



RHODE ISLAND COMMUNITY
FOOD BANK

2024 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island

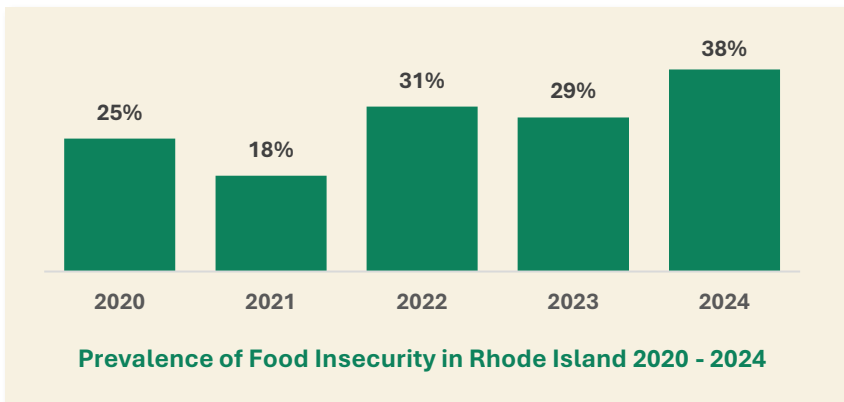


The Meal Gap in Rhode Island | Major Findings

- 🍏 38% of Rhode Island households are food insecure, with higher rates among communities of color.
- 🍏 Low-income Rhode Islanders miss over 42 million meals each year.
- 🍏 The Rhode Island Community Food Bank and its statewide network of member agencies are serving a record number of people each month: 84,400.

Food Insecurity Reaches New High Level

Nearly **two of every five households in Rhode Island have difficulty affording adequate food** and are food insecure, a higher rate than at any time during the pandemic¹. This is one of the major findings of the RI Life Index, which was conducted in March and April 2024. It is an initiative of Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Brown University School of Public Health.



Rapid increases in the cost of rent, utilities, transportation, childcare, and health care have left many low-income and even moderate-income households unable to afford adequate food. According to the Economic Progress Institute, **basic annual household expenses for a single-parent family with two children in Rhode Island reached \$83,239 in 2024.**²



Results from the RI Life Index reveal disparities based on race and ethnicity. While 33% of white households are food insecure, the rate is 47% among Black households, 55% among Latino households, and 47% among all other households (including Asian, Native American, and more than one race/ethnicity), communities that have long experienced barriers to economic opportunity due to systemic racism.

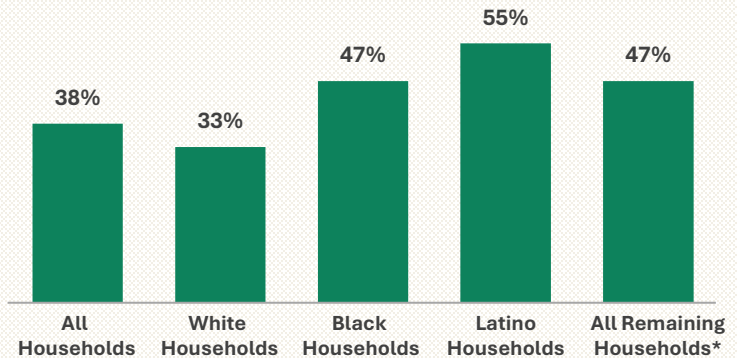


Food Insecurity Questions from the RI Life Index:

Respondents were asked to rate these two statements as always true, true most of the time, sometimes true, or never true for the household over the last 12 months:

- We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.
- The food we bought just didn't last and we didn't have money to get more.

Prevalence of Food Insecurity for Different Households in Rhode Island



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

Missing Meals in Rhode Island

2024 Meal Sources⁵

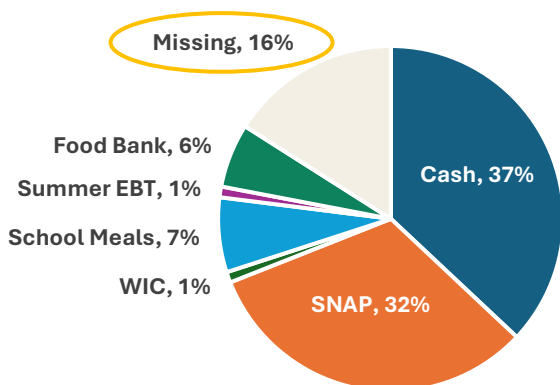
Meals in Millions

Purchased with cash	94.7
SNAP benefits	81.2
WIC benefits	3.1
School Meals ⁶	16.7
Summer EBT	3.0
Food Bank & Member Agencies ⁷	15.3
Total Meals Provided	214.0
Total Meals Needed	256.2
Missing Meals	42.2

When families are unable to afford adequate food, they miss meals. **In Rhode Island, the annual unmet need is 42.2 million meals.**

There are currently 234,000 Rhode Islanders living in low-income households (annual household income below 185% of the federal poverty level, which is \$47,767 for a family of three)³. Most of these households are eligible for USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) nutrition programs including SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children), and Summer EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer). Children from low-income households receive free breakfast and lunch at school. And many of these households rely on member agencies of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank for food assistance.

These sources of food account for 214 million meals per year, along with households' own cash resources for food purchase. Since 256.2 million meals are needed for all 234,000 low-income Rhode Islanders to have three healthy meals a day, the state's low-income population missed 42.2 million meals; 16% of the total needed. **By comparison, 11.3 million meals were missed in Rhode Island in 2019, 6% of the total needed.**⁴



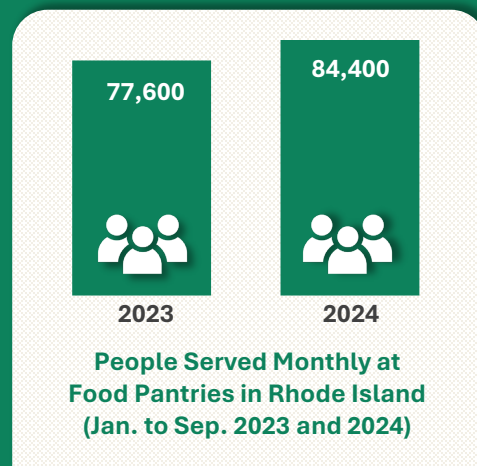
Sources of Meals for Low Income Rhode Islanders



Demand for Food Assistance Continues to Grow

The Rhode Island Community Food Bank's statewide network of 147 member agencies served 84,400 individuals per month in 2024 (January through September), an increase of 9% from the previous year when 77,600 people were served monthly.

In response to the high need for food assistance, the Governor and General Assembly approved an increase in the state's annual allotment for the Food Bank, from \$550,000 in FY 2024 to \$800,000 in FY 2025. The Food Bank uses state funds solely to acquire food, including fresh produce and foods that meet the cultural preferences of low-income populations in the state.



Government Programs Address Food Insecurity

Providing Local Fresh Food

The USDA's Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Program (LFPA) provides federal funds to the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, which subcontracts with Farm Fresh Rhode Island, Southside Community Land Trust, the African Alliance, and the Commercial Fisheries Center of Rhode Island to distribute fresh, local produce and fish to individuals and families in need through community-based organizations, including 35 member agencies of the Food Bank. The Narragansett Tribe also received an LFPA grant to implement the program for tribal members.

The goal of LFPA is to improve the resiliency of the local food system and to strengthen the agricultural supply chain that was disrupted during the pandemic. It is a temporary federal program that is currently funded through 2025. **This year, Senator Reed introduced EAT (Expanding Access To) Local Foods Act, which if passed will continue the program and make it permanent.**

SNAP Incentives: Eat Well, Be Well

In January 2024, the Rhode Island Department of Human Services launched the Eat Well, Be Well Pilot Incentive Program for SNAP recipients. The program offers a \$.50 rebate in SNAP benefits for every \$1.00 spent on fruits and vegetables at participating retail stores. The incentives, up to \$25.00 per month per household, are funded with a \$11.5 million appropriation by the state.

With 90,500 Rhode Island households enrolled in SNAP, if each of them fully utilized the incentives, the cost to the state would be approximately \$2,260,000 per month. In fact, incentives have totaled \$367,000 on average each month with 36% of SNAP households earning incentives.⁸

The current low utilization of the program may represent a baseline for fresh fruit and vegetable purchases by SNAP recipients. Utilization should grow as more SNAP recipients become aware of the program and the program is expanded to include more retailers across the state.

WIC Modernizes to Reach Eligible Families

WIC serves pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age five living in low-income households. The program provides nutrition counseling, health care and social service referrals, and prescriptions for food with the goal of improving birth outcomes and children’s health.

WIC only reaches about half of those eligible for the program. In May 2024, there were 18,421 participants in Rhode Island. The average monthly benefit for food was \$60 per participant.⁹

Now in its 50th year, WIC is modernizing to better serve participants’ needs. Families use an EBT card called eWIC to access their benefits, rather than using paper vouchers at check-out in the grocery store. In addition, the state received a planning grant this year to allow online shopping for food using WIC benefits.

More Children Receive Free Meals at School



The USDA reimburses schools for meals served to students based on the student’s household income. Children from households with incomes below 130% of the federal poverty level (\$33,566 for a family of three) receive free meals and the USDA fully reimburses the school district. Children from households with incomes between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty level (\$47,767 for a family of three) qualify for reduced-price meals with a small fee charged to parents and the remaining cost reimbursed by the USDA.

The state expanded access to free breakfast and lunch meals this school year to include more students from low-income families. Free school meals are now available to public school students who meet the federal qualifications for reduced-price meals.

The Rhode Island Department of Education will reimburse public schools for the parents’ cost for reduced-price meals. The state’s investment of \$776,000 will allow approximately 6,200 more students to receive meals at school at no charge.¹⁰



School Meal Enrollment & Eligibility

School Year
23-24 24-25

Students Eligible to Receive Free Breakfast and Lunch*	56,000	62,000
Total Student Enrollment	138,000	138,000
% of Enrolled Students Eligible to Receive Free School Meals	41%	45%

*Includes students at schools participating in the Community Eligibility Provision, which allows all students to receive free breakfast and lunch with federal reimbursement at schools with 25% or more students from households receiving SNAP, Medicaid, or other government benefits.

Reducing Child Hunger in the Summer

When schools close for summer vacation, child hunger spikes because students lose access to school breakfast and lunch. Summer EBT (also known as SUN Bucks) is a new federal program enacted by Congress to address this need. **The program provides \$120 per child for the purchase of groceries to families with children that are enrolled in SNAP, in Medicaid, or otherwise qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.**

Approximately 104,600 Rhode Island children were enrolled this summer with \$12.5 million in benefits issued to their parents.¹¹





Closing the Meal Gap

Low-income families in Rhode Island are in crisis, particularly in communities of color. The high cost of living robs them of their ability to purchase adequate food. They regularly run out of money, they run out of food, and they miss meals.

There is an urgent need to close the meal gap. The federal nutrition programs – SNAP, WIC, School Meals, and Summer EBT – were designed to prevent food insecurity and hunger. Unfortunately, these programs are less effective today because benefits have not kept up with the real cost of food.

Congress has the opportunity to increase SNAP benefits through the reauthorization of the Farm Bill this year. Additional benefits would help the 90,500 Rhode Island households enrolled in SNAP afford three healthy meals a day. **If Congress fails to act, or reduces SNAP benefits, the meal gap in Rhode Island will only grow larger.**

Rhode Island, in its role as administrator of the federal nutrition programs, can do more to reduce barriers to enrollment. The goal should be to enroll every eligible Rhode Islander in SNAP, WIC, free school meals, and Summer EBT. By improving access to these programs, the state will leverage substantial federal resources.

Until we close the meal gap, thousands of Rhode Islanders will rely on the Food Bank’s network of food pantries and meal sites to feed their families each month. The Governor and the General Assembly must maintain state funding for the Food Bank to preserve our nutrition safety net and ensure that no one in Rhode Island goes hungry.

Endnotes

- 1 RI Life Index, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Brown University School of Public Health, 2024.
- 2 2024 Rhode Island Standard of Need, Economic Progress Institute, 2024.
- 3 2024 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, Current Population Survey, U.S. Census Bureau, September 2024. 2024 Poverty Guidelines, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, January 2024.
- 4 2019 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island, Rhode Island Community Food Bank, November, 2019.
- 5 2023 Consumer Expenditure Survey, U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, September 2024. Low-income individuals spend \$3,299 to purchase food on average each year. Total spending for 234,000 low-income Rhode Islanders is \$772 million. According to Nielson, the average cost of a meal in Rhode Island is \$4.24, so this population purchased 182 million meals using \$401.7 million in cash (94.7 million meals), \$344.4 million in SNAP benefits (81.2 million meals), \$13.3 million in WIC benefits (3.1 million meals), and \$12.6 million in Summer-EBT (3 million meals).
- 6 Child Nutrition tables, Total Lunches and Breakfasts Served, FY2023, USDA.
- 7 The Rhode Island Community Food Bank distributed 18.3 million pounds of food between July 2023 and June 2024. According to the national food bank organization, Feeding America, 1.2 pounds of food yield one meal.
- 8 Rhode Island Department of Human Services Report, October 2024.
- 9 WIC Program Report, Food Costs FY2024, USDA.
- 10 Child Nutrition Report, Rhode Island Department of Education, October 2024.
- 11 RI SNAP Advisory Committee Meeting Report, Rhode Island Department of Human Services, September 2024.

