



Permanent Commission RACIAL, INDIGENOUS & TRIBAL POPULATIONS

Testimony in Support of LD 2051

An Act to Ensure Access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Maine Presented to the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

January 14, 2026

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services, 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 here today to testify in support of LD 2051, “An Act to Ensure Access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in Maine.”

The Permanent Commission’s Policy Committee broadly supports legislation aimed at addressing food insecurity in Maine. Access to healthy, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food is at the center of all human wellbeing and all food insecurity is cause for concern, but patterns of food insecurity fall unevenly across our communities, with notable disparities among racial groups. This has many causes, including a lack of accessible food retailers,¹ lack of access to land for farming and cultivation,² and wealth and income inequality.³ These challenges are compounded for racial minorities who are also new Mainers or those seeking asylum, who face additional challenges to accessing state benefits and securing reliable forms of income. This bill would ensure that new Mainers that have been eligible to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits in the past do not have to worry about food security as they navigate our complex immigration system.

¹ Larson, N. I., Story, M. T., & Nelson, M. C. (2009). Neighborhood environments: disparities in access to healthy foods in the US. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 36(1), 74-81.

² Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations. 2022. Land Access for Indigenous and African American Farmers in Maine.

³ Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations. 2024. State of Racial Disparities Report.

Food insecurity impacts both long-time and new Mainers, with 1 in 8 people and 1 in 5 children facing hunger in Maine in 2022.⁴ But new Mainers are especially vulnerable to food insecurity. MaineHealth reported in 2025 that, based on intake screenings, 7% of English-speaking patients had faced food insecurity, while 20% of non-English speaking patients had.⁵ And a study of food insecurity disparities among immigrants found that noncitizens are 1.28 times more likely to face food insecurity than citizens born in the United States.⁶ This disparity between immigrants and citizens all but disappeared when immigrants had access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.⁷ This tells us that SNAP benefits are working to keep people fed and to prevent further downstream health challenges that result from lack of access to healthy foods.⁸ When everyone is fed, we all benefit because people are able to bring their full attention and energy to their jobs, their families, and their communities.

Thank you for your time and attention. I urge you to vote in support of this bill. I would be happy to answer any questions.

⁴ Feeding America. (n.d.). Maine. <https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/maine>

⁵ Data from the MaineHealth Inpatient Food Security Questionnaire, Jan-Dec 2025.

⁶ Sharareh, Nasser et. al. (2023). *Food Insecurity Disparities Among Immigrants in the U.S.* AJPM Focus. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2773065423000500>

⁷ See note 3.

⁸ Brown, Karen. (2025). *In the U.S., Hunger is Often Hidden. But it Can Still Leave Scars on Body and Mind.* National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/sections/shots-health-news/2026/01/05/nx-s1-5655254/hidden-hunger-food-insecurity-us-brain-development-psychological-scars-shame>

Food Security

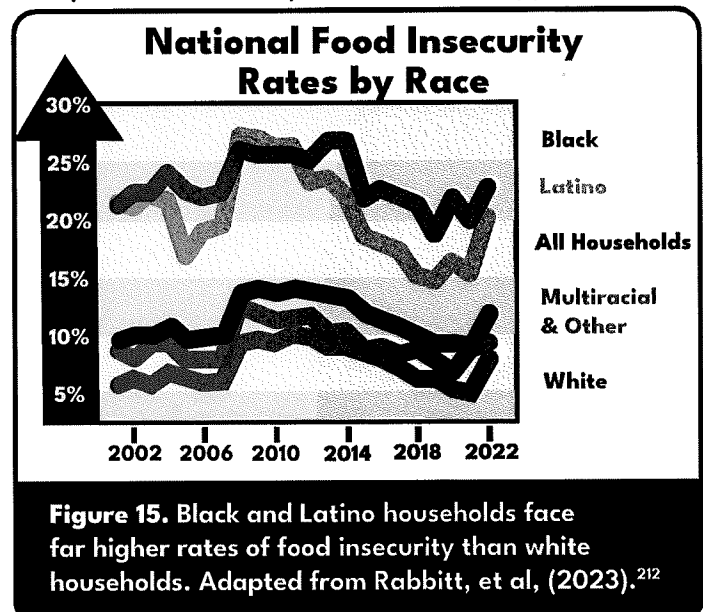
Access to healthy, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods is at the center of all human well-being. Food provides physical sustenance, cultural connection and identity, and opportunities for us as families and communities to come together. Food connects us to the land, water, and animals around 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.



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 12.1% of households in Maine faced hunger in 2022.

Communities of color in low-income areas have 10% lower grocery costs 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 10% 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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