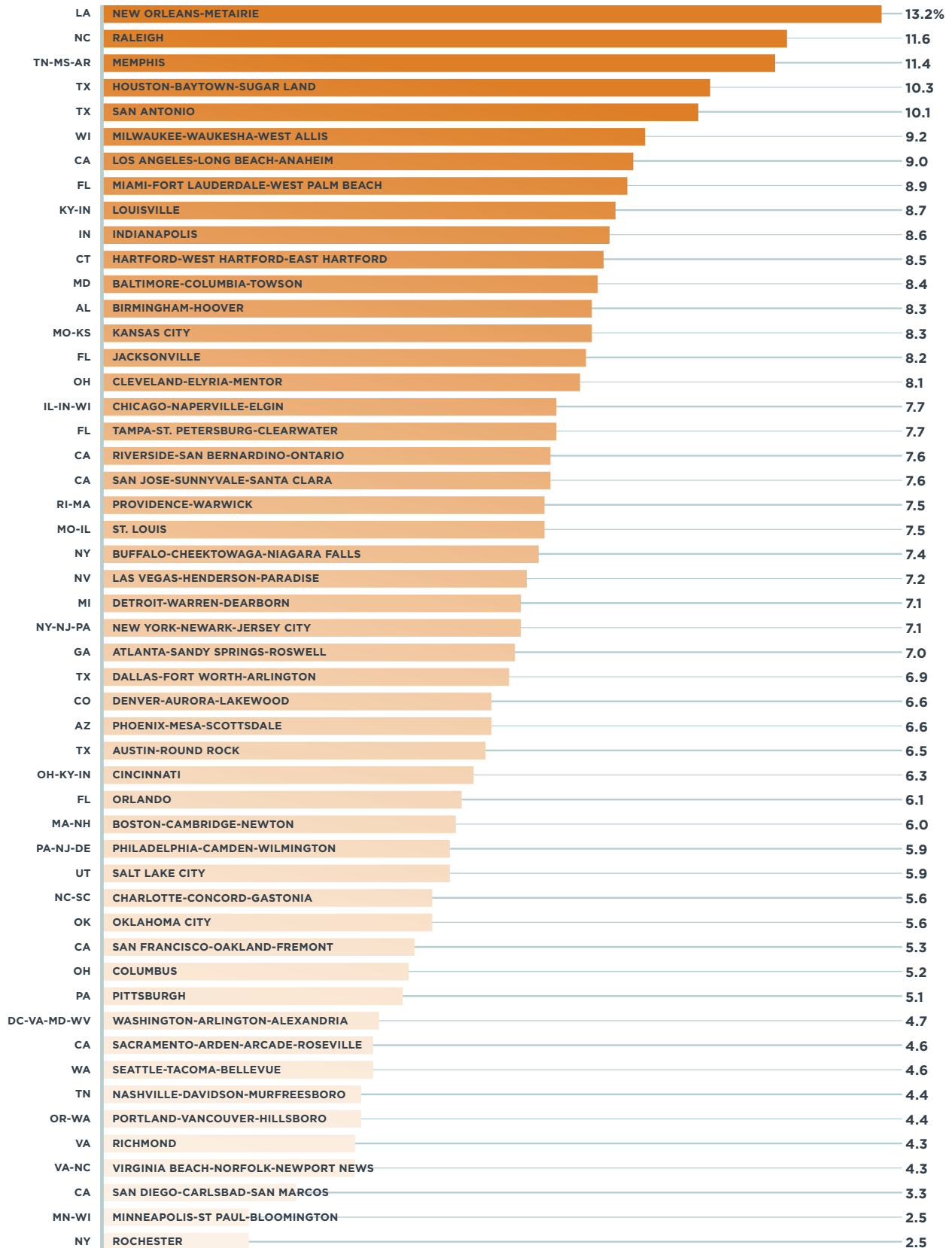
Every state is home to seniors who experience food insecurity.



METRO-LEVEL

SENIOR FOOD INSECURITY RATES IN 2020

In addition to food insecurity rates for all 50 states and the District of Columbia, the report examines senior food insecurity rates for the 51 metropolitan areas that have a population of more than 1 million people.





FOOD INSECURITY IMPACTS ON SENIOR HEALTH AND NUTRITION

Food insecurity among seniors aged 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. Additionally, inadequate nutrition can increase the negative effects of disabilities and chronic health conditions.

Last year's report series included findings from the 1999-2016 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). The NHANES provided information about food insecurity and its health and nutrition implications for seniors. Findings showed that food insecure seniors consume lower quantities of key nutrients, such as iron and calcium, compared to seniors who are food secure. In addition, among the senior population, food insecurity is associated with increased risk of developing negative health conditions, such as depression and asthma. Food insecurity is associated with worse nutrition and health outcomes for seniors regardless of their race/ethnicity, age, gender, education, and marital status.

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

IRON
INTAKE WAS
13.3%
LESS

PROTEIN
INTAKE WAS
9.2%
LESS

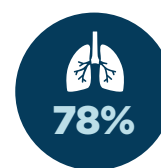
CALCIUM
INTAKE WAS
9.7%
LESS

ENERGY
INTAKE WAS
8.5%
LESS

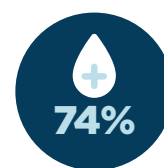
Food-insecure seniors are more likely to have chronic health conditions.



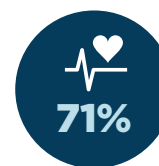
MORE LIKELY
TO EXPERIENCE
DEPRESSION



MORE LIKELY
TO EXPERIENCE
ASTHMA



MORE LIKELY
TO EXPERIENCE
DIABETES



MORE LIKELY
TO EXPERIENCE
**CONGESTIVE
HEART
FAILURE**



MORE LIKELY
TO EXPERIENCE
**HEART
ATTACK**



CONCLUSION

The State of Senior Hunger in 2020 sheds light on the extent of food insecurity among seniors aged 60 and older in the United States during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to show how food insecurity affects seniors differently based on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, as well as geography. For seniors, obtaining adequate nutrition can be especially important to support healthy aging, but it can be challenging for some due to limited financial resources and declining health and mobility.

A variety of different programs are available to support seniors as they age, including many specifically designed to provide nutrition assistance. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) continues to be the first line of defense against hunger for seniors and other individuals alike, and it has played an especially prominent role in helping people with lower incomes weather the storm brought on by the pandemic. Other important nutrition programs operated by the federal government include the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), and the Child and Adults Care Food Program (CACFP). In addition, the charitable sector is an important source of food for many individuals and families at risk of hunger across the country. Like many federal programs, the charitable food system expanded and adapted its services

in 2020 to meet the need as it emerged, and it is estimated that more than 60 million individuals (1 in 5 people) received food from a charitable food program in 2020.^{xiv} Feeding America and its network of 200 food banks serve seniors, as well as individuals of all ages, through traditional pantries, meal delivery programs, benefits assistance, and other programming.

The current state of senior hunger, the anticipated growth of the senior population and new challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the important roles of the public and private sectors in addressing food insecurity for the aging population. Given the scope and scale of the issue, it is important that policymakers strengthen the existing safety net of public food programs as well as invest in public-private partnerships to reduce food insecurity and end hunger in America.

About This Study

The State of Senior Hunger in America in 2020 report series includes two reports authored by Dr. James P. Ziliak and Dr. Craig Gundersen—*The State of Senior Hunger in 2020* and *Hunger Among Adults Aged 50-59 in 2020*. This brief is based on data within two reports, *The State of Senior Hunger in 2020* 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 www.feedingamerica.org/research/senior-hunger-research

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- ^{xii} Odoms-Young, A. M. (2018). Examining the impact of structural racism on food insecurity: implications for addressing racial/ethnic disparities. Family & community health, 41(Suppl 2 FOOD INSECURITY AND OBESITY), S3.
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- ^{xiv} Hake, M., E. Engelhard, C. Gundersen (2021). Charitable Food Assistance Participation in 2020. Available from Feeding America: www.feedingamerica.org/research/charitable-food-access

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