

Food Insecurity Among Seniors – What You Need to Know

Definitions

- **Food insecurity** is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate *food*. It's a consequence of poverty or economic hardship and is often measured by asking if you have experienced a time in the last year when you didn't know where your next meal would come from.
- **Hunger** is an individual-level physiological condition that may result from food insecurity. Hunger is often used interchangeably with food insecurity, but it's not quite the same.

Data on the Prevalence of Food Insecurity

- Nationwide, approximately 10 million older adults – or one in six – face the threat of food insecurity. With the percentage of Americans aged 65 and older expected to grow to 26% by 2050 (up from 18% in 2010), this problem will get worse if society doesn't mobilize around it.



- According to the NC Division on Aging and Adult Services, North Carolina has the third highest rate of senior hunger in the country. In 2015, 20.73% of North Carolina adults age 60 and older faced the threat of hunger.
- Up to 50% of older adults nationwide may be malnourished and an estimated one-third of older adults admitted to the hospital may be malnourished. Seniors who are malnourished stay in the hospital longer and have more health complications than those who have adequate nutrition.

Durham's Seniors

- Based on 2015 data, Feeding America estimates that approximately 18% of Durham residents experience food insecurity. With 40,513 residents being age 65 or older, this translates to approximately 7,300 seniors in Durham who are food insecure. This does not include people aged 60-64 who are vulnerable because they are not physically able to work, do not yet receive Social Security, and are not yet eligible for Medicare unless they have qualified for disability.
- Many seniors over 65 are enrolled to receive SNAP benefits but many receive only \$15 a month for food because their housing is subsidized and their medical expenses are mostly covered. However, expenses for transportation and the average cost of living still add up, leaving seniors short of money for food.
- Some seniors are unwilling to fill out a 14-page SNAP application that has to be recertified each year only to receive \$15 a month in benefits. To address this problem in Durham, End Hunger Durham is leading an effort to get the NC Dept. of Human Services to apply for a waiver from the USDA to simplify the SNAP application and recertification process for seniors 60 and older. It's called the Elderly Simplified Application Project, or ESAP. It's been tried in eight other states and the SNAP enrollment by seniors has greatly increased.

Causes of Food Insecurity

- Financial constraints are the primary factor that limits access to food. Other factors include lack of adequate transportation, mobility limitations, race or zip code (living in a food desert), lack of social contact and inadequate services, program and funding.



- A long history of racial discrimination has caused a high percentage of African Americans to have few opportunities to build wealth and plan for retirement. Racial inequality leads to lower educational status, neglected neighborhoods, limited transportation, and difficulty accessing food and healthcare.

Consequences of Food Insecurity for Seniors

- Older adults are more likely to have adverse health consequences from food insecurity than other age groups. Food insecure adults are 50% more likely to have diabetes, three times more likely to suffer from depression, 60% more likely to have congestive heart failure or a heart attack, and twice as likely to report gum disease and asthma.
- Food insecurity also reduces a senior's ability to conduct activities of daily living (ADL). A senior experiencing food insecurity is 30% more likely to have at least one ADL impairment.
- Health outcomes of food insecurity in seniors also include increased falls, increased vulnerability to infection, loss of energy and mobility, and poor wound healing. All of these lead a cascading list of problems that include pain, disability, fatigue and depression, which, in turn, cause poor appetite and lack of interest in food preparation and difficulty eating due to problems with teeth and gums and/or swallowing.
- Seniors cope with food insecurity by buying the cheapest food possible even if it's unhealthy food, watering down food or drink, selling or pawning personal property, and borrowing money from friends and family.
- A study by Feeding America showed in households that visit food pantries and have a member over age 75, the most common coping strategy was a tradeoff between medication and food.
- Food insecurity among older adults may increase costs for the healthcare system by as much as 300% as these seniors have increased likelihood of entering health care facilities, convalescent homes, or some form of assisted living. Or they may be forced to move in with relatives and receive inadequate care; this eventually leads to higher health care costs as chronic conditions worsen when remaining untreated.

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