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Food Banks in the United States: Systems, USDA Programs, and Participation

Laura J. Hales, Anne T. Byrne, Laura Tiehen, Shellye Suttles,
Rachel M. Zack, Ashley Chaifetz, Susannah Barr, and Ayana Charity





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Abstract

Charitable food assistance networks collectively distribute billions of dollars' worth of food assistance to U.S. residents every year. This report explores charitable food assistance systems, explains how USDA programs fit into those systems, and reports trends in participation among households that benefit from those systems. A special focus is placed on food banks within the charitable food assistance system, as they are key components that collect, store, and distribute large quantities of food. Food banks and beneficiary-facing pantries are shaped by government policies and programs, including Federal assistance programs operated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). USDA purchases and distributes domestically produced foods known as "USDA Foods" through food banks and their affiliates via the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). A wide range of findings are reported, including information on food bank sourcing, statistics for relevant USDA programs, and trends in participation. Notable findings include the amount of food that comes from USDA Foods, which has accounted for as much as 39 percent of food bank supplies, and the range in food pantry participation by State, from 2.6 percent in New Hampshire to 8.2 percent in New Mexico in recent years.

Keywords: food and nutrition assistance programs; The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP); Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP); food security; disaster relief

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About the Authors

Anne T. Byrne and Laura Tiehen were research agricultural economists with USDA, ERS and co-led the completion of this report. Laura J. Hales is an agricultural economist and Shellye Suttles is a former research agricultural economist with USDA, ERS. Ayana Charity was a USDA, ERS Pathways intern in 2023. Ashley Chaifetz is a senior analyst, Rachel M. Zack is a social science policy analyst, and Susannah Barr is a social science research analyst with USDA, FNS.

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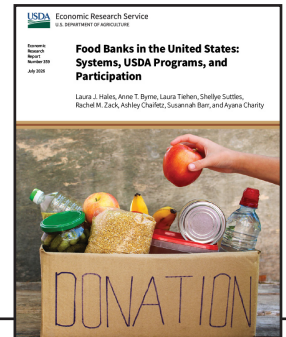
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A report summary from the Economic Research Service

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Key Points

- Food banks and food pantries are privately-run organizations that are available nationwide. In 2021, the percent of the population using their services varied by State, ranging from 2.6 percent in New Hampshire to 8.2 percent in New Mexico.
- USDA operates two programs that distribute food through food banks: the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). These two programs combined to distribute over \$639 million dollars worth of fruits, vegetables, legumes, protein foods, grains, and dairy products in fiscal year 2022.
- As much as 39 percent of the food distributed annually through the food banking system comes from USDA Foods programs such as TEFAP and CSFP.
- Many food pantry clients also participate in Federal assistance programs. In 2021, approximately 48 percent were also beneficiaries of USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), 11 percent participated in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), 41 percent in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), and 38 percent in the School Breakfast Program (SBP).
- While privately run, food banks and food pantry distributions are shaped by government policies, including policies that protect those who donate fresh food and provide tax incentives for donors.

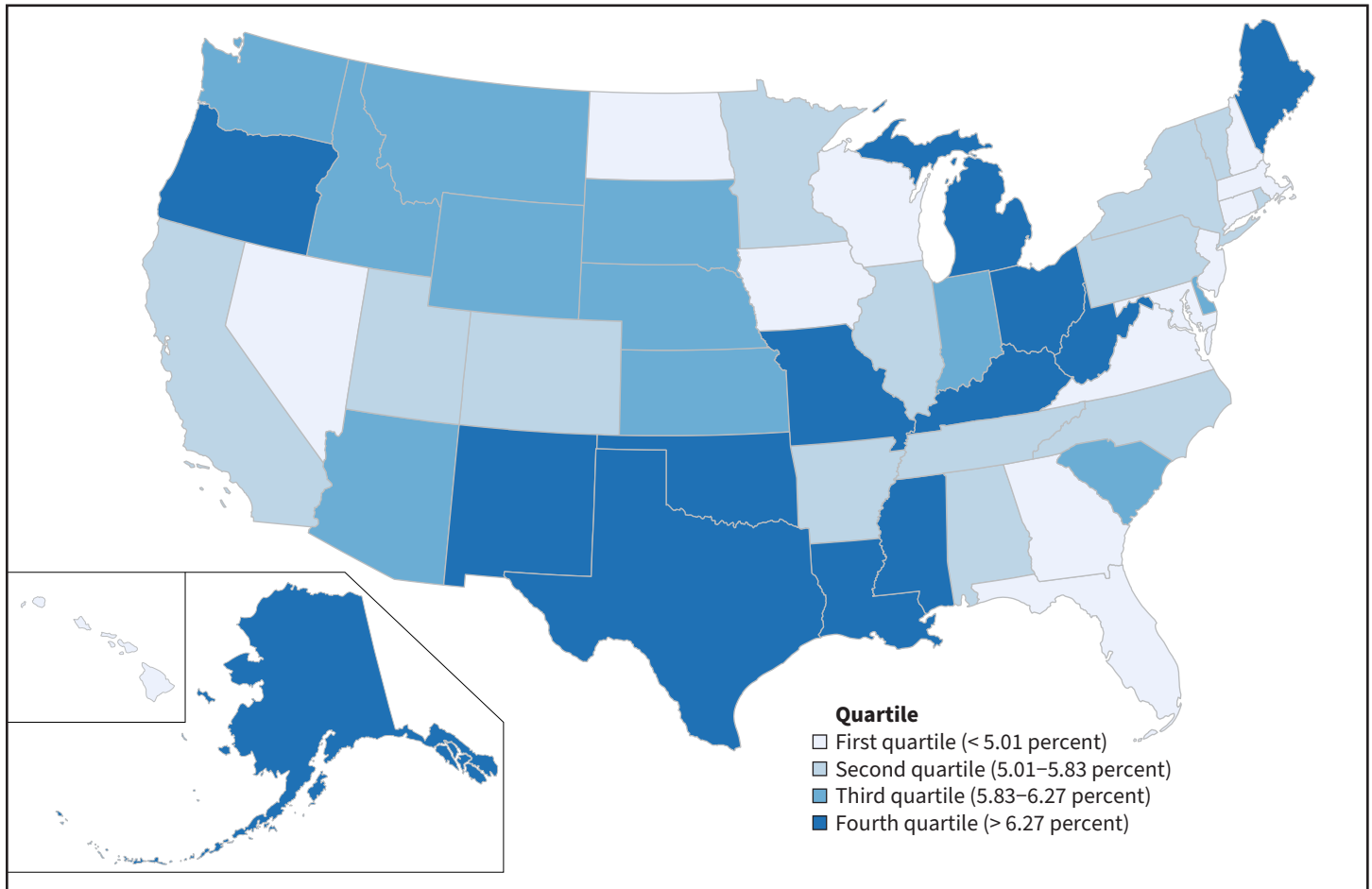
Why Does This Matter

Food banks and food pantries form a key component of the food security safety net in the United States, collectively distributing free groceries to millions of U.S. residents every year. Using data from the USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, the Current Population Survey, and Feeding America, this report provides new information on the current state of food bank systems and food pantry participation at the national level between 2021 and 2023, with historical trends from 2007–21. Information is included showing differences in rates of use and TEFAP eligibility across States, as well as summary statistics on food bank organizations. Food banks collect, organize,

and distribute food supplies to their partners. Most of these partners are food pantries, which directly distribute groceries to those in need. Households who use food pantries at higher rates include those who are low income, headed by single females with children, located in rural areas, and those with Black or Hispanic reference persons (the survey reference person is an adult household member in whose name the housing unit is owned or rented). Food banks differ in terms of size, resources, and services offered, with some also offering Federal benefit assistance, nutrition education, skill building or job training, and essential nonfood supplies.

A Few More Details

Rates of food pantry use vary by State



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service calculations using pooled data from the 2019–21 U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplements.

Food Pantry Use Varies by State

The number of households receiving services from food pantries, and the subsequent rate of use, vary by State. Among the States in the fourth quartile of food pantry use, over 8 percent of people living in New Mexico, Missouri, and Oklahoma used food pantries, according to data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census' Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement. Among the States in the first quartile of food pantry use, New Hampshire (2.6 percent), Iowa (3.5 percent), and Virginia (3.8 percent) had the lowest number of households receiving these services. A list of States and the percent of their population who used food pantries is available in table 6.

Knowledge of Food Banks

Recent research finds that approximately 98 percent of U.S. counties have a food pantry, but there is a gap between the availability of those resources and potential user knowledge. According to the Current Population Survey, of the food-insecure households it surveyed, 59 percent knew of at least one food pantry in their area but only 29 percent received free groceries. Among households that were both food insecure and did not use food pantries, those with Hispanic (48 percent) or Black (53 percent) reference persons were less likely than those with White non-Hispanic reference persons (68 percent) to report knowing those services were available within their community.

ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

Food Banks in the United States: Systems, USDA Programs, and Participation

Introduction

There is a long history of food assistance distribution through charity (i.e., nongovernmental) outlets in the United States and elsewhere around the world (Poppendieck, 1998). However, the past several decades have been characterized by rapid growth in food banks and other forms of charitable food assistance, often referred to as “emergency food assistance” or “private food assistance” (Loopstra, 2018). Modern food banks collect and distribute food from a variety of sources, including Federal programs. Food banks are affected by Federal policies that govern their programs and acquisitions, so while food banks are privately run, Government policy has a direct impact on their operations and the operations of their affiliates. Furthermore, while the most prominent form of food assistance in the United States is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), food banks and their networks distribute large amounts of benefits to millions of U.S. residents each year and may reach distinct households not served by SNAP.

Food banks generally operate at the community or regional level, creating a heterogeneous network that can be difficult to study at the national level. Much of the literature on food banks and pantries focuses on local or regional settings, often using primary data collected at a small number of agencies (Byrne & Just, 2022a). There are few national studies of food banks and pantries currently available. The only comprehensive government-funded study of charitable food assistance providers and the individuals they serve, called the Emergency Food Assistance System (EFAS) study, was conducted in two phases from 2000 to 2001. The initial phase of the study provided detailed information about the operations of five major types of provider organizations (Ohls & Saleem-Ismael, 2002). Two types—food pantries and emergency kitchens—provide meals or groceries directly to individuals in need. The three other types—food banks, food rescue organizations, and emergency food organizations—act as distributors, receiving food donations from a variety of sources and distributing them to food pantries or emergency kitchens. A second phase of the EFAS study surveyed individuals who received food assistance from a representative sample of food pantries and emergency kitchens across the United States, collecting information on a wide range of household characteristics (Briefel et al., 2003).

The EFAS study was designed to survey all charitable food assistance providers—including those who were not in the nationwide Feeding America network of food banks. The EFAS study estimated that, in 2000, 82 percent of food banks were affiliated with Feeding America (known then as America’s Second Harvest). Feeding America is a national organization that partners with food banks, food pantries, and other food programs. Their stated mission is to end hunger in the United States, which is supported through a variety of efforts including food distribution, financial support, research, and advocacy.¹ Although the EFAS study has not been repeated, Feeding America has summarized data from the providers in their network and those seeking assistance from them in a series of Hunger in America reports (Kim et al., 2002; Mabli et al., 2010; O’Brien & Aldeen, 2006; Weinfield et al., 2014). The EFAS and Hunger in America studies have documented the structure and reach of the charitable food assistance

¹ With operating expenses over \$5 billion, Feeding America is one of the largest—if not the largest—charities in the United States (Barrett, 2023).

network in the United States and the operating characteristics of the organizations in that network. Other notable national-level studies of food pantries have been conducted via systematic search of websites (Burke & Huffman, 2023) and analysis of tax return data from organizations large enough to be subject to reporting requirements (Heflin & Price, 2019).

Scope of This Report

This report examines several features of food banks and affiliate services in the United States. This report is organized around three main topics: systems, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs, and household participation. Systems refers to the components of the charitable food assistance networks, including food banks, pantries, sources, and related organizations, including Feeding America (the national organization that networks most food banks in the United States). Systems also describes the relationships between these components and policies that govern those relationships. USDA Programs refers to USDA-funded programs (i.e., direct program administration) that provide food and other resources to the food bank network. Two USDA programs are analyzed: The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which serves low-income households of all ages, and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), which serves low-income seniors. Participation refers to individual and household use of food pantry services, including changes over time and differences across demographic groups. Notably, the historical trends examined in this section include years that took place during the recent Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In our study of participation, we do not examine use of congregate (group) meal sites, soup kitchens, or other food bank-related services due to data limitations.

We rely on publicly available household-based survey data to analyze participation in food bank services. The EFAS and Hunger in America studies include surveys of recipients, which have provided valuable insights into the characteristics of those who access charitable food assistance and can be difficult to capture in a typical household survey. While there are some limitations to using household-based survey data to examine the use of charitable food assistance, it provides consistent information on patterns of use over time. USDA, Economic Research Service (ERS) previously published information on the use of charitable food assistance by U.S. households in its annual report on household food security (Rabbitt et al., 2023a) but now publishes that information in the accompanying statistical supplement (Rabbitt et al., 2023b). The information is aggregated from questions in the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS), which has been administered annually to roughly 50,000 U.S. households since 2001. Using the CPS-FSS allows us to provide annual estimates of participation for the national population and for key subgroups defined by household structure and the presence of children, income, food security, and participation in other USDA programs. The CPS-FSS also provides unique data on use of USDA programs and knowledge of food pantry resources in respondents' communities. Collectively, analysis of this data provides key insights into the nature of food pantry utilization, including the utilization spike at the onset of COVID-19.

Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations

Terms

Agency partner: A household- or beneficiary-facing organization that distributes food (e.g., a food pantry or congregate meal site) and is affiliated with a larger food bank from which it receives supplies.

Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP): A program aimed at improving the health of low-income persons at least 60 years of age by supplementing their diets with nutritious USDA Foods.

Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS): Annual survey in the Nation's food security monitoring system, sponsored by USDA, Economic Research Service and the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census and conducted since 1995. It has been conducted specifically in December of each year since 2001.

Eligible Recipient Agency: A public or private institution (not a penal institution) which provides food assistance and has entered into an agreement with the designated State agency to receive USDA Foods or administrative funds. Includes emergency feeding organizations, charitable institutions such as hospitals and retirement homes, summer camps for children, and others.

Emergency Feeding Organization (EFO): An umbrella term for a subset of eligible (as determined by the USDA) recipient agencies which provide nutrition assistance to relieve situations of emergency and distress through the provision of food to persons in need, including low-income and unemployed persons; includes food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens. Emergency feeding organizations have priority over other eligible recipient organizations in the distribution of USDA Foods.

Food Bank: A public or charitable institution that maintains an established operation involving the storage of food or edible commodities and provision of that food to pantries, soup kitchens, hunger relief centers, rehabilitation centers, homeless shelters, or other food or feeding centers that, as an integral part of their normal activities, provide meals or food to feed persons in need on a regular basis. In this report, we refer to the core distributors of food (not the beneficiary-facing arm) of the charitable food system as food banks.

Food Pantry: A public or private nonprofit organization that distributes unprepared food and grocery products to households in need, which may include those experiencing situations of emergency and distress. May also be referred to as food shelves; may or may not be affiliated with a large food bank.

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP): A Federal program that helps supplement the diets of people with low income by providing them with emergency food assistance at no cost.

USDA Foods: Domestically produced foods that USDA purchases and makes available to organizations that provide food to households or individuals in need through TEFAP, CSFP, and other USDA programs. USDA Foods are purchased by the USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and distributed through USDA, FNS.

USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS): The agency responsible for administering 16 nutrition assistance programs, including The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

continued on next page ►

Abbreviations

AMS: USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service

CACFP: Child and Adult Care Food Program

CARES: Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security

CCC: Commodity Credit Corporation

CPS-FSS: Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement

CSFP: Commodity Supplemental Food Program

DHD: Disaster Household Distribution

D-SNAP: Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

EBT: Electronic benefit transfer

EFAS: Emergency Food Assistance System

EFO: Emergency Feeding Organization

ERS: USDA, Economic Research Service

FDPIR: Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations

FEMA: Federal Emergency Management Agency

FFCRA: Families First Coronavirus Response Act

FNS: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service

MEFAP: Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program

NSLP: National School Lunch Program

SBP: School Breakfast Program

SFSP: Summer Food Service Program

SNAP: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

SSO: Seamless Summer Option

TEFAP: The Emergency Food Assistance Program

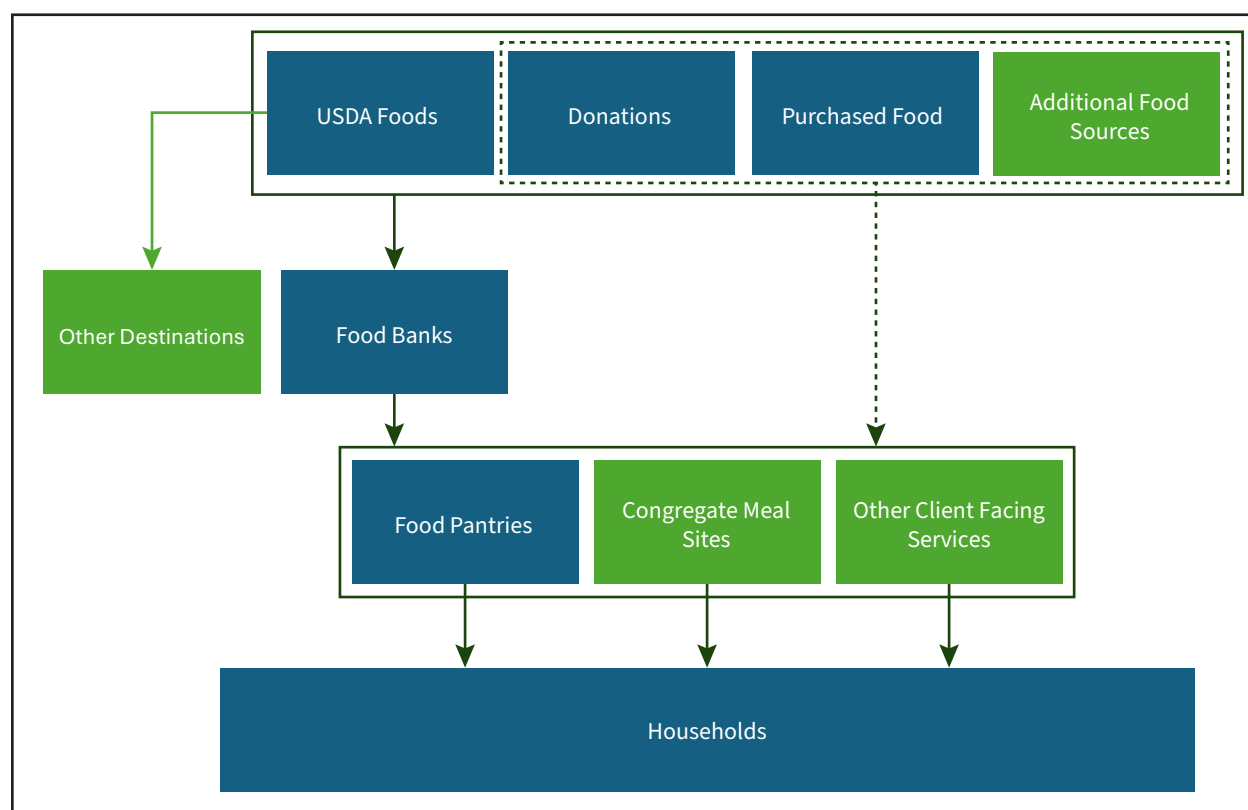
WIC: Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

Charitable Food Systems

Food banks serve as the core distributors within a network of charitable and emergency food assistance. While food banks collect, aggregate, and distribute food supplies to a variety of types of agency partners, food pantries are the primary organizations that distribute food to households. To that end, we refer to food banks as the supply-facing arm of the emergency food system and food pantries as the main beneficiary-facing arm of the emergency food system that distributes groceries.² Figure 1 shows this distinction, where food banks are the recipients of foods from USDA Foods, donations, purchased food, and additional food sources and food banks are shown to distribute food directly to pantries. Readers should note that pantries are just one type of beneficiary-facing charitable food distribution organization; food from food banks or food that comes directly from donations, purchases, or other sources may ultimately be distributed to households through congregate meal sites (i.e., soup kitchens) or other services. Furthermore, some food pantries may be agency partners who partner with a food bank, or they may be standalone pantries that collect and distribute food independently. Finally, readers should note that food banks are just one of several destinations for USDA Foods.

Figure 1

Charitable food distribution flows



Note: Components of the system that are discussed in this report are highlighted in blue while additional components of the system that go beyond the scope of this report are highlighted in green. Other destinations for USDA Foods are varied but may include programs like the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), for example.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service.

² Some food banks also distribute some food directly to households.

Food Banks

Feeding America defines a food bank as a “non-profit that safely stores millions of pounds of food that will soon be delivered to local food programs, like a food pantry” (Waite, 2019). We analyze data from Feeding America regional food banks because they comprise the majority of food banks in the United States and collect systematic data on the characteristics of organizations in their network. Feeding America food banks are extensive, spanning the entire United States, and provide a near-comprehensive picture of the food bank landscape. In 2021, Feeding America reported 200 food banks in their system and, while there are food banks that operate independently of the Feeding America network, most large food banks are part of the Feeding America network.³ In addition to Feeding America, many food banks are networked as part of State food bank associations, which may manage Statewide grants, coordinate sourcing, foster strategic partnerships, advocate to State governments, and engage in other activities to support local hunger relief organizations.

Food banks primarily distribute food to those in need through pantries but may also operate programs for target groups and provide services to improve food access. Key target groups include children, seniors, students, veterans, and/or those facing housing insecurity. Common programs for children include backpack programs and summer feeding programs to address gaps in food access during school vacations and unanticipated school closures for students who rely on the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). These may include USDA summer feeding programs such as the Seamless Summer Option (SSO) and the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), offering both congregate (group meal sites) and noncongregate (to-go meals) options. Many food banks operate mobile pantry operations where trucks or buses of food are brought to areas that are remote or lack food access. Some food banks offer grocery delivery and online ordering to improve access to services (SF-Marin Food Bank, n.d.). Finally, food bank websites may serve as hubs of information on local pantries and food assistance resources.

Food banks have varying levels of labor and capital, which are important resources for food bank operations and are summarized in table 1. On average, each food bank has 68 full-time paid staff, with staff sizes ranging from 8 to 364. Volunteer counts vary dramatically, though the average number of unduplicated annual volunteers nationally is about 3,600. Capital inputs similarly vary. The average number of trucks or trailers owned by a food bank is 16, with the minimum and maximum reported as 2 and 135, respectively. To distribute fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy, and meats at main food bank facilities, cooler and freezer space tend to represent about 2,000–5,000 square feet of facility space each, which is roughly equivalent to between 100 and 300 household refrigerators. This accounts for about 26.7 percent of warehouse space in an average-sized main facility. The overall capacity of food banks, including how many households can participate and how many meals can be served, is determined by varying labor and capital resources unique to each food bank location.

³ Food Bank News reported over 50 independent food banks in the United States (Food Bank News, 2020). Our findings may not generalize to all organizations that label themselves as food banks as these independent food banks may differ systematically from those in the Feeding America network.

Table 1

Labor and capital at food banks in the United States, 2021 (Feeding America network only)

	Mean	Minimum	25th percentile	50th percentile	75th percentile	Max
Labor						
Paid staff (full-time equivalent)	67.83	7.5	30	50	85.75	363.50
Volunteers (unduplicated count)	3,601.87	0	671	1,650	3,369	67,021
Capital						
Trucks and trailers (count)	16.41	2	8	12	20.25	135
Vans and other (count)	8.75	0	3	6	12	49
Cooler space (square feet)	6,248	256	2,015	3,576	6,865	53,428
Freezer space (square feet)	5,691	480	1,976	3,797	7,456	60,045

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from Feeding America.

Operating expenses at food banks vary greatly, averaging over \$15 million annually per member food bank, though expenses can be as low as \$1.3 million and as high as \$100 million (Feeding America, 2023). Funding for food banks may come from donations, grants, government sources—such as those that come from TEFAP administrative funds or the Emergency Food and Shelter Program operated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—or other sources.

As nonprofits, food banks also rely on charitable donations which may be incentivized by tax policy. Individuals who itemize deductions can deduct contributions to qualified charitable organizations, such as those in the food bank system, from their income when calculating their federal tax liability (U.S. Department of the Treasury, Internal Revenue Service, 2023). Businesses may also be allowed to deduct contributions to charitable organizations, including donations from their business inventory (i.e., the goods that are held to be sold to customers). The specific tax rules regarding contributions from businesses depend on factors such as the business structure and the purpose of the donation.

Food Bank Sources

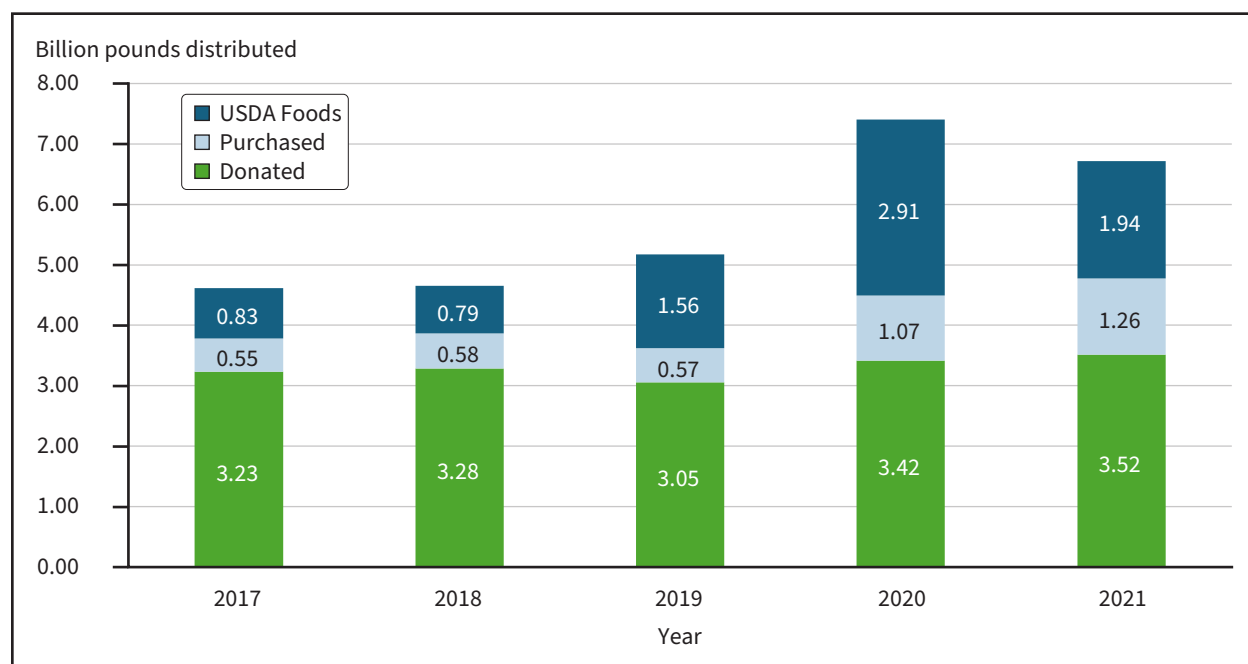
Feeding America food banks mainly acquire food three ways: through donations, direct purchases, and Federal assistance. Donations represent the largest component of food bank supplies and are described in the subsection below. Food banks may also purchase food directly from retailers or wholesalers. A benefit of direct purchasing is that the food banks can select the exact retail food products they want, with selections that may be informed by beneficiary needs, nutrition goals, or cultural appropriateness. Food that is secured through the Federal government and distributed through food banks generally comes from TEFAP or CSFP, which are described in the section USDA Programs in Food Banks.

Of course, food banks are heterogeneous and may have additional sources of food not previously mentioned. We note three additional sources for reader awareness. First, a minority of food banks have gardens, farms, and/or gleaning operations. Second, Feeding America food banks may acquire food through an internal market operated by Feeding America where shares, rather than dollars, are used for purchasing (Prendergast, 2017). Third, in addition to food from the Federal government, some States operate their own in-kind food assistance programs that distribute food through food banks

and their affiliates. For example, the Massachusetts Emergency Food Assistance Program (MEFAP), provides tens of millions of dollars in funding for food purchases by the four major food banks in that State (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, n.d.).

The prevalence of food from various food bank sources has changed in recent years. We explore these changes by examining the composition of food from donations, direct purchasing, and Federal assistance programs between 2017 and 2021.⁴ From 2017–21, the quantity of food distributed through these food banks increased, with substantial increases in the amount of food coming from direct purchases and USDA Foods. Figure 2 shows changes in the composition of food sources at Feeding America food banks between 2017 and 2021 and changes in the total value of food bank distributions. In 2017, USDA Foods represented 18 percent of food distributed through Feeding America food banks, while that number was 28 percent in 2021 (after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic). Meanwhile, the volume of food coming from donations remained steadier. Despite increases in food supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic, many food banks reported insufficient supplies to meet demand; Byrne and Just (2022b) found that 81.4 percent reported insufficient supplies to meet demand in July of 2020.

Figure 2
Composition of food distributed by Feeding America Network food banks, 2017–21



Note: The donated category includes all products donated to the food banks, including but not limited to retail, manufacturing, and producers. The purchased product category includes all purchases, including funds from the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) administrative funds, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), State and local agencies, and both restricted and nonrestricted funds.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using Feeding America proprietary data.

⁴ These dates were selected based on data availability and the authors' aim to provide data dating back before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Food Bank Donations

Food bank donors include individuals and businesses, such as farms, manufacturers, and retailers. There are special tax rules about how to calculate the value of food inventory donations and how to calculate an enhanced deduction when a business donates food inventory to charitable organizations that care for the ill, those in need, and infants (Congressional Research Service, 2020). This enhanced deduction has specified limits, but can be up to twice the value of the deduction allowed for nonfood inventory donations (Harvard Law School Food Law and Policy Clinic, 2020). In addition to Federal tax incentives, a growing number of States offer State-level tax incentives, often in the form of tax credits, which provide a direct dollar-for-dollar subtraction from a business or individual's tax bill. Hudak et al. (2022) found that, as of fall 2020, 16 states provided some form of State-level tax incentive for food donation. Many State-level incentives are targeted at farmers and restaurants, and a few are focused specifically on donations of farm products. In addition, the Farm to Food Bank Projects program, operated through TEFAP, funds programs that connect local producers with emergency feeding organizations (EFOs).

Donations may also come from Federally funded programs with excess food. While USDA encourages schools, Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) institutions, and SFSP sponsors to plan menus and make meals in ways that reduce leftovers, it recognizes that leftovers are bound to be generated occasionally and the institutions are permitted to donate that leftover food to food banks, homeless shelters, and other organizations designed for supporting individuals and households in need (Hudak et al., 2022). In addition to specific legislation on donations from schools, the Federal Food Donation Act of 2008 encourages the donation of excess foods in situations where Federal funds are involved.⁵ Specifically, where there are Federal funds above \$25,000 for the “provision, service, or sale of food in the United States, or for the lease or rental of Federal property to a private entity for events at which food is provided in the United States,” contracts should include clauses that encourage food donation to nonprofit food assistance organizations (Federal Food Donation Act of 2008, 2008).

A potential concern with donated food is food safety. Both donors and recipients want donated food to be safe to consume, but, as with any food distribution, there may be concerns about contamination and spoilage. If donors are liable for unsafe food, they may be less inclined to donate, thus threatening the supplies of food banks and other emergency feeding organizations. The Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act of 1996, updated via the Food Donation Act of 2017, provides liability protection for individual donors who donate products in good faith to nonprofit organizations with the intention of distributing food to individuals in need. The act provides protection for backyard gardeners, farmers, gleaners, food service and retail donors, manufacturers, caterers, school food authorities, institutions of higher education, food banks, and other recipient agencies. The act does not cover organizations that ultimately sell the food, even when food is sold below cost with the intention of serving households in need (Buzby, 2020), but updates made through the Food Donation Improvement Act, signed into law in 2023, extend liability coverage to such organizations. In addition to Federal liability protections, donors may be protected by additional State or local policies.⁶

There are ongoing efforts to increase the size and variety of food donations. The aforementioned Farm to Food Bank Projects, authorized through the 2018 Farm Bill, provide grants for projects that reduce food waste in agricultural production, processing, or distribution through the donation of food; provide food to individuals in need; and build relationships between agricultural producers,

⁵ More information can be found through policy memo SP11 CACFP05 SFSP07-2012: Guidance on Food Donation Program in Child Nutrition Programs (published February 3, 2012), which provides guidance on food recovery practices and clarifies that any food not consumed may be donated to eligible local food banks or charitable organizations.

⁶ Hudak et al. (2022) reported that California has the most policies related to food donation.

processors, and distributors with excess food opportunities through the donation of food.⁷ There are also countless examples of food rescue programs and other initiatives to collect food for donation to food banks. While there is no Federal excess food law, policies have emerged at the State level requiring some businesses to donate edible food instead of sending it to the landfill.

Finally, there are organizations that may not immediately be associated with charitable food assistance that promote food bank donations. For example, the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) runs the Stamp Out Hunger food drive each year where USPS carriers collect food from across the country for donation to food banks. Stamp Out Hunger is the largest one-day food drive in the United States and is responsible for the delivery of over 1.82 billion pounds of food since its inception 30 years ago (United States Postal Service, n.d.). Another example is Hunters for the Hungry and other charitable organizations dedicated to purposing hunted game and wildlife for distribution at food banks. These organizations often facilitate processing and packaging of hunted game, thus reducing the burden on donor hunters.

Food Pantries

A food pantry is a place where people go to receive free food. Food pantries generally provide food that is intended to be prepared and consumed elsewhere (i.e., groceries), unlike congregate meal sites which provide prepared meals for immediate consumption.⁸ Food pantries may have income limits for beneficiaries.

While many food pantries are affiliated with Feeding America network food banks (i.e., agency partners), there are also pantries that operate independently. Regardless of food bank affiliation, many food pantries are associated with places of worship (Weinfield et al., 2014). Other common pantry locations are community centers, schools and universities, domestic shelters, childcare centers, senior centers, and medical clinics.

Food pantries vary in capacity and structure. Capacity may be measured by the size of the physical space of a pantry, its geographic coverage, beneficiaries served, meals served, pounds distributed, or another metric. Structure may refer to any number of features of the operation. For example, while some offer perishable food that may be stored in refrigerators or freezers, others distribute shelf-stable items only. Some food pantries allow clients to choose their food while others distribute prescribed bundles of food to beneficiaries. Furthermore, sourcing may vary by food pantry; food banks are major distributors of food to beneficiary-facing food pantries, but some pantries are not affiliated with a food bank and some pantries receive food directly from donors or through purchasing. Food collected and distributed at the pantry level is not captured in the overall food bank supply numbers shown in figure 1. In some cases, such direct sourcing may be substantial. Some of the aforementioned national studies (e.g., the Hunger in America series) quantitatively summarize food pantries in the United States, and the most recent such study was published in 2014 (see Weinfield et al., 2014).

⁷ Section 4018(b) of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (PH-115334) amended section 203D of the Emergency Food Assistance Act of 1983 provides additional information on how Farm to Food Bank Project funds are provided to State agencies administering TEFAP to pay for projects to harvest, process, package, or transport commodities donated by agricultural producers, processors, or distributors for use by EFOs.

⁸ Some locations operate both food pantries and congregate meal sites.

The number of food pantries in the United States is difficult to estimate because of the decentralized nature of the organizations. However, recent work from Burke and Huffman (2023) provided analysis which concluded that there are at least 48,581 food pantries covering 98 percent of U.S. counties. They found that the mean number of pantries per county was 15 while the median number of pantries per county was 6.

Additional Services at Food Banks and Food Pantries

Many food banks provide more than food to the communities they serve, also acting as hubs of information or connections to other services. Food banks and affiliate pantries are involved in Federal benefit assistance and coordination, nutrition education and healthcare partnerships, skill building and job training, disbursement of additional nonfood supplies, and advocacy and outreach.

Federal benefit assistance and coordination: With missions oriented towards reducing hunger and food insecurity, most food banks also provide some level of outreach to encourage eligible beneficiaries to enroll in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). These SNAP outreach services may include events to promote awareness of SNAP benefits, designated outreach coordinators, or application assistance (including in languages other than English). While less common than SNAP outreach, similar initiatives exist at food banks to support enrollment in the USDA's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), as well as Medicaid and other nonfood benefits. At some food banks, benefit assistance is coordinated through a central hub or office (Greater Cleveland Food Bank, n.d.). Some food banks may also assist with tax preparation (Food Bank for New York City, n.d.).

Nutrition education and healthcare partnerships: Food banks often have services, resources, or programs oriented towards improving diet quality and health. These may include online resources, nutrition education classes (East Texas Food Bank, n.d.), teaching kitchens (Philabundance, n.d.), teaching gardens (Northwest Arkansas Food Bank, n.d.), produce prescription programs (Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, n.d.), clinic-based or clinic-affiliated pantries (Feeding South Dakota, n.d.), or dietician-designed meals (Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida, n.d.).

Skill building and job training: Food banks may offer programs for beneficiaries, students, and others to develop and improve skills. When such programs exist, they often target individuals seeking careers in the warehouse and logistics industry (St. Mary's Food Bank, n.d.) or food service and culinary arts (Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, n.d.). Food banks may also work with early career professionals who are interested in nutrition security or nonprofit management through internships (Island Harvest, n.d.).

Disbursement of nonfood supplies: Food banks and pantries may make coordinated efforts to disburse additional nonfood items to beneficiaries. These may include personal care items, diapers, clothing, teaching supplies, toys, or pet supplies.

Advocacy and outreach: Food banks often engage in advocacy and outreach through information campaigns, which may include legislative advocacy alert systems. In addition, some food banks have specific programs to engage beneficiaries, volunteers, employees, and/or community members in advocacy through speaking opportunities (Food Bank of the Southern Tier, n.d.).

Food Bank Networks of Agency Partners

Each Feeding America food bank serves 300 recipient agencies on average, though the minimum is 14 and the maximum listed is nearly 1,300 (table 2), which demonstrates the differences in these regional networks. These recipient agencies provide a wide variety of services, including food pantries, soup kitchens, senior programs, emergency shelters and residential programs, and childcare and youth programs. Assuming recipient agencies are served by a single food bank, this suggests approximately 60,000 agency partners in the Feeding America network, of which about half are standalone food pantries. Other pantries may be part of multiservice organizations or may be co-located with other services.

Table 2

Composition of food bank recipient agencies, 2021 (Feeding America Network only)

	Mean	Minimum	25th percentile	50th percentile	75th percentile	Max
Total agencies served	303.68	14	146.75	230	367.5	1,298
Food pantries	151.97	0	76	117.5	201.75	587
Soup kitchens	10.78	0	3.75	7	13	85
Emergency shelters	6.44	0	1.75	4	9	65
Residential facilities	11.31	0	2.75	6	13.25	155
Child or adult day cares	3.35	0	0	1	4	61
Senior programs	18.04	0	2	6	22	168
Rehabilitation facilities	3.84	0	0	2	5	31
Youth programs	48.80	0	4	14	53	808
Multiservice facilities	29.08	0	5	14	37.25	260
Other	20.1	0	0	3	19.25	235

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from Feeding America.

USDA Programs in Food Banks

USDA operates two programs that distribute USDA Foods through food banks: TEFAP and CSFP. At the state level, USDA Foods programs are administered through State agencies, with programs often housed within departments of health and human services, agriculture, or education. State administrators of these Federal food assistance programs then manage the distribution of food to local or recipient agencies.

Farm Bills and Food Banks

Approximately every 5 years, Congress passes a Farm Bill. These bills authorize funding for TEFAP and CSFP and include provisions that affect these two programs, as well as food bank services more broadly. Funding for TEFAP and CSFP is discussed in the subsections for each program. Other key provisions relating to food banks in the past three Farm Bills were:

- Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (H.R.2419): Key changes to TEFAP included adding an inflation adjustment to the annual funding allocation, making permanent TEFAP State plans, removing the requirement that States submit plans for approval every 4 years, and the explicit allowance of TEFAP administrative funds for the processing of wild game (USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, 2009). The bill also extended the discretionary authority provided in the Emergency Food Assistance Act of 1983 to provide grants to improve the capacity and infrastructure of emergency feeding organizations, with no less than 50 percent of such funds to be used to support organizations serving rural communities.
- Agricultural Act of 2014 (H.R.2642): Phased out the eligibility of pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children in CSFP, allowing current participants to remain on the program until their eligibility certification period expired. In addition, it included a section requiring the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to “finalize and implement a plan to increase the purchase of Kosher and Halal food” for distribution through TEFAP.
- Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (H.R.2): Authorized \$4 million per year from fiscal year (FY) 2019 to FY 2023 for TEFAP Farm to Food Bank Projects which “harvest, process, package, or transport commodities donated by agricultural producers, processors, or distributors for use by emergency feeding organizations.”¹ The act also added a requirement that TEFAP State plans include a plan for eliciting feedback from recipient organizations on food preferences and needs. Third, the law required that the Secretary of Agriculture “issue guidance outlining best practices to minimize the food waste of commodities” that were donated. Finally, the act established certification periods for CSFP that specified certification must not be less than 1 year and not more than 3 years.

¹ Additional legislation extended Farm to Food Bank Projects funding through FY 2024 and States received funding in 2024 as well.

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)

TEFAP is a USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) program that supports emergency food organizations by distributing USDA-purchased, 100 percent domestically grown and processed foods for use by emergency feeding organizations including food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens. Organizations that distribute USDA Foods through TEFAP may provide food directly to eligible individuals for home consumption or use those foods to prepare meals for distribution. In 2021, Feeding America reported that 193 of their 200 member food banks received USDA Foods through TEFAP.

TEFAP is administered at the Federal level by USDA, FNS and at the State level by 54 State agencies, including all 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam. The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands receives TEFAP as cash-in-lieu rather than

USDA Foods. Income eligibility rules for households receiving USDA Foods through TEFAP for home consumption vary by State as Federal regulations allow for States to set income eligibility guidelines for households including discretion in establishing methods to verify income. Table 3 provides TEFAP income eligibility requirements as of 2024.

Table 3

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) income eligibility by State (as of 2024)

State	TEFAP income eligibility (percent of the Federal poverty level)
Alabama	130
Alaska	300
Arizona	185
Arkansas	130
California	235
Colorado	235
Connecticut	300
Delaware	185
District of Columbia	185
Florida	130
Georgia	130
Hawaii	400
Idaho	200
Illinois	300
Indiana	185
Iowa	185
Kansas	130
Kentucky	185
Louisiana	130
Maine	185
Maryland	150
Massachusetts	250
Michigan	200
Minnesota	300
Mississippi	130
Missouri	185
Montana	200
Nebraska	180
Nevada	185
New Hampshire	240
New Jersey	185
New Mexico	185
New York	225
North Carolina	200
North Dakota	200
Ohio	200
Oklahoma	200
Oregon	300

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State	TEFAP income eligibility (percent of the Federal poverty level)
Pennsylvania	185
Puerto Rico	185
Rhode Island	300
South Carolina	150
South Dakota	185
Tennessee	185
Texas	185
Utah	185
Vermont	300
Virginia	185
Washington	400
West Virginia	185
Wisconsin	200
Wyoming	130
Guam	400
US Virgin Islands	185

Note: The Food Distribution Programs Access and Parity Final Rule (published in October 2024) could impact these eligibility levels over time. Under the final rule, State agencies must set TEFAP maximum income-based eligibility standards between 185 and 300 percent of the U.S. Federal Poverty Guidelines and may submit a request to USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to establish guidelines at a higher level, with justification. More information can be found on the USDA, FNS website.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from USDA, FNS regional offices.

Most annual TEFAP expenditures at the Federal level can be broken into entitlement foods, bonus foods, and administrative funding. Entitlement foods are those the USDA is authorized to purchase specifically for TEFAP. Bonus foods are items the USDA purchases to support agricultural markets and distributes through TEFAP and other programs. The administrative funds help defray State and local costs related to transportation, processing, storage, and distribution of USDA Foods or other foods, including those from the private sector.⁹ While the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) provides these administrative funds, in certain years additional funds have been made available through other TEFAP funding sources in response to specific events, such as natural disasters and increased funding during the COVID-19 pandemic.

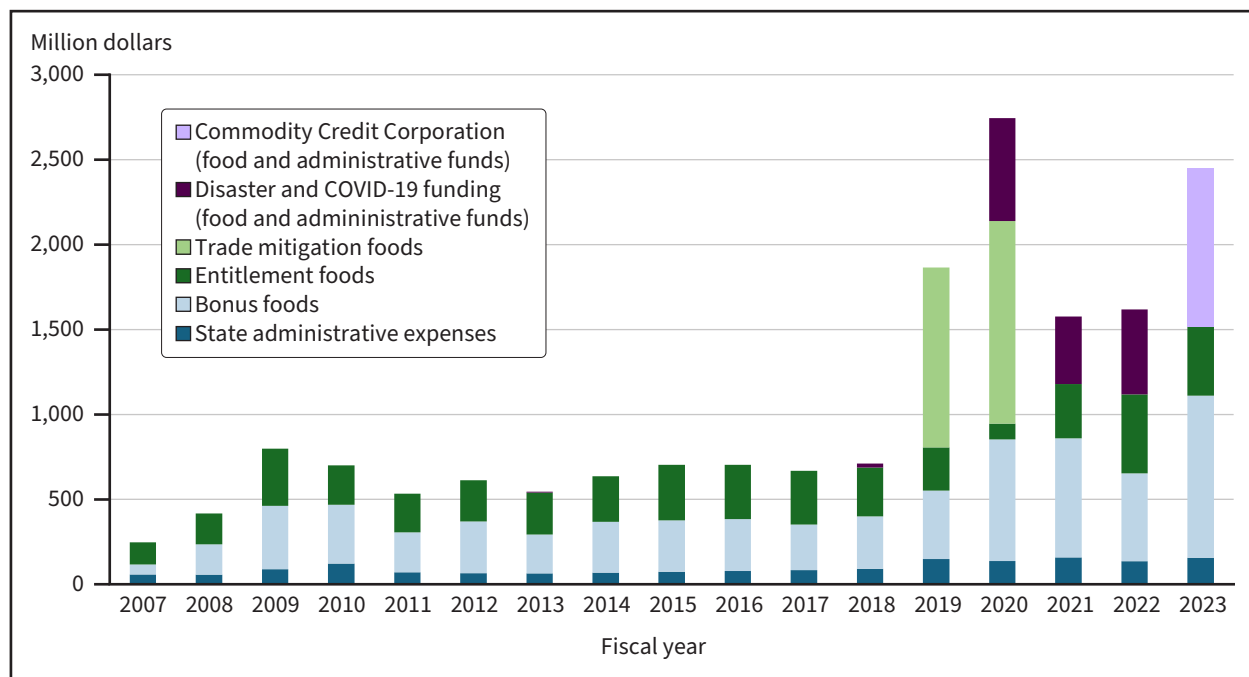
TEFAP food entitlements and administrative funds are allocated to States based on a formula that considers the number of unemployed people in each State and the number of persons in each State with incomes below the poverty level. USDA Foods distributed through TEFAP are allocated to eligible recipient agencies within each State. Distribution practices are outlined in TEFAP State plans and may identify needs using metrics other than unemployment and poverty. For example, some States consider SNAP enrollment within the State to make distributions within the State.

Historical TEFAP funding is shown in total and by category in figure 3. Total funding for TEFAP has increased from \$246.8 million in FY 2007 to \$2.5 billion in FY 2023. TEFAP commodity distributions have been substantially higher in recent years, primarily due to USDA trade mitigation efforts and COVID-19 pandemic relief legislation. Through the trade mitigation Food Purchase and Distribution Program, USDA provided roughly \$1 billion worth of food to TEFAP outlets in FY 2019 and FY 2020

⁹ States can convert up to 20 percent of food funds into administrative funds and can convert any amount of their administrative funds to food funds to purchase additional USDA Foods.

as part of an effort to assist “farmers suffering from damage due to unjustified trade retaliation by foreign nations” (USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service, n.d.-a). Even as the trade mitigation funding ended, food banks saw increased TEFAP foods from COVID-19 pandemic relief. In FY 2022, \$500 million in supplemental funding for TEFAP was provided under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, Division B (P.L. 116-136) as part of USDA’s Food Systems Transformation initiative. Funding for TEFAP has also included supplemental funding for natural disasters such as Hurricane Sandy in 2013 and hurricanes and wildfires in 2017.

Figure 3
The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) funding, fiscal years 2007–23



Note: Funding is shown in nominal dollars. A version of this figure, dating back to 1983, can be found in *The Emergency Food Assistance Program: Background and Funding* (2023). Disaster and COVID-19 funding includes supplemental funding for Hurricane Sandy in 2013, hurricanes and wildfires in 2017, supplemental funding via the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, and COVID Division N Funding that provided individuals and businesses with additional funding, expanded program eligibility, and new assistance programs during the pandemic.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, Food and Nutrition Service budget explanatory notes for fiscal year 2009 through fiscal year 2025.

USDA Foods distributed through TEFAP are varied and include fruits and vegetables; protein items such as meat, fish, eggs, nuts, and beans; whole grain and enriched grains; and dairy products. They can be fresh, frozen, or canned, depending on the product, some with commercial kosher or halal certification. Overall, the FY 2023 entitlement foods were valued at \$405.1 million, though they represented just a fraction of the \$2.2 billion worth of USDA Foods distributed through TEFAP (table 4).

Bonus food purchases fluctuate and totaled \$954.8 million in FY 2023. Bonus USDA Foods are acquired based on market conditions, so can vary from year to year. In FY 2023, the 10 largest bonus foods by value were walnuts, almonds, pistachios, frozen pork loin roast, raisins, frozen catfish fillet, fresh peaches, canned red salmon, frozen Pacific shrimp, and dry lentils.

Table 4

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) entitlement foods distributed in fiscal year 2023

Category	Pounds distributed	Dollar value
Fruits	63,495,255	\$65,610,762
Canned fruit	31,801,051	\$36,417,766
Dried fruit	2,240,124	\$4,755,829
Fresh fruit	6,195,068	\$3,495,888
Frozen fruit	3,992,688	\$7,107,385
Fruit juice	19,266,324	\$13,833,894
Vegetables	89,764,790	\$79,569,165
Dark green vegetables	2,145,171	\$2,912,636
Other vegetables	11,400,855	\$12,016,752
Red orange vegetables	40,845,117	\$36,706,025
Starchy vegetables	29,969,138	\$23,981,769
Legumes (beans, lentils, peas)	58,610,212	\$41,293,639
Protein Foods (fish, eggs, meat)	67,885,067	\$139,183,690
Grains	64,371,246	\$54,931,878
Whole grains	7,324,215	\$9,344,534
Oils	8,607,058	\$8,821,041
Dairy	31,055,687	\$17,662,165
Other	3,937,725	\$4,204,649

Note: Categories come from USDA Foods available list for TEFAP.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, Food and Nutrition Service budget explanatory notes for fiscal year 2025.

Recent efforts have been made to support TEFAP and expand its reach, including the TEFAP Reach and Resiliency grants, which provided funding in FY 2022 and FY 2023 for two year-long projects. The key objective of TEFAP Reach and Resiliency grants is to expand TEFAP's reach into remote, rural, tribal, and/or low-income areas underserved by the program (USDA, FNS, n.d.-a). The USDA made \$100 million available to all TEFAP State agencies; round 1 grants totaled over \$39 million for 38 State agencies and round 2 grants totaled over \$58 million for 40 TEFAP State agencies. Funds were used to expand mobile distribution, fund freezing and cooling investments, and build partnership and outreach efforts.

TEFAP is authorized under The Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, which authorizes mandatory TEFAP food funding, and The Emergency Food Assistance Act of 1983, as amended, which governs TEFAP operations and authorizes discretionary TEFAP administrative funds (USDA, FNS, 2023). Federal regulations covering TEFAP can be found in Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Parts 250 and 251.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)

CSFP is a USDA, FNS program that provides USDA Foods to eligible low-income seniors aged 60 years and older. The program, which was authorized to serve more than 730,000 people in calendar year 2024, provides participants with a nutritious monthly or bimonthly food package to supplement their diets (USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, 2024). CSFP is administered at the Federal level by USDA, FNS and at the State level by 59 State agencies, including all 50 States, Puerto Rico, the District of

Columbia, and 7 Indian Tribal Organizations (USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, n.d.-b). Food provided through CSFP is distributed through a network of 59 State agencies, approximately 250 local agencies (primarily food banks and Community Action Agencies), and approximately 8,500 distribution sites (U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.). Local agencies may subcontract with distribution sites to store and distribute food. Although CSFP is available in all States, it is not available in all counties. In 2021, Feeding America reported that 128 of their 200-member food banks operate CSFP.

CSFP provides participants with a monthly or bimonthly supplemental food package and nutrition education through a network of local agencies (e.g., nonprofits and local governments). These local agencies may or may not contract with distribution sites to store and deliver the food packages. The food package includes cheese and a variety of shelf-stable foods, such as canned fruits and vegetables; dairy products; grain products, including cereals and pasta; and protein foods, including meats, poultry, fish, and beans (table 5).

Table 5
Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) foods distributed in fiscal year 2023

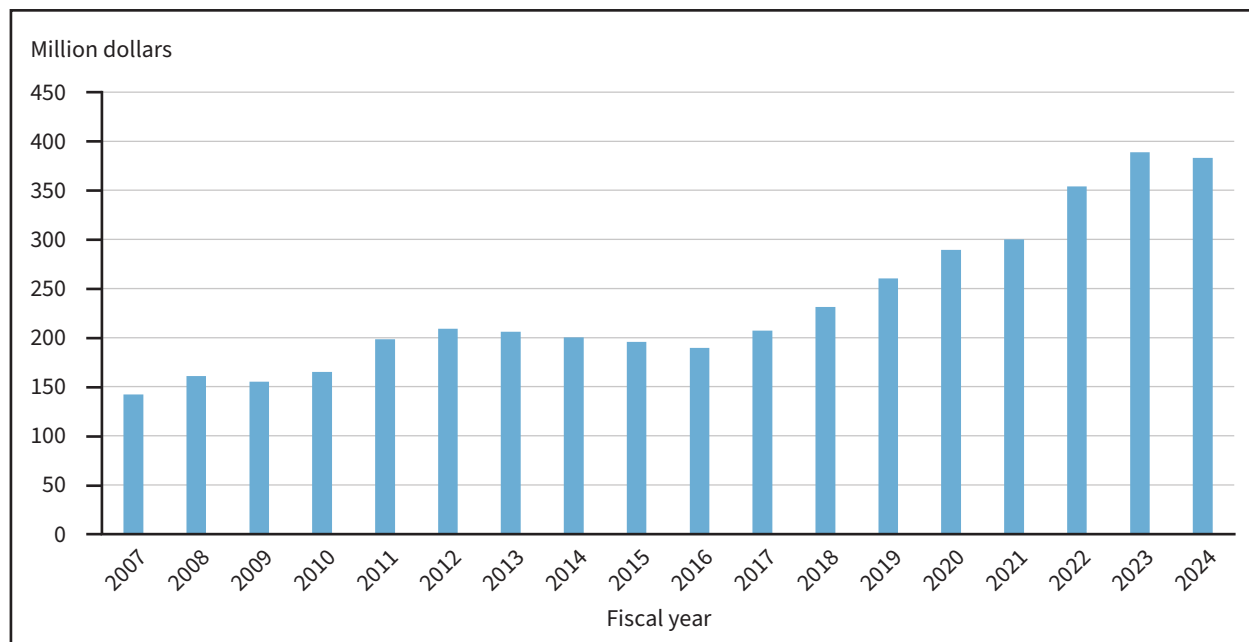
Category	Pounds distributed	Dollar value
Fruits	61,020,222	\$56,337,158
Fruit juice	38,935,841	\$28,410,074
Canned fruit	20,013,301	\$24,818,077
Dried fruit	2,071,080	\$2,778,000
Vegetables	56,267,962	\$51,846,211
Dark green vegetables	3,382,974	\$4,611,981
Other vegetables	22,586,768	\$20,610,394
Red/orange vegetables	17,921,401	\$15,741,238
Starchy vegetables	12,376,819	\$10,882,598
Legumes (beans, lentils)	21,402,017	\$14,904,780
Protein foods (fish, meat, peanut butter)	25,101,903	\$60,881,644
Grains	38,506,077	\$48,561,364
Whole grains	4,535,865	\$6,707,452
Dairy	48,971,757	\$60,058,237
Total	251,269,938	\$292,589,394

Note: Categories come from the USDA Foods availability list for CSFP.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using information from USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (2025).

Figure 4

Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) funding, fiscal years 2007–24 (nominal dollars)



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, National Data Bank.

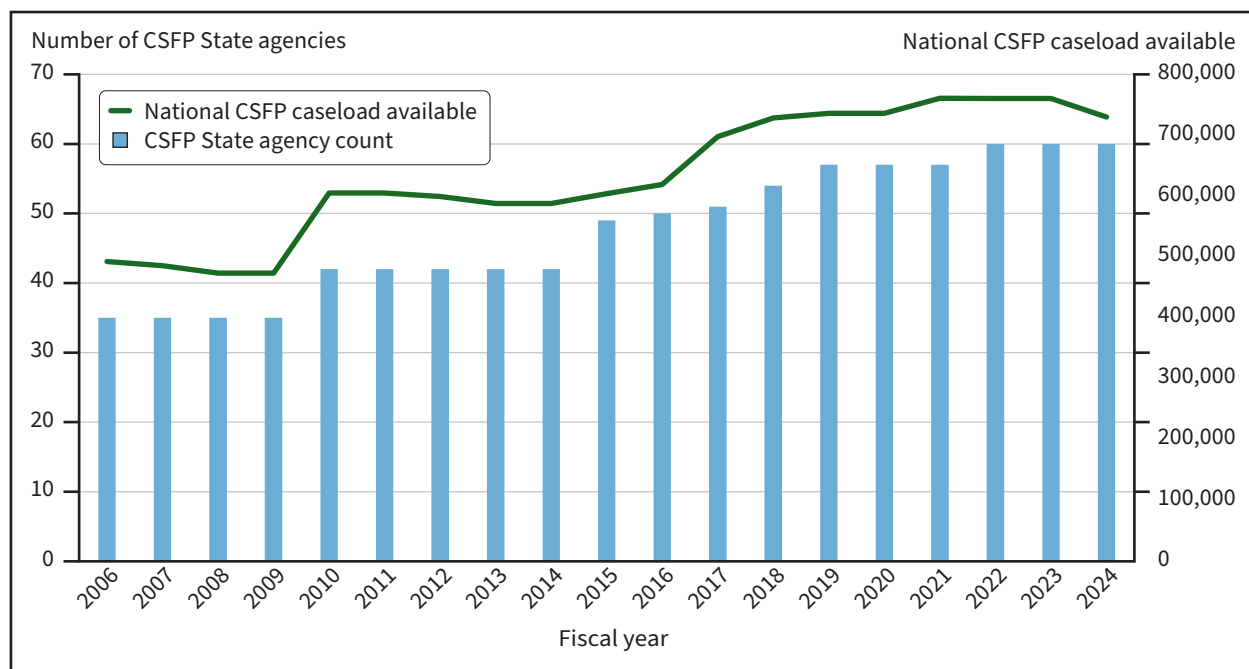
Congress has steadily increased the resources available for CSFP. Federal funding for CSFP from FY 2007 through FY 2024 is shown in figure 4.

USDA funds the full cost of USDA Foods and allocates both a caseload and an administrative grant to State agencies within the program’s annual appropriated funding. Caseload is the maximum number of CSFP participants USDA, FNS allows a State agency to serve on average each month. In the last 18 years, available CSFP caseload has increased from 492,613 available slots in 2006 to 731,933 available slots in 2024 (a 48 percent increase).¹⁰ As USDA, FNS has increased the caseload over the years, more State agencies have been able to join the program. However, CSFP is not available statewide in many States due to limited caseload size relative to the eligible population. Figure 5 shows the growth in CSFP caseload and the number of participating CSFP State agencies between 2006 and 2024.

¹⁰ USDA, FNS provided the CSFP annual caseload memos from 2006–24. Recent CSFP caseload memos can be found on the USDA, FNS website.

Figure 5

Number of Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) State agencies and available caseload, fiscal year 2006–24



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, Food and Nutrition Service CSFP annual caseload memos from 2006–24.

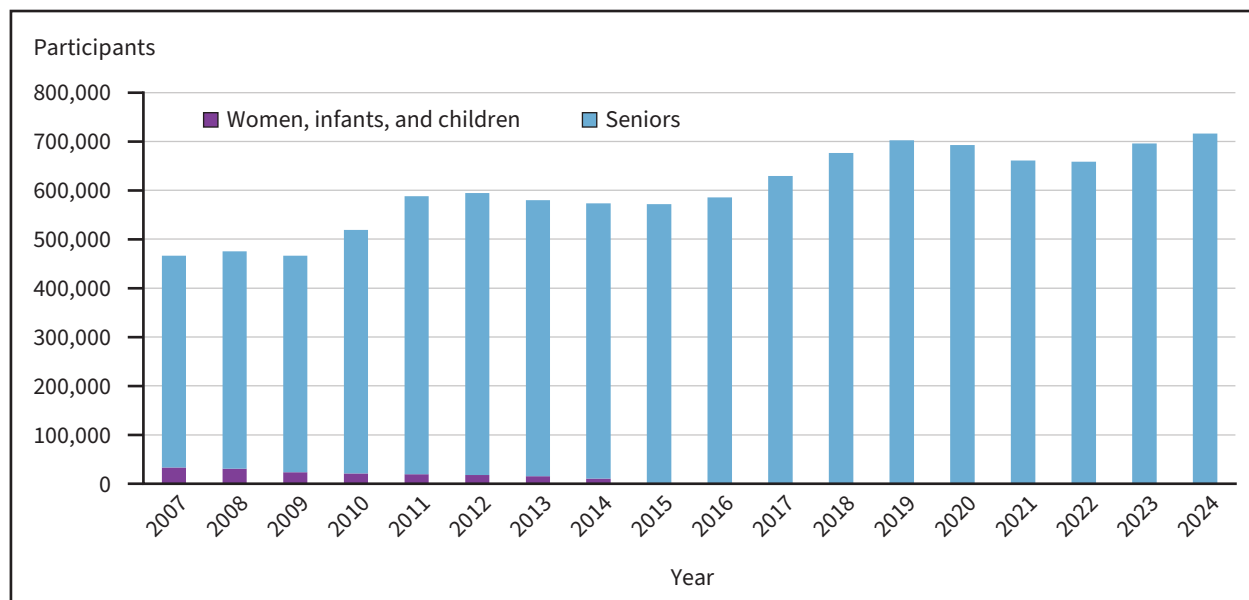
To participate in CSFP, individuals must be 60 years of age or older, have a household income at or below 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Income Guidelines, and not live in an institutional setting.¹¹ CSFP State agencies may establish other eligibility criteria, such as requiring that an individual be at nutritional risk or requiring that an individual reside within a local agency’s service area. Participants must be recertified every 1–3 years, depending on State agency policy.

As of FY 2021 CSFP only serves seniors, but CSFP began in 1969 as a program for low-income women, infants, and children before the creation of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). People aged 60 and older became eligible for CSFP in pilot projects in FY 1981, and then broadly in FY 1986 (Finegold et al., 2008). To help maximize the number of people that WIC and CSFP could serve, pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children were not allowed to participate in both WIC and CSFP. Over time, WIC became the dominant source of nutrition assistance for these populations. In FY 2007, less than 7 percent of CSFP participants were non-seniors (Finegold et al., 2008). The Agricultural Act of 2014 (2014 Farm Bill) began to phase out the WIC-eligible population from CSFP. State agencies could certify pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children through February 6, 2014, and those individuals could participate in CSFP until they were no longer eligible under the program rules. As of FY 2021, only seniors participate in CSFP.

¹¹ Similar to TEFAP, CSFP eligibility may be affected by the Food Distribution Programs Access and Parity Final Rule, which is described in footnote 9 of this report.

Figure 6

Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) average monthly participation, fiscal years 2007–24



Note: Women, infants, and children were phased out of the program beginning in 2014.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using USDA, Food and Nutrition Service, National Data Bank.

CSFP is authorized under Section 4(a) of the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act of 1973 (PL 93-86), as amended. Federal regulations covering CSFP can be found in Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Parts 247 and 250.

The Role of Food Banks in Emergency Relief

Natural Disaster Relief

Food banks may be involved in disaster relief and recovery efforts for a variety of disaster events. Disasters may interrupt home food preparation through utility disruption, lead to food vendor closures, and/or displace affected households from their homes. Food banks’ response to a disaster, and their involvement with Federal programs, varies depending on these three factors.

Both USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) may aid food banks to address community food needs in the wake of a natural disaster. The USDA Foods Disaster Manual provides detailed guidance for Federal, State, and local agencies responding to natural disasters.¹ USDA, FNS prioritizes the continued operation of its nutrition programs, such as the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), and the School Breakfast Program (SBP)

¹ More information about the process of declaring a disaster is described in the USDA Foods in Disasters Manual and detailed further in the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act, Public Law 100-707).

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in disaster-affected areas. FEMA programs provide financial and logistical support for community support organizations that may respond to disasters.

After a disaster, USDA Foods distributing agencies can request to divert their existing inventories to congregate feeding sites which provide meals to people that cannot prepare food at home. These sites are often operated by food banks, disaster response agencies, or nongovernmental organizations. In disasters that disrupt retail food operations, USDA, FNS may approve use of the Disaster Household Distribution (DHD) program to draw from inventories of TEFAP foods at food banks and food pantries in the area to create boxes of food for households. Recovery agencies may implement the DHD program simultaneously with congregate feeding sites until food retailers in affected areas have recovered.

Once food retailers have returned to normal operations and utility service is available in the affected area, the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) may become available to households affected by the disaster in areas where a Presidential disaster declaration of Individual Assistance has been received. D-SNAP operates similarly to SNAP with benefits distributed through electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards that can be used at authorized retailers to purchase food. D-SNAP operates in all 50 States. It does not operate in Puerto Rico, the Northern Mariana Islands, or American Samoa. D-SNAP may operate simultaneously with DHD and congregate feeding sites. TEFAP foods may still be distributed to households in need by food banks and food pantries per their normal operations.

A State-by-State archive of USDA, FNS disaster assistance and ongoing USDA, FNS disaster assistance can be found on the USDA, FNS website.

COVID-19 Relief

USDA Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic relief efforts that involved food banks extended across multiple agencies, including USDA, FNS and USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). In addition to increases in program distributions, USDA, FNS efforts included granting flexibility to program providers, responding to supply chain disruptions, and streamlining State administrative requirements. This includes continued implementation of disaster relief efforts based on the USDA Foods Disaster Manual.

From January 1–September 30, 2020, \$71 million in replacement USDA Foods were issued to 33 States, with over 67 million pounds of USDA Foods distributed through congregate feeding sites and DHD in response to the pandemic (U.S. Department of Agriculture, n.d.). By the start of FY 2021, States were no longer requesting replacements for USDA Foods used in congregate feeding sites and DHD.

USDA, AMS implemented the Farmers to Families Food Box Program during the pandemic. The Farmers to Families Food Box was a temporary, emergency COVID-19 pandemic relief program that distributed more than 173 million boxes of fluid milk, dairy products, produce, meat, and seafood, worth over \$5 billion from 2020 to 2021 (USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service, n.d.-b). The boxes were filled with agricultural products purchased by the USDA and were packaged and delivered to food banks, nonprofits, and other community and faith-based organizations for distribution.

More information on USDA, FNS disaster relief and the specific COVID-19 relief referenced above can be found in the USDA Foods Disaster Manual.

Participation in Food Pantry Services

To understand who receives the benefits provided through food banks and food pantries, we examine trends in participation. This data comes from the CPS-FSS, so we are unable to identify the type of food pantry visited or whether it was affiliated with a Feeding America food bank.

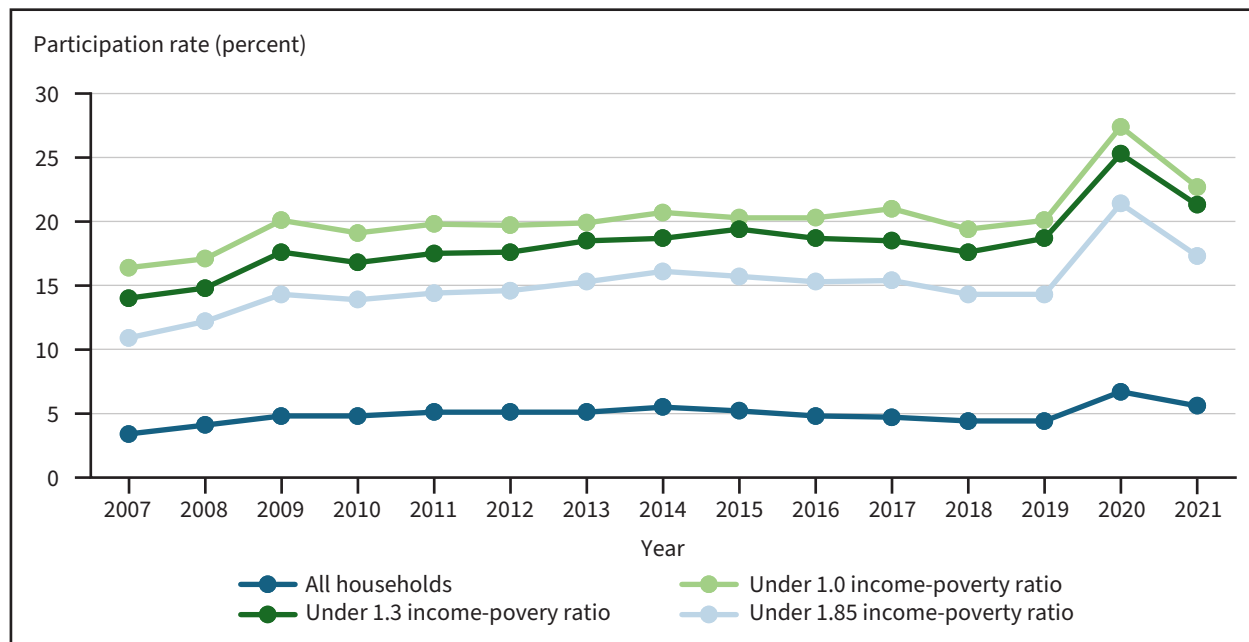
Specifically, we look at trends from 2007–21. Annual rates, including recent years, are reported in the USDA, ERS Statistical Supplement to Household Food Security in the United States in 2022 report (Rabbitt et al., 2023b). The questions used in the underlying survey for these reports about food pantry use changed in 2022, so we do not extend our historical series beyond 2021 but do note that in 2022, USDA, ERS reported 21.5 million free grocery recipients (Rabbitt et al., 2023b).¹² Food pantry participation rates across a variety of household characteristics, such as income, household type, and rurality are provided (Rabbitt et al., 2023b). We also examine overlap between food pantry use and use of Federal food assistance programs and report State-level rates of food pantry use using the most recent 3-year pooled sample available given data constraints (2019–21). Finally, we examine knowledge of food pantries among food-insecure households who report that they did not use a food pantry in the past year.

Participation Over Time and by Poverty Level

The prevalence of food pantry use appears to be sensitive to economic conditions, increasing from 2007 to 2014 (the Great Recession and its aftermath) before declining from 2014 until 2019. Food pantry use increased sharply in 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rates of use among low-income households have also fluctuated with economic conditions but have been persistently higher than higher-income households. Figure 7 shows rates among the general population alongside rates for three low-income groupings: under the poverty line (i.e., 1.0 income-poverty ratio), under 1.3 times the poverty line, and under 1.85 times the poverty line.

¹² Feeding America reports on participation in charitable food assistance as well, though the numbers are not directly comparable. Feeding America estimates rely primarily on the Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS). While the redesigned survey questions on use of charitable food assistance in the 2022 CPS-FSS are identical to those in the WBNS, there are differences in the survey samples that arise from related adjustments in the Feeding America estimates. In addition, estimates from Feeding America include beneficiaries of additional types of charitable food assistance, however we focus on CPS estimates of recipients of free groceries from food pantries and similar organizations (Feeding America, n.d.)

Figure 7
Use of food pantries by income-poverty ratio, 2007–21

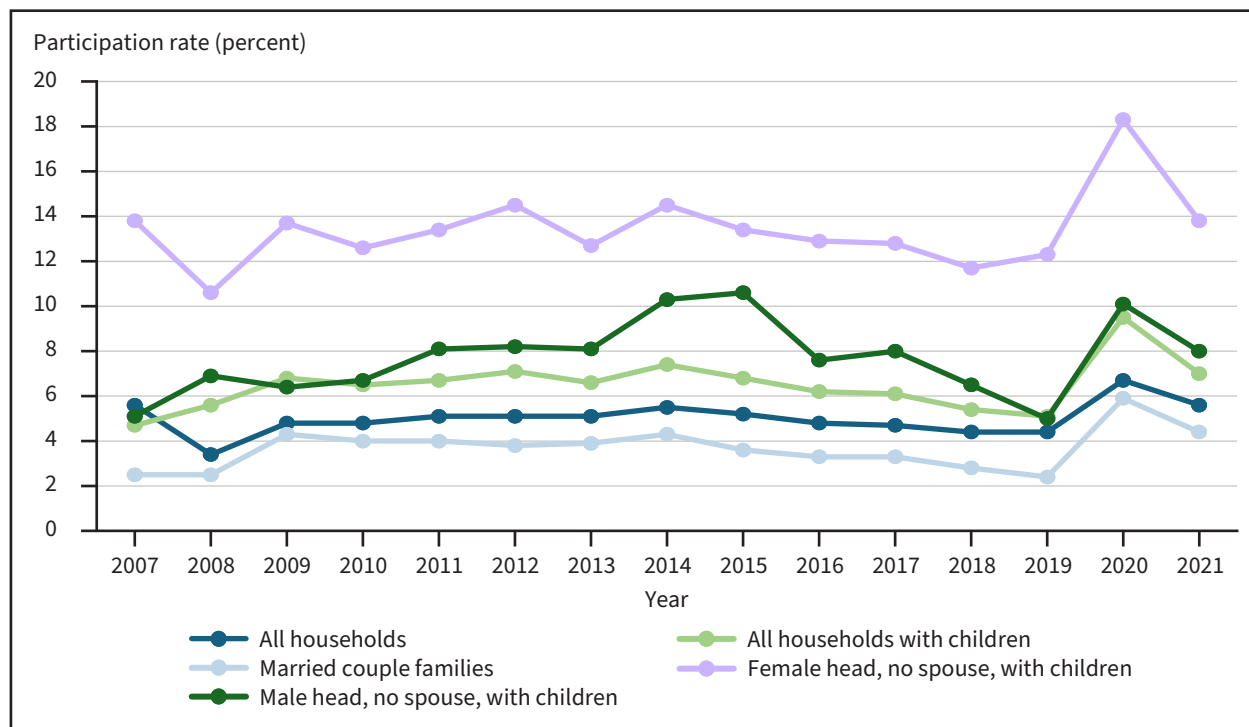


Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, Household Food Security in the United States reports and statistical supplements, 2007–21.

Participation Over Time among Households with Children

Households with children are a key group that uses food banks and affiliate pantries, especially those headed by single females. Figure 8 shows the use of food pantries by household type among households with children from 2007–21. Rates among households with children headed by a single female are notably higher than among other household types over this timeframe. Households with children headed by a single female experienced a particularly high peak during the COVID-19 pandemic, when almost one in five used food pantries.

Figure 8
Use of food pantries by household type with children, 2007–21



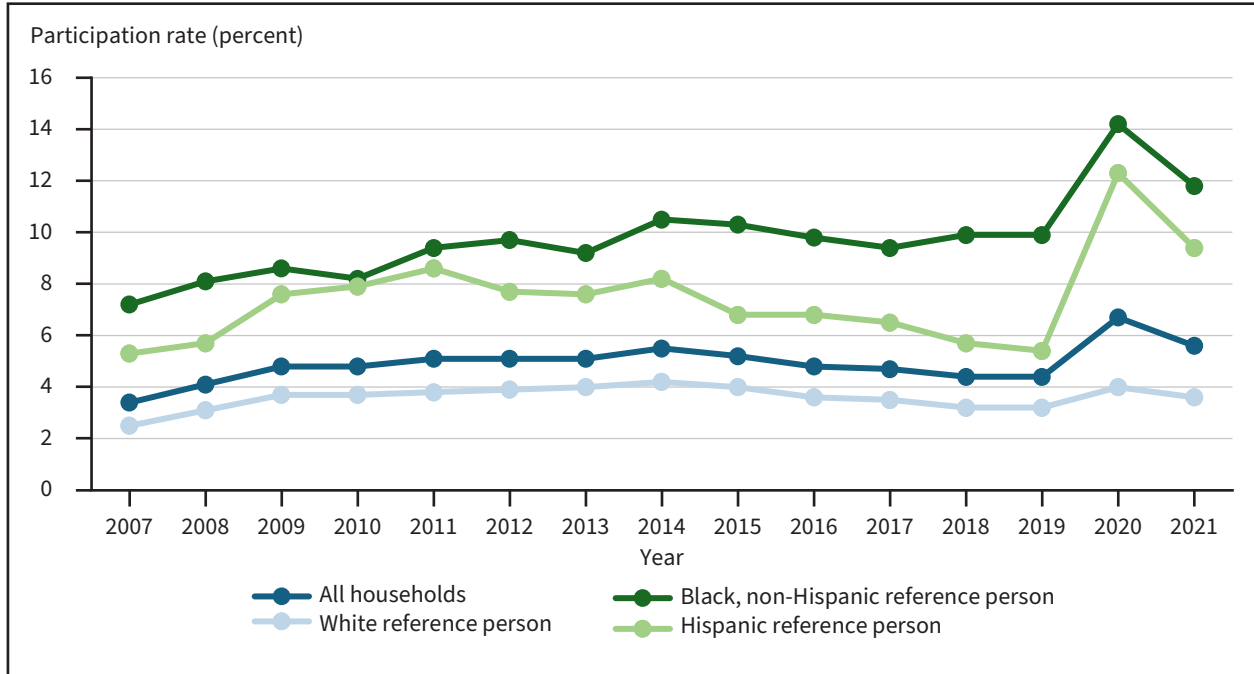
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, Household Food Security in the United States reports and statistical supplements, 2007–21.

Participation Over Time and by Race and Ethnicity

Food pantry use among households with Black or Hispanic reference persons (the survey reference person is an adult household member in whose name the housing unit is owned or rented) has been persistently higher than among households with a White reference person (figure 9). Households with Black, non-Hispanic reference persons have had the highest rates of use, followed by households with Hispanic reference persons. Households with Hispanic reference persons have experienced notable fluctuations in use over the past 15 years, with relatively low rates in 2019 followed by a significant increase in 2020.

Figure 9

Use of food pantries by race and ethnicity of household reference person, 2007–21



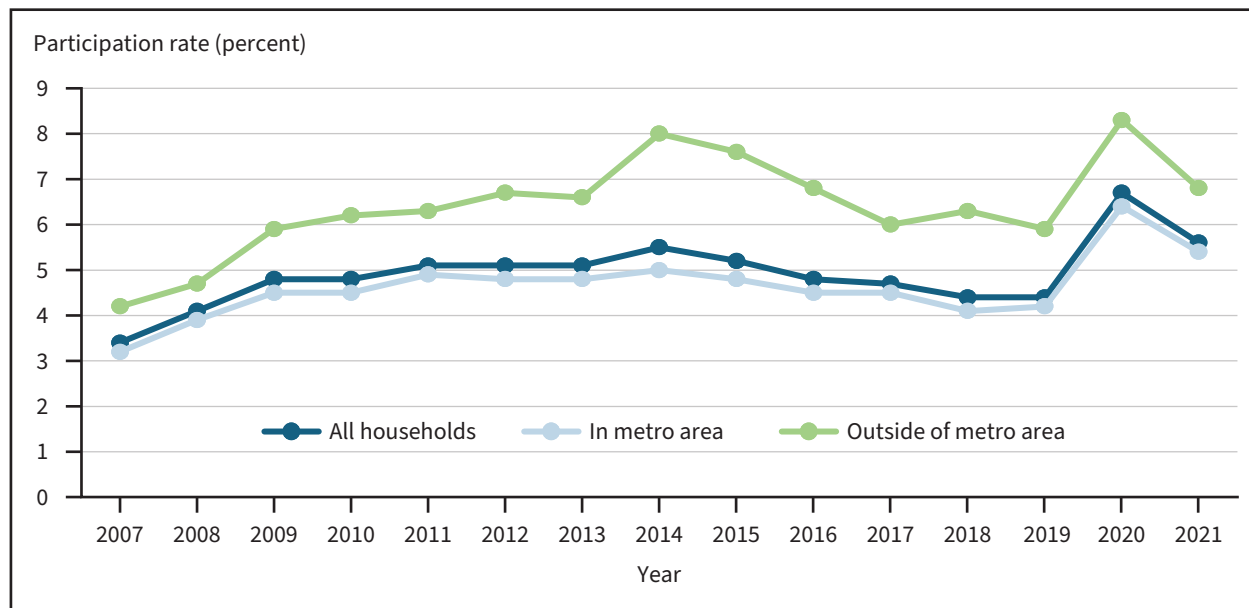
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, Household Food Security in the United States reports and statistical supplements, 2007–21.

Participation Across Rurality

Food bank services and participation differ between rural and urban areas. Rates of food pantry use have been persistently higher outside of metro areas (i.e., in rural areas) (figure 10). While both metro and nonmetro areas saw a spike in food pantry use in 2020 at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a similar spike occurred in nonmetro areas in 2014.

Figure 10

Use of food pantries inside and outside of metropolitan areas, 2007–21



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, Household Food Security in the United States reports and statistical supplements, 2007–21.

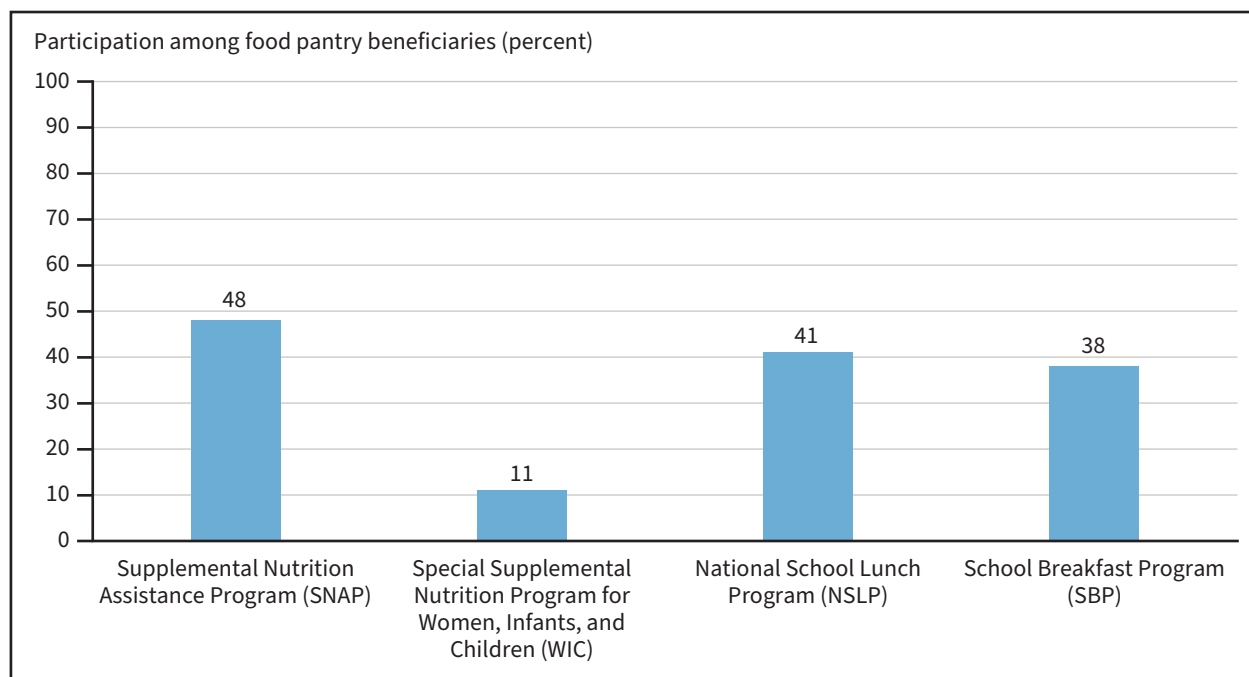
Participation of Food Pantry Beneficiaries in Federal Food Assistance Programs

Many food pantry beneficiaries also participate in Federal assistance programs such as SNAP, WIC, NSLP, or SBP. The rates of participation in some federal programs among food pantry beneficiaries are presented in figure 11. Beneficiaries may also participate in other Federal programs, such as CACFP and SFSP, although those programs are outside the scope of this research.

SNAP is the Federal food assistance program in which the most food pantry beneficiaries participate; 48 percent of food pantry beneficiary households also used SNAP in 2021. Participation rates in NSLP and SBP are slightly lower at 41 percent and 38 percent, respectively. Approximately 11 percent of food pantry beneficiaries were also enrolled in WIC in 2021. This suggests that while many use a combination of Federal and charitable food assistance, there are also many who rely solely on food pantries for food assistance.

Figure 11

Rates of participation in Federal food assistance programs (regardless of eligibility) among food pantry beneficiaries, 2021



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement for 2021.

Rates of Household Food Pantry Use by State

The prevalence of household food pantry use varies across States. Following the methods used in prior USDA, ERS research to estimate State-level food insecurity rates, we combine 3 years of data from the CPS-FSS to estimate the prevalence of household food pantry use. The use of a 3-year pooled sample provides for more reliable statistics and a greater ability to detect differences in the prevalence of food pantry use across States (table 6). The percent of households that used food pantries during the 2019–21 period ranged from 2.6 percent in New Hampshire to 8.2 percent in New Mexico.

Table 6

Rates of household food pantry use by State (3-year pooled sample, 2019–21)

State	Rate (percent of households participating)
Alabama	5.1
Alaska	7.1
Arizona	5.9
Arkansas	5.7
California	5.2
Colorado	5.0
Connecticut	4.2
Delaware	6.1
District of Columbia	6.0
Florida	4.2
Georgia	5.0

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State	Rate (percent of households participating)
Hawaii	4.8
Idaho	6.1
Illinois	5.8
Indiana	6.1
Iowa	3.5
Kansas	6.0
Kentucky	6.6
Louisiana	7.1
Maine	6.9
Maryland	4.7
Massachusetts	4.1
Michigan	6.9
Minnesota	5.3
Mississippi	6.9
Missouri	8.1
Montana	5.9
Nebraska	6.0
Nevada	4.6
New Hampshire	2.6
New Jersey	4.0
New Mexico	8.2
New York	5.8
North Carolina	5.1
North Dakota	4.0
Ohio	6.3
Oklahoma	8.1
Oregon	6.6
Pennsylvania	5.1
Rhode Island	5.2
South Carolina	6.0
South Dakota	6.1
Tennessee	5.6
Texas	6.4
Utah	5.4
Vermont	5.4
Virginia	3.8
Washington	6.2
West Virginia	7.3
Wisconsin	4.9
Wyoming	6.2

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement for 2021.

The wide variation in State-level differences in use of food pantry services may reflect a variety of factors, including differences in the need for assistance or in the accessibility of food pantries to those who need them.

Knowledge of Local Food Pantries

A significant number of household reference persons in food-insecure households report not using food pantries. As of 2022, roughly one-third of food-insecure households received free groceries from a pantry or similar organization (Rabbitt et al., 2023b). Therefore, a natural question is whether such agencies are available and, if so, whether they are known to potential beneficiaries. We report responses to a question from the CPS-FSS about knowledge of local food pantries for the specific population of households that is both food insecure and reports not using food pantries (table 7). To remain consistent with participation trends analysis, we use the most recent year of the data (2021) before the questions were updated.

Table 7

Knowledge of local food pantries among food insecure households that reported not using food pantries in 2021

	No knowledge of local pantries (percent)	Knowledge of local pantries (percent)	Don't know (percent)
All	29	59	12
Households with children	29	60	11
Senior reference person	32	56	12
Household receives SNAP	27	65	8
Household does not receive SNAP	30	56	13
Household located in a nonmetro area	19	74	7
Household located in a metro area	31	57	12

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement for 2021.

Among food-insecure households that did not use a food pantry in 2021, the majority (59 percent) reported that they do know of such services in their community while 29 percent reported that no such services exist. If a household indicated that no pantry exists, it may indeed indicate that no pantry exists or that they do not know of pantries that exist. The existence of pantries in these communities was not externally validated.

Reported knowledge of local food pantries varies across household characteristics and by location. Among those who are both food insecure and did not use food pantries, households with Hispanic reference persons (48 percent) and Black reference persons (53 percent) are less likely than those with White, non-Hispanic reference persons (68 percent) to report knowing of such services in their communities. Knowledge of food pantries among food-insecure households that did not use a food pantry is higher in nonmetro/rural areas (74 percent) than in metro areas (57 percent). Finally, knowledge of food pantries is higher among SNAP beneficiaries than those not on SNAP who report both food insecurity and not using food pantries in the last year.

Conclusion

Food banks and food pantries account for a unique and substantial portion of the food assistance landscape. Food banks and food pantries reach millions of individuals and households, some of whom are not served by Federal food assistance programs. While food banks are privately owned and operated, they are affected by State and Federal policies and USDA Foods programs. Specifically, TEFAP and CSFP comprise large sources of food distributed through major food banks. As such, an evaluation of the effectiveness of TEFAP and CSFP (GAO, 2024) would include their effects through food banks and pantries.

Food banks and their beneficiaries are heterogeneous. While some regional food banks serve entire States with large contingents of volunteers and employees and substantial physical resources, others are much smaller in capacity and reach. Food banks and other emergency feeding organizations offer infrastructure and assistance during emergencies and in recent years, particularly with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of Americans have turned to food banks for help. These food bank and pantry beneficiaries include a wide range of people, though use is substantially higher among those with low-income and single female households with children.

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