



The **2023 Hunger Survey** was conducted for the Rhode Island Community Food Bank by the Survey Research Center at the Brown University School of Public Health¹. The purpose of the survey was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the population served by the Food Bank. A similar survey was completed in 2019, allowing comparison to this year's results.

The survey was administered at food pantries and meal sites that are member agencies of the Food Bank between April and June 2023. Trained volunteers and Food Bank staff members surveyed people receiving food assistance in one-to-one interviews in either English or Spanish. A total of 459 surveys (328 in English; 131 in Spanish) were completed at 65 randomly selected member agency sites.

INCOME & POVERTY

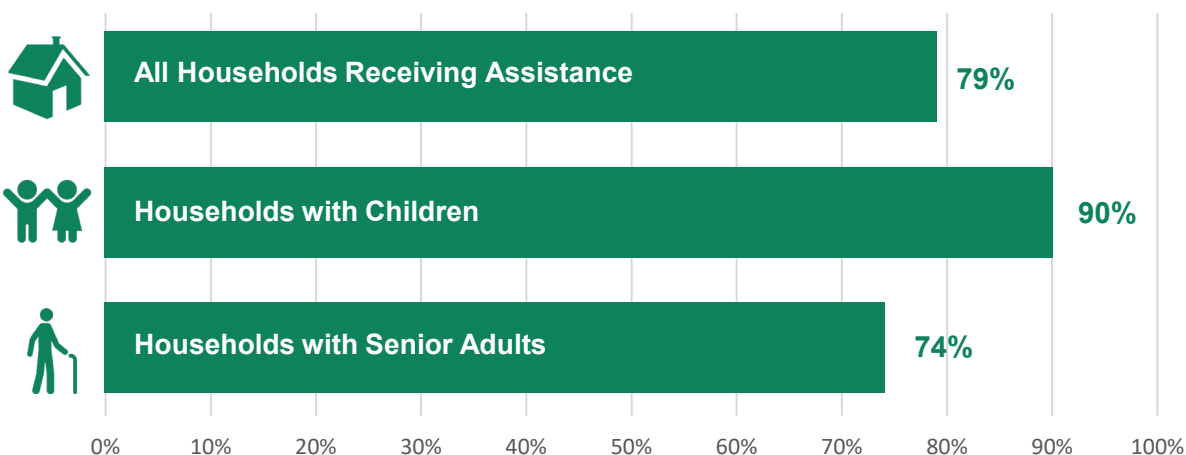
Approximately **120,000 Rhode Islanders**, (**11% of the state's population**) live in households with incomes below poverty. The federal government's 2023 poverty guidelines are based on the number of household members and household income, as shown at right.

Our survey found that most people receiving food assistance (79%) have incomes below the federal poverty level. Among households with children, 90% reported incomes below this level.

2023 Poverty Guidelines: US Department of Health and Human Services

Persons in the Household	Annual Household Income
1	\$14,580
2	\$19,720
3	\$24,860
4	\$30,000

Households Receiving Food Assistance with Incomes at or below the Federal Poverty Level



2023 RHODE ISLAND HUNGER SURVEY

Poverty level income leaves many households unable to afford adequate food.
The majority of households (68%) reported needing more money to meet their basic food needs.
For those households, the median estimated amount needed was \$98 per week.

Low-income households often make difficult decisions about which bills to pay.

- **45% of households** (two in five) had to choose between paying for housing or paying for food at least once in the last 12 months.
- **47% of households** had to choose between paying for utilities or paying for food in the last 12 months.
- **35% of households** reported outstanding debt on a credit card or loan and **45%** borrowed money from a friend or family member in the last 12 months. Households are taking on this debt just to get by.

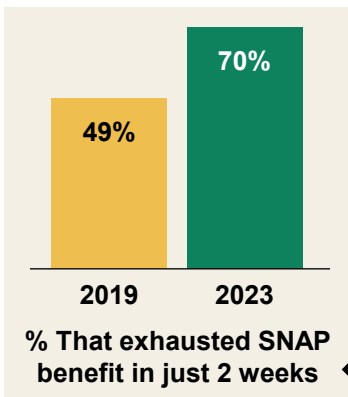
LIVING SITUATION

Along with struggling to afford food, finding permanent, affordable housing is a challenge for the households surveyed.

- **24% (nearly one-quarter)** live in temporary housing (for example, a boarding house, shelter, or campground) or have no housing.
- **23%** started living with another person or family member because they had trouble paying rent to live on their own.



SNAP



SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) is the largest federal nutrition program. SNAP provides benefits to low-income households for the purchase of food at retail outlets including grocery stores, supermarkets, and farmers' markets. Benefits are delivered on the first of each month via an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card. **The average household benefit in Rhode Island is \$315 per month (\$78.75 per week).**

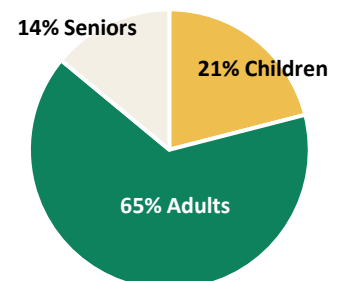
Most of those seeking food assistance at member agencies of the Food Bank are enrolled in SNAP. Among all households, 67% receive SNAP benefits. **However, they report using up these benefits quickly, with 70% exhausting their monthly benefits within just two weeks, compared to 49% in 2019.**

AGE, RACE & ETHNICITY

Among all those receiving food assistance, **21% are children** (0 to 17 years old), **65% are adults** (18 to 64 years old), and **14% are senior adults** (aged 65 or older).

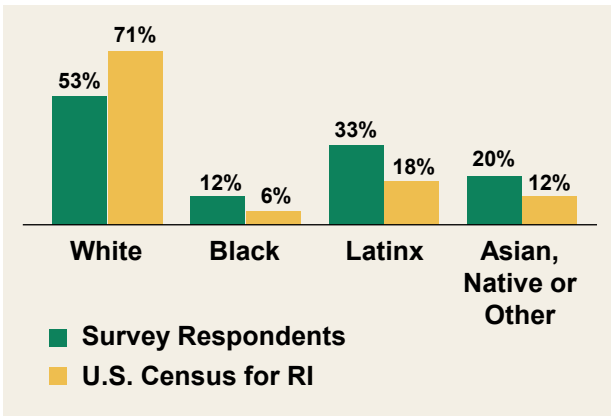
There are major differences between the populations served at meal sites and at food pantries.

- **Meal Sites:** **48% (close to half)** of the people served at meal sites are single adults. **22%** of those served at meal sites are households that include one or more *senior* adult.
- **Food Pantries:** Food pantries serve mainly larger households. **41%** of those served are households with one or more children. Food pantries also serve a larger proportion of senior adults: **38%**.



Age Breakdown of People Receiving Food Assistance

2023 RHODE ISLAND HUNGER SURVEY



Respondents were asked to identify the race and ethnicity of members of their household and were able to select more than one category. Among all households, participants identified as:

- **53%** White
- **12%** Black
- **33%** Latinx
- **20%** Asian, Native American, or other race / ethnicity

By comparison, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates the state's population to be 71% White, 6% Black, 18% Latinx, and 12% Asian, Native American, or some other race/ethnicity.

EMPLOYMENT



- **54%** of households surveyed include someone who was employed in the last 12 months.
- **79%** of households with children include a working adult.
- **87%** of those who are unemployed and not looking for work are either retired or cannot work due to poor health or disability.
- **42%** of households surveyed include someone receiving disability benefits.

HEALTH STATUS

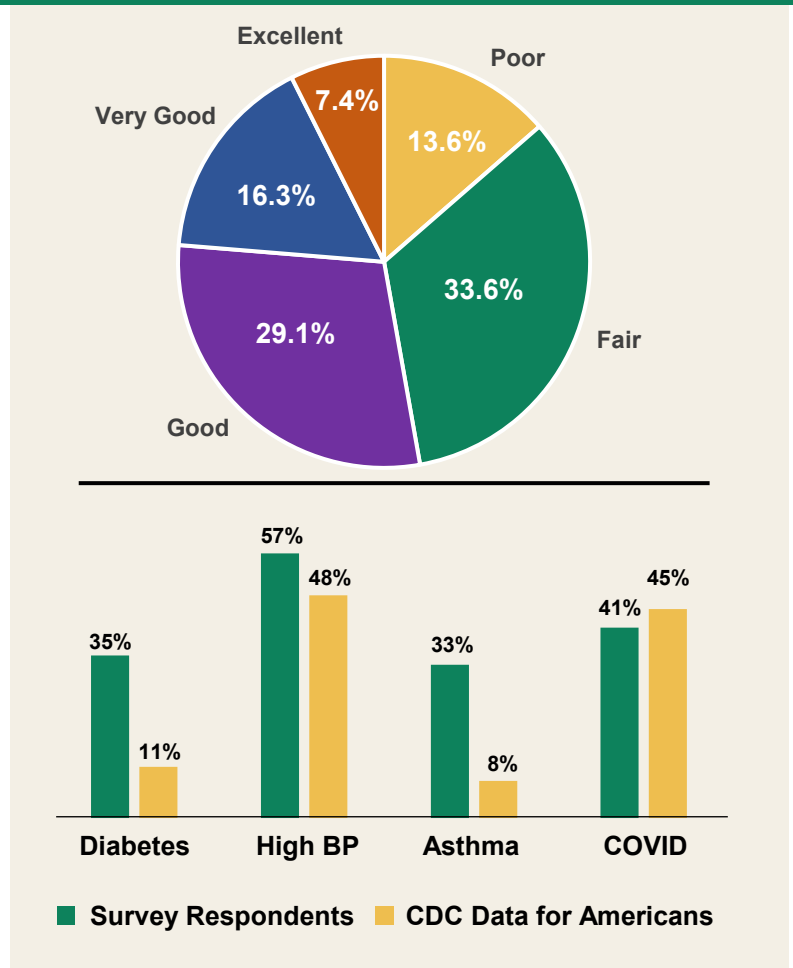
Nutrition can be closely tied to overall health. Close to half (47%) of those surveyed rated their health status as fair or poor (as compared to good, very good, or excellent).

A high percentage report chronic disease:

- **35%** have a household member with diabetes,
- **57%** with high blood pressure,
- **33%** with asthma.

By comparison, 11% of Americans report having diabetes, 48% high blood pressure, and 8% asthma, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The cumulative incidence of COVID-19 in the survey was **41%**, which is similar to the CDC estimate of 45% for the entire United States population.



2019 RESULTS COMPARISON



The most significant event to occur between the 2019 and 2023 Hunger Surveys was the pandemic. The economic disruption caused by the pandemic led to a dramatic increase in the number of people seeking food assistance in Rhode Island, from 53,000 people served on average each month in 2019 to **75,000 in 2023**. Comparing the two surveys, the overall demographic make-up of those receiving food assistance did not change substantially between 2019 and 2023, except that the proportion of households that speak Spanish as their primary language at home increased from 21% in 2019 to 32% in 2023.

Several important COVID-19 relief programs, enacted by Congress to assist low-income families during the pandemic, terminated in 2023 when the federal public health emergency ended. At a time when low-income households faced the loss of these benefits, inflation rapidly increased the overall cost of living.

Responses to the two surveys reflect the impact of inflation and higher food prices. The additional money needed by households to afford adequate food increased from \$66 per week (or \$264 per month) in 2019, to \$98 per week (or \$392 per month) in 2023. For SNAP recipients, 70% reported that their benefits only lasted two weeks or less in 2023, as compared to 49% in 2019.

IN SUMMARY

The 2023 Rhode Island Hunger Survey provides a portrait of the people served by the Food Bank and its statewide network of member agencies. They are some of the most vulnerable individuals in our state: children, seniors, and people with disabilities. They live in poverty, burdened by unstable housing, poor health, and chronic disease. Since the last survey in 2019, food inflation has taken a toll on these households, making it more difficult for them to afford adequate food. Most participate in SNAP, but they rely on food pantries and meal programs because SNAP benefits alone are not sufficient.

The number of Rhode Islanders served at food pantries and meal sites grew significantly during the pandemic. More and more people cannot afford adequate food, but as the survey results demonstrate, they face many hardships in addition to food insecurity. With federal aid receding, the state must do more to reduce poverty, prevent hunger, and strengthen the safety net for low-income Rhode Islanders.



¹For the full report, see Michelle L. Rogers, Tamara A. Sequeira, and Melissa A. Clark, [2023 Rhode Island Hunger Survey, Providence, RI, 2023](#).