



OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE

Food Equity and Access

IN MASSACHUSETTS



A REPORT BY



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Background

The U.S. economy has been unpredictable during the second year of the pandemic. Despite improvements in unemployment, inflation is offsetting economic gains, particularly for people with lower incomes. As Massachusetts unemployment decreased from [7.1% in January 2021](#) to [4.6% in December 2021](#), nationally, grocery prices increased by 6.5%; the largest over-the-year increase in over ten years. Fortunately, national policies to support people struggling financially because of the COVID-19 pandemic were shown to [improve the financial status](#) of many Americans. However, benefits such as supplemental pandemic unemployment benefits and the Expanded Child Tax Credit came to an end in 2021, the end of which has disproportionately harmed people with lower incomes and people of color.

Over the last 2 years, varying attempts to measure the prevalence of food insecurity indicate that, while the need for food assistance has increased, the extraordinary public and private response, and investments in the federal and charitable food systems, have helped cushion the otherwise devastating blow of the pandemic for millions of Americans.

Rationale:

Motivated by a desire to update its understanding of food insecurity and food assistance program usage in the Commonwealth, GBFB conducted a second statewide survey. Our goals were to:

- 1 Identify changes in rates of food insecurity and food assistance use
- 2 Document barriers to and facilitators of food pantry use and SNAP enrollment
- 3 Develop data-driven recommendations to improve food access equity through programmatic, policy and advocacy efforts

ABOUT THIS SURVEY

- This is GBFB's second annual Massachusetts statewide survey on food access.
- From December 2021 to February 2022, using an online survey company, GBFB surveyed more than 3,000 Massachusetts adults.
- The survey oversampled adults with lower incomes to ensure we heard from people most likely to need food assistance. Statistical weighting methods were used to collect estimates representative of the Massachusetts adult population.
- The survey was adapted from the [National Food Access and COVID Research Team \(NFACT\)](#) survey and modified to focus on issues related to food insecurity and food assistance use. GBFB modified the NFACT survey with input from statewide community partners including GBFB's [Health and Research Advisory Council](#).

WHAT'S NEW IN THIS REPORT?

- Data on survey participants' gender identity and sexual orientation
- Expanded data on the experience of food pantry users and SNAP participants, including perceived experiences of discrimination
- Data on drivers of food pantry use and why people stopped using food pantries

In Massachusetts, one indicator of increased need has been pantry usage, which has not returned to pre-pandemic levels, and has increased in recent months, concurrent with the expiration of benefits and rise in inflation.



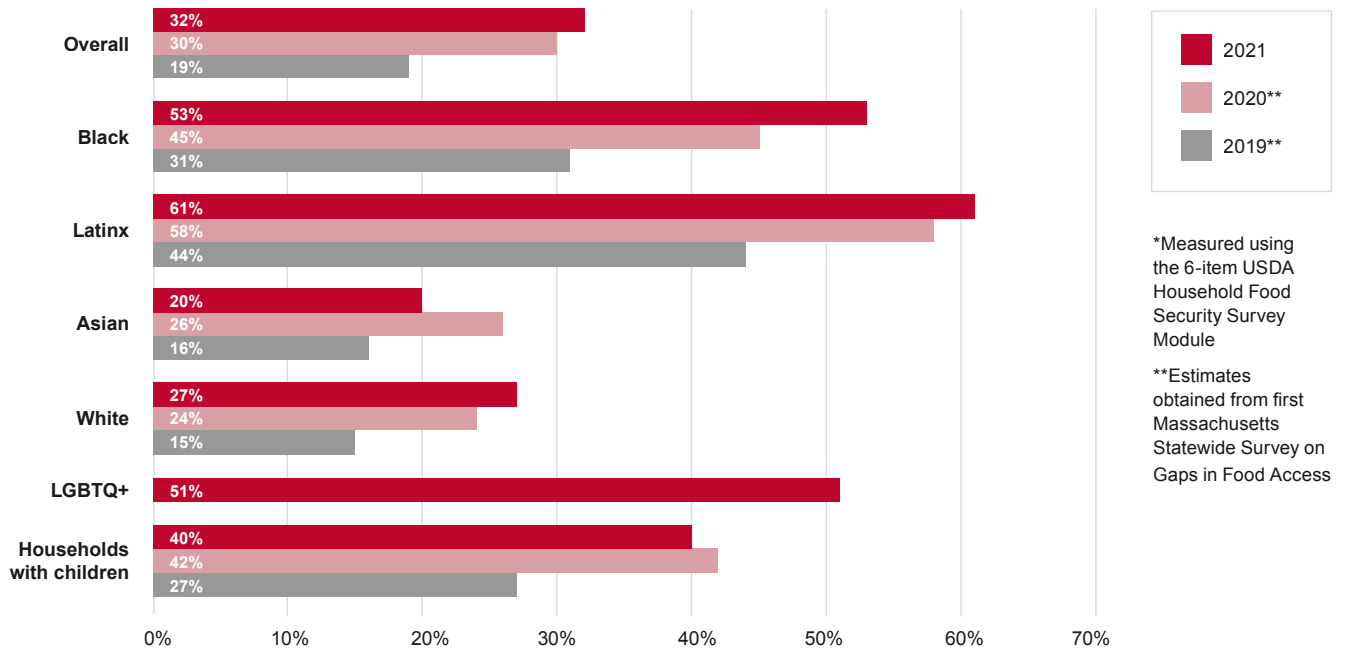


Rates of food insecurity

The survey estimates that food insecurity in Massachusetts during 2021, the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, remained high with 1.8 million adults estimated to have experienced food insecurity or 32% of the state's population.

FIGURE 1

Food insecurity* rates among Massachusetts adults





Experiences with perceived discrimination among those with food insecurity

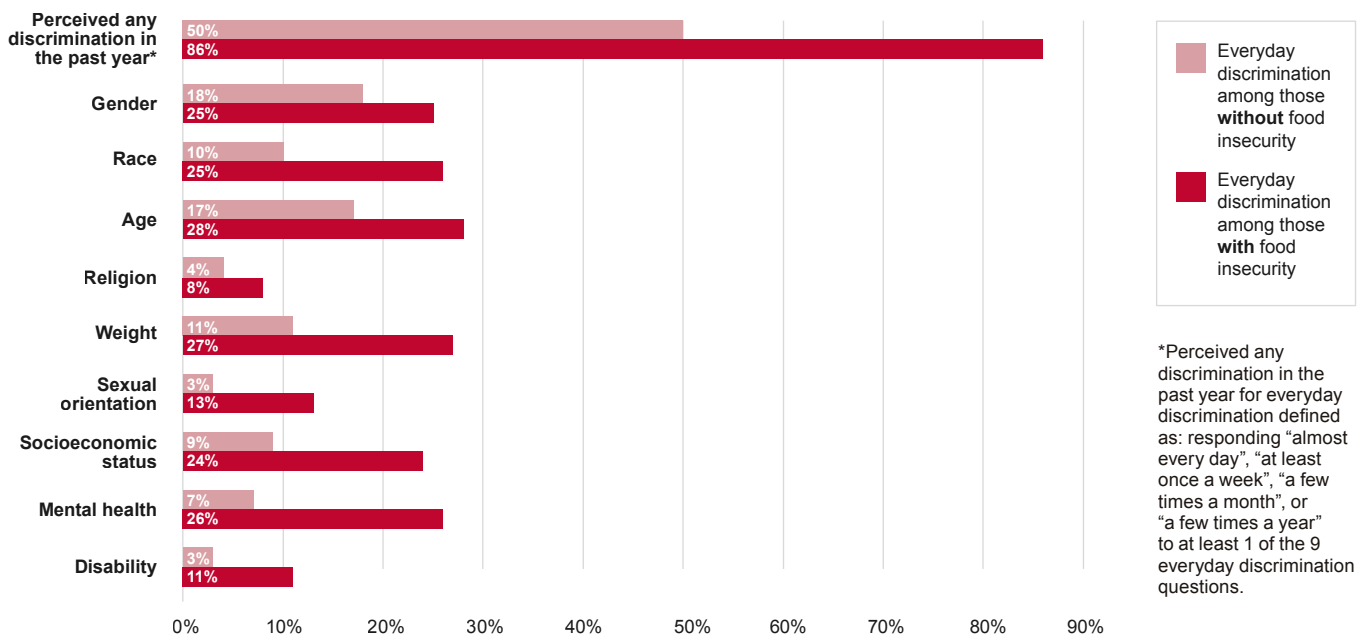
Food security inequities are symptoms of systemic barriers, including structural racism, across many sectors. As such, a heightened focus on understanding the barriers caused by discrimination that people with food insecurity face can serve as a catalyst for the challenging work ahead required to address inequities in our food system.

To better understand what adults with food insecurity in Massachusetts are experiencing, GBFB used the [Everyday Discrimination Scale](#), which asks respondents how often they experience a variety of discriminatory events in their day-to-day life. If someone reported experiencing any of these more than a few times per year, they were then asked to identify the reasons they thought these experiences occurred.

Adults with food insecurity had a much higher rate of perceived everyday discrimination (86%) compared to those without food insecurity (50%). Younger age, weight, mental health, race and gender were the most prevalent reasons cited for perceived discrimination. These experiences with discrimination add to the stigma around seeking food assistance, and therefore are barriers to access.

FIGURE 2

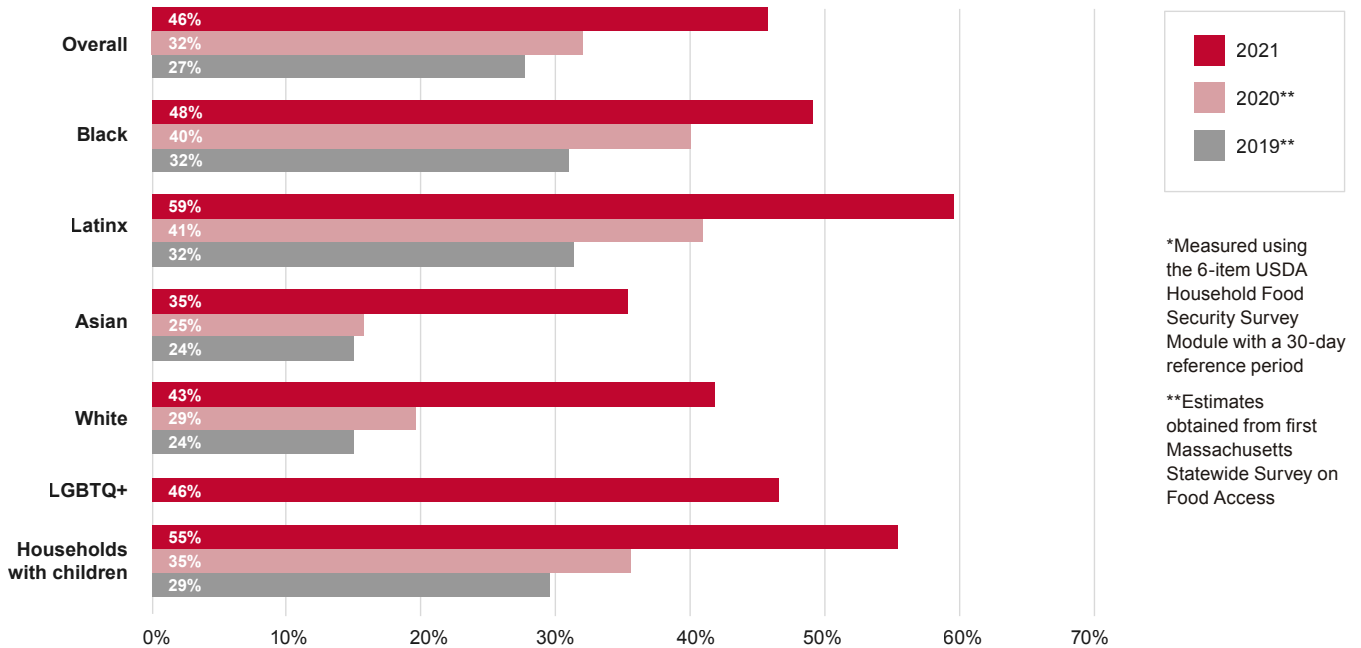
Perceived everyday discrimination by food security status*



Pantry use among adults with food insecurity increased from 1 in 3 in 2020 to 1 in 2 in 2021

Food pantry use among those experiencing food insecurity increased from 27% in 2019 to 46% in 2021, indicating that more of those in need were receiving assistance. Latinx and households with children had the biggest percentage increase in usage from 2020 to 2021.

FIGURE 3
Food pantry use among Massachusetts adults with food insecurity*



“I’m grateful to the food pantry, I have been receiving more SNAP so I haven’t gone to food pantries as often as I used to. As grateful as I am, it’s embarrassing — not because of the staff, they are wonderful, but that I can’t always get nutritious food from supermarkets because of expense.”

– Part-time worker, Marshfield, Plymouth County



Drivers of food pantry use

Higher cost of groceries, followed by decreased income were key drivers of greater food pantry use. In comparison, increased federal assistance and increased income were the top reasons people stopped relying on pantries. Others found the pantries' hours of operation to be a barrier to access.

FIGURE 4
Why new food pantry users **started using pantries** in 2021

| ✓ | |
|---|-----|
| Increased cost of groceries | 54% |
| Decreased income | 42% |
| Quarantined due to COVID-19 | 28% |
| Healthcare expenses | 24% |
| Only recently learned about food pantries/banks | 21% |
| Lost federal assistance | 20% |
| Lost housing/housing costs increased | 20% |
| Additional childcare expenses | 12% |

FIGURE 5
Why food pantry users **stopped using pantries** in 2021

| ✗ | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Increased federal food assistance | 35% |
| Household income increased | 25% |
| Received help from family or friends | 23% |
| I can't get there when it's open | 21% |
| Too hard to get to | 21% |
| Don't like the food | 19% |

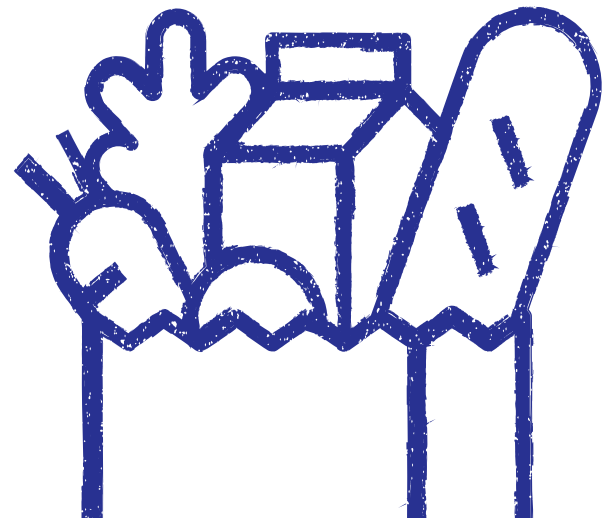
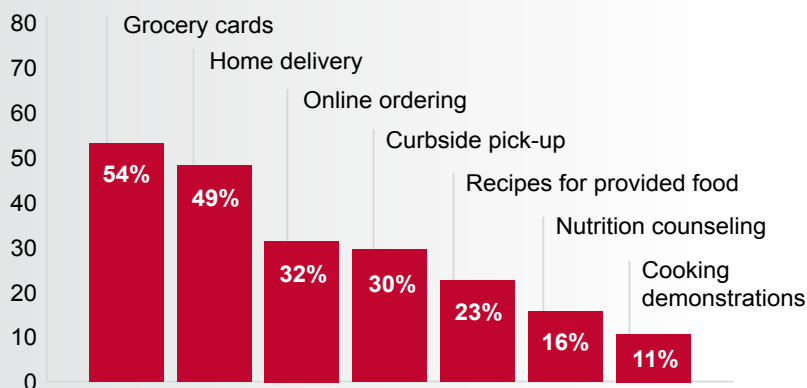
“I paid \$14.98 for a pack of 2 small chicken breasts and \$24 for a pack of assorted pork chops (4 pack). Everything has gone up a lot. \$241.00 in SNAP benefits is not enough for 30 days' worth of groceries.”

– Food pantry client, Chicopee

Experiences of pantry users and suggestions for improvement

While most pantry users access local pantries within 30 minutes of their home, 2 out of 3 pantry users rely on transportation modalities other than their own car (primarily walking or getting a ride with family or friends). This can create challenges to accessing the healthy food they need for themselves and their families. When asked how best to address these challenges and optimize the food pantry experience, pantry users suggested grocery cards and home delivery options.

FIGURE 6
Food pantry users' suggestions for improving food pantries

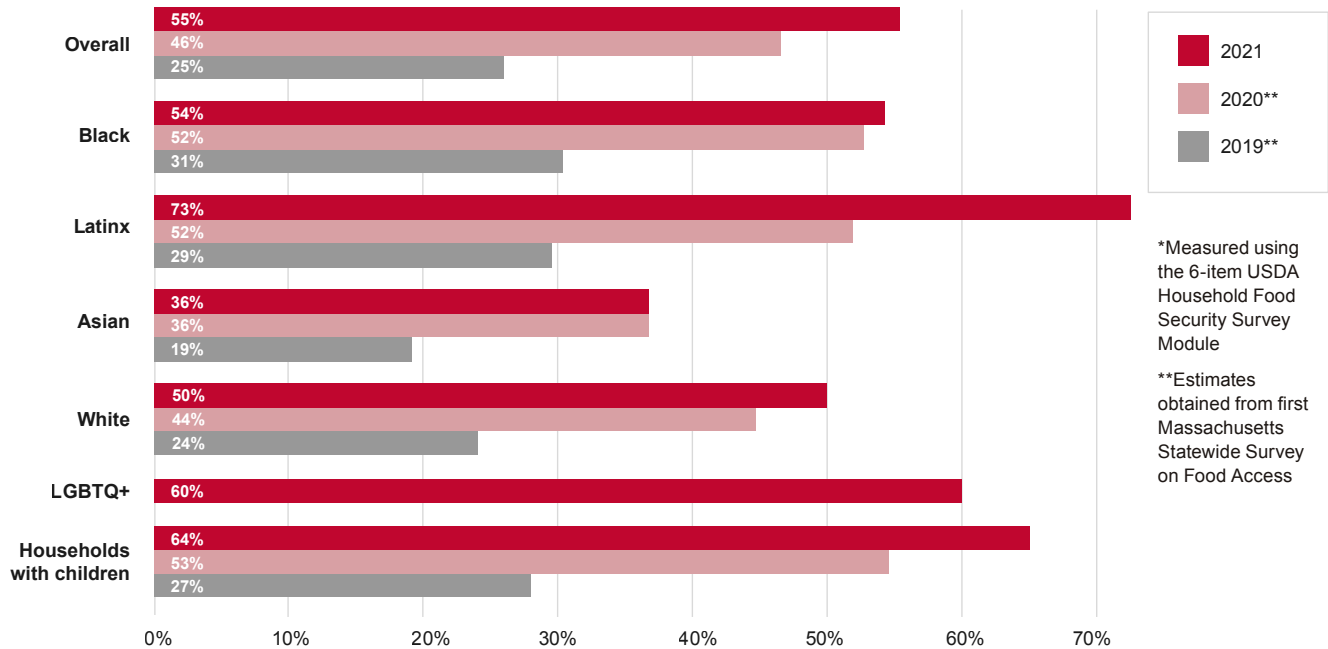


SNAP enrollment and participant experiences

According to our survey, SNAP enrollment among those with food insecurity increased from 25% in 2019 to 55% in 2021. Households with children and Latinx populations had the largest increase in enrollment in 2021. Although SNAP benefits increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 2 SNAP participants stated they did not receive enough money from the program and needed to seek additional support from either food pantries or friends and family.

FIGURE 7

SNAP use among Massachusetts adults with food insecurity*



For 71% of SNAP users, the SNAP increase during COVID freed up money to pay other bills.

However, the majority (84%) of recipients were worried about being able to afford enough food if the SNAP increases were to stop.

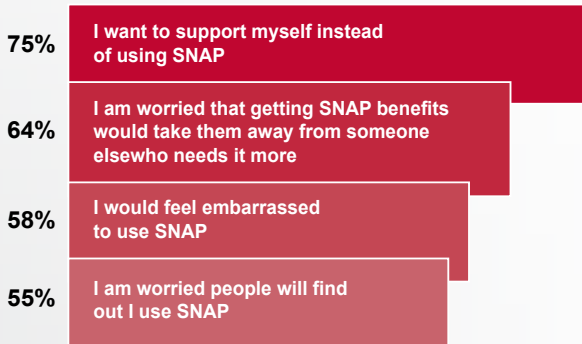


Adults with food insecurity not using SNAP most often cited self-reliance and concern that they were taking benefits from others as a reason for not enrolling. Unfortunately, 70% of those with food insecurity who were not enrolled were unsure whether they were eligible.

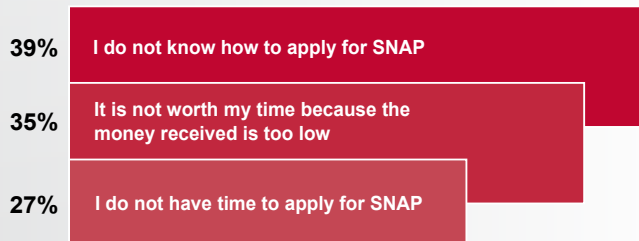
FIGURE 8

Reasons reported by adults experiencing food insecurity for not using SNAP in 2021

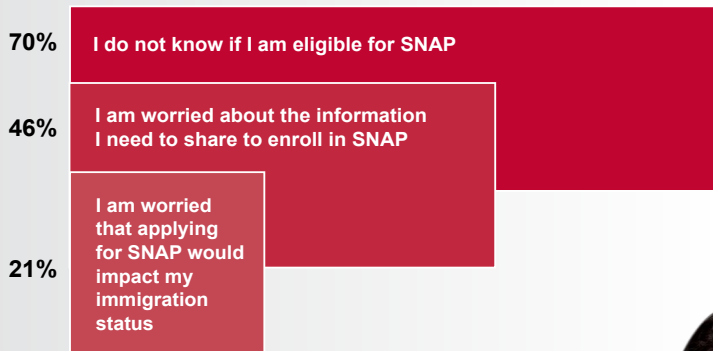

STIGMA AND SELF-RELIANCE



KNOWLEDGE AND CONVENIENCE



ELIGIBILITY CONCERNS

“I am SO VERY GRATEFUL for my increased SNAP benefits during COVID, since it means I can afford to buy higher quality food on a much more frequent basis.”

– SNAP participant, Boston



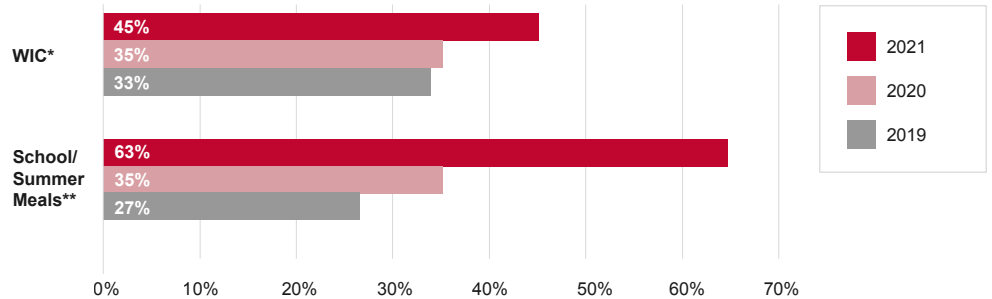


Federal Child Nutrition Program findings

Much like SNAP, participation in the Federal Children Nutrition Programs WIC, and School and Summer Meals increased significantly over the last 2 years.

FIGURE 9

Child Nutrition Program usage among adults with children experiencing food insecurity



* Restricted to households with children under 5 experiencing food insecurity

**Restricted to households with children under 18 experiencing food insecurity

Summary of Findings

During 2021, high levels of food insecurity persisted in Massachusetts, with inflation and the high cost of groceries being key drivers.

Fortunately, a higher proportion of those experiencing food insecurity were able to access resources, including food pantries, SNAP, school meals, and WIC in 2021 compared to 2020. Additionally, increases in SNAP benefits allowed adults with food insecurity to rely less on food pantries and to pay more of their bills.

But for many, obtaining sufficient healthy food remains a challenge, and pantry users would like more convenient options, beyond traditional pantry services, such as grocery cards and home delivery.

Inequities remain prevalent, with Latinx, Black, and LGBTQ+ individuals, and households with children continuing to disproportionately experience food insecurity. Beyond economic hardships, those experiencing food insecurity also report significantly higher levels of perceived everyday discrimination.

Programmatic and policy recommendations for improving the food assistance experience in Massachusetts

Goals

- 1 Increase awareness and support for food assistance programs to continue meeting the high level of need
- 2 Decrease inequities in food access
- 3 Improve experiences for those receiving services from hunger relief organizations

Hunger relief organizations, federal and state food assistance programs, as well as the healthcare, education, and retail sectors will need to continue supporting the large number of people in need of food assistance by increasing fundraising, staffing, and volunteering and by developing sustainable and equitable public policy.

Recommendations for programmatic anti-hunger efforts

- Increase public awareness and outreach by food and financial assistance programs to reduce stigma and discrimination and maximize utilization.
- Explore opportunities to make it more convenient to access food pantry services in a friendly, dignified way.
- Expand and utilize client-centered best practices among hunger relief organizations, staff, and volunteers (e.g., home delivery, cultural competency, equity training, language translation, increased hours of operation, and reducing wait times).
- Optimize food access alternatives and opportunities for people receiving services from hunger relief organizations. This includes offering culturally responsive food options, grocery cards, expanding food delivery and maximizing government benefits.
- Connect food pantries, healthcare, organizations, schools, and other community-based organizations with local SNAP outreach and other support programs to build partnerships that will ensure clients receive accurate eligibility information and timely assistance.
- For organizations directly engaging with individuals who have lived experience with food insecurity and discrimination, develop informed solutions to address stigma, discrimination, and lift their voices in advocacy efforts.
- Focus investments on food pantries that serve sizable communities of Black, Latinx and LGBTQ+ individuals, to improve services and access.
- Promote equitable data collection and data-informed food access investments.

Federal and state policy recommendations:

- Support the Federal Administration’s policy changes and programmatic implementation, including the upcoming White House Conference on Hunger, Health and Nutrition.
- Support the 2023 Farm Bill and Child Nutrition Reauthorization that prioritizes adequate funding, promotes equitable access, and removes systemic barriers from federal nutrition programs to reduce food insecurity and poverty. Policymakers should support the continuation of elevated funding and increased access as outlined in:
 - **Farm Bill:** The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
 - **Child Nutrition:** Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Summer EBT (Electronic Benefit Transfer), and Universal School Meals. Implement the continuation of the Child Tax Credit.
- In Massachusetts, continue to prioritize policies that impact vulnerable populations, including students, BIPOC, families, and LGBTQ+, while sustaining increased funding for the Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP) and the Healthy Incentives Program (HIP). Continue to invest in our food assistance infrastructure and cross-agency capacity.
- Support policies designed to reduce poverty and the burden of unemployment, and promote economic mobility. Adequate living wages will be key to ensuring an equitable economic recovery.



Glossary

Farm Bill

Approximately every 5 years, Congress reauthorizes the Farm Bill, a comprehensive piece of legislation that authorizes most federal policies governing food and agriculture programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Child Nutrition Reauthorization

Every 5 years, Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) provides Congress with an opportunity to improve and strengthen the child nutrition and school meal programs. Although the current law, the [Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 \(Public Law 111-296\)](#), expired on September 30, 2015, the programs continue to operate.

SNAP – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

SNAP provides nutrition benefits to supplement the food budget of needy families so they can purchase healthy food and move towards self-sufficiency.

TEFAP – The Emergency Food Assistance Program

TEFAP is a federal program that helps supplement the diets of low-income Americans by providing them with emergency food assistance at no cost. To operate TEFAP, the USDA provides 100% American-grown USDA Foods and administrative funds to states.

Thrifty Food Plan

SNAP maximum allotments (benefit amounts) are updated each year based on the cost of the Thrifty Food Plan, which is the cost of groceries needed to provide a healthy, budget-conscious diet for a family of 4.

WIC – Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children

WIC provides federal funding to states for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age 5 who are found to be at nutritional risk.

MEFAP – Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program

MEFAP ensures a consistent supply of quality nutrient dense foods and locally grown fresh produce to a statewide network of nearly 1,000 Massachusetts emergency food providers.

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For more information

Email data@gbfb.org
Visit GBFB.org/data

ABOUT GBFB

The Greater Boston Food Bank (GBFB) is the largest hunger relief organization in New England and among the largest food banks in the country. In response to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, GBFB distributed the equivalent of nearly 97 million meals in 2021 through its network of 600 dedicated food distribution partners and programs in the 190 cities and towns across Eastern Massachusetts. A member of Feeding America, the nation's food bank network, GBFB's mission is to end hunger here and it is committed to providing at least 3 healthy meals a day to everyone in need. To learn more visit GBFB.org.

ABOUT NFACT

This research evolved from GBFB's collaboration with the National Food Access and COVID Research Team (NFACT). NFACT is a national collaboration of researchers committed to rigorous, comparative, and timely food access research during the time of COVID-19. We do this through collaborative, open access research that prioritizes communication to key decision-makers while building our scientific understanding of food system behaviors and policies. To learn more visit www.nfactresearch.org.

ABOUT THE HUNGER TO HEALTH COLLABORATORY (H2HC)

The Hunger to Health Collaboratory (H2HC) works to align food, health, and policy through an equity lens by convening cross-sector stakeholders, advocating for legislation, and supporting critical research. H2HC is committed to including diverse community voices and perspectives as we move together toward a healthy food- and nutrition-secure future for all. To learn more, please visit h2hcollaboratory.org.



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