



Permanent Commission RACIAL, INDIGENOUS & TRIBAL POPULATIONS

Testimony Regarding LD 2004

An Act to Enhance Support of Local Nutrition Incentive Programs by Modifying the Eligibility Requirements of the Fund to Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives

Presented to the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

January 7, 2026

Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Sam Zuckerman. I am the Policy Coordinator of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations. I am submitting this testimony neither for nor against LD 2004, “An Act to Enhance Support of Local Nutrition Incentive Programs by Modifying the Eligibility Requirements of the Fund to Address Food Insecurity and Provide Nutrition Incentives.”

The Permanent Commission’s Policy Committee broadly supports legislation that addresses food insecurity. However, because this bill is precisely targeted, I am here to provide more general information about how food insecurity disproportionately impacts the communities that the Permanent Commission’s legislative mandate directs our attention to when advising the Legislature.ⁱ

“Food provides physical sustenance, cultural connection and identity, and opportunities for families and communities to come together.”ⁱⁱ Mainers know that access to food is essential for all of us to thrive, which is why we have the right to food enshrined in our state constitution.ⁱⁱⁱ

Food insecurity impacts people from all cultures and backgrounds in the United States, with 12.8% of households across the country reporting an inability to meet their own food needs at some point during 2022.^{iv} However, racial minorities experience twice the rate of food insecurity when compared with white households.^v Rates of food insecurity among children also show similar rates of racial disparity.^{vi} The causes of these disparities are numerous and complex, but include lack of access to land,^{vii} food deserts resulting from red-lining and exclusionary zoning,^{viii} barriers to reliable and efficient transportation,^{ix} and difficulty accessing assistance programs.^x And children are uniquely vulnerable to food insecurity and more frequently impacted by it than adults are – in 2022, one in eight people in Maine experience food insecurity but one in five children in Maine are impacted

by it.^{xi} Experiencing hunger as a child can also have lifelong impacts, as it hampers the development of language and motor skills and impacts concentration and behavior, which can then lead to learning challenges.^{xii}

In Maine specifically, the rate of food insecurity in households of color is 28% and in Black households is 40%, while the rate for white households is 13%.^{xiii} Food insecurity among migrant farmworkers in Maine ranges from 37% to 64% based on national studies.^{xiv} And our Wabanaki neighbors face further, unique barriers to food security. Colonization, land theft, exploitation, and displacement all contributed to the current food insecurity faced by tribal communities.^{xv} And the ongoing failure of the Maine state government to acknowledge tribal sovereignty limits Indigenous access to traditional food and is a primary driver of poverty in Wabanaki communities,^{xvi} which in turn directly contributes to food insecurity.

Any expansion of access to nutrition assistance programs will help keep Maine's marginalized and vulnerable communities fed and healthy, but tackling the underlying problems that make people vulnerable in the first place will be necessary to tackle our larger food security problems. If you would like further information about racial disparities in Maine, our office has a number of reports on our website, including our State of Racial Disparities report.^{xvii} Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions.

ⁱ MRSA Title 5, Chapter 631, Section 25007;

<https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/5/title5sec25007.html>

ⁱⁱ Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Tribal Populations. (2024). *The State of Racial Disparities*. Page 19. https://www.pcritp.me/sites/pcritp.me/files/inline-files/State_of_Disparities.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Me. H.R. Reg. Sess. (2021) Resolution Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of Maine To Establish a Right to Food. <https://legislature.maine.gov/legis/bills/getPDF.asp?paper=HP0061&item=1&snum=130>

^{iv} Rabbitt, M.P., Hales, L.J., Burke, M.P., & Coleman-Jensen, A. (2023). *Household food security in the United States in 2022*. US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=107702>

^v Hall, L. (2023, October 26). Food Insecurity Increased in 2022, With Severe Impact on Households With Children and Ongoing Racial Inequities. *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*.

<https://www.cbpp.org/blog/food-insecurity-increased-in-2022-with-severe-impact-on-households-with-children-and-ongoing>

^{vi} See note 2.

^{vii} Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous and Tribal Populations. (2022). *Land access for Indigenous and African American farmers in Maine*.

https://www.pcritp.me/sites/pcritp.me/default/files/inline-files/LD%20870%20Report%20to%20Legislature_PCRITP%20%284%29.pdf

^{viii} Washington, K. (2016). My life from the projects to the farm. In Godfrey, P., & Torres, D. (Eds.). *Emergent Possibilities for Global Sustainability*. (pp. 178-183). Routledge; Gross, R., Edmunds, M., & Schwartz, P. (2021). *Food Security: A community driver of health*. American Public Health Association, AcademyHealth, and Kaiser Permanente.

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^x Feeding America. (2022, July 20). *New Study from Feeding America Shows Extensive Disparities in Food Insecurity at the County Level* [Press Release]. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/about-us/press->

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^{xi} Feeding America. (n.d.). Maine. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/maine>

^{xii} National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities. (2024). Food accessibility, insecurity and health outcomes. <https://www.nimhd.nih.gov/resources/understanding-health-disparities/food-accessibility-insecurity-and-health-outcomes.html>; Gross, R., Edmunds, M., & Schwartz, P. (2021). Food Security: *A community driver of health*. American Public Health Association, AcademyHealth, and Kaiser Permanente. https://www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/pubs/food_security_health_community_driver.ashx

^{xiii} Graham, G. (2021, March 28). Pandemic reveals race disparities around hunger in Maine. *Portland Press Herald*. <https://www.pressherald.com/2021/03/28/pandemic-reveals-race-disparities-around-hunger-in-maine/>; Myall, J. (2019). Issue Brief: *Food Insecurity in Maine*. Maine Center for Economic Policy. <https://www.mcep.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/MECEP-Hunger-Issue-Brief-2019.pdf>.

^{xiv} Mora, A. M., et al. (2022). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on California farmworkers' mental health and food security. *Journal of Agromedicine*. 27(3). 303-314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1059924X.2022.2058664>; Borre, K., Ertle, L. and Graff, M. (2010). Working to eat: Vulnerability, food insecurity, and obesity among migrant and seasonal farmworker families. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*. 53. 443-462.

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^{xvi} Kalt, J.P., Medford, A.B., & Taylor, J.B. (2022). *Economic and Social Impacts of Restrictions on the Applicability of Federal Indian Policies to the Wabanaki Nations in Maine*. The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development.

^{xvii} <https://pcritp.me/resources>

Food Security

Access to healthy, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods is at the center of all human well-being. Food provides physical sustenance, cultural connection and identity, and opportunities for us as families and communities to come together. Food connects us to the land, water, and animals around us and is vital not only on an individual level, but to our state's economy and cultural identity as well. As Mainers, we know that all people regardless of age, race, or national origin deserve to have access to the food that sustains them, which is why in 2021, Mainers resoundingly passed an amendment to our state constitution noting our "natural, inherent and unalienable right" to "grow, raise, harvest, produce and consume food of [our] own choosing."²⁰⁷ However, we also know that inequalities in our food system persist despite these shared values. Today, more than one in eight Mainers face insufficient food access, with Black, Latino, and Indigenous people the most significantly impacted. Understanding the drivers of these disparities and creating structural changes to address them is vital to improving the health and well-being of all people in our state.

Disparities in Food Access

Food insecurity is a prevalent issue across the U.S., with 12.8% of households reporting inability to meet their food needs at some point during 2022.²⁰⁸ When disaggregated by race, however, those numbers show that disparities in food access are significant, with racial minorities experiencing twice the rate of food insecurity compared with white households.²⁰⁹ Lack of access to healthy and nutritious food has serious chronic health impacts, including obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and mental health disorders (see more in [Health & Healthcare](#)). In children, food insecurity also hampers language and motor skills development and hurts school performance, leading to challenges with concentration and behavioral issues associated with hunger.^{210, 211} Rates of childhood food insecurity are similarly high across the United States, and showcase similar levels of racial disparity²¹² (see Figure 15).

The source of racial disparities in food security are complex and linked to other areas of systemic inequality. At its deepest level, access to food is tied deeply to access to land. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the number of Black farmers in the US has declined by 98%,²¹³

driven in large part by exclusionary USDA policies that prevented Black farmers from accessing critical loans and social programs that would have allowed them to stay on their land.²¹⁴ These policies had an impact in Maine as well; today, 95% of white farmers own the land that they farm, compared with only 11% of Black farmers.²¹⁵ While new federal and state programs have emerged to extend support to Black and other minority farmers, distrust of government programs continues to shape who voluntarily accesses these opportunities.

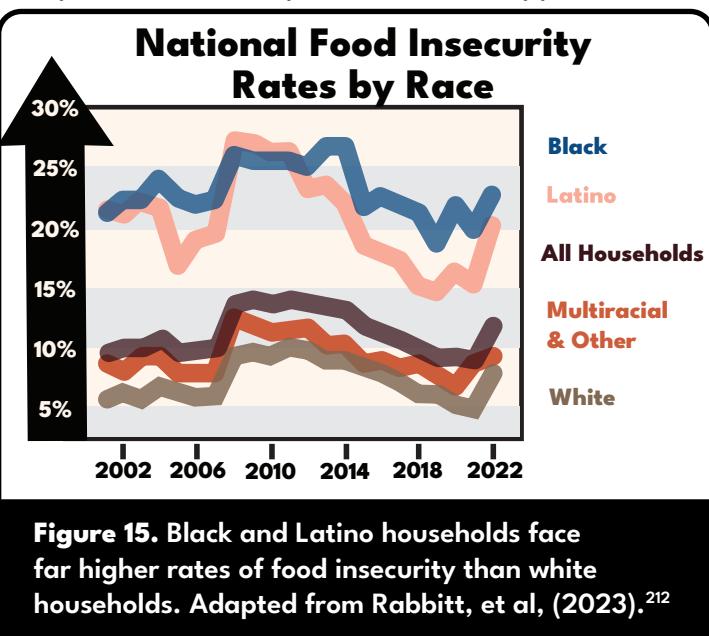


Figure 15. Black and Latino households face far higher rates of food insecurity than white households. Adapted from Rabbitt, et al, (2023).²¹²

Farmland, however, is not the only factor driving disparities in food access today. Through a process of what food activist Karen Washington describes as "food apartheid," historic government policies and programs like red-lining and exclusionary zoning have created segregated access to food in the US.²¹⁶ Today, communities of color in low-income census tracts have up to 50% fewer supermarkets than in wealthier communities,²¹⁷ and even fewer have access to *culturally-appropriate foods* that support community flourishing.

Limited public transit options and higher costs to car ownership for people of color, make it even more difficult for marginalized communities to access affordable, healthy food (see more in [Transportation](#)). And for individuals working multiple jobs or long hours to support their families — which disproportionately includes people of color — time cost can be significant as well (see more in [Employment & Workers](#)). In addition, social programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and WIC (Women, Infants, and Children Program) exist to help very low-income households with food costs,

but research suggests that as many as one-third of food-insecure households²¹⁸ do not qualify based on the income, resource, work, and citizenship requirements.²¹⁹ Rising food costs across the country have created significant barriers in access to healthy foods for all people, but the consistent rate of disparity in access illustrates that this issue has structural causes as well.²²⁰

Food Insecurity in Maine

In Maine, which had the highest average rate of food insecurity in New England in recent years,²²¹ one in eight people and one in five children faced hunger in 2022.²²² Similarly to national trends, rates of food insecurity are disproportionately high in racial and ethnic minority populations. The rate of food insecurity in households of color in Maine is 28%, and in Black households is 40%,²²³ both multiple times the rate of food insecurity in white households (13%).²²⁴ These rates of food insecurity are particularly high among Maine's migrant farmworker populations, where national studies suggest food insecurity ranges from 37% to 64%.^{225, 226, 227} Exclusion from minimum wage laws, inability to negotiate for better working conditions, rural geography, and temporary work authorizations that limit access to federal programs all contribute to the lack of food security in these communities^{228, 229} (see more in [Employment & Workers](#)).

Wabanaki people face additional, unique barriers to food security. Centuries of colonial land theft and exploitation displaced Wabanaki people from the land, decimated Maine's rivers, forests, and natural environment, and destroyed traditional Indigenous practices, contributing to contemporary food insecurity.²³⁰ Damming along Maine's rivers decimated native fish populations, and PFAS and other chemical contamination in Maine's rivers and farmlands continues to limit Wabanaki food access²³¹ (see more in [Environmental Justice](#)). The state government's continued refusal to acknowledge tribal sovereignty also limits Indigenous access to traditional food and is a primary driver of poverty in Wabanaki communities²³² (see more in [Wabanaki Self-Determination](#)). While community supported programs and state food subsidies are vital to protecting those most vulnerable, tackling the root causes of the food crisis is imperative to helping Maine communities thrive.

QUICK FACTS:

12.8% of households in the US and about 12.5% of households in Maine faced hunger in 2022.

Communities of color in low-income areas have 50% fewer grocery stores than wealthy neighborhoods.

Up to one third of households do not qualify for federal assistance with food costs.

In Maine, the rate of hunger in Black households is 40% compared to 13% in white households.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT & THEORY

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NATIONAL-LEVEL DATA SOURCES

[USDA Report: Household Food Security in the United States in 2022](#)
[Feeding America: Map the Meal Gap 2024](#)

[Food Insecurity Increased in 2022, with Severe Impact on Households with Children and Ongoing Racial Inequities](#)

[National Institutes of Health: Food Accessibility, Insecurity and Health Outcomes](#)

MAINE-SPECIFIC DATA SOURCES

[Feeding America: Maine Facts](#)
[Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: Maine State SNAP Fact Sheet](#)
[Maines' Roadmap to End Hunger](#)
[USDA Maine Fact Sheet](#)

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