

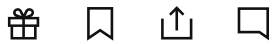
Food bank numbers are rising again with more new people in lines – grandparents

As pandemic safety-net programs end and food prices skyrocket, more Americans find themselves relying on food banks this holiday season

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By [Laura Reiley](#)

Today at 6:00 a.m. EST



This holiday season, food banks report feeding more families, some of them newcomers and older, as food donations and volunteers grow scarcer.

Hunger in America peaked in December 2020 and has slowly eased since, according to census surveys, but many of the nation's thousands of food banks, pantries and soup kitchens are reporting growing numbers.

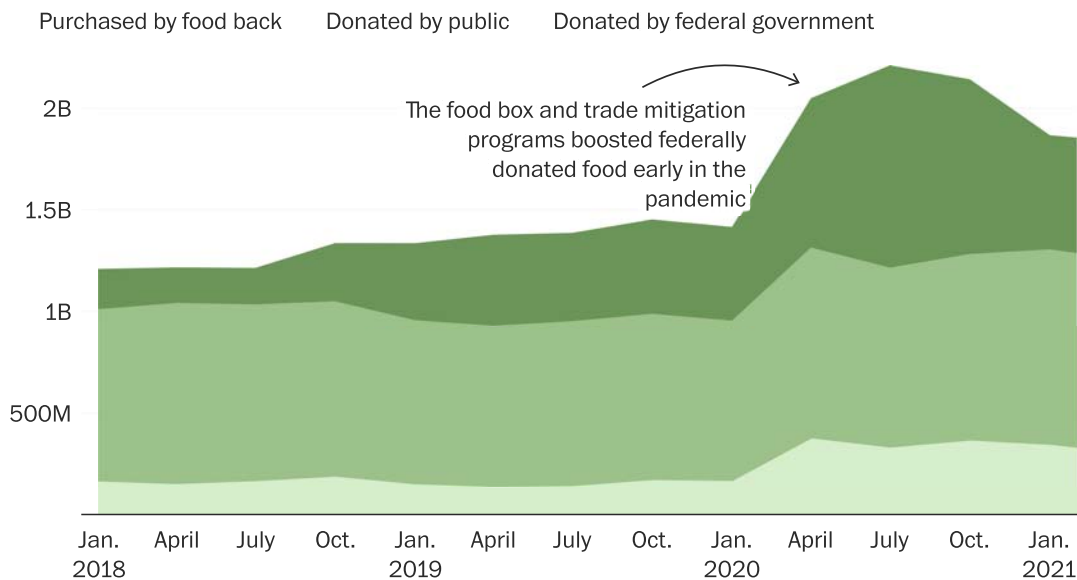
In an October survey of the 200 food banks in the Feeding America nonprofit organization, the largest national network of food banks, 85 percent reported seeing an increase or the same number of people seeking food as the previous month.

The number of Americans on food stamps also increased by 20,000 between August and September, and now stands at 40.8 million people, according to the most recent data from the Agriculture Department.

"Food banks have started to see an uptick in demand recently and we are bracing for 2022," said Katie Fitzgerald, the president and chief operating officer of Feeding America.

Feeding America's food supply down from pandemic peak, but remains elevated

Quarterly pounds of food by source for Feeding America food banks



At many of the nation's food banks, there are new hungry faces in line. In western Ohio, a significant number of those in need have not sought assistance in the past, said Tommie Harner, chief executive of the West Ohio Food Bank.

"Between 17,000 and 20,000 new families have never been to a pantry or distribution center within our service area," she said.

Many are grandparents raising grandchildren on fixed incomes who have seen the price of food, medication, heating and electricity go up, she added.

This phenomenon has also been apparent in the Washington metro area at the Capital Area Food Bank, which is still serving numbers 50 percent higher than during pre-pandemic times, according to chief executive Radha Muthiah. She said many of the new people come from what she calls "grand-families."

"They may have planned well for retirement based on what they had seen as the cost of living," Muthiah said. However, the tremendous surge in the cost of living in the area may have changed people's financial picture and "caused them to become more food insecure or first-time food insecure."

Lima, Ohio, resident Crysti Price, 51, would be considered part of a "grand-family." She and husband Kenneth Long, 53, are raising their granddaughter, who is 12 and diagnosed with autism. Price has depended on the West Ohio Food Bank since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, because Long had triple bypass surgery and couldn't return to work at the local Whirlpool factory. In recent months, their financial situation has deteriorated and donations from the food bank have become less reliable, she said.

"There are times our food bank has struggled, times they've run out. That's happened a couple times, with more people showing up than they thought. I sat for four hours in line, and I didn't get anything," she said. "But I had to do what I had to do. I can't afford to go to the store and get what I actually need, like a couple pounds of hamburger and buns."

In addition to feeding more people, food banks are facing unprecedented challenges with skyrocketing food prices, supply chain snarls, diminished volunteers and more-limited food contributions from the federal government.

For example, the cost of transporting donated food has increased more than 20 percent this year, Fitzgerald said. Plus, to make up for donation shortages, Feeding America food banks have purchased 58 percent more food in fiscal year 2021 to try to meet the needs of the more than 38 million people facing hunger, which includes nearly 12 million children, she said.

Harner of the West Ohio Food Bank has seen prices for many kinds of groceries skyrocket, with some shortages, which hurts her ability to serve the growing numbers showing up in lines in the 11 counties the food bank serves. Recently, she recalled getting a price quote for a truckload of canned chicken, but in the couple of weeks that passed before she actually put in the order, that truckload had increased by \$10,000.

"This summer, I thought things were getting back to a pre-covid state, but now it's just increasing," said Harner, who noted that its distribution area has overflowed with cars blocking traffic recently.

Another problem for food banks is that two separate federal programs that buoyed food contributions expired earlier this year. During the worst of the pandemic, the \$6 billion USDA Farmers to Families Food Box Program delivered boxes of produce, dairy and meat weekly to be distributed to food banks around the country. That program ended in May.

Separately, the government had also purchased \$2.3 billion in food from American farms and ranches, which was donated to food banks, as part of President Donald Trump's \$28 billion aid package for farmers hit hard by the U.S.-China trade war. That program concluded in March.

For the Gleaners Community Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan, the end of these programs has meant a shortfall, said chief executive Gerry Brisson. Food donations last year through the spring averaged 2.4 million pounds of food per month for his food bank alone, he said. In July, that dropped by a million pounds. He expects contributions to fall even further over the next six months.

During the peak of the pandemic, Gleaners Community Food Bank didn't have to turn anyone away, he said.

"With need going up and resources going down, we're going to have to make tough choices. We can't serve everyone based on the resources we have," Brisson said.

In the D.C. area, the Capital Area Food Bank dealt with smaller federal food distributions and higher food prices by spending more to purchase food outright, said Muthiah. In 2020, it purchased \$5.2 million in food. This year, it spent \$26 million, with \$21 million budgeted for next year.

Also challenging is the lack of volunteers. In a September survey of Feeding America’s food banks, 80 percent said they were in need of volunteers.

Before the pandemic, Gleaners Community Food Bank had 50,000 volunteer shifts per year. Last year, during the peak of the pandemic, that shrank to 13,000 shifts, filled almost entirely by the National Guard, Brisson said.

“The National Guard went away late summer, and now we are really struggling,” he said. The bulk of volunteers previously came from school groups and corporations, and because of a surge in coronavirus numbers in Michigan and the unknowns associated with the omicron variant of the virus, “it’s just not happening, so staff cost is a big concern right now,” Brisson added.

Food bank experts don’t expect improvement any time soon. For example, food insecurity in America spiked during the Great Recession and took nearly a decade to recover. Muthiah said she and her counterparts at other food banks anticipate they will be responding to the fallout from the pandemic for at least the next three years.

“The peak of the emergency might be over, but there’s a fat tail,” Muthiah said. “For some of us, life is returning to normal, but for so many it really isn’t. You can see that in elevated levels of distribution.”

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