



# Full Plate PRESS

THE NEWSLETTER OF  
**FEEDING  
AMERICA**  
West Michigan

## Take Action

1 in 8 people in our service area are at risk of hunger. Help fill our neighbors' plates by getting involved with Feeding America West Michigan.



**DONATE:**  
**\$10 = 40 MEALS**



**VOLUNTEER:**  
In one hour, you can help us distribute up to 200 meals.



**ADVOCATE:**  
Have a way with words? Help spread our mission by letting people in your community know about our services.



**FUNDRAISE:**  
Your creative spirit can put meals on neighbors' plates. Visit our website for more information.

FBF-FWM-20181



## Connect with us



@feedingwestmich

2022 ISSUE 1

### ABOUT US

Serving local families in need since 1981, Feeding America West Michigan reclaims millions of meals' worth of safe, surplus food from various sources. With the help of countless volunteers, the food bank sorts, stores and distributes this food through a network of more than 800 partners to fill hundreds of thousands of neighbors' plates instead of landfills. The food bank's service area consists of 40 of Michigan's 83 counties from the Indiana border north through the Upper Peninsula.

Feeding America West Michigan is a member of Feeding America, The United Way and The Food Bank Council of Michigan. The food bank also maintains a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator.

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# HUNGER A STARK REALITY FOR GROWING SENIOR POPULATION

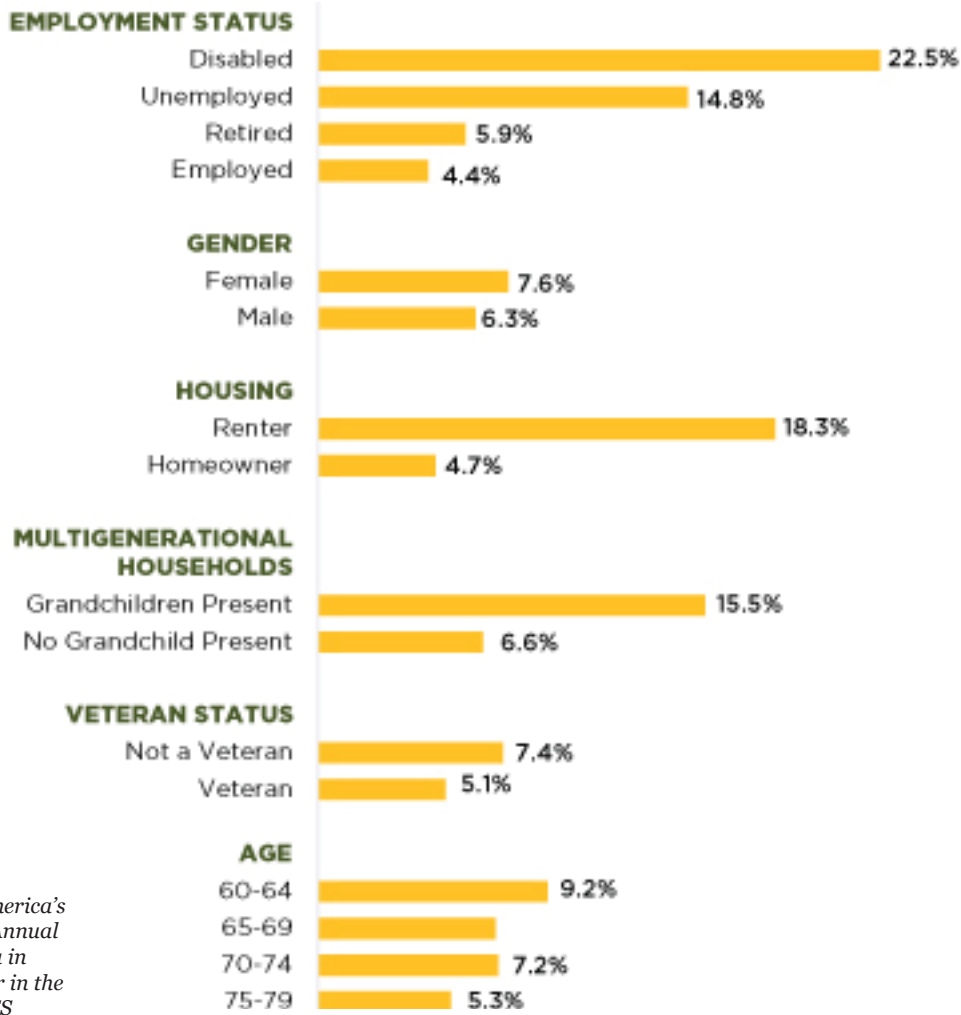
Neighbors of all ages and demographics can experience bouts of food insecurity — meaning they can’t access or afford enough healthy food for a period of time. When neighbors over age 60 become food insecure, however, these periods of time often stretch into the long-term.

For many seniors, retirement actually poses no real threat to their food security because fixed incomes can offer stability and protect them from hunger. This is one reason why food insecurity rates are lower for seniors (5.8 percent in Michigan) than younger people. But for other seniors who experience decreased earnings upon retirement, having a static income can make it difficult to make ends meet. Younger people can more often break the cycle of hunger by finding a

## Food Insecurity Rates by Select Characteristics Among Seniors Age 60 and Above in 2019



Data analyzed in this article comes from Feeding America’s The State of Senior Hunger in America in 2019: An Annual Report, Hunger Among Adults Age 50-59 in America in 2019 and The Health Consequences of Senior Hunger in the United States: Evidence from the 1999-2016 NHANES



higher-paying job. In contrast, food-insecure seniors are often trapped on low, fixed incomes for the rest of their lives.

Therefore, most seniors rarely experience changes to their food-insecure status. This, over time, can lead to numerous health problems related to nutrition. These outcomes are particularly problematic considering the health, financial and nutritional challenges aging adults face — ultimately making traveling to stores, carrying groceries or cooking meals more difficult.

Some groups of seniors are more at risk than others. Being disabled, unemployed, female or a renter can increase their risk of being food insecure. Additionally, food-insecurity rates are

higher among younger seniors. One hypothesis for this is that sadly, the health implications associated with food insecurity could cause early deaths.

Other groups of seniors are at increased risk as well. African American and Hispanic seniors are both more than twice as likely to be food insecure than Caucasian seniors.

No matter their situation, seniors who are food insecure face increased risk of chronic health conditions.

Senior hunger isn’t going away anytime soon. In fact, incoming seniors (ages 50-59 now) are expected to face higher rates of food insecurity because their earning years were unstable due to events like the dot-com bubble, the 9/11

downturn, the great recession and the COVID-19 pandemic. The demographic and health trends among these older adults are similar to those for current seniors, but the magnitude is often greater (e.g. 26.6% of disabled older adults are food insecure while only 22.5% of disabled seniors are). As a result, older adults currently experience higher rates of food insecurity. With the senior population expected to grow in the coming decades, trends among older adults provide insight into the future challenges the next generation of seniors may face.

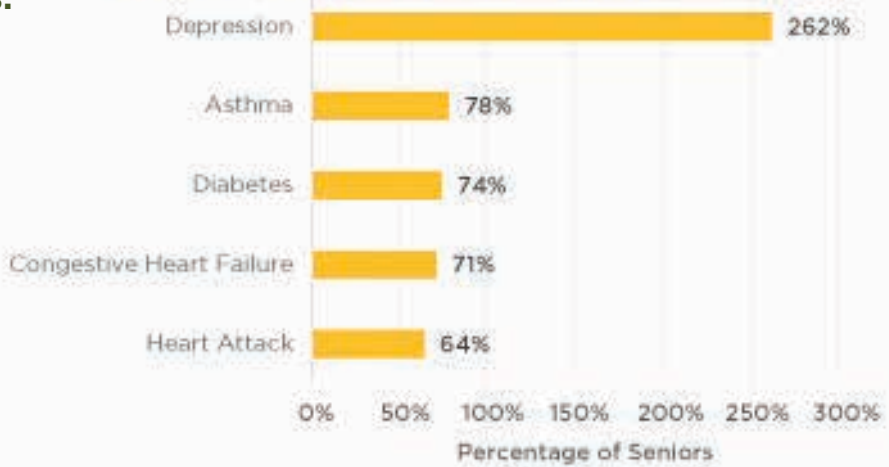
**The strength of the charitable food sector, as well as the federal nutrition programs that serve seniors and older adults, will be essential to ending hunger in the years to come.**

## Seniors who are food insecure consumed lower quantities of key nutrients than food secure seniors.

- **Iron** intake was **13.3% less**
- **Calcium** intake was **9.7% less**
- **Protein** intake was **9.2% less**
- **Energy** intake was **8.5% less**



## Food insecure seniors were more likely to have chronic health conditions.





# As “grandfamilies” become more common, seniors face new challenges

After raising their children and four grandchildren, Wanda and her husband never expected to raise another child, but when their great-grandson needed a home, they couldn’t turn him away.

“The thought of what would happen if he wasn’t with us is very scary,” Wanda said.

Wanda and her family are among the growing number of multi-generational households in the U.S. — often known as “grandfamilies.” According to the Pew Research Center, in 2018, one in five Americans lived in one of these homes. This family structure can yield many benefits, but studies from the Feeding America National Organization have found that seniors who reside with their grandchildren are more than twice as likely to be food insecure than seniors who don’t.

Seniors rarely expect to raise their grandchildren when planning for retirement, so the many expenses a child brings can make it tough to afford enough food. In any situation, children are often shielded from food insecurity by the adults in their home. Seniors like Wanda ensure the children they are raising have enough to eat — sometimes at the expense of their own dietary needs as they stretch already-limited financial resources.



Some grandparents raising grandkids don’t qualify for government support, even though they’re spending income differently than their peers. This is true for Wanda, so she attends Feeding America West Michigan Mobile Pantries near her home in Lake County every month. At these food distributions, she receives plenty of fresh produce and other food.

“We don’t get any help raising him, and that makes things really tight for us,” Wanda said. “So every little bit helps.”

Vegetables are her great-grandson’s favorite. “He’ll eat any vegetable there is!” she said.

In addition to attending Mobile Pantries, Wanda also gardens and cans to help feed her family. One of her favorite hobbies is researching her ancestry and taking photos of local graves to share with long-distance relatives. Even her great-grandson helps find the right graves when she takes him to the graveyard!

Seniors face a wide range of challenges, whether they’re raising a grandchild or not. The food bank is honored to support Wanda as she does all she can to ensure her great-grandson has the food he needs to thrive.



# FARMER SHARES ORCHARD’S SURPLUS WITH NEIGHBORS IN NEED

Jim Raak grew up harvesting pine trees on his family’s farm near Fennville. As an adult, farming was the natural career choice for him, and he worked alongside his father as their farm took on many iterations. Over the years, he’s grown pine trees, corn, beans and pears, but today Dutchman Orchards’ 300 acres are dedicated mainly to peach, cherry and apple trees. Jim also owns a retail store — Dutch Farm Market — that offers produce from both his farm and other local farms. Shoppers can also pick from the fruit trees themselves.

Like any farmer, Jim has good years and bad. Last fall, he had only a fourth of an apple crop due to environmental factors outside his control. In contrast, he had a great peach crop during the summer. When it got really hot, a lot of the peaches ripened far quicker than they could sell, so Jim called the Food Bank Council of Michigan to donate the extra.



The Food Bank Council of Michigan helps the seven food banks in Michigan — including Feeding America West Michigan — access fresh, surplus produce and distribute it to neighbors in need. Because the orchard is in our service area, we get first dibs on accepting donations. But a benefit of the Food Bank Council is that if our food bank can’t use a donation that’s offered (e.g. we have similar product already and accepting more would mean wasting some),

we can pass knowing the donation will be offered to another food bank. Our staff also works with the Food Bank Council to find specific foods we need.

Ever since Jim’s father heard of donating to food banks in the early 2000s, the farm has donated surplus — but still tasty — produce to Michigan food banks.

Jim is glad the produce he can’t sell still ends up on the plates of Michiganders who will enjoy it.

“Growers like growing. They hate throwing things away when they can go to good use,” he said. “It’s just a good feeling knowing you can help somebody out that’s hungry.”





# Filling the SNAP gap for seniors and older adults

When Judith had a stroke three years ago, she couldn't talk for six months and was ultimately forced to quit her real estate job. She was disappointed because, although she was already well into her 70s, she'd planned to work for a few more years.

To help make ends meet, Judith attends Mobile Food Pantries, where she loves receiving fresh produce and other food. However, it wasn't an easy decision for her to attend at first.

Ever since Judith got divorced at a young age and had to care for her three daughters on her own, she has been very independent.

"My husband left with his girlfriend. I worked two or three times a day to take care of my kids," she said.

From learning to paint her home to changing the oil in her car, she's never been afraid to learn something new and do it herself. Since her stroke, a lot of that has changed. Needing help — whether that's with a household repair or getting enough food — has been challenging for her to accept at times.

"It's embarrassing for people [to ask for help] and I understand that," she said.

Like Judith, many seniors who have led long, independent lives feel unsure whether to ask for help — even as their fridges and cupboards empty. According to Feeding America, only half of eligible seniors are enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), perhaps due to barriers related to mobility, technology or



stigma around receiving federal assistance. Other seniors are not eligible for SNAP benefits at all, even as they struggle to pay for medical bills or other expenses on a fixed income. Many of these neighbors rely on (or perhaps feel more comfortable attending) communal senior meal sites and traditional or Mobile Food Pantries, where camaraderie — even if just a quick talk with a volunteer — is included on the menu.

James and Susan are older adults among those ineligible for SNAP. They began attending Mobile Pantries last year after James injured his shoulder and was propelled into early and unexpected retirement. Despite these challenges, James did not receive unemployment benefits and went without a paycheck for 20 weeks. This made it difficult for the couple to put food on the table and forced them to deplete their savings.

Today, James receives disability income, which helps a bit. But the couple also relies on food pantries, in addition to a small garden, to fill the gaps on their plates.

James loves cooking and particularly appreciates receiving vegetables. "When I get vegetables, it's soup time!" he said.

Feeding America West Michigan partners with organizations across our 40 counties that make it a priority to serve seniors and older adults like Judith, James and Susan. No matter the reason they cannot make ends meet, all neighbors should have access to enough food for a healthy, active life.



# Gerry Syrba marks 27 years volunteering at the food bank

This year marks Gerry's 27th year fighting hunger at Feeding America West Michigan! As one of our most longstanding volunteers, Gerry has given countless hours of his time to help nourish our neighbors at risk of hunger.

Every Thursday, Gerry arrives at the food bank around 8:30 in the morning to volunteer in the reclamation center with his friends.

Volunteers handle a wide range of projects in the reclamation center, from bagging bulk produce or cereal into family-sized portions to repacking Pop-Tarts and packing nonperishable food boxes — the project Gerry most often takes on.

"I love coming here. We look forward to it. My friends, they've been coming quite a few years. All of us are single. We've lost husbands and wives. This is our social gathering."

An article in the *Grand Rapids Press* spotlighting the food bank — then known as Second Harvest Gleaners Food Bank of West Michigan — is what first drew him to volunteer.

"After I retired, I wanted something to do. I thought 'that sounds good' so I came for an interview and they put me to work right away."

Since that first experience, he's rarely missed his weekly volunteer shift. When asked about his experience, he spoke highly of the reclamation staff and the organization at large. He hopes to stick around for a while!

"I really believe in this. I really do," he said.



## Volunteers across our service area help out their neighbors

