

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106218](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

AI/AN populations face significant challenges with food security—that is, having enough food at all times for an active, healthy life. Questions have been raised about whether federal nutrition programs meet tribal communities' unique needs.

GAO was asked to review issues related to tribal food security. This report examines AI/AN food insecurity rates and the food security challenges of tribal communities; the extent to which select federal nutrition programs address tribal communities' needs; and Tribes' role in administering the programs.

GAO interviewed a nongeneralizable group of Tribes and tribal organizations in seven states; state officials in three of these states; and relevant USDA officials. Tribes were selected to reflect regional diversity, food security factors such as rurality, and experience administering programs. GAO reported the most recent USDA data and reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and guidance.

## What GAO Recommends

Congress should consider addressing the role of Tribes in administering USDA nutrition programs, including specifying that states consult with Tribes when administering programs. GAO is also making six recommendations to USDA, including that it assess what additional flexibilities could support tribal food security for Tribes and states, and take steps to implement them.

USDA generally concurred with our recommendations, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-24-106218](#). For more information, contact Kathryn A. Larin at (202) 512-7215 or [larink@gao.gov](mailto:larink@gao.gov).

July 2024

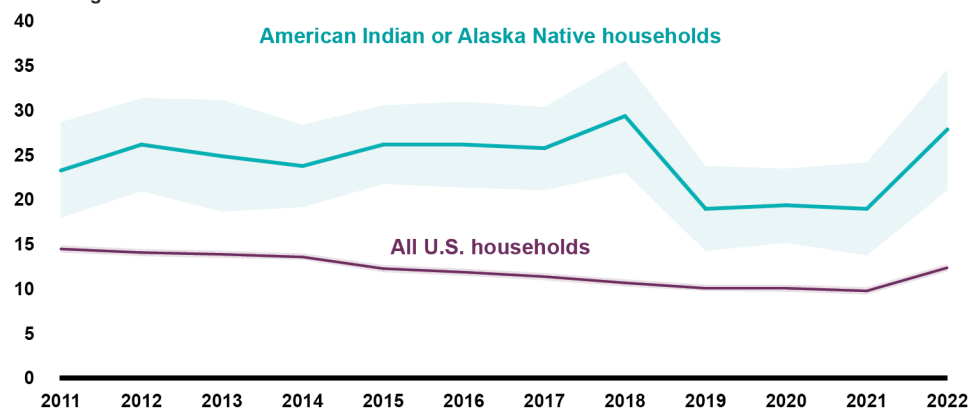
## TRIBAL FOOD SECURITY

### Opportunities Exist to Address Challenges in Federal Nutrition Programs

## What GAO Found

Food insecurity among American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) households is significantly greater than for all U.S. households, according to recent data (see figure). Tribal representatives reported multiple challenges to food security, including economic barriers such as unemployment, distance to grocery stores, limited access to transportation and healthy food, and environmental factors like weather. Representatives of six of nine Tribes said the high cost of food and inflation were barriers to food security.

**Estimated Percentage of Households that Experienced Food Insecurity in the Past 12 Months**



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Healthy People website. | GAO-24-106218

Note: Bold lines indicate estimates and shaded areas indicate their 95 percent confidence intervals. For more details, see fig. 2 in GAO-24-106218.

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) nutrition programs have helped address tribal food security challenges such as food availability and quality, but obstacles remain. Implementing and overseeing programs can be challenging in tribal communities due to infrastructure challenges and staffing shortages. USDA offers flexibilities—such as allowing certain community members to certify households for food assistance, according to officials, or allowing waivers for certain program provisions—but selected Tribes continue to report challenges. Additional flexibilities such as streamlining administrative requirements could better position Tribes and states to meet the unique needs of tribal communities as they implement and oversee nutrition programs.

Among the USDA programs GAO reviewed, laws specifying Tribes' roles varied. Six of nine programs provide for tribal administration, but laws for three do not address a tribal role. Selected Tribes also reported challenges with state-administered programs, and laws for most of the nine programs do not require states to consult with Tribes on matters that affect them. Without addressing a tribal role, including requiring consultation, Tribes may lack the opportunity to provide input to states on nutrition programs that impact their citizens.