

How Many Food-Insecure Adults Need Help but Don't Know Where to Get It?

Findings from the Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2022

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Among adults experiencing food insecurity who reported not accessing charitable food in 2022, **more than three in five reported not being aware of a community resource for charitable food.**

Nearly two-thirds of food-insecure adults who didn't access charitable food did not feel comfortable accessing it.

Between December 2021 and 2022, **there were no significant changes in who was aware of accessing charitable food.**

These data suggest that many **people who may need charitable food resources are not receiving the aid they need.**

Rapid growth in food prices, reductions in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits for some households, and the expiration of federal COVID-19 pandemic aid to households have coincided with increased food insecurity and placed persistent demands on the nation's charitable food system. Though the share of nonelderly adults turning to charitable food for their households has fallen from its peak at the height of the recession (from 19.7 percent in 2020 to 16.0 percent in 2022), this share in 2022 remained above the prepandemic level observed in 2019 (12.7 percent) (<https://urban.is/44zz4vZ>).

In December 2022, nearly two-thirds (64.3 percent) of food-insecure adults who did not receive charitable food in 2022 felt uncomfortable accessing it. Those who could most benefit from receiving charitable food resources, such as those provided by food banks or food pantries, may not be receiving the aid they need. This may, in part, be because they aren't aware of where to receive food assistance in their communities.

In this fact sheet, we analyze awareness of and comfort with using charitable food, using data from the Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey—a nationally representative, annual survey of approximately 7,500 adults ages 18 to 64. We compare trends between 2020 and 2022 and focus on those not accessing charitable food.

We find the following:

- Nearly one in five (18.3 percent) adults in households that did not use charitable food reported being food insecure in 2022.
- Three in five (60.5 percent) food-insecure adults who did not use charitable food in 2022 did not know of a community resource for charitable food (39.3 percent were aware; data not shown), and 64.3 percent did not feel comfortable accessing these resources (35.4 percent were comfortable; data not shown). Those experiencing food insecurity may be in particular need of help from charitable food resources.
- Between 2021 and 2022, there were no significant changes in the shares of low-income and food-insecure adults reporting awareness of charitable food resources. However, we saw an increase in the share of low-income adults reporting discomfort with using charitable food resources between 2021 and 2022 (47.4 percent versus 49.7 percent; see figure 1). This may be the result of differences in who answered the survey each year, differences in who received charitable food or reported low income in each year, or increased reluctance to access resources as the economy was perceived as improving.

TABLE 1

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Awareness of and Comfort with Using Charitable Food among Those Reporting No Charitable Food Use in the Past 12 Months, by Family Income and Food Security Status, December 2022

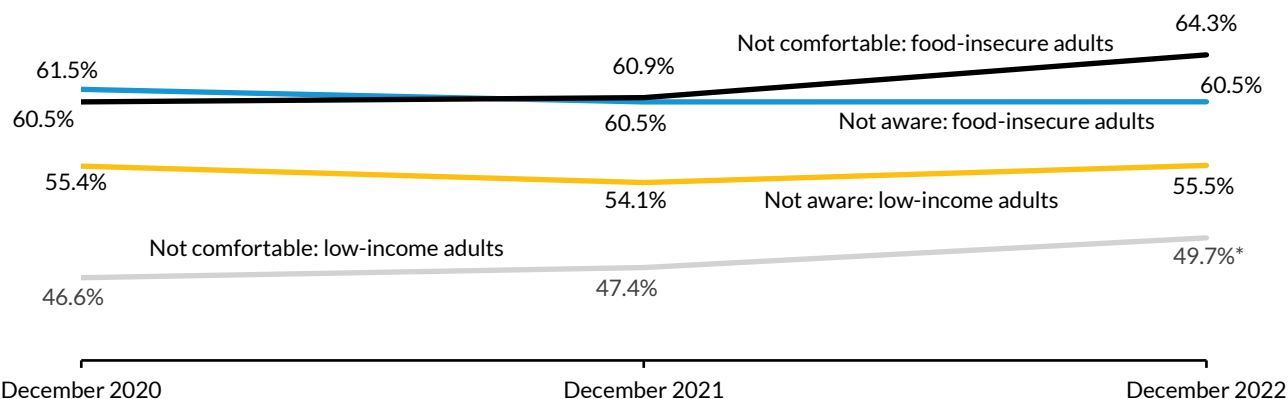
	Below 200% FPL [^]	At or above 200% FPL	Adults in food-insecure households [^]	Adults not in food-insecure households
Not aware of place in community to obtain charitable food	55.5%	50.3% ^{**}	60.5%	48.5% ^{***}
Not comfortable in getting charitable food	49.7%	57.6% ^{***}	64.3%	54.5% ^{***}
Sample size	2,266	3,777	1,448	4,510

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

Notes: FPL = federal poverty level. Not comfortable represents adults who noted they were not too or not at all comfortable. ^{**}/^{***} Estimate differs significantly from reference group (denoted by [^]) at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

FIGURE 1

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Awareness of and Comfort with Using Charitable Food among Those Reporting No Charitable Food Use in the Past 12 Months, by Family Income and Food-Insecurity Status, 2020–22



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

Notes: Low-income adults are adults with family incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Not comfortable represents adults who noted they were not too or not at all comfortable. ^{**}/^{***} Estimate differs significantly from 2021 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 levels, using two-tailed tests.

IMPLICATIONS

The lack of awareness of and comfort with accessing charitable food resources among food-insecure adults could be attributed to several factors, such as a lack of up-to-date knowledge on charitable food locations and availability, barriers to accessing and finding information online, and stigma associated with receiving charitable food. During the pandemic, the charitable food sector made some strides in reducing stigma by shifting to mobile distributions to respond to requirements around social distancing. Although client choice, or the ability to “shop” for groceries in a pantry setting, had been the gold standard for pantries before the pandemic, many people also appreciated the simplicity and anonymity allowed by driving up to a food distribution site and acquiring a prepackaged box of food. While there are downsides to this approach, including receiving unwanted food items, charitable food providers may be able to build on lessons learned from the pandemic about privacy and dignity while also increasing food choice, such as through online ordering (<https://urban.is/46tLhnm>). In addition, using a combination of technology and community influencers to share up-to-date information on locations’ hours and logistics may help combat lack of awareness. Finally, it’s important for nonprofit organizations and municipalities, among other local actors, to find ways to reduce stigma in accessing charitable food.