

High levels of hunger persist in Mass., as COVID-era benefits roll back

A new report from Greater Boston Food Bank found that a third of residents struggle with finding enough to eat, and it fears those figures could get worse

By **Diti Kohli** Globe Staff, Updated May 30, 2023, 1 hour ago



SNAP recipient Marina Pena at the Catholic Charities Boston food pantry in Lynn this March. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

“Feeding a growing child and two adults in this economy is tough.”

“Buying fruits and veggies has gotten so much more expensive.”

“Do you have to buy groceries instead of paying for your medicine? I have to make that choice most of the time.”

~~A new report released Tuesday from the Greater Boston Food Bank is check full of such stories and a~~

litany of sobering findings: In 2022, one in three adults in Massachusetts experienced limited or uncertain access to adequate food, also known as food insecurity. And 20 percent had “very low” food security, meaning their eating patterns were disrupted for a prolonged period. More than a third of households said a child in their family has skipped a meal — or several — in the past 12 months due to lack of food. Among Black, Hispanic, and LGBTQ+ households, those numbers are higher.

It’s a sign that the record levels of hunger first seen during the COVID-19 pandemic have yet to wane and are in fact still rising. Soaring grocery costs continue to squeeze residents across the Commonwealth and drive more people to food pantries and federal assistance programs than ever before. Respondents of the survey — administered in collaboration with Mass General Brigham — frequently reported having to choose between buying food and other essentials. Seventy percent of those reporting food insecurity paid for a utility bill rather than a meal; more than 60 percent prioritized transportation or medical care ahead of food.

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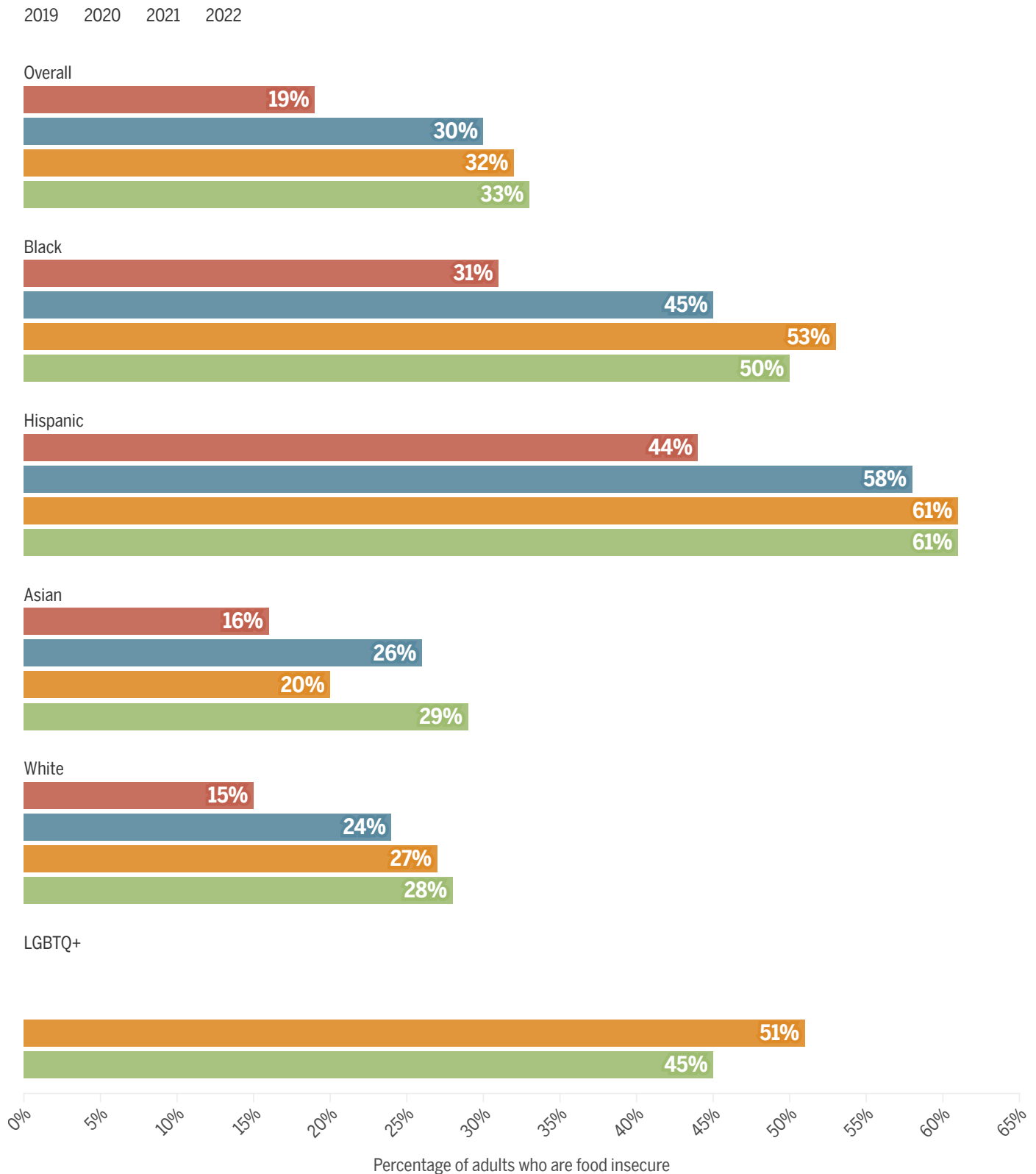


Replay

In May 2022, the food bank found [32 percent of Massachusetts adults](#) to be food insecure. This year, it’s 33 percent.

Food insecurity rates over time

Around 1.8 million adults reported running out of food or not having enough money to get more food every month in 2022.



Source: Greater Boston Food Bank • The data from 2019-2021 was measured using the 6-item USDA Household Food Security Survey Module. 2020 was Measured using the 18-item USDA Household Food Security Survey Module.
Data for the LGBTQ+ population in 2019 and 2020 was not available.

✿ A Flourish chart

Food bank chief executive Catherine D'Amato called the results “shocking, but not surprising.”

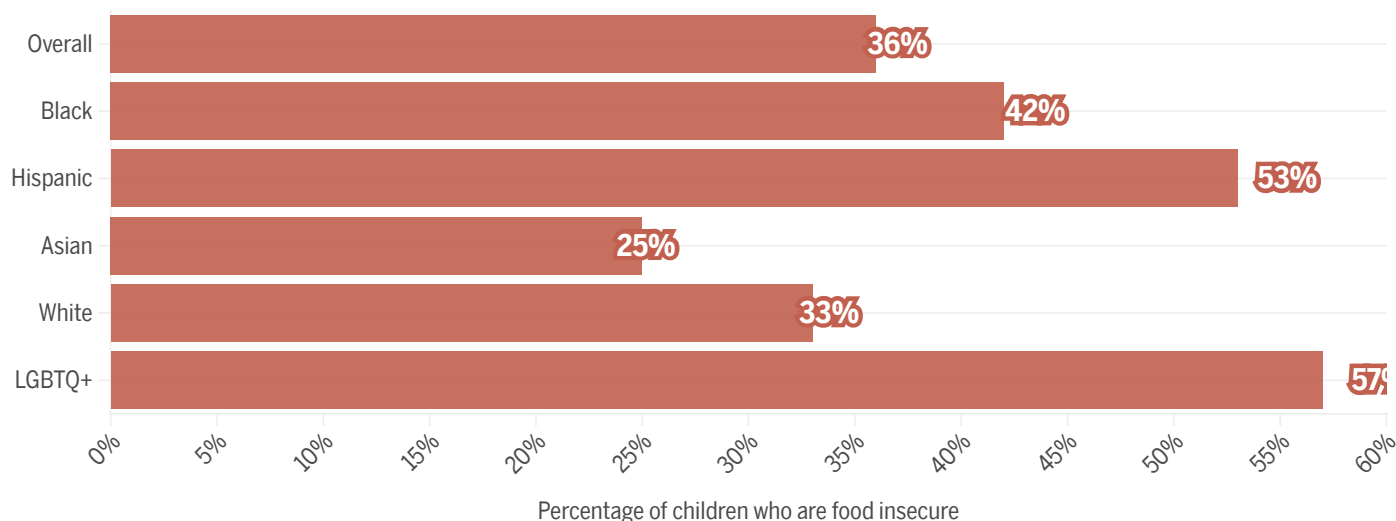
“The data is the data is the data,” she said. “It doesn’t lie, and that’s what is most profound for a state the size of Massachusetts. We’re a small state with really good resources [and] places people want to come. The best healthcare, the best colleges, the best everything. Why are we not the best food-secure state?”

Researchers and aid organizers point to a few explanations.

The end of the pandemic public health emergency brought the rollback of benefits that had been expanded in the initial years of COVID. President Biden allowed participants of the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, to receive the maximum allotment offered for two years. It led to a statewide average increase of \$151.46 each month per household until the expansion ended in April, [leaving a swath of needy families without a safety net](#). Governor Maura Healey used state funding to provide about \$60 a month to help fill the gap for two additional months, but that program, too, is slated to end on June 2.

Child food insecurity in 2022

One in three households in Massachusetts said a child was hungry, skipped a meal, or did not eat for a whole day because there wasn’t enough money for food.



Source: Greater Boston Food Bank • Measured using the 18-item USDA Household Food Security Survey Module (child level)

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Add that to [unprecedented inflation](#), stagnant wages, and the ever-growing cost of housing in the state,

and “the math doesn’t add up,” said Erin McAloon, chief executive of the Boston food assistance charity.

and the math doesn't add up," said Erin McAfee, chief executive of the Boston food assistance charity Project Bread. "Folks who make minimum wage and work 40 hours a week — they come home with \$2,000 a month. Forget food. You can't really afford much else but your apartment."

Then comes the precarious economy, D'Amato said. The threat of a recession lurks constantly, and the money from pandemic relief and stimulus checks issued in 2020 and 2021 has long since run out. State lawmakers [prolonged the free school lunch program](#) for this school year with \$110 million, but that's not permanent either.

Now worries are flourishing among advocates that things could go from bad to worse. And the GBFB survey — administered in January, before the expanded federal SNAP benefits expired — is far from reassuring.

Central and Western Massachusetts residents experienced food insecurity at higher rates than the more populous and job-rich eastern parts of the state, at 41 and 39 percent respectively. But people from Northampton to Nahant are skimping to stay full. Forty-one percent of food-insecure respondents said they sold personal property to afford produce, and 30 percent watered down food or infant formula for children amid [a severe shortage that began last spring](#) and sent formula prices to the stratosphere.

"It's a constant cycle of, 'What can I get by on?'" said Dr. Lauren Fiechtner, director of nutrition at MassGeneral Hospital for Children and an adviser of health and research at GBFB. "What can I make work?"

The growing need has led more people to what resources do exist — a silver lining amid the gloom, Fiechtner said. Over half of food-insecure respondents were enrolled for SNAP or accessed a food pantry last year, up from around a fourth in 2019. Usage of the National School Lunch Program among respondents boomed, up to 73 percent in 2022 from 27 percent prepandemic.

Yet even that is not enough. Nearly 60 percent of SNAP users reported that they would need \$100 or more each week to meet their household's food needs. The same goes for WIC, the SNAP-style program for women and children, said one Hampden County woman who responded to the survey anonymously.

"WIC doesn't provide enough for a month, especially if you have a baby with formula feeds," she said.

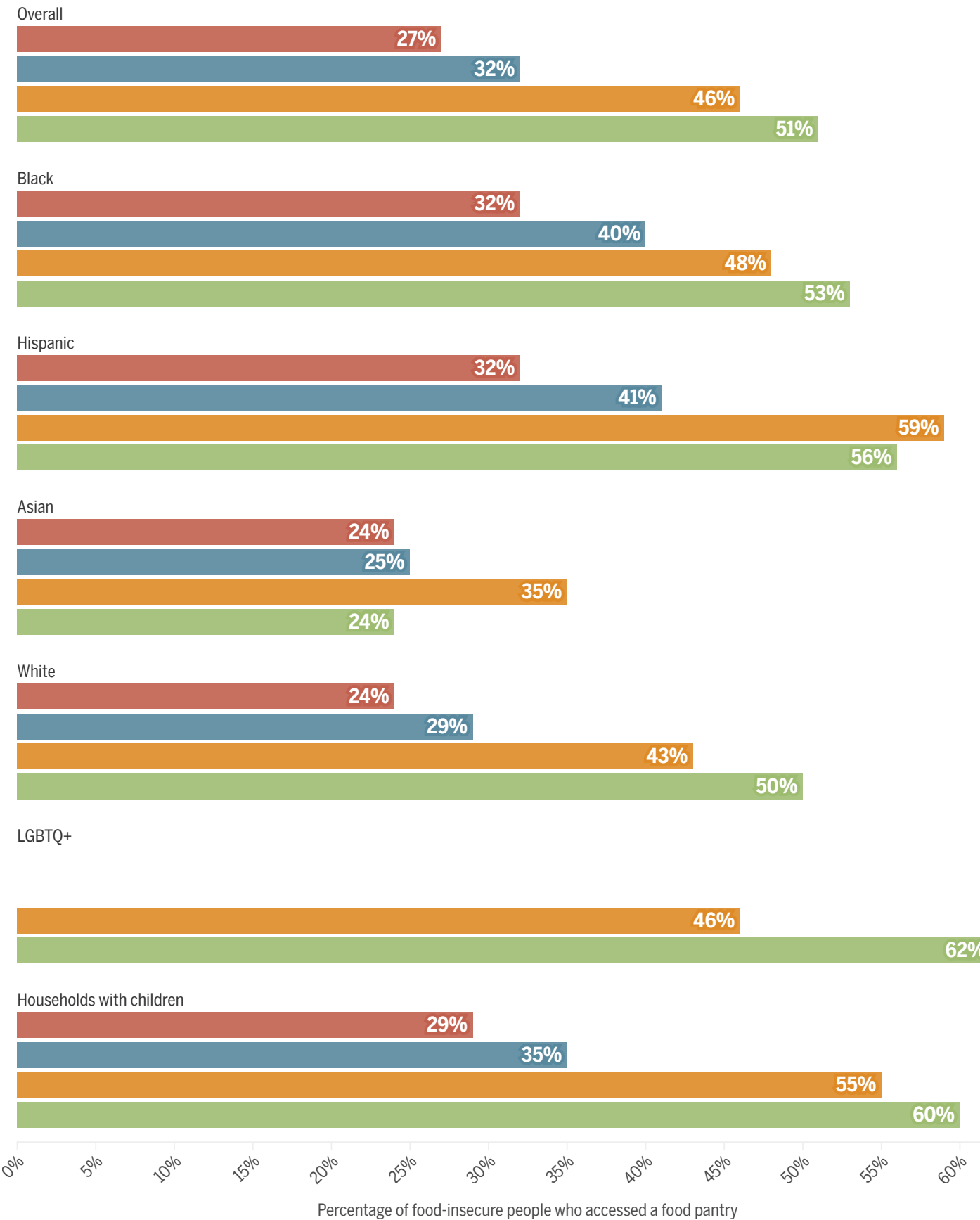


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In 2022, more people experiencing food insecurity accessed pantries or enrolled in assistance like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the National School Lunch Assistance Program, and WIC.

Food pantry use among Massachusetts adults with food insecurity

2019 2020 2021 2022



Source: Greater Boston Food Bank • The data from 2019-2021 was measured using the 6-item USDA Household Food Security Survey Module. 2020 was Measured using the 18-item USDA Household Food Security Survey Module. Data for the LGBTQ+ population in 2019 and 2020 was not available.

It all ultimately lands on the organizations working to help, said Tim Cavaretta, interim director of operations at Food for Free, a Somerville nonprofit that redistributes uneaten produce and pantry

staples. A 3,000-square-foot space the group moved into in 2020 quickly felt too small, forcing it to move within a few months to someplace four times as big. And Food for Free now distributes four times as much food as it did prepandemic — from 2 million pounds to 8 million — even though produce prices have climbed sharply.

“We, almost every day, get requests to see if we have more food we can bring to our partners,” Cavaretta said. “We’re hearing from organizations that would like to become partners with us. And we have to tell them we just don’t have the capacity.”

In the long run, Fiechtner said, it is not just access to food that matters, but the way food is intrinsically linked to health outcomes. SNAP recipients are twice as likely to report anxiety and depression than the general population, the GBFB report found. Food insecurity also drives up levels of hypertension, heart disease, and food allergies.

The only way to avoid such outcomes, according to one respondent, is for the flow of resources to continue — whether that be increased SNAP allotments or something else.

“Rents are skyrocketing and so is the cost of bills but the threshold of SNAP has not been raised,” a Bristol County woman told the survey. “My dollar earned has not changed but it buys less now.”

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