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Hunger by the Numbers Among Older Americans: Hunger, Nutrition, and Health

Health and Aging

Life expectancy has been rising steadily in the United States. The average expected lifespan in 2001 was 76 years. In 2012 this increased to 79 years¹. This means there is a growing population of older Americans. One estimate puts the number of older Americans at 72 million by 2030—almost a fifth of the projected total population².

Issues of health and nutrition come to the forefront as the population ages. The leading causes of death among older Americans continue to be chronic conditions. Cancer and heart disease are among the leading causes³.

Healthy habits, such as eating nutritious food, help lessen the risk of developing chronic conditions. Nutrition plays a vital role in promoting personal health in the long term. Individuals following a healthy diet are less likely to develop chronic conditions as they age.

Getting enough nutrition is possible only when there is adequate access to healthy foods. Yet the number of older Americans experiencing food insecurity increased by 45 percent from 2001 until 2013⁴. More troubling is that this increase is projected to continue, increasing by 50 percent, as more and more baby boomers age⁵.



Rick Reinhard for Bread for the World

Food Insecurity

Almost 5 million older Americans are food-insecure, currently representing almost 10 percent of the older population⁶. Americans aged 60 to 69—baby boomers recently coming into retirement age—are the most food-insecure⁷. Those most at risk of food insecurity are older Americans whose income is below 100 percent

60% Food insecure seniors are 60% more likely to experience depression.

Source: FeedingAmerica.org

of the poverty threshold. This includes non-white older Americans, older Americans living in the South—especially Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas—and Washington, D.C.⁸

Older Americans experiencing food insecurity also have a narrower selection of food. They eat less, with diets lacking in key nutrients⁹. This shows up in the differences between the health of food-insecure and food-secure older Americans. The former report more cases of heart attacks, asthma,

In 2012, **9.3 million** older Americans faced the threat of hunger, representing 15.3% of all seniors.



Source: ncoa.org

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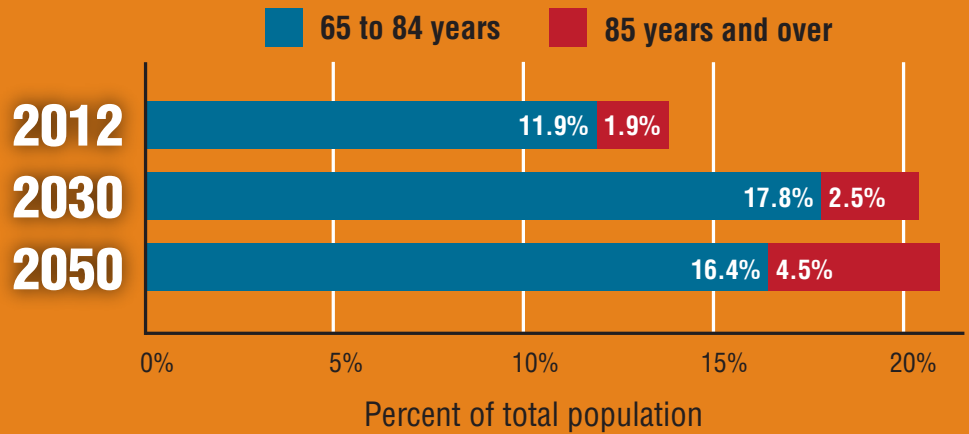
congestive heart failure, and coronary heart disease than their food-secure peers¹⁰.

Conclusion

Food security is still an issue as Americans age. Chronic health conditions arise from persistent food insecurity. Health and food insecurity are problems that go hand in hand for the older population. Programs like SNAP (formerly known as food stamps) allow the older population not only to eat, but also to eat healthier. However, 5.2 million older Americans who are otherwise eligible to receive SNAP benefits do not participate in the program¹¹, and this number is expected to increase as more of the adult population ages. Low participation

by older Americans in SNAP is attributed to feelings of stigma or of guilt, as well as to confusing application processes¹².

Percent of U.S. population that are 65 to 84 years and 85 years and over



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 Population Estimates.

Endnotes

¹ The World Bank. (2015). *Life expectancy at birth, total (years)*. Retrieved May 7, 2015, from the World Bank website: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN>

² The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2013. "The State of Aging & Health in America 2013." www.cdc.gov/aging/pdf/state-aging-health-in-america-2013.pdf

³ Ibid. 2.

⁴ National Foundation to End Senior Hunger. 2015. "The State of Senior Hunger in America 2013: An Annual Report." www.nfesh.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/State-of-Senior-Hunger-in-America-2013.pdf

⁵ Feeding America. (2015). *Senior Hunger Fact Sheet*. Retrieved May 7, 2015, from Feeding Hunger website: www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger/senior-hunger/senior-hunger-fact-sheet.html

⁶ Half in Ten. 2014. "Poverty and Opportunity Profile: Seniors." <http://halfintenn.org/ms-content/uploads/sites/12/2014/08/HiT-SeniorPoverty-profile.pdf>

⁷ Feeding America. n.d. "Spotlight on Senior Health: Adverse Health Outcomes of Food Insecure Older Americans (Executive Summary)". www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/our-research/senior-hunger-research/or-spotlight-on-senior-health-executive-summary.pdf

⁸ Ibid. 4.

⁹ Ibid. 7.

¹⁰ Ibid. 7.

¹¹ National Council on Aging. (2015). *Facts about SNAP and Senior Hunger*. Retrieved May 19, 2015, from National Council of Aging website: www.ncoa.org/enhance-economic-security/SeniorHunger/facts-snap-senior-hunger.html

¹² Food Research and Action Center. (2015). *Seniors and SNAP/Food Stamps*. Retrieved May 19, 2015, from Food Research and Action Center website: <http://frac.org/initiatives/addressing-senior-hunger/seniors-and-snapfood-stamps/>



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