

# Food Assistance and Hunger in the Heartland 2021

*Summary of Key Findings for Harvesters – The Community Food Network  
June 2022*

## Background

---

*Food Assistance and Hunger in the Heartland 2021: Summary of Key Findings for Harvesters – The Community Food Network* highlights results from research<sup>1</sup> conducted in the spring and summer of 2021 by the University of Missouri Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security. The research aimed to better understand the characteristics of food pantries and food pantry clients. It involved implementation of 1) an online and telephone survey completed by food pantry directors and 2) in-person interviews with food pantry clients conducted on-site at food pantries. This summary includes results obtained from food pantries operating in the Harvesters 26-county service area in Kansas and Missouri and clients served at those pantries.

## Agency Characteristics

---

- **Staffing**
  - 42 percent of food pantries have paid staff.
  - 30 percent of all pantries report employing at least one full-time staff person.
  - 30 percent of all pantries report employing at least one part-time staff person.
  - 58 percent of food pantries have no paid staff and rely entirely on volunteers.
  
- **Volunteers**
  - Each food pantry utilizes an average of 49 volunteers each month.
  - An average of 160 hours of service are provided by volunteers at each pantry each month.
  - 55 percent of volunteers are 60 years of age or older.
  
- **Nutrition assistance programs**
  - At least 46 percent of food pantries provide some form of referral, information, or assistance related to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
  - 34 percent provide referrals for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

---

<sup>1</sup> This study only included food pantries (i.e., grocery programs that distribute food for off-site consumption) and did not collect data related to meal or congregate feeding programs or other types of food bank programs.

## Client Counts & Impact of Covid-19

---

- **Client counts**
  - Food pantries vary greatly in terms of the number of households they serve. An average, food pantry serves 253 unduplicated (unique) client households or 336 duplicated client households each month.
  - Unduplicated count: Within the Harvesters region, 226,015 unduplicated (unique) clients are served in an average month and 384,874 are served annually. An estimated 66,624 unduplicated households are served in a typical month and 110,596 are served annually.
  - Duplicated count: Within the Harvesters region, clients are reached 301,611 times in an average month and 3,619,329 annually. Households are reached 87,617 times in a typical month and 1,051,408 annually.
- **Changes in client counts**
  - 67 percent of pantries report serving more clients in 2021 compared to 2020.
  - 15 percent report serving fewer clients compared to 2020.
- **Impact of Covid-19**
  - 78 percent of pantries were serving more people who were impacted by Covid-19 in 2021 compared to 2020 (e.g., from business closures, layoffs).
  - 80 percent of pantries changed the way they distributed food (e.g., changing to drive-thru distribution).

## Client & Household Characteristics

---

- **Household composition**
  - 38 percent of all households have a least one adult over the age of 65.
  - 51 percent have at least one child under 18 years of age.
  - 25 percent have at least one child under six years of age.
  - 13 percent of households with children are headed by a single adult.
- **Client demographics**
  - 57 percent of client respondents identify as Caucasian/White.
  - 16 percent identify as African American/Black.
  - 20 percent identify as Hispanic/Latino/Latina/Latinx.
  - 68 percent of respondents identify as a woman.
  - 9 percent of clients live in temporary housing or are houseless.
  - 81 percent have a high-school degree or higher level of education.

- **Veteran status**
  - 15 percent of households include someone who previously served in the U.S. Armed Forces, Reserves, or National Guard.
  
- **Employment and income**
  - 61 percent of households have at least one working adult.
  - 36 percent of all households have a member who is working full-time.
  - 47 percent of all households make \$15,000 or less per year.
  
- **Food pantry use**
  - 60 percent of households used a food pantry more than once a month in the summer of 2021.
  - 37 percent of households used a pantry every month during the past year.
  - 43 percent reported using a food pantry for more than two years.
  - 54 percent of households get at least half of the food they consume in a typical month from a food pantry.
  
- **Food security**
  - 72.2 percent of households experience food insecurity.
  - 38.5 percent experience very low food security (indicated by disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake).
  - 33.7 percent experience low food security (indicated by reduced quality, variety, and desirability of diet).
  - 27.8 percent experience marginal food security (indicated by anxiety over food sufficiency).
  
- **SNAP eligibility and use**
  - 78 percent of households have incomes making them eligible for SNAP.
  - Only 30 percent of client households have used SNAP in the previous year.
  
- **Use of child nutrition assistance programs**
  - 35 percent of households with children 5 and under used WIC in the previous year.
  - 58 percent of households with children under 18 participate in free or reduced-price breakfast or lunch.

- **Health**
  - 38 percent of all households have a member with diabetes or pre-diabetes.
  - 55 percent have a member with high blood pressure.
  - 46 percent have a member with high cholesterol.
  - 47 percent have a member without health insurance of any kind.
  
- **Trade-offs**
  - 40 percent of households had to choose between paying for food and *medicine/medical care* in the past 12 months.
  - 49 percent had to choose between paying for food and *utilities*.
  - 38 percent had to choose between paying for food and *housing*.
  - 32 percent had to choose between paying for food and *transportation*.
  - 9 percent had to choose between paying for food and *education expenses*.
  - 16 percent of those with children under 18 had to choose between paying for food and *childcare*.
  
- **Coping strategies**
  - 63 percent of households purchased the least expensive food in the past 12 months, even if it wasn't the healthiest option.
  - 43 percent purchased food in dented or damaged packages.
  - 48 percent consumed food past its expiration date.
  - 26 percent sold or pawned personal items.
  - 22 percent watered down food or drinks.

Prepared for Harvesters – The Community Food Network, [harvesters.org](http://harvesters.org)  
 Contact: Communications at 816.929.3000

Prepared by the Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security, University of Missouri, [foodsecurity.missouri.edu](http://foodsecurity.missouri.edu)  
 Contact: Bill McKelvey, Senior Project Coordinator, [mckelveywa@missouri.edu](mailto:mckelveywa@missouri.edu)

Funding provided by Feeding Missouri. The University of Missouri provided additional support.



Interdisciplinary Center  
 for Food Security  
 University of Missouri