



# Who Is Accessing Charitable Food in America?

## Results from the 2018 Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey

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Many people in the US turn to charitable food sources, such as food pantries and free meal programs, when food budgets run tight. But, information about the households that use these resources is limited. The Urban Institute Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS), launched in December 2017 to track individual and family well-being, asks whether nonelderly adult respondents' households received free groceries or a free meal in the last 30 days. Drawing on the December 2018 survey data, we analyze the role that charitable food plays in the lives of many people across the country. We find the following:

- Approximately 1 in 10 adults ages 18 to 64 (10.3 percent) reported that they or someone in their household used charitable food services in the 30 days before the survey (table 1). Among low-income adults, the rate is significantly higher at one in five (table 1). These results suggest many more Americans are turning to food pantries and free meal programs than may be indicated by other national survey data.
- Some people report accessing charitable food in the past 30 days more than others, including younger adults ages 18 to 34, women, Non-Hispanic black and Hispanic adults, single parents, adults who did not complete high school, home renters, and adults with annual family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL).
- Those who are unemployed or out of the labor force, especially those with health problems or a disability, and/or who experienced income volatility in the prior 12 months, are also more likely to access charitable food services. Though employed respondents access charitable food

services much less, about half of all those who reported accessing these services in the past 30 days were working.

- In addition to reporting high rates of food insecurity, people whose households access charitable food services are also typically struggling with other material hardships, such as trouble paying for housing, utilities, and/or medical bills. Approximately two out of three people who have used charitable food assistance in the past 30 days report some other material hardship beyond food insecurity, indicating that other priorities, such as rent, may compete with food spending in family budgets.
- Many of those who use charitable food services also have accessed public safety net programs. Of people in households accessing charitable food, 57.6 percent reported that their families received medical assistance, including Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and 54.6 percent reported that their families received federal nutrition assistance in the past year, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and/or free or reduced-price school meals (figure 2). However, about 36 percent of nonelderly adults in households accessing charitable food report family incomes at or above 200 percent of FPL (table 3), which makes them ineligible for such benefit programs.

## Background

### What Is Charitable Food?

Charitable food is services offering free groceries for off-site consumption or free meals prepared for consumption on site at various community-based locations (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2019b). Grocery programs are commonly called food pantries or food shelves, and meal programs may be identified in several ways, including as soup kitchens or emergency kitchens. In 2014, Feeding America’s Hunger in America study identified approximately 58,000 programs across the country offering these services, with most being food pantries (Weinfield et al. 2014). These programs frequently obtain food from larger regional organizations known as food banks, which are nonprofit organizations that collect and distribute food to hunger-relief charities and act as storage and distribution depots for smaller frontline agencies that provide food directly to people struggling with hunger.<sup>1</sup> Though most of the food sourced through food banks comes from private-sector resources, food banks also distribute food from the Emergency Food Assistance Program, a federal program administered by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).<sup>2</sup>

## Existing Survey Estimates of Charitable Food Use

The primary survey that asks households about charitable food use is the annual Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS), which is conducted each December and includes two questions on whether households have used these services:

- “In the last 12 months, did you or other adults in your household ever get emergency food from a church, food pantry, or food bank?”
- “In the last 12 months, did you or other adults in your household ever eat any meals at a soup kitchen or shelter?”

The survey also asks about respondents’ use of these services in the past 30 days.

Based on CPS-FSS data, the USDA reported that 4.5 percent of the population (14.6 million people, including approximately 4.5 million children) lived in households that used food pantry services in the prior 12 months, and another 0.4 percent (1.2 million people, including approximately 255,000 children) lived in households that reported using soup kitchens in 2018 (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2019a). However, the CPS-FSS calculation of the number of people accessing charitable food may fail to capture the full population. The CPS-FSS uses a restricted sample for these questions and question wording that may not reflect the range of terms people most commonly associate with charitable food sites (box 1).

The other often-referenced data on charitable food services come from Feeding America, the largest network of food banks. Its 2014 Hunger in America study found that approximately 46 million people, including 12 million children and 4.7 million seniors, visited a charitable food site in 2013.<sup>3</sup> This number, estimated based on approximately 60,000 interviews with Feeding America clients, was significantly higher than CPS estimates for the same year (18.8 million people using food pantries and 1.6 million using kitchen programs). In this brief, we use responses to 2018 WBNS questions to provide new estimates of charitable food use by demographic and socioeconomic characteristics and explore how use of charitable food intersects with other material hardship measures and safety net program participation. This information can be useful to social service providers who plan for and provide these services and policymakers who need insights on how well federal nutrition programs address the needs of low-income families.

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## BOX 1

### Does the CPS-FSS Underestimate the Population Using Charitable Food Services?

USDA has previously acknowledged that the CPS estimates of charitable food use “almost certainly underestimate the proportion of the population that actually uses these providers” (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2019b). USDA suggests that part of the underestimate may be attributable to CPS contacting families who occupy housing units from an address-based database, likely missing people who are homeless or tenuously housed (e.g., doubled up with other families).<sup>4</sup> Though this partially explains the undercount, there are likely other reasons why the annual CPS supplement may be missing households that access charitable food services. For example, the CPS-FSS only asks these questions of households with incomes below 185 percent of FPL, unless households report a certain level of difficulty meeting their food needs on preliminary screener questions (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2019b).

Given that approximately 32.9 percent of households reporting food insecurity at some point in the prior year also report annual incomes above 185 percent of FPL (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2019a), it may be more important than previously acknowledged to avoid restrictive screener questions on charitable food use. Moreover, other research suggests that not all households that seek charitable food services identify as food insecure in surveys, meaning the CPS screener for higher-income households may miss people seeking assistance. The Hunger in America study found that 16 percent of Feeding America client households did not report experiencing low or very low food security. Households seeking charitable food assistance might not identify as food insecure because they fear stigma or view such assistance as a means of maintaining food security, among other reasons (Page et al. 2019).

The wording of the current CPS questions may also limit the number of households that accurately report their use of charitable food. Feeding America interviews with people at food pantries suggest that the terms included in the questions may not fully reflect the nature and/or location of services where people get free food. For example, some people who use food pantries as a regular coping strategy, especially older adults, may not associate these resources with the term “emergency food” (Echevarria et al. 2012). In recent years, the types of sites that offer charitable food have also diversified significantly. Thus, currently listed terms, like church, food pantry, food bank, and soup kitchen, may not capture the full range of locations and sources from which households receive these services, such as mobile food distributions set up like farmers’ markets or regular afterschool meal programs, like Kids’ Cafes (Crowe, Waxman, and Engelhard 2016).

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## Reported Use of Charitable Food in the WBNS

Approximately 1 in 10 adults (10.3 percent) reported that they or someone in their household accessed any charitable food in the past 30 days (table 1). Use of charitable food services varies by individual and family characteristics; as seen in table 1, certain groups tend to have accessed charitable food in the prior 30 days more than others, including

- younger adults ages 18 to 34,
- women,
- non-Hispanic black and Hispanic adults,

- single parents,
- adults who did not complete high school,
- people who rent their homes,
- adults with family income below 200 percent of FPL, and
- those reporting fair or poor health.

These findings are generally consistent with other research that identifies these groups as having a greater risk of food insecurity and, by extension, perhaps being more likely to use charitable food services.<sup>5</sup>

TABLE 1

**Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Household Use of Charitable Food in the Past 30 Days, by Select Characteristics**

	Share reporting any use of charitable food in past 30 days
<b>All</b>	<b>10.3%</b>
<b>Age</b>	
18–34 <sup>^</sup>	11.9%
35–49	9.6%**
50–64	9.2%**
<b>Sex</b>	
Male <sup>^</sup>	8.6%
Female	11.8%***
<b>Race and ethnicity</b>	
Non-Hispanic white <sup>^</sup>	7.9%
Non-Hispanic black	16.1%***
Hispanic	14.5%***
Non-Hispanic other/more than one race	9.4%
<b>Census region</b>	
Northeast <sup>^</sup>	9.3%
Midwest	11.5%*
South	9.2%
West	11.5%*
<b>Urban-rural residence</b>	
Lives in a metropolitan area <sup>^</sup>	10.1%
Does not live in a metropolitan area	11.1%
<b>Family composition</b>	
Married/partnered with own children <sup>^</sup>	9.7%
Married/partnered without children	6.1%***
Single with children	17.7%***
Single without children	13.2%**
<b>Educational attainment</b>	
Less than high school <sup>^</sup>	24.1%
High school graduate	11.8%***
Some college	10.8%***
College graduate or higher	4.4%***
<b>Housing tenure</b>	
Owns home <sup>^</sup>	7.5%

**Share reporting any use of charitable food in past 30 days**

Rents home	15.3%***
<b>Family income as a percentage of FPL</b>	
Below 200% FPL (low income)	21.6%
200–299% FPL	10.9%***
300–399% FPL	7.3%***
At or above 400% FPL	2.7%***
<b>Self-reported health status</b>	
Excellent/very good/good^	8.5%
Fair/poor	19.3%***

**Source:** Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2018.

**Notes:** FPL is federal poverty level. Use of charitable food refers to receipt of free groceries or a free meal. Among those with incomes below the federal poverty level and between 100 and 199 percent of the federal poverty level, 24.0 percent and 19.0 percent, respectively, reported using charitable food in the past 30 days.

\*/\*\*/\*\*\* Estimate differs significantly from reference group (^) at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

As seen in table 2, charitable food use is also higher among adults who report employment and financial challenges. Unsurprisingly, unemployed adults are about three times as likely to report any household use of charitable food in the past 30 days as those who are employed. About 16 percent of adults who are not in the labor force report accessing any charitable food, though this masks significant differences between retired adults and adults reporting another reason for not being in the labor force. Among respondents not in the labor force, those not working because of a health problem or disability are about five times as likely as retired respondents to report any household use of charitable food in the past 30 days.

**TABLE 2**

**Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Household Use of Charitable Food in the Past 30 Days, by Employment and Income Characteristics**

	Share reporting any use of charitable food in past 30 days
<b>Employment</b>	
Employed^	7.3%
Unemployed	23.1%***
<i>Not in labor force</i>	16.1%***
Retired^	5.4%
Health problem or disability	26.0%***
Other reason	13.6%***
<b>Hours worked per week</b>	
35 or more^	5.8%
Fewer than 35	13.3%***
<b>Income volatility</b>	
Income roughly the same each month^	8.7%
Income roughly the same most months, but some unusually high or low months	13.5%***
Income varies quite a bit from one month to the next	15.5%***

**Source:** Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2018.

**Notes:** Use of charitable food refers to receipt of free groceries or a free meal. Other reasons for not being in the labor force include inability to find work, difficulties finding child care, family responsibilities, enrollment in school or other training, and transportation problems.

*\*/\*\*/\*\** Estimate differs significantly from reference group (^) at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

## Characteristics of Those Accessing Charitable Food Services

Whereas the previous section examined charitable food use by different groups of people, the following section analyzes the characteristics of the 10.3 percent of WBNS respondents who reported household use of charitable food, relative to those who do not.

Among respondents who report that their household accessed charitable food, half are currently working (table 3). Working part-time hours and having volatile income are associated with a greater likelihood of using charitable food. However, close to two-thirds (62.5 percent) of working adults in households that seek charitable food assistance report usually working 35 or more hours per week.

**TABLE 3**

**Income and Employment Characteristics of Adults Ages 18 to 64, by Whether Their Household Accessed Charitable Food in the Past 30 Days**

	Reported using any charitable food	Did not report using any charitable food
<b>Income</b>		
Below 100% FPL	37.6%	13.6%***
100–199% FPL	26.7%	13.0%***
<i>At or above 200% FPL</i>	35.7%	73.5%***
200–299% FPL	16.6%	15.6%
300–399% FPL	8.1%	11.8%***
At or above 400% FPL	11.0%	46.1%***
<b>Employment</b>		
Employed	50.3%	73.0%***
Unemployed	10.1%	3.9%***
Not in labor force	37.2%	22.2%***
Not reported	2.4%	1.1%
<b>Hours worked per week (if employed)</b>		
Usually 35 hours or more	62.5%	80.2%***
Usually less than 35 hours	37.3%	19.2%***
Not reported	0.3%	0.7%
<b>Income volatility</b>		
Income roughly the same each month in past 12 months	60.6%	72.6%***
Income roughly the same most months, but some unusually high or low months	24.4%	17.9%**
Income varies quite a bit from one month to the next	13.3%	8.2%***
Income volatility not reported	1.8%	1.3%

**Source:** Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2018.

**Notes:** Use of charitable food refers to receipt of free groceries or a free meal. Those who are not in the labor force did not look for work in the last four weeks. Among those who reported wanting a job, the main reasons for not looking primarily owed to

health or disability issues and child care or family responsibilities. Those who do not want a job report many of the same reasons, but a larger share report being retired.

*\*/\*\*/\*\** Estimate differs from adults in households using any charitable food at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

Together, these findings suggest that charitable food services are important for relieving financial strains on families who not only experience income shocks or barriers to employment but may also struggle with low wages and/or high expenses for basic needs. A broader finding from a comprehensive analysis of WBNS survey results suggests that even those with relatively high incomes experience financial insecurity and material hardship (Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez 2019).<sup>6</sup>

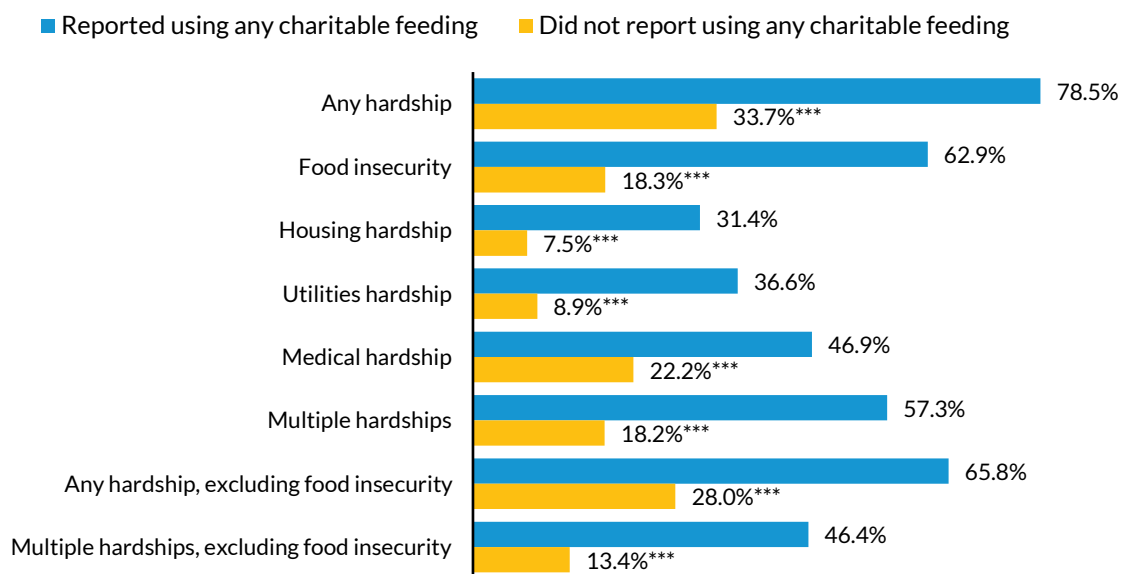
## **Food Insecurity, Material Hardship, and Use of Charitable Food**

As shown in figure 1, just under 80 percent of those who seek charitable food assistance report experiencing at least one material hardship in the prior year (78.5 percent), most commonly food insecurity (62.9 percent). Further, when excluding food insecurity, we find that approximately two out of three people (65.8 percent) who have used charitable food still report experiencing some other hardship. The next most common type of hardship is medical, defined as difficulty paying medical bills or being unable to access needed medical care because of cost (46.9 percent), followed by utility hardship (36.6 percent) and housing hardship (31.4 percent). Overall, 57.3 percent of respondents report facing multiple material hardships in the past year,<sup>7</sup> compared with only 18.2 percent of those who did not seek charitable food. These findings highlight how other household expenditures may compete with food spending in many family budgets. Access to free meals and groceries may be especially critical for these families and, more broadly, may help keep afloat families who struggle with other costs.



FIGURE 1

**Material Hardship in the Past 12 Months among Adults Ages 18 to 64, by Whether Household Accessed Charitable Food in the Past 30 Days**



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2018.

Notes: Use of charitable food refers to receipt of free groceries or a free meal. Housing hardship is inability to pay the full amount of the rent or mortgage or being late with a payment because of an inability to pay or being forced to move by a landlord, bank or other financial institution, or the government. Utilities hardship is inability to pay the full amount of the gas, oil, or electricity bills or the gas or electric company turning off service or the oil company not delivering oil. Medical hardship is having problems paying family medical bills or reporting unmet needs for medical care because of costs. “Any hardship” includes these hardships as well as food insecurity. “Multiple hardships” means reporting at least two of the seven measures constituting any hardship.

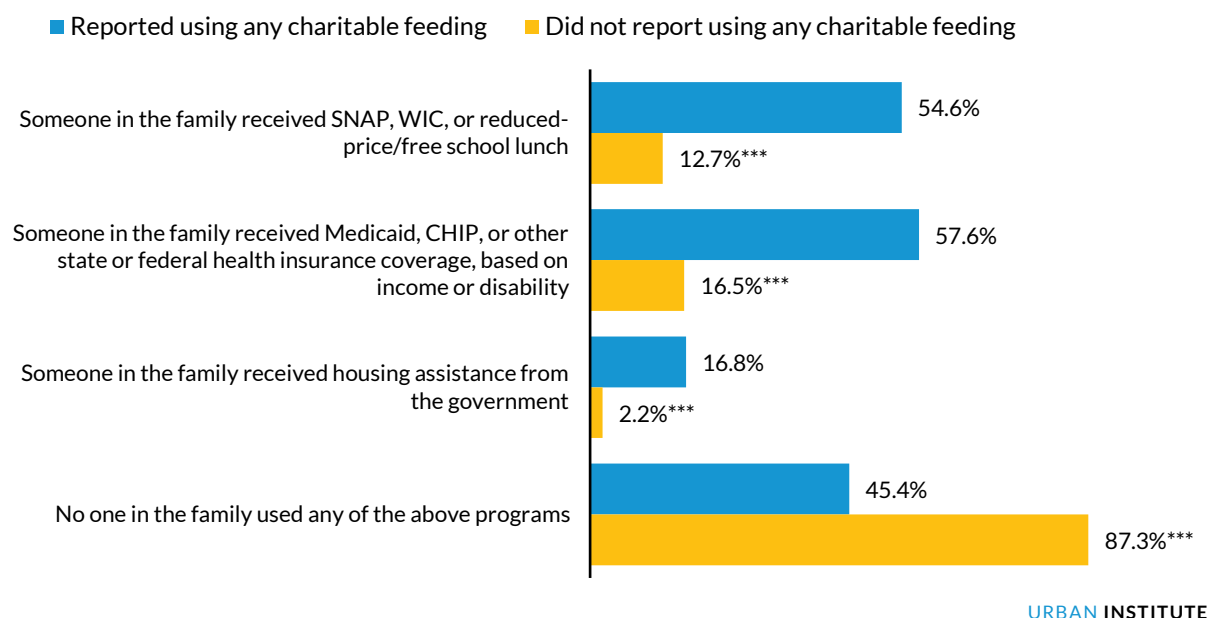
\*/\*\*/\*\* Estimate differs from adults in households using any charitable food at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

**Households Accessing Both Charitable Food and Public Safety Net Programs**

Many respondents who reported use of charitable food services in the past 30 days also reported accessing public safety net programs in the past 12 months. As shown in figure 2, 57.6 percent of charitable food service clients lived in a family who received Medicaid, CHIP, or other state- or government-sponsored health insurance coverage (based on income or a disability), and 54.6 percent reported living in a family who received some type of federal nutrition assistance, including SNAP, WIC, and/or free or reduced-price school meals.<sup>8</sup> The notable overlap between charitable food use and SNAP enrollment may partially owe to the inadequacy of SNAP benefits: in 99 percent of counties across the nation, the maximum SNAP benefit per meal did not cover the cost of a low-income meal in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

FIGURE 2

**Public Safety Net Program Participation in the Past 12 Months among Adults Ages 18 to 64, by Whether Household Used Charitable Food in the Past 30 Days**



Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2018.

Notes: SNAP is Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. WIC is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. CHIP is the Children’s Health Insurance Program. Use of charitable food refers to receipt of free groceries or a free meal. Housing assistance refers to a federal, state, or local government housing program that lowers rent, such as a housing voucher or public housing. Self-reports may understate benefit use.

\*/\*\*/\*\*\* Estimate differs from adults in households using any charitable food at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

## Discussion

Findings from the WBNS provide several important insights about the families and individuals who access charitable food across the United States. First, use of charitable food may be more common than previously understood; approximately 1 in 10 adults ages 18 to 64 reported living in a household that accessed these services in the 30 days before completing the December 2018 WBNS (table 1). Among low-income adults, the rate is approximately one in five (table 1). Analysis of the characteristics of those who access charitable food show that use is higher among several groups at elevated risk of food insecurity, including those with low incomes, those experiencing a high degree of income volatility, those who are unemployed or out of the labor force, those with lower levels of education, black and Hispanic people, those who report fair or poor health, and single people with and without children.

The 2014 Hunger in America study revealed that people who seek charitable food assistance are often facing trade-offs between paying for food and other basic needs, like housing and health care. The high rates of material hardship among nonelderly adults using charitable food in the WBNS also suggest that addressing the needs of these families often requires supports beyond food. Most respondents receiving charitable food assistance, about 66 percent, report some type of hardship beyond food

insecurity (difficulty affording housing, utilities, or medical bills), and just under half report multiple hardships (figure 1). Many households access both charitable food services and federal safety programs (SNAP, WIC, reduced-price/free school lunch, Medicaid, CHIP, or housing assistance) but still struggle to make ends meet.

Rates of charitable food use presented here are substantially higher than those found in our analysis of the CPS-FSS sample of nonelderly adults reporting use of such services in the prior 30 days. Differences in the question wording, survey mode, and populations mean the results are not directly comparable. The question wording in the WBNS, which includes a broader range of sites and terms people may associate with charitable food, likely affects the results. In addition, because the WBNS is administered online, people who access services may be more willing to share information than when responding to telephone or in-person surveys. The WBNS also does not restrict questions about charitable food to households with incomes below 185 percent of FPL or those who report some difficulty accessing food, as the CPS currently does. As such, 36 percent of WBNS respondents in households accessing charitable food report family incomes at or above 200 percent of FPL (table 3), suggesting that those with somewhat higher incomes, though not a majority of the population receiving these services, may still need assistance when experiencing income shocks and/or high expenses. Moreover, these families are typically ineligible for federal nutrition programs, and therefore charitable food may be particularly important for them.

## Data and Methods

### Data and Sample

The Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey is a nationally representative, internet-based survey of adults ages 18 to 64. The survey is fielded annually in December and monitors changes in individual and family health and well-being. The WBNS samples approximately 7,500 nonelderly adults drawn from a probability-based internet panel and includes an oversample of adults in households with low incomes. We use 2018 data for this report. For further details on the survey design and content, see Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez (2018).

### Measures

#### CHARITABLE FOOD

Though we used Feeding America's charitable food survey questions as a foundation for such questions in the WBNS, we opted to ask about use of charitable food in the past 30 days, anticipating that recall in a shorter period may be more accurate. However, focusing only on the prior 30 days, rather than the past year, results in a lower estimate of all households and individuals using charitable food services.

However, the WBNS population differs substantively from the CPS-FSS population, limiting the surveys' comparability. In contrast to the CPS, the WBNS asks charitable food use questions of adults in

all households, regardless of reported income level and responses to the food security questions. Additionally, the WBNS only focuses on respondents ages 18 to 64.<sup>10</sup>

### **MATERIAL HARDSHIP**

The WBNS also asks respondents about material hardships experienced in the 12 months before the survey by themselves or their households or families. The hardships are grouped into four dimensions:

- **Housing:** (1) The household did not pay the full amount of the rent or mortgage or was late with a payment because it could not afford to pay or (2) the respondent was forced to move by a landlord, bank or other financial institution, or the government.
- **Utilities:** (3) The household was not able to pay the full amount of the gas, oil, or electricity bills or (4) the gas or electric company turned off service or the oil company could not deliver oil.
- **Food security:** (5) The household was food insecure based on responses to the six-item short form of the US Department of Agriculture's Household Food Security Survey Module (USDA 2012).
- **Health care:** (6) The respondent had unmet needs for medical care because of costs or (7) the family had problems paying medical bills.

We define food security based on the cumulative number of affirmative responses to the six-item food security module.

Though most of these seven measures are reported at the household level, problems paying medical bills are measured at the family level, and unmet needs for medical care and forced moves are reported at the individual level. Our definition of family includes the respondent, his or her spouse or partner (if applicable), and any of the respondent's children under age 19 who live with the respondent.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of surveys drawing on the KnowledgePanel is the low recruitment rate, which produces a low cumulative response rate for the WBNS. Though this may increase the risk of nonresponse bias, previous 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). Additionally, the sample excludes populations who may experience elevated rates of food insecurity and use of charitable food, including older adults, adults who do not speak English or Spanish, adults with low literacy levels who would have difficulty completing an online survey, and the homeless. Further, the survey is fielded in December, when use of charitable food programs can be particularly high.

## Sensitivity Analysis

### COMPARISON OF WBNS AND CPS-FSS 30-DAY ESTIMATES

To understand the differences between reported charitable food use in the WBNS and CPS-FSS, we examined the underlying characteristics of respondents who used such services within the previous 30 days. Though the characteristics of all adults ages 18 to 64 were very similar, except for higher food insecurity rates in the WBNS, the characteristics of those who respond affirmatively to the charitable food question differ in each survey. Specifically, low-income adults in the WBNS who report using charitable food are younger, more female, and more likely to live in an urban area and have greater educational attainment, higher homeownership rates, and lower SNAP participation rates than low-income adults who report using these services in the CPS-FSS (data not shown).

For comparison, we analyzed the 30-day rate of charitable food use in the 2018 CPS-FSS, focusing on low-income adults ages 18 to 64.<sup>11</sup> Because the CPS only asks charitable food questions of people with incomes below 185 percent of FPL or who have incomes above that level but report food access problems on two preliminary screening questions,<sup>12</sup> we constrained our WBNS sample to the closest low-income threshold (200 percent of FPL). As shown in table 4, the rate of any charitable food use among our CPS-FSS sample of low-income nonelderly adults is 6.8 percent, significantly lower than the estimate for our WBNS sample of low-income nonelderly adults (21.6 percent). These differences may be attributable to multiple factors, including survey question wording, survey mode, and differences in the definitions of our low-income samples. Notably, the CPS asks about “emergency food,” whereas the WBNS asks about “free groceries” and “free meals.” This could lead to differences in the characteristics of those responding affirmatively in each survey.<sup>13</sup> Though these are directional comparisons, they suggest charitable food use may be more significant than the CPS data suggest.

TABLE 4

#### Share of Low-Income WBNS and CPS-FSS Respondents Ages 18 to 64 Reporting Household Use of Charitable Food in the Past 30 Days

	CPS-FSS	WBNS
Free meal	0.7%	8.4%
Free groceries	6.6%	20.0%
Any charitable food	6.8%	21.6%

Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey and CPS-FSS data from December 2018.

Notes: WBNS is Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey. CPS-FSS is Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement. Use of charitable food refers to receipt of free groceries or a free meal. For CPS estimates, adults with family incomes below 185 percent of the federal poverty level are low income. In the WBNS, adults with family incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level are low income.

# Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “What Is a Food Bank?” Feeding America, accessed November 20, 2019, <https://www.feedingamerica.org/our-work/food-bank-network>.
- <sup>2</sup> “What Is the Emergency Food Assistance Program?” US Department of Agriculture, March 5, 2019, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tefap/tefap-fact-sheet>.
- <sup>3</sup> The Hunger in America study found an unduplicated annual count of clients that was approximately 14.2 percent of the population in 2014.
- <sup>4</sup> The CPS-FSS will only collect information from the housing units occupying an address selected for an interview. Because of this, housing units more susceptible to hardships are less likely to be observed in the data.
- <sup>5</sup> “USDA ERS – Key Statistics and Graphics,” US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, September 4, 2019, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics.aspx>.
- <sup>6</sup> For more information about financial distress and alternative financial services measures, see Brown and Braga (2019).
- <sup>7</sup> Multiple hardships include reporting at least two of the following: inability to pay the full amount of the rent or mortgage or being late with a payment because of an inability to pay; being forced to move by a landlord, bank or other financial institution, or the government; inability to pay the full amount of the gas, oil, or electricity bills; the gas or electric company having turned off service or the oil company not delivering oil; food insecurity; problems paying family medical bills; and unmet need for medical care because of costs.
- <sup>8</sup> Participation in public assistance programs is typically underreported in all surveys, and actual participation could be higher. For more information, see Meyer, Mok, and Sullivan (2009); Pascale (2008); and Wheaton (2008).
- <sup>9</sup> “Does SNAP Cover the Cost of a Meal in Your County?” Urban Institute, accessed November 20, 2019, <https://www.urban.org/does-snap-cover-cost-meal-your-county>.
- <sup>10</sup> Though respondents must be ages 18 to 64, their designation as having accessed charitable food services may be based off a senior in their household having received free groceries or free meals, because use of charitable food is calculated at the household level.
- <sup>11</sup> The age range in the CPS-FSS is constrained to mirror the population surveyed in the WBNS (adults ages 18 to 64). Because the CPS-FSS only asks charitable food questions of those with incomes below 185 percent of FPL or those reporting some food access difficulty, we also restricted our WBNS sample to those with incomes below 200 percent of FPL.
- <sup>12</sup> To minimize the burden on respondents, households with incomes above 185 percent of FPL were not asked the charitable food questions unless they indicated a certain level of difficulty meeting their food needs on preliminary screener questions. The questions analyzed in this supplement are as follows: “In the last 12 months, did you or other adults in your household ever get emergency food from a church, food pantry, or food bank?” The use of these resources any time in the last 12 months is called “food pantry use.” Households that reported using a food pantry in the last 12 months were asked, “How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?” Households reporting that they did not use a food pantry in the last 12 months were asked, “Is there a church, food pantry, or food bank in your community where you could get emergency food if you needed it?” and “In the last 12 months, did you or other adults in your household ever eat any meals at a soup kitchen or shelter?” The use of this resource is called “use of an emergency kitchen” in the following discussion.
- <sup>13</sup> As evidence, we find that low-income CPS-FSS respondents who reported using any charitable food in the past 30 days were more likely to have very low food security than such respondents of the WBNS (43.1 percent versus 37.5 percent).

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