



# Food Assistance And Hunger In The Heartland

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ST. LOUIS - People across the bi-state region using food pantries made difficult trade-offs to feed their families in mid-2021. A new report from the University of Missouri found that in the 26 counties served by the St. Louis Area Foodbank, 53% of food pantry clients had to choose between paying for food or utilities last year, while 40% had to decide between paying for food or medicine/medical care and 42% had to choose between purchasing food or paying for housing.

That's according to Food Assistance & Hunger in the Heartland 2021 which was conducted by the [MU Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security](#) to better understand the characteristics of food pantries and circumstances of those neighbors who rely on food pantries. "It is important to remind ourselves that food insecurity doesn't happen in a vacuum," said Bill McKelvey, co-author and project coordinator with the center. "People may also struggle to afford other essentials like housing, transportation and medical care."

"This report illustrates the critical role food banks and pantries play in supplying food to struggling families," said Scott Baker, state director for Feeding Missouri. "In 2021, our

network reached an estimated 653,000 people through food pantries alone. Additional people were reached through meal sites and other types of feeding programs.”

The local statistics also illustrate the dire situation. In the bi-state region served by the St. Louis Area Foodbank, 74% of households that used food pantries in 2021 experienced food insecurity. To cope with their circumstances, 53% purchased the least expensive food, 41% consumed food past its expiration date, and 35% purchased food in dented or damaged packages.

While the impact of the pandemic as illustrated in this report is staggering, today’s economic climate has made an already challenging situation even more of a crisis. In 2022, the St. Louis Area Foodbank has seen an increase in the amount of food they are distributing every month, surpassing the need seen at the onset of the pandemic. Many of those seeking food assistance today are doing so for the first time in an effort to reduce their out-of-pocket food costs so that they can meet other financial needs such as health care, housing, and utilities.

This important study illustrates the immense need that existed in 2021. Fast forward to today, and we are seeing a need that continues to grow. What we have learned has challenged us to expand our work to create resources focused on addressing the root causes of hunger. We believe that providing a pathway to nutritional security for our neighbors will help to provide them with the healthy, full life that each of us deserves.” shared Meredith Knopp, President and CEO of the St. Louis Area Foodbank.

To learn more about St. Louis Area Foodbank and ways that you can get involved, please visit: [www.stlfoodbank.org](http://www.stlfoodbank.org).

**ABOUT THE STUDY:** The report was prepared for [Feeding Missouri](#) and includes results obtained from [six regional food banks](#) — Second Harvest Community Food Bank, St. Louis Area Foodbank, Harvesters – The Community Food Network, Southeast Missouri Food Bank, The Food Bank for Central & Northeast Missouri and Ozarks Food Harvest — which collectively distribute more than 120 million pounds of food each year. This was the first time these food banks have partnered to gather quantitative data about the statewide impacts of hunger.

The research team at the Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security — which included multiple faculty, staff and students — was chosen to conduct this study because of members’ considerable experience in the development and implementation of survey research, including several projects focusing on food pantry guests in central and

northeast Missouri. The study involved an online and telephone survey of 344 food pantry directors and in-person interviews with 3,377 food pantry participants conducted on-site at food pantries.

Data collection for the study was completed during the spring and summer of 2021, a time when active COVID-19 cases had recently peaked in the coverage area. 66% percent of pantries reported serving more guests in 2021 compared to 2020 and 83% changed the way they distributed food, such as changing to a drive-thru distribution.

The study also shows a gap between Missourians who are eligible for safety net programs and those who participate. For example, approximately 77% of households surveyed have incomes that make them eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), but only 41% participated in SNAP in the previous year.

Food Assistance & Hunger in the Heartland 2021: State Report for Missouri is part of a larger study that included Missouri, Kansas, and parts of western Illinois. For more information, visit [foodsecurity.missouri.edu](https://foodsecurity.missouri.edu).

Research at the Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security — which is housed in the [Division of Applied Social Sciences](#) and part of the [College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources](#) — is used to inform policy makers, researchers, government agencies and a variety of local, regional and statewide non-profits. Other projects include the [Missouri Hunger Atlas](#) and the center's partnership with MU Extension to host the [Community Food Network](#), a resource for local and regional food systems stakeholders working on community-based initiatives.