



INDIANA UNIVERSITY

# PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Center for Research on Inclusion & Social Policy

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## FOOD INSECURITY IN INDIANA

### SUMMARY

Food insecurity is a public health concern affecting Hoosiers' well-being and their ability to contribute effectively to their work and society. In 2022, more than 950,000 Hoosiers struggled to access nutritious food, often due to a lack of adequate or stable income. Food insecurity leads to hunger, malnutrition, and increased risks for chronic diseases. Socially, food insecurity reduces people's cognitive ability by making it more difficult to concentrate and work effectively.

Many vulnerable Hoosiers, including women, children, infants, racial and ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities, cannot access Indiana's existing food assistance programs or feed themselves and their families. Research shows reducing barriers to existing food assistance programs and promoting local food systems—that is, the infrastructure for producing food near where it is consumed—lessens food insecurity. Industrial agriculture—which involves large-scale farming practices focused on maximizing output and profit, often at the expense of environmental and human health—stands in stark contrast to how local food systems operate. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, industrial farming contaminates water and soil, harms aquatic ecosystems, and negatively impacts human health.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, local food systems emphasize sustainability, community resilience, and health benefits by minimizing transportation distances and supporting regional economies. Fostering local food production can create more robust, healthy, and sustainable food networks that directly address food insecurity. Legislation strengthening funding for the availability of and access to fresh food and assistance programs are positive ways to address food insecurity in Indiana.

### KEY FINDINGS

- In 2022, 950,220 Hoosiers experienced food insecurity.
- A lack of adequate or stable income is the primary cause of food insecurity.
- Children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity due to factors such as limited resources, health and mobility challenges, and social isolation.
- Black and Hispanic Hoosiers experience a higher rate of food insecurity than white Hoosiers.
- Food insecurity can lead to malnutrition, mental health issues, and chronic diseases, all of which have economic consequences.
- Future legislation should:
  - Improve access to food assistance program
  - Promote local food systems
  - Increase food availability

### BACKGROUND

Hunger refers to the discomfort, weakness, or pain caused by a lack of food.<sup>2</sup> Food insecurity means lacking consistent access to enough nutritious food for a healthy life. It includes uncertainty about food availability, insufficient quality or quantity, and an inability to obtain preferred foods.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) identifies two levels of food insecurity: low and very low.<sup>4</sup> Households whose financial circumstances force them to reduce the quality, variety, or desirability of the food in their diets

have low food insecurity. Households with very low food security experience disrupted eating patterns and lowered food intake, at times, because of a lack of resources. Food insecurity is a nationwide issue. The United States Census Bureau reports rates of food insecurity, indicating the percentage of households struggling to access enough nutritious food.<sup>5</sup> Indiana and its neighboring states, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, and Kentucky, struggle with food insecurity (Table 1).<sup>6,7,8,9,10,11</sup> In 2022, the percentage of households experiencing food insecurity in Indiana's neighboring states was highest in Kentucky at 15% and lowest in Illinois at 12%. Indiana's food insecurity rate stood at 14%.

## METHODS

Researchers reviewed literature regarding the causes of food insecurity, food access inequities, and the consequences of being food insecure. They also interviewed Indiana legislators who had written or supported food access bills in 2023 and analyzed existing legislation and past efforts to alleviate food insecurity to inform recommendations for the future.

## CAUSES OF FOOD INSECURITY

### LACK OF ADEQUATE OR STABLE INCOME

Inadequate or unstable income is the primary cause of food insecurity as it limits households' access to sufficient and nutritious food.<sup>12</sup> In 2024, households with incomes below the poverty line were more than 4 times as likely to experience food insecurity than households with incomes at or above 185% of the poverty line. The federal government set the 2024 poverty level as a base household income of \$15,060, plus \$5,380 per person living in the household. According to this criterion, a family of four making less than \$31,200 annually lives in poverty.<sup>13,14</sup> Inflation can contribute to this instability. For instance, in 2023, the average monthly inflation rate in the United States was approximately 4.9%. Food prices increased by about 5.8%, making it even harder for low-income households to afford basic necessities.<sup>15,16</sup>

### LACK OF ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD OPTIONS

In a food desert,<sup>17</sup> access to healthy foods, like fresh fruits and vegetables, is limited. Food apartheid is typically found in low-income neighborhoods, due to the absence of full-service grocery stores and farmers'

**TABLE 1. Overall food insecurity in Indiana and its neighboring states (2022)**

	ILLINOIS	INDIANA	KENTUCKY	MICHIGAN	OHIO	UNITED STATES
<b>Food insecure population</b>	1,506,320	950,220	710,000	1,423,000	1,653,610	44,151,000
<b>Food insecurity rate</b>	12.0%	13.9%	15.7%	14.2%	14.1%	13.5%
<b>Annual food budget shortfall (millions)</b>	\$1,126	\$633	\$465	\$999	\$1,174	\$33,119
<b>Average meal cost</b>	\$3.98	\$3.54	\$3.49	\$3.74	\$3.78	\$3.99
<b>Average monthly SNAP participations</b>	1,981,714	617,630	541,623	1,349,321	1,491,294	41,189,080
<b>Poverty rate</b>	11.9%	12.6%	16.5%	13.4%	13.4%	11.5%
<b>Unemployment rate</b>	5.0%	2.4%	4.4%	4.9%	4.3%	4.0%
<b>Median household income</b>	\$78,020	\$70,030	\$55,880	\$68,990	\$66,990	\$74,580
<b>Public school students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch</b>	53.7%	50.9%	57.4%	53.3%	36.1%	53.3%

markets. Systemic racism—which refers to the entrenched policies and practices within institutions that disproportionately disadvantage certain racial groups—can also perpetuate food insecurity. It creates unequal access to resources needed to support a thriving local food system by influencing factors such as zoning laws, infrastructure investment, and funding availability. Communities of color often face greater barriers to accessing fresh, healthy food due to limited grocery store availability, reduced economic opportunities, and lower-quality public services. This inequity hinders the development of local food systems, further exacerbating food insecurity in these communities.<sup>18</sup>

## COVID-19 AND OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, food distributed by Feeding America food banks nationwide increased by 42%.<sup>19</sup> Many factors contributed to this increase, including unemployment, supply chain disruptions, and limited access to food assistance programs. School closures also played a significant role as many families lost access to free lunch programs that provided essential nutrition for their children. For many low-income families, school meals are a vital source of daily sustenance. Without them, families had to stretch their limited resources further to provide additional meals at home. However, evidence suggests job loss remained the leading cause of this rise in food insecurity. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate in Indiana increased from 3.4% in February 2020 to a peak of 16.8% in April 2020, before decreasing to 3.5% in March 2024.<sup>20,21</sup>

Natural disasters, climate change, and other environmental factors also contribute to food insecurity by disrupting food systems and limiting food access. For example, extreme weather events like floods, hurricanes, and wildfires can damage crops and infrastructure, alter growing conditions, and increase pests and diseases, disrupting food production and distribution. In Indiana, extreme weather events like floods and droughts have disturbed food production in recent years.<sup>22</sup>

## INEQUITIES IN FOOD SECURITY

Children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities in Indiana are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, due to factors such as limited financial resources, health and

mobility challenges, and social isolation. Post-pandemic aid programs lapsed due to natural expiration dates, federal budget constraints, gradual phasedowns, state-level decisions, and a lack of consensus on long-term solutions.<sup>23</sup> The expiration of these pandemic-related aid programs—such as expanded unemployment benefits, emergency food assistance, and enhanced child tax credits—has left many families without critical support.<sup>24</sup>

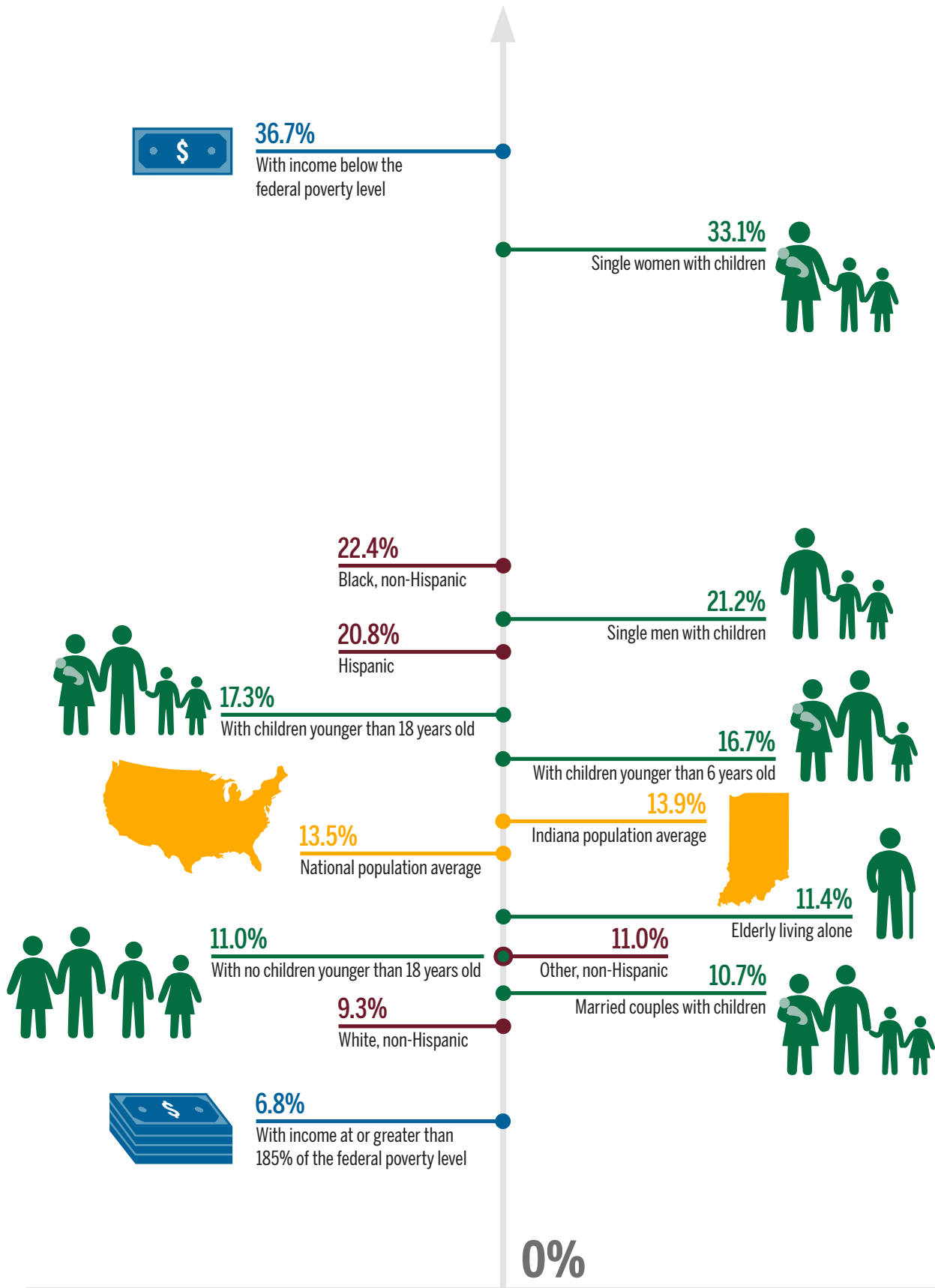
Approximately 17% of households with children experienced food insecurity in 2023, an increase from the previous year's rate of 13%.<sup>25</sup> This reflects the broader trend of rising food insecurity amid economic pressures such as inflation, increased cost of living, and stagnant wages. Additionally, around 9% of households with elderly individuals faced food insecurity in 2023. This percentage represents a slight increase from the 8% reported in 2019, indicating growing challenges for elderly populations in securing adequate nutrition.<sup>26</sup> Elderly individuals face food insecurity, due to financial constraints, physical limitations, and social isolation. The rising cost of living and healthcare expenses strain their fixed incomes, while declines in mobility and cognition hinder their ability to access and prepare nutritious food.

Food insecurity among households with individuals with disabilities remains critically high. In 2021, approximately 28% of households including a nonworking adult with a disability were food insecure. This figure starkly contrasts with the 7% food insecurity rate among households without disabled adults in the same year.<sup>27</sup>

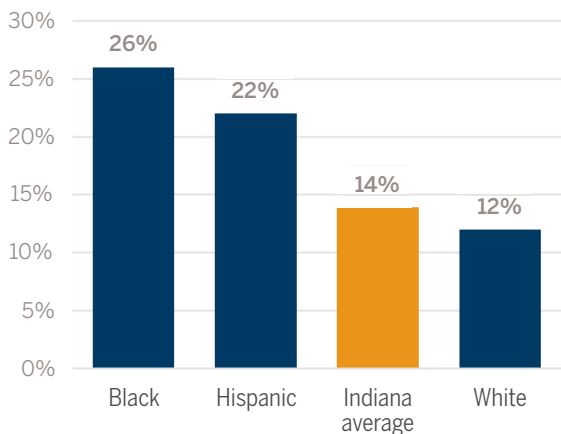
## RACIAL AND ETHNIC GROUPS

In Indiana and across the United States, food insecurity disproportionately affects communities of color. In 2022, Black Americans experienced food insecurity at a rate of 22% and Hispanic Americans at a rate of 21%—significantly higher than the national average of 13%. The rate for white Americans was below the national average at a rate of 9%.<sup>28</sup> This inequity exists at the state level as well. (Figure 2).

**FIGURE 1. Prevalence of food insecurity by household characteristics in the United States (2022)<sup>29</sup>**



**FIGURE 2. Rate of Indiana residents experiencing food insecurity by race/ethnicity (2022)<sup>30</sup>**



## CONSEQUENCES OF FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity can lead to malnutrition, which can have serious health consequences for children and adults. The stress, stigma, and shame associated with not having enough to eat may also increase an individual's mental health risks, such as suffering from depression and anxiety.<sup>31</sup>

Malnutrition and related stress can affect physical and cognitive development, weaken the immune system, and increase the risk of chronic diseases, such as obesity,<sup>32</sup> diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease.<sup>33</sup> A lack of access to healthy and nutritious foods and a reliance on inexpensive, high-calorie, and low-nutrient foods—often associated with food insecurity—contributes to the onset of these conditions.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, food-insecure individuals who experience chronic disease may require expensive medical treatment and hospitalization,<sup>35</sup> resulting in higher healthcare costs at the individual, state, and federal levels.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE LEGISLATION

To address food insecurity in Indiana, policymakers, communities, and individuals must collectively advocate for equitable policies, partnerships, and programs that prioritize providing all Indiana residents access to healthy food.

### Improve access to food assistance programs

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) aids low-income individuals and families in purchasing food. Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) provides nutrition education and food assistance to pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and young children. Both SNAP and WIC are federal programs aimed at addressing food insecurity.

These food assistance programs have complex application and reporting requirements that can be cumbersome for low-income, older Hoosiers—particularly for those older than 60 or with disabilities. Simplifying requirements, easing the certification process, and extending certification periods could significantly improve vulnerable individuals' access to nutritional food.

The state can also consider increasing funding and support for economic assistance programs like SNAP and WIC. In 2022, more than half of food-insecure households participated in one or more federal nutrition assistance programs, reflecting their essential role in stabilizing food access.<sup>36</sup> Feeding America—a United States-based nonprofit network of more than 200 food banks—conducted a study that found states with higher SNAP participation have lower rates of food insecurity.<sup>37</sup>

Efforts to enhance outreach and encourage increased program participation among eligible individuals would also reduce food insecurity. For example, cross-program notifications during Medicaid application or renewal, targeted mailings, and in-person or digital outreach would increase SNAP participation among Medicaid recipients by informing them about the food assistance program's potential benefits. In addition, offering training and resources to staff who assist with application processes would allow them to provide better support to eligible individuals and ensure these services are adequate and efficient.

### Promote local food systems

Local food is consumed close to where it is produced. Local food systems increase community resilience to economic downturns and environmental disasters, promote sustainability by using fewer resources and generating less waste, and empower communities through self-sufficiency and economic development. Aligning local food production

with cultural and dietary needs can improve overall food satisfaction and nutrition, collectively mitigating food insecurity and fostering community well-being.

Various states have implemented policies and programs to promote local food systems. For example, Vermont's Farm to Plate program aims to increase economic development and jobs in the food and farm sectors, improve access to healthy local food, and reduce environmental impacts.<sup>38</sup> Michigan's 10 Cents a Meal for Michigan's Kids and Farms program provides schools with matching funds to purchase Michigan-grown fruits and vegetables.<sup>39</sup>

Developing localized food systems would diversify food sources, enhance food security, increase access to fresh and nutritious food, and reduce reliance on the industrial food system. This system produces the rice, corn, and wheat which are used in a wide variety of inexpensive, low-nutrition, high-calorie, and widely available foods—often connected to increases in the incidence of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers.

### **Increase food availability**

Several states have implemented policies and programs to address food insecurity. For example, Pennsylvania's Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI) provides loans and grants to food retailers to open or expand in underserved areas.<sup>40</sup> Another example is the 38th and Sheridan project in Indianapolis, which represents a collaboration between the city, community organizations, and businesses to bring a grocery store, community space, and a manufacturing facility to an underserved neighborhood.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, food banks across the state offer immediate access to food. Examples include Gleaners Food Bank of Indiana, Food Bank of Northwest Indiana, and Second Harvest Food Bank of East Central Indiana.<sup>42</sup> Creating and funding programs that provide greater access to healthy, fresh food is a prime strategy for combating food insecurity. Making fresh, nutritious foods available in underserved communities will lessen food insecurity and contribute to the health and well-being of residents.<sup>43</sup> In addition, supporting food initiatives through legislation and financial support could increase awareness of and interest in sustainable and environmentally friendly food practices. Food access organizations—nonprofit and for-profit—are already

working toward making healthy food more accessible in food-insecure areas.

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The Center for Research on Inclusion and Social Policy (CRISP) addresses complex social issues at the intersection of equity and policy through community-engaged research. CRISP analyzes and disseminates community-relevant research about social disparities and policy issues to help leaders and residents around Indiana make informed decisions. CRISP is housed within the IU Public Policy Institute, which also supports the Center for Health and Justice Research (CHJR) and the Manufacturing Policy Initiative (MPI).

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