



RHODE ISLAND COMMUNITY
FOOD BANK

2021 STATUS REPORT on Hunger in Rhode Island

Thousands of Rhode Islanders Lack Adequate Food in Prolonged COVID-19 Emergency

MAJOR FINDINGS

- ★ Affording adequate food is a challenge for one in six Rhode Island households.
- ★ Critical government programs and benefits are ending, despite the continued hardships faced by low-income Rhode Islanders.
- ★ Racial and ethnic inequities in food security persist.
- ★ To meet the high demand for food assistance, the Food Bank distributed a record amount of food through its statewide network of partner agencies: 15.1 million pounds.



Food insecurity remains widespread in Rhode Island. But the economic disruption caused by the pandemic could have been much worse if it were not for the massive response of government to the emergency.

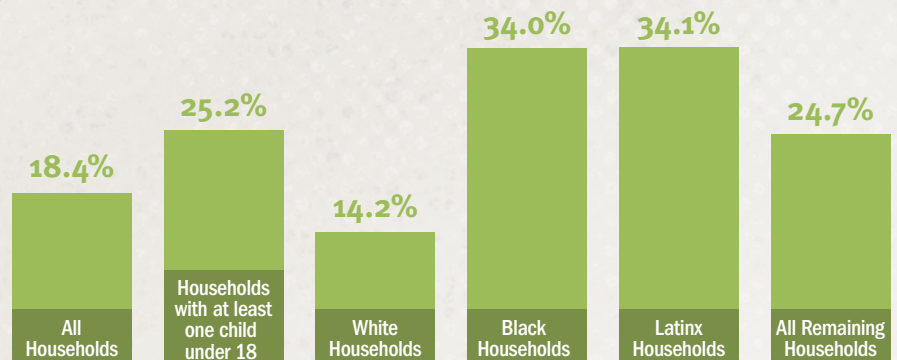
Among all households in Rhode Island, 18 percent (one in six households) cannot meet their basic food needs. **The risk of hunger is even higher for families with children: one in four.**¹

These are findings from the RI Life Index, which was conducted between April and August 2021. The RI Life Index is an initiative of Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and the Brown University School of Public Health.

Results from the RI Life Index also reveal racial and ethnic disparities. **Whereas 14 percent of White households reported food insecurity, the rate was significantly higher among non-**

White households: 34 percent for Black households, 34 percent for Latinx households, and 25 percent among all remaining households, including Asian, Native American, and multi-racial. Communities of color in Rhode Island were disproportionately harmed by COVID-19, in terms of illness and financial losses, compounding long-standing inequities in health and income.

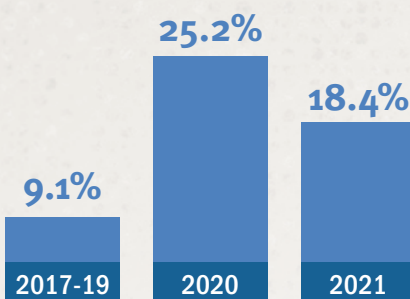
Prevalence of Food Insecurity in Rhode Island 2021



**All remaining households includes Asian, Native American/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and more than one race/ethnicity.*

Food Insecurity Remains High as Rhode Island's Economy Gradually Recovers

Prevalence of Food Insecurity Among All Households in Rhode Island



The pandemic recession took a toll on low-income households. Over half of the jobs lost during the March to April 2020 shutdown in Rhode Island were in low-wage industries (sectors with average annual wages below \$40,000).² Of the 56,300 jobs lost in low-wage industries, only 41,300 (73 percent) were back as of August 2021, indicating the remaining gap to achieve full economic recovery.

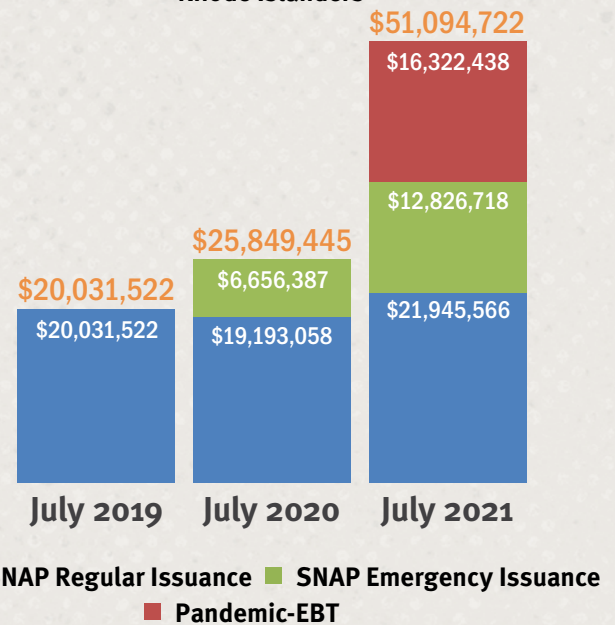
Without earned income, many families could not afford basic living expenses, including food. In 2020, food insecurity in Rhode Island reached the highest level recorded in twenty years with one in four households at risk of hunger. Fewer households are in dire need today, but the prevalence of food insecurity remains far above pre-COVID levels.³

Federal Response Reduces Hardships Caused by COVID-19

Increases in federal benefits helped to ease the burden for those who lost work due to COVID-19. The federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation program initially added \$600 per week to state unemployment payments. Receiving these extra benefits decreased food insecurity among the newly unemployed.⁴ The federal supplement was subsequently reduced to \$300 per week and then ended in September 2021.

Emergency relief for struggling families also came from federal nutrition programs. The American Rescue Plan Act, passed by Congress and signed into law by President Biden in March 2021, expanded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and extended a new program for families with children, Pandemic-EBT, significantly increasing food assistance for low-income households in Rhode Island. **For example, these two programs combined to provide \$51 million for the purchase of groceries in one month, July 2021, more than double the amount of regular SNAP benefits before the pandemic.**⁵

Monthly Food Benefits for Low-Income Rhode Islanders



Key Federal Benefits During the Pandemic

Farmers Feeding Families

Boxes of food distributed to people in need at no cost.

Status: Ended April 2021

Pandemic Unemployment Compensation

Extra payments (initially \$600, then reduced to \$300 per week) to supplement state unemployment benefits.

Status: Ended September 2021

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

Benefits increased by 15% for enrolled households.

Status: Ended September 2021

Benefits increased in October 2021 to reflect the actual cost of food by updating the Thrifty Food Plan (basis for SNAP benefit amount).

Status: Permanent

Purchasing food online made available to SNAP recipients beginning in June 2020.

Status: Permanent

\$95 extra per month or maximum benefit allowed per household.

Status: Temporary - Expires one month after the end of the State's public health emergency.

Expansion of eligibility for college students from low-income families.

Status: Temporary - Expires one month after the end of the federal public health emergency.

Pandemic-EBT

Additional benefits for families whenever their children lose access to free or reduced-price meals because schools are closed to in-person learning or for summer vacation. Children under six years old who are enrolled in SNAP also receive these benefits. During the summer of 2021, the monthly benefit for food purchase was \$187.50 per child.

Status: Temporary - Through 2021-22 School Year and Summer 2022, only if schools are closed to in-person learning.

National School Lunch and School Breakfast

Free breakfast and lunch meals available to all students, regardless of income.

Status: Temporary - Through 2021-22 School Year

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

Benefits for healthy food purchase supplemented with \$35 per month for fruits and vegetables for each enrolled participant.

Status: Temporary - Through December 2021

Child Tax Credit

Expanded to parents with low or no earnings. Maximum annual credit of \$3,000 per child (\$3,600 per child under age six).

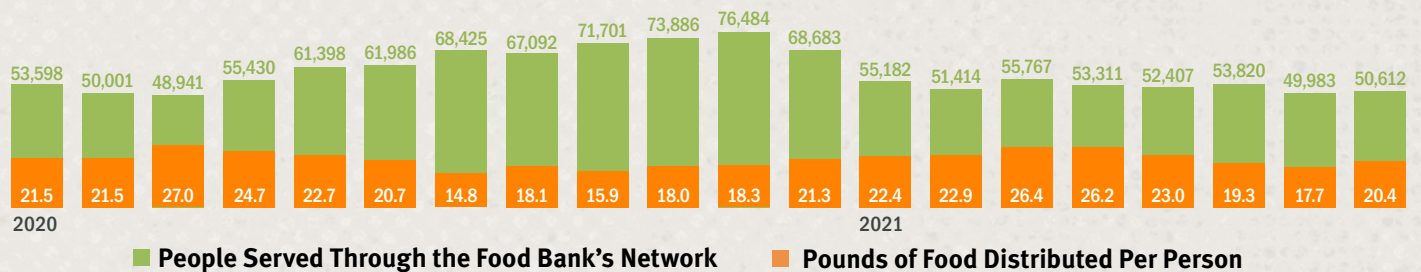
Status: Temporary - Through 2022

Food Bank Increases Distribution to Serve More People in Need

Demand for food assistance at member agencies of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank grew dramatically during the pandemic. At peak demand, in November 2020, 76,500 people were served at food pantries and meal sites across the state. By 2021, the number of Rhode Islanders seeking food assistance declined to pre-COVID levels, with an average of 53,650 people served each month.

To ensure that every person in need received food assistance, the Food Bank distributed 15.1 million pounds of food in the twelve-month period July 2020 to June 2021, an increase of 1.3 million pounds (9 percent) from the previous year and an increase of 3.5 million pounds (30 percent) from the year before the COVID-19 emergency. A steady supply of food was maintained even as demand spiked, with individuals receiving, on average, 20 pounds of food each month.

Rhode Islanders Receiving Food Assistance Each Month & Pounds of Food Distributed Per Person



No Growth in Rhode Island's SNAP Enrollment

Enrollment in SNAP is expected to increase during an economic recession or a period of high unemployment as more households become income-eligible for the program. Nationally, SNAP enrollment grew by 5.3 percent in the year following the pandemic recession.⁶

But that was not the case in Rhode Island. Between April 2020 and March 2021, the number of individuals enrolled in SNAP decreased from 150,824 to 146,326.⁷

During this same period, April 2020 to March 2021, other government programs serving low-income families showed major gains, both nationally and in Rhode Island. At the national level, enrollment in Medicaid (health coverage for low-income individuals) increased by 14 percent and in Rhode Island, participation in Medicaid similarly grew by 11 percent.⁸ Applicants for Medicaid in Rhode Island are assisted by Navigators who work at community agencies and health centers, facilitating access for eligible households.

Rhode Islanders Enrolled in SNAP & Medicaid During COVID-19 Emergency

Government Program	April 2020	March 2021	PERCENT CHANGE
SNAP	150,824	146,326	-3%
Medicaid	269,345	298,893	+11%



Legislative Accomplishments

The Rhode Island General Assembly enacted significant legislation in its 2021 session that will improve workers' wages, increase income supports for families, and add funding for food assistance:

- Increased the state's minimum wage from \$11.50 to \$15.00 per hour by January 2025.
- Raised the monthly cash benefit amount by 30 percent for low-income families enrolled in Rhode Island Works.
- Doubled annual funding for the Rhode Island Community Food Bank from \$175,000 to \$350,000 for food purchase and distribution.

Summary

The severe economic impact of the pandemic on low-income Rhode Islanders was mitigated by an array of federal programs. COVID-19 relief measures, including extra SNAP benefits and Pandemic-EBT, reduced food insecurity from its peak in 2020 and stemmed the surge in demand for food assistance. More households could have benefited from critical government aid, but SNAP enrollment declined in Rhode Island during the pandemic, bucking the national trend.

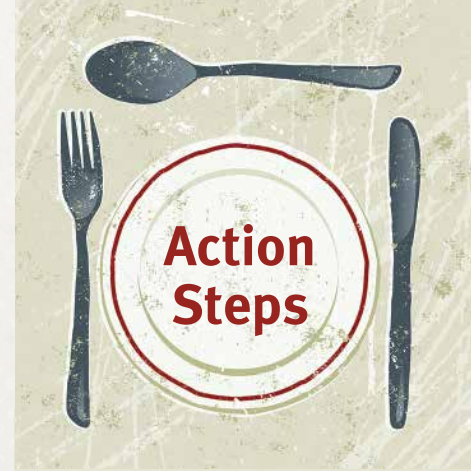
There are warning signs that the economic toll of the pandemic was greater, and the recovery will take longer, than originally assumed. As effective as government programs have been, the rate of food insecurity in Rhode Island remains above pre-COVID levels. Food insecurity is alarmingly high among families with children and in communities of color.

A sustained effort will be needed to protect children from hunger and to reverse long-standing racial inequities in food security. The Child Tax Credit, revised as part of the American Rescue Plan Act, is designed to do both.

The Child Tax Credit is now fully refundable to families at the bottom of the income ladder who were excluded in the past. It has the potential to reduce child poverty by half, with the greatest gains to be realized by Black and Latinx children.⁹

It will take time for communities most harmed by COVID-19 to fully recover. Low-income families will continue to need assistance from federal relief programs that remain available to them. State government and community-based organizations must work together to ensure that these critical benefits reach all eligible households in Rhode Island.

For Endnotes, please visit the Food Bank website at rifofoodbank.org/status-report



★ **Call on Rhode Island's Congressional Delegation to reduce child poverty and racial inequities by making the expanded Child Tax Credit permanent.**

★ **Urge the Governor to use American Rescue Plan Act funds to streamline access to SNAP benefits for eligible households in Rhode Island.**

★ **Thank the State representatives and senators who voted to increase the minimum wage, raise RI Works benefits, and boost funding for the Food Bank.**

For more information on these Action Steps, and how to contact your elected officials, visit www.rifofoodbank.org/advocate.

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RHODE ISLAND COMMUNITY
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OUR MISSION

To improve the quality of life for all Rhode Islanders by advancing solutions to the problem of hunger.

OUR VISION

We envision a state where no one goes hungry.



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2021

STATUS REPORT ON HUNGER IN RHODE ISLAND

Endnotes

1. **RI Life Index**, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Brown University School of Public Health, November 2021.
2. **Coronavirus Pandemic: The Rhode Island Economy February 2020 – July 2021**, Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training, August 2021.
3. **RI Life Index**, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Brown University School of Public Health, November 2020; Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbitt, M., Gregory, C. and Singh, A., **Household Food Security in the United States in 2019**, **Economic Research Service**, USDA, September 2020.
4. Raifman, J., Bor, J. and Venkataramani, A., **Association Between Receipt of Unemployment Insurance and Food Insecurity Among People Who Lost Employment During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United States**, JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association), January 2021.
5. **SNAP Report**, Rhode Island Department of Human Services, September 2021.
6. **SNAP: Number of Households Participating**, Food and Nutrition Service, USDA, July 2021.
7. **SNAP Data**, Rhode Island Department of Human Services, September 2021.
8. **Monthly Enrollment Report**, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, August 2021.
9. Parolin, Z., Collyer, S., Curran, M. and Wimer, C., **Monthly Poverty Rates among Children after the Expansion of the Child Tax Credit**, Center on Poverty and Social Policy, Columbia University, August 2021.