

# **FOOD INSECURITY** AMONG OLDER ADULTS

## **Food Insecurity Among Older Adults – Policy Brief**

Prepared for AARP Foundation by

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**Overview** | Millions of Americans are food insecure. In 2008, the nation witnessed the highest proportion of food insecure households on record since food insecurity statistics were calculated – almost 50 million Americans lived in food insecure households, i.e., households that were uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food for all household members because they had insufficient money and other resources for food. These high rates continued into 2009, and may not return to pre-2007 levels any time soon given the continued weakness of the U.S. economy.

The high food insecurity rates combined with the serious health consequences associated with food insecurity make food insecurity one of the most formidable public health challenges facing the United States today.

Particularly vulnerable to the threat posed by rising food insecurity are older adults between the ages of 50 and 59, a group known to slip through the age-specific social safety nets such as Social Security (typically for those over age 62) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (designed for families with children).

This overview considers the extent and determinants of food insecurity among older adults, the health consequences associated with food insecurity, and the influence of the recent economic downturn. This overview is based on research reported in *Food Insecurity Among Older Adults* (Ziliak and Gundersen, 2011).

**Defining food security** | Based on data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), a nationally representative survey of over 50,000 households per year, this report characterizes the extent of food insecurity among older adults over the past decade focusing on how food insecurity rates differ between adults in their 50s with those younger and older. The CPS contains the Core Food Security Module (CFSM), which is the data used to characterize food insecurity in the annual report from the USDA (Nord et al, 2010).

There are 18 questions in the Core Food Security Module (10 for households without children) used to assess food security status, which is determined by the number of food-insecure conditions and behaviors a household reports. Using these guidelines, a household is defined as MARGINALLY FOOD INSECURE if the survey respondent answers affirmatively to one or more questions, FOOD INSECURE if the survey respondent answers affirmatively to 3 or more questions, and VERY LOW FOOD SECURE if the survey respondent answers affirmatively to 8 or more questions if children are present and 5 or more questions if children are not. Table 1 below provides greater detail.

<b>Food Security Category</b>	<b>Description of Household Condition</b>	<b>Number of Affirmative Responses to CFSM</b>
FOOD SECURITY	No reported indications of food access problems or limitations	0
MARGINAL FOOD INSECURITY	One or two reported indications – typically of anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house	1 or more
FOOD INSECURITY	Reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet	3 or more
VERY LOW FOOD SECURITY	Reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake	5 or more without children; 8 or more with children

**The extent and determinants of food insecurity among older adults** | To illustrate the sheer magnitude of the problem, Figure 1 depicts the trends in food insecurity rates for those between 40 and 49, 50 and 59, and 60 and older. Food insecurity was fairly stable from 2001 until 2007 across all age groups when it jumped dramatically. From 2007 to 2009 food insecurity rose 63 percent for 40-49 year olds, 37 percent for 50-59 year olds, and 26 percent for those 60 and older. The figure also demonstrates that food insecurity is lower at older ages in every year.

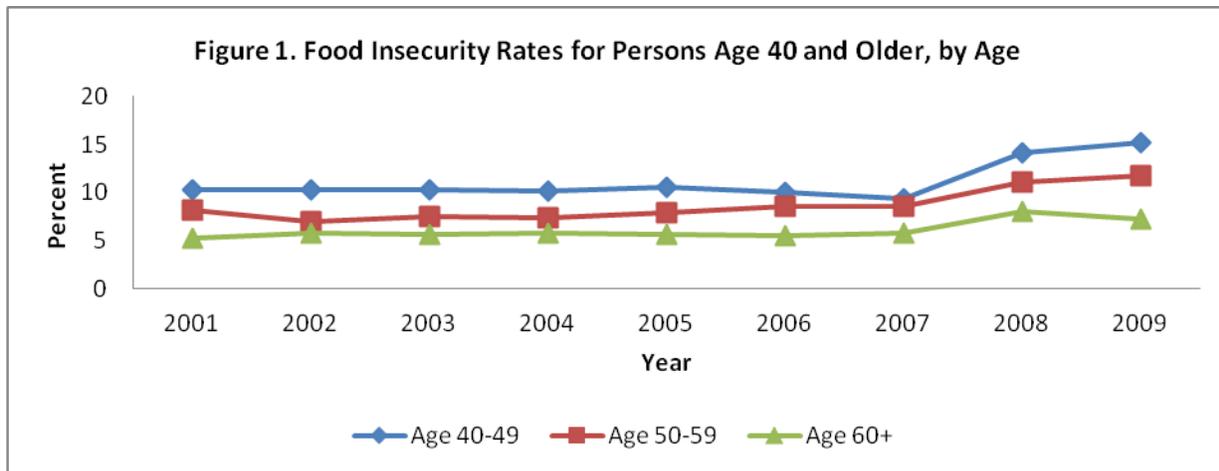
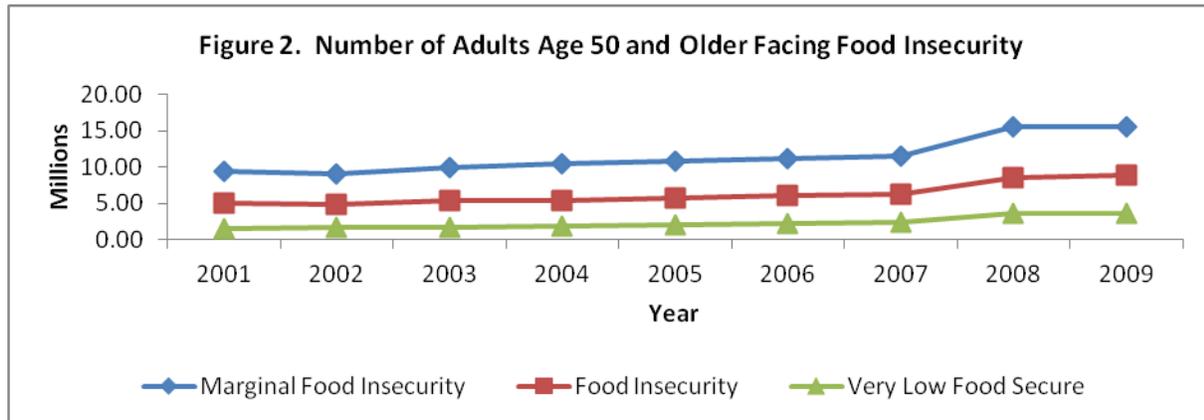


Figure 2 depicts the aggregated number of adults age 50 and older facing food insecurity in any given year from 2001-2009. In 2009:

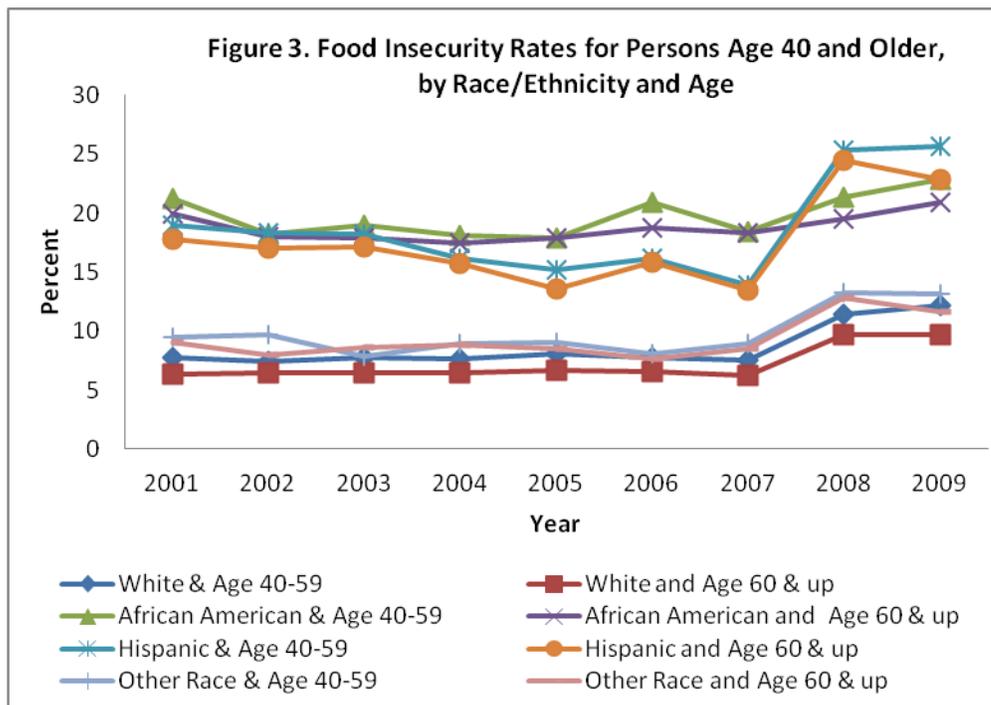
- 15.6 million older adults faced the threat of hunger (were marginally food insecure)
- 8.8 million older adults – 1 in 11 – faced the risk of hunger (were food insecure)
- 3.5 million older adults experienced hunger (were very low food secure)

This is an increase of 66%, 79%, and 132%, respectively, from the 2001 levels among this population.



**Trends by Age and Race/Ethnicity** | Insofar as food insecurity is closely tied to economic constraints, it is not surprising that certain groups of older adults are at greater risk of food insecurity. In particular, those with limited incomes, African-Americans, Hispanics, never-married individuals, renters, and those with grandchildren present are all more likely to be food insecure.

To illustrate this, Figure 3 has age-specific trends in food insecurity broken down by race and ethnicity and by age 40-59 and 60 and older. This figure is composed of two broad sets of lines. The higher set is composed of African-Americans and Hispanics and the lower set is composed of whites and other races. This demonstrates that differences by race/ethnicity are far more important than differences in age when considering the characteristics of older adults.



The figures also demonstrate that the trends in food insecurity are similar across race/ethnicity/age groups, and thus the increase in food insecurity after 2007 was not experienced predominantly by a specific race/ethnicity-age group but instead was widespread across young and old, white and black and Hispanic. That is, African American 40-59 year olds had a sustained level of food insecurity that was double or more their white counterparts, though some narrowing of the race gap in the last two years should be noted (the exception here is that the Hispanic-white gap widened after 2007).

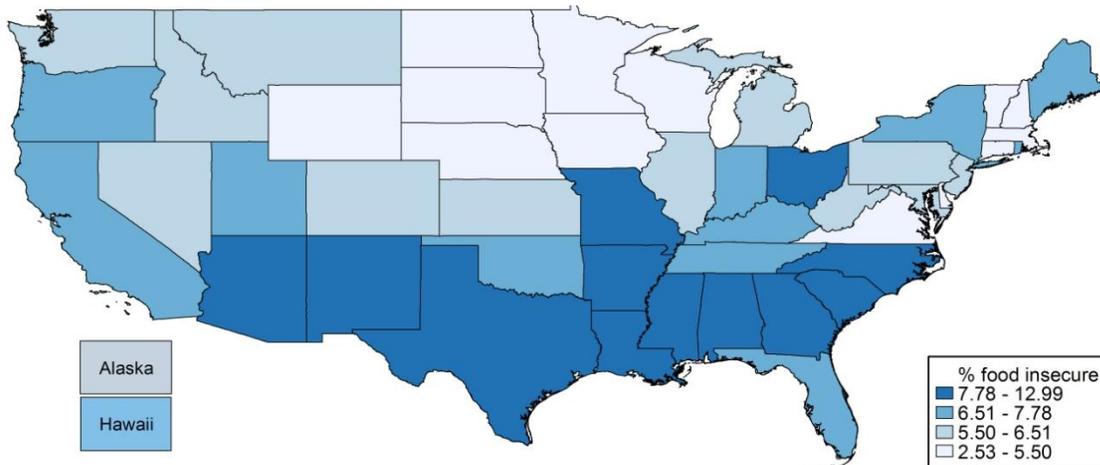
**Differences by State** | Along with income and demographic characteristics, there is a great deal of geographic diversity in food insecurity rates across the United States. The range on these rates among 50-59 year olds runs from 3.8 percent in North Dakota to 13.9 percent in Mississippi. When the sample is restricted to those below 200 percent of the poverty line, the range is 11.8 percent to 31.1 percent with the same two states setting the upper and lower bounds. Table 2 shows the top ten states in terms of food insecurity by age group.

<b>Table 2. Top Ten States in Terms of Food Insecurity by Age Group</b>					
<b>40-49 Year Olds</b>		<b>50-59 Year Olds</b>		<b>Age 60 and Older</b>	
<b>AR</b>	15.98	<b>MS</b>	13.79	<b>MS</b>	12.45
<b>OK</b>	15.97	<b>NM</b>	12.37	<b>NM</b>	10.01
<b>MS</b>	15.86	<b>AZ</b>	12.08	<b>TX</b>	9.67
<b>TX</b>	14.32	<b>TX</b>	11.33	<b>SC</b>	9.66
<b>UT</b>	13.80	<b>SC</b>	11.27	<b>AR</b>	9.61
<b>ME</b>	13.29	<b>AL</b>	11.07	<b>GA</b>	8.74
<b>NM</b>	13.21	<b>NC</b>	10.75	<b>LA</b>	8.32
<b>SC</b>	13.13	<b>OR</b>	10.57	<b>AL</b>	8.03
<b>TN</b>	13.08	<b>MO</b>	10.56	<b>NC</b>	7.97
<b>FL</b>	12.82	<b>OH</b>	10.41	<b>OK</b>	6.66

Seven of the ten states with the highest rates of food insecurity are in the South among 40-49 year olds, six are in the South among 50-59 year olds, and eight are in the South among those persons age 60 and older. Of these states, three states overlap the three age groups—Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas.

Figure 4 presents a map of food insecurity rates for the pooled sample of adults ages 50 and older, which makes transparent that at the state level food insecurity is most pronounced in the South.

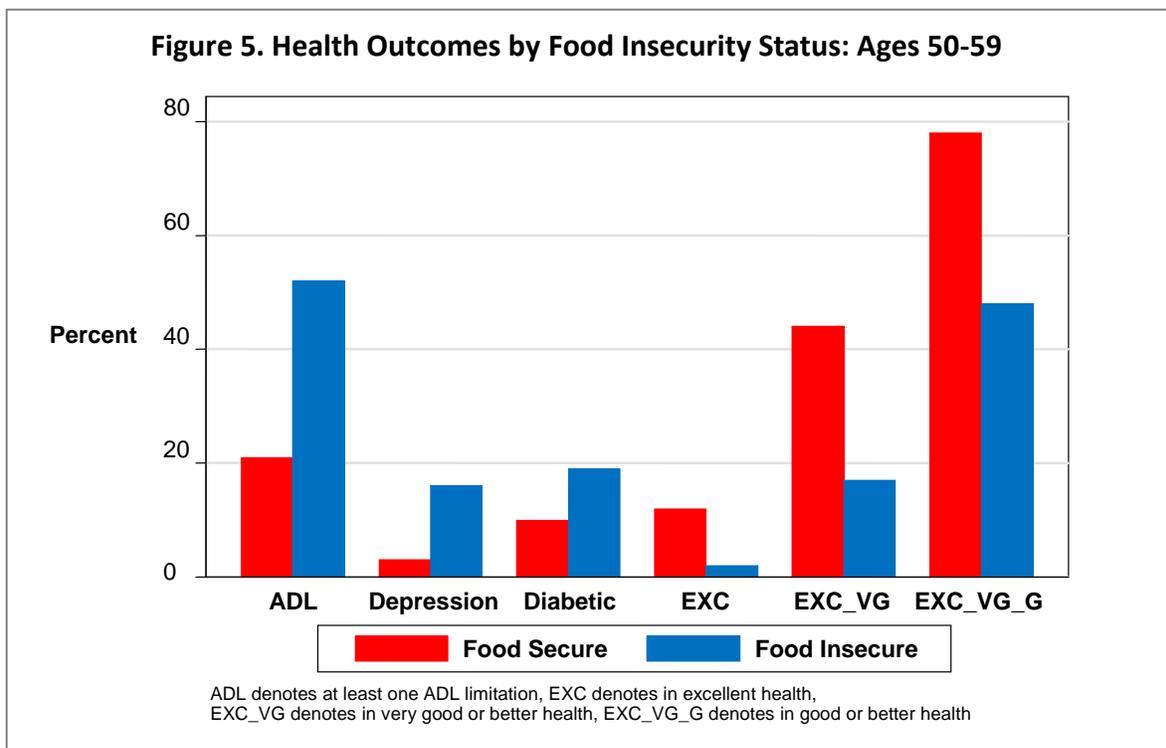
**Figure 4. State Food Insecurity Rates for Adults Age 50 and Older**



While certain age and race groups of adults are at greater-risk of food insecurity and there are certain states with especially high rates of food insecurity, it should be emphasized that food insecurity cuts all across the income spectrum. In fact, over 50 percent of adults 40 and older who are food insecure have incomes above 200 percent of the poverty line. Likewise, it presents in all demographic and age groups. For example, over two-thirds of food insecure adults over the age of 40 are white.

**The consequences of food insecurity among older adults** | The food insecurity literature has demonstrated serious nutrition and health consequences associated with food insecurity for both seniors and children. Little work, though, has been done on those between the ages of 50 and 59. Using data from the 1999 through 2008 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), findings show that food insecure persons between the ages of 50 and 59 have lower nutrient intakes and worse health outcomes than food secure persons in the same age range. The differences in health outcomes are especially pronounced as seen in Figure 5.

Food insecure 50-59 year old adults are almost twice as likely to be diabetic (19% versus 2%), are far less likely to be in excellent or very good health (17% versus 44%), are over five times more likely to suffer from depression (16% versus 3%), and over twice as likely to have at least one activity of daily living (ADL) limitation (52% versus 21). These differences hold, in general, across all the demographic categories considered.



One contrast with older seniors, though, is that the effect of food insecurity, controlling for other factors, on nutrient intakes is statistically insignificant but the association is negative and significant for older seniors. Nevertheless, the worse health outcomes associated with food insecurity for older seniors also holds for those in the 50 to 59 age group, even controlling for other factors.

For example, a food insecure 50-59 year old has an ADL rating that is similar to a food secure adult 14 years older. As a consequence, policymakers, program administrators, and non-profit organizations may wish to continue to concentrate their efforts on addressing the negative health outcomes among the food insecure in this group.

**Paving the road to food security among older adults** | Taken together, the analysis above indicates that food insecurity among older adults has been and will continue to be a pressing matter. This issue demands much attention from policy makers and those charged with program administration. The vulnerability of certain age groups must be an issue at the forefront of such considerations.

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## References

Nord, Mark, Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson. *Household Food Security in the United States, 2009*. ERR-108, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Econ. Res. Serv. November 2010.

Ziliak, James P. and Craig Gundersen. *Food Insecurity Among Older Adults*. AARP Foundation. August 2011.



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