

Experiences of Neighbors Who Access Food Pantries

Food insecurity has increased 50% in Connecticut since 2020, rising to over 560,000 residents, including 1 in 5 children.¹ It is critical for Connecticut Foodshare to understand the challenges facing neighbors to effectively deliver an informed and equitable response to hunger across the state.

Connecticut Foodshare, in partnership with Dr. Kristen Cooksey Stowers, principal investigator of UConn's Health Equity Lab for the People (HELP), and her team of researchers conducted surveys between March and July 2025 in 17 food pantries across the state of Connecticut. Surveys were conducted in Baltic, Enfield, Hartford, Middletown, New Britain, New Haven, Niantic, Norwich, Putnam, Stamford, Thomaston, Torrington, Waterford, Windsor, and Winsted. To ensure representation, the 17 pantries were selected from the Connecticut Foodshare network based on a stratified random sampling approach that considered pantry size (i.e., average households served per month, average people served per month, pounds of foods served) and location in a rural area. Five hundred and twenty-four food pantry guests completed the survey. Most surveys were administered in person, with a few administered via a URL at pantries that operate with a drive-thru distribution. The survey was offered in English and Spanish, with translation support provided by Interpreters and Translators, Inc. Graduates of Connecticut Foodshare's Neighbor Council also met with the research team to test and develop the final version of the survey instrument.

The insights gathered from food pantry guests through this survey will guide and inform the food bank's work, while recognizing that respondents represent only a portion of all guests receiving food from Connecticut food pantries. Because we drew our sample using a stratified random approach, guests from food pantries across the state are represented, which strengthens our confidence that these findings reflect the experiences of our broader network of neighbors.

Who We Serve

Food pantry guests were asked a variety of demographic questions to better understand who is accessing food assistance programs. Here's some of what we learned:



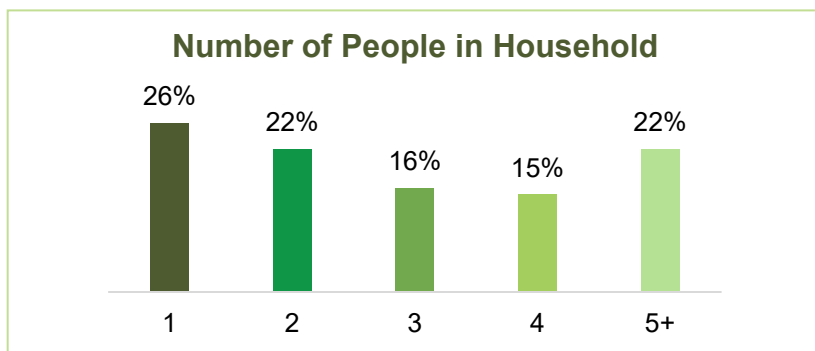
67.4%
of food pantry guests
were female



37.6%
of food pantry guests
were seniors (60+)

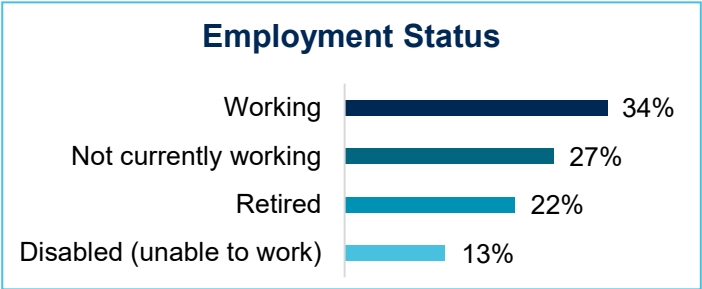


55.2%
of food pantry guests
had children (≤ 18
years old)



Household size varied, with the most common being one person (25.6%), followed by two people (22.1%) and 5 or more people (22.1%).

In terms of employment, about one third (33.9%) of food pantry guests reported currently working, 26.7% were not currently working (i.e., temporary layoff from a job, looking for work, other), 21.9% were retired, and 13.1% reported being disabled and unable to work.



Additionally, more than half of food pantry guests identified as white (53.5%) and 16.0% identified as Black/African American. More than a quarter identified as Hispanic or Latino (29.6%). About 26.2% were born outside of the United States, including in the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Jamaica, El Salvador, India, Guatemala, and Poland. About 21.3% said that English was not the primary language spoken in their household.

Measuring Nutrition Security

Nutrition security is defined as having reliable access to healthy, nutritious foods that promote overall health, including helping to prevent and treat diet-related diseases.² To measure nutrition security, we used the Center for Nutrition and Health Impact’s validated 4-item tool.³ About 17.4% of food pantry guests were experiencing nutrition insecurity and 82.6% of food pantry guests were nutritionally secure. Accessing free nutritious food at food pantries can help improve nutrition security for neighbors. A higher proportion of food pantry guests who identified as Black/African American (21.3%) or multi/other races (19.8%) were experiencing nutrition insecurity compared to those who identified as white (16.8%) or AIAN⁴/Asian/NHPI⁵ (12.0%). A higher proportion of food pantry guests who completed high school or less (19.0%) or some college (18.0%) were experiencing nutrition insecurity compared to those who had a college degree or higher (7.4%).

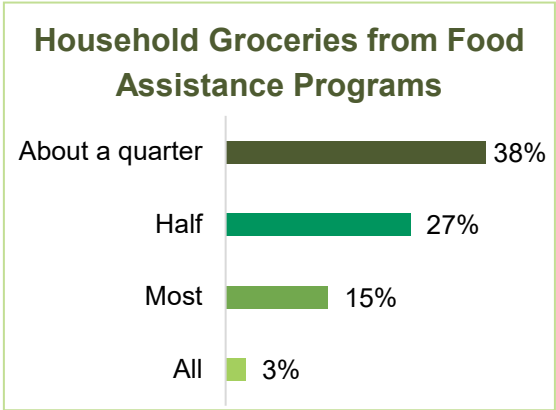
Support from Food Assistance Programs

Utilization:

Most food pantry guests visit their main pantry (i.e., the food pantry that they go to most often) once a week or more (34.2%), followed by a few times a month (30.3%), and about once a month (27.9%). Food pantry guests also were asked, in the last three months, the number of a food pantries, food banks, or mobile food programs from which they received free food. The majority received free food from one location (59.9%), followed by two locations (20.5%), and three locations (10.0%).

Household groceries:

Overall, reliance on food assistance was high, with 82.1% of food pantry guests reporting that at least a quarter of their household groceries came from a food pantry, food bank, or mobile food program. About 43.3% of food pantry guests indicated that at least half of their household groceries came from food assistance programs, and for 17.7%, most or all of their household groceries did.



² USDA. (2022). USDA actions on nutrition security. U.S. Department of Agriculture. <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/usda-actions-nutrition-security.pdf>

³ Calloway, E. E., Carpenter, L. L., Gargano, T., Sharp, J. L., & Yaroch, A. L. (2022). Development of new measures to assess household nutrition security, and choice in dietary characteristics. *Appetite*, 179(1). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2022.106288>

⁴ American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN)

⁵ Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (NHPI)

When looking at employment, 45.4% of those who were not working indicated that at least half of their household groceries came from a food pantry, food bank, or mobile food program, compared to 38.5% of those who were working. About one third (33.6%) of households were currently receiving SNAP benefits.

Financial Strain

Housing:

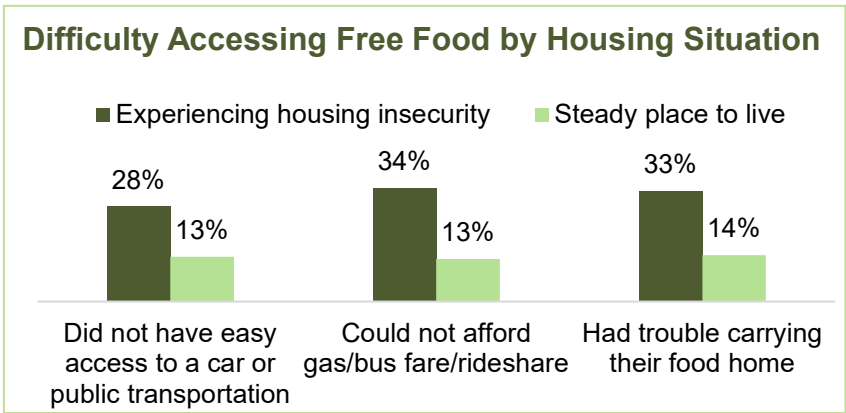
We asked food pantry guests about their current living situation.⁶ Food pantry guests who reported having a steady place to live were categorized as experiencing housing security (76.1%). About 18.8% were experiencing housing insecurity. This included food pantry guests who had a place to live but were worried about losing it; those temporarily staying with others; and those temporarily staying in a shelter, hotel, or were unhoused. A higher proportion of food pantry guests ages 18-29 (27.4%) or 30-44 (31.9%) were experiencing housing insecurity compared to those ages 45-59 (22.6%) or 60+ (7.7%). Similarly, a higher proportion of food pantry guests who identified as multi/other races (28.6%), Black/African American (25.0%) or AIAN⁴/Asian/NHPI⁵ (21.7%) were experiencing housing insecurity compared to those who identified as white (15.4%).

Food pantry guests also were asked if, in the last 12 months, they ever had a rent or mortgage increase that made it difficult to pay and if there was a time when they underpaid or did not make a payment. About 36.5% reported that they had a rent or mortgage increase in the last 12 months that made payments difficult. And 18.0% reported underpaying or not paying their rent or mortgage at some point in the last 12 months. When asked if in the last 12 months they could not pay the full amount of their gas, oil, or electricity bill, 39.6% reported that they were unable to pay their bills in full.

Transportation:

Food pantry guests used various modes of transportation to get themselves to the food pantry. The most common was a personal vehicle (42.4%), followed by walking (23.7%), a borrowed vehicle or carpool (9.1%), and public transportation/bus (7.4%). Transportation mode impacted whether food pantry guests had trouble accessing free food. For those who walked, biked, or took public transportation/bus, 32.2% often or always had trouble accessing free food because they had trouble carrying their food home. For all other modes of transportation, only 9.4% of food pantry guests often or always had trouble accessing free food because they had trouble carrying their food home.

A greater proportion of food pantry guests experiencing housing insecurity reported challenges with transportation more often than food pantry guests with stable housing. About 28.2% of those experiencing housing insecurity often or always had trouble accessing free food because they did not have easy access to a car or public transportation, compared to 13.3% of those who had a steady place to live.

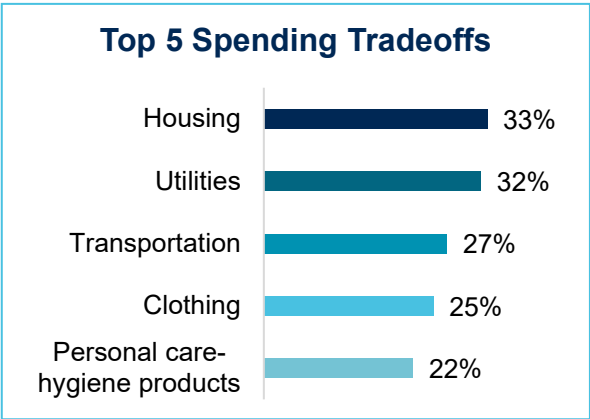


⁶ Question adapted from: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, & Abt Associates. (2017). *HUD Family Options Study restricted access files: Record counts and layouts* [Data documentation]. U.S. Census Bureau. [https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/about/about-the-bureau/adrm/data-linkage/HUDMetadata/HUD-FOS/HUD_FAMOPT_Record_Counts_Layouts_170310_PUBLIC%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/about/about-the-bureau/adrm/data-linkage/HUDMetadata/HUD-FOS/HUD_FAMOPT_Record_Counts_Layouts_170310_PUBLIC%20(2).pdf)

For those experiencing housing insecurity, 33.8% often or always had trouble accessing free food because they could not afford gas/bus fare/rideshare, compared to 12.6% of those who had a steady place to live. About 32.8% of those who were experiencing housing insecurity often or always had trouble accessing free food because they had trouble carrying their food home, compared to 13.8% of those who had a steady place to live.

Making tradeoffs between food and other key expenses:

More than three quarters of food pantry guests (76.4%) reported having to choose between buying food and paying for any of the following: childcare, child products (formula, diapers, wipes), clothing, education, housing, medical care or medication, menstrual products, personal care-gym membership/physical activity, personal care-hygiene products, transportation, or utilities in the last 12 months. The top five spending tradeoffs included paying for housing (32.7%), utilities (31.5%), transportation (27.1%), clothing (24.6%), and personal care-hygiene products (21.9%) instead of paying for food.



Making spending tradeoffs varied across different groups. When looking at age, more than half of those aged 60+ (58.8%) had to make any spending tradeoffs. For those who were experiencing housing insecurity, 94.3% had to make any spending tradeoffs, compared to 70.4% of those who had a steady place to live. More food pantry guests with children aged 18 or under (86.0%) had to make any spending tradeoffs compared to those without children (68.1%). For those who identified as Hispanic or Latino, 85.9% had to make any spending tradeoffs, compared to 71.6% of those who did not identify as Hispanic or Latino.

Pantry Experience

This section highlights key insights from food pantry guests about their experiences visiting their main food pantry, the food pantry that they go to most often. Over half of food pantry guests (57.4%) reported visiting a food pantry for one year or longer, while 28.1% had been visiting for six months or less. Overall, there were positive perceptions of pantry services. Most would recommend the food pantry for others who needed help with food (97.6%). The majority agreed that the food pantry made them feel welcome (94.9%), staff/volunteers spoke their language (91.9%), and hours were convenient (83.3%). When asked about lines at the food pantry, 39.3% agreed that there were long lines/long wait times. About half (50.4%) of those who were working found it very challenging to find a food pantry that was open during the times or days of the week when they needed it, compared to 35.5% of those who were not working.



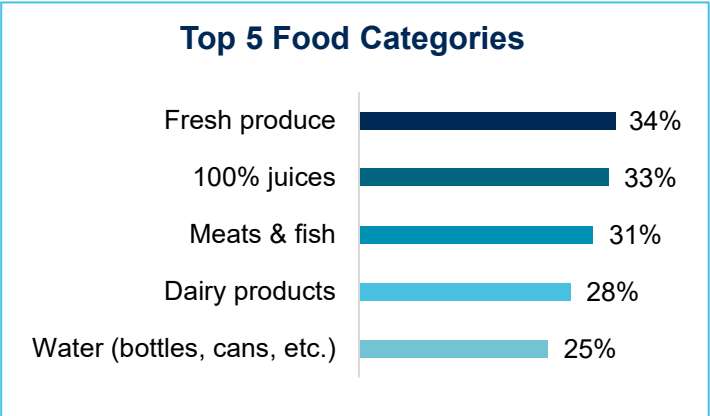
Meeting Food Needs and Preferences

Dietary requirements:

Food pantry guests reported a wide range of dietary needs. Most food pantry guests (40.8%) indicated that they had no dietary requirements. The most common restrictions were a diabetic diet (13.0%), gluten free diet (4.2%), and vegetarian diet (3.1%). When asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “The food I get from the food pantry meets my dietary restrictions,” 78.2% of food pantry guests agreed. However, when comparing the responses to this question based on if someone reported having a dietary restriction, 28.0% of those with a dietary restriction disagreed, compared to 15.3% of those with no dietary restriction.

Foods people wish were available more often at the food pantry:

Food pantry guests were asked if there were specific types of food and other household items that they would like to be available more often at the food pantry. They were provided a list of 24 categories and could select as many as they wanted. The top five categories food pantry guests wish were available more often included fresh produce (34.4%), 100% juices (32.8%), meats/fish (30.7%), dairy products (28.2%), and water (bottles, cans, etc.) (25.4%).



Cultural considerations related to food received from food pantries:

The primary language spoken in the household and whether someone identified as Hispanic or Latino impacted perceptions of food received from food pantries. When asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “The food pantry gives me foods that I do not know how to prepare”, food pantry guests’ responses differed based on primary language spoken in their household and Hispanic or Latino identification. For those where English was not the primary language spoken in their household, 39.3% agreed, compared to 24.7% of those where English was the primary language spoken in their household. For those who identified as Hispanic or Latino, 36.5% agreed, compared to 23.7% of those who did not identify as Hispanic or Latino.



When asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “The food I get from the food pantry aligns with my cultural beliefs”, food pantry guests’ responses differed based on Hispanic or Latino identification. For those who identified as Hispanic or Latino, 26.3% disagreed, compared to 20.6% of those who did not identify as Hispanic or Latino.



Summary

At Connecticut Foodshare, it is important that we hear directly from neighbors who are experiencing food insecurity to help inform our work and to partner to identify solutions. This report highlights key characteristics about who we are serving and the differences that we find across various demographics. Many neighbors are making very difficult decisions when it comes to spending tradeoffs for basic needs and are relying on food assistance for their household groceries, a reflection of the reality neighbors are facing daily due to the increasing cost of living. At a time when eligibility for SNAP and other key federal programs are changing, it is especially important to understand the needs of neighbors facing food insecurity. In combination with learnings from recent neighbor [listening sessions](#) across the state, the findings from this survey will help inform where Connecticut Foodshare will focus our efforts to address barriers to access and improve the neighbor experience including:

- Supporting food pantries and community meal programs in the Connecticut Foodshare network to ensure a welcoming, dignified, supportive, and convenient neighbor experience at their programs.
- Assisting eligible households to apply for SNAP benefits over the phone through Connecticut Foodshare's SNAP Outreach program.
- Strengthening Connecticut Foodshare's approach to sourcing culturally connected foods, foods that specific cultures, populations, or communities have a connection to and that are important to cultural traditions.

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If you have questions about the survey or methodology used, you can contact Dr. Kristen Cooksey Stowers, this study's principal investigator, at kristen.cooksey@uconn.edu. If you have other questions, please email Connecticut Foodshare at strategy@ctfoodshare.org.