



Alyson, Hawaii



Charitable Food Assistance Participation in 2023

Released November 2024



Feeding America estimates more than 50 million people received charitable food assistance sometime in 2023

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE PARTICIPATION?

Feeding America's charitable food participation estimate reflects the number of unique individuals who received food one or more times during the year from a charitable food distribution, including those from food banks, food pantries, and other private food assistance programs. While Feeding America is the largest hunger-relief organization in the United States, the estimate is designed to account for individuals who received food from *any* charitable food distribution, both inside and outside of the Feeding America network of food banks, food pantries, and community-based organizations.

WHY DOES THIS ESTIMATE MATTER? HOW DOES IT RELATE TO OTHER MEASURES?

Our estimate of charitable food assistance participation, combined with other measures, data, and insights, can help improve understanding about the barriers that keep millions of people from thriving, as well as the programs and resources that exist to help people access enough food for themselves and their families.

Charitable food assistance participation is related to but distinct from *food insecurity*. Food insecurity is defined by the USDA as a social and economic condition in which a household has limited access to adequate food due to a lack of money or other resources. Households that experience or are at risk of experiencing food insecurity can participate in charitable food assistance programs in an effort to make ends meet. The

[most recent data available for 2023](#) shows that food insecurity rates rose slightly compared to 2022 (+6%) and significantly since 2021 (+38%). More than 47 million people, including nearly 14 million children, lived in a food-insecure household in 2023. Despite signs of an improving economy, prices for food and other basic necessities have remained persistently high, pandemic-era programs continued to expire, and SNAP benefits remain inadequate. These factors likely contributed to the highest food insecurity levels since 2014.



The federal government operates a number of nutrition assistance programs that are designed to keep individuals and families from experiencing food insecurity, the cornerstone of which is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). For some households, the benefits provided through federal programs like SNAP are not enough to achieve food security, while other households who might benefit do not meet the income thresholds and thus are not eligible for federal nutrition programs. In these cases, private programs including charitable food assistance exist as additional support to help people have enough nutritious food for themselves and their families. Feeding America's estimate of charitable food assistance for 2023 reflects an increase compared to 2022, indicating that the charitable food sector remains a critical support for tens of millions of people.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

There is a movement to end hunger underway in this country. Part of that movement relies on policymakers, organizations and people everywhere to deliver innovative policies and programs that increase access, prioritize dignity, expand opportunity and improve health for all. During the peak of the pandemic, significant investments were made to help ensure individuals and families facing hunger could put food on the table. It is critical now that Congress builds on those successes and continues to support neighbors facing hunger and the food banks so many rely on for food assistance. For example:



- Congress must strengthen critical nutrition programs in the 2024 Farm Bill that help seniors, families, children, active military members and other people. This includes:
 - Increasing funding for TEFAP, which provides over 20% of the food distributed through Feeding America food banks and local hunger-relief programs.
 - Supporting and strengthening SNAP by ensuring purchasing power, streamlining eligibility and enrollment, and providing improved support and flexibility for individuals seeking employment.
- The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) can continue to help our nation's food banks by providing additional food purchases to ensure food banks can meet the demand for local emergency hunger relief in their communities.

-
- Congress and USDA can help support children facing hunger by supporting strong implementation of the summer EBT program, Sun Bucks, to ensure millions of food-insecure children have access to food in the summer.

ABOUT OUR APPROACH TO ESTIMATING CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE PARTICIPATION AND THIS YEAR'S ESTIMATE

Since 2021, Feeding America has estimated the number of individuals who received charitable food assistance (CFA) using results from two nationally representative surveys that ask respondents whether they have received charitable food assistance in the past 12 months: (1) 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). To see details about our calculations and the estimates we previously released about the years 2020 through 2022, visit [our landing page about charitable food assistance participation](#).

To estimate charitable food assistance for 2023, we used a similar approach as in previous years. However, recently the methodology of the Current Population Survey changed. The CPS questionnaire now utilizes [Feeding America's Charitable Food Assistance Participation Module](#) – two survey questions developed and cognitively tested by the Feeding America Research team. While we expect the addition of the module to the CPS to result in substantial long-term value, in the short term it means that the latest output of our calculation using the most current CPS data is not directly comparable to prior years' estimates. Therefore, we have opted to communicate an estimate about 2023 that directionally indicates an increase relative to [the prior year](#) but is less specific than estimates released for the last three years.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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

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

Feeding America: feedingamerica.org or research@feedingamerica.org