Senior Food Insecurity in Maine

Seniors—adults age 60 and over—are a distinct population. They often have fixed incomes, limited mobility, specific nutrition needs, and chronic health issues such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Older adults have an increased risk of nutritional deficiencies and often have difficulty meeting the requirements of a healthy diet.¹

Food insecurity exacerbates their situation and has particularly severe consequences for this population. Seniors facing marginal food insecurity are more than twice as likely to have overall poor health conditions than food secure elderly.² They have the functional abilities of someone 14 years older on average ³ and are at an increased risk for health conditions such as depression, heart attack, asthma, and congestive heart failure.⁴ With fixed incomes and rising costs of living, older adults have a difficult time protecting themselves from food insecurity.

What is Senior Food Insecurity?

Senior food insecurity, or hunger, is a complex topic because it has physical, social, and psychological symptoms. There are a myriad of causes, and it is difficult to measure. Food insecurity among the elderly involves difficulties in accessing, preparing, and consuming food. Seniors can experience hunger because of financial reasons, but also because of transportation difficulties, mobility limitations, functional impairments, and isolation. Senior hunger is also often a hidden issue because seniors can be reluctant to reach out or accept help, even when they need it. The hidden nature of senior food insecurity makes it difficult to identify and remedy.

How Many Seniors Suffer From Food Insecurity?

Nationally, the number of seniors facing marginal food insecurity has more than doubled since 2001.⁵ In 2014, the most recent year for which data is available, over 10 million seniors experienced marginal food insecurity.⁶ By 2025, when the youngest of the Baby Boom Generation reaches age 60, the number of food insecure seniors is projected to increase by 50%.⁷

Figure 1: The Threat of Senior Hunger in the U.S.

Who Suffers From Senior Hunger?
While food insecurity is unpredictable and volatile, seniors are more likely to be food insecure if they:

- Are a younger senior (age 60-64)
- Have lower incomes
- Are African-American or Hispanic
- Are divorced/separated or never married

Seniors without access to emotional and financial support are also more likely to suffer from hunger.

SENIOR HUNGER IN MAINE

Demographics in Maine
Maine is the oldest state in the nation with the highest median age and the highest percentage of Baby Boomers in the country. The state’s population is aging at a faster rate than both the New England and national averages. Currently, one in four Mainers is over the age of 60.

Almost 30% of Mainers over the age of 55 are low-income, and more than half of adults age 65 and over in the state do not have the money required to cover their basic needs. Social Security is the only source of income for one in three Mainers over 65, and the average Social Security benefit is $11,964 annually. In Maine, 42% of seniors live alone, and almost 10,000 Maine seniors are on the waitlist for affordable housing. As a result of these difficulties and the projected increases in the older population, more Maine seniors will struggle with food insecurity.

Growing Numbers of Food Insecure Seniors
Hunger is increasing among Maine seniors. Nearly 14% of Maine seniors—about 45,600 people—are food insecure. An additional 17% of Maine seniors—about 56,000 people—experience marginal food security and suffer the threat of hunger. Taken together, these figures mean that almost one in three Maine seniors struggles to access enough food. Additionally, Maine has one of the highest rates of seniors per capita who report having to reduce their food intake multiple times a year.
In 2010, Maine ranked 41st in the U.S. for senior food insecurity. By 2014, Maine’s position had worsened, jumping to 12th highest in the nation and the worst in Northern New England. During this time, the number of food insecure seniors in the state more than doubled. In 2014, Maine entered the top 10 worst states for very low food security among seniors—a subset of food insecurity and the most severe category of hunger measured.

![Figure 2: Senior Food Insecurity in Maine](image)


**Studies on Hunger in Maine Reveal That:**
- A majority of seniors interviewed didn’t know where they would go if they needed help
- Many seniors did not know about food assistance programs or how to access them

**For Seniors Visiting a Maine Food Pantry:**
- Just under half reported not receiving SNAP benefits (food stamps). The majority of those that did have SNAP said that the benefits run out within two weeks of receiving them
- Almost 90% of seniors interviewed use a food pantry once a month or more
- 55% visited a food pantry more this year than last year
- About 60% of seniors reported having to choose between food and other essentials such as healthcare and home utility costs
ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

The Policy Response
The U.S. has several federal policies that aim to reduce senior food insecurity. Some programs serve seniors exclusively, while others serve at-risk populations of all ages. Figure 4\(^{27}\) highlights the federal nutrition programs available to seniors at risk of food insecurity, and Figure 5 summarizes the programs’ operation in Maine. Federal programs play an important and significant role in serving hungry Maine seniors. However, as Figure 5 shows, they are not able to fully meet the need.

The Charitable Response
Charitable organizations are an important part of fighting senior hunger in the state. Charitable food assistance groups, such as food pantries, offer services to Mainers of all ages. Across Good Shepherd Food Bank’s network of over 400 partner agencies, almost 40\% of patrons have a senior living in the household.\(^{28}\)

Many other organizations serving seniors also have a food security focus. Each of Maine’s five Area Agencies on Aging have a nutrition department that offers community meals, nutrition counseling, and services such as Meals on Wheels. Throughout the state, healthcare organizations are also implementing food insecurity efforts by screening for hunger or sending seniors home with meals when they are discharged from the hospital.

Conclusion
Senior food insecurity in Maine has been getting progressively worse and will continue to strike more people as the elderly population increases and economic hardships persist. Maine’s current federal and charitable programs will not be able to sufficiently meet the need without increasing their efforts. Halting and reversing the state’s rising senior food insecurity problem will ultimately require more resources. Additional efforts to quell senior food insecurity should build upon existing senior service networks and focus on raising awareness about senior hunger, advocating for senior food programs, and increasing food access points. Partnerships and integrated networks that can refer seniors to services, reduce the stigma around hunger, and increase support to this demographic will ultimately make these efforts more successful.
Figure 4: Federal Nutrition Programs for Seniors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Federal Programs</th>
<th>Eligibility Requirements</th>
<th>AMERICANS 60+ SERVED</th>
<th>THE UNMET NEED</th>
<th>JURISDICTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SNAP</td>
<td>130% of the federal poverty line, or an annual income of $15,444 for a senior living alone.</td>
<td>4.25 MILLION SENIORS</td>
<td>Only 41% of eligible seniors are enrolled in SNAP and recipients on average access only $129/mo, an insufficient benefit to support seniors’ nutritional needs for the full month.</td>
<td>Last Authorized February 2014, Expires 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SENIOR FARMERS’ MARKET NUTRITION PROGRAM</td>
<td>185% of the federal poverty line, or an annual income of $21,978 for a senior living alone.</td>
<td>817,751 SENIORS</td>
<td>The program is funded at a set level annually and therefore cannot serve all eligible seniors and is unavailable in 7 states. Seniors on average only receive $31/year in groceries.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSFP</td>
<td>130% of the federal poverty line, or an annual income of $15,444 for a senior living alone.</td>
<td>572,035 SENIORS (2015)</td>
<td>The program is funded at a set level annually and therefore cannot serve all eligible seniors and is unavailable in AL, WV, and WY.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEFAP</td>
<td>185% of the federal poverty line, or an annual income of $21,978 for a senior living alone.</td>
<td>596,929,272 meals served by Feeding America</td>
<td>The program is funded at a set level annually and therefore feeds only as many people as the commodities can provide for.</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONGREGATE MEALS</th>
<th>HOME-DELIVERED MEALS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eligible seniors receive meals in a group setting (like a senior center, community building, or adult care home), often accompanied by nutrition education, exercise and other social activities.</td>
<td>Eligible seniors receive nutritious meals delivered to their home either by a Meals on Wheels volunteer or staff member, accompanied by a friendly visit and safety check.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*Image Source: Feeding America and Meals on Wheels*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Older Americans Act Title III, Home-delivery</th>
<th>OAA Title III Congregate Meals</th>
<th>CSFP</th>
<th>Senior FarmShare</th>
<th>CACFP</th>
<th>SNAP (Food Stamps)</th>
<th>TEFAP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provides eligible seniors with meals and a check-in from Meals on Wheels staff or volunteers</td>
<td>Provides eligible seniors with meals and nutrition services at sites such as senior centers, community centers, schools and adult day cares</td>
<td>Provides low-income seniors with a nutritionally appropriate 30 pound box of USDA food each month</td>
<td>Provides participants with $50 worth of produce from a local farmer on a weekly basis for 8 weeks during the growing season</td>
<td>Provides Adult Day Care Centers with reimbursements for food provided to eligible seniors</td>
<td>Provides eligible people, including seniors, with a card with monthly benefits that are used to purchase food at authorized retailers</td>
<td>Provides low-income people, including seniors, with groceries or meals through food pantries, kitchens or shelters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Administration</td>
<td>DHHS, Office of Elder Services</td>
<td>DHHS, Office of Elder Services</td>
<td>Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry</td>
<td>Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry</td>
<td>DHHS, Office of Child and Family Services</td>
<td>DHHS, Office of Family Independence</td>
<td>Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eligibility</td>
<td>60+ and Homebound</td>
<td>60+</td>
<td>60+ and an income that is 130% of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL)</td>
<td>60+ and 185% of FPL</td>
<td>Adult Day Care Centers serving non-residential seniors age 60+ or functionally impaired adults of any age</td>
<td>185% of FPL</td>
<td>150% of FPL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>Discretionary Funding Maine receives a set amount of money every year State funding and private donations supplement federal funds</td>
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<td>Mandatory/Entitlement Funding Every person who meets eligibility requirements receives services</td>
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<td>Discretionary Funding Maine receives a set amount of money every year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors Served in Maine</td>
<td>4,430</td>
<td>14,067</td>
<td>3,229*</td>
<td>16,558</td>
<td>Information not available</td>
<td>29,000</td>
<td>Total Number of Recipients/Month: 32,000 # of seniors unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waitlist</td>
<td>Fluctuates</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>Waitlist numbers are not reported, but demand historically outnumbers supply</td>
<td>Information not available</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmet Need**</td>
<td>Over 90% of estimated food insecure seniors are not receiving services 64% of estimated food insecure seniors are not receiving services</td>
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<td>Information not available</td>
<td>40% of eligible seniors are not enrolled***</td>
<td>Almost 90% of all eligible people in Maine are not receiving services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that in 2017, Maine’s CSFP allocation increased to 9,000
** The number of food insecure seniors is about 45,600. The unmet need shows what percent of this population is not served by the program
***According to Feeding America
References


6. Ibid


12. American Community Survey. 2015 5 Year Estimates. Table S0102.


21. Calculations from:


