

REPORT FOOD ACCESS

Disabilities, money keep many over 50 hungry

Benefits from state-funded programs only go so far; face stigma asking for help



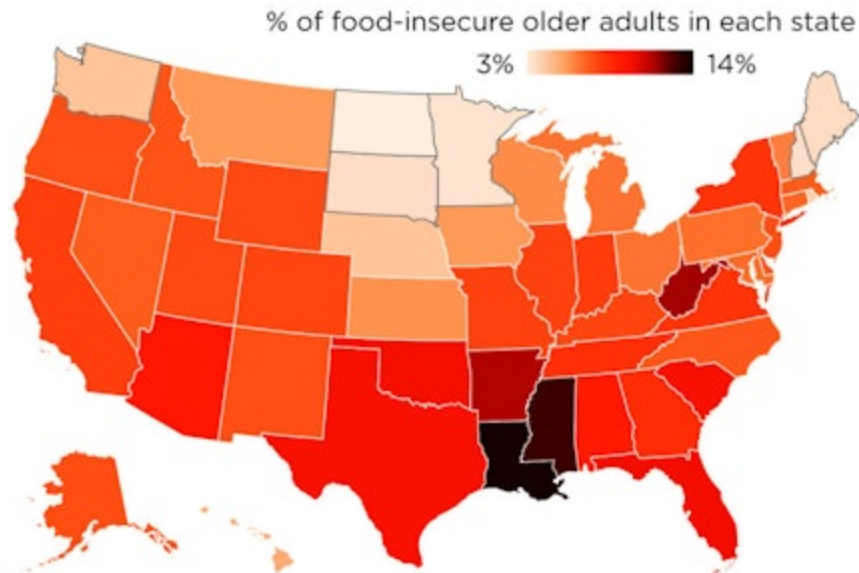
Southern Dallas' food desert means FEED Oak Cliff founder Anga Sanders focused on transit issues for food access in older adults. (Elías Valverde II/Staff Photographer)



Barriers to accessible food options, like stigma with food banks and “pride,” prevent some adults from getting help. (Eliás Valverde II/Staff Photographer)

Food insecurity rates among adults over 60

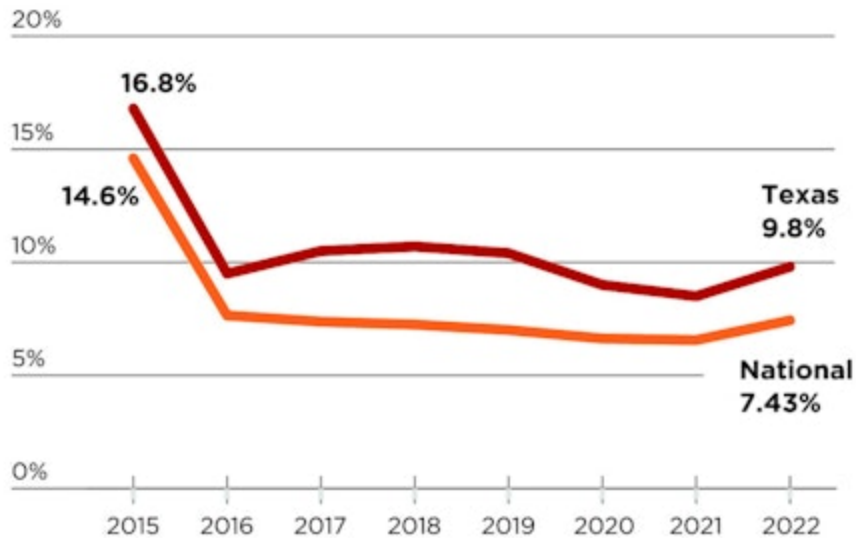
Food insecurity is the lack of consistent access to enough food for a healthy life. About 9% of the senior population in the United States experience food insecurity.



SOURCE: North Texas Food Bank

How Texas has compared to the nation

Percentage of food-insecure seniors



SOURCE: Feeding America research archives

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Texas has the second highest number of older adults in the nation who struggle to put food on the table, according to data released last week by Feeding America.

The report also said more than a million people in Texas aged 50 and older cannot consistently access nutritious meals, with Black and Latino adults experiencing food insecurity at a rate that is 2.7 times higher than those who are white.

“It’s not just a food insecurity issue,” said Jessica Johnston, senior director for economic well-being at the National Council of Aging. “It’s an overall financial security and economic well-being issue.”

Texas’ aging population is growing quickly, and that growth is projected to continue. The number of Texans older than 50 is expected to nearly double to 16.4 million by 2050, according to Texas Health and Human Services.

“We picture seniors being older, seniors who are oftentimes the images of the 85-year-old ... grandmother struggling to get enough food and of course, that is part of it,” said Baylor University economics professor Craig Gundersen. “But there’s actually what we call a declining age gradient.”

The gradient refers to the higher concentration of people 50-59 experiencing food insecurity compared to those 60 and older.

Benefits programs

Many programs that provide monthly payments to people with limited incomes — such as Supplemental Security Income — do not take full effect until the recipient is 65 years old. However, these benefits often cannot keep up with the rising costs of living.

Recognizing the higher concentration of 50-59-year-olds experiencing food insecurity is one of the reasons Feeding America decided to collect data on the age demographic for the first time. The data can also be a predictor for how many people will struggle with food security as they enter the next age bracket.

Healthcare and food insecurity heavily influence one another, said Julie Krawczyk, the financial safety director at The Senior Source, a service dedicated to supporting seniors with difficult financial situations. Some individuals with chronic health issues and deficiencies are unable to eat the food provided by support organizations.

“It’s a struggle because there’s a shame of going to a food pantry,” Krawczyk said. “And also it just doesn’t feel dignified if you don’t have the option to kind of select

the food that works best for you and meet your nutritional needs.”

DeSoto resident Nettie Turner, a senior turning 74 this month, said the incomes from Social Security benefits and support from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) aren't nearly enough to afford the food she requires, especially as someone with many health issues.

As someone who grapples with high blood pressure and diabetes, fruits and vegetables are essential for Turner's health but especially difficult to find at an affordable price.

“I have all these illnesses that want me to get a balanced diet, three times a day,” she said. “That's not gonna happen.”

On Wednesday mornings, Turner will look at the grocery store sales as supplements to what she receives at food banks. Often this means buying canned vegetables and fruits.

“It's canned food and cancer, you shouldn't have processed foods. But you know, we don't have a choice,” Turner said.

Seniors receive an average benefit of \$118 a month for SNAP. The benefit loads monthly onto an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card, more commonly called a Lone Star Card in Texas.

However, Turner, receives closer to the \$23 a month minimum monthly benefit, not enough to keep up with rising prices of groceries. It isn't much, but the extra help can go a long way.

When her EBT card is loaded with her \$27 monthly benefit, Turner loves to use it on Kroger's frozen spinach.

“I love Kroger's frozen spinach,” she said. “Can't afford to buy the fresh spinach, but I love that frozen spinach.”

Knowing the terrain

In areas like southern Dallas, which has been labeled by the USDA as a food desert, it can be challenging to access healthy and nutritious foods.

Organizations like FEED Oak Cliff are working to address this by providing fresh produce and hosting events like the annual Dallas VegFest, scheduled for Sept. 22.

Anga Sanders, founder of FEED Oak Cliff, said although she is able to drive 25 miles a week to buy groceries, she's seen other older adults and seniors struggle with transportation to grocery stores or food banks.

“If you are a senior, an elderly person without your own transportation, that puts you in the position of either having to ask somebody or pay somebody to take you

to the grocery store or to take public transportation,” Sanders said.

One of the leading causes of food insecurity is disability, according to a 2021 USDA report. Due to aging and illness, seniors tend to have more disability and mobility impediments that limit their ability to shop for food and other needs. Instead, they have to turn to family members or others for help.

“All of the kids, grandkids, have jobs,” Turner said. “I don’t want anybody losing a job because they are trying to get me where I need to be.”

Three months ago, Turner didn’t do her usual monthly visit to Crossroads Community Services, a food bank that also offers financial services, because she was afraid to drive with her chronic knee pain. She explained there’s no cartilage, just bones rubbing against one another when she moves.

Barriers to entry

The stigma associated with seeking food assistance can also be a barrier. Krawczyk said the primary challenge of enrolling seniors into support systems such as SNAP is a matter of “pride.”

Assistance programs can offer support for those who face hunger, but the application process can be cumbersome, said Benaye Wadkins Chambers, CEO of Crossroads.

While Crossroads is a food pantry, it also houses senior support services such as assistance with SNAP enrollment. The North Texas Food Bank also provides a support line for SNAP alongside their Commodity Supplemental Food Program, which includes food boxes distributed to seniors monthly.

Food is not as prioritized when seniors are under financial strain due to the lack of support for other living costs such as rent or healthcare, said Clarissa Clarke, government relations officer at North Texas Food Bank.

“Food is one of the first things that people will cut in their budget in order to ... keep the lights on,” Clarke said.

Supply and demand

Rising inflation in recent years has meant demand is increasing for older adult and senior support services. Before the pandemic, the North Texas Food Bank was spending \$5 million a year on food. Now, they’re spending closer to \$30 million, according to Clarke, in part due to demand and rising grocery costs.

Crossroads has also seen a decline in the amount of food it can distribute. The nonprofit used to provide 25 pounds of food per person. That number is down to 20 pounds, Wadkins Chambers said.

“We want to be able to serve everybody who comes in, and that’s not just Crossroads,” she said. “I think that’s all of us.”