

RESEARCH THAT MATTERS

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# “WE’RE STILL HUNGRY”

Lived Experiences with  
Food Insecurity and  
Food Programs Among  
LGBTQ People

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Bianca D.M. Wilson  
M. V. Lee Badgett  
Alexandra-Grissell H. Gomez

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Millions of adults struggle with hunger in California.<sup>1</sup> Sexual orientation and gender identity, like race and ethnicity, are important social statuses relevant to understanding patterns of hunger and food insecurity. Despite a lack of federal data on food insecurity and SNAP participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals and households, research demonstrates that LGBT people in the United States report high rates of food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> What is less known is what that *actually* looks like for LGBTQ people. In the interest of informing public policies and social services, this study was designed to document how LGBTQ people manage food insecurity and the role of sexual orientation and gender identity in those experiences.

In the context of the larger Pathways Project ([www.pathways-study.org](http://www.pathways-study.org)), this current study sought to answer the following research questions to inform ongoing work on food insecurity:

1. What are the food insecurity experiences of LGBTQ people?
2. What challenges do LGBTQ people face when accessing and using programs designed to alleviate food insecurity, particularly food banks and food stamps?
3. How do experiences with food banks and other aspects of food insecurity among LGBTQ people differ across key demographic groups, particularly older adults and those living in nonurban areas?

To answer these questions, we used data obtained from in-depth interviews and questionnaires from 93 LGBTQ people in Los Angeles County and Kern County and 35 follow-up questionnaires from some of the respondents.

### **Camila, Los Angeles County, 24, Latina/Hispanic, bisexual transgender woman**

'Cause we were hungry, but we didn't have any, like, money. And here we are just, like, Googling places, like, you know, but we're still hungry, like, so we have to, like, go to, like, these places and, you know, there's a chance that they could be like, no. You don't have the proper paperwork or something, so come back tomorrow or something. But we're hungry.

### **O., Los Angeles, 44, Latino/Hispanic, gay cisgender man**

Yeah. This past year, I had a lot of concerns about foodwise. I would—it would really worry me, like how I'm gonna get food, where I'm gonna get the food, where I'm gonna put the food, how I'm gonna cook the food?

<sup>1</sup> <http://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/overall/california>

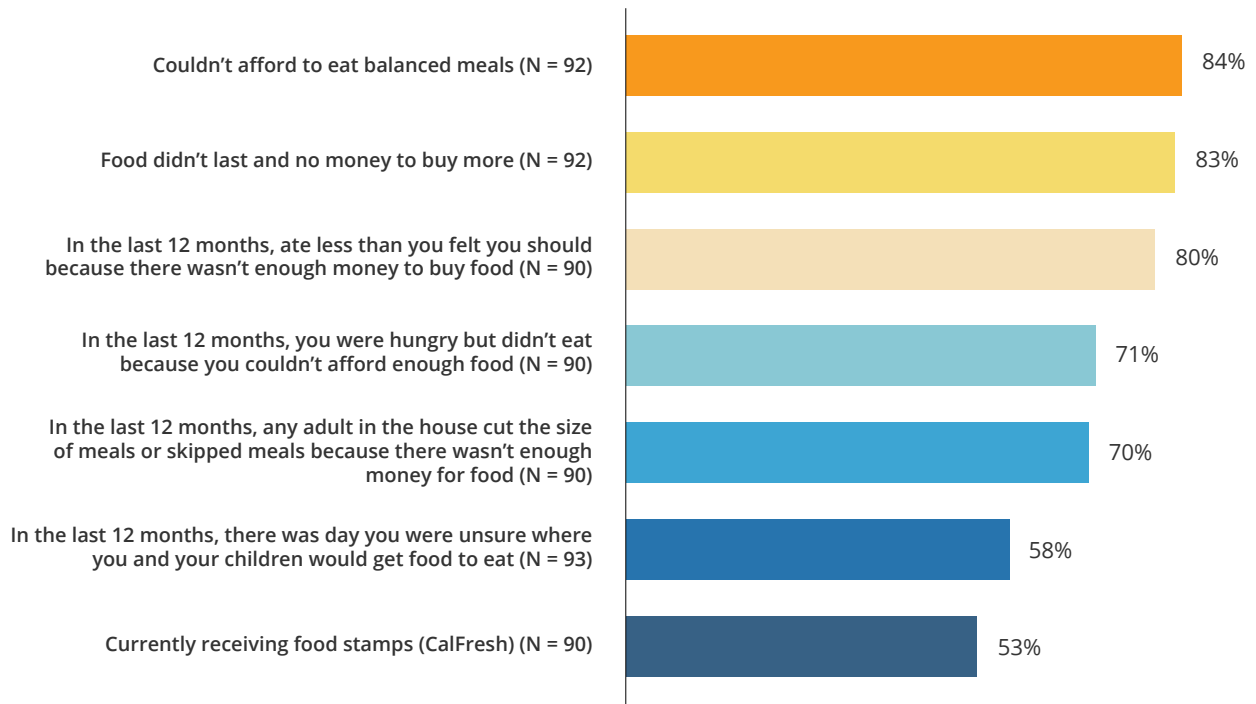
<sup>2</sup> Wilson, B. D. M., & Conron, K. J. (2020). *National estimates of food insecurity: LGBT people and COVID-19*. Los Angeles, CA: Williams Institute. Retrieved from <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/food-insecurity-covid19/>

**C., Los Angeles, 29, Middle Eastern/North African, other sexuality trans woman**

Or like when I started my job in February, I, you know, I didn't need food stamps anymore. ... or GR [General Relief], but yeah. I mean, I've begged for money before for food, but that's it. ... 'Cause, you know, when you, like, get—like when you've begged for money or food, at least in my experience, for a while—you kind of, like, get used to it and it's fine. But, like, when you're restarting it, and you haven't done it forever, it's not even, like, an issue of, like, realizing like your class, or, like, your, uh, situation. It just—it, it just sucks. I don't know what it is about it. Like every time it makes me like wanna cry. Like when I pick back up on asking people for money.

Analysis of the interview and questionnaire data revealed multiple themes across this sample of low-income LGBTQ people in terms of how they manage food insecurity. We focused our analyses for this initial report on their experiences with food banks and other charitable food services, as well as food stamps.

- Many participants discussed feeling hunger and most reported not having enough food to eat.
- To find food, respondents used various strategies:
  - Finding food that's been thrown away by others, asking people for food on the street, identifying events with free food, or getting help from friends and family;
  - Applying for food stamps/SNAP;
  - Getting groceries or cooked food from charitable food services.
- Most (65%) participants had received food at a food bank, food pantry, or other charitable food services (e.g., free meals offered at churches or secular programs).
- Respondents with children were more likely to discuss using food bank-related services.
- A lack of transportation and housing (with a kitchen and places to store food) were key barriers to being able to use charitable food services among participants.
- Older adults (50 years or older) in the study were particularly concerned with the quality of food available from these services and the dynamics among clients in the programs.
- Respondents from Kern County, the area representing a rural or nonurban experience in California in the study, were limited to mostly religious-affiliated charitable food services.
- Several participants in both counties discussed concerns about potential LGBTQ-related rejection from these religiously-affiliated services.

Indicators of food insecurity and hunger in LGBTQ sample<sup>3</sup>

The themes we identified demonstrate that access to food programs is not simply about whether people can find the services or get the benefits. The concept of access was inextricably tied to the means to get to the services, the emotional toll taken by using the programs, whether they had housing adequate for storing and cooking food, and comfort with the program environment. Fear that food program staff would not be accepting of LGBTQ people affected both choices and options for where participants could go for help and the emotional experience of going to places that participants expected or knew would reject them.

<sup>3</sup> Data source: Pathways Project pre-interview questionnaire.

## INTRODUCTION

Millions of adults struggle with hunger in the United States.<sup>4</sup> In the U.S., there are multiple federal responses to food insecurity, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. Food banks and other charitable food services are another major response to food insecurity in the United States, as in other high-income countries.<sup>5</sup> There is a substantial body of research on food insecurity, experiences with SNAP, and access to food banks, much of which notes the promises and limitations of existing federal programs responding to hunger, the emotional and mental health toll of experiencing food insecurity, and the concerns over access and effectiveness of charitable food programs<sup>6</sup>. Sexual orientation and gender identity, like race and ethnicity, are important social statuses relevant to understanding patterns of hunger and food insecurity. Despite a lack of federal data on food insecurity among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals and households, research still demonstrates that LGBT people in the United States report high rates of food insecurity.<sup>7</sup> What is less known is what managing hunger and accessing services designed to reduce it *actually* look like for LGBTQ people, including where they go for help and how they experience assistance in getting food. Further, prior research on poverty among sexual and gender minority people has been limited to those identified as LGBT, thereby excluding a broader range of people with different sexual and gender minority identities, same-sex attractions, and same-sex behaviors. In the interest of informing public policies and social services, this study was designed to document how LGBTQ people manage food insecurity and the role of sexual orientation and gender identity in those experiences.

## BACKGROUND

This report on food insecurity and experiences with food banks among LGBTQ people is a substudy of a larger study called The Pathways to Justice Project (herein called Pathways Project). The Pathways Project aimed to understand the experiences of LGBTQ adults living in poverty and the community and political actions needed to improve their lives. As part of this project, we conducted in-person interviews with 93 LGBTQ people in Los Angeles County and Kern County with low incomes or other indicators of economic instability. These two counties represent urban and nonurban or rural cases in the state of California, ensuring an analysis of how poverty is experienced similarly and differently across contexts. We aimed to identify pathways in and out of poverty, barriers to escaping poverty, how race and gender affect these

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<sup>4</sup> <http://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2018/overall/california>

<sup>5</sup> Middleton, G., Mehta, K., McNaughton, D., & Booth, S. (2018). The experiences and perceptions of food banks amongst users in high-income countries: An international scoping review. *Appetite*, 120, 698–708. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2017.10.029>

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Dys, T. D., Hake, M., Morgan, B., O'Leary, M. (2015) *Baby Boomers And Beyond Facing Hunger After Fifty*. Chicago, IL. Feeding America; Frongillo, E. A., Warren, A. M. (2019). An Evaluation Report: Senior Food Assistance, Related Programming, and Seniors' Experiences across the Feeding America Network. Columbia, SC. Feeding America; Jackowitz, A., Amirkhanyan, A., Crumbaugh, A. S., & Hatch, M. (2019). Exploring the Challenges and Coping Strategies in Households Relying on SNAP and Food Pantries. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 14(1–2), 281–295. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2018.1555073>; Loopstra R. Interventions to address household food insecurity in high-income countries. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society 2018*;77(3):270-281. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002966511800006X>

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, B. D. M., & Conron, K. J. (2020). *National estimates of food insecurity: LGBT people and COVID-19*. Los Angeles, CA: Williams Institute. Retrieved from <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/food-insecurity-covid19/>

pathways, and whether adequate services exist to serve LGBTQ people in poverty. We provide more information about the methods for this substudy in the Methods Note and a more detailed description of the overall project methodology on our project website ([www.pathways-study.org](http://www.pathways-study.org)).

As a qualitative project, the goal of this study is to provide knowledge about the range of experiences LGBTQ people have and relevant factors that are not tracked easily through quantitative (survey) methods to those invested in an informed dialogue about poverty. The data presented here come from an analysis of transcripts from in-depth interviews, pre-interview questionnaires, and follow-up surveys with a subset of participants who experienced food insecurity. In the context of the larger Pathways Project, this current study sought to answer the following research questions to inform ongoing work on food insecurity:

- What are the food insecurity experiences of LGBTQ people?
- What challenges do LGBTQ people face when accessing and using programs designed to alleviate food insecurity, particularly food banks and food stamps?
- How do experiences with food banks and other aspects of food insecurity among LGBTQ people differ across key demographic groups, particularly older adults and those living in nonurban areas?

Across both counties in California, we interviewed 93 LGBTQ low-income people, representing a range of ethnic and racial, sexual orientation, and gender identities (see Table 1). By design, this study included sexual and gender minority people who had experienced one or more forms of economic insecurity in their lifetime, most of whom (90 out of 93) had experienced economic hardship in the last year (Table 2).

**Table 1. Demographics of Study Sample (N=93)**

DEMOGRAPHICS	ESTIMATE	N
Age		
19-70 yrs (mean = 38 yrs)		93
Race		
White or European	23%	21
Black or African American	25%	23
Latino/a or Hispanic	39%	36
Asian or Asian American	4%	4
American Indian	8%	7
Middle Eastern or North African	1%	1
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1%	1
Sexual orientation		
Straight or heterosexual	3%	3
Gay or lesbian	50%	46
Bisexual	27%	25
Pansexual	11%	10
Queer	9%	8
Other	1%	1

DEMOGRAPHICS	ESTIMATE	N
Gender identity		
Cisgender woman	26%	24
Cisgender man	37%	34
Trans man (FTM)	10%	9
Trans woman (MTF)	13%	12
Nonbinary, male at birth	6%	6
Nonbinary, female at birth	9%	8

Note: Due to rounding total percentages under variables may not equal 100%.

**Table 2. Socioeconomic Status of Study Sample (N = 93)**

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	ESTIMATE	N
Education		
Less than high school	4%	4
Some high school but not graduated	3%	3
High school graduate	25%	23
Technical or vocational school	9%	8
Two-year associate degree	9%	8
Some college	28%	26
College graduate	17%	16
Postgraduate	4%	4
Household income		
Less than \$10,000	42%	39
\$10,001–\$20,000	28%	26
\$20,001–\$30,000	19%	18
\$30,001–\$40,000	5%	5
More than \$40,000	5%	5
Financial reserve		
<i>At the end of the month, I...</i>		
End up with some money left over	11%	9
Have just enough money to make ends meet	35%	30
Do not have enough money to make ends meet	54%	46
Past year living arrangement		
Unstably housed	61%	55
Current living arrangement <sup>a</sup>		
Own alone or with others	6%	6
Rent alone or with others	51%	47
Live with significant other or someone else who covers expenses	12%	11
Live with family or friends temporarily	10%	9
Homeless	13%	12
Live in a shelter or transitional housing	14%	13
Other	2%	2

Note: Due to rounding total percentages under variables may not equal 100%.

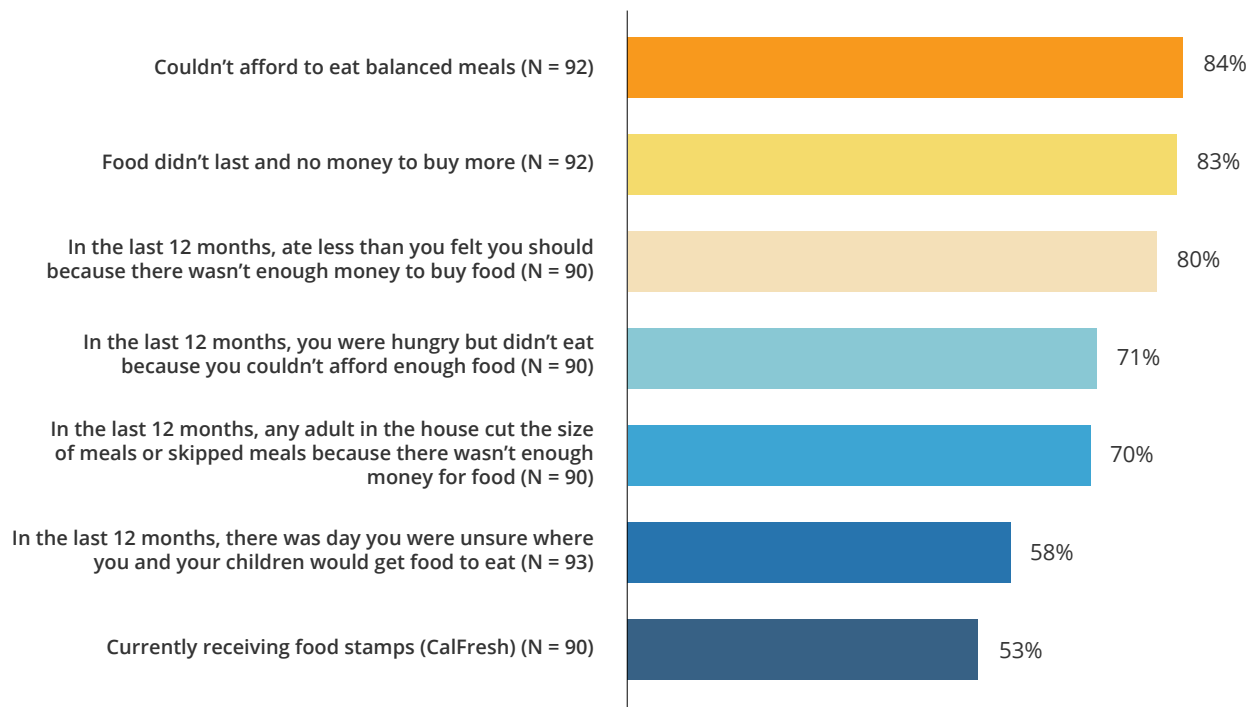
<sup>a</sup>Answer options equal more than 100% because respondents were allowed to choose multiple responses.

Our analysis of the interviews and questionnaire responses revealed several major themes relevant to LGBTQ+ people's experiences with food insecurity. We discuss each theme with example quotes from the interviews to illustrate the context and detailed experiences that inform our conclusions.

## HUNGER

At the heart of the concept of food insecurity is hunger. When asked about whether they had managed their food consumption to help with hunger in the pre-interview questionnaire, many participants said yes to several of the indicators (see Figure 1). Most participants reported that there were days where they felt they didn't have enough to eat.

Figure 1. Indicators of food insecurity and hunger in LGBTQ sample<sup>8</sup>



Further, without being asked about hunger directly in the interview, participants' responses to our questions about accessing services for food insecurity often included a reference to feeling hungry—how it felt, how they tried to ignore it, and how they managed it. For example, one participant described the feeling of hunger as an expected fact of life.

**An, Los Angeles County, 26, Latinx and Black/African American, pansexual, transman**

So, when food is there, food is there, and I take it. When food is not—food is not there then I starve and that's OK. ... I'll eventually eat again. I just feel that—that rumbly feeling for a while. I'm still here. It's not like I died.

<sup>8</sup>Data source: Pathways Project pre-interview questionnaire.



Typically, when respondents talked about feeling hungry, it was in the context of what they do to find food. For some, that meant finding or taking food wherever possible, and for others, it meant planning how to get more services.

**Isaac, Los Angeles, 41, Latinx, bisexual cisgender man**

If I get hungry, sometime I go to the store, and I steal something, to be honest with you. ... Protein bars, and put it in the bag. In fact—in fact, I wouldn't go hungry. ... Like if—if I have to go and do it, I do it.

**Alexis, Kern, 37, Black/African American and Latinx, straight trans woman**

Yeah, there was a time I used to eat out of the trash cans. The people would come. The people from KFC, Little Caesar's, there's a bunch of places that throw away the food at night. A lot of homeless people just sit there and wait, so when they throw it away, they can't give it to them, but they can get it out of, you know, the clean bag out of the trash can. But like the pizzas and the chicken and stuff like that in the bags, and share with other people out there, too.

**C., Los Angeles, 29, Middle Eastern/North African, other sexuality trans woman**

Or like when I started my job in February, I, you know, I didn't need food stamps anymore. ... or GR [General Relief], but yeah. I mean, I've begged for money before for food, but that's it. ... 'Cause, you know, when you, like, get—like when you've begged for money or food, at least in my experience, for a while—you kind of, like, get used to it and it's fine. But, like, when you're restarting it, and you haven't done it forever, it's not even, like, an issue of, like, realizing like your class, or, like, your, uh, situation. It just—it, it just sucks. I don't know what it is about it. Like every time it makes me like wanna cry. Like when I pick back up on asking people for money.

**Camila, Los Angeles County, 24, Latina/Hispanic, bisexual transgender woman**

'Cause we were hungry, but we didn't have any, like, money. And here we are just, like, Googling places, like, you know, but we're still hungry, like, so we have to, like, go to, like, these places and, you know, there's a chance that they could be like, no. You don't have the proper paperwork or something, so come back tomorrow or something. But we're hungry.

People managed hunger mentally by finding ways to get their minds off of it and logistically through seeking out food in places like the trash or by skipping meals. One of the other ways respondents addressed hunger and concerns about food was to get help from friends and family. For example:

**Ralph, Los Angeles County, 42, American Indian, gay cisgender man**

No, maybe, like, one of my friends, if I go over there and I'm like, "I'm hungry," and she'll, you know, she'll: "OK, well, we'll get something to eat," but she wants me to run around with her a little bit first. And on the way there, it's like, "Oh gosh, can we just, you know, like—not trying to rush you," but, I mean, yeah, she likes to take, you know, take her time getting there. Yeah.

**S., Kern County, 26, Mexican and White/European American, lesbian cisgender women**

My White grandma. And, you know, she always made sure that we—we were provided for, we had food. If I showed up at her house, she would automatically feed me, you know. And she wouldn't even ask if I was hungry, she would just make me food.

**Jamie, Los Angeles County, 25, Asian/Asian American, gay cisgender man**

So, my mom comes like once every like, 6 months. ... So, when she does, she just brings food automatically because she—she's like, "Oh, I feel bad." Like, "I'm coming to visit for a week," and like, "I'm gonna like, bring anything," or like, kinda thing, so Imma bring food 'cause that's what I can contribute—because she also gets food stamps.

Though several participants talked about getting help from family, this was not an available resource for everybody. For various reasons, including LGBT-related family conflict, history of family violence, estrangement due to the participants' substance use issues, or simple geographic distance, some participants we interviewed did not have family members who could get them food or money for food.

**Alison, Kern County, 34, White/European American, bisexual, trans woman**

Been going it alone. Been doing everything alone. That's what makes it harder. I been doing financially alone. Uh, pretty much friendship. Been alone. Don't have anybody to hang out with. So, a lot of times, when I'm actually feeling up to it, I work on my books. I have one ready to publish.

**Jyoti, Los Angeles County, 25, Asian/Asian American, queer, nonbinary female assigned at birth**

Uh, yeah. I just had, a lotta difficulty paying rent. Like, I—I don't have any ties to my family. So, I was just tryin' to figure out how to pay all of my bills and food and rent.

**Miles, Kern County, 26, Latino/Hispanic, pansexual transgender man**

Food pantries. Uh, churches. I don't have any ties to my family. They've, like, completely disowned me, so, like, I don't have any family help. I try and ask friends for help, but, you know, they're financially in a hardship too. ... My family, I do not get support from them. They completely disowned me, as soon as I medically started transitioning. I don't have any family, but one cousin. But she lives in DC, so it's not like I can talk to someone. I lost most of all my friends. I solely rely on counseling.

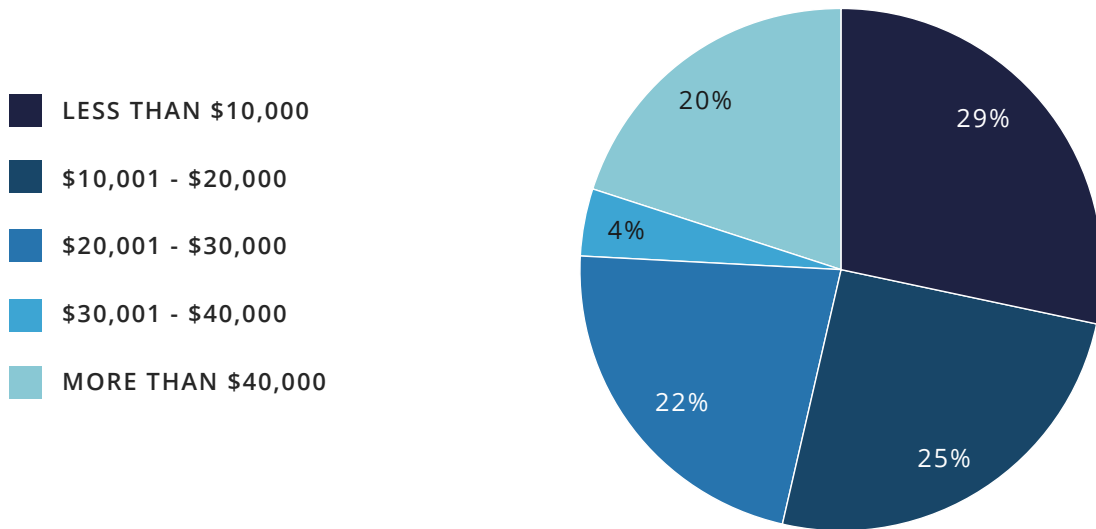
Though participants across all gender and sexual orientation groups talk about family rejection related to LGBTQ status, it appeared to be mostly transgender respondents who raised the issue in the context of food insecurity. In addition to these everyday strategies for dealing with hunger, many participants talked about their experiences with various food programs, such as charitable food services and government benefits, as ways to feed themselves and their families.

## FOOD BANKS AND OTHER CHARITABLE FOOD SERVICES

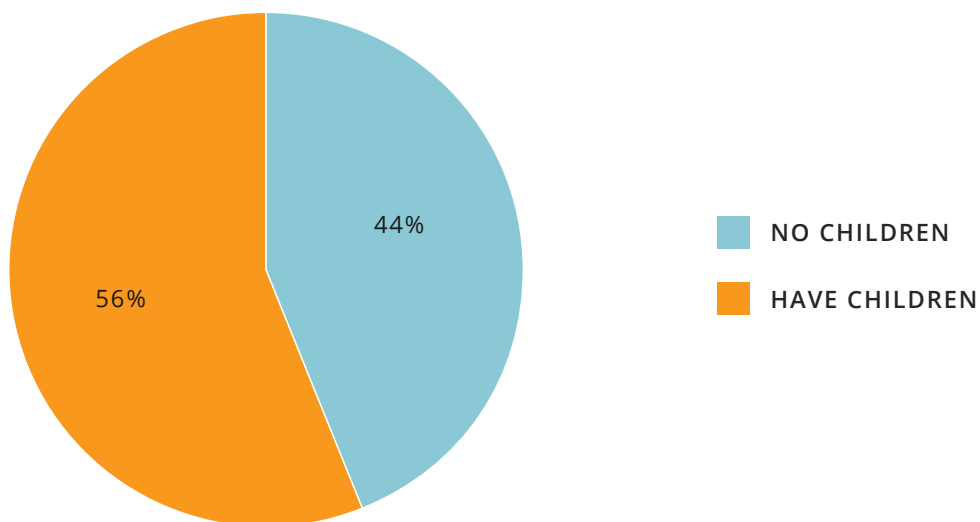
When we asked people about what they did to deal with not having enough food, 65 of the 93 LGBTQ people we interviewed talked about their experiences with food banks, pantries, and other charitable food services (churches that provided meals, school-based meal programs for families). Figures 2–7 show the weighted proportion of the amount of discussion about food banks by various demographic subgroups of LGBTQ people. In general, use of these services was distributed across all groups regardless of income level, age, gender, and race and ethnicity. However, a few patterns are notable in terms of which subgroups of LGBTQ people indicated their experiences with food banks were an important part of their narrative about poverty. Participants with children were a significant group accessing food banks—56% of the comments made about food banks were among parents, when parents make up less than 30% of the sample. Further, participants at lower education levels (those with a high school diploma or less) made up almost 40% of the discussion about experiences accessing food banks. Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, American Indians, Latinx, and Hispanics comprised more than half of the comments made about using food banks. Participants across all income levels sought out and discussed charitable food services, which indicates a need for these programs regardless of eligibility for federal food assistance benefits.

Figures 2-7. Saliency of food bank experiences by income, parenting status, education, race and ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation.<sup>9</sup>

INCOME GROUPS AMONG THOSE USING FOOD BANKS

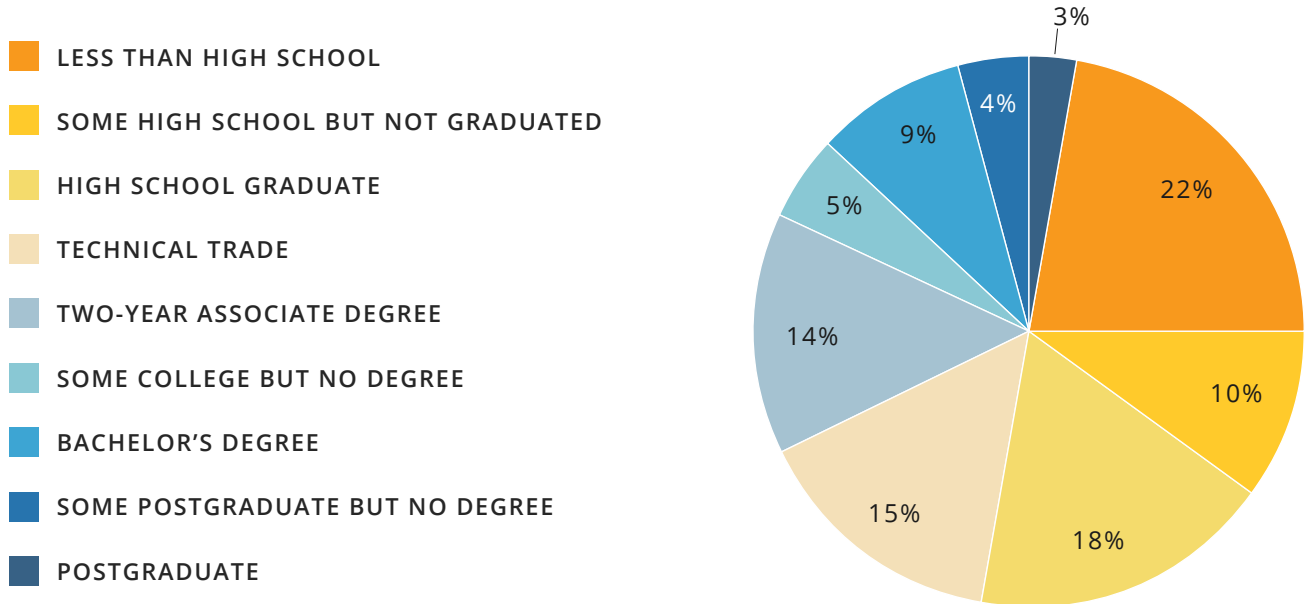


PARTICIPANTS WITH CHILDREN

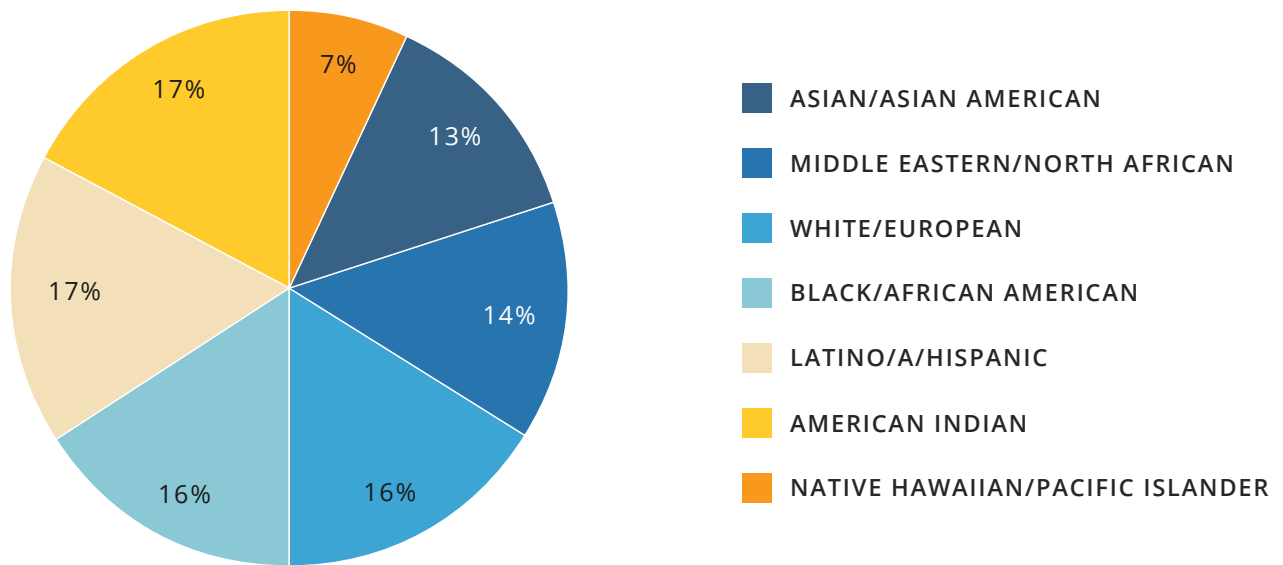


<sup>9</sup>(Data source: Pathways Project Interview Transcripts)

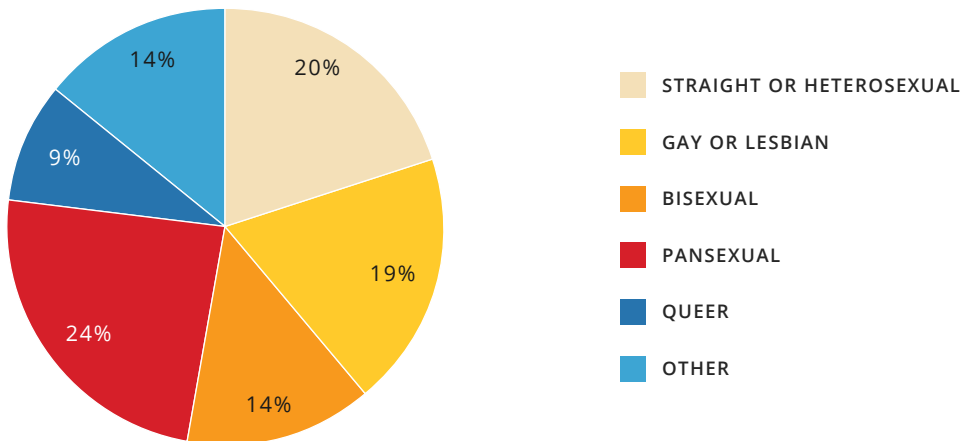
### EDUCATION



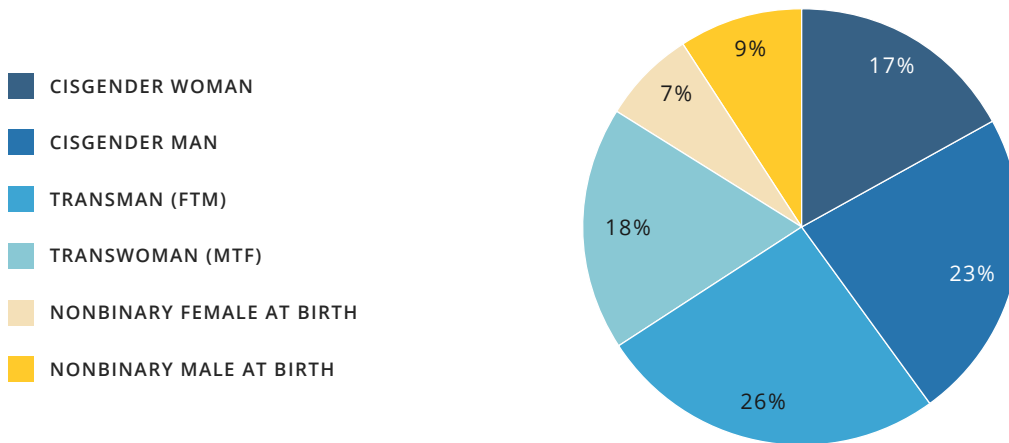
### RACE/ETHNICITY



SEXUAL ORIENTATION



GENDER IDENTITY



Shame and Stigma

When talking about accessing food banks, pantries, and other services for food, several participants talked about feelings of shame. Shame emerged as a theme when describing what it was like accessing many types of poverty-related services, but it was especially prominent among those going to food pantries and similar food-related programs.

**Matthew, Kern County, 28, Latino/Hispanic, pansexual cisgender man**

It was pretty—well, it was pretty straightforward. Like I said, I had an advantage from having worked there before. ... But at the time, I was also homeless. So, like, I was, like, really tan, and, like, my clothes were ... kind of dirty and stuff. So, I just—I felt a little insecure going in there because people would, like, see, how I had fallen, fallen, fallen. Like, going from working there to, like, being a bum that’s asking for help, basically. So, I felt kind of insecure about that. Also, my sister works there, so I kinda, like, felt embarrassed of her seeing me. But also having worked there, I was like, “There’s some ghetto-ass people that go in there.” So, like, I’m not gonna feel that bad either.

**Alexander, Los Angeles County, 29, White/European American, gay transgender man**

[Name of organization] has been really positive, I think, because they try to not be like a lot of—a lot of other services, which kind of scrutinize you. ... And they take away a lotta the shame associated with, being poor.

As we can see from these two quotes, the experience of shame was deeply connected to the stigma of being seen as the “kind of person” who gets help, especially with food. Shame was something several participants negotiated emotionally to get what they needed. For others, it became a reason to choose a more accepting food pantry over others that invoked shame.

**Cycle of Housing Instability, Lack of Transportation, and Food Insecurity**

Another major theme that emerged was the complex process of navigating housing and transportation and accessing food-related services. The ability to use the foods provided by charitable food services was highly dependent on having the means to transport the goods and having a home or place with a kitchen to prepare many of the foods. For participants who did not have stable housing, because they were on the street or in a single-resident occupancy or other boarding setting with no independent kitchen, making full use of the provided foods from a food pantry was not possible. In essence, the concept of having access to the services was incomplete without a way to get the food home, have a place to store it, and have a kitchen to cook it in.

**O., Los Angeles, 44, Latino/Hispanic, gay cisgender man**

Yeah. This past year, I had a lot of concerns about foodwise. I would—it would really worry me, like how I’m gonna get good, where I’m gonna get the food, where I’m gonna put the food, how I’m gonna cook the food.

**Dominic, Los Angeles County, 32, Black/African American, gay cisgender man**

I don’t do food banks because I don’t have access to, a lotta space ... whether—like for ‘frigeration or—or cooking. So, that’s not helpful for me as much ... and I don’t know any other places to go.

Further supporting the significance of this theme, when we examined interviews in which participants talked about positive experiences with food banks, a higher percentage of stably housed participants (58%) did so compared to unstably housed (47%).

## Rejection by Religiously Affiliated Charitable Food Services

About half of those who discussed going to food banks said they went to a church-based or religiously affiliated charitable service—all of which appeared to be of Christian faith—and many of them reported positive experiences. However, a few discussed fearing rejection or judgment from these religion-based services.

### A., Los Angeles County, 27, Asian/Asian American and White/European American, queer, nonbinary

There's not a lot of positive experiences. Again, we don't have, like, an official county-run food bank or that kind of thing. It's generally churches or religious organizations and, uh, all of the homeless services out here are religiously run, basically. ... So, again, with my partner is visibly trans and so walking into that kinda place is always a risk. 'Cause, yeah, you never know. In general, people are pretty nice, but there is also that sort of visible recoiling when we go places together. And that kind of thing. And then, back when they were presenting as female, like, again, us walking into a place together—we automatically get clocked and that can be rough when you're going to a place already asking for food. Yeah.

### Alex, Los Angeles County, 39, Black/African American, pansexual transgender man

You know, like, when I was going through that whole phase of it, and I would try to access the church food banks, it was difficult. Like, you go in there, and they just have this look on their face of like disgust,—you really don't wanna deal with them. You don't wanna deal with that. ... You already emotionally defeated going into that situation, and then to get all of that, I was like I'd rather turn around and go back, figure this out a whole 'nother way.

A few participants also mentioned that some charitable food services expected them to pray as part of the meal. Given these experiences, it is not surprising that some participants said they avoided certain food banks to avoid potential anti-LGBT bias. Further, in the follow-up questionnaire that was sent to respondents, we asked the question, “Have you ever avoided going to a food pantry because of bias against LGBT people?” Five of the 37 follow-up questionnaire respondents (14%) marked “yes.” Although we did not get responses from everyone to the follow-up questionnaire, the acknowledgement of this as an issue for a few respondents in the questionnaire and several others during the interview indicates this is a salient problem for at least a subset of the larger LGBTQ community experiencing poverty.

## NAVIGATING GOVERNMENT BENEFITS

In addition to charitable food services, the most significant and widespread program by which people in the U.S. receive help getting food is SNAP. The material benefit received through SNAP is commonly still known also as “food stamps” or people refer to the electronic balance (cash) transfer (EBT) card, which is a limited debit card provided as part of the program. In California, where this



study was conducted, SNAP is implemented through a program called CalFresh. According to the pre-interview questionnaire, more than half (53%) of the respondents received food stamps. Among those who received the government benefits, some talked about the challenges involved in maintaining and using them. For example, Jillian, like several participants, talked about food stamp benefits not being enough.

**Jillian, Kern, 36, White/European American, lesbian cisgender woman**

When, I lost my job, we were getting food stamps, but a lot of times, like, that would only go so far. It was, like, 200 bucks a month or 198 or something like that, which isn't a lot of money to feed two people for a month. So we were having to rely on, her dad a lot—my partner's dad a lot—to help us with those costs. My parents would buy me a meal every once in a while, but I was so full of shame. Like, having to reach out to them was really embarrassing and, you know, just, kind of a—a take—take a hit at your pride.

In this participant's account, we also see how this theme regarding the interrelated nature of housing and food insecurity is also relevant to the use of government food benefits, and not only the use of food pantries. For some participants, the amount they received from food stamps still did not feel like enough, even if they had the means and space to prepare the foods. This concern seemed especially significant for parents.

**Miles, Kern County, 26, Latino/Hispanic, pansexual transgender man**

Even though I do get food stamps, it's just, like—my son requires a really special diet, so, you know, I have to buy an abundance of just fruits and veggies. And he can't have meat. ... I mean, that's the whole food-stamp money that I get. And, so, you know, I don't even eat his food. ... So, that's affected that. I go to food pantries all the time. They have, like, what's called the "blessing box," too.

Across the comments about using food stamps, responses like the ones above demonstrate that SNAP benefits were not only sometimes not enough to get the needed food, but also could create barriers by limiting the range of food one can buy. Another type of access challenge that emerged from participants' comments was the issue of wanting food stamps but facing challenges getting them.

**Cori, Los Angeles County, 48, Black/African American, gay, nonbinary**

You know, I'm coming to you in a time of need, and it became this—this constant issue, and then once you do get the CalFresh, whatever, you have to mail in these forms, and if you don't send them in on time, you know, granted, if you're on drugs, you don't do stuff on time. When you're drunk, you don't do stuff on time. When you're high, you—you wake up too late to get to the office to do stuff on time. Deadlines don't compute. ... You know, deadlines don't compute, and—and it's interesting they give you—I've seen more deadlines and more stuff, paperwork to turn in when I was poor and homeless than I do now. ... How do you expect poor and homeless people and addicts and alcoholics to fill out paperwork and meet deadlines? ... It doesn't—you know what I mean? It doesn't—it's the syst—and that's why I'm like—notice the system's—the system's created, you know, like that to—to make it difficult.

In this case, the participant was talking about the challenges of managing substance abuse problems and maintaining basic needs when access to those needs requires focus and organization to complete paperwork. Managing substance use issues, as well as mental health concerns, were relatively common themes overall in the study—more than one third of respondents raised substance use issues and over two thirds raised mental health concerns as factors in their efforts to navigate poverty during their interview. The bureaucracy of applying and reporting for food-related benefits was one of these domains that were challenging to navigate in the context of substance use problems and mental health issues.

Among those participants that were able to apply and receive benefits, very few described difficult experiences with staff at the physical offices (e.g., Women, Infant, and Children [WIC] office, local CalFresh office). However, one participant talked about experiencing what she perceived to be LGBT – related discrimination because of the gender expression of her friend. When talking about going to a SNAP office, Mary talked about how she felt that her case worker was prejudiced.

**Mary, Los Angeles County, 33, Latinx, bisexual cisgender woman**

The time that I went to turn in, like, the receipts and stuff, I went with a friend, and there—it's—I don't know if you—she's, like, a—she's a lesbian, but she's, like, more manly. ... So, I don't know if that's why they were lookin' at me funny and acting weird with me. Every month, I had to go in for my food stamps so they could activate it on my card. For some reason, it was never on there. And, like, every time I would go, she'd be like, "That's so weird. Like, your worker's not doing something right or—" and it was always a problem, always.

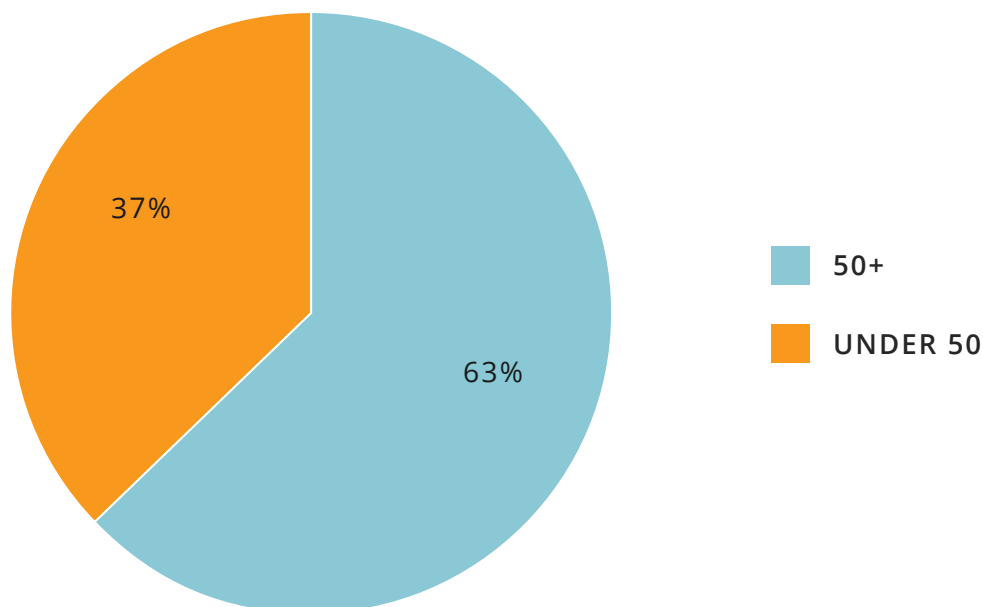
## Subgroup vulnerabilities to managing food insecurity

A main goal of the food bank substudy of the larger Pathways Project was to understand the experiences of two groups that often receive little attention in LGBTQ studies: older adults (50 years old or older) and those living outside of large metropolitan urban cities. It is common for studies of LGBTQ people, particularly those that use convenience sampling strategies that rely on community event participation to find respondents, to be heavily biased toward younger urban queer people. Below, we provide a summary of the issues raised by these two groups as it relates to food insecurity and accessing services that are beyond the shared experiences across LGBTQ people as previously described.

### Older LGBTQ people

Prior research has shown that more expansive definitions of food insecurity need to be applied when documenting the experiences of older adults because “access” is a complicated concept that involves more than whether they simply have enough money or have food in the house.<sup>10</sup> In this study, we also found that LGBT older adults appeared to be especially vulnerable to food insecurity issues. Of those who discussed using food banks, more than 60% of the discussions about this issue came from those 50 years old or older. This weighted percentage is driven by the fact that 95% of older adult participants in this study (n = 22) discussed having used food banks or other charitable food services recently, compared to 62% of participants younger than 50 (n = 71).

Figure 5. Saliency of food bank experiences by age group<sup>11</sup>



<sup>10</sup>Wolfe, W. S., Frongillo, E. A., & Valois, P. (2003). Understanding the experience of food insecurity by elders suggests ways to improve its measurement. *The Journal of Nutrition*, 133(9), 2762–2769. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jn/133.9.2762>

<sup>11</sup>Data source: Pathways Project Interview Transcripts.

Although many of the older LGBT adults had positive experiences with food-related services like food banks and meal services, some reported concerns. Lack of transportation was an issue shared across respondents regardless of age. Older respondents also reported concerns about the quality of food, especially when they were dealing with health conditions.

**Jasmine, Los Angeles, 64, Black/African American, lesbian cisgender woman**

Sometimes the food is outdated. Sometimes the food isn't no good, and you have to kind of like shop around for the best ones. Because some of the places, um, the food is outdated, or it's not good. So, you have to look around. You have to find the—the—the places that are better. And you have to travel. And then sometimes you have to look at, uh, they want a bunch of paperwork on your income. This, that, and—basically, I—I—I search around.

**Vincent, Los Angeles, 70, Black/African American, Bisexual cisgender man**

We're talking about they get millions of dollars a year. ... But when it trickles down to the, what I call the—the trenches, the front line, for what all this is supposed to be about—when they march these people through there and parade them and show them the dormitories. "See, this is what we're doing. This is where they shower." When you really look at—really, really what they getting to eat, it—it—it—it's enough to make you cry. It's ridiculous. ... [Interviewer asks about food quality.] Well, it's kind of like you got millions of dollars, but you're feeding me leftovers, to put it in perspective. ... It's you're feeding me leftovers and stale food that's past the stale date. ... Yeah. That's what's going on. Not everywhere, but a lot of places.

**Carlos, Los Angeles County, 61, Latino/Hispanic, gay cisgender man**

Well, I think they know that we need to eat healthy, so they—they get more healthy foods, I will say, or more—the other food banks are not very—very healthy. Nah. Nah. Nah. ... They have a lot of canned food.

As these three quotes represent, several older LGBTQ people seeking services to alleviate hunger struggled to find food of high quality. Carlos' point about HIV-related services administering food pantry programs appears to suggest that services geared toward people living with HIV (PLWH) are better resources for those managing a range of health conditions, an issue that is more likely to occur among older compared to younger people. In addition to quality issues, the older respondents often reported negative feelings about using food-related charitable services. Sometimes using those services felt "demeaning" to some or hurtful to their pride.

**T., Kern County, 50, White/European American, bisexual cisgender woman**

You know? Admitting to yourself that you can't provide for your family. I mean, that's just a, uh—that's stigmatizing. And—and, I don't know. It's just an awful feeling. ... But, I mean, I always feel a sense of failure every time I go in there.

These feelings and other challenges may be especially challenging when people first access services. The emotional effects might diminish over time or be balanced by an awareness of getting something important for survival.

**Jerel, Los Angeles County, 58, Black/African American, gay cisgender man**

It's really—at the beginning, it was very shameful. You know, pride as a man. Then there's long lines gettin' numbers and everybody's running around, "What's goin' on with all these people havin' all these bags and plastic?" OK. I'm just trying to get my food and get out. And, uh, but then I said, "[name]," to myself, "this is helping you. There's nothing to be ashamed of." I'm—I'm sure those people passing 'em out are like this themselves. They're just too ashamed to get in a line to help get what they need probably for themselves, send their children or whatever.

In addition to feelings related to the use of the services, respondents expressed concerns about the atmosphere in the food banks created by other clients that sometimes exacerbated other sources of respondents' discomfort with accessing the services. In particular, these respondents pointed to the behavior of other clients and presence of active substance users or HIV-positive people as a source of emotional discomfort.

**St, Los Angeles County, 51, White/European American, gay cisgender man**

It usually wasn't very positive, 'cause you're dealing with a lot of addicts. ... A lot of people there are in their addiction, so it was kind of a negative experience. You're dealing with a lot of crazy people.

**Jeff, Los Angeles County, 53, American Indian, gay cisgender man**

It's depressing. I don't really like being surrounded by all the clients who are HIV, and it's like—it's so depressing. It's more depressing than—than the homeless people in the streets. But, you know, I shouldn't say that. That's kinda mean, but I almost broke down just being around all of them guys.

**Peter, Los Angeles County, 58, White/European American, gay cisgender man**

The positives were I felt like I was just, even by goin' through the process of applying and standing in a long line, I felt like was doin' something for myself rather than just whining and staying at home or isolating and being depressed. The negatives were at the one at [church-based organization] here on Saturdays, you see a lot of tweakers, a lot of people in active use. It was uncomfortable. You see weird competitiveness. People that I don't know, just grabbing the good stuff and cutting in front of people and treating other people poorly. You see some sweethearts, too, but you see a lot of weird behavior. The same at [a different church-based organization]—you see a lot of active use. I don't deny anybody food, it is just uncomfortable to be around. It gets less uncomfortable as time goes on, but when you're new, when you're really new, it's hard to be around that. Even if someone's behavior looks really not appealing, it can still be triggering. That would be the negative and sometimes just, [church-based organization] does a really good job but [a different church-based organization] there for a while, you'd show up and they'd give you a bag of one big carrot, three potatoes, a bag of rice, and a can of chili or something and you're, like, wow, I came here for this? You wait in line an hour or something. I mean, not to be ungrateful, but it didn't really seem worth it a lot of times.

**T., Kern County, 50, White/European American, bisexual cisgender woman**

Dealing with the people in general who do go there, a lot of people who are drug addicts. I wouldn't—I wouldn't wanna put anybody down or do any shade. But, uh, you know, everybody's got their own faults, but, uh, I'm just trying to overlook it and just go there for one reason and move on.

Not only older adults talked about concerns with the other clients or recipients of charitable food services, but most who expressed distress about it were older. In particular, most of the respondents who were concerned about how they saw themselves in relation to the other people who needed help from these services were older White cis gay or bisexual people.

Reflecting the same concerns with religious-based services as previously mentioned, a few older respondents highlighted this as a major concern. One way of managing fear of discrimination was to keep their LGBT identity secret. "T," who was previously mentioned, said "it was difficult at first because of my identity. And I couldn't reveal that to them." Others resented having to say prayers or felt uneasy about workers who were less friendly to them than to other clients.

**Carissa, Kern County, 51, White and Hispanic identified, bisexual cisgender woman**

I'm OK. I don't care who—what religion. I'll go if—we're able to eat. ... Over here on 33rd Street, you have to say prayer before you go, before they'll give out food, you know? Same thing on Sunday, well, all of 'em are like that—'cause they're all—they're all, church-based places. ... I'm OK with it now but, a few months back, it was like, "No, I'm not—I'm not gonna go pray," you know? Why do we have to pray or why do we have—or why do we have to, talk about God just to get food?

Again, like other participants, older LGBT people also reported receiving SNAP benefits but noted their insufficiency, making food banks and other services even more important. Respondents used food banks and meals to make up for the shortfalls of those public benefits, as noted by one transgender woman when asked about dealing with not being able to make food stamps last.

**D., Los Angeles, 51, Latina/Hispanic, lesbian transgender woman**

[I'm] going to food bank. Going to different places where I can get clothes and hygiene stuff. Yeah.

The value of SNAP was more limited for some respondents. Several noted limitations on the food that can be purchased, a particular problem for people with housing insecurity. George explained those challenges intertwined with many other factors discussed throughout this report (transportation, concerns with food quality, health issues).

**George, Los Angeles, 55, Latino/Hispanic, gay cisgender man**

Well, yeah. I mean, um, I—I just had open heart surgery last year, um, and I've lost quite a bit of weight—and I've done that by eating in a healthy manner. Um, the food banks are carbohydrate-laden, so it makes it difficult—I have to pick and choose what I want, which puts me in conflict with them as well because they feel that if I'm accessing their services, that I should take everything that they give me. Well, I can't take canned foods 'cause I can't really carry them a long distance. I don't have a car, right? Um, when I start picking and choosing, they get angry, so it puts me in a—it puts me in a place where I'm defensive and, um, where I don't really want to go back. And then I have to start looking at what's pesticide-laden, you know. I have to choose the things that have less pesticides so that I can continue to keep my health. ... So, um, sometimes, I don't get much food from food banks. My, uh, benefits run out, um, pretty early. Like, um, I have \$22.00 in benefits on my card now—on my SNAP card. We're the 22nd of the month, I don't get benefits for another 15 days. So, \$22.00 has to last me for another 15 days. And fingers crossed, when I go to the food banks, I'll be able to find things that I'll be able to eat that will maintain a healthy regimen.

Several respondents had gathered information on times and places when they could access meals provided by food charities when their other resources were insufficient. As Jerel put it, their knowledge of where hot meals were available was essential: “So, it’s survival. That’s all it was.” A respondent who was living “on the river” outlined her schedule.

**Carissa, Kern County, 51, White and Hispanic, bisexual cisgender woman**

Well I go to the—I go—every day there’s a place where you go eat. You go the, um, church without—well, see, Mondays, Sundays—start Sunday, ‘cause I—I help out on Sun—at the food giveaway on Sundays, so they give me extra, so that covers me for Monday. And then Tuesday, I go over here on 33—at 33rd Street, they give you sandwiches and goodies. And then, um, enough to last you ‘til the next day. And then, [church-based organization named], they give out food every day; you just gotta make sure you’re there at the—in between the time that they do it. And then, they give, um, hot dinner on Sundays. Um, [another church-based organization named] -they do breakfast on, on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings, I think, [unintelligible], so.

[Interviewer asks whether she plans her week around the food banks.] No, like, s—, like, there would be times where I can’t—I can’t make it or I’m too tired to, um, walk ‘cause I have to walk everywhere, so, and they’re, like, distance from—the river’s like the middle spot.

Overall, older LGBT adults appear to face many similar challenges as younger people, but also some additional issues with accessing food services. The quality of food available might not meet their dietary needs. Also, the atmosphere of food pantries appears to be particularly psychologically challenging for older (especially White) adults. It is striking that although some older adult participants discussed relying on family for help with food and also getting emotional support and love from their children, no one talked about getting help with food from their children, despite them being no more or less likely to have had children compared to younger participants.

## Rural LGBTQ food insecurity

While research shows higher rates of food insecurity among urban households compared to those in rural areas, studies also indicate that people in rural areas have unique needs and may employ distinct strategies for coping.<sup>12</sup> We examined whether food insecurity issues were discussed differently among those living in Kern County compared to those living in Los Angeles County. Kern County is the first county north of Los Angeles and is part of what is called the Central Valley. Kern includes over 40 census tracts that are classified as rural, and the major metropolitan city of the County, Bakersfield, is one quarter the size of Los Angeles.<sup>13</sup> As a home to many migrant communities, particularly from Central America, an issue we anticipated being especially salient in this county in

<sup>12</sup> Dys, T. D., Hake, M., Morgan, B., O’Leary, M. (2015) *Baby Boomers And Beyond Facing Hunger After Fifty*. Chicago, IL. Feeding America.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-commuting-area-codes/>



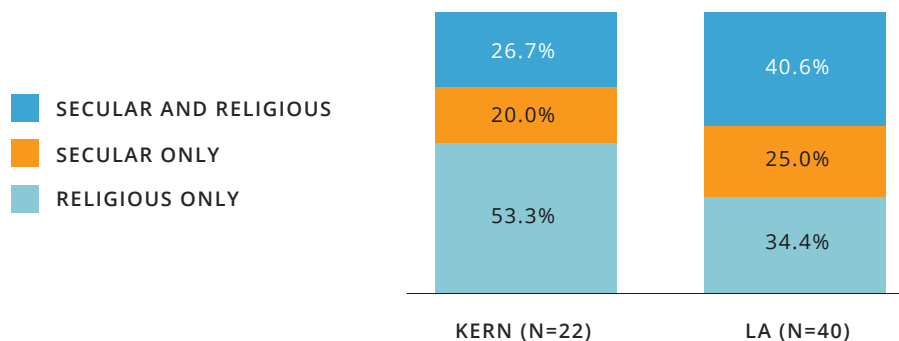
relationship to food insecurity was citizenship status.<sup>14</sup> The issue of barriers and/or discrimination when accessing food charity services due to being undocumented did emerge in both counties. Although we did not ask participants about their citizenship, we interviewed a key informant and a former resident of Kern County that organized with migrant LGBTQ workers and she described an experience she had with her friend when trying to access resources.

**Rural County outside of Kern, 47, Latinx, straight trans woman**

I mean, the receptionist, she’s—all right. I see other girls had bad experiences with the receptionist regarding that, oh, you don’t qualify for these benefits. You’re—you—you’re undocumented. I understand that we get grant money for certain things, and they have restrictions. Is, [it] for the receptionist to decide who gets these services or who’s—doesn’t make her decide to say no.

Overall, food insecurity was a prevalent theme among both Kern County and Los Angeles County participants. However, only three of the participants in Kern County described having no indicators of food insecurity, indicating it was a particularly highly salient concern. A distinguishing issue that emerged more often for participants from the Central Valley is the role of religious-based organizations. About two thirds of all comments about church-based services—most of which provided food—came from those living in Kern County. The range of possible services related to food appeared limited to primarily religion-based organizations among participants living in the nonurban county. In Figure 7, we see that once we coded for whether participants, when talking about their use of food banks, named only organizations that were religious, only organizations that were nonreligious, or a mix, Kern County participants were more likely to name only religious organizations that they knew were available to them.

**Figure 7. Religiosity of Named Charitable Food Services by County<sup>15</sup>**



<sup>14</sup> Moos, K. (2008). Documenting Vulnerability: Food Insecurity Among Indigenous Mexican Migrants In California’s Central Valley. Retrieved on June 17, 2020 at <https://www.hungercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Documenting-Vulnerability-Moos.pdf>

<sup>15</sup>Data source: Pathways Project Interview Transcripts

For the most part, these comments were positive or neutral. However, a couple of participants from Kern County specifically named feelings of discomfort or concerns about possible prejudice.

**Phoebe, Kern County, 28, Latino/Hispanic, bisexual cisgender man**

You know, which is why I tend to not go, because I can tend to—when people are really loud and disrespectful, I tend to get really snippy. I tend to get really snippy. People tend to be like, “Oh, wow. You’re fucking gay? Fucking faggot.” So that’s—that can be—that can be the prejudice and discrimination, always. [Interviewer asks why the participant thinks this happens and whether it is connected to sexual orientation.] ... Yeah. Definitely, because these are churches, and you’re around these spiritual people.

**Jennifer, Kern County, 30, White/European American, lesbian cisgender woman**

I think, from going through a Christian program, you kind of have, like—uh, I don’t know. We—we just don’t, express ourselves in a church setting.

As these quotes make clear, some of the strongest examples from participants of ways that sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression came up in the process of accessing food-related programs in Kern County demonstrate the relationship between type of region and availability of secular services.

## CONCLUSION

This report provides an in-depth analysis of food insecurity experiences in a large and diverse sample of sexual and gender minority people. The diversity of the sample across two counties in California, one urban and one rural, allows for confidence in the range of issues represented. The goal in this type of research is not to say how many people in the population experience these issues, but to have a better understanding of what it looks like to experience food insecurity and what factors are connected to those experiences and under what conditions. Many of the findings reflect issues that have been identified in non-LGBTQ samples. Shame was an integral part of the experience of feeling hungry and seeking ways to alleviate hunger. Pushing past the shame in order to use existing services was linked to happening at the expense of one's mental health. Other times, shame was too difficult to overcome and was a barrier to accessing help altogether. Although food insecurity and challenges to getting help were present across many demographic subgroups, both age and urbanicity were particularly important factors relevant to the LGBT participants' experiences in this study. The themes we identified demonstrate that access to charitable food services is not simply about whether people can find the services. The concept of access was inextricably tied to the means to get to the services, the emotional toll taken by using the services, whether participants had housing adequate for storing and cooking food, and comfort with the program environment. A finding specific to this LGBTQ sample was evidence of fear that charitable food services would not be accepting of LGBTQ people. This fear of anti-LGBTQ bias in programs and services designed to alleviate food insecurity affected both choices and options for where participants could go for help and the emotional experience of going to places that they expected or knew would reject them.

In all, challenges to all food programs, including navigating the bureaucracy of applying to SNAP and the adequacy of the monetary amount of benefits, were reported by many respondents. However, the concerns with food banks with regard to food quality, transportation, access to housing to store and cook the donated food, and interpersonal dynamics with staff and other clients in charitable food services settings possibly indicate larger barriers to the impact of this form of response to food insecurity. This study's findings reflect the results of larger scale program evaluation studies<sup>16</sup> in which there is evidence that the greatest promise for addressing food insecurity among low income people may be in expanding SNAP benefits, cash transfer, and food subsidies, including among LGBTQ people.

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<sup>16</sup> Loopstra R. Interventions to address household food insecurity in high-income countries. *Proc Nutr Soc.* 2018;77(3):270-281. doi:10.1017/S002966511800006X

## METHODS NOTE

The Pathways to Justice Project (also referred to as the Pathways Project) was a concurrent nested mixed-methods study of poverty among LGBTQ+ people. Participants for the study initially completed a screening questionnaire and were selected if they were: 18 years old or older; identify as LGBTQ or as something other than heterosexual cisgender; lived in Kern County or Los Angeles County in California; and reported having ever or recently struggled financially. We prioritized selecting people who experienced recent major indicators of poverty and economic insecurity such as experiences with homelessness or housing insecurity, receiving public benefits, inability to pay for utilities or rent, food insecurity, low income, and unemployment. Participants who enrolled into the study completed a pre-interview questionnaire and an in-depth semistructured interview, and were asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire (only about one third completed this step). The interviews were conducted between January 2019 and May 2020; thus, only four interviews captured the impact of COVID-19. This report is based on these data sources for the 93 interviews conducted for this project. For more details on the Pathways Project methodology, please visit [www.pathways-study.org](http://www.pathways-study.org).

All questionnaire data are analyzed in aggregate using STATA statistical software, as well as being linked to participants' interview responses and analyzed along with the qualitative data using Dedoose qualitative software. The qualitative analysis procedures followed multiple steps, involving both inductive and deductive coding, as well as checks for coding stability across multiple coders. The details on the analysis process are also described at [www.pathways-study.org](http://www.pathways-study.org). Specific to this report on responses to food insecurity, the questionnaire data were used to report on frequencies of indicators of food insecurity (e.g., whether they or other adults cut or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food; whether they were ever hungry but didn't eat because they didn't have enough money; or they received food stamp benefits, i.e., CalFresh). Food insecurity was then further assessed by coding the in-depth interview transcripts, focusing primarily on the sections of the interview asking about whether "there was a time when you felt there was not enough food?", and if so, what they did to manage this and from whom they sought help. Responses to these questions were initially coded inductively, meaning we just looked at what they were saying without searching for specific types of responses. This process revealed topics such as good food services, poor food quality, hunger, safety issues involved in getting food, and mentions of religiosity of the services and programs. We then deductively sought to examine relationships between these codes in relationship to key demographic variables, such as age and location. We present quotes to illustrate the types of responses that lead to the findings and conclusions. Quotes are included verbatim, except for um's, repeated words or other indications of a participant trying to think through their response. If an interviewer's follow up question is key to understanding part of the quote, we include it in brackets.

## AUTHORS

**Bianca D.M. Wilson, Ph.D.**, is a Senior Scholar of Public Policy at the Williams Institute. She is also the Principal Investigator of the Pathways to Justice Project and led the theoretical and analytic framework, and writing for this report.

**M. V. Lee Badgett, Ph.D.**, is a Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and a senior scholar at the Williams Institute. She assisted in analyzing the data and co-wrote this report.

**Alexandra-Grissell (Alex) H. Gomez, B.A.**, Project Coordinator for the Pathways Project at the Williams Institute. She/they led the analyses and wrote the methods section for this report.

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### FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law  
1060 Veteran Avenue, Suite 134  
Box 957092, Los Angeles, CA 90095-7092  
[williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu](http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu)

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