



# As Inflation Squeezed Family Budgets, Food Insecurity Increased between 2021 and 2022

## Findings from the Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey

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Although investments in federal nutrition programs and other federal aid during the COVID-19 pandemic helped mitigate hunger, families contended with a new economic stressor in 2022: food price inflation. Food prices increased by 10.4 percent between December 2021 and December 2022, the highest rise in decades.<sup>1</sup> With fewer public resources provided as COVID-19 pandemic aid expires and stricter budgeting needed for groceries, food hardship has increased for many households across the country. In this brief, we examine trends in food insecurity<sup>2</sup> and receipt of charitable food using data from the Urban Institute’s Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS), a nationally representative, annual survey of more than 7,500 adults ages 18 to 64. We estimate the shares of adults reporting household food insecurity and charitable food receipt in 2022 and compare those shares to estimates from 2019, 2020, and 2021. In light of the rapid rise in food price inflation, we also assess households’ use of financial coping methods to deal with rising grocery costs in 2022.

We find the following:

- Between December 2021 and December 2022, the share of adults reporting food insecurity in the last year increased from 20 percent to 24.6 percent. The rate of food insecurity in 2022 was not statistically different from the rate in the year just before the pandemic (23.3 percent in 2019).

- » We observed a similar trend in the share of adults reporting the most severe level of food insecurity: very low food security, which is characterized by a reduction in the frequency and quality of foods consumed. More than 1 in 10 adults (12.5 percent) reported experiencing very low food insecurity in 2022, up from 9.3 percent in 2021.
- Hispanic/Latinx\* and Black adults were consistently at greater risk of food insecurity than white adults between 2019 and 2022, reflecting longstanding disparities in opportunities and access to resources.
  - » The shares of Hispanic/Latinx and Black adults reporting food insecurity in 2022 were roughly 50 percent higher than the share of white adults reporting food insecurity (32.6 percent and 30.4 percent vs. 21.6 percent).
- Nearly one in six adults (16.0 percent) reported their households received charitable food (free groceries or meals) in 2022, down from 17.4 percent in 2021, which translates to about 2.8 million fewer adults, and down from the height of usage in 2020 (19.7 percent), but well above the prepandemic rate in 2019 (12.7 percent or roughly 6.8 million more adults).<sup>3</sup>
- In December 2022, 63.2 percent of adults reported their household grocery costs increased a lot in the last year, higher than the shares reporting costs increased a lot for gasoline (55.5 percent), home heating (26.4 percent), rent (26.2 percent), child care (14.3 percent), health insurance (12.5 percent), and mortgage payments (8.1 percent).
- Adults whose grocery costs increased a lot in 2022 relied on charitable food and other coping strategies but still faced high rates of food insecurity.
  - » Adults whose grocery costs increased a lot were nearly twice as likely as other adults to be food insecure (29.0 percent vs. 16.5 percent).
  - » Because of recent price increases, 62.0 percent of adults whose grocery costs increased a lot reported either reducing the amount of food they bought or not buying the kinds of foods they wanted, 43.3 percent withdrew money from savings, and 36.3 percent increased credit card debt. About 16.8 percent received charitable food.

## Background: Recent Changes in Inflation and Federal Aid

In spite of the COVID-19 pandemic job losses and widespread economic distress, surveys found food insecurity held steady or decreased during the pandemic, likely because of the strong federal response to shore up the safety net as well as increased mobilization of charitable food resources (Cooney and Shaefer 2021; Karpman and Zuckerman 2021; Waxman and Gupta 2021).<sup>4</sup> However, by late 2022, families could no longer receive many of the expansions of the public safety net.

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\* We use the term “Hispanic/Latinx” throughout this brief 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.

For instance, the expanded child tax credit provided monthly advance payments of \$250 to \$300 per child between July and December 2021 and was associated with a decline in food insecurity among households with children (Karpman et al. 2022; Shafer et al. 2022). Federal waivers allowing free school meals for all students without families having to certify income were implemented during the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years. Though the initiative had widespread support (Gutierrez 2022) and has been shown to reduce food insecurity (Cohen et al. 2021), the waivers expired in June 2022. Additional COVID-19-pandemic-related assistance, such as enhanced unemployment insurance and economic impact payments, also expired by late 2021.

This expiration of federal and state aid coincided with accelerating inflation, with especially rapid growth in the price of food and, during the summer of 2022, extreme volatility in gasoline prices.<sup>5</sup> Food prices increased by 10.4 percent between December 2021 and December 2022, hitting a 40-year high for inflation. And, while growth in food prices showed some signs of abating as of early 2023, they remain significantly higher than in 2021 and are still increasing at a rate well above the historical norm.<sup>6</sup> These policy and economic changes have put pressure on family budgets, making it more difficult to afford food and other basic needs.

Additional federal aid has expired in 2023. Enhanced Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits in the form of “emergency allotments,” which were temporary benefit increases of between \$95 and \$250 a month per household, ended in February 2023 in 35 states.<sup>7</sup> Analysis showed that these allotments reduced household poverty and had the largest impact on Black and Hispanic/Latinx people, providing evidence that this may advance equity goals by reducing longstanding disparities in food security between white families and families of color (Wheaton and Kwon 2022). The provision of additional federal and state assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic may have mitigated food insecurity, but with fewer resources available to support families in the coming year alongside high inflation, families are more at-risk of food insecurity and lack adequate buffers and supports to meet their day-to-day needs.

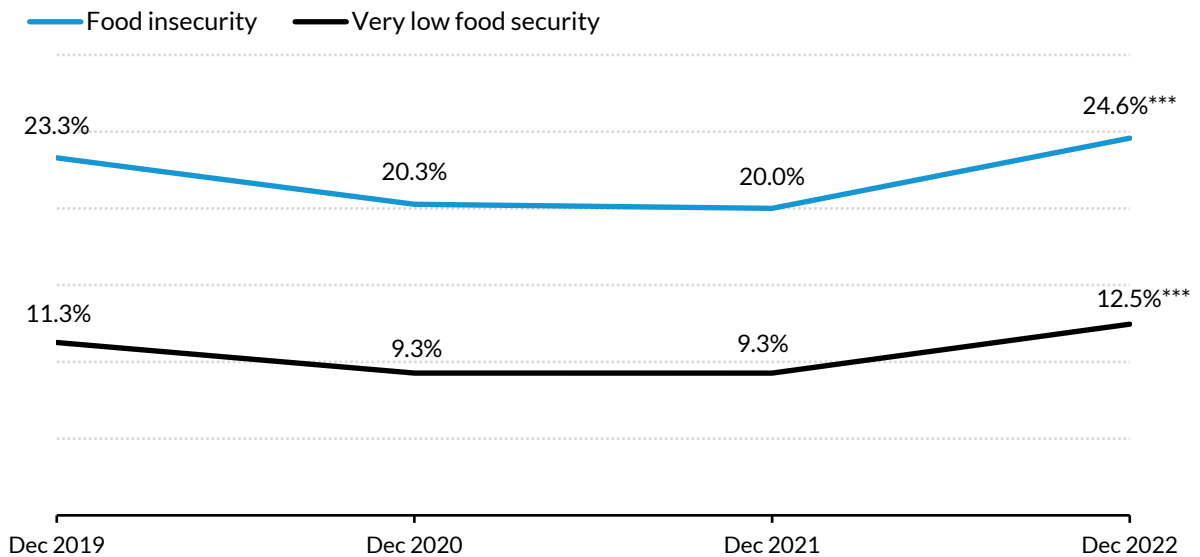
## Trends in Food Insecurity and Charitable Food Receipt

***The share of adults reporting household food insecurity increased sharply between 2021 and 2022, erasing reductions in food insecurity that occurred following safety net policy changes during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.***

Between December 2021 and December 2022, the share of adults reporting food insecurity in the last year increased from 20 percent to 24.6 percent (figure 1). We observed a similar trend in the share of adults reporting very low food security: 12.5 percent reported this most severe form of food insecurity in 2022, up from 9.3 percent in 2021. Households experiencing very low food security not only report reductions in dietary quality and variety but also experience reduced food intake and skipped meals, presenting a more severe indicator of household hunger. We observed the largest increases in food insecurity between 2021 and 2022 among adults who had family incomes between 100 to 200 or 200 to 400 percent of the federal poverty level (data not shown).

FIGURE 1

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Experiencing Household Food Insecurity in the Last 12 Months, December 2019 to December 2022



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2019 to December 2022.

\*/\*\*/\*\* 2022 estimate differs significantly from 2021 at 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels using two-tailed tests.

We also observed an increase in the share of adults reporting marginal food security (9.4 percent in December 2022, up from 8.2 percent in 2021; data not shown), in which adults report anxiety over food sufficiency but little or no indication of changes in food intake. Adults experiencing marginal food security are often simplified to food secure and are missed in national-level data reporting on food hardship. However, research shows that those with marginal food security are more similar to those who are experiencing food insecurity than those who report no concerns about food and suggests that national estimates of food insecurity may actually be an underestimate of the issue (Cook et al. 2013). As inflation continues to place pressure on families' budgets, there is the risk that adults experiencing marginal food security could struggle to remain food secure and may be at risk for experiencing deepening levels of hardship.

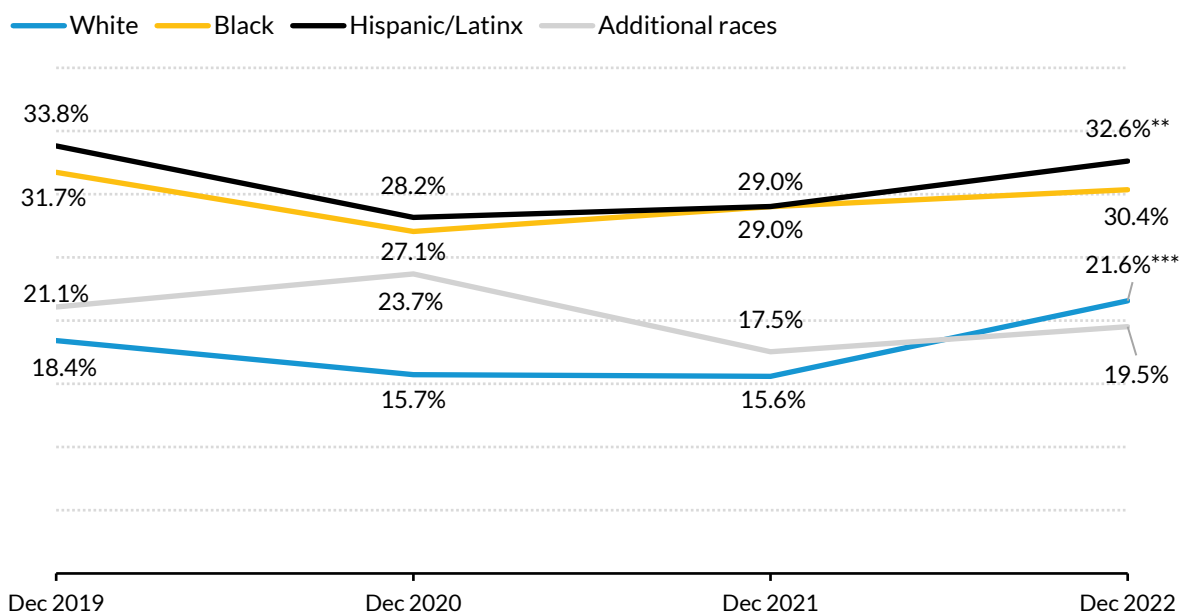
***Hispanic/Latinx and Black adults were consistently at greater risk of food insecurity than white adults between 2019 and 2022, reflecting longstanding disparities in opportunities and resources because of structural racism.***

Racial disparities in food security reflect legacies of policies contributing to inequitable systems, such as housing, employment, health care, and criminal justice (Odoms-Young and Bruce 2018). Specifically, these systems have created differential access to resources for purchasing food and other basic needs, as well as contributed to low assets that reduce the ability of households of color to weather economic shocks. Decades of systematic disinvestment in communities of color have also contributed to limited access to healthy, affordable, and nutritious food (Shaker et al. 2022). This legacy

of structural racism throughout the food system reproduces longstanding disparities in food insecurity rates between Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and Native American adults and their white counterparts.<sup>8</sup>

Hispanic/Latinx and Black adults reported food insecurity in 2022 at rates that were approximately 50 percent higher than that of white adults (32.6 percent and 30.4 percent vs. 21.6 percent; figure 2). Historically, Black and Hispanic/Latinx households have experienced higher rates of food insecurity compared with white households.<sup>9</sup> Overall, we observed the largest increases in food insecurity between 2021 and 2022 among adults who are white or Hispanic/Latinx.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Experiencing Household Food Insecurity in the Last 12 Months, By Race/Ethnicity, December 2019 to December 2022**



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2019 to December 2022.

\*/\*\*/\*\*\* 2022 estimate differs significantly from 2021 at 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels using two-tailed tests.

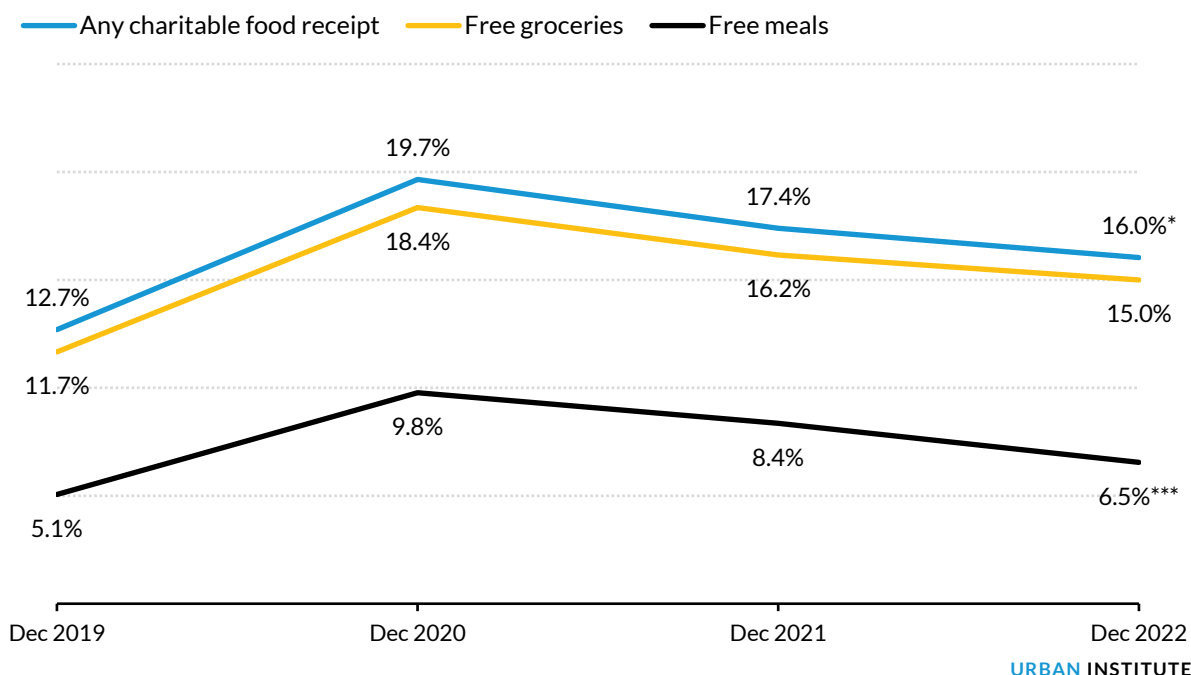
***The share of adults reporting charitable food use has declined steadily since the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, but receipt of charitable food in 2022 remained above prepandemic levels.***

Use of charitable food, including free groceries and free meals, is a common coping mechanism in times of economic hardship (Waxman et al. 2021). Nearly one in six adults (16 percent) reported their households received charitable food in 2022, down from 17.4 percent in 2021 and from the height of usage in 2020 (19.7 percent; figure 3). But use of charitable food in 2022 remained higher than the prepandemic rate in 2019 (16 percent vs. 12.7 percent). We did not observe a statistically significant change in the share of adults reporting receipt of charitable food in the 30 days prior to the survey between 2021 and 2022 (13.4 percent vs. 13.0 percent; data not shown).<sup>10</sup>

Adults reporting household food insecurity had higher rates of charitable food use than adults in food secure households. In December 2022, about two in five (38.9 percent) adults in food insecure households reported receiving charitable food in the last year, though this figure is not significantly higher than the 2019 rate.

The role of charitable food in meeting families' food needs has been substantial during the COVID-19 pandemic, and these data suggest that families are still experiencing heightened need for charitable food services.

**FIGURE 3**  
**Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Household Use of Charitable Food in the Last 12 Months, December 2019 to December 2022**



Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2019 to December 2022.

\*/\*\*/\*\*\* 2022 estimate differs significantly from 2021 at 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels using two-tailed tests.

## The Impact of Inflation on Families' Food Costs and How Families Coped

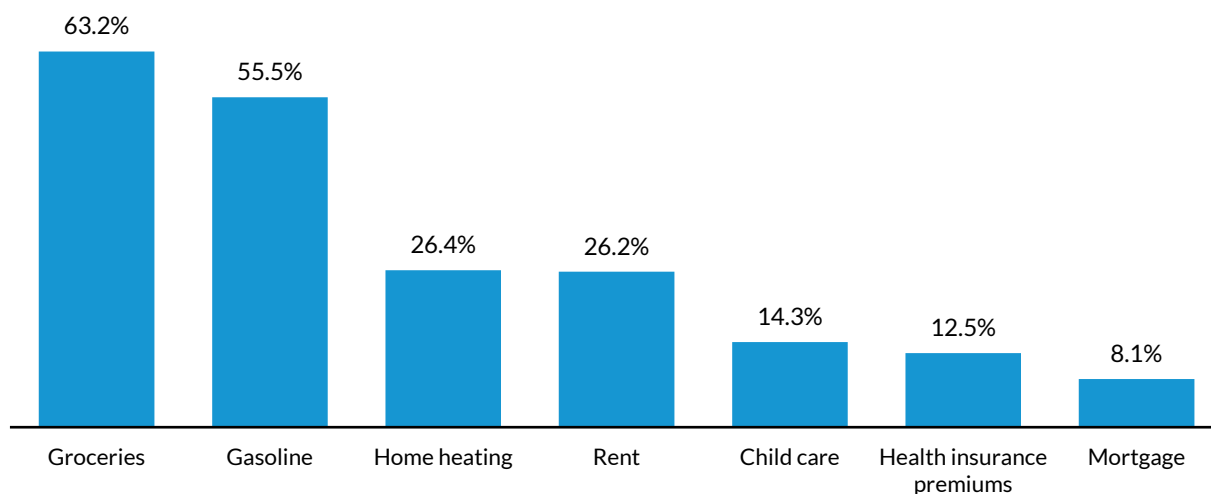
*In 2022, inflation affected households' grocery costs more commonly than other essential expenses, such as gasoline, home heating, child care, health insurance, and rent or mortgage costs.*

Although inflation rates have slowed in recent months, prices for groceries in December 2022 were nearly 12 percent higher than prices in December 2021.<sup>11</sup> During this period, inflation also increased for rent and other common household costs,<sup>12</sup> putting pressure on families' finances, especially those

with limited or fixed incomes.<sup>13</sup> Prior research demonstrates that increases in food prices and gasoline prices are associated with higher rates of food insecurity and limit the ability of SNAP to provide families with a buffer against volatile economic circumstances (Gregory and Coleman-Jensen 2013).

In December 2022, more than 6 in 10 adults (63.2 percent) reported that their families' grocery costs increased a lot in the last year (figure 4). Prior research indicates that this likely increased the risk that these families may experience food insecurity and have insufficient economic resources to secure enough food for a healthy and active life (Gregory and Coleman-Jensen 2013).

**FIGURE 4**  
**Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting the Costs Their Families Pay for the Following Expenses Increased A Lot in the Last 12 Months, December 2022**



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**Source:** Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2022.

**Notes:** Estimates for child care are limited to adults living with children ages 5 and under. Estimates for rent are based on how costs changed for the rent or mortgage among adults whose households pay rent. Estimates for mortgage are based on how costs changed for the rent or mortgage among adults whose home is owned.

Although most families reported inflationary price pressures in December 2022, some families may be less able to absorb price increases for necessities and subsequently experience greater levels of hardship, such as food insecurity. Specifically, prior research indicates that families experiencing marginal food security may consume less food, lower quality food, and use charitable food to meet their needs (Leung and Tester 2019).<sup>14</sup>

In early 2022, families that relied on cars were also more vulnerable to price shocks stemming from increased gas prices, as in many parts of the US, a car is needed to maintain employment and access services.<sup>15</sup> In December 2022, more than half of adults (55.5 percent) reported that their gasoline costs increased a lot in the last year (figure 4).

Additionally, increased inflation in housing costs placed additional pressure on renters. In 2022, about 1 in 4 adults in households that pay rent (26.2 percent) reported their rent costs increased by a lot, compared with nearly 1 in 12 homeowners (8.1 percent) who reported the same about their mortgage costs. Specifically, with surges in rent prices in 2022, prior research indicates that this may leave some families with uncertain housing circumstances and leave them at risk of being evicted or experiencing food insecurity (Fletcher et al. 2009).<sup>16</sup>

***Adults whose grocery costs increased a lot used charitable food and other coping strategies but still faced high rates of food insecurity. Black and Hispanic/Latinx adults were most likely to use coping strategies such as changes in food purchasing, withdrawing money from savings, and increasing debt.***

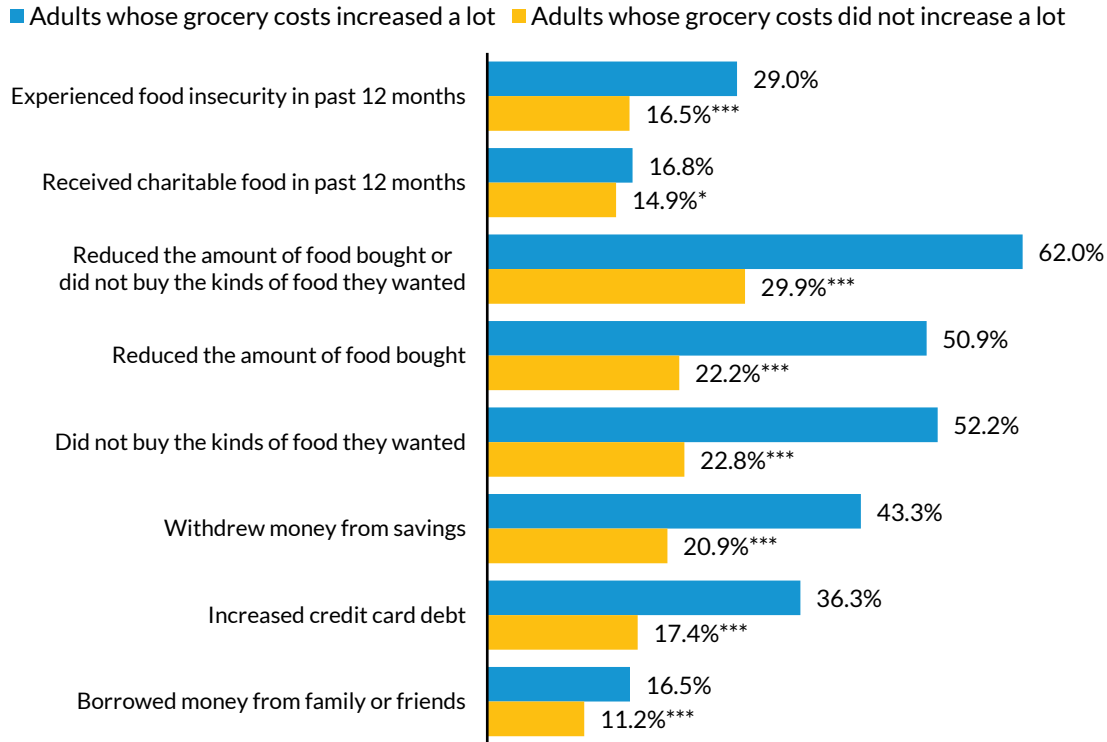
Adults who faced much higher grocery costs during 2022 were more likely to experience food insecurity and to report changing their food purchasing behavior, using savings, increasing credit card debt, or borrowing from family and friends because of recent price increases (figure 5). More than 6 in 10 (62.0 percent) adults whose grocery costs increased a lot during 2022 reported reducing the amount of food they bought (50.9 percent) or not buying the kinds of foods they wanted (52.2 percent), which points to deepening food insecurity. A large body of literature emphasizes the long-term health risks of food insecurity, heightening the risk of chronic disease, including hypertension, coronary heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, among others (Gregory and Coleman-Jensen 2013; Gundersen and Ziliak 2015).

Additionally, 43.3 percent of adults whose grocery costs increased a lot reported withdrawing money from savings and 36.3 percent increased credit card debts because of recent price increases, leaving them more vulnerable to future financial shocks and potentially undermining their long-term credit health (McKernan et al. 2016). About 16.8 percent of adults facing the largest increases in grocery costs reported receiving charitable food in the last year; roughly the same share reported borrowing money from family or friends. Despite these various coping strategies, adults whose grocery costs increased a lot were nearly twice as likely as other adults to report food insecurity in 2022 (29.0 percent vs. 16.5 percent). We also find that adults whose families faced higher grocery costs in 2022 were more likely than other adults to report problems paying the rent or mortgage and paying utility bills (data not shown), which suggests that increasing food costs may increase families' challenges in meeting other essential needs.



FIGURE 5

**Household Food Insecurity, Charitable Food Receipt, and Actions Taken in Response to Price Increases Among Adults Ages 18 to 64, By Changes in Grocery Costs in the Last 12 Months, December 2022**



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2022.

Notes: Estimates are not shown for adults who did not report how their grocery costs changed in the last 12 months.

\*/\*\*/\*\*\* Estimate differs significantly from adults whose grocery costs increased a lot at 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels using two-tailed tests.

We also found that Black and Hispanic/Latinx adults who faced higher grocery costs were more likely than white adults to experience food insecurity and to increase credit card debt or borrow money from family and friends because of price increases (table 1). Prior research has articulated how longstanding racial disparities in credit health are shaped by structural racism and leaves consumers living in communities of color with worse credit health, increasing their costs of borrowing and increasing the risk of delinquency (Elliott and Lowitz 2018).<sup>17</sup>

Hispanic/Latinx adults were also more likely than white adults to report reducing the amount of food they bought (58.4 percent vs. 49.1 percent), suggesting their family budgets were less able to absorb grocery price increases.

TABLE 1

**Household Food Insecurity, Charitable Food Receipt, and Actions Taken in Response to Recent Price Increases Among Adults Ages 18 to 64 Whose Grocery Costs Increased a Lot in the Last 12 Months, By Race/Ethnicity, December 2022**

	All adults	White	Black	Hispanic /Latinx	Additional races
Experienced food insecurity in last 12 months	29.0%	26.4%	35.2%***	36.0%***	23.4%
Received charitable food in last 12 months	16.8%	12.3%	26.6%***	26.3%***	15.0%
Reduced the amount of food bought or did not buy the kinds of food they wanted	62.0%	60.7%	64.1%	68.2%***	55.7%
<i>Reduced the amount of food bought</i>	50.9%	49.1%	52.3%	58.4%**	45.7%
<i>Did not buy the kinds of food they wanted</i>	52.2%	52.1%	51.0%	55.2%	47.9%
Withdrew money from savings	43.3%	40.9%	43.9%	50.5%***	43.4%
Increased credit card debt	36.3%	33.3%	45.2%***	43.8%***	29.6%
Borrowed money from family or friends	16.5%	14.1%	25.3%***	21.1%***	12.3%
<b>Total adults</b>	5,172	3,102	718	994	358

Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2022.

Notes: Adults who are white, Black, or additional races exclude those who are Hispanic.

\*/\*\*/\*\* Estimate differs significantly from adults who are white at 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels using two-tailed tests.

## Policy Implications

Although expanded safety net supports in the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic were associated with a reduction in food insecurity, the expiration of this aid alongside rapid inflation left families at greater risk of food insecurity in 2022. Families faced significant challenges paying for groceries and other necessities, resulting in higher rates of food hardship and use of financial coping strategies. Food insecurity and the more severe form, very low food security, increased between 2021 and 2022, and significant racial and ethnic disparities persisted, with Black and Hispanic/Latinx adults at greater risk of hardship than white adults. Because food insecurity is associated with adverse physical and mental health outcomes, especially for children, this trend could have lasting negative consequences if not reversed (Gundersen and Ziliak 2015). Moreover, although fewer adults reported using charitable food resources in 2022 than in 2021, use was still elevated when compared with the year before the COVID-19 pandemic.

About 3 in 10 adults facing higher grocery costs in 2022 reported food insecurity, and more than 6 in 10 adults facing higher grocery costs coped with price increases by reducing the amount of food they bought or not buying the kinds of foods they wanted. Many also reported increasing credit card debt, borrowing from family and friends, and withdrawing savings. Such coping strategies could increase families' long-term risk of food insecurity by leaving them less capable to meet future financial needs. Efforts to reduce saving or increase borrowing also may not have been sufficient for some families to

absorb price increases without experiencing greater levels of food insecurity in 2022, especially Black and Hispanic/Latinx families, renters, and families with fixed incomes or limited savings.

Consumers' coping strategies are shaped by the resources they have available to them to respond to an emergency. Long-term disinvestment in communities of color and policies that constrain opportunities for wealth-building have left Black and Hispanic/Latinx families with fewer community and household resources to absorb economic shocks, such as prolonged inflation (Kijakazi et al. 2019). Simultaneously, some preliminary research suggests that people of color may experience differential rates of inflation, which may interact with long-term structural disparities in assets and financial resources to deepen hardship among consumers of color.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, families of color often have no choice but to rely on coping strategies that could undermine their future financial stability and well-being by drawing down savings, borrowing, or shifting their food consumption patterns. Overall, we find that Black and Hispanic/Latinx adults were more likely than white adults to experience food insecurity and use financial coping strategies in response to higher grocery costs in 2022, signaling that inflation could deepen racial and ethnic disparities in credit health and wealth.<sup>19</sup>

## Timely Ways to Support Families Facing High Inflation

As inflation continues putting pressure on family budgets, policymakers and practitioners have opportunities to help consumers meet their increasing financial needs and avoid deepening level of hardship. In the short term, policy actions that can help protect families from current food challenges include the following:

- **Strengthening SNAP for families during times of hardship.** SNAP plays a central role in mitigating food insecurity (Ratcliffe et al. 2011) and proved to be an invaluable safety net program for families during the COVID-19 pandemic as more families participated in the program and temporary increases in benefits during the pandemic provided more assistance.<sup>20</sup> The SNAP pandemic emergency allotments provided to families reduced household poverty and reduced inequities in food insecurity (Wheaton and Kwon 2022). Moreover, flexibilities like suspension of the three-month time limit for able-bodied adults without dependents (also known as ABAWDs) to receive benefits and waivers tied to states' workload in managing applications were beneficial as well, as research shows these eligibility restrictions substantially decrease SNAP participation (Wheaton et al. 2021).

However, Congress ended SNAP emergency allotments earlier than expected, and as a result, these allotments expired in 35 states in February 2023. This removal of enhanced benefits means that all SNAP participants experienced a decline in benefit levels, although food price inflation remains high. Recent media coverage suggests that SNAP participants feel the loss of SNAP emergency allotments acutely, with many turning to charitable food to make up the shortfall and reporting increasing levels of food hardship, with one participant reporting: "I don't buy fresh vegetables anymore. I can't afford them."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, there continue to be underlying challenges with the adequacy of SNAP benefits, even following the increased value

of the Thrifty Food Plan, on which benefits are based, in 2021.<sup>22</sup> For example, SNAP benefits have historically failed to cover the cost of a moderately priced meal.<sup>23</sup> After months of high inflation in 2022, the maximum SNAP benefit for a family of four was found to be \$130 less than the minimum needed to acquire enough food for the month of September due to lags in benefit adjustments for cost of living (Acs and Wheaton 2023). Even with a cost of living increase implemented in October 2022, a deficit still existed, as these annual adjustments use food price estimates from June (Acs and Wheaton 2023). Some lawmakers have raised the prospect of reducing SNAP expenditures by proposing program changes in the upcoming Farm Bill, which is the vehicle used to reauthorize SNAP.<sup>24</sup> However, the evidence base for SNAP as an effective tool for reducing food insecurity is strong and it will be important to continue strengthening the program to preserve and improve the well-being of low-income families and communities. Indeed, a strong SNAP program is particularly critical in this period of increasing food insecurity and persistently high food prices, suggesting that policymakers should revisit the decision to reduce benefits and remove administrative flexibilities at this time.

- **Reinstating universal access to school meals.** As the 2022–23 school year continues, reinstating access to free meals in school for all children can be an important way to support households with children, given historically higher rates of food insecurity among these families and research evidence showing positive impacts of universal meal programs (Cohen et al. 2021). Following the discontinuation of pandemic-era waivers that provided for universal free school meals, evidence has mounted that families are struggling to absorb these costs, accumulating school lunch debt, and these hardships are likely to be exacerbated for those families who also receive SNAP and consequently experienced a decline in benefits in 2023.<sup>25</sup>

It is also important to consider how policy decisions to reduce inflation may affect food insecurity. Since early 2022, the Federal Reserve has been increasing interest rates in an effort to slow inflation by increasing the cost of borrowing for families, businesses, and financial institutions. These actions may increase the likelihood of unemployment for some workers, which may contribute to higher food insecurity for families affected by job loss (Nord et al. 2014). In addition, families who have compensated in the short term for higher prices by increasing debt may be negatively affected by increasing interest rates on credit cards and loans. This could potentially increase their debt burdens and undermine their ability to cope with other financial emergencies (Elliott and Lowitz 2018).

## Long-Term Investments in Reducing Disparities in Food and Financial Insecurity

In the longer term, families need additional supports to build resiliency against future shocks to the economy and decrease racial and ethnic gaps in hardship. Policy responses to promote racial equity can address structural disparities in income, wealth, credit, and food access. Some of these future-looking policies include the following:

- **Restoring expansion of the child tax credit.** The temporary expansion of the child tax credit and advanced monthly payments in 2021 were associated with reductions in food insecurity among families with children, which subsequently rose when the payments ended (Karpman et

al. 2022; Shafer et al. 2022). The credit has also been tied to improved financial security outcomes, such as declines in credit card debt and improved ability to weather emergency expenses (Hamilton et al. 2022).

- **Building families' financial assets and resiliency.** Federal and local policymakers can expand asset building and financial support programs (like baby bonds, individual development accounts, and direct income supports) so that Black and Hispanic/Latinx families have more resources to draw on for food and other costs during tough economic times (Brown et al. 2023). A national baby bond policy could reduce wealth disparities between young white and Black Americans and promote economic security and resiliency against unexpected financial emergencies (Brown et al. 2023; Darity et al. 2022; Zewde 2020). Additionally, several communities have experimented with providing direct income supports to families, and preliminary evidence suggests that such programs can lower food insecurity, reduce income volatility, and bolster individuals' mental health (Bogle et al. 2022; West et al. 2022).
- **Investing in communities of color to improve community resources, assets, and access to affordable healthy food.** Several states have implemented policies to connect residents with accessible, affordable, and culturally appropriate goods. The Healthy Food Financing Initiative, developed by the US Department of Agriculture and authorized in the 2014 and 2018 Farm Bills, invested nearly \$23 million in retail store development in over 130 underserved communities.<sup>26</sup> Expansion of nutrition incentive programs through SNAP that support the purchase of fruits and vegetables can also help increase affordability for families in high need areas.<sup>27</sup> These programs have demonstrated that participants eat more fruits and vegetables, improved their food security, and generated an economic impact of nearly \$41 million for local food retailers.<sup>28</sup> These initiatives represent targeted strategies that states have pursued to reduce barriers to food security for communities of color (Rissler et al. 2020).
- **Continuing to support families with children.** As of summer 2024, states will have the option to implement Summer EBT for families with children, which is a benefit program in which families with children eligible for free- or reduced-price school meals can receive \$40 a month during the summer months to purchase food.<sup>29</sup> Summer EBT has been shown to reduce summer hunger and food insecurity and improve nutritional intake,<sup>30</sup> and robust uptake of the option by states can offer a support during a known period of high vulnerability.

Overall, policymakers can act to alleviate families' financial pressures and provide crucial buffers to all families during tough economic times, including periods of high inflation. Targeted and intentional policy can make headway in enabling families of color to access the resources they need to respond to economic emergencies without widening racial disparities in wealth and food security.

## Data and Methods

This brief draws on data from nationally representative samples of adults ages 18 to 64 who participated in the Urban Institute's WBNS, including 7,694 adults who participated in the December

2019 round of the survey, 7,737 who participated in December 2020, 8,142 who participated in December 2021, and 7,881 who participated in December 2022. The WBNS is an internet-based survey designed to monitor changes in individual and family well-being as policymakers consider changes to federal safety-net programs. For each round of the WBNS, we draw a stratified random sample (including a large oversample of adults in low-income households) from the KnowledgePanel, a probability-based internet panel maintained by Ipsos that includes households with and without internet access. Survey weights adjust for unequal selection probabilities and are poststratified to the characteristics of nonelderly adults based on benchmarks from the Current Population Survey and American Community Survey. Participants can complete the survey in English or Spanish. For further information on the survey design and content, see Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez (2018).<sup>31</sup>

We estimated changes between December 2019 and December 2022 in the share of adults reporting that their households experienced food insecurity in the last 12 months and the share whose households received charitable food in the last 12 months. Charitable food estimates for 2019 are limited to the randomly selected half of the 2019 survey sample (3,863 adults) who received charitable food questions that were consistent with the charitable food questions asked in 2020 through 2022. The remaining half of the 2019 sample (3,831 adults) were asked charitable food questions that have been used in the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement; we exclude this group when estimating charitable food receipt in 2019 for this brief.

Estimated changes between 2019 and 2022 for all adults and within each racial or ethnic group included in this study 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, family size, family income, chronic health conditions, residence in an urban or rural area, internet access, homeownership status, family composition, and census region; the presence of children under age 19 in the respondent's household; whether the respondent participated in multiple survey rounds; and how long the respondent has been a member of the KnowledgePanel. 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 WBNS has several limitations, including a low cumulative response rate, and the survey weights and regression adjustment mitigate, but do not eliminate, potential nonresponse bias. However, studies assessing recruitment for the KnowledgePanel have found little evidence of nonresponse bias for core demographic and socioeconomic measures (Garrett, Dennis, and DiSogra 2010; Heeren et al. 2008), and WBNS estimates are generally consistent with benchmarks from federal surveys (Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez 2018). The sampling frame for the WBNS also excludes or underrepresents certain groups of adults, including those who are homeless, have low literacy levels, and who are not proficient in English or Spanish. Finally, there may be measurement error in self-reported household food security, charitable food receipt, perceptions of changes in household costs, and financial coping strategies.

# Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Summary Findings: Food Price Outlook, 2023,” USDA Economic Research Service, last updated February 23, 2023, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings/>.
- <sup>2</sup> 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 12-month 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**. Respondents with one affirmative response are defined as having **marginal food security**. 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 almost every month, or some months but not every month; 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.
- <sup>3</sup> We multiplied the estimated the 3.3 percentage-point increase in charitable food use between December 2019 and December 2022 and the 1.4 percentage-point decrease in charitable food use between December 2021 and December 2022 by the projected number of adults ages 18 to 64 in 2022. We used national population predictions available from the US Census Bureau. These files give population projections for all ages from 2016 to 2060 based on estimated birth rates, death rates, and net migration rates over the period. Using the “Main Series” file, we summed the 2022 population projections for all 18- to 64-year-olds to arrive at 203,351,348 nonelderly adults in 2022. See “2017 National Population Projections Datasets,” US Census Bureau, Department of Commerce, last updated October 8, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/2017/demo/popproj/2017-popproj.html>. The 95 percent confidence interval for the estimated increase in the number of adults receiving charitable food (6.8 million) between 2019 and 2022 is 4.2 million to 9.4 million. The 95 percent confidence interval for the estimated decrease in the number of adults receiving charitable food (-2.8 million) between 2021 and 2022 is -5.7 million to 200,000.
- <sup>4</sup> “Key Statistics and Graphics in 2021,” last updated October 17, 2022, USDA Economic Research Service, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/key-statistics-graphics>.
- <sup>5</sup> Scott Horsley, “No Retreat in the Summer Heat. Inflation Blistering at 9.1% in June,” *NPR*, July 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/13/1111070073/no-retreat-in-the-summer-heat-prices-likely-topped-40-year-high-last-month>.
- <sup>6</sup> Zoe Han, “Inflation is Easing, but Some Grocery Prices Are Expected to Soar in 2023 – Including One Whose Price Rose Nearly 60% over the Past Year,” January 2023, *MarketWatch*, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/inflation-is-easing-but-the-prices-of-these-food-items-are-likely-to-soar-in-2023-11673501308>.  
  
“Summary Findings: Food Price Outlook, 2023,” USDA Economic Research Service, last updated February 23, 2023, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings/>.
- <sup>7</sup> Dottie Rosenbaum, Katie Bergh, and Lauren Hall. 2023. “Temporary Pandemic SNAP Benefits Will End in Remaining 35 States in March 2023.” *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, February 2023, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/temporary-pandemic-snap-benefits-will-end-in-remaining-35-states-in-march>.
- <sup>8</sup> Areeba Haider and Lorena Roque, “New Poverty and Food Insecurity Data Illustrate Persistent Racial Inequities,” *Center for American Progress*, September 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/new-poverty-food-insecurity-data-illustrate-persistent-racial-inequities/>.
- <sup>9</sup> See Table “Trends in Food Insecurity by Race and Ethnicity, 2001–21” in “Interactive Charts and Highlights,” USDA Economic Research Service, last updated September 7, 2022, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/interactive-charts-and-highlights/>.

- <sup>10</sup> The share of adults reporting receipt of free meals in the 30 days prior to the survey in 2022 was 5.2 percent, down from 6.5 percent in 2021. The share of adults reporting receipt of free groceries in the 30 days prior to the survey was 11.7 percent in 2022, statistically unchanged from the 2021 level of 12.0 percent.
- <sup>11</sup> “Consumer Price Index: 2022 in Review,” *US Bureau of Labor Statistics*, January 2023, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2023/consumer-price-index-2022-in-review.htm>.
- <sup>12</sup> “Consumer Price Index,” *US Bureau of Labor Statistics*, accessed March 6, 2023, <https://www.bls.gov/cpi/>.
- <sup>13</sup> Cassandra Martinchek and Poonam Gupta, “Four steps policymakers can take now to tackle food insecurity,” *Urban Wire* (blog), September 30, 2022, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/four-steps-policymakers-can-take-now-tackle-food-insecurity>.
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- <sup>20</sup> “SNAP Data Tables,” USDA Food and Nutrition Service, accessed March 6, 2023, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.
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