

# 2023 Status Report on Hunger in Rhode Island

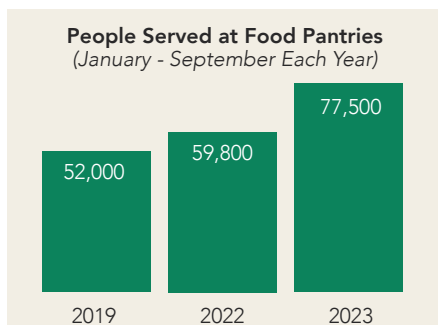


## Major Findings of the Report:

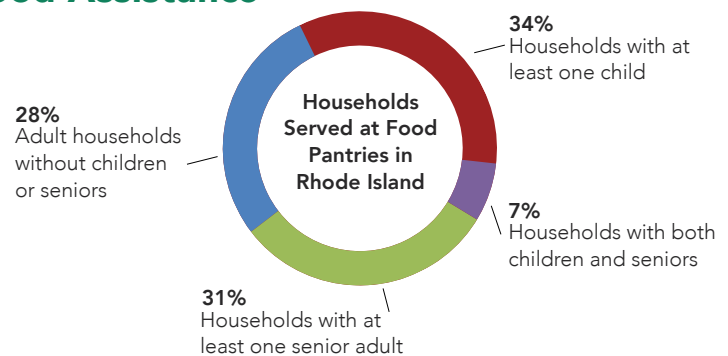
- ★ A record number of Rhode Islanders need food assistance due to high food prices, the steep rise in housing costs, and the end of COVID-19 relief programs.
- ★ Nearly one in three Rhode Island households cannot afford adequate food.
- ★ Communities of color and families with children are at the greatest risk of hunger.
- ★ Ending free meals for all students led to a decline in the number of children participating in school breakfast and school lunch in Rhode Island.

## Record Number of Rhode Islanders Seek Food Assistance

Demand for food assistance reached a new, high level in 2023. Through its statewide network of 143 member agencies, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank served on average 77,500 people each month in 2023 (January through September), 30% more than one year ago and 49% more than before the pandemic.



Of those utilizing food pantries in Rhode Island, 72% are families with children and senior adult households.<sup>1</sup>



Most have annual incomes below the federal poverty level, which is set at \$30,000 for a family of four.<sup>2</sup> The minimum wage in Rhode Island (\$13.00 per hour) produces annual earnings of just \$27,040 for a full-time worker, not enough to lift a family of four out of poverty.

# Emergency SNAP Benefits End as Inflation Grows

During the pandemic, Congress approved an emergency allocation of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits to prevent widespread hunger. Emergency benefits enabled the 88,000 Rhode Island households enrolled in SNAP to purchase additional food.<sup>3</sup>

When Congress ended the emergency allocation in March 2023, SNAP benefits in Rhode Island were reduced by \$13.4 million (32%) per month, from \$41.8 to \$28.4 million. On average, each enrolled household lost \$155 per month.

The reduction in SNAP benefits could not have come at a worse time as food and housing costs continued to climb this year. In a food cost study conducted in Rhode Island, food prices went up by 11% from July 2022 to July 2023, adding to already high food inflation from the previous year.<sup>4</sup> The fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Rhode Island grew by 14% in one year from \$1,264 in 2022 to \$1,444 in 2023.<sup>5</sup>



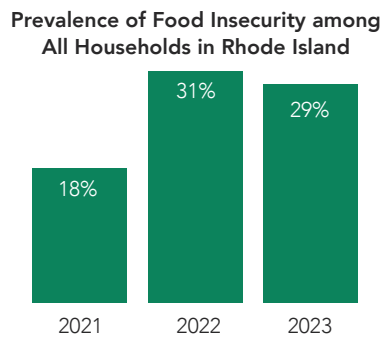
## ACTION STEP

Urge Rhode Island’s Congressional Delegation to boost SNAP benefit levels to keep pace with the real cost of food. [rifeedbank.org/advocate-for-change](http://rifeedbank.org/advocate-for-change)

# Food Insecurity Impacts Nearly One in Three Households in Rhode Island

High food prices continue to take a toll on both low-income and moderate-income families in Rhode Island. According to findings from the RI Life Index, food insecurity remains close to the same high level found last year, with 29% of households reporting that they cannot afford adequate food.<sup>6</sup> The risk of hunger is even greater for households with children: 38%.

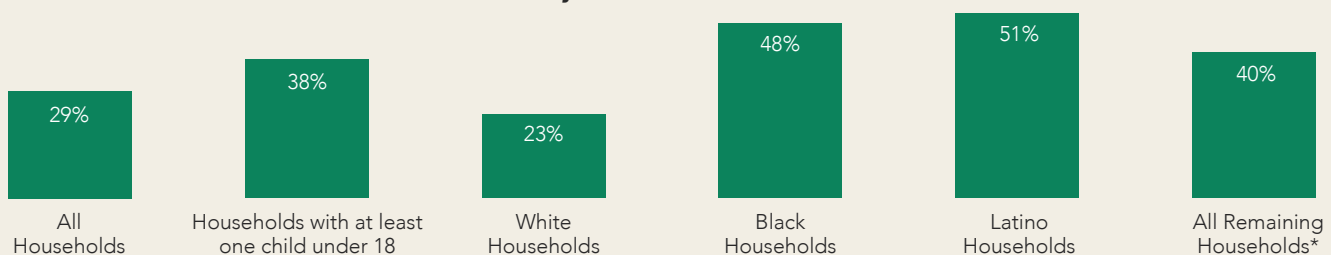
As in the past two years, over 2,000 Rhode Island households were surveyed between April and June for the RI Life Index. It is an initiative of Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and the Brown University School of Public Health.



<b>Food Security:</b>	Consistent, dependable access to enough food for active, healthy living. <sup>7</sup>
<b>Food Equity:</b>	Access to nourishing, affordable, and culturally appropriate food for every person. <sup>8</sup>
<b>Food Insecurity:</b>	Limited ability to acquire adequate food due to a lack of money and other resources. <sup>9</sup>

Significant racial and ethnic disparities in food security were also revealed by the RI Life Index. Whereas 23% of White households reported food insecurity, the rate was higher for non-White households: 48% for Black households, 51% for Latino households, and 40% for all remaining households. Communities of color in Rhode Island have not recovered from the severe impact of the pandemic, which exacerbated long-standing inequities in health and economic well-being.

Prevalence of Food Insecurity for Different Households in Rhode Island



\*All remaining households include Asian, Native American/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and more than one race/ethnicity.

## Participation in School Meals Declines in Rhode Island

During the pandemic, Congress allowed schools to provide breakfast and lunch meals to all students at no charge. When the federal authorization for this program ended in June 2022, schools in Rhode Island returned to a tiered fee system (free, reduced-price, full-price), charging parents for school meals based on their household income. For a student to qualify for free meals, the household must be at or below 130% of the federal poverty level (\$39,000 annual income for a family of four).

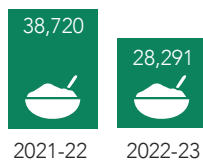
Many families that don't qualify for free meals cannot afford to pay school meal fees. According to the Economic Progress Institute's 2022 Rhode Island Standard of Need, a family of four requires an annual income of \$85,914 to afford all their basic expenses, more than double the income level to qualify for free school meals.<sup>10</sup>

When school meals were no longer free for all students, the number of children receiving lunch and breakfast at school decreased dramatically in Rhode Island. Average daily participation in school lunch went down by 15%; school breakfast participation dropped by 27%.<sup>11</sup>

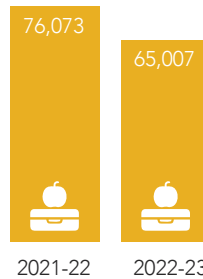
By comparison, Massachusetts continued to provide school meals to all students at no charge last year and participation in both lunch and breakfast grew in their schools.<sup>12</sup> From 2022 to 2023, participation in lunch went from 576,619 to 585,990 students per school day, and breakfast participation increased from 248,073 to 262,804 students per school day. Now, Massachusetts is one of eight states, including California, Colorado, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Vermont, that has a permanent free school meal policy.

During last year's legislative session in Rhode Island, a similar measure was proposed that would require school districts to maximize federal reimbursement for school meals and then use state funds to supplement federal reimbursements to make school meals free for all students. It was not approved by the General Assembly.

### Children Participating in School Breakfast



### Children Participating in School Lunch



## Government Investment in Food Security

**ARPA Grants:** Governor McKee, the General Assembly, and the Rhode Island Foundation established a grant program, utilizing federal ARPA funds, to assist nonprofits that address food insecurity, homelessness, housing issues, and behavioral health needs. The Rhode Island Foundation awarded \$20 million to 240 nonprofits in 2022, including the Rhode Island Community Food Bank and over 50 of its member agency partners.

**FY24 State Budget:** The Food Bank was awarded \$3 million in one-time ARPA funds in the fiscal year 2024 state budget in response to the high need for food assistance. The General Assembly also increased the Food Bank's annual state allocation from \$450,000 to \$550,000. These funds will be used to acquire 3.5 million pounds of food, including fresh produce and food items that match the cultural preferences of low-income populations in the state.

**Summer EBT:** This year, Congress established a new, permanent program to address child hunger: Summer EBT. It provides families that qualify for free or reduced-price school meals with \$40 per child for each month in the summer when students miss out on school breakfast and lunch. Summer EBT will begin in 2024. Pandemic-EBT was still operating this past summer, giving these families \$120 per school-aged child in August 2023.



### ACTION STEP

Ask the Governor and General Assembly to make school lunch and breakfast free for all students in the 2025 fiscal year budget. [rifoodbank.org/advocate-for-change](http://rifoodbank.org/advocate-for-change)





## Expanded Child Tax Credit: A Lost Opportunity to Reduce Food Insecurity

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), passed by Congress in 2021, made several positive changes to the Child Tax Credit. The credit was expanded to parents with low or no income and was fully refundable. The annual value of the credit increased to \$3,000 for each child age 6 to 17 and increased to \$3,600 for each child age 5 or younger.

Once enacted, the expanded Child Tax Credit significantly reduced child poverty, with the greatest gains realized by Black and Latino families. It also improved food security among low-income households.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, the expanded Child Tax Credit ended in 2022 and has not been renewed by Congress.



### ACTION STEP

Call on Rhode Island's Congressional Delegation to reinstate the expanded Child Tax Credit. [rfoodbank.org/advocate-for-change](https://rfoodbank.org/advocate-for-change)

## Lessons Learned from the Pandemic

Low-income households faced major challenges in 2023 when trying to feed their families: the hardship of high food and rent costs and the loss of critical resources that they relied on during the pandemic, particularly emergency SNAP benefits. These challenges left many Rhode Islanders unable to meet their basic food needs. **As compared to pre-pandemic times, 49% more people were served at food pantries and meal sites across the state.** Even with the state's laudable infusion of emergency funds for food assistance, the Rhode Island Community Food Bank and its member agencies cannot possibly compensate for the loss of \$156 million per year in federal SNAP benefits.

Food insecurity is not a burden that is shared equally – it is felt most acutely by families with children and in communities of color in Rhode Island. During the pandemic, three programs proved to be effective at protecting families from hunger and reducing racial and ethnic disparities in food security: higher SNAP benefits, the expanded Child Tax Credit, and free school meals for all students. If reinstated, these programs have the capacity to reduce food insecurity, decrease demand at food pantries and meal sites, and bring Rhode Island closer to the goal of achieving food equity.

**It is up to Congress to raise SNAP benefit levels and expand the Child Tax Credit, but the state has the power to provide free school meals to all children.** This would be an important step toward ensuring that children have the critical nutrition that they need to learn and grow.



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## Endnotes

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3. [SNAP Data](#), Rhode Island Department of Human Services, 2023.
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5. [Out of Reach: The High Cost of Housing](#), National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2022 and 2023.
6. [RI Life Index](#), Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Brown University School of Public Health, 2023.
7. Coleman-Jensen, A., Rabbitt, M.P., Gregory, C.A., and Singh, A., [Household Food Security in the United States in 2021](#), Economic Research Service, 2022.
8. Virudachalam, S., Kim, L., and Seligman, H., [Produce Prescriptions and a Path Toward Food Equity for Children](#), JAMA Pediatrics, 2023.
9. Coleman-Jensen, et al., [Household Food Security in the United States in 2021](#).
10. [The 2022 Rhode Island Standard of Need](#), The Economic Progress Institute, 2022.
11. [School Breakfast and Lunch Participation Data](#), Rhode Island Department of Education, 2023.
12. [School Breakfast Program and National School Lunch Program: Children Participating](#), U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023.
13. Rook, J.M., Yana, C.L., Schickedanz, A.B., Feuerbach, A.M., Lee, S.L., and Wisk, L.E., [Changes in Self-Reported Adult Health and Household Food Security with the Expanded Child Tax Credit Monthly Payments](#), JAMA Health Forum, 2023.