

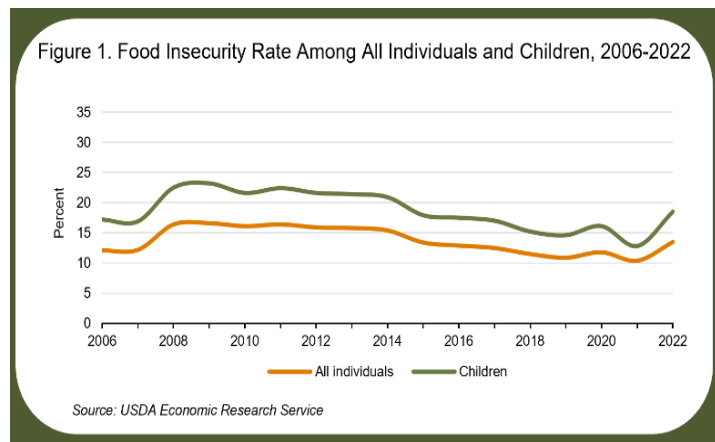
# Food Insecurity Among Seniors and Older Adults in 2022



## BACKGROUND

Food insecurity is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as the lack of access to enough food for an active, healthy life due to limited financial resources. The USDA reported that in 2022, the most recent year of data available, the overall food insecurity rate increased sharply, rising from 10.4% in 2021 to 13.5% in 2022. The change reflects the largest one-year increase since 2008, and the rate, which amounts to over 44 million people, or 1 in every 7, is the highest it has been since 2014.<sup>i</sup>

Recent trends in food insecurity levels and the strengthening and subsequent weakening of safety net programs tell a story about how policies and programs can help people weather the storm during times of crisis. In response to the economic downturn that began at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, federal and local support programs expanded, and for a period of two years food insecurity levels were stable or declined. As pandemic programs ended and prices for household expenses (including food) rose, food insecurity levels have also risen. Figure 1 shows trends in food insecurity levels among all individuals and children from 2006 through 2022.



## ABOUT THIS REPORT

To better understand food insecurity among the aging population in the U.S., Feeding America has analyzed data from the December Supplement of the Current Population Survey through 2022. In the following pages, we provide food insecurity estimates for *seniors*, defined as adults age 60 and older, a group that is continuing to grow in size as the Baby Boomer generation ages. Additionally, we provide estimates for adults age 50-59, referred to hereafter as *older adults*, a cohort that represents the next generation of seniors and has historically faced some of the highest rates of food insecurity among adults in the U.S. Our estimates include national-level data showing how levels of food insecurity vary for seniors and older adults according to different demographics and other characteristics, as well as state-level estimates for both groups, showing how food insecurity varies across the country. By better understanding variations in need, communities can develop more targeted strategies to reach people experiencing food insecurity.

Feeding America's research to understand food insecurity among seniors and older adults is made possible by funding from Enterprise Rent-a-Car Foundation. To access additional information and research about food insecurity among seniors, visit <https://www.feedingamerica.org/research/senior-hunger-research>.

For information about *Map the Meal Gap*, Feeding America's annual study about local food insecurity and food price data, visit [map.feedingamerica.org](http://map.feedingamerica.org).

Suggested citation: Hake, M., & Dawes, S. (2024). *Food Insecurity Among Seniors and Older Adults in 2022*. Feeding America.

## FINDINGS

### National findings for 2022

**1 in 11 Seniors**  
experienced  
food insecurity



8.7% of the  
senior population

6.9 million  
seniors

**1 in 8 Older Adults**  
experienced  
food insecurity



11.9% of the  
older adult population

4.9 million  
older adults

Both rates reflect increases compared to the prior year, consistent with increases observed among other populations as reported by the USDA in its annual food security report.<sup>ii</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by 2050, the senior population will comprise around 104 million people age 60 and older.<sup>iii</sup> If the current rate of food insecurity among seniors does not change, this would equate to more than 9 million seniors experiencing food insecurity.<sup>1</sup>

### Food insecurity by demographic and socioeconomic characteristics

Food insecurity rates among seniors and older adults vary according to demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. Below we describe findings related to disability, the presence of grandchildren in the home, and race and ethnicity. Complete findings are displayed in Figure 2.

#### Disability is strongly associated with food insecurity among aging adults

Seniors with a disability had food insecurity rates over twice the rate of seniors without a disability (15.3% and 6.5%, respectively). Older adults with a disability had rates that were over three times higher than those without a disability (31.2% and 9.3%). Research shows that having a disability is closely associated with an increased chance of being food insecure.<sup>iv</sup> And as seniors age, they may develop disabilities and other health problems that can make accessing groceries and cooking more difficult.<sup>v</sup>

#### Multigenerational households are more than twice as likely to experience food insecurity

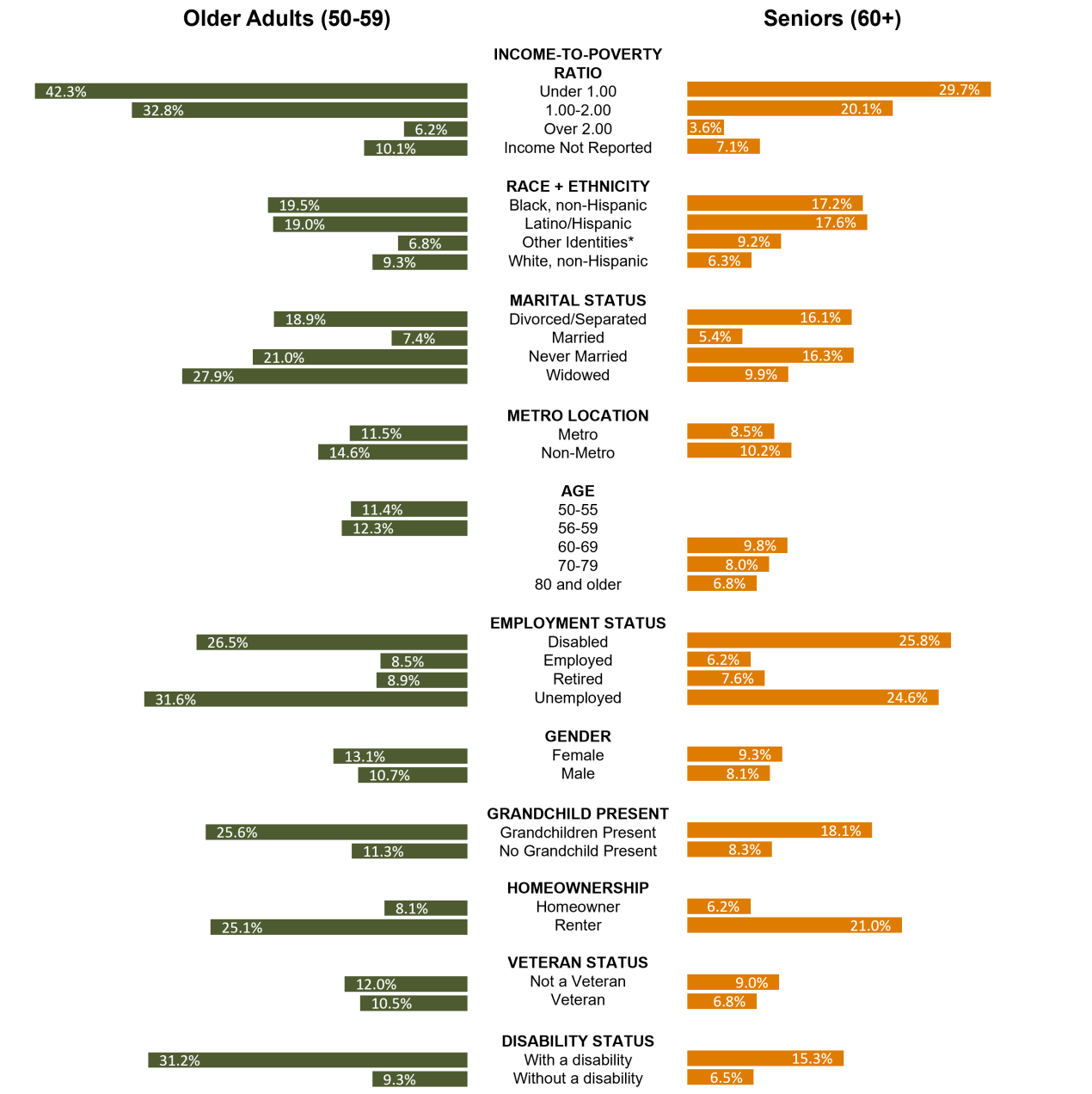
While this type of household structure can yield many positive benefits, seniors and older adults who have a grandchild in the household experience food insecurity at higher rates than those without a grandchild present. In 2022, food insecurity was 2.2 times as high for seniors residing with a grandchild (18.1% vs. 8.3%) and 2.3 times as high for older adults residing with a grandchild (25.6% vs. 11.3%). In households with limited economic resources, children are often shielded from food insecurity by adults, so seniors and older adults 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.<sup>vi</sup>

#### Communities of color experience disproportionate levels of food insecurity

Across the age spectrum, many communities of color experience food insecurity at disproportionate rates due to the continued impact of systemic racism and discrimination. Seniors and older adults are no exception. In 2022, food insecurity among Black, non-Hispanic seniors (17.2%) and Latino seniors (17.6%) was more than 2.7 times as high as for white, non-Hispanic seniors (6.3%). Food insecurity among Black, non-Hispanic older adults (19.5%) and Latino older adults (19.0%) was more than 2 times as high as for white, non-Hispanic older adults (9.3%).

For both age groups, food insecurity estimates are not available separately for Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, and people who identify as multi-racial. However, other work has found food insecurity to be disproportionately high among some of these populations, especially Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and some Asian subgroups.

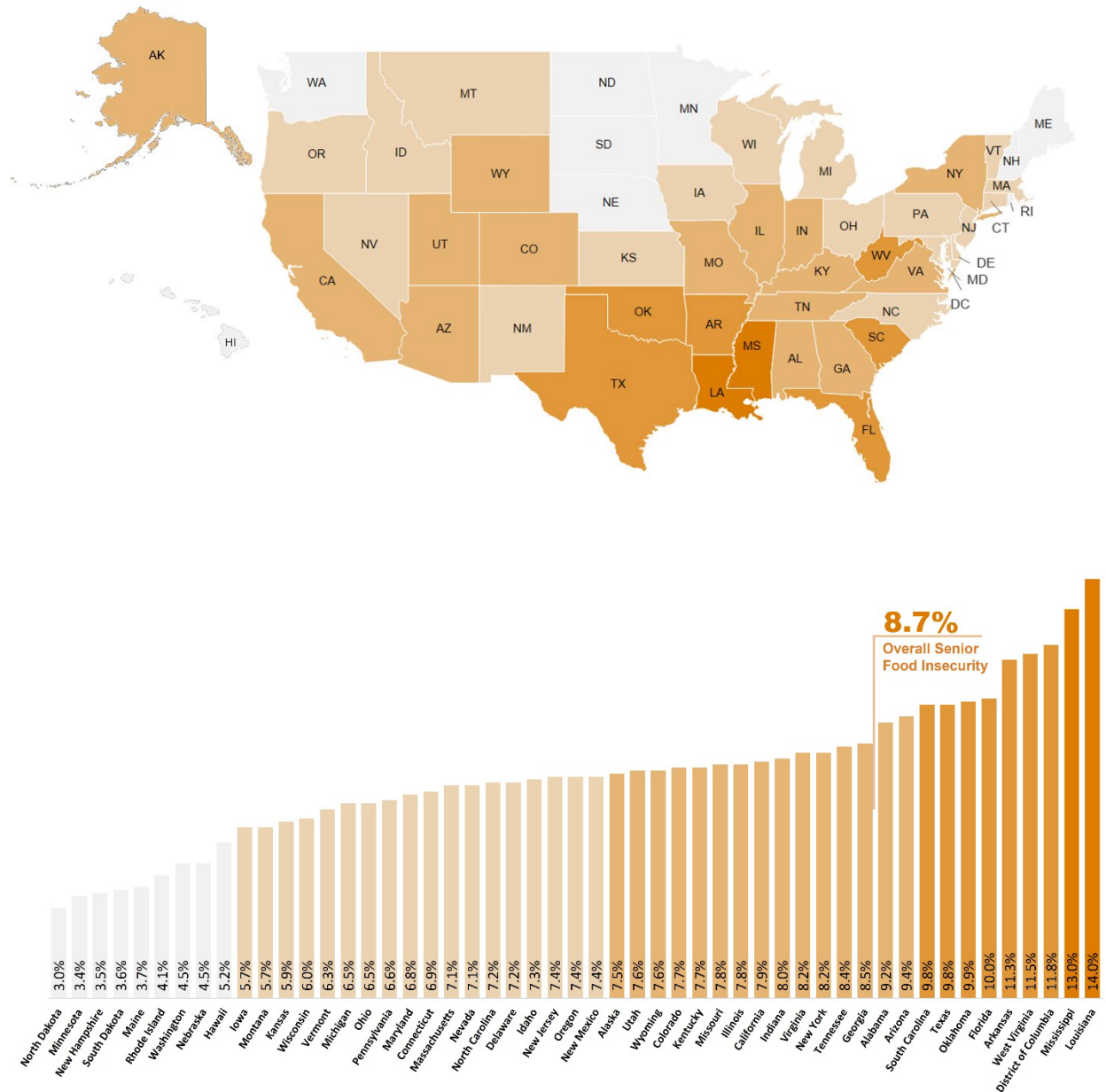
**Figure 2. Food Insecurity Rates Among Seniors and Older Adults by Demographic and Socioeconomic Categories in 2022**



\*Other identities includes individuals who identify as Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, and multiple races, non-Hispanic.

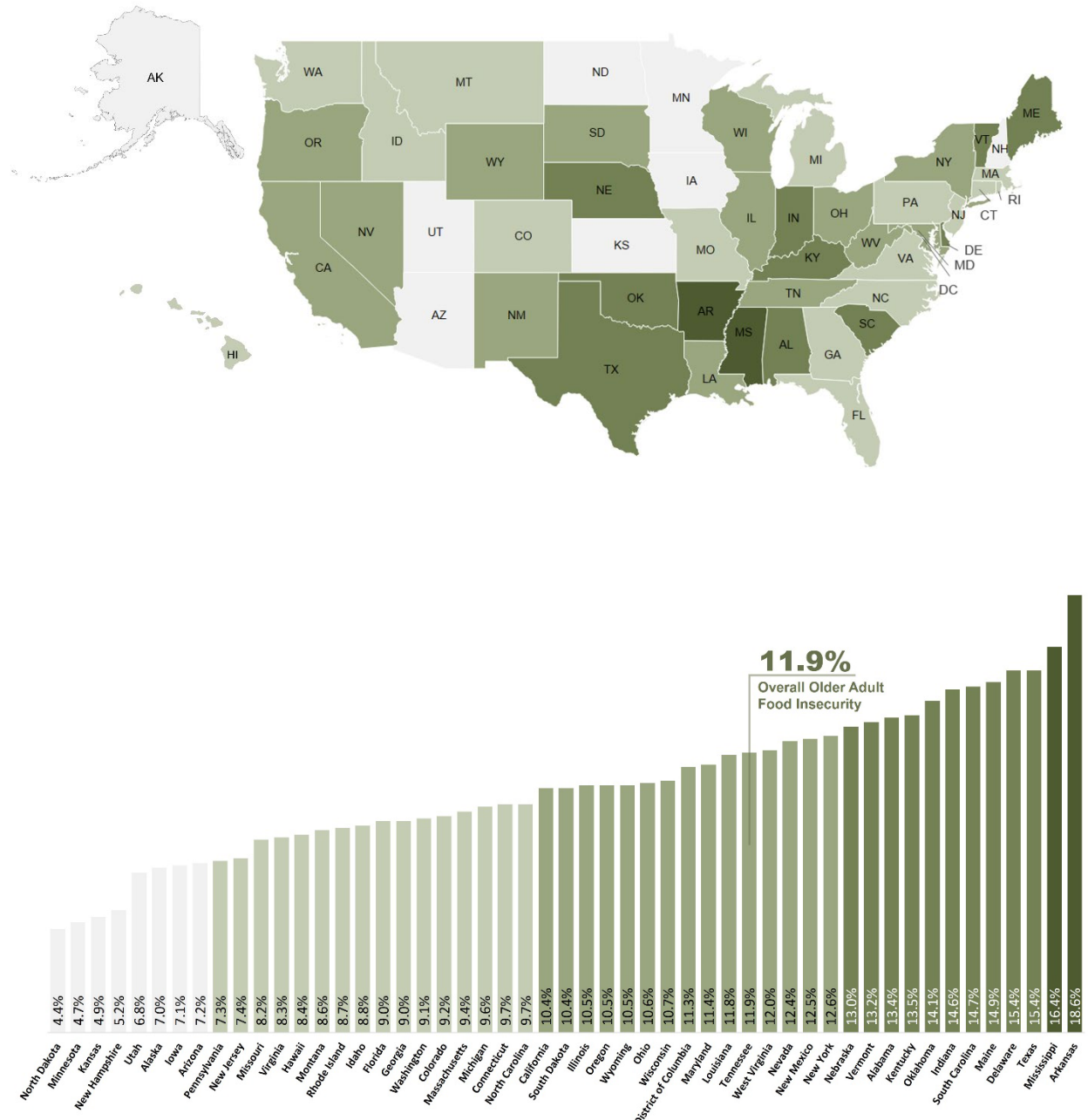
**Figure 3. State-Level Food Insecurity Among Seniors in 2022**

Nationally, millions of seniors face food insecurity. Exploring senior food insecurity rates across geographies such as states is one way to better understand this wide-spread need. In 2022, state-level food insecurity rates for seniors ranged from a high of 14.0% in Louisiana to a low of 3.0% in North Dakota. Nine of the ten states with the highest rates of food insecurity among seniors are located in the South.



### Figure 4. State-Level Food Insecurity Among Older Adults in 2022

Nationally, millions of older adults face food insecurity. One way to better understand this need is through exploring food insecurity rates across geographies such as states. In 2022, state-level food insecurity rates among older adults ranged from 18.6% in Arkansas to 4.4% in North Dakota. Seven of the ten states with the highest rates of food insecurity among older adults are located in the South.



## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings presented in this report shed light on the extent of food insecurity among seniors age 60 and older and older adults age 50-59 in the United States in 2022. They also show how food insecurity varies by demographics, socioeconomic characteristics, and geography.

Leading up to and during 2022, prices, especially for food, reached historically high levels.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, many relief programs that were installed or expanded during the pandemic have since returned to their pre-pandemic size, while others have been eliminated altogether. Following two years of stable or decreased food insecurity levels, rates rose in 2022, including for seniors and older adults, showing how the implementation of strong policies helped mitigate food insecurity during the pandemic, and the subsequent weakening of the safety net has now left more individuals and households struggling to make ends meet.

Improved policies are critical to help people experiencing food insecurity get the food they need now, as well as to expand opportunity, enable economic mobility, and support financial well-being. Below are recommended policy changes that can help neighbors facing hunger, and seniors and older adults in particular, have what is needed to thrive. For complete detail of policy recommendations inspired by the voices of people facing hunger, refer to Feeding America's latest [Elevating Voices Report](#).

### **Strengthen and expand access to SNAP and nutrition programs targeting seniors**

- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the cornerstone of the federal nutrition programs and shown to be effective at improving food security; yet SNAP benefits did not cover the cost of a meal in 99 percent of counties in 2022.<sup>vii</sup> SNAP benefit levels and purchasing power must be set at an adequate level and made to reflect modern dietary guidelines, evolving food consumption patterns and preparation practices, and food prices to ensure individuals and families can purchase enough nutritious foods.
- Access to SNAP should be improved and simplified, particularly for seniors, college students, veterans and military families, tribal communities, and others who do not qualify for or are unable to participate in SNAP due to eligibility and enrollment barriers, such as the Federal Drug Felon Ban.
- Senior nutrition programs under the Older Americans Act, including Meals on Wheels and congregate feeding programs, should be strengthened and have funding increased to help close the existing needs gap for nutrition services for older adults.

### **Simplify and improve access to other grocery and commodity programs, including TEFAP and CSFP**

- Increased funding is needed for The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which provides a significant amount of nutritious food through food banks and helps maintain dignity of choice instead of limiting options. Millions of people who are food insecure do not qualify for SNAP, and many turn to food banks to help fill the gap. Last year, Feeding America helped provide 5.2 billion meals to tens of millions of people in need. This direct work with communities depends upon the nutritious food provided by TEFAP, and it complements the vital assistance offered through SNAP.
- Reauthorization of TEFAP Rural Infrastructure Grants would help meet the need in rural communities where some of the highest rates of food insecurity exist.
- The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) should be reauthorized and streamlined to further improve the food security and health of seniors.
- Work with tribes is needed to increase food security in Native American communities, including allowing tribal governments to administer federal programs.

### **Improve policies that support financial well-being**

- Benefit cliffs that impede economic mobility and stability should be eliminated from programs where they exist.
- It is critical that investments be made in policies that address high housing costs, including policies that will provide more affordable housing in communities, additional housing aid, and oversight programs for landlords.

The rise in food insecurity among seniors and older adults, coupled with the continued growth of the senior population, underscores the important roles of the public and private sectors in addressing food insecurity for the aging population. 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. Food insecurity

among older adults continues to be more prevalent than among seniors, signaling that many among the next wave of adults joining a growing senior population may struggle to make ends meet. Given the scope and scale of the issue, policymakers must 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.

## Notes

1. *An Aging Nation: The Older Population in the United States* (citation in reference iii below) provides population projections for the senior population age 65 and older. To estimate projections for the 60 and older population, we first look at Figure 2. As shown, the population for the age groups from 45 to 64 is distributed in a roughly even way. Using this information, we can say that in 2050, about 25% of those in the 45 to 65 are in the 60-65 age range. By taking 25% of the middle projection for the 45 to 64 age group in Figure 3 (95 million/4) and adding this to the middle projection of those 65 and older (80 million), you get 104 million people over the age of 60. Calculations are below.  
 $(95,000,000 \text{ seniors}/4)+80,000,000 \text{ seniors}=104,000,000 \text{ seniors}$   
 $104,000,000(.087)=9,048,000 \text{ seniors}$
2. In its annual *Map the Meal Gap study*, Feeding America reported that individuals who were food secure reported spending an average of \$3.99 per meal in 2022, higher than the \$3.59 they reported in 2021. Even after adjusting for annual average inflation, the national average cost per meal increased by nearly 3% compared to the previous year, reaching its highest point in the last two decades.

## References

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- <sup>ii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ortman, J. M., Velkoff, V. A., & Hogan, H. (2014). An aging nation: The older population in the United States. US Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, United States Census Bureau. Retrieved from: <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/demo/p25-1140.pdf>
- <sup>iv</sup> Heflin, C. M., Altman, C. E., & Rodriguez, L. L. (2019). Food insecurity and disability in the United States. *Disability and Health Journal*, 12(2), 220-226
- <sup>v</sup> Maresova, P., Javanmardi, E., Barakovic, S., Husic, J. B., Tomsone, S., Krejcar, O., & Kuca, K. (2019). Consequences of chronic diseases and other limitations associated with old age—A scoping review. *BMC Public Health*, 19(1), 1431.
- <sup>vi</sup> King, C. (2018). Food insecurity and child behavior problems in fragile families. *Economics & Human Biology*, 28, 14-22.
- <sup>vii</sup> Waxman, E., Gupta, P., Gundersen, C. (2023, July 13) Does SNAP Cover the Cost of a Meal in Your County? Urban Institute. Retrieved May 8, 2024, from <https://www.urban.org/data-tools/does-snap-cover-cost-meal-your-county-2022>