



2019 Rhode Island Hunger Survey

Background and Methodology

The 2019 Rhode Island Hunger Survey was conducted by the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute at Brown University for the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. The purpose of the survey was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the population served by the Food Bank, including their most pressing needs. Information and data gleaned from the survey will be used to guide strategic planning and program development, ultimately helping the Food Bank achieve its mission: improving the quality of life for all Rhode Islanders by advancing solutions to the problem of hunger.

The Rhode Island Community Food Bank provides a safety net for people experiencing food insecurity and hunger. From its warehouse in Providence, the Food Bank distributes food through a statewide network of 168 member agencies, including food pantries and meal programs. Currently, the Food Bank and its member agencies serve 53,000 people on average each month.

In the past, the Food Bank participated in the Hunger in America study, sponsored by Feeding America, the national food bank organization. Many questions in the current survey were adapted from the 2014 Hunger in America study to enable comparison to past results. Between April and July 2019, trained volunteers administered the survey in one-to-one interviews. A total of 419 surveys were completed at 61 randomly-selected member agency programs.

Results

Population Served

The survey found that people receiving food assistance are some of the most vulnerable in Rhode Island: one-half of all households have at least one household member under age 18 or over age 64.

Among all households surveyed, 44 percent have earned income from employment. Among households with children, 69 percent include an adult who worked for pay in the last year.

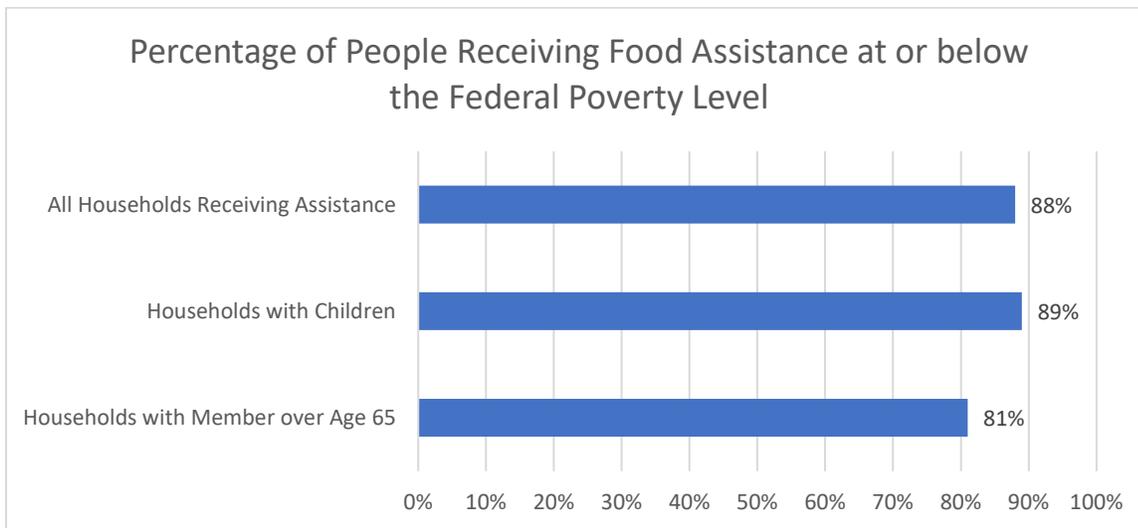
Respondents were asked to identify the race and ethnicity of members of their household and were able to select more than one category. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in Rhode Island 83 percent of the population is White, 8 percent Black, and 15 percent Latino. Among all households in the survey, 60 percent identified as White, 21 percent Black, and 28 percent Latino. In a series of questions about residential status, 99 percent reported that members of their household are either U.S. citizens or permanent legal residents.

Income and Poverty

Approximately 136,000 Rhode Islanders (13.4 percent of the state’s population) live in households with incomes below poverty. The federal government sets the 2019 poverty level at \$12,490 for an individual living alone. For families, the poverty level is based on the number of household members, as shown below:

2019 Poverty Guidelines: US Department of Health and Human Services	
Persons in the Household	Annual Household Income
1	\$12,490
2	\$16,910
3	\$21,330
4	\$25,750

The survey found that the vast majority of people receiving food assistance (88 percent) have incomes below the poverty level. Over half of households reported annual incomes below \$10,000.

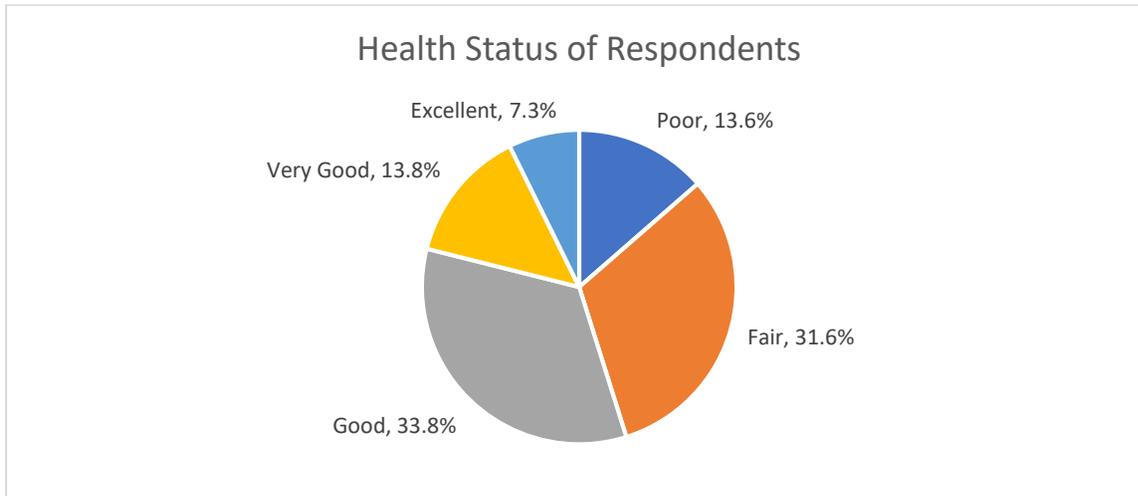


At this level of income, households struggle to afford basic necessities, including food. This means frequently making difficult decisions about which bills to pay. One-third of households had to choose between paying the rent or paying for food at some point during the past year, and similarly one-third chose between paying utility bills or purchasing food. More than half (57 percent) reported needing more money to afford adequate food. Of those who reported that they would have to pay more, the median estimated amount was \$66 per week.

To get by, households reported borrowing money and taking on debt: 48 percent borrowed money from a friend or family member in the past year; 33 percent have outstanding debt on a credit card or loan; and 30 percent have unpaid medical or hospital bills.

Health Status

Among all households completing the survey, 45 percent report their health status as poor or fair (as compared to good, very good, or excellent). Of particular concern, 41 percent have a household member with diabetes and 60 percent have a household member with high blood pressure. By comparison, 9 percent of Americans have Type 2 diabetes and 32 percent have high blood pressure, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



SNAP

SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly the Food Stamp Program) is the largest federal nutrition program. SNAP provides benefits to low-income households for the purchase of food at retail outlets including grocery stores, supermarkets, and farmers markets. Benefits are delivered on the first of each month via an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card. The average household benefit in Rhode Island is \$224 per month.

Most of those seeking food assistance at member agencies of the Food Bank are enrolled in SNAP. Among all households, 75 percent receive SNAP benefits. However, they report using up these benefits quickly, with close to half (49%) exhausting their monthly benefits in just two weeks.

Conclusion

Results from the 2019 Rhode Island Hunger Survey provide a portrait of the people who are served by the Food Bank and its statewide network of member agencies. They are children, seniors and working families. They are people living in poverty, facing many hardships, making difficult financial choices, and suffering from poor health. Many participate in SNAP, but they also rely on food pantries and meal programs for assistance because SNAP benefits alone are not adequate.

The Food Bank and its member agencies are a critical safety net for people living in poverty in Rhode Island. These results show that the Food Bank is reaching those most in need, but their needs go well beyond food assistance. At a time when the economy in the state is strong, much more should be done to reduce poverty, to prevent hunger, to alleviate the hardships faced by low-income families, and to strengthen the safety net.