

Over 40% of Tennessee families with children say they are food insecure; 70% have changed spending on food

This year's [Vanderbilt Child Health Poll](#) shows that over 40% of Tennessee families report they are food insecure — a similar proportion from last year. Most families (71%) say they have continued to change food spending habits due to high prices.

The annual poll from the [Vanderbilt Center for Child Health Policy](#) asked more than 1,000 Tennessee parents a series of questions on food security and the use of food assistance programs. In the poll, food insecurity was evaluated using a standardized questionnaire from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). According to the USDA, food insecurity occurs when “there is limited or uncertain availability of food or limited or uncertain ability to acquire food in socially acceptable ways.”

This year's poll also found substantial racial disparities in food insecurity across Tennessee, with 49% of Black families reporting food insecurity compared to 40% of white families. Among families who have changed their food spending habits, 38% of Black parents versus 24% of white parents reported skipping a meal. There are also differences across grand regions of the state, with more food insecure families in West (49%) and East (43%) than in Middle (34%) Tennessee.

“The fact that 2 in 5 Tennessee families continue to struggle with food insecurity tells us that families need additional support to afford enough food. Ensuring that all children can access breakfast and lunch during the school day, which may be the only consistent meals for some, would be an important step toward supporting families and ensuring children have the nutrition needed to learn and thrive,” said Cristin Fritz, MD, MPH, assistant professor of Pediatrics at Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt and member of the Center.

Previous polls from the Center have shown that 9 in 10 Tennessee parents support free school meals for all children, a topic that has been considered on a bipartisan basis in both the 2023 and 2024 legislative sessions, though it ultimately failed. Most recently, a bipartisan bill that would provide two meals to school-age children failed in a state House subcommittee on March 12.

“Food insecurity continues to be an enduring challenge for Tennessee children,” said Stephen Patrick, MD, MPH, a neonatologist at Monroe Carell and the William R Long Director of Child Health Policy. “When children are hungry, it hurts their ability to learn, play and grow. During the pandemic, we addressed food insecurity by providing free meals at schools. It was effective — since these supports went away, we've seen food insecurity among Tennessee children rise. This is a solvable problem. No child should go hungry in our state.”

The Vanderbilt Child Health Poll is conducted annually in the fall and explores a variety of issues that impact Tennessee parents and their children. This year the Center asked questions about

mental and behavioral health, insurance status, firearm safety and education concerns. The poll is funded in part by a grant from the Boedecker Foundation.