

Nearly One in Three Households with Children Were Food Insecure in 2025

Findings from the Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey

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In this analysis, we report on food insecurity among households with children under 18 using December 2025 data from the Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS).¹ We also examine recent trends in food insecurity among working-age adults (ages 18 to 64) living with and without children.

We find that in 2025, food insecurity among adults living with children remained high, with nearly 1 in 3 struggling to afford food. Black and Hispanic adults living with children were significantly more likely to report food insecurity than white adults living with children. These persistently high rates put children and their families at increased risk of health challenges in the short- and long-term.

Further details on the WBNS data and methods are available in a companion policy brief (Karpman et al. 2026).

Nearly 1 in 3 Adults Living with Children Struggled to Afford Food in 2025

In December 2025, about 1 in 3 (31.9 percent) adults living with children under 18 reported their household was food insecure in the last 12 months (figure 1). This share included 1 in 6 (16.0 percent) adults who reported very low food security, a severe form of food insecurity in which household members experience multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns, such as skipping meals or going without food for a whole day.

In comparison, households without children were significantly less likely than households with children to report overall food insecurity (20.4 percent versus 31.9 percent). Households without children were also less likely to experience very low food security (10.0 percent versus 16.0 percent).

FOOD INSECURITY IN THE 2025 WBNS

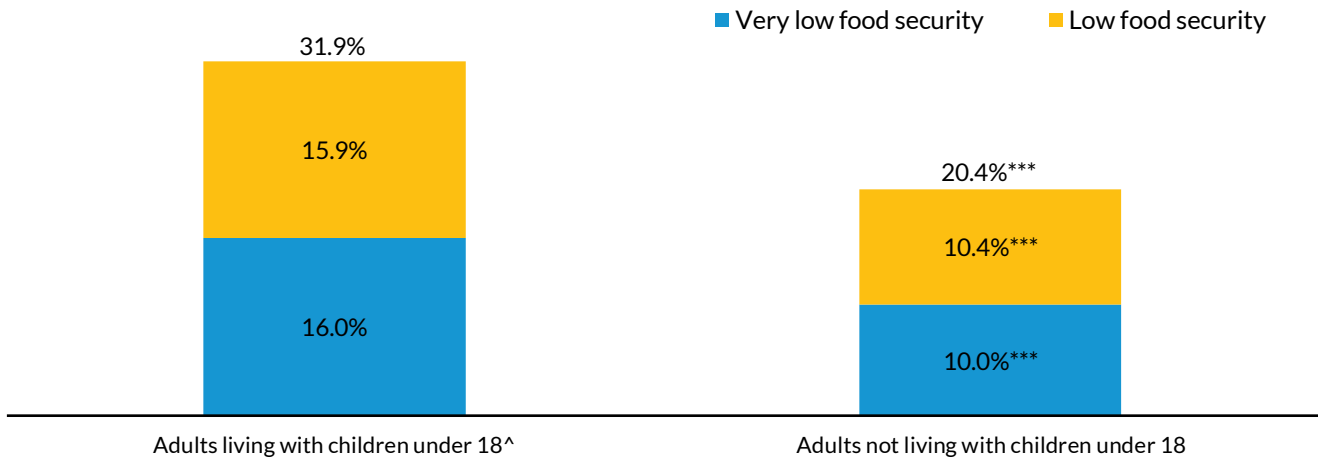
The Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS) is a nationally representative, annual survey of adults that monitors individual and family well-being in the context of a changing safety net. It has collected data on household food insecurity from a sample of working-age adults since 2017. The 2025 sample was expanded to include adults of all ages.

The WBNS can help address key knowledge gaps following the US Department of Agriculture's decision to stop collecting household food security data in federal surveys, and amid looming cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and other safety net programs.

In this series of data summaries, we examine household food insecurity in 2025 among population groups that are disproportionately at risk of experiencing food access challenges and deeper levels of hardship under forthcoming safety net cuts.

FIGURE 1

Food Insecurity Among Adults in Households With and Without Children, December 2025



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2025.

Notes: Among adults 18 or older in the last 12 months. The estimates at the top of each stacked bar represent the total share of adults reporting food insecurity in the last 12 months.

*/**/*** Estimates differ significantly from reference group (^adults living with children) at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

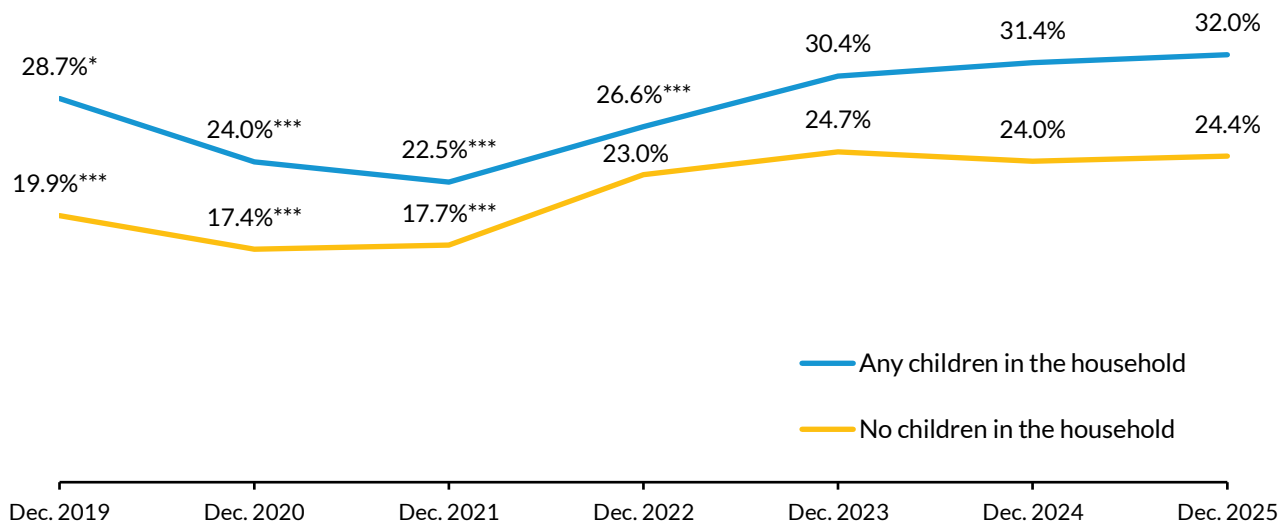
Food Insecurity Persisted at a Rate Similar to 2024 in Households of Working-Age Adults Living with Children

The WBNS sample has included working-age adults in each survey round since it was launched in 2017, with a sample of adults ages 65 and older added for the first time in 2025. In figure 2, we report annual trends in household food insecurity among working-age adults by presence of children between 2019 and 2025.

As shown in figure 2, food insecurity among households with children remained consistently elevated between 2023 and 2025, at above 30 percent. The 2025 rate (32.0 percent) was markedly higher than that observed between 2020 and 2021 (24 percent and 22.5 percent), when several supports were available to many families with children in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the enhanced child tax credit, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) emergency allotments, Pandemic EBT, and universal school meals. Food insecurity among households with children in 2025 was also higher than the prepandemic level observed in 2019 (28.7 percent).

FIGURE 2

Food Insecurity Among Working-Age Adults in Households With and Without Children, December 2019 to December 2025



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2025.

Notes: Among adults ages 18 to 64 in households with and without children under 18 in the last 12 months. Because of an update to our methodology, estimates differ slightly from those published in previous reports. See the companion policy brief for details (Karpman et al. 2026).

*/**/** Estimates differ significantly from Dec. 2025 at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

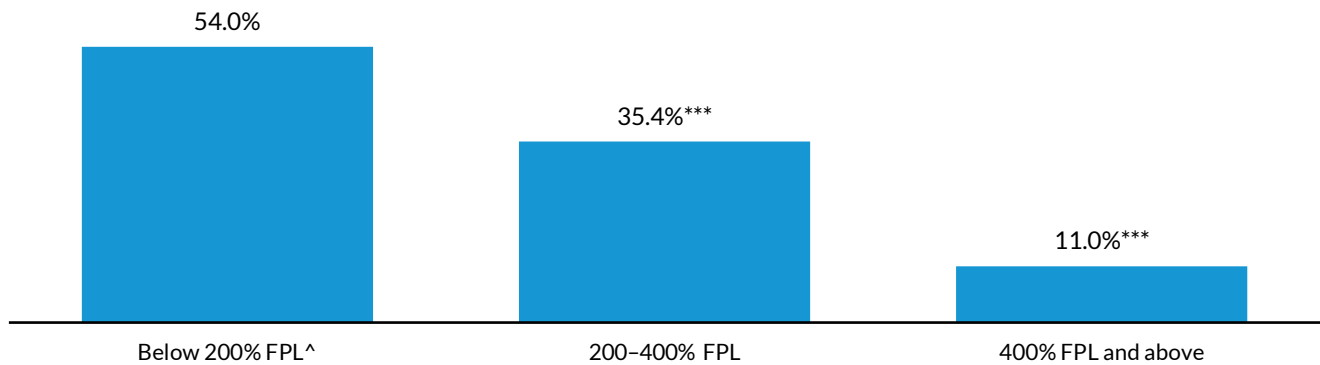
More than Half of Low-Income Households with Children Were Food-Insecure

In figure 3, we show household food insecurity in 2025 among adults of all ages who lived with children, broken out by family income. More than half of households with children who had family incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) (less than \$53,300 for a family of three in 2025) experienced food insecurity (54.0 percent).

By comparison, roughly a third (35.4 percent) of households with incomes between 200 and 400 percent FPL were food insecure in 2025. These households may be struggling to afford food, but are not generally eligible for federal nutrition programs. Just over 1 in 10 households (11.0 percent) with annual incomes at or above 400 percent FPL experienced food insecurity at some point during the year.

FIGURE 3

Food Insecurity Among Adults in Households with Children, by Family Income, December 2025



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2025.

Notes: FPL = federal poverty level. Among adults 18 or older in the last 12 months.

*/**/** Estimates differ significantly from reference group ([^]below 200% FPL) at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

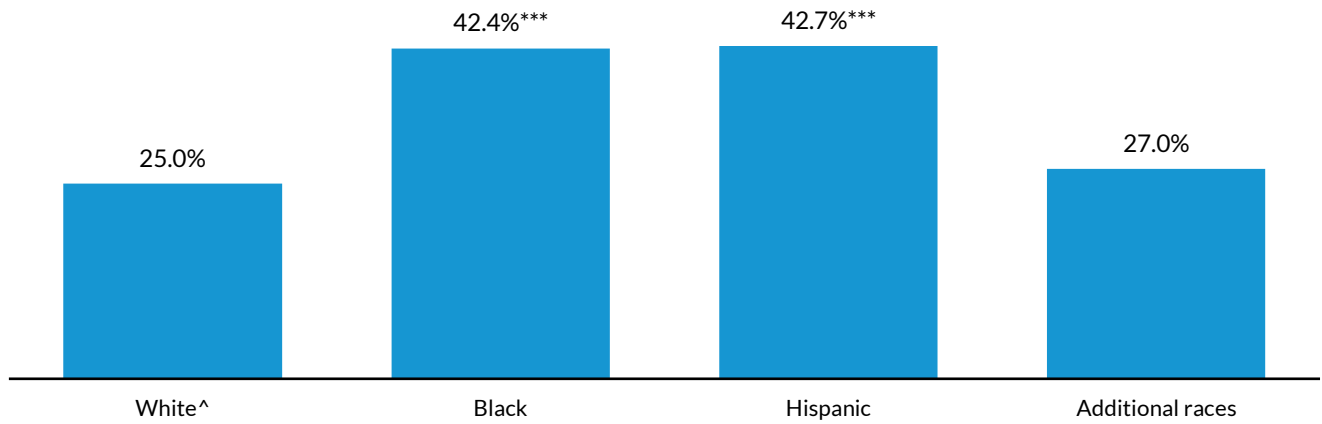
Black and Hispanic Adults in Households with Children Had Significantly Higher Rates of Food Insecurity

Overall food insecurity rates among adults in households with children mask considerable differences in experiences with food insecurity across racial and ethnic groups. Children were much more likely to live in food-insecure households if the adult survey participant was Black (42.4 percent) or Hispanic (42.7 percent) than if the respondent was white (25.0 percent).

Our ability to disaggregate data for households with adults who identify as Asian, American Indian or Native American, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, another race, or more than one race is limited by the small sample size of respondents in those groups and the administration of the survey in only English and Spanish. When aggregated into one group, the food insecurity rate for these households with children is close to that of white adults living with children. However, research has found wide differences in food insecurity among groups within this broad category (Nikolaus et al. 2022; Long et al. 2020).

FIGURE 4

Food Insecurity Among Adults in Households with Children, by Race and Ethnicity, December 2025



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2025.

Notes: Among adults 18 or older in the last 12 months. Adults who are white, Black, or additional races refer to those who are not Hispanic. Adults of additional races include those who are Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, another race, or more than one race. Sample size limitations preclude us from providing disaggregated estimates for this group.

*/**/*** Estimates differ significantly from reference group ([^]white) at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

Food Insecurity Poses Health Risks for Children and Their Families

There are both short- and long-term health risks for children who live in food-insecure households. Food insecurity is associated with multiple challenges for children as they grow and develop, including greater instances of fair or poor health, higher rates of hospitalization, and greater likelihood of cognitive/developmental delays (Gallegos et al. 2021; Gundersen and Ziliak 2015). Persistent exposure to food insecurity as a child can contribute to worse health outcomes later in life (Lam, Gau, and Kandula 2025; Metallinos-Katsaras et al. 2012), with long-term effects on community well-being.

Several evidence-based policies and programs can help reduce the risk of food insecurity and its associated harms among households with children. These include SNAP and child nutrition programs like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), school meals, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (Ratcliffe et al. 2011; Kreider et al. 2016; Cohen et al. 2021; Heflin et al. 2015).

However, looming changes to the safety net may reduce the availability and effectiveness of these interventions. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act, passed in July 2025, extended SNAP work requirements and time limits to families with adolescent children 14 and up. States will also be required to share the costs of benefits in fiscal year 2028 and beyond, making it more difficult for state SNAP programs to maintain current eligibility and benefit levels, which are already well-documented as inadequate (Waxman and Gupta 2024). Changes that may affect both SNAP and Medicaid enrollment may also ultimately affect direct certification for and overall participation in child nutrition programs (Gutierrez 2025).

These changes are unfolding while food insecurity rates among households with children remain persistently high, and families across household income levels report challenges affording food. Tracking and understanding experiences with food insecurity are vital to assessing how current and future policy environments may shape outcomes for children across the US.

Notes

¹ We measure household food insecurity based on the six-item short form of the USDA's Household Food Security Survey Module, using a 12-month reference period. Affirmative responses to these six questions include reporting that (1) 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; (2) it was often or sometimes true that the household could not afford to eat balanced meals; (3) adults in the household ever cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food; (4) meals were cut or skipped almost every month, or some months but not every month; (5) the respondent ate less than they felt they should because there was not enough money for food; and (6) the respondent was ever hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money for food. 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.

This year, WBNS also tested the inclusion of two additional survey items from the recently developed 8-item Abbreviated Adult and Child Food Security Scale (AACFSS) (see Poblacion et al. 2023). The AACFSS has been proposed by researchers at Children's Healthwatch as a way to include additional questions about the direct experiences of children with food hardship when it is not considered feasible to ask the full 18-item household food security module. We find that the rate of food hardship among households with children is similar using both the traditional six-item measure and the AACFSS. We will further explore the information generated from the child-focused items in the AACFSS in a separate publication. The AACFSS asks two questions from the 18-item survey: "We couldn't feed the children a balanced meal, because we couldn't afford that." Was that often, sometimes, or never true for your household in the last 12 months?" and "In the last 12 months, were the children ever hungry because there wasn't enough money for food?"

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