

# Charitable Food Assistance Participation in 2020

**At least 60 million people turned to food banks, food pantries, and other private food assistance programs in 2020, the first calendar year of the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Starting in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spurred an economic crisis that has had widespread effects. Within weeks, tens of millions of people lost jobs or saw declines in hours worked. Many people already experiencing food insecurity experienced increased hardship and other people at risk for food insecurity faced new challenges in accessing the food they needed for themselves and their families. While the pandemic did not invent the food crisis in America—in 2019, 35 million people experienced food insecurity—it did shine a spotlight on what has been an existing problem in the U.S. for decades.

As national awareness of the growing need for food increased, federal and local governments passed sweeping legislation and disbursed new and additional resources to help people weather the storm. Along with the public response, the charitable food sector ramped up efforts in local communities across the country, serving at least 60 million people in 2020. For many people it was not the first time visiting a food bank, pantry or other private food assistance program. It is estimated that in 2019, roughly 40 million people received charitable food assistance. For others, their first experience needing and receiving charitable food was brought on by the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

**In 2020:**



**60** Million People **OR** **1** in every **5**

Received charitable food assistance, an increase of 50% over the prior year



**Feeding America** is the largest network within the charitable food sector, with 200 food banks and 60,000 agencies



The Feeding America network provided

 **6.1 billion meals**

an increase of 44% over the prior year



## How did we estimate charitable food assistance participation in 2020?

The estimated number of individuals who received charitable food assistance (CFA) in 2020 is derived from two primary sources of information: (1) findings from the Urban Institute’s Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS) and (2) the December Supplement of the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS). Both surveys are nationally representative, and both ask respondents whether they have received CFA in the past 12 months and in the past 30 days. Because the WBNS uses CFA questions that have been more rigorously developed and tested by the Research Team at Feeding America, we primarily rely on the results of that survey, while supplementing our calculation with data from the CPS to arrive at an estimate for the overall population.

How we calculate the estimate is shown in the graphic to the right. First, we estimate the number of people who received CFA in households with an adult age 18-64 by multiplying the annual CFA rate from the WBNS by the corresponding population estimate from the CPS.

Next, we estimate the number of people who received CFA in households with an adult age 65 and older. To do this, we use CPS data to calculate a ratio of the frequency by which individuals 65 and older receive CFA relative to adults 18-64. Then, we take the annual CFA rate from the WBNS for the 18-64 population and multiply it by the ratio and by the

corresponding population estimate from the CPS. The sum of these two numbers is the estimated number of individuals who received CFA.

### Estimate of Annual Charitable Food Assistance Participation in 2020

Annual Estimate for Individuals in a Household (HH) with an Adult Age 18-64

Annual Rate of CFA Participation

x

Population Data, HHs with 18-64

+

Annual Estimate for Individuals in a Household (HH) with an Adult Age 65+

Annual Rate of CFA Participation

x Ratio of: CFA by 65+ / CFA by 18-64

x Population Data, HHs with 65+

=

Annual #, All individuals

**60 Million**  
(1 in 5 people)

Legend  
 CPS data  
 WBNS data  
 New Estimate

#### For additional information:

- About the WBNS, go [here](#).
- About the CPS, go [here](#).
- About Feeding America or other information contained in this brief, contact [research@feedingamerica.org](mailto:research@feedingamerica.org).