HUNGER STUDY 2026

A Data-Driven Profile on Ohioans Facing Hunger

OHIO ASSOCIATION OF FOODBANKS

Partner State Association of FEEDING AMERICA

ABOUT THE OHIO ASSOCIATION OF FOODBANKS

The Ohio Association of Foodbanks (OAF) represents Ohio’s 12 Feeding America foodbanks and their more than 3,600 local hunger relief partners and programs serving people in need across all 88 counties. As Ohio’s largest charitable response to hunger, our statewide network works every day to help individuals and families have access to nutritious food and the support they need to thrive.

In Fiscal Year 2025, Ohio’s foodbank network fulfilled 5,921,836 household visits to food pantries, collectively supporting take-home grocery visits 16,807,804 times during the year, providing groceries to an average of 1.4 million household members each month. In addition, foodbanks and their partners provided over 17.7 million prepared meals through shelters, soup kitchens, senior meal programs, and other community feeding sites.

While our work sourcing and distributing food is the best way our network can uniquely impact food insecurity, we recognize that food insecurity is often tied to broader circumstances such as housing or economic instability, health conditions, or a lack of other resources. Many of Ohio's foodbanks address some of these challenges directly, such as by operating workforce development programs and connecting families facing food budget shortfalls with other programs that can help them fill gaps and achieve stability.

We believe that together, we can achieve stronger communities and better outcomes across Ohio through reliable access to healthy food. By understanding the circumstances and challenges facing the neighbors we serve, Ohio's hunger relief network and its cross-sector partners can be better equipped to meet their needs.

ABOUT THE 2026 HUNGER STUDY - METHODOLOGY

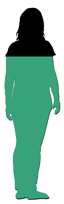
Rich data from a widely distributed survey comprises the basis for the Hunger in Ohio 2026 results. All data were collected through electronic surveys completed by food pantry visitors from April 18th to May 22nd. Neighbors also had the option to self-select into a secondary, more in-depth interview process. These interviews provided additional context and support for the survey findings and are featured throughout this report in quotations. The neighbors surveyed received a modest incentive for their valued time and feedback. This survey was implemented in partnership with staff and volunteers at each of Ohio's 12 Feeding America foodbanks, who distributed flyers containing unique QR codes that securely connected food pantry visitors to a confidential online survey developed in Qualtrics.

Following data collection, the raw survey export from Qualtrics underwent a structured data validation and cleaning process before analysis. Blank survey submissions were excluded from the dataset. Surveys with at least 90 percent completion were retained for analysis to maximize the use of valid responses while maintaining data quality. Surveys containing more than 15 "Don't Know/Prefer not to answer" responses were removed, as they did not provide sufficient information for meaningful analysis. Duplicate responses, where identified, were also removed to ensure each household was represented only once in the final dataset.

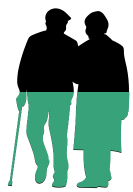
In total, 2,644 unique, verified survey responses were included in the final analysis. The analysis consisted of descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations. Suppression rules were applied where appropriate to protect respondent confidentiality and to avoid reporting results based on small sample sizes. The survey continued to utilize validated questions from established research instruments, including those compiled through the Feeding America Client Survey and other nationally recognized sources, allowing for meaningful comparisons over time while maintaining consistency in survey methodology. The data analysis and interpretation for the 2026 Hunger Study were conducted by the OAF team to produce this report.

THE PEOPLE SERVED BY THE OHIO ASSOCIATION OF FOODBANKS NETWORK

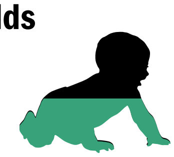
Research consistently identifies economic instability, rising food costs, inflationary pressures, limited household resources, and chronic health conditions as important factors associated with food insecurity.[1] Food insecurity is also linked with a number of poor health outcomes.[2] Many of these same challenges are reflected in the experiences of households seeking assistance through Ohio's charitable hunger relief network. Many of the factors that contribute to food insecurity, such as economic instability, high food costs, inflationary pressure, and health challenges impact households seeking assistance through Ohio's charitable hunger relief network.



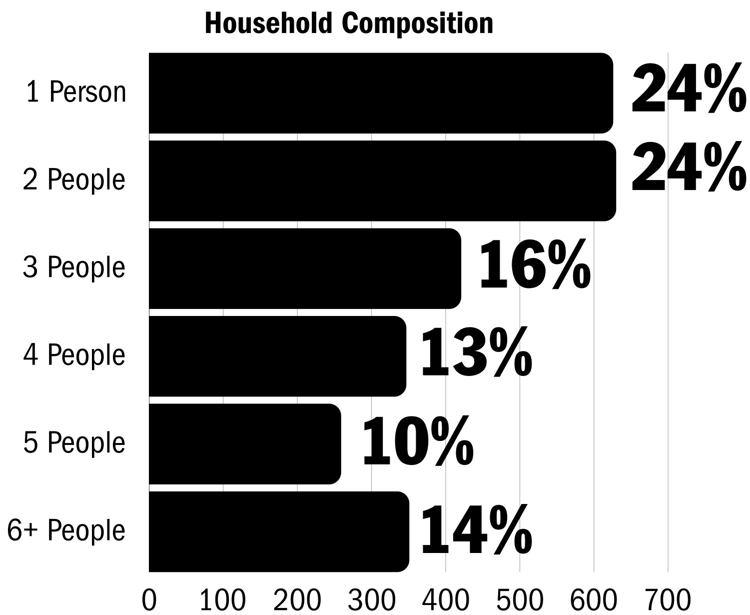
76% **of households surveyed included at least one adult between the ages of 19-59**



46% **of households surveyed included at least one senior over the age of 60+**



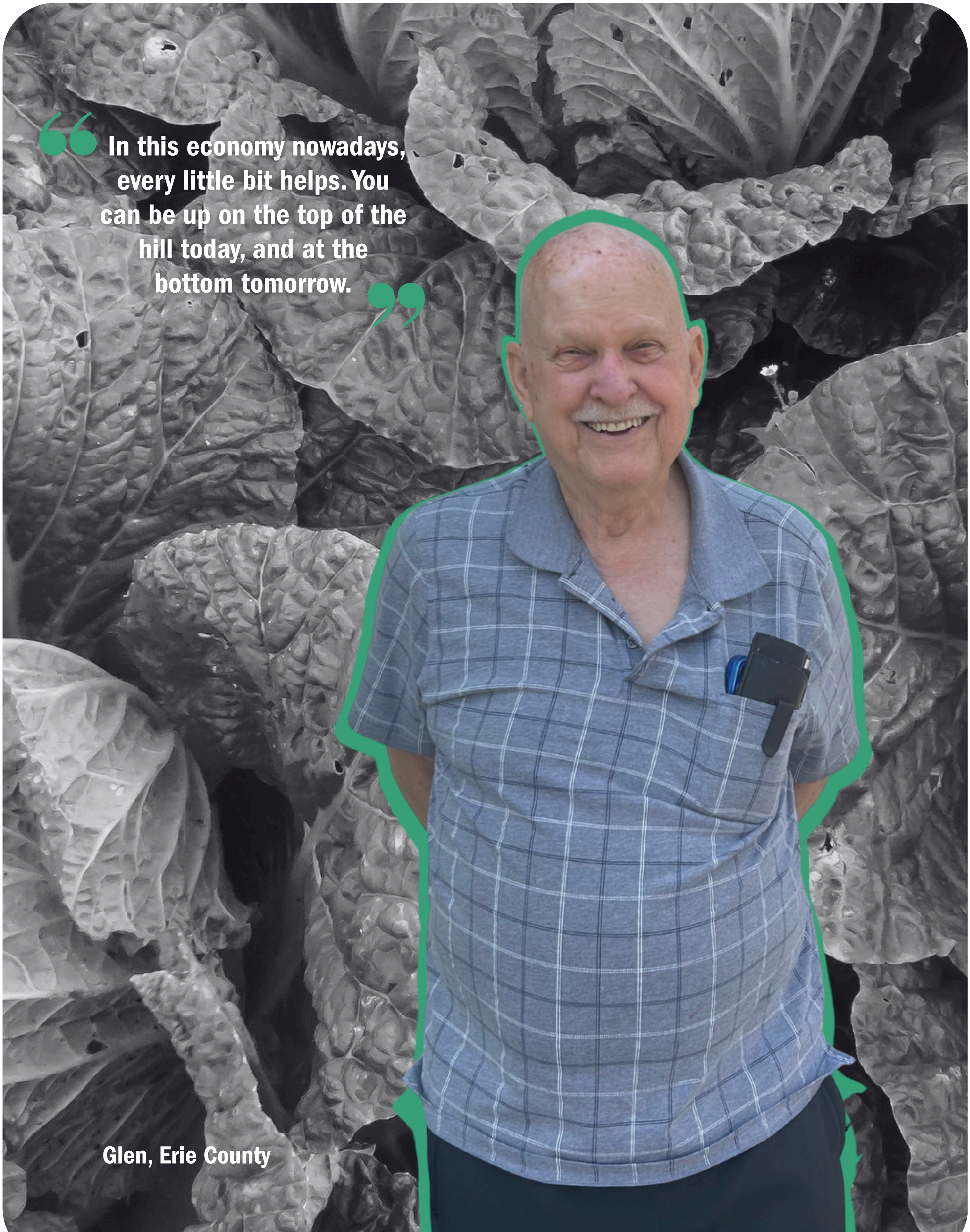
46% **of households surveyed included at least one child under the age of 18**



The Ohio charitable food assistance network serves a diverse range of households, including families with children and older adults, two populations that are especially vulnerable to food insecurity. The Hunger Study 2026 found that many households seeking food assistance are raising children or caring for older adults. Among households with children, 64% had one or two children under age 18. Similarly, among households with seniors, 97% had one or two senior household members.

Understanding who turns to charitable food assistance, and the circumstances that lead them to seek help, provides important insight into the root causes of food insecurity and can help inform effective responses and solutions.

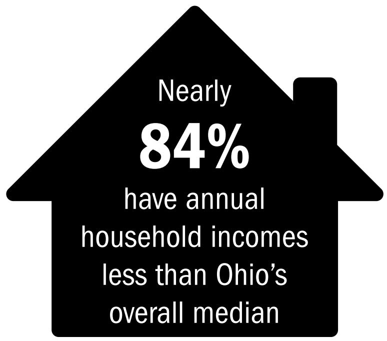
People like Glen from Erie County. He is an 85-year-old widower, father, and proud retired factory worker. He lives on a modest Social Security check and a small pension. His children live nearby, and he enjoys spending time with them. Glen regularly utilizes his local foodbanks and often visits his local senior center for support and community. While he is thankful for the assistance provided by his local Veterans Affairs office, the rising cost of living means that affording enough food and covering everyday expenses continues to be a struggle.



INCOME, EMPLOYMENT, AND FINANCIAL SECURITY

Households seeking assistance through Ohio's foodbank network often have very limited incomes.

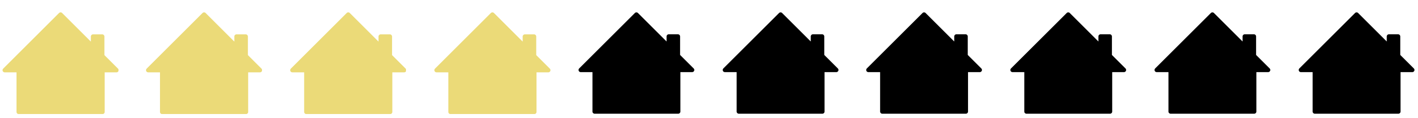
More than half (54%) reported annual household incomes below $20,000, and 69% reported incomes below $30,000, highlighting the financial strain many families face as increases to the cost of living outpace incomes. Of the households surveyed, only 8% reported having no income in the past 12 months.



Although household incomes were lower than the median, workforce participation was consistent with broader trends. Half (50%) of surveyed households had at least one member employed during the previous 12 months. Among households without employment, **48% reported that a household member was unable to work due to a disability or illness, while 38% were retired.**

Among households with at least one adult under age 60, 59% had at least one employed member. More than one in ten surveyed households (11%) reported serving as a caregiver for a child, older adult, or other family member in the home. These findings highlight that food insecurity affects workers, seniors, and people with disabilities alike.

When asked about strategies they are using to cover basic expenses like housing, healthcare, utilities, transportation, and food, nearly three in ten households (29%) responded that they had taken on an additional job or income source to make ends meet. Concerns about future financial stability were widespread.



Four in ten households (40%) expected to rely on free meals or groceries more often in the next year, while 44% anticipated using assistance at about the same level. Households expecting to increase their reliance on food assistance were more likely to include children (52%) than those expecting usage to remain the same (40%). In addition, one in five households (20%) were accessing charitable food assistance for the first time. Ashley, a resident of Ashland County, is a stay-at-home mother of four children while her husband works full-time as a truck driver. Although his income places the family above the threshold for SNAP benefits, rising bills and the increasing cost of living make it difficult for them to make ends meet. Ashley's family benefits from free school meals, Medicaid, and SUN Bucks during the summer, but each day remains a financial challenge. Both Ashley's household and her in-laws rely on local foodbanks to help stretch their grocery budget. The family is doing everything they can to stay afloat including gig work and selling personal belongings. As Ashley explained,

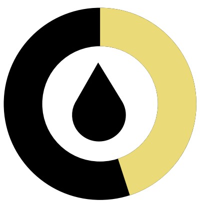
> **"Our bills added all up is more than what my husband's making. And what I'm doing with gas prices, it's just not coming together. I try to [earn income as a ride share driver] when I can. We've pretty much sold a lot of our stuff. So yeah, just doing what we can. I had used up all of my credit limit, and now I'm in debt recovery. It [food insecurity] can happen to anybody. I mean things were going great between both of us working but life happens and here we are. We're just trying to make ends meet by whatever means necessary."**

Low wages, fixed incomes, benefit cliffs, and rising costs continue to drive demand for charitable food assistance among families, workers, seniors, and individuals with disabilities across Ohio, leaving many households like Ashley's increasingly stretched to meet basic needs.

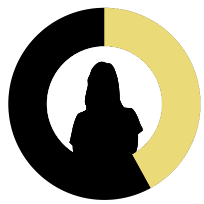
HEALTH, WELLBEING AND CHRONIC CONDITIONS

Chronic illnesses and disabilities are common among households seeking food assistance and often create additional financial and daily living challenges.[4] Managing health conditions frequently requires ongoing medical care, prescription medications, and specialized diets, leaving fewer resources available for food and other necessities. The connection between health and food insecurity is complex: poor health can contribute to food insecurity, and food insecurity can make health conditions worse. The cost of treating chronic conditions can strain household budgets, forcing difficult tradeoffs, while limited access to nutritious food can negatively affect health outcomes.

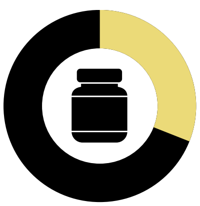
Of the households surveyed, about half (49%) reported having Medicaid coverage, while an additional 3% had marketplace insurance. At the same time, **more than three quarters (76%) said someone in their household was living with a health condition:**



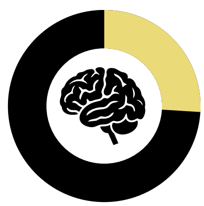
45% of households surveyed included at least one member with high blood pressure/hypertension



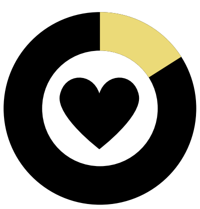
42% of households surveyed included at least one member with a physical or mental disability



31% of households surveyed included at least one member with diabetes



26% of households surveyed included at least one member with a mental health condition



16% of households surveyed included at least one member with heart disease/stroke

These findings underscore the strong connection between food insecurity and health. The prevention and management of chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease require consistent access to a healthy diet,[5] yet many households face financial barriers to obtaining nutritious foods.[6]

Disabilities[7] and chronic illnesses[8] can also limit employment opportunities, increase healthcare utilization and costs, and further strain household budgets. Take neighbors like Joanne, a resident of Allen County, for example. Joanne is a retired military veteran who lives alone and cherishes every moment she gets to spend with her three grandchildren. She explained that her health condition makes it impossible for her to work, increasing the financial challenges she faces on a fixed income. As Joanne shared,

> **"I always worked, and then in 2022, before I had my last surgery on my knee, I had to have a cardio catheterization, and I was 70% blocked, and then I kept having pulmonary problems, and I have COPD and asthma, so I stopped working in 2023. I applied for disability but was originally denied and that's when my neighbor told me about the foodbanks."**

Responses indicate that many households seeking food assistance face health-related challenges. Their ability to access nutritious food is important not only to prevent hunger but also to help them manage their conditions and improve their long-term health outcomes.

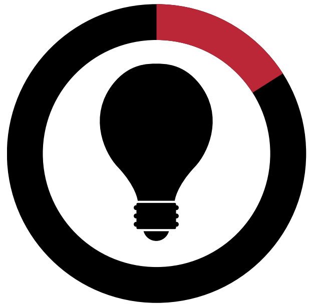
"Once I received my disability, even after paying all my bills and everything else, there's not a lot left for food. I do get food stamps, but my food stamps went down to $24 last year and that doesn't get me much because I have to eat gluten-free for my diet which is more expensive."

Joanne, Allen County

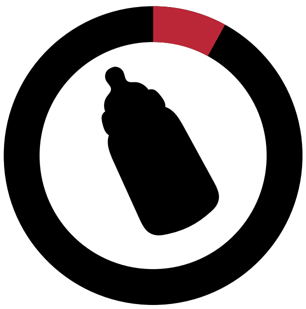
PUBLIC ASSISTANCE AND BENEFITS

Charitable food assistance is one part of a broader assistance landscape. Other sources of assistance, including federal nutrition and public benefit programs, are essential for helping families meet basic needs. Respondents reported receiving a range of public benefits including:

49% of households surveyed benefited from Medicaid



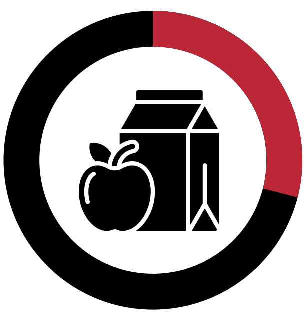
16% of households surveyed benefited from Energy Assistance Programs



8% of households surveyed benefited from the Women, Infants, and Children Program

5% of households surveyed benefited from the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)

Household also reported receiving the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Among households with seniors, 45% received SNAP benefits. Among veteran households, one-third (33%) receive SNAP benefits, including 11% who reported receiving reduced benefits. For households with children public benefits included:

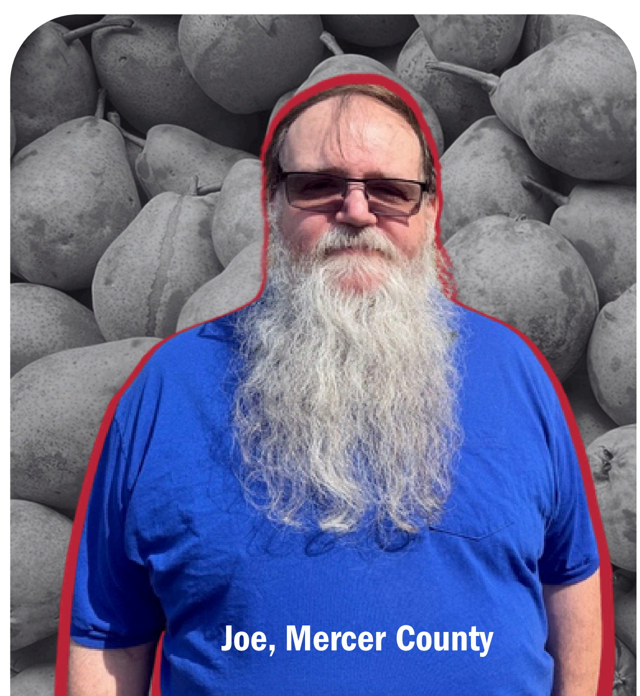


29% of households with children surveyed benefited from Free School Meals

22% of households with children surveyed benefited from SUN Bucks

Despite the availability of these programs, many still found themselves needing assistance. We spoke to Joe from Mercer County about his experience with public benefits and the food assistance network. Joe is a retail employee who lives alone and enjoys both reading and writing his own books. He spends a lot of time at his local library and is currently on leave from work due to an injury. However he still doesn't qualify for assistance, making him one of the many Ohioans who don't qualify but are still hungry, putting them directly in the lines at our foodbanks.

> **"I have used a credit card to buy groceries in the past, as well as visiting the food pantries. Yeah. And then applying for assistance, but nine times out of ten, I'm told I don't qualify but I still need help."**

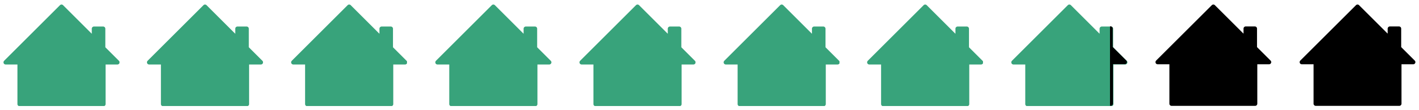


Joe, Mercer County

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE AND BENEFITS

Among SNAP recipients, most reported that benefits did not last through the month.

Nearly eight in ten (78%) exhausted benefits within the first three weeks,



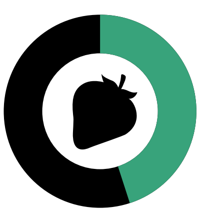
with 30% whose benefits lasted two weeks and about one in four (24%) whose benefits lasted one week or less. Meal skipping was more common among households whose benefits ran out sooner during the month. The survey also highlights the consequences of inadequate or lost benefits, such as meal skipping and increased reliance on charitable food assistance.

Meal skipping was most common among households reporting reduced SNAP benefits (66%) and among those who previously received SNAP but no longer did (61%). Among respondents who had lost SNAP benefits, 52% reported becoming ineligible due to a change or increase in income, while 22% said the recertification process was too difficult, and 9% cited work requirements as the reason for losing benefits.

Among households reporting reduced SNAP benefits, nearly half (49%) expected to rely on foodbanks more often in the next 12 months.

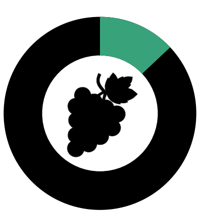
Many people turning to charitable food assistance in Ohio are also accessing public benefits to help stretch their limited budgets and support their health and financial well-being. However, not everyone is participating in public benefit programs.

Among survey respondents, 45% reported receiving SNAP benefits. Of those respondents, 8% reported that their benefits had been skimmed or stolen at least once in the past year. For these households, the loss of a full month's worth of food assistance can have long-lasting consequences on their overall household stability and increase demand for emergency food. Combined with rising costs and limited resources, recent high rates of benefit theft have further weakened an already strained safety net.

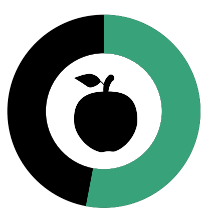


45% of households receive SNAP benefits

of those households

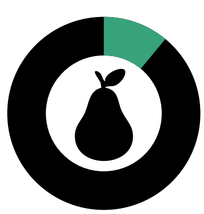


13% receive SNAP benefits but they have decreased



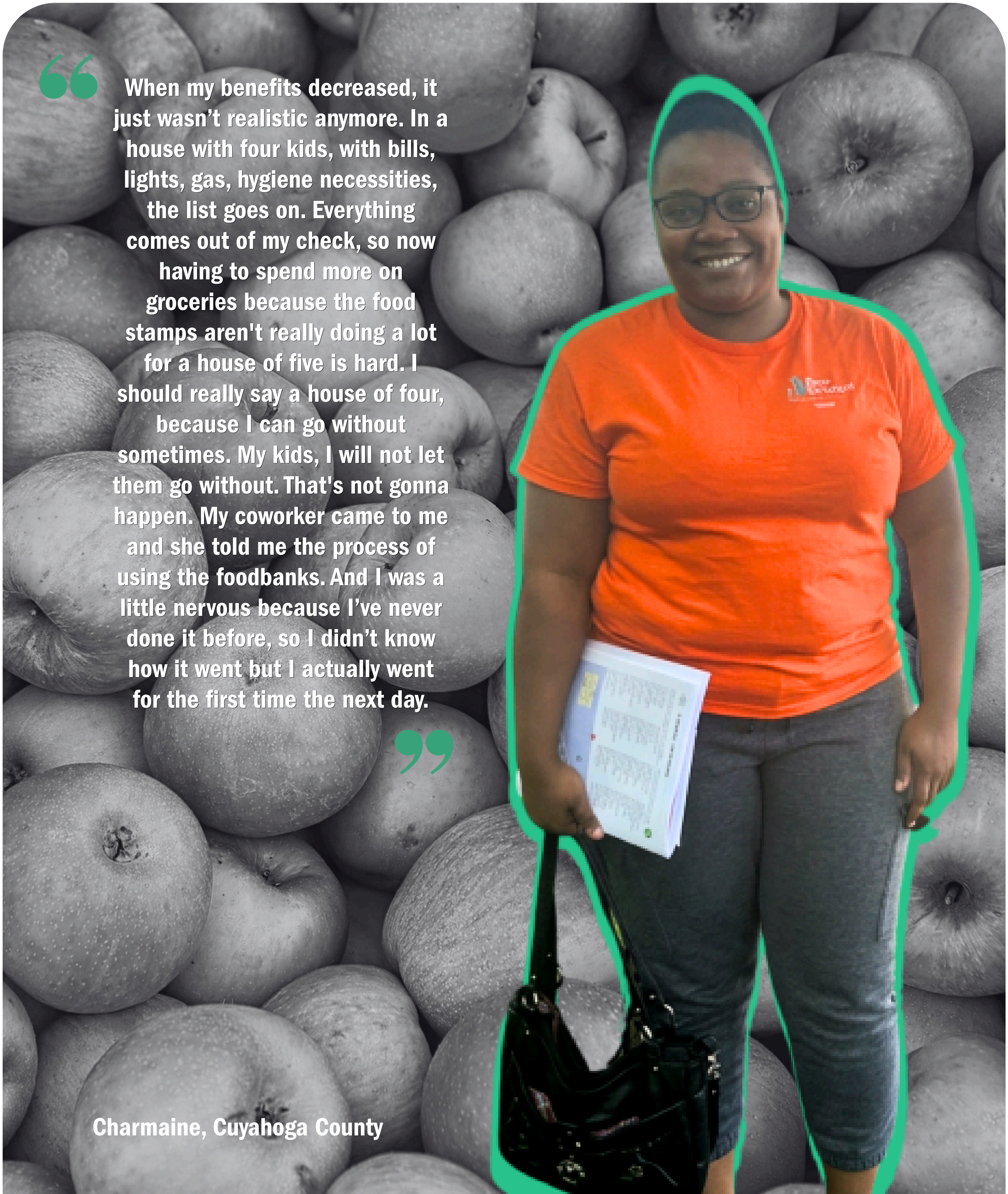
53% of households do not receive SNAP benefits

of those households



11% received SNAP benefits in the past

Charmaine, a resident of Cuyahoga County, faces challenges experienced by many working families. She is a single mother of four school-aged children and works full-time. Her family receives SNAP, energy assistance, free school meals, and SUN Bucks (Summer EBT). However, after receiving a pay increase through a new job, Charmaine's SNAP benefits were reduced for both herself and her four children. While her earnings increased on paper, the additional income did not offset the loss in food assistance. Her experience illustrates the benefits cliff many families face, where modest gains in income can result in significant reductions in critical supports, leaving households financially worse off despite working and earning more.



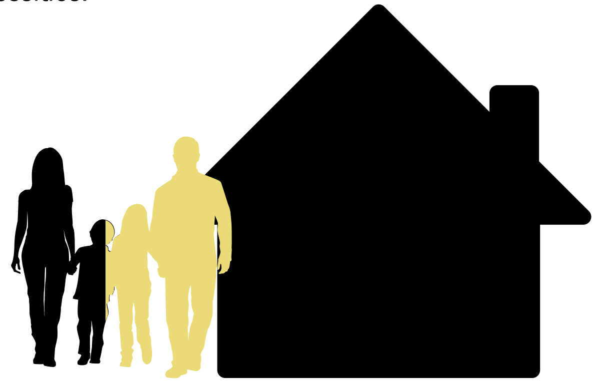
“When my benefits decreased, it just wasn’t realistic anymore. In a house with four kids, with bills, lights, gas, hygiene necessities, the list goes on. Everything comes out of my check, so now having to spend more on groceries because the food stamps aren't really doing a lot for a house of five is hard. I should really say a house of four, because I can go without sometimes. My kids, I will not let them go without. That's not gonna happen. My coworker came to me and she told me the process of using the foodbanks. And I was a little nervous because I’ve never done it before, so I didn’t know how it went but I actually went for the first time the next day.”

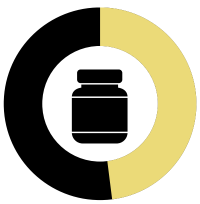
Charmaine, Cuyahoga County

TRADE OFFS

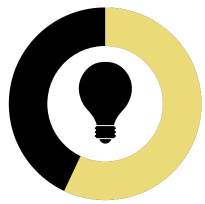
For many households seeking food assistance, difficult tradeoffs are a regular part of daily life. Rising costs and limited incomes often force families to choose between food and other necessities.

More than half of surveyed households (52%) reported at least one member of the household skipped meals during the past year. Among those who skipped meals, 59% said they did so every month, indicating that food shortages are often a recurring challenge rather than a temporary hardship. Households frequently faced tradeoffs between food and essential expenses.



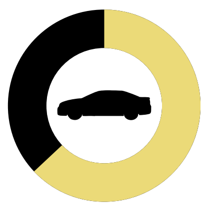


48% **of households chose between affording medicine or affording food**



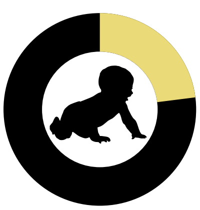
57% **of households chose between affording utilities or affording food**

45% **of households chose between affording rent or mortgage or affording food**



63% **of households chose between affording transportation or affording food**

Additional tradeoffs extended to other necessities. Nearly six in ten households (59%) reported choosing between clothing or personal hygiene products and food. Among households with children, tradeoffs were more frequent, with 65% choosing between utilities and food and 54% choosing between rent or mortgage and food.



23% **of households with children chose between affording childcare or babysitting or affording food**

30% **of households with children chose between affording education or affording food**

We spoke with Karissa from Perry County, a mother of five, who works full time and still is finding herself struggling month to month and having to make tough decisions.

> **"My husband is covered through marketplace coverage. He's diabetic, so we don't really have a choice but to make sure he's covered. And that's like $300 and something dollars a month. We just actually got hit with a bill that came in the mail for $500 because my husband had an infection and just went to our local urgent care. We are in a super tiny town, so unless you want to drive like 40 minutes to Zanesville, you're going to the local urgent care. He didn't realize that they were out of network, so his insurance covered nothing for it. So yeah, you're paying your monthly premium, but you're still getting billed and still having to pay for his insulin. There's still a co-pay for everything."**

She goes on to explain that because of this unexpected medical expense, a few household things, and the kids being home for the summer time they were struggling so she visited their local food pantry so they could have their bills paid and food on the table for their family of seven.

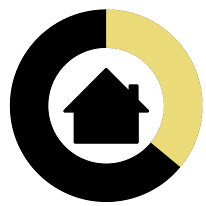
> **"Our bills were so tight, it was less than paycheck to paycheck. I was going to drown if we didn't stick ourselves out a little bit. So we went to the food pantry and I had to take my kiddo and they were amazing with him and kind of played around with him and just made it positive for him. I try not to involve my kids at all or let them even know what's going on so that was kind of nice."**

Among households with chronic conditions, many are forced to make difficult trade-offs between basic necessities.

More than half (53%) of households with a chronic condition reported having to choose between affording medicine and affording food at least once during the year.

Seniors facing chronic health conditions experience similar challenges. Half (50%) of seniors with chronic conditions reported having to choose between affording medication and affording food at least once in the past year. As some of the most vulnerable members of our communities, many seniors are increasingly relying on food pantries to meet their basic needs. In fact, 53% of households with seniors reported visiting food pantries more than 12 times per year, highlighting the ongoing financial pressures that force many older adults to seek food assistance on a regular basis.

50% **of households with seniors chose between affording utilities or affording food at least once in the past year**



36% **of households with seniors chose between affording rent or mortgage or affording food at least once in the past year**

These findings demonstrate that food insecurity rarely exists in isolation. Instead, it is closely linked to broader challenges, including financial hardship and chronic health conditions, that place significant strain on a household's budget. Food assistance programs help stabilize family finances while supporting health, well-being, and overall household stability. When families have access to nutritious food and financial relief, they are better able to devote time and energy to pursuing opportunities, strengthening relationships, and building a brighter future for themselves and their children.

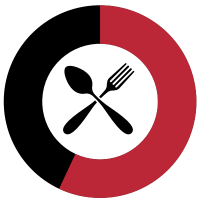
Kiarius, a resident of Cuyahoga County, understands these challenges firsthand. After earning her bachelor's degree, she soon became the full-time caregiver for both her 87-year-old grandfather and her five-year-old son, who has autism and requires additional care and support. She knows how difficult it can be to balance competing household needs. She is grateful for the support provided by the foodbank and shared that food pantries help subsidize her grocery expenses, allowing her to stretch her budget further and provide healthier meals for her family:

> **"The pantry makes it easier to eat healthy because there's a large amount of fresh fruits and fresh vegetables that I can always choose from. I try to see what I can get from the pantries first and then do additional grocery shopping so that I'm not purchasing the same things. So, if I get some type of beef or I have potatoes, then it's like, okay then all I need to do is go get a cabbage or a broccoli."**

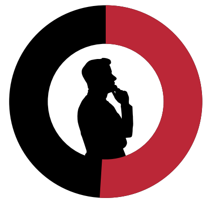
Kiarius, Cuyahoga County

FOOD ASSISTANCE USAGE AND OUTLOOK

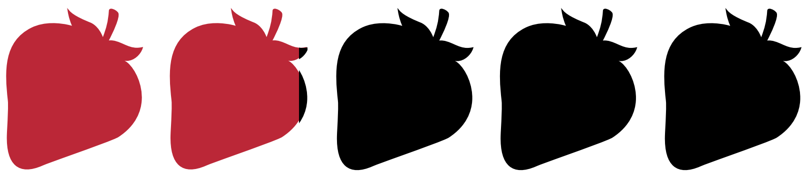
Hunger Study 2026 sought feedback about the value of charitable food access to Ohioans seeking help from the Ohio Association of Foodbanks network. We found that food assistance provides benefits beyond reducing hunger, helping households lower financial stress, access healthier foods, and support overall well-being. Some of the most common ways in which neighbors report that free meal/grocery sites have provided value to them include:



57% of households reported that having more food to eat was an important value of receiving food assistance



51% of households reported that their decreased stress levels was an important value of receiving food assistance



About two in five households (39%) said that receiving food assistance helped them eat healthier foods.

Access to nutritious foods such as fresh produce, dairy products, and proteins can help families improve diet quality while stretching limited budgets. For example, 18% said the food they receive helps them better manage existing health conditions, highlighting the important connection between nutrition and health.

Food assistance also frees up household budgets, allowing neighbors to achieve greater financial stability in other areas. **43% of surveyed households reported that food assistance freed up resources to cover other essential expenses beyond food.** This includes paying off credit card debt, affording necessities such as hygiene and personal care items, setting aside money for emergencies, making home repairs, and gaining the financial flexibility needed to build long-term economic security.

We spoke with Elizabeth from Montgomery County about her experience with the Ohio Association of Foodbanks network. Elizabeth is a stay-at-home mother of six children whose husband works full-time. Her children are also homeschooled. Her household of eight receives WIC, SUN Bucks, and Medicaid; however, even with these resources, she still needs assistance with the cost of groceries.

> **“Thankfully we don’t have a lot of barriers, but I would say if the foodbank were not available, it would require an additional $150-$400 per month in order to feed our family. So thankfully, we have transportation, and I have sufficient health.**
>
> **I love the foodbank workers, how respectful they are, how caring they are, how much they do to give back to the communities. They want to give back to the communities and hear people’s stories, not just of hardship, but also of success.”**

Overall, the findings demonstrate that charitable food assistance provides meaningful benefits for households facing economic hardship. In addition to increasing access to food, Ohio’s foodbank network helps reduce stress, support healthier eating, and improve overall well-being. As many families anticipate ongoing financial challenges, food assistance remains an important source of stability and support across Ohio.

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