RISING FOOD PRICES: IMPACT ON HUNGER & NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

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INTRODUCTION

While the price of food at home remained relatively flat over the last decade, food inflation spiked in the first half of 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted supply chains and has been rising sharply since the beginning of 2021.[1] Food at home grew at an average annual rate of 3.5 percent in both 2020 and 2021, more than 17 times the average annual rate of the previous five years.[2] Food at home reached an annual inflation rate of 10 percent in March 2022, the first time annual food inflation had reached double digits since March 1981.[3]

Inflation is especially concerning for low-income households. Because they spend a greater share of their monthly income on food, rising food inflation can wreak havoc on their household budget. Families struggling to adapt to rising food prices can turn to food banks, church pantries and other local charities to help make ends meet. Unfortunately, higher food prices also reduce the purchasing power of charitable food providers, meaning that the increased demand for emergency food assistance caused by food inflation is often mirrored by strains on supply in the emergency food system.

CONSUMER PRICE INDEX FOR FOOD AT HOME, 2012 TO 2022

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Food at home, U.S. city average, all urban consumers, not seasonally adjusted, 2012 to 2022

Rising food costs also impact the efficacy of federal nutrition programs. Most federal nutrition programs are updated annually to reflect the cost of food inflation but when food inflation rises quickly it erodes the value of a household's food benefit, resulting in less purchasing power. Families will have to wait six more months to see an inflationary adjustment in their nutrition benefits despite the fact that food inflation has already risen 5.2 percent since the last inflationary adjustment in October 2021.[4]

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This briefing paper describes the impact of rising food prices on low-income households and the nutrition safety net, addressing such questions as:

- How have food prices increased and what is the context for the current acceleration in food inflation?
- How are low-income people and nutrition assistance programs affected, and what are the mechanisms for adjusting nutrition assistance programs for food inflation?
- What policy changes would help low-income families and the nutrition programs they rely on better withstand rising food inflation?

FOOD INFLATION: How have food prices increased and what is the context for the current acceleration in food inflation?

How do we measure food price increases?

There are two primary measures that the U.S. government uses to track changes in food prices. The Bureau of Labor Statistics publishes the Consumer Price Index (CPI), a measure of changes in the price U.S. consumers pay for goods and services, including food. In addition to the overall measure of food inflation, the CPI distinguishes between food at home and food away from home. The CPI for food at home is the main indicator of changes in the price of groceries and represents the cost of food purchased to eat at home. Food away from home represents the cost of food from vending machines, restaurants, and cafeterias and includes labor costs associated with meal production. The CPI also measures specific food categories, like dairy, and individual food items, like milk. The CPI is updated monthly. Month-to-month changes are seasonally adjusted to correct for expected seasonal fluctuations.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) also monitors food prices. USDA calculates the monthly cost of groceries for a family of four to eat an adequate diet. USDA provides this estimate for four different food plans, each representing a different cost level –thrifty, low-cost, moderate-cost, and liberal. The nutritional basis of the food plans is USDA's Dietary Guidelines. The plans are constructed based on a fixed market basket of goods and the costs are updated monthly using the CPI for the specific food items in the plans. Because the food plans are composed of selected grocery items and do not represent the entire range of foods available at the grocery store, increases in the cost of the food plans do not exactly match the CPI food inflation rate.

Federal nutrition programs use different measures to adjust for food prices. For example, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), our nation's largest hunger-relief program, uses the Thrifty Food Plan to adjust benefits for inflation. By contrast, school nutrition programs are adjusted based on the CPI for food away from home.

What causes food prices to go up?

Several factors contribute to higher food prices. Many input costs have a general impact on overall food costs. Higher production costs, including rising fuel prices and labor costs, contribute to a general increase in food prices by making it more expensive to transport and distribute food. On average, about 16 cents of each dollar spent on food in 2020 resulted from farm costs.[5] The rest of the cost comes as the product travels from the farm to the store. In fact, most of the retail price of food comes from labor, packaging, transportation, advertising, and other costs. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 has pushed up the price of natural gas, a key ingredient in fertilizer, and has led to severe sanctions against Russia, a major exporter of fertilizer, increasing another input cost for food.[6]

There are also crop-specific causes for higher food prices. For example, the war in Ukraine continues to threaten the global supply of commodities as both Russia and Ukraine are major exporters of wheat and maize. Nearly 30 percent of global wheat exports and 20 percent of corn exports originate in these countries.[7] Global sanctions and military operations are disrupting the production and export of these key food resources, contributing to price spikes across the globe.

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Domestically, the highly pathogenic avian influenza was detected in commercial flocks in February. As of early April 2022, over 31 states are affected, bringing the potential for a largescale outbreak impacting poultry production and prices.[8] In the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association's (NOAA)'s U.S. Spring Outlook issued in March 2022, forecasters predict prolonged, persistent drought in the Western United States.[9] The severe drought conditions in the West have implications for the broader agricultural economy. For example, alfalfa hay, the production of which is concentrated in the Western United States, is an important input for livestock and dairy operations. Drought conditions have the potential to reduce alfalfa hay yields, which in turn may influence feed and ultimately food prices.[10]

Prior to the war in Ukraine, global food prices were already rising due to disruptions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, the spread of the coronavirus and the actions taken in response to it drastically shifted food consumption from restaurants to homes as stay-at-home orders went into effect. Some households stocked up on food and other household goods, further disrupting purchasing patterns.

Supply chain disruptions, rising shipping costs, and bad weather also contributed to food price increases in 2020 and 2021. Outbreaks in a number of U.S. meat processing facilities in 2020 led to a domestic meat shortage, causing a subsequent increase in demand for imports.[11] In turn, imported meat prices rose 16 percent in May 2020, the largest 1-month jump since the index was first published monthly in December 1993. Early in the pandemic, the U.S. experienced an oversupply for both milk and cheese as the food service industry largely shut down. In June 2020, dairy prices rebounded sharply, increasing 24.5 percent. Higher input costs, coupled with low inventories and cold storage stocks, pushed cheese prices dramatically higher.[12]

How have food prices changed?

Retail food prices have been relatively stable over the past 20 years.[13] From 1999 to 2019, grocery prices increased an average of 2 percent per year. In the period 2015 to 2019, food at home inflation averaged only 0.2 percent per year.[14]

Household food staples have increased at alarming rates in the past two years. With the onset of stay-at-home orders in March 2020, food inflation picked up pace in April 2020. The cost of food at home grew at an average annual rate of 3.5 percent in both 2020 and 2021, more than 17 times the average annual rate of the previous five years.[15]

Food inflation accelerated again in late 2021 and deepened with the war in Ukraine, reaching an annual inflation rate of 10 percent in March 2022, the first time annual food inflation had reached double digits since March 1981.[16]

FOOD AT HOME, 12-MONTH PERCENT CHANGE BY MONTH, 2019-2022

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2019	0.6	1.2	1.4	0.7	1.2	0.9	0.6	0.5	0.6	1.0	1.0	0.7
2020	0.7	0.8	1.1	4.1	4.8	5.6	5.6	4.6	4.1	4.0	3.6	3.9
2021	3.7	3.5	3.3	1.2	0.7	0.9	2.6	3.0	4.5	5.4	6.4	6.5
2022	7.4	8.6	10.0	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Food at home, U.S. city average, all urban consumers, not seasonally adjusted, 2019 to 2022

Food inflation typically does not impact all food groups equally. Sector-specific disruptions can cause some food categories to experience price increases while others are largely stable. For example, meat and poultry products are more sensitive to fluctuations in the cost of feed corn. Looking at 2021, extreme inflation was largely limited to a few categories of protein products. But because gasoline prices are up nearly 50 percent over a year ago, in March 2022 we saw significant inflation across all food categories.

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FOOD AT HOME CATEGORIES, 12-MONTH PERCENT CHANGE

Food Category	Annual Inflation Rate		
	March 2022	2021	2020
Fresh fruits and vegetables	8.1%	3.3%	0.8%
Cereals and cereal products	10.1%	1.7%	1.8%
Flour and prepared flour mixes	14.2%	2.3%	1.2%
Bread	7.1%	2.0%	3.6%
Beef and veal	16.0%	9.3%	9.6%
Pork	15.3%	8.6%	6.3%
Chicken	13.4%	5.3%	5.0%
Fish and seafood	10.9%	5.4%	3.3%
Eggs	11.2%	4.5%	4.3%
Milk	13.3%	3.4%	5.5%
Fats and oils	14.9%	4.6%	1.3%
Baby food	10.8%	2.6%	2.6%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. city average, all urban consumers, not seasonally adjusted, 2020 to 2022

Why do the prices of some foods go up more than others?

The more processed a food is, the less its retail price is impacted by changes in the original commodity price. Take for example a highly processed food like breakfast cereal. An 18-ounce box of corn flakes contains about 12.9 ounces of milled corn. A 49 percent increase in corn prices would increase the price of corn flakes by about 1.6 cents, or 0.5 percent.[17]

By contrast, eggs and meat products require very little processing, so the retail price is more sensitive to commodity price fluctuations. The price of corn-based chicken feed has increased with rising corn prices. Because there are no other ingredients in the final product of a carton of eggs to mitigate the higher price of feed, higher input prices are passed on more substantially to the consumer.

What do we expect for food prices in 2022?

Prior to the war in Ukraine, USDA had projected food prices to begin slowly decreasing in 2022 following the dramatic increase in prices in 2020 and 2021. Unfortunately, USDA now predicts the price of food at home to increase between 3 to 4 percent and the price of food away from home to increase by 5.5 to 6.5 percent in 2022.[18]

USDA also forecasts the price of specific food groups. Several food groups will see above average inflation, with poultry, fats and oils, and dairy product prices expected to be especially high in 2022.[19]

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IMPACT ON LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLDS: How are low-income households and nutrition assistance programs affected, and what are the mechanisms for adjusting nutrition assistance programs for food inflation?

How do rising food prices impact low-income people?

Rising food costs make it harder for people to afford their groceries. As food prices rise, the amount of food a family can purchase with its monthly food budget goes down. Families coping with reduced purchasing power may stretch their food budget by purchasing lower-cost foods, which are sometimes lower in nutritional quality; decreasing portion sizes; or skipping meals to stretch their food budget.

Some families can shift spending from other parts of their budget to allow them to spend more on food. But because low-income households already spend a greater share of their income on food – spending on food at home accounts for 10.8 percent of expenditures for the lowest income quintile compared to 6.8 percent for the highest income quintile – they have less flexibility in their budgets to absorb higher food costs.[20]

Labor disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have increased the number of people seeking food assistance. But rising food prices impact all low-income families, even those who do not qualify for nutrition assistance programs. Eligibility rules for nutrition programs are largely income-based, so families hit hard by higher food costs do not become eligible for federal food assistance just because they are spending more on groceries. These families have nowhere else to turn but to friends or family or charitable feeding organizations, like our nation's food bank network.

How else are families being impacted by inflation?

Inflation growth has not been limited to food, and families are feeling the impact on multiple fronts. The problem of food inflation is made worse by the fact that other weekly and monthly expenses like gasoline, household energy, and household cleaning products are also soaring, especially gasoline. With the war in Ukraine and ban on Russian oil imports, prices on gasoline have skyrocketed to reach historic levels.

Many families can delay the purchase of other household expenditures such as apparel, major appliances, or cars, but for those who can't, those household necessities are also experiencing significant price increases. Each of these inflationary pressures contributes to the financial crunch that families are feeling as they try to make ends meet just to afford basic household necessities.

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HOUSEHOLD NECESSITIES, 12-MONTH PERCENT CHANGE

Item	Annual Inflation Rate		
	March 2022	2021	2020
Weekly/Monthly Necessities			
Food at home	10.0%	3.5%	3.5%
Food away from home	6.9%	4.5%	3.4%
Gasoline	48.0%	36.0%	-16.3%
Household energy	15.4%	7.9%	-0.3%
Household cleaning products	8.7%	2.5%	3.1%
Other Household Necessities			
Apparel	6.8%	2.5%	-4.8%
Major appliances	12.4%	10.8%	4.6%
New cars and trucks	12.6%	5.9%	0.5%
Used cars and trucks	35.3%	26.6%	3.2%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. city average, all urban consumers, not seasonally adjusted, 2020 to 2022

How are consumers in Chicago being impacted compared to consumers nationally?

The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates food inflation for individual metropolitan areas as well as the U.S. city average. Overall, the Chicago area is experiencing the same rapid inflation across food and household necessities as the rest of the country, but some areas stand out. In particular, the cost of household energy grew at a 20.6 percent annual inflation rate in March in the Chicago area, compared to 15.4 percent for the U.S. city average.

MARCH 2022 ANNUAL INFLATION RATE - CHICAGO AND U.S. CITY AVERAGE

Item	Chicago-Naperville-Elgin	U.S. City Average
Food Category		
Food at home	10.2%	10.0%
Fruit and vegetables	12.4%	8.5%
Cereal and bakery products	7.7%	9.4%
Meats, poultry, fish and eggs	13.0%	13.7%
Dairy and related products	8.1%	7.0%
Other Household Necessities		
Gasoline	48.5%	48.0%
Apparel	6.6%	6.8%
Household energy	20.6%	15.4%
New vehicles	12.3%	12.5%
Used cars and trucks	35.8%	35.3%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Chicago-Naperville-Elgin and U.S. city average, all urban consumers, not seasonally adjusted, 2020 to 2022

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Are wages keeping pace with inflation?

Strong wage increases are related to both price inflation and the willingness of workers to quit their jobs. Increasing prices compel workers to demand higher salaries from their employers, and competition among employers to retain their staff compels employers to increase salaries.

Despite the strongest annual wage growth the United States has seen in many years, households are still worse off. Inflation is eating into workers' paychecks, eroding much of the salary increases businesses have offered in the last year to recruit and keep employees during a tight job market.

Average pay increased substantially in 2021. Wages and salaries increased 4.5 percent for the 12-month period ending in December 2021.[21] But because of inflation – the overall Consumer Price Index increased 7 percent in 2021, the fastest rate since June 1982[22] – the average worker effectively experienced a 2.4 percent pay cut because expenses increased faster than wages.[23]

Real earnings – wages minus inflation – vary from one household to the next based on individuals' jobs. Wage increases do not benefit all workers evenly and are typically lower for individuals most at risk for food insecurity. Workers in leisure and hospitality, transportation and warehousing, and retail all saw wage increases in 2021 that either exceeded or matched inflation, whereas workers in other sectors did not fare so well.[24]

How do rising food prices impact the nutrition safety net?

Rising food prices also place a strain on the nation's nutritional safety net, making it harder for programs to meet the needs of food insecure people. When food prices go up, people who are eligible for but not participating in nutrition assistance programs have a greater incentive to enroll. Fortunately, the entitlement nature of most federal nutrition programs allows them to meet rising demand and serve all who are eligible.

For discretionary programs like the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), the Commodity Supplemental Food Program for seniors (CFSP), and Older Adult Nutrition programs like congregate meals and home-delivered meals, the programs can only serve as many people as annual funding levels allow. When program costs go up, discretionary programs need to be monitored to make sure they have the funding to serve program clients. Similarly, when food bank operating costs increase, they must expend more resources to serve the same number of households, as well as to keep up with the cost of any changes in demand.

How do rising food prices impact food banks and the emergency food system?

When food prices and other costs rise, food banks suffer from the same diminished purchasing power as the families they serve. About 47 percent of the food distributed by the Greater Chicago Food Depository is purchased, and the food bank operates a fleet of trucks to distribute food in the community. Rising food and fuel costs make it more expensive for the Food Depository to purchase and distribute food at the same time that families are struggling from the same inflationary pressures.

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The Food Depository purchases a range of foods. Nearly half of all foods purchased are fresh produce, which in March grew at an 8.1 percent annual inflation rate. Meat and poultry make up 15 percent of purchased food, which grew at an annual rate of 13 to 16 percent in March.[25]

Even items that make up a small share of the Food Depository's overall food purchasing budget can have a huge impact on costs under current inflationary pressures. For instance, avian flu has increased the price the Food Depository pays for a carton of eggs from $1.20 to $2.20 over the last eight weeks. In 2021, the Food Depository purchased approximately 2.2 million pounds of eggs, approximately 2.3 percent of all purchased foods. The recent cost increase would translate to a $2.2 million increase in spend for only one item, a significant hardship when the Food Depository's total food budget for Fiscal Year 2023 is $35 million.[26]

Because 90 percent of SNAP benefits are exhausted by the third week of the month, food banks serve many people whose SNAP benefits are inadequate to meet their nutritional needs.[27] When food prices rise and SNAP benefits lose purchasing power, some households may make more frequent visits to the food pantry to make up the shortfall in their household food budget.

About 31 percent of food insecure households are not income-eligible for federal nutrition assistance programs and another 19 percent are only income-eligible for programs targeted at women, infants, and children.[28] As a result, food banks also serve people in need of food assistance who are not eligible for any federal nutrition programs.

How do rising food prices impact SNAP and child nutrition programs?

When food prices rise, the purchasing power of the monthly SNAP benefit is diminished – families can buy less food with the benefit they receive. Similarly, the per-meal reimbursement that schools, child care providers, and community-based sponsors receive for providing meals and snacks to children in school, child care, afterschool and summer settings also has decreased purchasing power, leaving local program providers to make up the difference with other funding sources.

SNAP monthly benefits and child nutrition meal reimbursement rates are adjusted for inflation, but the adjustment is made only once each year. The SNAP adjustment is made at the beginning of the federal fiscal year in October, based on food prices from the previous June. For child nutrition programs, the reimbursement rate adjustment is made between school years in July, based on food inflation data from May. In years of average food inflation, most families and providers find ways to accommodate growing food costs between annual inflationary adjustments. However, in years with above average food inflation – like we have seen in 2021 and 2022 – food inflation grows faster than they are prepared to keep up. SNAP households will have to wait six more months to see an inflationary adjustment in their nutrition benefits even though food inflation has already risen 5.2 percent since the last inflationary adjustment in October 2021.[29]

SNAP and child nutrition programs use different measures of food inflation to determine their annual adjustment. SNAP benefits are based on the cost of USDA's Thrifty Food Plan, a market-basket of food representing the minimum amount a family could spend on groceries for a nutritionally adequate diet. Child nutrition reimbursement rates are based on the CPI's cost of food away from home since benefits are for prepared meals consumed in school, child care, or other settings outside of the home.

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: What policy changes would help low-income families and the nutrition programs they rely on better withstand rising food inflation?

What immediate actions can we take to help low-income people weather higher food prices?

The elevated need for food assistance is expected to continue through 2022.[30] With higher food and fuel costs, Congress should take immediate action to bolster SNAP and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which provides commodities for distribution through the emergency food network.

During the pandemic, SNAP households received emergency allotments to help them withstand food price volatility so they could afford enough food for their families. Unfortunately, these emergency allotments will expire at the end of the public health emergency declaration, even if food price volatility continues or even worsens due to the war in Ukraine and other factors. SNAP emergency allotments must continue regardless of the public health emergency declaration to help protect families during this period of extreme food inflation.

Likewise, immediate additional resources are needed to support food banks and ensure an adequate supply of food through the emergency food system. As part of the annual appropriations process, $100 million is needed for TEFAP Storage and Distribution and $15 million is needed for TEFAP Infrastructure Grants to support the emergency food system's ability to store and distribute food. In order to keep up with sharply rising food prices, Congress should also include an additional $900 million for food purchases through TEFAP in supplementary spending.

What long-term solutions would help nutrition assistance programs better respond to higher food prices?

In the long-term, policy changes should be made in the 2023 farm bill reauthorization to ensure that SNAP and TEFAP keep pace with food prices and increased need for food assistance during periods of high food inflation. For both SNAP and TEFAP, Congress should add an inflationary trigger that adjusts programs for food inflation more than once per year in years with above average food inflation. Additionally, Congress can further improve SNAP benefit adequacy by pegging the program to the Low Cost Food Plan, a more adequate market basket of food compared to the current Thrifty Food Plan. Likewise, legislators can ensure an adequate supply of emergency food by increasing the funding level for mandatory TEFAP commodities.

For more information, please contact Sophie Milam, Vice President of Public Policy and Advocacy, at smilam@gcfd.org

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