

## **Food insecurity among Tennessee families remains at 39% for third year**

Four in 10 Tennessee parents reported unmet food, utility or housing needs for their families within the last 12 months, according to data from the Vanderbilt Child Health Poll fielded in late 2024.

Food insecurity was most common (39%), followed by utility concerns (17%), and unstable housing (13%), with 1 in 5 parents reporting more than one unmet need.

Since the Vanderbilt Child Health Poll was first fielded in 2021, food insecurity has climbed from 32% in 2021 to 39%-41% for the past 3 years. Food insecurity has consistently been higher among Black and Hispanic families in Tennessee. In 2024, 43% of Black families were considered food insecure compared to 37% of white families. This was the first year the poll asked about housing and utility security.

The poll aligns with the U.S. Department of Agriculture definition of food insecurity.

“The fact that the food insecurity rate has remained persistently elevated over the past three years is evidence that currently available programs are inadequate to support families,” said Cristin Fritz, MD, MPH, assistant professor of Pediatrics at Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt.

Roughly 45% of all parents statewide who were polled said they used a nutrition assistance program, whether that be WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children), SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), or a community program. More parents in East (50%) and West Tennessee (52%) reported using food assistance programs than Middle Tennessee (38%).

“We need to identify tangible strategies to improve families’ ability to afford and access nutritious foods in order to see an improvement in food insecurity across our state,” Fritz said.

When asked about a statewide policy to implement access to free, healthy meals for all children during the school day, 85% of parents supported the idea (74% strongly supported), 11% were unsure or had no opinion, and only 6% were opposed.

“Ensuring that all Tennessee children have access to a nutritious meal during the school day would be a meaningful step toward improving food security, and ultimately improving health, for Tennessee children and their families,” Fritz said.

### **About the Poll**

The Vanderbilt Child Health Poll is conducted annually to gauge parents’ concerns about a wide range of topics. The data, collected from a representative sample of Tennessee parents across each of the three grand divisions of the state, focuses on child health issues ranging from education to food security, insurance status and mental health. Roughly 80% of all parents polled identified as registered voters.