

# Charitable Food Assistance Participation in 2021



When the COVID-19 pandemic began in the spring of 2020, one of the immediate effects was a sudden increase in awareness about food hardship in the United States. Food insecurity has long been a domestic issue, but it swiftly became more visible when the public health emergency caused communities to close, unemployment to soar, and, for many, mounting anxiety about paying for and accessing enough food to meet their family's needs. In response to the crisis, federal and local governments passed sweeping legislation and disbursed new and additional resources to help people weather the storm. Likewise, the charitable food sector ramped up efforts in local communities across the country. Images of long lines of cars stretching from food distribution sites became emblematic of the acute nature of the crisis in the first year of the pandemic.

As of its second year, many of the indicators of crises stemming from the pandemic have receded. The economy has recovered across many dimensions, with unemployment heading towards pre-pandemic levels. In turn, many of the governmental programs and resources made available in 2020 have ended or been reduced in size. While schools had reopened for the most part, many still closed periodically due to COVID-19 cases, preventing or complicating access to school breakfast and lunch programs. **While the long lines outside of food banks and food pantries may not have been as noticeable in year two, an estimated 53 million people received food assistance from the charitable sector in 2021. This estimate is lower than it was for 2020, when more than 60 million people were served by the charitable food system, but still reflects a 33% increase over the 40 million individuals who received food in 2019 before the pandemic began.**

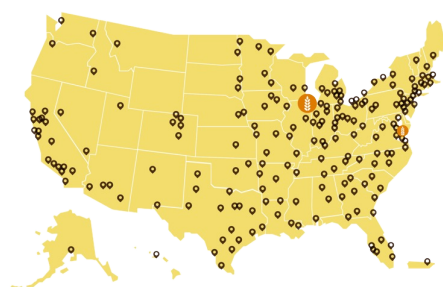
Now in the third year of the pandemic, there are new and pressing challenges – including war abroad and inflation and higher costs of food, gas and other necessities – which are impacting the ability of individuals and families, especially with lower incomes, to make ends meet. At the same time, many pandemic supports, such as child nutrition flexibilities and SNAP emergency allotments, continue to sunset. Looking ahead, government support is needed to mitigate resource losses, and the charitable sector will continue to be a critical support for tens of millions of people in the U.S.

IN 2021

**53 MILLION PEOPLE (1 IN 6)**

received food assistance from the charitable sector and the Feeding America network provided

**5.5 BILLION MEALS**



Feeding America is the largest network within the charitable food sector, serving every county in the U.S. with

**200 + 60k**  
**FOOD BANKS AGENCIES**

## Who participated in charitable food assistance programs in 2021?

The 53 million individuals who received food from the charitable sector in 2021 represent diverse backgrounds and circumstances. Here are the faces and stories of five of those individuals and families.



### ROSA AND LUIS

“We’re very happy because we are getting help from the food distribution,” Rosa said about El Centro Hispano, a partner of Feeding Westchester in White Plains, N.Y., that offers English lessons, immigration referrals, and high school tutoring, in addition to food assistance. She emigrated from Ecuador 20 years ago. “We’ve come to this center looking for jobs and apartments, and El Centro is there to support us in everything we need. It helps a lot...now we don’t have to buy the food and we can concentrate on rent and things like that.”



### ELIONA

As Roberta pulled up to the holiday food distribution at Northeast Iowa Food Bank, her bubbly, rambunctious 4-year-old daughter Eliona, just wanted to charm the volunteers. “She loves being the center of attention.” Roberta has a career in home healthcare, but needed a little extra help this year affording food for Thanksgiving. She knew the food bank would be there for her. “This is going to help a lot,” she said as volunteers loaded bags of holiday food into her trunk. “We’ll have this for the holiday, and then have leftovers for awhile too.”



### JAKE, TRISH & FAMILY

Jake and Trish live with their children on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming as members of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe. Both work full-time on the reservation but have experienced their share of challenges. “When you’re hit financially, you’re just without and there’s nothing more scary than when you’ve got to figure out how to feed your kids,” Jake said. When he was previously out of work, the family turned to a food pantry on the reservation. “You figure out how to make the meals stretch,” Trish said. “One day we’ll make a big meal, then have leftovers for dinner the next day, and then have it for lunch the next.”



### ROBERT

Robert Johns and his wife are both retired after working in central Virginia for 42 and a half years. He drove trucks all over the region, and she worked in housekeeping. Their fixed income doesn’t cover all of their expenses, he said. “You’ve got your house payment. Light bill, phone bill, insurance. You don’t have a whole lot left.” The weekly distributions at the Monacan Indian Nation Food Bank guarantee that they won’t go without food. “They’re really helping people,” he said.



### BRIDGET AND KEVIN

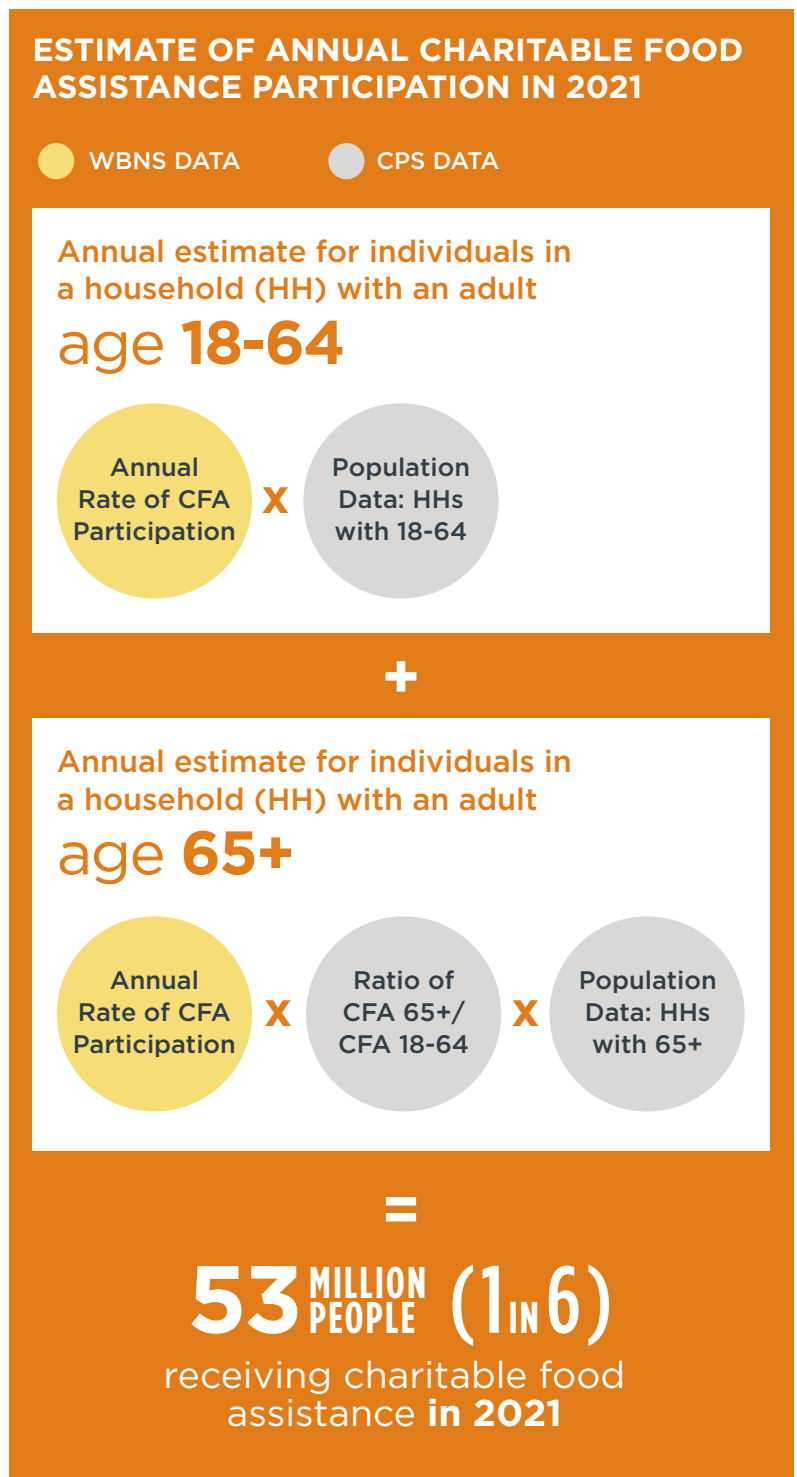
Some working families are only one illness, accident, or unexpected hardship away from hunger. Last year, after 25 years working in landscaping in and around Minneapolis, Kevin retired to become the primary caregiver for his father battling dementia. “We always made sure his dad had his meds,” Bridget said, though her work as a restaurant manager wasn’t enough to cover expenses for their family of five. “We needed the help to get from paycheck to paycheck,” Bridget said. Thanks to the Open Door Pantry, they still had food. “You have that sense of relief that if you can’t do anything else, you can feed your family,” she said.

## How did we estimate charitable food assistance participation in 2021?

The estimated number of individuals who received charitable food assistance (CFA) in 2021 is derived from two primary sources of information: (1) findings from the Urban Institute’s Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS) and (2) the December Supplement of the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS). Both surveys are nationally representative, and both ask respondents whether they have received CFA in the past 12 months and in the past 30 days. Because the WBNS uses [CFA questions that have been more rigorously developed and tested by the Research Department at Feeding America](#), we primarily rely on the results of that survey, while supplementing our calculation with data from the CPS to arrive at an estimate for the overall population.

How we calculate the estimate is shown in the graphic to the right. First, we estimate the number of people who received CFA in households with an adult age 18-64 (the WBNS is nationally representative of this population) by multiplying the annual CFA rate from the WBNS by the corresponding population estimate from the CPS.

Next, we estimate the number of people who received CFA in households without an adult age 18-64. To do this, we use CPS data to calculate a ratio of the frequency by which individuals 65 and older receive CFA relative to adults 18-64. Then, we take the annual CFA rate from the WBNS for the 18-64 population and multiply it by the ratio and by the corresponding population estimate from the CPS. The sum of these two numbers is the estimated number of individuals who received CFA.



FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

[Well Being and Basic Needs Survey \(WBNS\)](#) - Urban Institute

[Current Population Survey \(CPS\)](#) - Census Bureau

Feeding America: [feedingamerica.org](https://feedingamerica.org) or [Research@FeedingAmerica.org](mailto:Research@FeedingAmerica.org)

