



441 G St. N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

Accessible Version

May 17, 2024

The Honorable Bernard Sanders
Chair
Committee on Health, Education, Labor,
and Pensions
United States Senate

Older Americans Act: Updated Information on Unmet Need for Services

Dear Chair Sanders:

This correspondence formally transmits our analysis in response to a request to provide the most current data related to the Older Americans Act of 1965, as amended (Older Americans Act), and unmet need, updating what we provided in 2015.¹ On January 16, 2024, we briefed committee staff on our findings, and this correspondence transmits a final version of the tables used in that briefing (see encls. I & II).

This report includes quantitative analysis of (1) need for and receipt of meal services among older individuals, and (2) potential need for home-based care services among older individuals. To estimate the unmet need for meal services, such as those funded by Title III of the Older Americans Act (Title III programs), we used the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2021 Current Population Survey (CPS). Specifically, we used these data to estimate the potential need for and receipt of such services for individuals at least aged 60 with incomes under 185 percent of the federal poverty guideline. Some individuals included in our analysis also have difficulties with daily activities.² To estimate the unmet need for home-based care services like those provided by Title III programs, we used the University of Michigan’s 2020 Health and Retirement Study (HRS).³ Specifically, we used these data to estimate the number of older individuals in potential need of such services and compared it to our analysis of the 2012 HRS. We assessed the reliability of the data we used by reviewing relevant documentation and prior reports using the same data fields. We found the data to be reliable for our purposes.

¹GAO, *Older Americans Act: Updated Information on Unmet Need for Services*, [GAO-15-601R](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 10, 2015).

²We used CPS questions about functional impairments including having cognitive impairments and/or difficulties with instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) or activities of daily living (ADL) to identify older adults likely to have need for meals programs based on potential difficulties preparing or obtaining food.

³Data collection for the 2020 HRS took place from March 2020 to May 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We conducted this performance audit from October 2023 to May 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

In summary, we estimate that:

- Food insecurity among older Americans was an estimated 18.1 percent in 2021 according to the CPS. The same year an estimated 9 percent of low-income older adults received either home-delivered or congregate meals (meals served in group settings such as senior centers), while an estimated 22.7 percent received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits. The data indicate that the percentage of those receiving home-delivered meals increased slightly relative to 2013. This pattern could suggest a shift toward home-delivered meals amid social distancing efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴
- The estimated percentage of older individuals reporting difficulties with daily activities decreased in the 2020 HRS data relative to 2012 HRS estimates. No explanation of this trend can be offered through the data alone. The 2020 HRS also shows that the percentage of individuals who have trouble with at least one activity of daily living who also reported receiving home-based care decreased.⁵ This trend might be attributed to social distancing efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, which might have reduced the provision of home-based services.

As agreed with your office, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies to the appropriate congressional committees and the Secretary of Health and Human Services. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

Should you or your staff have any questions concerning this report, please contact me at 202-512-7215 or at larink@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Key contributors to this report were Kimberley Granger (Assistant Director), Daniel Dye (Analyst-in-Charge), Steven Flint, Lara Laufer, Aaron Olszewski, Jessica Orr, Trevor Osaki, Dae Park, and Anna Pechenina.

Sincerely,



⁴We previously found that the overall number of home-delivered meals increased by over 40 million from 2019 to 2020. GAO, *COVID-19: Selected States Modified Meal Provision and Other Older Americans Act Services to Prioritize Safety*, [GAO-22-104425](https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-22-104425) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 15, 2021). The CPS data and the findings of that report are not directly comparable because of the sampling design of the former.

⁵This includes those who have trouble with one to two ADLs and those who have trouble with three or more ADLs.

Kathryn A. Larin,
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

Enclosures – 2

Enclosure I: Data Analysis from the 2021 Current Population Survey

Table 1: Estimated Percentages of Low-Income Older Adults with Each Characteristic of Likely Need and Percentages Who Do and Do Not Receive Meals Services, per 2021 CPS Data

Category	Characteristics of likely need	Have each characteristic	Receive home-delivered meals	Do not receive home-delivered meals	Receive congregational meals	Do not receive congregational meals	Receive either type of meal	Receive neither type of meal
Food security ^a	Food secure	81.9	4.0	96.0	3.3	96.7	6.7	93.3
Food security ^a	Food insecure	18.1	14.0	86.0	8.8	91.2	19.3	80.7
Numbers of difficulties with any daily activities ^b	None	65.0	2.9	97.1	3.4	96.6	5.5	94.5
Numbers of difficulties with any daily activities ^b	One	18.2	8.2	91.8	4.9	95.1	11.5	88.5
Numbers of difficulties with any daily activities ^b	Two or more	16.8	14.7	85.3	7.3	92.7	19.6	80.4

Source: GAO analysis of 2021 Current Population Survey (CPS) data. | GAO-24-107513

Note: Congregate meals are those served in group settings, such as senior centers. Data in the table are derived from individuals in the sample of households age 60 and older with incomes below 185 percent of the poverty threshold that were represented in the 2021 CPS Food Security Supplement. All estimates in this table have 95 percent confidence intervals within +/- 3.4 percentage points.

^aWe used a series of CPS questions commonly used to measure food security.

^bWe used four CPS questions about functional impairments including having cognitive impairments and/or difficulties with instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) or activities of daily living (ADL) to identify older adults likely to have need for meals programs based on potential difficulties preparing or obtaining food.

Table 2: Estimated Numbers and Percentages of Low-Income Older Adults by Various Characteristics, per 2021 CPS Data

Characteristic	Category	Number	Percent
Home-delivered meal	No	18,913,467	94.2
Home-delivered meal	Yes	1,172,837	5.8
Congregate meal	No	19,224,512	95.7
Congregate meal	Yes	861,792	4.3
Home or congregational meal	No	18,281,631	91.0
Home or congregational meal	Yes	1,804,673	9.0
Food Security	Food secure	16,435,303	81.9

Characteristic	Category	Number	Percent
Food Security	Food insecure	3,624,078	18.1
Impairments	None	13,073,689	65.1
Impairments	One	3,652,246	18.2
Impairments	Two or more	3,360,369	16.7
Food stamps	No	15,523,430	77.3
Food stamps	Yes	4,562,874	22.7
Age	Under 60	1,919,044	9.6
Age	60 to 69	8,534,235	42.5
Age	70 to 79	6,076,268	30.3
Age	80 plus	3,556,757	17.7
Sex	Male	8,680,923	43.2
Sex	Female	11,405,381	56.8
Race	White	15,346,116	76.4
Race	Black	3,102,560	15.4
Race	Other	1,637,627	8.2
Hispanic origin	Hispanic	3,544,098	17.6
Hispanic origin	Non- Hispanic	16,542,206	82.4
Marital status	Married	8,717,104	43.4
Marital status	Widowed	4,387,260	21.8
Marital status	Other	6,981,940	34.8
Income	Less than \$10,000	2,221,307	11.1
Income	\$10,000 - \$19,999	5,222,023	26.0
Income	\$20,000 - \$29,999	5,880,382	29.3
Income	\$30,000 or more	6,762,592	33.7
Household size	Living alone	6,888,738	34.3
Household size	Two persons	8,184,109	40.7
Household size	Three or more persons	5,013,457	25.0
Education	Less than high school	4,275,472	21.3
Education	High school graduate	8,163,526	40.6
Education	Some college	4,825,664	24.0
Education	College graduate	2,821,642	14.0
Employment status	Employed	3,441,850	17.1
Employment status	Retired	12,130,406	60.4
Employment status	Disabled	2,929,112	14.6
Employment status	Other	1,584,937	7.9
Homeowner	Owner	13,718,431	68.3
Homeowner	Renter or other	6,367,873	31.7
Metropolitan status	Metropolitan	15,810,198	79.9
Metropolitan status	Non-metropolitan	3,983,979	20.1
Region	Northeast	3,110,955	15.5

Characteristic	Category	Number	Percent
Region	Midwest	3,983,503	19.8
Region	South	8,497,012	42.3
Region	West	4,494,834	22.4

Source: GAO analysis of 2021 Current Population Survey (CPS) data. | GAO-24-107513

Note: Congregate meals are those served in group settings, such as senior centers. Data in the table are derived from individuals in the sample of households age 60 and older with incomes below 185 percent of the poverty threshold that were represented in the 2021 CPS Food Security Supplement. This includes spouses and disabled household members living with individuals age 60 and older, who may have been under age 60 but were still eligible for meals services like those provided by programs under Title III of the Older Americans Act of 1965, as amended. Percentage estimates in this table have a maximum margin of error at the 95 percent confidence interval of plus or minus 1.5 percentage points.

Table 3: Estimated Percentages of Low-Income Older Adults Receiving Home-Delivered or Congregate Meals Among Various Likely Need and Demographic Groups, per 2021 CPS Data

		Percent of low-income older adults	Receive home-delivered meals	Do not receive home-delivered meals	Receive congregate meals	Do not received congregate meals	Receive either type of meal	Do not receive either type of meal
Food security	Food secure	81.9	4.0	96.0	3.3	96.7	6.7	93.3
Food security	Food insecure	18.1	14.0	86.0	8.8	91.2	19.3	80.7
Impairments	None	65.1	2.9	97.1	3.3	96.7	5.5	94.5
Impairments	One	18.2	8.2	91.8	4.9	95.1	11.5	88.5
Impairments	Two or more	16.7	14.7	85.3	7.3	92.7	19.6	80.4
Food stamps	No	77.3	3.7	96.3	3.6	96.4	6.5	93.5
Food stamps	Yes	22.7	13.1	86.9	6.5	93.5	17.3	82.7
Age	Under 60	9.6	5.4	94.6	3.1	96.9	7.2	92.8
Age	60 to 69	42.5	5.6	94.4	3.5	96.5	8.1	91.9
Age	70 to 79	30.3	5.1	94.9	4.2	95.8	8.0	92.0
Age	80 plus	17.7	7.9	92.1	7.0	93.0	13.7	86.3
Sex	Male	43.2	5.8	94.2	4.4	95.6	8.9	91.1
Sex	Female	56.8	5.9	94.1	4.2	95.8	9.0	91.0
Race	White	76.4	4.9	95.1	4.1	95.9	8.1	91.9
Race	Black	15.4	10.8	89.2	6.2	93.8	14.2	85.8
Race	Other	8.2	4.8	95.2	2.6	97.4	7.0	93.0
Hispanic origin	Hispanic	17.6	6.3	93.7	6.7	93.3	11.0	89.0

		Percent of low-income older adults	Receive home-delivered meals	Do not receive home-delivered meals	Receive congregational meals	Do not received congregational meals	Receive either type of meal	Do not receive either type of meal
Hispanic origin	Non-Hispanic	82.4	5.7	94.3	3.8	96.2	8.5	91.5
Marital status	Married	43.4	2.8	97.2	2.6	97.4	4.9	95.1
Marital status	Widowed	21.8	7.5	92.5	5.0	95.0	11.1	88.9
Marital status	Other	34.8	8.6	91.4	6.0	94.0	12.8	87.2
Income	Less than \$10,000	11.1	9.5	90.5	9.1	90.9	16.5	83.5
Income	\$10,000 - \$19,999	26.0	8.6	91.4	4.7	95.3	12.2	87.8
Income	\$20,000 - \$29,999	29.3	4.9	95.1	3.8	96.2	7.3	92.7
Income	\$30,000 or more	33.7	3.3	96.7	2.9	97.1	5.5	94.5
Household size	Living alone	34.3	8.7	91.3	6.6	93.4	13.5	86.5
Household size	Two persons	40.7	3.6	96.4	3.3	96.7	6.2	93.8
Household size	Three or more persons	25.0	5.5	94.5	2.7	97.3	7.4	92.6
Education	Less than high school	21.3	7.8	92.2	5.9	94.1	12.2	87.8
Education	High school graduate	40.6	5.7	94.3	3.8	96.2	8.3	91.7
Education	Some college	24.0	5.0	95.0	4.0	96.0	8.1	91.9
Education	College graduate	14.0	4.6	95.4	3.7	96.3	7.5	92.5
Employment status	Employed	17.1	1.7	98.3	2.0	98.0	3.5	96.5
Employment status	Retired	60.4	5.6	94.4	4.6	95.4	9.1	90.9
Employment status	Disabled	14.6	12.6	87.4	6.1	93.9	15.8	84.2

		Percent of low-income older adults	Receive home-delivered meals	Do not receive home-delivered meals	Receive congregated meals	Do not received congregated meals	Receive either type of meal	Do not receive either type of meal
Employment status	Other	7.9	4.4	95.6	3.6	96.4	7.4	92.6
Homeowner	Owner	68.3	3.3	96.7	2.7	97.3	5.6	94.4
Homeowner	Renter or other	31.7	11.4	88.6	7.7	92.3	16.3	83.7
Metropolitan status	Metropolitan	79.9	5.7	94.3	4.6	95.4	9.0	91.0
Metropolitan status	Non-metropolitan	20.1	5.2	94.8	2.9	97.1	8.0	92.0
Region	Northeast	15.5	8.4	91.6	4.9	95.1	12.0	88.0
Region	Midwest	19.8	4.5	95.5	4.5	95.5	8.3	91.7
Region	South	42.3	5.4	94.6	4.1	95.9	8.1	91.9
Region	West	22.4	6.0	94.0	4.1	95.9	9.2	90.8

Source: GAO analysis of 2021 Current Population Survey (CPS) data. | GAO-24-107513

Note: Congregate meals are those served in group settings, such as senior centers. Data in the table are derived from individuals in the sample of households age 60 and older with incomes below 185 percent of the poverty threshold that were represented in the 2021 CPS Food Security Supplement. This includes spouses and disabled household members living with individuals age 60 and older, who may have been under age 60 but were still eligible for meals services like those provided by programs under Title III of the Older Americans Act of 1965, as amended. Percentage estimates in this table have a maximum margin of error at the 95 percent confidence interval of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

Table 4: Estimated Percentages of Low-Income Older Adults with Various Characteristics: Who Are Food Insecure, Who Report Receiving Home-Delivered Meals, Congregate Meals, or Either Type of Meal in the Past 30 Days, per 2021 CPS Data

		Food insecure	Home-delivered meal	Congregate meals	Home or congregated meal
Food security	Food secure		4.0	3.3	6.7
Food security	Food insecure	100	14.0	8.8	19.3
Impairments	None	13.6	2.9	3.3	5.5
Impairments	One	23.6	8.2	4.9	11.5
Impairments	Two or more	29.1	14.7	7.3	19.6
Food stamps	No	13.9	3.7	3.6	6.5
Food stamps	Yes	32.2	13.1	6.5	17.3
Age	Under 60	25.1*	5.4	3.1	7.2
Age	60 to 69	21.4	5.6	3.5	8.1
Age	70 to 79	14.3	5.1	4.2	8.0
Age	80 plus	12.6	7.9	7.0	13.7

		Food insecure	Home-delivered meal	Congregate meals	Home or congregate meal
Sex	Male	18.2	5.8	4.4	8.9
Sex	Female	18.0	5.9	4.2	9.0
Race	White	15.7	4.9	4.1	8.1
Race	Black	27.9*	10.8	6.2	14.2
Race	Other	21.2*	4.8	2.6	7.0
Hispanic origin	Hispanic	22.2	6.3	6.7	11.0
Hispanic origin	Non- Hispanic	17.2	5.7	3.8	8.5
Marital status	Married	13.6	2.8	2.6	4.9
Marital status	Widowed	17.2	7.5	5.0	11.1
Marital status	Other	24.2	8.6	6.0	12.8
Income	Less than \$10,000	29.7*	9.5	9.1	16.5
Income	\$10,000 - \$19,999	23.1	8.6	4.7	12.2
Income	\$20,000 - \$29,999	14.8	4.9	3.8	7.3
Income	\$30,000 or more	13.1	3.3	2.9	5.5
Household size	Living alone	20.9	8.7	6.6	13.5
Household size	Two persons	13.8	3.6	3.3	6.2
Household size	Three or more persons	21.1	5.5	2.7	7.4
Education	Less than high school	23.2	7.8	5.9	12.2
Education	High school graduate	16.4	5.7	3.8	8.3
Education	Some college	19.4	5.0	4.0	8.1
Education	College graduate	12.7	4.6	3.7	7.5
Employment status	Employed	15.2	1.7	2.0	3.5
Employment status	Retired	12.7	5.6	4.6	9.1
Employment status	Disabled	37.7	12.6	6.1	15.8
Employment status	Other	28.7*	4.4	3.6	7.4
Homeowner	Owner	14.0	3.3	2.7	5.6
Homeowner	Renter or other	26.8	11.4	7.7	16.3
Metropolitan status	Metropolitan	18.3	5.7	4.6	9.0
Metropolitan status	Non-metropolitan	17.2	5.2	2.9	8.0
Region	Northeast	16.5	8.4	4.9	12.0
Region	Midwest	15.4	4.5	4.5	8.3
Region	South	18.7	5.4	4.1	8.1
Region	West	20.3	6.0	4.1	9.2

Source: GAO analysis of 2021 Current Population Survey (CPS) data. | GAO-24-107513

Note: Congregate meals are those served in group settings, such as senior centers. Data in the table are derived from individuals in the sample of households age 60 and older with incomes below 185 percent of the poverty threshold that were represented in the 2021 CPS Food Security Supplement. This includes spouses and disabled household members living with individuals age 60 and older, who may have been under age 60 but were still eligible for meals services like those provided by programs under Title III of the Older Americans Act of 1965, as amended. Unless otherwise noted, percentage estimates in this table have a maximum margin of error at the 95 percent confidence interval of plus or minus 4 percentage points. Percentages marked with an * have a margin of error that is between 4.1 and 5.0.

Table 5: Older Adults by Income Threshold

Age 60 or over	Below 185% of the poverty threshold		Above 185% of the poverty threshold or income not reported	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
No	67,370,639	27.2	180,547,370	72.8
Yes	18,673,358	23.9	59,329,495	76.1

Source: GAO analysis of 2021 Current Population Survey (CPS) data. | GAO-24-107513

Note: The contents of this table correspond to updates to footnote 46 on page 15 of report GAO-11-237.

Table 6: Cross-tabulation of Reported Food Security and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Receipt

	na	Receive SNAP Benefits			
	na	No		Yes	
	Received any meal	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Missing	No	17,447	64.8	9,477	35.2
	Yes	na	na	na	na
Food secure	No	12,649,285	82.5	2,681,771	17.5
	Yes	703,542	63.7	400,704	36.3
Food insecure	No	1,842,960	63.0	1,080,691	37.0
	Yes	310,196	44.3	390,230	55.7

Source: GAO analysis of 2021 Current Population Survey (CPS) data. | GAO-24-107513

Note: The contents of this table correspond to updates to footnote 49 on page 16 of report GAO-11-237. The row heading labeled "Missing" corresponds to respondents who did not respond to a CPS question on food security. All of these respondents replied "No" to receiving either congregate or home-delivered meals.

Table 7: Cross-tabulation of Income Threshold and Reported Food Security

		Missing	Food secure	Food insecure
Below the 185% poverty threshold	Number	74,321	16,819,209	3,796,346
	Percentage	0.4	81.3	18.3
Above the 185% poverty threshold or income not reported	Number	27,408	62,426,602	2,622,300
	Percentage	0.0	95.9	4.0

Source: GAO analysis of 2021 Current Population Survey (CPS) data. | GAO-24-107513

Note: The contents of this table correspond to updates to footnote 4 on page 40 of report GAO-11-237. The column labeled "Missing" corresponds to respondents who did not respond to a CPS question on food security.

Enclosure II: Data Analysis from the 2020 Health and Retirement Study

Table 8: Number and Percent of U.S. Population, Age 60 or Older and with at Least One IADL or ADL Type of Difficulties

	2012 HRS	2020 HRS
Number of US population with age 60 or older (in millions)	59.0	74.6
Number of US population with age 60 or older and with at least one IADL or ADL type of difficulties (in millions)	16.4	18.9
Percent of US population with age 60 or older and with at least one IADL or ADL type of difficulties	27.8%	25.3%

Source: GAO Analysis of 2012 and 2020 Health and Retirement Study (HRS) data US population of age 60 and over, and U.S. Census Bureau data. | GAO-24-107513

Note: The 2012 data are for the civilian noninstitutionalized population. Instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) refer to tasks, such as shopping or housework, while activities of daily living (ADL) include dressing or bathing.

Table 9: Estimated Proportion and Number of Older Adults in Likely Need Who Receive and Do Not Receive Home-based Care, per 2020 HRS Data

Type of difficulty	Percent and number who do not receive any help with identified difficulties, from any source	Percent and number who receive help with some, but not all identified difficulties, from any source	Percent and number who receive help with all identified difficulties, from any source	Among those receiving any help, percent and number who receive at least some help from professionals or organizations
	Estimated percent (%)	Estimated percent (%)	Estimated percent (%)	Estimated percent (%)
Difficulty with one or more instrumental activities of daily living (IADL)	59.9	9.1	31.0	5.8
Difficulty with one or more instrumental activities of daily living (IADL)	(3.9 million)	(0.6 million)	(2.0 million)	(0.2 million)
Difficulty with one or two activities of daily living (ADL)	60.3	27.9	11.7	14.6
Difficulty with one or two activities of daily living (ADL)	(5.2 million)	(2.4 million)	(1.0 million)	(0.5 million)
Difficulty with three or more ADLs	18.6	65.8	15.6	30.1
Difficulty with three or more ADLs	(0.7 million)	(2.5 million)	(0.6 million)	(0.9 million)

Source: GAO Analysis of 2020 Health and Retirement Study (HRS) data. | GAO-24-107513

Note: Instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) refer to tasks, such as shopping or housework, while activities of daily living (ADL) include dressing or bathing.

All percent estimates in this table have 95 percent confidence intervals within +/- 3.6 percentage points, except for the percent of older adults with difficulties three or more ADLs who received help with some activities (+/- 4.3) and the percent of older adults with

difficulties three or more ADLs who received at least some help from professionals or organizations (+/- 4.4). The first three columns may not add to 100, due to rounding.

Table 10: Estimated Proportion and Number of Older Adults in Likely Need Who Receive and Do Not Receive Home-based Care, per 2012 HRS Data

Type of difficulty	Percent and number who do not receive any help with identified difficulties, from any source	Percent and number who receive help with some, but not all identified difficulties, from any source	Percent and number who receive help with all identified difficulties, from any source	Among those receiving any help, percent and number who receive at least some help from professionals or organizations
Difficulty with one or more instrumental activities of daily living (IADL)	56 percent (3.2 million)	11 percent (0.6 million)	33 percent (1.9 million)	8 percent (0.2 million)
Difficulty with one or two activities of daily living (ADL)	47 percent (3.3 million)	30 percent (2.1 million)	24 percent (1.7 million)	12 percent (0.5 million)
Difficulty with three or more ADLs	8 percent (0.3 million)	70 percent (2.5 million)	23 percent (0.8 million)	30 percent (1 million)

Source: GAO Analysis of 2020 Health and Retirement Study (HRS) data. | GAO-24-107513

Note: Instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) refer to tasks, such as shopping or housework, while activities of daily living (ADL) include dressing or bathing.