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Food Insecurity Trended Upward in Midst of High Inflation and Fewer Supports

Findings from the Health Reform Monitoring Survey, June 2022

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Approximately one in five adults reported experiencing household food insecurity[1] in spring 2020 and in summer 2022 after a decline in reported food insecurity in spring 2021. High food price inflation, along with elevated costs for other basic needs, such as transportation and rent, have likely eroded food budgets in the last year. In addition, some of the safety net responses that buffered food insecurity in 2021 are no longer in place. Unemployment rates have declined significantly since early 2020, and wages have increased for many, but wage growth has not kept pace with rapidly rising inflation.[2]

In this brief, we examine how food insecurity changed over the last two years. Using data from the Health Reform Monitoring Survey (HRMS), a nationally representative survey of nonelderly adults, we assess food insecurity among households with nonelderly adults in March/April 2020, April 2021, and June 2022.

Key Findings

Overall Food Insecurity Trends

As shown in table 1, food insecurity in the 30 days prior to the survey among nonelderly adults and their households increased significantly between spring 2021 and summer 2022, after having declined following the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately one in five adults (21.6 percent) reported their households were food insecure in the last 30 days in March to April 2020, as the economy was shutting down in the early weeks of the pandemic. The proportion of adults living in food

insecure households declined to a little less than one in six (15.3 percent) in April 2021, following a robust public sector and private charitable response. The share of adults reporting food insecurity in their households rose significantly by June 2022, reaching a similar level (21.4 percent) to that observed in spring 2020.

Food insecurity can be further analyzed by "very low" food security, the most severe form of food security hardship. Although food insecurity overall is associated with a number of negative health outcomes (Gundersen and Ziliak 2015), the incidence of very low food security is particularly concerning because it indicates a significant reduction in food intake (e.g., skipping meals or going whole days without food; Gundersen and Ziliak, 2015). Very low food security rose markedly between April 2021 and June 2022, from 5.4 percent to 9.1 percent. A different barometer of potential food hardship is characterized as "marginal food security"[3] in which respondents indicate anxiety over the supply of food in the household but generally do not indicate a reduction in quality and variety of diet or disrupted food intake. Marginal food security may be an indicator of those who are at risk of becoming food insecure when economic disruptions occur. This indicator also rose again between 2021 and 2022, from 8.3 percent to 9.5 percent.

TABLE 1

Household Food Security in the Last 30 Days among Adults Ages 18 to 64, March/April 2020, April 2021, and June 2022

	March/April 2020 (%)	April 2021 (%)	June 2022 (%)
High food security	69.5	76.5	69.2^^^
Marginal food security	8.9	8.3	9.5^^^
Food insecurity	21.6	15.3	21.4^^^
Low food security	13.3	9.8	12.3^^^
Very low food security	8.3	5.4	9.1^^^

Source: Health Reform Monitoring Survey, March/April 2020, April 2021, and June 2022.
Notes: Estimates are regression adjusted. Food security estimates may not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.
*/**/*** Estimate differs from 2020 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.
^/^^/^^^ Estimate differs from 2021 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

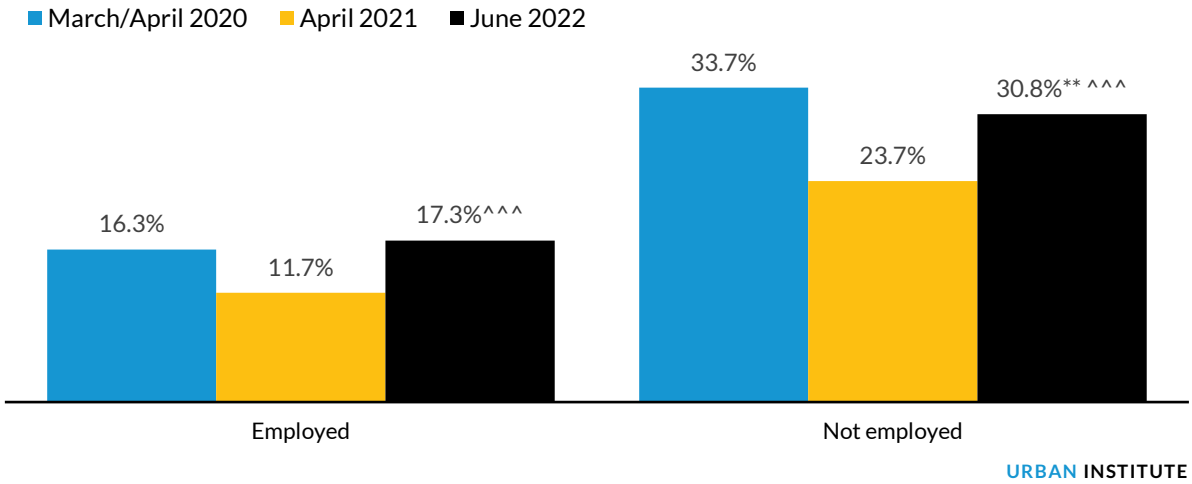
Food Insecurity and Employment Status

Adults who were employed at the time of the survey reported lower rates of household food insecurity on average than those who were not working. In June 2022, 17.3 percent of employed adults reported food insecurity versus 30.8 percent of those who reported they were not working. Although the unemployment rate has steadily improved since the first year of the pandemic and was 3.5 percent in July 2022,[4] food insecurity for both employed and nonworking adults rose in 2022, when compared with 2021. Nonworking adults include unemployed adults, as well as those not in the labor force because of age, disability, or other factors, and these groups also experience higher rates of food insecurity because of lower financial resources.[5] Notably, the June 2022 food insecurity rate for

nonworking adults was lower than the rate in spring 2020, while employed adults reported food insecurity at a similar rate to spring 2020.

FIGURE 1

Share of Adults Reporting Household Food Insecurity in the Last 30 Days, by Employment Status, March/April 2020 to June 2022



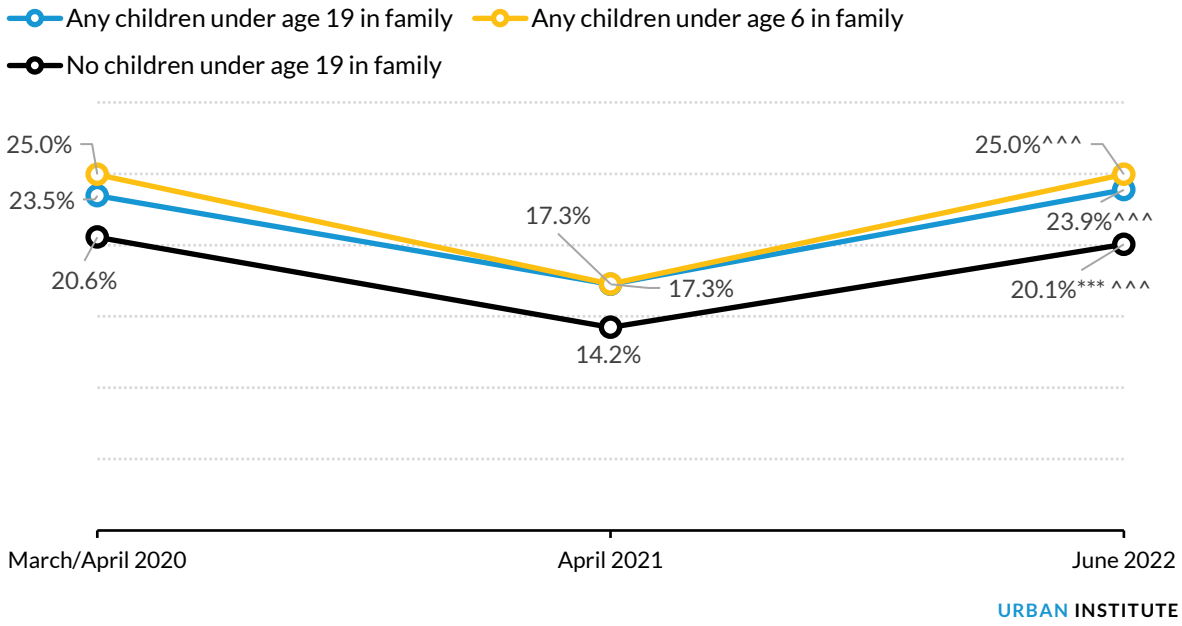
Source: Health Reform Monitoring Survey, March to April 2020, April 2021, and June 2022.
Notes: Estimates are regression adjusted.
*/**/*** Estimate differs from 2020 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.
^/^^/^^^ Estimate differs from 2021 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

Food Insecurity among Families with Children

Food insecurity is typically more prevalent in households with children compared with all households, and this pattern holds in the HRMS data (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2022). In June 2022, nearly one in four adults who were parents or guardians of children under 19 living with them (23.9 percent) reported their household was food insecure, compared with about one in five adults without children under 19 in their families (20.1 percent). Similar to the trends reported above, the 2022 rates showed a statistically significant increase from 2021 and were similar to those reported in spring 2020.

FIGURE 2

Share of Adults Reporting Household Food Insecurity in the Last 30 Days, by Presence of Children in Family, March/April 2020, April 2021, and June 2022



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Source: Health Reform Monitoring Survey, March/April 2020, April 2021, and June 2022.
Note: Estimates are regression adjusted. Adults with children in their families are those who are parents or guardians of children under age 19 who live with them.
*/**/*** Estimate differs from 2020 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.
^/^^/^^^ Estimate differs from 2021 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

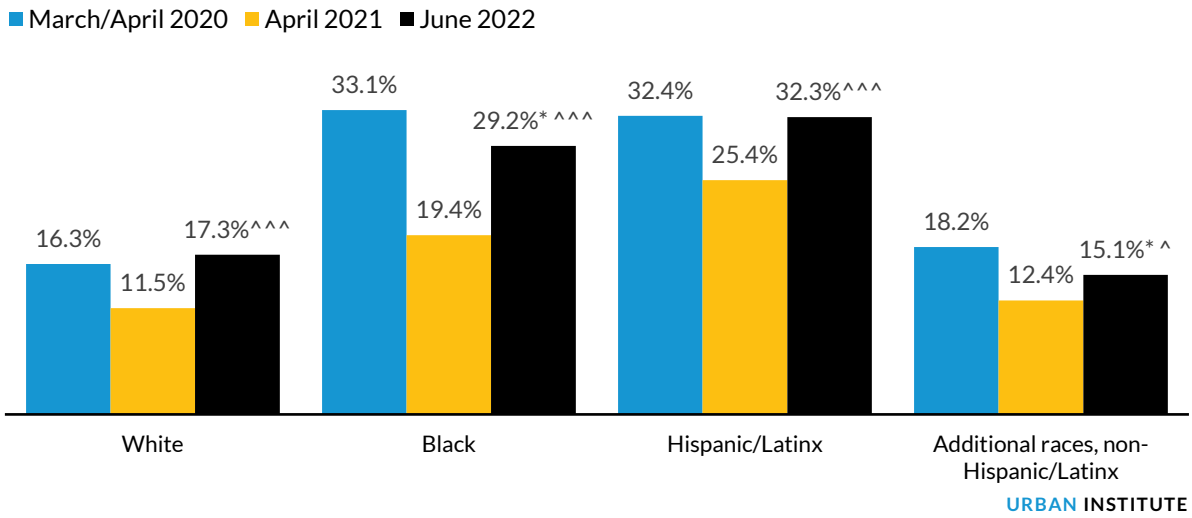
Higher Food Insecurity Rates Among Communities of Color

People of color experience persistently higher rates of food insecurity, which is evident in the racial and ethnic groups examined with HRMS data. In June 2022, food insecurity rates among Black and Hispanic/Latinx[6] adults participating in the HRMS were 29.2 percent and 32.3 percent, respectively. In contrast, food insecurity among white adults was considerably lower, at 17.3 percent. Rates for white, Black, and Hispanic/Latinx adults all declined between 2020 and 2021 and then increased significantly between 2021 and 2022. Black adults and those included in the category of additional races/non-Hispanic/Latinx had a slightly lower rate of food insecurity in 2022 than in 2020; white and Hispanic/Latinx adults had similar rates at the beginning of the pandemic and summer 2022.

Data limitations in the HRMS constrain the ability to examine disparities experienced by non-Hispanic/Latinx adults who are not white or Black. But other research documents that Native Americans experience persistently high rates of food insecurity (Nikolaus et al. 2022), and efforts to disaggregate data on Asian and Pacific Islanders indicate that averages can mask wide differences among specific Asian communities and that Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders have higher rates than white households and Asian communities when they are aggregated together (Long et al. 2020).

FIGURE 3

Share of Adults Reporting Household Food Insecurity in the Last 30 Days, by Race/Ethnicity, March/April 2020, April 2021, and June 2022



Source: Health Reform Monitoring Survey, March/April 2020, April 2021, and June 2022.
Notes: Adults are ages 18 to 64. Adults of additional races include those who identify as Asian; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, American Indian, or Alaska Native; other races; or more than one race. Estimates are regression adjusted.
*/**/*** Estimate differs from 2020 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.
^/^^/^^^ Estimate differs from 2021 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

How Do the HRMS Data Compare with Other Recent Information on Food Hardship?

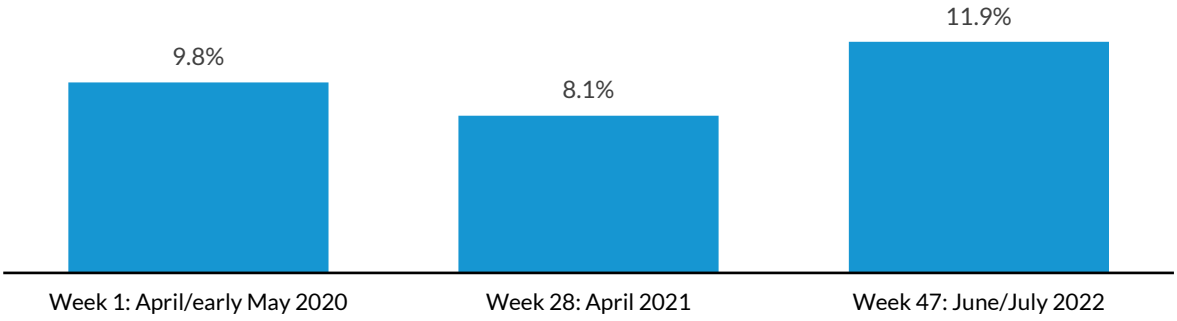
The most recent information from US government sources on food hardship comes from the Household Pulse Survey conducted by the US Census Bureau. The Pulse Survey uses a different measure of food hardship than the Household Food Security Module used in the HRMS.[7] The Pulse Survey assesses "food insufficiency," which documents the percent of adults who report that there was sometimes or often not enough to eat in their household in the last seven days. This measure is more similar to the very low food security measure used in HRMS, which is the most severe form of food security hardship. In the wave closest to the HRMS June 2022 data collection period (Pulse week 47, June 29 to July 11), the food insufficiency rate was 11.9 percent,[8] significantly higher than the rate in April 2021 (8.1 percent). The Pulse Survey was launched for the first time in late April/early May 2020, which is about a month after the 2020 HRMS data collection period, and a period when some initial assistance, such as initial stimulus payments, had begun reaching households. At that time, the food insufficiency rate was 9.8 percent. The Pulse trends over time follow a similar trajectory to the HRMS over these three periods (April/May 2020, April 2021, and June 2022) and reflect a resurgence in food hardship in 2022.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) released its latest Household Food Security in the United States report in September 2022 that includes data from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement, but these data reflect 2021 experiences (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2022). The USDA

report indicates that overall annual food insecurity rates were similar in 2020 and 2021, but food insecurity declined among households with children. Because the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement is collected in December 2021, it does not shed light on 2022 experience. Therefore, the 2022 Census Pulse Survey data offer more recent insights in potential trends in hardship.

FIGURE 4

Household Food Insufficiency Reported in the Last Seven Days



Source: Household Pulse Survey.

What Conditions Have Changed That May Influence Food Insecurity Trends?

Food price inflation has accelerated during 2022, eroding the purchasing power of many families at the grocery store. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the US food price index increased 11.4 percent in August 2022, the largest 12-month increase recorded since May 1979.[9] In addition, some of the safety net supports available during the pandemic are no longer available. For example, the expanded child tax credit payments enacted through the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act provided monthly advance payments of $250 to $300 per child but ended after Congress did not extend the expansion past December 2021. Survey data indicate the expanded child tax credit was associated with a reduction in food insecurity among households with children (Karpman et al. 2022; Shafer et al. 2022). Pandemic Electronic Benefit Payments, a program designed to provide resources to households with children equivalent to the value of school meals when school is not in session, were implemented unevenly across states in 2022. Recent analysis suggests states that moved more quickly to provide Pandemic Electronic Benefit Payments experienced lower rates of food insufficiency among households with children.[10] Some other forms of pandemic-related assistance, including stimulus payments and enhanced unemployment benefits, have also ended. Enhanced Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits in the form of "emergency allotments" have continued into 2022 in most states while the public health emergency is in effect.

Policy Implications

Persistent food price inflation at levels not seen in four decades, combined with a reduction in some safety net supports in 2022, may be eroding families' ability to consistently afford a nutritionally

adequate diet. Policymakers need to closely monitor challenges that families may be facing and assess tools that may be available to help buffer food hardship.

- During the public health emergency, states have had the option to provide emergency allotments, or enhanced monthly benefit amounts to SNAP participants, and the majority of states have continued to do so in 2022. A recent analysis shows that these allotments have reduced household poverty (Wheaton and Kwon 2022). However, authorization for emergency allotments ends when the administration declares an end to the public health emergency, which may happen in the near future. The impact of the reduction in benefit amounts will be buffered somewhat by an important change in the value of the Thrifty Food Plan, which is the market basket of food items that USDA uses as the basis for determining SNAP benefits.[11] In fall 2021, the Thrifty Food Plan was increased by 21 percent, improving the adequacy of SNAP benefits when compared with local food prices for a large majority of counties. Nevertheless, gaps between the maximum benefit and meal costs persist in some higher cost areas[12] and have likely increased in 2022. Although SNAP benefits will be adjusted on October 1, 2022, based on food price inflation data through June 2022, food prices are continuing to rise, and households will experience an erosion of purchasing power until the next inflation increase in fall 2023. Given that SNAP benefits are adjusted for food prices only once a year, it may be difficult for families to stretch their dollar as far in the coming months. Policymakers may need to consider whether some type of continued SNAP emergency allotment is needed to buffer potential hardship among low-income households as inflation persists.
- Congressional authorization to provide universal access to school meals ended in June 2022, which will likely impact food insecurity among some households as the new 2022–23 school year begins. Reinstatement of universal access during this uncertain time may be an important strategy for supporting households with children, and survey data suggest a large majority of adults support making universal access to free school meals permanent (Gutierrez 2022).
- In January 2021, the White House released an Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government,[13] communicating the administration's commitment to addressing persistent disparities related to structural racism and other forms of marginalization and exclusion. This emphasis on equity necessitates an intentional assessment of how policy actions (or lack thereof) impact those who experience disparities, particularly those that undermine the ability to meet basic needs. As well-documented in research literature (Odoms-Young and Bruce 2018), and reinforced in these recent survey data, households of color continue to experience much higher rates of food insecurity and the negative health outcomes that can be associated with food hardship. Policymakers can look to research evidence to inform policy choices that can support meaningful reductions in food insecurity. For example, the recent analysis by Wheaton and Kwon (2022) on the impact of the SNAP emergency allotments and the reevaluation of the Thrifty Food Plan concludes that the greatest impacts in poverty reduction occur among Black and Hispanic people. Similarly, while extension of universal school meals could be beneficial for

children of all race and ethnicities, it can also be an important tool for reducing gaps in food insecurity among racial and ethnic groups.[14]

Data and Methods

This brief draws on data from the Urban Institute's HRMS, a nationally representative, internet-based survey of adults ages 18 to 64. For each round of the HRMS, we draw a stratified, random sample of adults from Ipsos's KnowledgePanel, the nation's largest probability-based online research panel. Members of the panel are recruited from an address-based sampling frame covering approximately 97 percent of US households, including those without internet access. If needed, panel members are given internet access and web-enabled devices to facilitate their participation.

For this analysis, we use data from the 2020, 2021, and 2022 rounds of the HRMS. The 2020 round was fielded March 25 to April 10, with a sample of 9,032 adults. The 2021 round was fielded April 2 to April 20, with a sample of 9,067 adults. The 2022 round was fielded June 17 to July 5, with a sample of 9,494 adults; 98 percent of 2022 respondents completed the survey in June. In each round, we oversample adults in low- and moderate-income households, nonwhite and Hispanic/Latinx adults, and young adults. Survey weights adjust for unequal selection probabilities and are poststratified to the characteristics of the national nonelderly adult population, based on benchmarks from the Current Population Survey and the American Community Survey. The margin of sampling error, including the design effect, for the full sample of adults in each round is plus or minus 1.2 percentage points for a 50 percent statistic at the 95 percent confidence level. Additional information about the HRMS can be found at https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/health-policy-center/projects/health-reform-monitoring-survey.

Estimated changes in food insecurity between 2020 and 2022 are regression adjusted to control for any changes in the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the adults participating in each survey round not fully captured in the survey weights. We control for a respondent's gender, age, race and ethnicity, primary language, educational attainment, marital status, presence of children in the household, household income, family income, homeownership status, internet access, urban or rural status, region, and participation in the previous round of the survey. In presenting the regression-adjusted estimates, we use the predicted rate of each outcome in each year for the same nationally representative population. For this analysis, we base the nationally representative sample on respondents to the 2021 and 2022 rounds of the survey.

The HRMS has several limitations, including a low cumulative response rate, and nonresponse bias is likely only partially mitigated by the survey weights. However, studies assessing recruitment for the panel from which HRMS samples are drawn have found little evidence of nonresponse bias for core demographic and socioeconomic measures (Garrett, Dennis, and DiSogra 2010; Heeren et al. 2008). Further, HRMS estimates benchmark well against federal surveys with larger samples sizes, higher response rates, and stronger designs (Long et al. 2014). Because the HRMS is fielded in English and Spanish, we do not fully capture the experiences of households with adults who speak other languages.

Notes

[1] Our estimate of household food insecurity is based on the six-item short form of the USDA's Household Food Security Survey Module and uses a 30-day reference period. Respondents with two to four affirmative responses are defined as having low household food security, and respondents with five to six affirmative responses are defined as having very low household food security. These groups are jointly defined as food insecure. Affirmative responses include reporting that it was often or sometimes true that the food the household bought did not last, and the household did not have money to get more; it was often or sometimes true that the household could not afford to eat balanced meals; adults in the household ever cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food; meals were cut or skipped for three or more of the last 30 days; the respondent ate less than they felt they should because there was not enough money for food; and the respondent was ever hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money for food.

[2] Tami Luhby, "Workers' Wages Continue to Climb, but Not as Fast as Inflation," *CNN*, July 2022, https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/29/economy/worker-wages-inflation/index.html.

[3] See endnote 1.

[4] "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey," US Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed September 20, 2022, https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000?years_option=all_years.

[5] Alisha Coleman-Jensen, "Disability is an important risk factor for food insecurity," US Department of Agriculture (blog), February 12, 2017, https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2013/02/12/disability-important-risk-factor-food-insecurity.

[6] The term "Hispanic/Latinx" is used throughout this report to reflect the different ways in which people self-identify. The US Census Bureau uses the term "Hispanic." Also, the terms "white" and "Black" in this report refer to adults who do not identify as "Hispanic/Latinx."

[7] The HRMS uses the six-item short form of the Household Food Security Module used by USDA to estimate food insecurity rates. The full module includes 10 items for households with adults only and 18 items for those that include children. The six-item module is a validated measure often used in other surveys to reduce respondent burden.

[8] "Household Pulse Survey Interactive Tool: Week 47," US Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey, accessed September 20, 2022, https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?periodSelector=47.

[9] "Economic News Release: Consumer Price Index Summary," US Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 2022, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/cpi.nr0.htm.

[10] Lauren Bauer, Krista Ruffini, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Natalie Tomeh, "Food Security Shouldn't Take a Summer Vacation," *Up Front* (blog), Brookings, August 26, 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2022/08/26/food-security-shouldnt-take-a-summer-vacation/.

[11] "USDA Food Plans: Cost of Food," US Department of Agriculture, last updated August 16, 2021, https://www.fns.usda.gov/cnpp/usda-food-plans-cost-food-reports.

[12] Elaine Waxman, Craig Gundersen, and Olivia Fiol, "Does SNAP Cover the Cost of a Meal in Your County?" last updated November 2021, Urban Institute, https://www.urban.org/features/does-snap-cover-cost-meal-your-county.

[13] "Executive Order On Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government," January 20, 2021, The White House, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/.

[14] Martinelli, Sarah, Swapna Reddy, Michael Yudell, Saigayatri Darira, Maureen McCoy. "The Case for Universal Free Meals for All: A Permanent Solution," *Health Affairs Forefront*, May 5, 2022, https://www.healthaffairs.org/do/10.1377/forefront.20220504.114330/.

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