

Food insecurity has worsened for the elderly and women living alone

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Today, the USDA released the [Household Food Security in the United States in 2021](#) detailing the level of food insecurity at the national level in 2021 indicating that the level of food insecurity, 10.2%, is unchanged

from the level in 2020 (10.5%). But according to the report, different groups of households fared very differently. Households with children experienced significant declines in food insecurity over 2021, but women living alone and elderly living alone experienced significant increases in food insecurity.

Colleen Heflin, Syracuse University professor and a national expert on food insecurity, nutrition and welfare policy, and the well-being of vulnerable populations, addresses this disparity.

"It is likely that rising [food prices](#) are hitting older adults on fixed incomes hard, resulting in increased levels of food insecurity. Unfortunately, [negative health effects](#) are likely not far behind. More needs to be done to protect older Americans in the months ahead," said Heflin.

Recent research by Heflin and colleagues, published in *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, suggests that [cognitive decline](#) may pose a barrier to SNAP participation for older adults, particularly for older adults living alone and female older adults due to the complexity of the application process.

[Other research](#) by Heflin and colleagues indicates that 1 in 4 older adults experiences a break in their SNAP benefits, termed administrative churn, in which older adults have access to fewer resources to support food consumption. [In other work](#), Heflin and colleagues found evidence that [older adults](#) on SNAP with diabetes and hypertension, two illnesses that require regular treatment to maintain adequate control, were making trade-offs between food and medicine, sometimes called the "eat or treat" problem.

However, households with children experienced significant declines in food insecurity during 2021, likely as a result of the Child Tax Credit.

This decrease in food insecurity occurred across a variety of household types with children including married and single mother households and those with young child. This is important because the risk of food insecurity is highest during childhood and a host of studies have shown the [negative consequences](#) associated with exposure to food insecurity in terms of physical health, [mental health](#), [cognitive development](#), and behavioral outcomes, according to Heflin.

In addition, other groups that are often left behind when food insecurity declines saw significant improvements in 2021, including households headed by Black individuals, low-income households and those in the South.

Heflin is the chair and professor of public administration and international affairs and associate dean of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. She is also a faculty affiliate at the Center for Policy Research and the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion. As a research and policy scholar for nearly twenty years, Heflin is regarded as a national expert on food insecurity, nutrition and welfare policy, and the well-being of vulnerable populations. Heflin's research has helped document the causes and consequences of [food insecurity](#), identify the barriers and consequences of participation in nutrition programs, and understand the changing role of the public safety net in the lives of low-income Americans.

More information: Dongmei Zuo et al, Cognitive Impairment and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Take-up Among the Eligible Older Americans, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* (2022). [DOI: 10.1093/geronb/gbac111](https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbac111)

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