Physical Food-Access Limitations Among Older Adults

Evidence from the 2025 Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey

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Food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.[1] While validated food insecurity measures capture critical financial barriers to food access, they are not designed to identify people who have other barriers to acquiring, preparing, and consuming an adequate and nutritious diet due to physical limitations. Examining the extent to which older adults or others with disabilities experience physical food access barriers is increasingly important for understanding whether these populations can consistently meet their nutritional needs, especially in a rapidly changing policy environment that may exacerbate levels of hardship. The 2025 budget reconciliation law (the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, or OBBBA) made significant changes to safety net programs that protect older adults from hardship, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid. While home-delivered and congregate meal programs continue to be offered under the Older Americans Act, funding is frequently insufficient to meet the need, resulting in waitlists for many who seek services.[2]

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Some older adults experience food access barriers because of health-related physical limitations that make it difficult to shop for food or prepare meals. Physical food-access limitations are distinct from the concept of food insecurity but can overlap.
- Understanding these additional unmet food needs can inform policymaking, program design, and evaluation intended to improve nutrition, health, and independence among older adults.
- The 2025 Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey collected data on physical barriers that can affect food access.

The December 2025 Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS), a nationally representative survey fielded annually by the Urban Institute, explored the prevalence of individual physical barriers to acquiring food and preparing meals among older adults, defined as those ages 60 and older.[3] We also examine variation by family income, presence of selected functional limitations, and household food security status to assess which subgroups may experience disproportionate levels of difficulty and would therefore be at higher risk of further hardship as a result of recent policy changes.

Measuring Physical Food-Access Limitations in the WBNS

Adults ages 60 and older who reported functional limitations associated with doing errands alone, such as shopping, preparing their own meals, or lifting and carrying objects (see Data and Methods), were asked two new questions about physical barriers to obtaining enough food: (1) whether during the previous month they had gone without groceries or personal items because shopping independently was too difficult and no one was available to help, and (2) whether they had gone without a hot meal because preparing one independently was too difficult and no one was around to help. We refer to these collectively as physical food-access limitations.

Relationship Between Physical Food Access and Food Insecurity

Information gained from questions on physical food-access limitations can complement findings from the validated United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) six-item food security module used in the WBNS by capturing barriers that stem from functional limitations instead of financial hardship. Although these challenges do often overlap, it is important to understand how both can contribute in different ways to a person's food access. Some older adults may report that they feel food secure, as the food security module centers on whether the respondent can afford sufficient and balanced meals, and whether they skip or cut meals or feel hungry due to lack of money for food. However, even food-secure adults can still experience unmet food needs because of disability or functional limitations that affect their ability to acquire an adequate diet. Others may report experiencing food insecurity without also navigating individual physical barriers to accessing food. Examining both concepts together provides a more complete understanding of unmet food needs among older adults and can help tailor policy measures and interventions appropriately to ensure the specific barriers to food access are being addressed.

About 1 in 5 Older Low-Income Adults with a Functional Limitation That May Affect Their Ability to Shop or Prepare Food Reported Going Without Groceries or a Hot Meal

Physical limitations and inadequate social support can combine to restrict access to food. Adults ages 60 or older who reported functional limitations related to running errands like shopping, or lifting or carrying up to 10 pounds, were asked a follow-up question: had they gone without groceries or personal items in the last month because they were unable to shop independently and had no one to help? We refer to this as unmet grocery shopping needs. We found that 7.7 percent of older adults with difficulty shopping, lifting, or carrying had unmet grocery shopping needs. Older adults were significantly more likely to have unmet grocery shopping needs if they had lower incomes. More than 1 in 10 (11.1 percent) older adults in this subgroup with family incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) reported unmet grocery shopping needs, compared with 4.6 percent of those with incomes between 200 and 400 percent of FPL and 4.2 percent of those with incomes greater than 400 percent FPL.

Adults ages 60 or older who reported difficulty preparing meals or lifting or carrying up to 10 pounds were asked a second follow-up question: had they gone without a hot meal because they were unable to prepare one independently and had no one to help? We refer to this as an unmet meal preparation need. In this subgroup, a similar share (10.6 percent) reported unmet meal preparation needs (table 1). Unmet meal preparation needs were also more common among lower-income adults, affecting approximately 1 in 6 (15.8 percent) of those with incomes below 200 percent of FPL, compared with 4.2 percent of those with incomes between 200 percent and 400 percent FPL and 6.4 percent of those with incomes at or above 400 percent of FPL.

Overall, 14.3 percent of adults ages 60 or older with a functional limitation affecting their ability to shop or prepare food reported unmet grocery shopping or meal preparation needs, including about 1 in 5 (20.4 percent) of these adults with incomes below 200 percent of FPL and about 8 percent of those with higher incomes.

TABLE 1

Unmet Grocery Shopping and Meal Preparation Needs Among Adults Ages 60 and Older with Functional Limitations Related to Shopping and Cooking, Overall and by Income, December 2025

Question	Adults ages 60 and older	Income <200% FPL	200-400% FPL	400% FPL or more
Ever **went without groceries or personal items** in the last month because it was too difficult to shop by yourself and no one was there to help or shop for you*	7.7%	11.1%	4.6%***	4.2%***
Ever **went without a hot meal** in the last month because it was too difficult for you to make one by yourself and no one was there to help or make one for you**	10.6%	15.8%	4.2%***	6.4%***
Ever **went without groceries or personal items or a hot meal** in the last month because of difficulty shopping or preparing meals***	14.3%	20.4%	8.2%***	8.3%***

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

Notes: FPL = federal poverty level.

*/**/*** Estimates differ significantly from adults with income below 200 percent of the FPL at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

The sample sizes for the estimates above are as follows:

*Among adults ages 60 and older reporting difficulty doing errands alone or lifting/carrying something as heavy as 10 pounds (N = 1,421); those with incomes below 200 percent of the FPL (n = 933); between 200 and 400 percent FPL (n = 285); and 400 percent FPL or more (n = 203).

**Among adults ages 60 and older reporting difficulty preparing meals or difficulty lifting/carrying something as heavy as 10 pounds (N = 1,431); those with incomes below 200 percent of the FPL (n = 939); between 200 and 400 percent FPL (n = 283); and 400 percent FPL or more (n = 209).

***Among adults ages 60 and older reporting any of these difficulties (N = 1,472); those with incomes below 200 percent of the FPL (n = 965); between 200 and 400 percent FPL (n = 292); and 400 percent FPL or more (n = 215).

Characteristics of Older Adults with Unmet Food Needs

As noted above, older adults with unmet grocery shopping or meal preparation needs were much more likely to have lower family incomes (below 200 percent of FPL) compared with all older adults (71.4 percent versus 30.3 percent; table 2).[4] In addition to having difficulty preparing meals, lifting or carrying up to 10 pounds, or doing errands alone, older adults with unmet grocery shopping or meal preparation needs were more likely than average to report other functional limitations including mobility issues such as difficulty walking or climbing stairs (77.4 percent versus 23.8 percent), difficulty hearing (17.9 percent versus 9.4 percent), difficulty seeing (11.4 percent versus 3.5 percent), and difficulty with self-care including dressing or bathing (29.0 percent versus 5.1 percent).

TABLE 2

Characteristics of Adults Ages 60 and Older Reporting Unmet Grocery Shopping or Meal Preparation Needs, December 2025

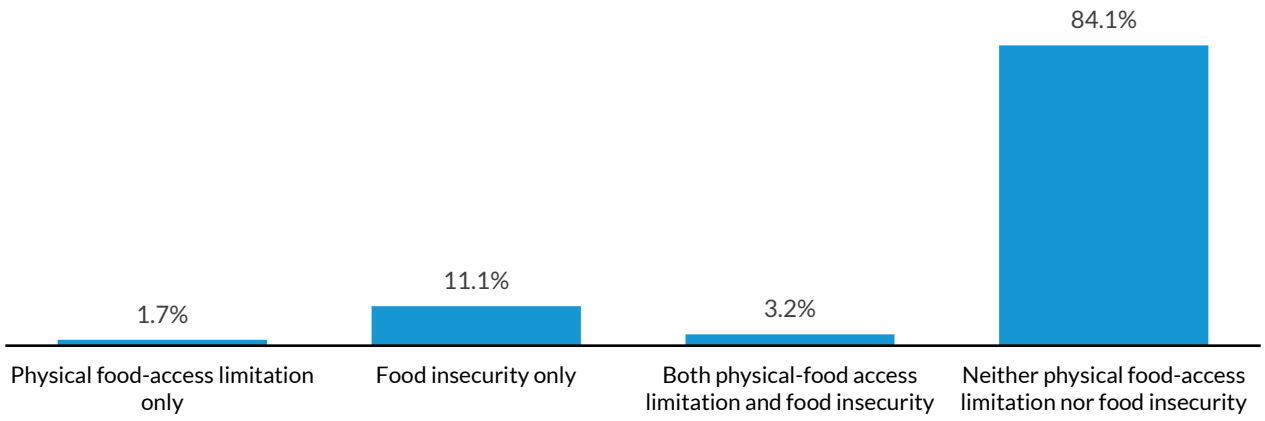
Characteristics	All adults ages 60+	Adults ages 60+ reporting unmet grocery shopping needs or unmet meal preparation needs
Family income		
Below 200% FPL	30.3%	71.4%
200-400% FPL	27.5%	16.1%
400% FPL or more	42.2%	12.4%
Functional difficulties		
Hearing	9.4%	17.9%
Vision	3.5%	11.4%
Cognitive	7.0%	40.7%
Ambulatory	23.8%	77.4%
Self-care	5.1%	29.0%
Doing errands alone	10.1%	53.1%
Preparing meals	14.3%	80.6%
Lifting/carrying	31.2%	89.2%
Communication	3.0%	17.5%
Food security		
Food secure in the last 12 months	85.7%	34.1%
Food insecure in the last 12 months	14.3%	65.9%
Sample size	3,681	259

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

Food insecurity is much higher among those reporting physical food-access limitations, compared with the broader older adult population. Among all adults aged 60 and older, 14.3 percent reported being food insecure at some point in 2025, while 65.9 percent of older adults with either unmet grocery shopping needs or unmet meal preparation needs were food insecure (table 2). While distinct concepts, presence of physical food-access limitations and reported food insecurity often overlap. As shown in figure 1, only a small percentage of all older adults ages 60 and older reported experiencing a physical food access limitation without also being food insecure (1.7 percent), while more than 1 in 10 (11.1 percent) experienced food insecurity without a physical food access limitation. In addition, 3.2 percent of older adults experienced both conditions, while 84.1 percent report neither.

FIGURE 1

Intersection of Physical Food-Access Limitations and Food Insecurity Among Adults Ages 60 and Older, December 2025



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2025.
Notes: Physical food-access limitation includes those reporting either unmet grocery shopping needs or unmet meal preparation needs.

Why This Matters

Existing food insecurity measures provide valuable information about economic hardship but may not capture additional burdens of unmet food needs among older adults who also experience functional limitations or disabilities. Data from these two questions on physical food access barriers included in the 2025 WBNS suggest that additional insights can be generated by examining how functional limitations can further constrain food access beyond food insecurity. A better understanding of these additional barriers can help inform policymakers, practitioners, and researchers when designing and assessing policies and programs intended to improve nutrition, health, and independence among older adults.

Data and Methods

The WBNS is a nationally representative, annual survey of adults that monitors individual and family well-being in the context of a changing safety net. Launched by the Urban Institute in December 2017, the WBNS provides timely information on the challenges that households face in meeting basic needs, such as food, housing, and health care.

More than 10,000 adults ages 18 and older participated in the December 2025 round of the survey. Between 2017 and 2024, each survey round included more than 7,500 adults ages 18 to 64, and in 2025, the sample was expanded to include 2,500 adults ages 65 and older.

For each survey round, a stratified random sample is drawn from the KnowledgePanel, a probability-based internet panel that is maintained by Ipsos and includes households with and without internet access. Survey weights adjust for unequal selection probabilities from the panel and are poststratified to the characteristics of adults based on benchmarks from the Current Population Survey and the American Community Survey. Participants can complete the WBNS in English or Spanish. For further information on the survey design before the 2025 change in sampling, see Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez (2018).

Two new questions were added to the 2025 WBNS to assess barriers accessing food due to individual physical limitations:

1. "In the last month, did you ever go without groceries or personal items because it was too difficult to shop by yourself and no one was there to help or shop for you?" This question was given to respondents ages 60 and older who also reported at least one of the following:
    - Difficulty doing errands alone, such as visiting a doctor's office or shopping, because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition
    - Some difficulty, much difficulty, or unable to lift or carry something as heavy as 10 pounds
2. "In the last month, did you ever go without a hot meal because it was too difficult for you to make one by yourself and no one was there to help or make one for you?" This question was given to respondents ages 60 and older who also reported at least one of the following:
    - Some difficulty, much difficulty, or unable to prepare their own meals
    - Some difficulty, much difficulty, or unable to lift or carry something as heavy as 10 pounds

The questions on difficulty lifting or carrying and preparing meals were adapted from a short-form Physical Food Security Tool, which was based on the NHANES Physical Functioning Questionnaire (Sassine et al. 2023). The question about difficulty doing errands alone is one of the six functional limitation questions used in the American Community Survey. Finally, the two questions on unmet grocery needs and unmet meal preparation needs were adapted from the National Health and Aging Trends Study.[5]

Notes

[1] "Food Security in the U.S. – Definitions of Food Security," USDA Economic Research Service, last updated March 30, 2026, https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.

[2] "Waitlists," Meals on Wheels America, accessed October 7, 2026, https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/issues/the-urgent-need/waitlists/.

[3] We chose to focus on this group to align with the age group eligible for federal nutrition programs targeted to older adults, such as the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, the Older Americans Act nutrition programs such as congregate meals, and the Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program.

[4] Due to sample size limitations, we cannot assess characteristics of these two populations (those with unmet grocery shopping needs and those with unmet meal preparation needs) separately.

[5] See "NHATS Round 8 Data Collection Instrument," National Health and Aging Trends Study, accessed October 7, 2026, https://www.nhats.org/sites/default/files/public-documentation/NHATS%20Round%208%20Data%20Collection%20Instrument_032023.pdf.

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