

Hunger on the rise in Mass. as food costs soar

A new study highlights how food insecurity has surged since the start of COVID pandemic.



In January, a team packed orders at the South Community Food Pantry in Pittsfield, Mass. At least 1.8 million people in the state are food-insecure, a new survey found. People lined up at a new food pantry location of La Colaborativa in Chelsea. Nearly a third of Massachusetts adults are struggling to get enough to eat, a new survey found.

By Diti Kohli | GLOBE STAFF

Nearly a third of Massachusetts adults are struggling to get enough to eat as the economic pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to batter household budgets.

At least 1.8 million people — or 32 percent of the state's adult population — are food-insecure, a new survey from the Greater Boston Food Bank found. The burden lies most heavily on minority communities and families with children.

It's "a frightening statistic," said GBFB CEO Catherine D'Amato. "We've worked with much better numbers in years past."

The study spanned three months — December 2021 to February 2022 — when the impact of rising inflation first began to take hold, and pandemic-era assistance programs, including stimulus checks and the expanded child tax credit program, disappeared. Nationally, grocery store prices increased by 6.5 percent in 2021, the largest yearly bump in a decade. Those factors are key in explaining why the number of food-insecure adults rose by 200,000 since last year's report, D'Amato said.

Early in the pandemic, Americans saw "a false positive of support," she added. "Now we're in a much more honest situation."

The GBFB findings exceed estimates from the nonprofit Project Bread, which in March found that 16.4 percent of Massachusetts households were food-insecure. But both reports show hunger on the rise and offer a grim outlook on the economic health of everyday Americans in the time of sky-high gas prices and a precarious stock market.

Respondents to the Food Bank survey said the growing cost of groceries and the need to quarantine due to COVID are driving them to pantries, often in record numbers. Loss of federal assistance, ballooning housing costs, and expensive child care play a role, too.

But not everyone in need of food assistance can access it. Forty-five percent of Massachusetts adults with food insecurity do not use the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a federal stipend that helps low-income households purchase food. And 70 percent of those who are not enrolled are unsure whether they were eligible.

Still, awareness of aid programs has ticked up since 2020, said Dr. Lauren Fiechtner, the director of nutrition at MassGeneral Hospital for Children and the food bank's senior adviser of health and research. Half of food-insecure residents used a pantry to get food in 2021, compared to a third in 2020 — a consequence of the "public awareness campaign" advocates launched to inform residents in need, Fiechtner added.

However, 84 percent of respondents with SNAP worried about being able to afford enough food if the temporary COVID boost to the program — at least a \$95 extra monthly allotment — were to end.

"Even though my SNAP increased, so did the cost of everything," wrote one Bristol resident.

The survey found that 75 percent of food-insecure respondents who were not using SNAP said they wanted to support themselves instead of relying on public assistance, and 64 percent said they feared using the benefits would take away from someone who needs it more.

Year over year, the most startling findings lie in the realities for people of color, Fiechtner said, as “the inequities have only increased over time.” Sixty-one percent of Latinx people, as identified in the report, experience food insecurity. That’s followed by 53 percent of Black people and 20 percent of Asian population. Twenty-seven percent also reported not having enough food, up from 24 percent from a year earlier. The study also found that food insecurity rates were higher among families with children and LGBTQ+ people.

The food bank conducted the survey to get a better sense of where the need lives and how to address it.

Respondents suggested that food pantries expand the availability of grocery cards that residents can use at local markets (54 percent), home delivery services (49 percent), and online ordering (32 percent). D’amato added that food assistance programs should also ensure they are accessible to communities who often walk or carpool to pantries, rather than taking their own car.

D’Amato called the report “a wake-up call for our state.”

“We have the food. We have the network,” she said. “So how can we help people? How can we address these dramatic numbers? That’s the next step.”

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