

Health Indicator Profile: Food Insecurity



Most U.S. households are able to obtain enough food for healthy, active lives, but others struggle with access to adequate food because of limited financial or other resources. These households are considered food insecure, which affects many physical and mental health problems. For example, food insecurity can contribute to anemia, poor nutrition, and cognitive and behavioral problems, especially among children and those with anxiety, mental distress and poorer general health.¹

Findings from the 2022 Santa Barbara County CHNA

Measure

This measure was based on a combination of two survey questions. Respondents were asked to report if these statements were often true, sometimes true, or never true over the past 12 months. Respondents who answered that either of these statements were at least sometimes true were considered food insecure.

Although similar questions are available from the Current Population Survey (CPS), which is used by Feeding America to generate food insecurity estimates nationwide, the CPS questions are only asked among those who had incomes <185% below the Federal Poverty Level, so they are not directly comparable. Additionally, the Feeding America definition of food insecurity differs from how it is defined in the Santa Barbara Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) and includes total population and not just those 18 years of age and older. The Feeding America estimate for food insecurity for the total population in Santa Barbara County in 2021 was 8.9%.²

FOOD INSECURITY QUESTIONS

1) In the past 12 months, the food that {I/we} bought just didn't last, and {I/we} didn't have money to get more.

2) In the last 12 months, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food?

¹ Gundersen, C., & Ziliak, J. P. (2015). Food insecurity and health outcomes. *Health Affairs*, 34(11), 1830-1839.

² Accessed from Feeding America's Healthcare Costs of Food Insecurity Dashboard: <https://public.tableau.com/profile/feeding.america.research#!/vizhome/TheHealthcareCostsofFoodInsecurity/HealthcareCosts>

Table 1. Percentage of Adults with Food Insecurity by Demographics in Santa Barbara County

	2016 Santa Barbara CHNA	2019 Santa Barbara CHNA	2022 Santa Barbara CHNA
	% (95% CI)	% (95% CI)	% (95% CI)
Overall	21.1 (18.3, 24.0)	21.5 (17.5, 25.5)	25.5 (21.2, 29.7)
Male	20.6 (16.2, 25.0)	20.4 (14.7, 26.2)	22.8 (16.2, 29.4)
Female	21.6 (18.0, 25.3)	22.3 (16.6, 28.0)	27.6 (22.0, 33.1)
Hispanic	30.7 (25.2, 36.2)	32.5 (25.1, 39.9)	43.4 (34.6, 52.2)
Non-Hispanic White	15.8 (12.2, 19.3)	14.9 (9.8, 19.9)	12.6 (8.4, 16.9)
Other	11.9 (4.9, 19.0)	11.4 (0.2, 22.5)	27.6 (16.0, 39.3)
Age 18-44	25.3 (20.3, 30.3)	26.7 (20.1, 33.2)	37.2 (29.7, 44.8)
Age 45-64	21.8 (17.3, 26.3)	23.4 (16.5, 30.3)	24.2 (17.0, 31.4)
Age 65+	9.3 (6.7-12.0)	3.3 (0.3, 6.3) †	7.0 (2.5, 11.4)†
< High School	47.9 (38.5, 57.4)	40.7 (28.5, 53.0)	58.6 (41.6, 75.6)
High School Grad	24.5 (17.0-31.9)	27.0 (16.9, 37.1)	40.2 (26.8, 53.6)
Some College	17.0 (12.8, 21.3)	20.5 (13.4, 27.5)	24.7 (17.6, 31.8)
College Grad	8.3 (5.2, 11.5)	9.1 (4.1, 14.1)	12.9 (8.2, 17.7)
<\$35,000	38.7 (32.8, 44.6)	40.9 (32.6, 49.1)	54.9 (44.7, 65.2)
\$35,000-\$74,999	14.5 (9.2, 19.8)	16.2 (7.9, 24.6)	27.9 (19.0, 36.7)
\$75,000 or greater	4.4 (1.7, 7.2)	5.0 (0.7, 9.3)	13.9 (9.0, 18.8)

†Unreliable estimate (Relative Standard Error >0.3)

Health Disparities

Although the percentage of adults reporting food insecurity has increased by 4.0% since 2019, food insecurity, as defined above, has remained relatively unchanged overall in Santa Barbara County between 2016 and 2022. The highest estimates of food insecurity reported in 2022 were for those reporting less than high school education at 58.6% followed by those with annual household incomes less than \$35K at 54.9%. Since 2019, increases in food insecurity were observed in every subgroup except non-Hispanic whites, which saw a 2.3% decrease. Food insecurity decreases with increased age, education, and household income with the lowest estimates reported in those age 65 or older at 7.0%, followed by those with college education and those in households with incomes \$75K+ at 12.9% and 13.9%, respectively.

Most impacted demographic subgroups include Hispanics, those aged 18-44 years old, those with high school education or less, and those with household incomes below \$35,000 (see figures below).

Figure 1. 2022 Percentage of Adults with Food Insecurity by Demographic Group

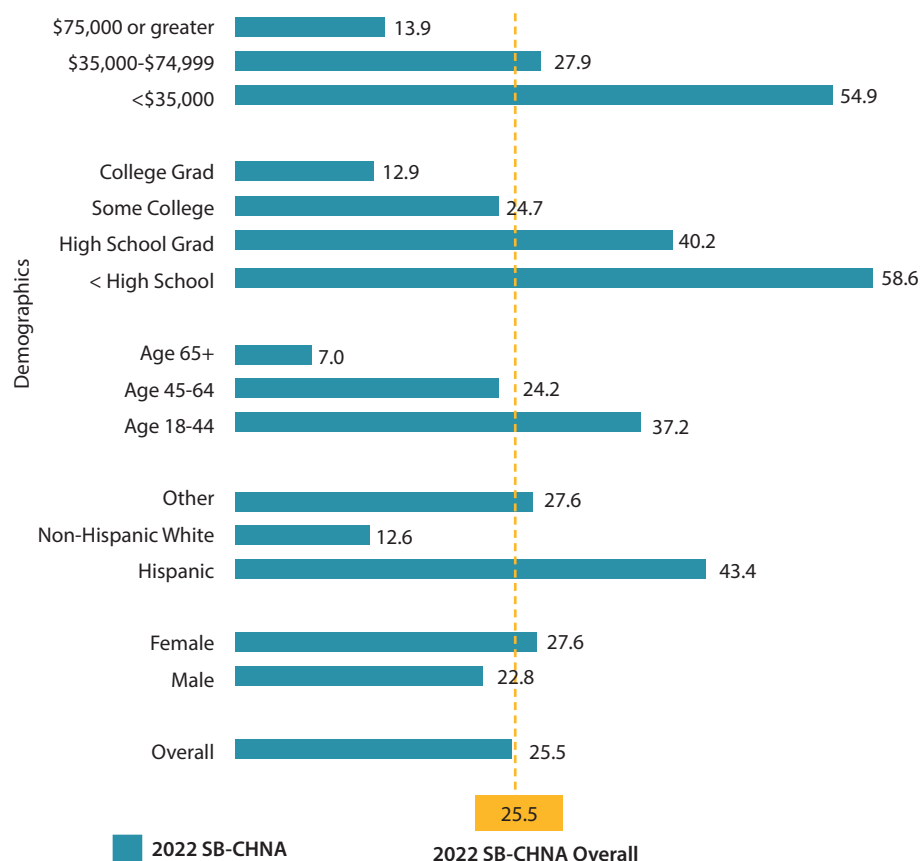


Figure 2. Percentage of Food Insecure Adults by Highest Level of Education in 2016, 2019 and 2022

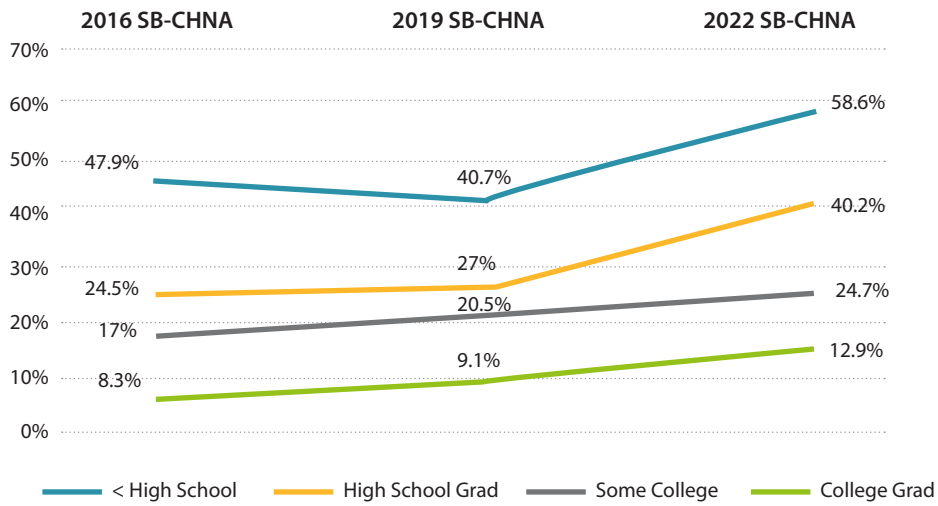
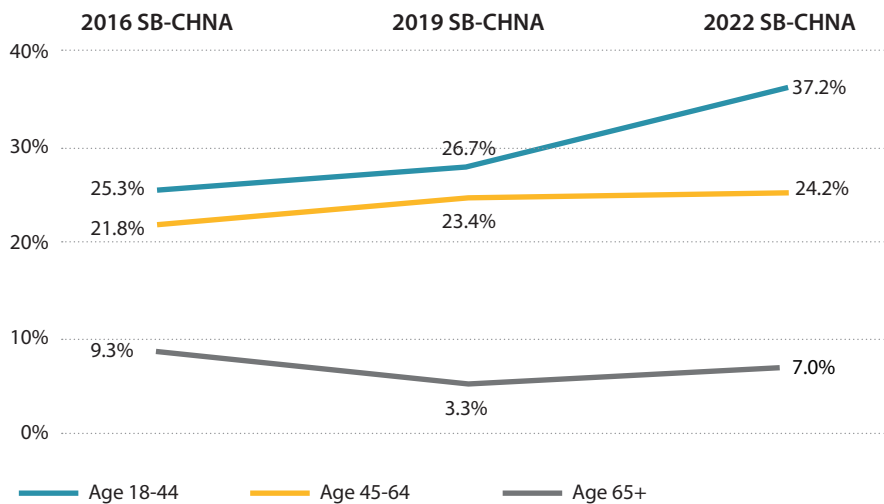


Figure 3. Percentage of Food Insecure Adults by Age in 2016, 2019 and 2022



Factors and Health Outcomes Associated with Food Insecurity

Figure 4 depicts the four health indicators that were most significantly related to food insecurity. These four health indicators are low resilience, experiencing cost as barrier to care, unemployment and housing insecurity. Those reporting housing insecurity reported much greater food insecurity than the average for Santa Barbara County (68.4% vs. 25.5%). Similarly, those reporting low resilience and cost as a barrier to healthcare reported food insecurity at more than twice that of the county average.

In models adjusted for age, sex at birth, race/ethnicity and education, the odds of reporting food insecurity are 3.8 times higher for those reporting low resilience or experiencing cost as a barrier to care versus those not reporting low resilience or cost as a barrier. Housing insecurity remained significant as well in adjusted models with the odds of reporting food insecurity 2.5 times higher in those who are housing insecure compared to those who are not.

Figure 4. Percentage of Food Insecure Adults by Significant Related Factors

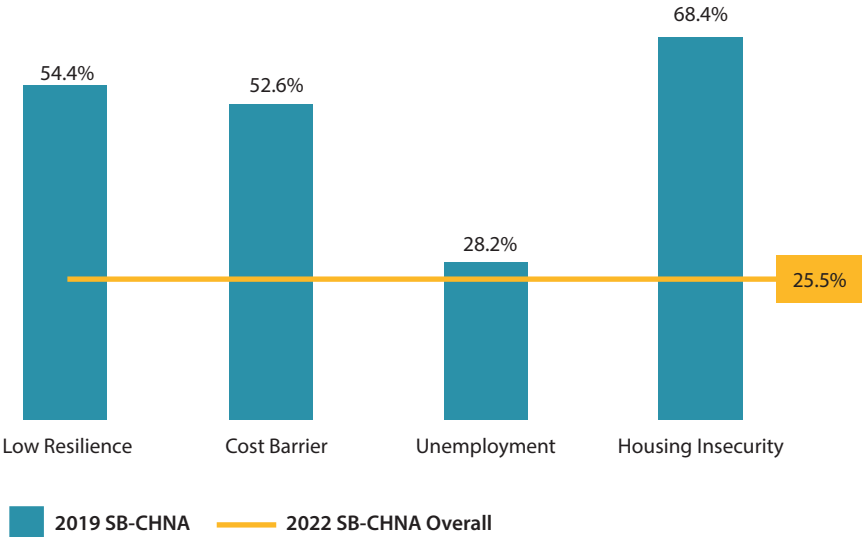


Table 2. Odds Ratio Estimates for Food Insecurity by Significant Related Factors

Significant Related Factor	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Limits	
Low Resilience	3.8	1.6	9.2
Cost as a Barrier to Care	3.8	1.7	8.4
Unemployment	0.0	0.0	0.4
Housing Insecurity	2.5	1.0	6.5

NOTE: The degrees of freedom in computing the confidence limits is 1276.

Findings from the 2022 Santa Barbara County Listening Tour

Through the 2022 Listening Tour, participants repeatedly identified the central role that food security has in any understanding of wellbeing. Findings indicate that **food prices have gone up drastically**. Increasing food insecurity has led to a **persistent undercurrent of worry and stress** as families seek alternative ways to keep food on the table.

Groceries and other items have gone up a lot. You're having to pay more for items that would normally be a lot cheaper. You go to get, like, a box of cereal or something like that, and you're paying like \$2 more than you normally would. – Individual Experiencing Homelessness

Lack of Food Impacts Mental Health

Food insecurity increases problems with mental health by raising people's levels of stress. Food is a basic necessity, and people are having to find creative ways to make ends meet.

There's a huge mental health crisis in regards to the isolation, to the impacts of grief, loss, the heightened cost of food and basic needs, and, you know, it's a compounded effect. Families are having a stress response caused by the pandemic. And it's compounded by social and economic factors that are affecting the population we serve in that with lack of housing, high cost, high housing costs, inflation, food, gas, crowded living conditions, and so on. And so we see that everything's tight and like everybody's talking about it. – Service Provider

Illicit Substances Mask Hunger

Findings highlight that **drugs are often cheaper than food** and have the potential to keep the mind off of hunger, contributing to an unending cycle of drug use. This was seen especially within the community among those experiencing homelessness.

People don't realize... drugs are cheaper than...cheaper than medication and cheaper than the other stuff. And sometimes people get caught... I say that I got caught up in that kind of stuff where I couldn't afford to eat. But the same \$20 would keep me high and on guard for a week, and I wouldn't have to eat because I'm not hungry. You know, I mean, but that same \$20 is just gonna buy me a burger, a fry and a coke. And that's it. You know, I mean, and then I'm cold, dark, scared, hungry again. – Individual Experiencing Homelessness

Increase in Resources Needed

Resources like CalFresh, school food distributions and food banks were mentioned various times in relation to providing solutions for food insecurity. The usage of these resources has increased; however, they are **temporary solutions that do not address the root of the problem** – high food costs.

I know during even the summer during school, they always told us that on a certain day they have food available if anybody needed to go pick it up. And that's how I knew because of school, but if, you don't have kids or other people, you don't really find out the help that's available to you.
– Hospital Services Worker

We see a really high need for food and food security among college students right now. So mainly Allan Hancock [College], SBCC, I'm sure at UCSB too, but I just want to make sure they're included on that list of high needs. And then one way we're seeing a lot of people asking for help through the Foodbank, obviously, the food. But secondly, our application support for CalFresh has gone up fourfold in the last year or so, a tremendous demand for application assistance, but also a much higher rate of those applications being accepted for funding. – Countywide Services Leader

I'll just give a shout out to the Foodbank because they have done a fabulous job of meeting the needs of our community, our delivering groceries to older adults, and making sure we have lots of distribution sites where families could access nutritious food, making sure there were fresh fruits and vegetables in there. – Countywide Services Leader

Conclusion

Policies and programs addressing food insecurity can empower residents to maintain safe, culturally acceptable and nutritionally adequate diets through sustainable food systems. Food insecurity, due to high food prices, has added another stressor to the community, and food insecurity can exacerbate struggles such as drug use and mental health. The most successful programs will address elements that are inextricably tied to the experience of being food insecure, such as addressing the high cost of food and having safe, stable and affordable housing.