



Household Food Access in Rhode Island: Findings from the Rhode Island Voices Panel

Summary

Rhode Island is confronting record-high food insecurity. As of 2024, 38% of Rhode Island households surveyed in the 2024 RI Life Index reported some level of household food insecurity. In a recent survey of 507 members of the *Rhode Island Voices* panel, 28% reported high household food insecurity and 16% reported very high household food insecurity. Nearly two-thirds of participants feel that hunger in this state is a crisis or a big problem. Panel members indicated how rising grocery prices have changed how they shop for food, whether they have had to make choices between paying for food or paying for other expenses, and how confident they feel that they could find the support they would need if they needed help accessing food.

Key Findings

- 20% say that hunger in this state is a crisis; 41% feel that hunger is a big problem but not a crisis
- 44% experienced household food insecurity in the last 12 months
 - 28% experienced high household food insecurity
 - 16% experienced very high household food insecurity
- When asked how increasing grocery prices have changed how they shop for food:
 - 60% spend more money
 - 57% buy cheaper brands
 - 50% buy cheaper alternative items
 - 50% buy less food
 - 33% shop more at discount stores
 - 31% shop less often
 - 28% buy fewer fresh fruits and vegetables
 - 27% buy less healthy foods
- Some have had to make choices between paying for food or paying for other expenses:
 - Utilities: 22%
 - Housing: 20%
 - Transportation: 18%
 - Prescription medicines: 13%
 - Medical care: 10%
- 17% feel not too confident or not at all confident that they could find the support they would need if they needed help accessing food
- 35% buy their food at stores outside of their community most or all of the time

- The top reasons cited for not buying food in their community include:
 - High prices: 65%
 - Lack of variety of food: 31%
 - Poor quality or lack of freshness of food: 25%
 - No food stores in the community: 19%
- 14% feel it is hard or very hard to get to places where they purchase or receive food

Methods

Adult residents of Rhode Island aged 18 and older were recruited to join the *Rhode Island Voices* panel beginning on July 12, 2024. Eligible individuals were asked to complete an enrollment survey that included information about their household, employment status, gender identity, and other demographic characteristics. By design, data collection was ongoing until at least 500 surveys were received. A total of 507 of 627 (80.9%) panel members enrolled as of April 5, 2025, completed the survey.

The analytic sample of 507 respondents was weighted to align with the demographic distribution of the Rhode Island population using iterative proportional fitting (raking) based on age, gender, educational attainment, race/ethnicity, and geographic location, using Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs), with benchmarks derived from the 2019-2023 American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates.

In the appendix, we provide basic frequency tabulations, overall and by residence in a core city vs. non-core area for each survey item fielded to *Rhode Island Voices* panel members who had enrolled by April 5, 2025. All survey estimates have been weighted to be representative of Rhode Island residents aged 18 and older.

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APPENDIX

Survey Frequencies Overall and by Residence in a Core City or Non-Core Area

Note: All numbers are percentages unless otherwise noted.

	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core Area (N=296)
1. Would you say that hunger in Rhode Island is:			
A crisis	19.7	28.8	15.6
A big problem, but not a crisis	41.5	30.9	46.3
A problem	28.9	30.1	28.3
Not a problem	9.9	10.2	9.8

	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core Area (N=296)
2. How often do you buy your food at stores <u>in your community</u> ?			
None of the time	3.9	8.0	2.0
Some of the time	22.1	32.7	17.3
Most of the time	35.0	30.3	37.1
All of the time	39.0	29.0	43.5

	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core Area (N=296)
3. Why do you not buy your food at stores in your community?			
No food stores in the community	19.4	24.6	13.6
Lack of variety of the food	30.6	33.8	27.1
Poor quality or lack of freshness of food	25.0	24.6	25.4
There is not food that you like	8.1	12.3	3.4
There is no food that meets dietary needs	7.3	10.8	3.4
Poor customer service	4.0	7.7	0.0
High prices	65.3	61.5	69.5
Safety concerns	7.3	10.8	3.4
Stores are hard to get to	8.1	13.8	1.7
Stores don't accept SNAP or other food assistance programs	4.8	7.7	1.7
Another reason	18.5	15.4	22.0

NOTE: Respondents were instructed to select all that apply. Only respondents who indicated they bought food at stores in their community "none of the time" or "some of the time" saw this question (n=114).

	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core Area (N=296)
4. About how long does it take you to get to the place where you get most of your food?			
Less than 15 minutes	61.3	49.5	66.6
15-29 minutes	34.5	43.7	30.3
30 minutes or longer	4.2	6.8	3.1

5. In the last 12 months, from where have you <u>bought or received</u> food?	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core Area (N=296)
A supermarket or grocery store	97.7	94.6	99.1
A corner store, convenience store, bodega, or independent store	46.7	59.5	41.0
Food pantry, soup kitchen, or meal site	12.5	17.9	10.1
Donation from friends, family, social services agency, or other group	7.2	9.7	6.0
Farmers market	35.0	35.6	34.7
A community garden or urban farm	5.4	4.8	5.7
Restaurant	62.5	67.4	39.7
Some other way	7.5	4.9	8.7

NOTE: Respondents were instructed to select all that apply.

6. How do you most often get to the places where you get your food?	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core Area (N=296)
Walk	14.2	33.0	5.7
Drive myself	82.7	59.9	92.9
Take the bus	8.3	25.3	0.6
Ride a bike	3.2	3.8	2.9
Uber/Lyft/Taxi	2.7	7.8	0.4
Get a ride with a friend, relative, or neighbor	22.8	41.4	14.4
Have food delivered	18.1	22.4	16.1
Some other way	0.7	0.1	1.0

7. How easy or hard is it for you to get to places where you purchase or receive food?	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core Area (N=296)
Very hard	2.9	6.0	1.5
Hard	10.7	19.3	6.8
Easy	40.2	47.4	36.9
Very easy	46.1	27.2	54.7

NOTE: Columns may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

8. How have increasing grocery prices changed how you shop for food?	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core Area (N=296)
Spend more money	60.0	55.3	62.1
Buy less food	49.6	52.7	48.2
Buy cheaper brands	57.1	54.6	58.2
Buy cheaper alternative items	49.9	47.3	55.7
Buy less healthy food items	27.1	31.8	25.1
Shop more at discount stores	32.6	38.3	30.1
Shop less often	30.8	28.5	31.9
Buy fewer fresh fruits and vegetables	27.7	26.0	28.4
Other	7.9	5.1	9.2
Hasn't changed how you shop for food	2.8	1.6	3.4

NOTE: Respondents were instructed to select all that apply, although the "Hasn't changed how you shop for food" response option was mutually exclusive.

9. In the past 7 days, on how many days did you eat:	Total (N=507)				Core City (N=211)				Non-Core Area (N=296)			
	0	1	2	3+	0	1	2	3+	0	1	2	3+
Food from a fast food restaurant?	53.4	23.1	12.9	10.6	40.8	23.6	21.4	14.2	59.0	22.9	9.1	9.0
Food from a food pantry, meal program, or soup kitchen?	82.7	5.2	2.0	10.0	73.0	6.5	3.3	17.2	86.9	4.6	1.5	7.0
Food delivered to you (for example, by Door Dash, Grubhub, or Uber Eats)?	83.4	10.0	3.8	2.7	81.1	9.7	6.7	2.5	84.3	10.2	2.7	2.8

NOTE: Rows may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

10. Please tell us how important the following items are to you when thinking about the food you eat on a typical day.	Total (N=507)				Core City (N=211)				Non-Core Area (N=296)			
	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Important	Very important	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Important	Very important	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Important	Very important
The food can be bought in places close to where you live or work	6.9	21.7	33.3	38.1	5.9	20.8	44.1	29.2	7.4	22.0	28.5	42.1
The food takes no time to prepare.	29.0	41.7	23.6	5.7	32.2	34.3	25.7	7.7	27.5	45.0	22.7	4.8
The food is easy to prepare.	12.1	42.3	36.2	9.4	17.7	26.0	43.5	12.8	9.5	49.7	32.9	7.9
The food meets the dietary needs of you or other people you live or stay with.	5.9	19.0	41.0	34.1	5.6	22.4	37.4	34.6	6.0	17.5	42.6	33.9
The food is affordable.	1.6	14.6	35.9	47.9	2.1	6.0	36.9	55.1	1.4	18.4	35.4	44.7
The food is easily available.	3.4	19.3	43.2	34.1	5.1	11.8	42.8	40.3	2.7	22.7	43.4	31.3

NOTE: Rows may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

11. The food that I/we bought just didn't last, and I/we didn't have money to get more.	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core City (N=296)
Often true	14.6	24.6	10.1
Sometimes true	32.0	28.3	33.6
Never true	53.4	47.1	56.3

12. I/we couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core City (N=296)
Often true	19.8	30.8	14.9
Sometimes true	27.3	28.4	26.9
Never true	52.8	40.8	58.2

NOTE: Columns may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

13. In the last 12 months, did you/anyone in your household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core City (N=296)
Yes	25.8	44.9	16.8
No	74.2	55.1	83.2

14. How often did this happen?	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core City (N=296)
Almost every month	50.3	59.0	39.8
Some months but not every month	21.4	25.5	16.4
Only 1 or 2 months	28.4	15.5	43.8

NOTE: Only respondents who indicated they or anyone in their household ever cut the size of their meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food saw this question (n=107).

15. In the last 12 months, did you/anyone in your household eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food?	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core Area (N=296)
Yes	29.0	41.0	23.3
No	71.0	59.0	76.7

16. In the last 12 months, were you/anyone in your household ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food?	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core Area (N=296)
Yes	19.5	32.7	13.5
No	80.5	67.3	86.5

17. Level of household food insecurity (summary measure)	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core City (N=296)
Very high household food insecurity	16.1	32.8	8.4
High household food insecurity	27.8	20.6	31.0
Low or marginal food insecurity	56.2	46.5	60.6

18. In the past 12 months, have you/anyone in your household had to choose between paying for food or paying for any of the following expenses?	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core Area (N=296)
Percentage responding "yes"			
Prescription medicines	13.0	28.2	6.2
Medical care	9.7	13.3	8.1
Utilities	22.4	25.6	20.9
Transportation	18.4	26.9	14.6
Housing	19.9	34.7	13.4

19. Does your household currently receive SNAP benefits or food stamp benefits with a SNAP card or EBT card?	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core Area (N=296)
Yes	20.0	36.4	12.4
No	80.0	63.6	87.6

20. If you needed help accessing food, how confident are you that you could find the support you needed?	Total (N=507)	Core City (N=211)	Non-Core Area (N=296)
Not at all confident	7.2	7.6	7.0
Not too confident	10.1	17.3	6.9
Somewhat confident	51.8	51.9	51.8
Very confident	30.9	23.2	34.4

NOTE: Columns may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

21. In your opinion, what do you think Rhode Island is doing well with regard to access to affordable, healthy food?

Coded responses	Count
Food Bank/pantries	112
Farmers markets	61
SNAP at farmers markets	40
SNAP	39
Grocery store number or variety	25
Eat Well Be Well	15
Community gardens	10
Food accessible by public transportation	7
Meals on Wheels	7
School meal programs	7
WIC	5

22. In your opinion, what is the biggest problem in Rhode Island with regard to access to affordable, healthy food?

Coded responses	Count
Affordability	170
Access	108
Transportation	66
Affordable housing	33
Outreach and education	29
Cost of living	28
Wages	19
Low quality items	12
Lack of time	9
Stigma	<5