

# Senior Hunger in Arkansas

# 2013

Impact, Extent, and Trends

Division of Aging and Adult Services,  
Arkansas Department of Human Services



# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>What is food insecurity?</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>The impact of food insecurity on seniors</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>How does Arkansas compare?</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Patterns of need in Arkansas</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Fighting hunger together</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Recommendations for action</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>References and Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Appendix I: State-level data</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Appendix II: County-level data</b> .....	<b>14</b>

# Executive Summary

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Hunger and food insecurity affect thousands of Arkansans and present special concerns and burdens for the elderly population. Based on information from the U.S. Census Bureau and others studying this issue, Arkansas has one of the highest rates of hunger and food insecurity among seniors in the country. This report examines food insecurity among elderly Arkansans, the impact it has on their lives and ways to address the problem.

Key findings include:

- **About a third of all Arkansans aged 60 or older—more than 160,000 people—are living with food insecurity.** This puts Arkansas in the top tier nationally in terms of the proportion of seniors with food insecurity.
- Senior food insecurity is caused primarily by **financial hardship**, but **lack of transportation, living in areas with few food stores, and mobility limitations** are also significant contributors.
- **Food insecurity is associated with many negative health effects**, including malnutrition, poor overall health, extended hospital stays, and cardiovascular disease. **These health consequences have profound costs in terms of quality of life and financial impact.**
- While many groups across the state are working to address food insecurity and hunger, more should be done. **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits are underutilized by this age group.**

# What is food insecurity?

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## Definitions of food insecurity

When people are unable to procure nutritionally adequate food in sufficient quantities and in socially-acceptable ways, they are said to have food insecurity.<sup>1</sup> There are different aspects of food insecurity, and it does not necessarily mean true hunger or complete lack of food. Still, milder forms of food insecurity have profound effects upon health and quality of life.

There are several categories of food insecurity, representing different levels of need and various coping strategies that people employ to meet their food needs.<sup>2,3</sup> These categories

**Hunger** is the complete lack of food. **Food insecurity** is the label given to levels of **reduced quality and quantity** of food, and also includes true hunger.

exist as a spectrum and may be experienced sequentially, with severity ranging from mild insecurity all the way to true hunger. Categories of food insecurity as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) are marginal food security, low food security, and very low food security.<sup>4</sup>

**Marginal food security.** Sometimes called “marginal food *insecurity*,” marginal food security is characterized by anxiety over how to pay for enough food. These people are uncertain about where and how they will get food and how to manage a food budget so that they have enough food for a certain timeframe. People with food anxiety may experience high levels of stress, adversely affecting health and quality of life.

**Low food security.** People who have low food security have a diet of foods that aren’t as nutritious as they need to be, but they have enough food. These people may not eat more expensive foods, such as fresh produce and fresh meat. Eating less nutritious foods can lead to many negative health outcomes.

**Very low food security.** Very low food secure individuals have significantly interrupted eating patterns. They may be restricted to meals that are not socially acceptable or may eat less than they would otherwise. Socially unacceptable meals can include foods with extremely restricted variety (i.e., oatmeal for every meal) or portion sizes that are too small to adequately satiate or provide adequate nutrition.

People with very low food security may use food pantries or public assistance. However, elderly people generally are more likely to accept help from family members than from people outside the family, and often consider soliciting outside help as a “last resort.”<sup>3</sup>

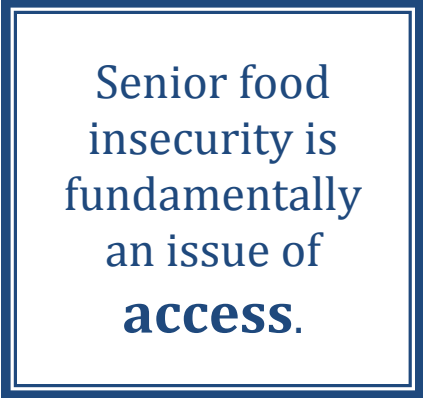
Finally, people with very low security may experience true hunger. People with very low food security frequently report eating smaller meals than they want or need, and about a third report going one or more days without any food at all.<sup>4</sup>

## The causes of food insecurity

Food insecurity is fundamentally an issue of a lack of access to sufficient amounts of nutritious foods. Multiple barriers to access have been found, including:

**Financial constraints.** Financial hardship is the most common cause of food insecurity. Many food insecure seniors live on a limited budget that makes it difficult for them to purchase the quality and amount of foods needed. In 2011, the consumer price index for fruits and vegetables rose 4.1% and the index for meats, poultry, and fish rose 7.4%. Overall, there was a 3.7% increase.<sup>5</sup> Such price increases pose a special hardship for people on fixed incomes.

**Lack of food outlets selling healthy foods.** Many areas of Arkansas, particularly rural counties, are designated as “food deserts.” Food deserts are defined by the USDA as low-income census tracts where a substantial proportion of the population does not live near a supermarket or grocery store.<sup>6</sup> People in these areas may have difficulty accessing any food items; accessing healthier, fresh foods may be especially difficult.



Senior food  
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**Lack of transportation.** In Arkansas, about 6% of households overall, and about 8% of those with a householder aged 65+, do not own a vehicle.<sup>7</sup> Many other elderly individuals may have access to a vehicle, but may be unable to drive due to low vision or other medical reasons. People without personal transportation must rely upon shuttle programs, public transit, family, or friends to visit food stores, and therefore may not make trips as often.

**Reduced mobility.** Many elderly individuals are physically disabled or have other mobility restraints that may make it difficult to leave home or go shopping. In Arkansas, 12.3% of all adults have ambulatory restrictions.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, 21% of people aged 65+ have a health problem that requires the use of specialized equipment, such as a wheelchair or walker, which may make food shopping more difficult.<sup>8</sup>

# The impact of food insecurity on seniors

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Food insecurity has an impact upon both health and quality of life.

**Poor health.** Food insecure seniors are much more likely to have multiple chronic diseases and restrictions in the activities of daily living, and to report being in poor health, compared to other seniors.<sup>9,10</sup> While this association can be partially explained by the fact that these factors could precede and even cause food insecurity, there is a great deal of evidence that insecurity is also an independent predictor of these health outcomes.

**Nutritional inadequacy.** Research shows that food insecure individuals often have lower levels of important nutrients. This is especially the case among low-income elders. A 2011 American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) study found that low-income, food insecure seniors had significantly lower nutrient intakes of energy, protein, thiamin, vitamin B6, phosphorous, magnesium, and iron.<sup>11</sup> Nutritional deficiency has been identified as a contributing cause for many negative health conditions among the elderly. It can cause longer hospital stays, premature institutionalization, diminished immune response, reduced activity levels, and higher risk of cardiovascular disease.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, seniors with a diet rich in vitamins and minerals have a decreased risk of many negative outcomes, including falls, osteoporosis, mobility limitations, cognitive impairment, and muscle wasting.<sup>12</sup> Food insecurity, then, could significantly contribute to healthcare costs.

Food insecurity significantly impacts **health**, increasing the risk of **disease and death**.

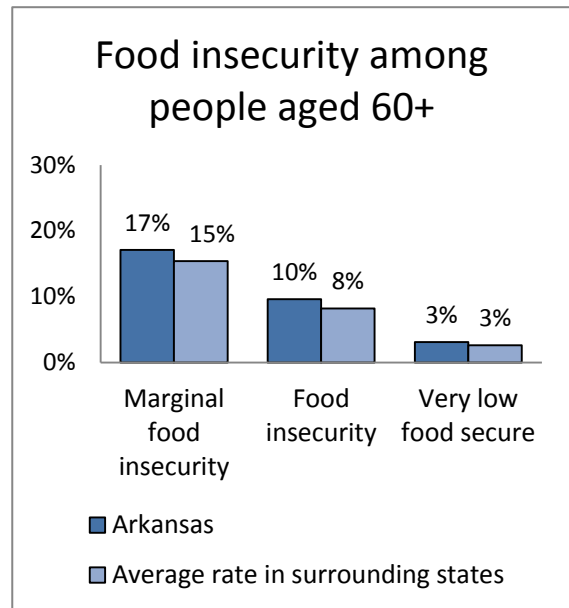
**Worsening of chronic conditions.** Food insecurity can cause additional problems for people with preexisting chronic conditions. Nearly 20% of Arkansans aged 65+ have been told by a doctor that they have diabetes, and having a poor quality diet poses a special problem for these seniors.<sup>8</sup> Food insecure elders have difficulty procuring a diabetic diet, experience more anxiety related to their diabetes, and are more likely to have poor glycemic control.<sup>13</sup> The lack of glycemic control puts these seniors at elevated risk of diabetes complications, which can include kidney failure, neuropathy, vision loss, heart disease, and stroke.<sup>14</sup>

**Restricted access to and use of medical care.** Food insecurity is often a byproduct of poverty, and food insecure seniors must make difficult decisions between purchasing food and purchasing other important items, such as medication or medical care. They often have medical needs that are unmet for financial reasons.<sup>10</sup>

# How does Arkansas compare?

Several recent studies have examined senior food insecurity across the country. The Meals on Wheels Association of America (MOWAA) and the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) released reports that used the US Census' Current Population Study to examine the rates of food insecurity among seniors in America.

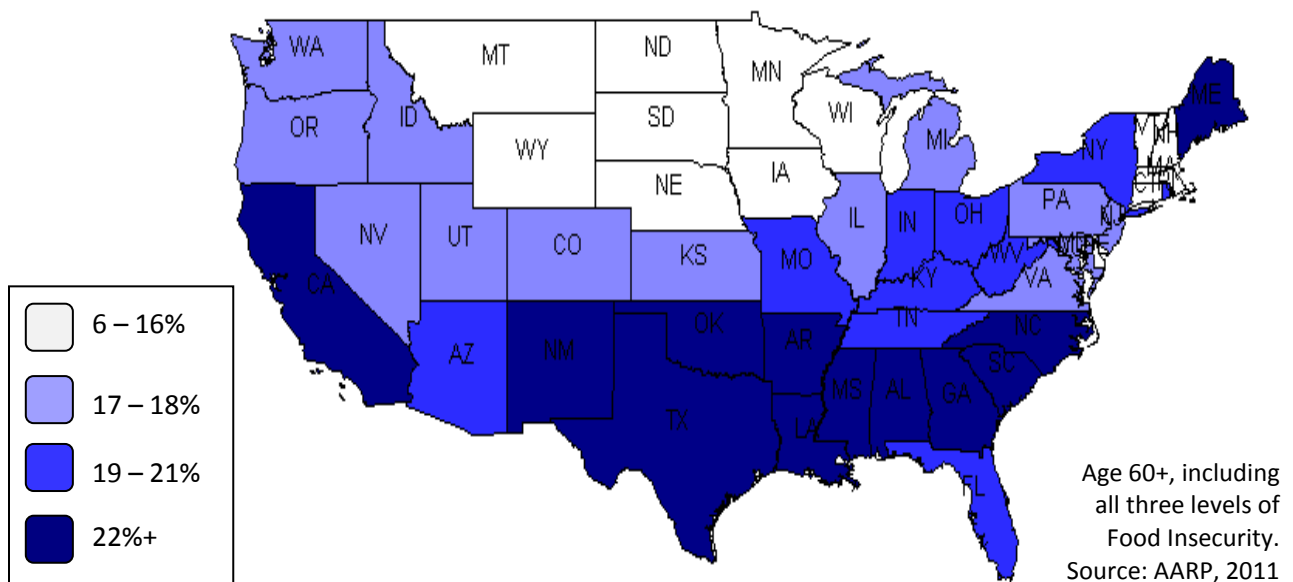
While estimates vary slightly, **Arkansas has among the highest senior food insecurity rates in the country.** Depending upon which study is referenced and which category of food insecurity is examined, Arkansas is between first and seventh in terms of senior food insecurity in the United States.<sup>11,15</sup>



Source: AARP, 2011

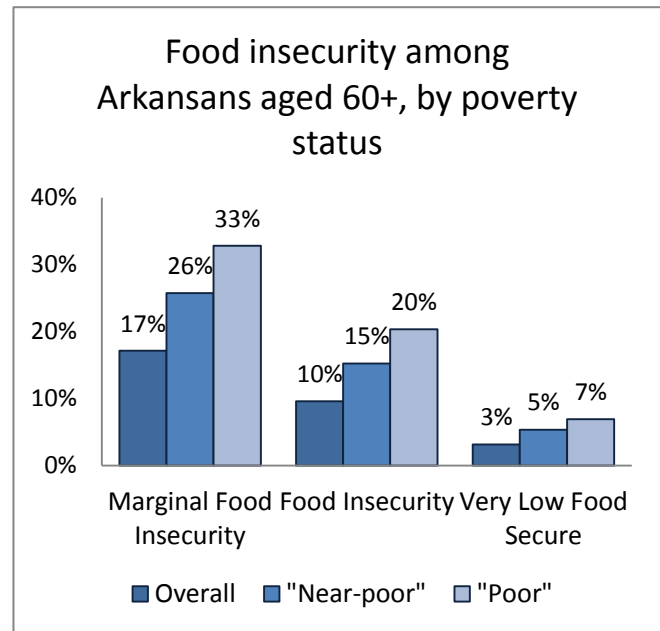
Arkansas's rates are also high compared to states in the same region. The range in surrounding states, as reported by the AARP study, is 11-21% for marginal food insecurity, 6-13% for food insecurity, and 2-5% for very low food security. See Appendix I for more information about the rates of food insecurity among Arkansas seniors.

## Total Senior Food Insecurity by State



# Patterns of need in Arkansas

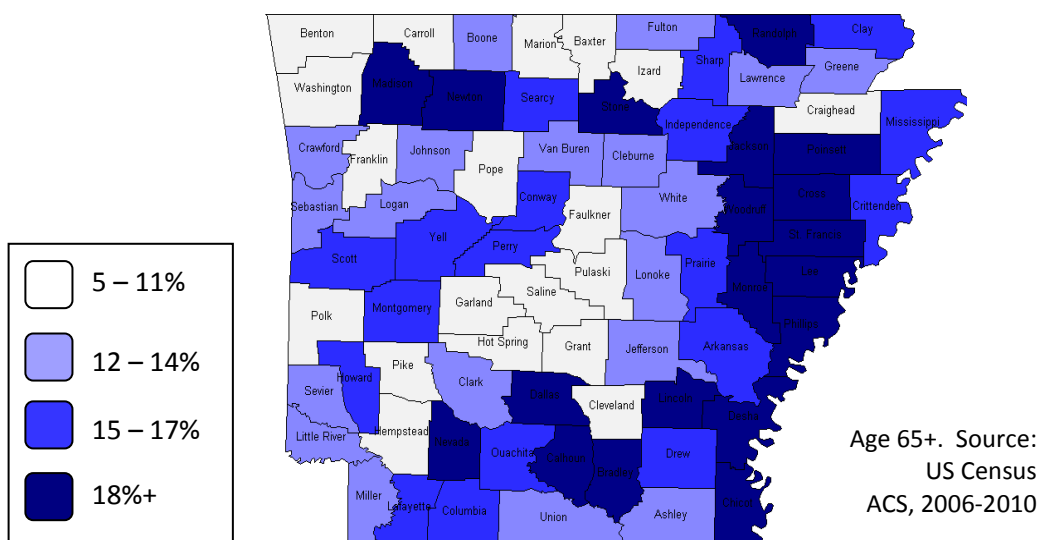
**There are some groups of people who are more likely to face food insecurity than others.** These groups include African Americans and Hispanics, seniors who are widowed, divorced, or separated, seniors in poverty, younger seniors, high school drop-outs, renters, persons with disabilities, the unemployed, and grandparents caring for grandchildren.<sup>11</sup> In Arkansas, “Near-poor” (below 300% of poverty) and “Poor” (below 200% of poverty) seniors have much higher food insecurity rates than seniors at higher income levels.<sup>11</sup> More than half of all Arkansas seniors below 200% of poverty are food insecure. We do not have Arkansas-specific data on food insecurity among the other higher risk subgroups, but it is likely that the patterns in our state are similar to those found nationally.



Source: AARP, 2011

Data do not exist on the distribution of elderly food insecurity by county. However, given the close association between food insecurity and poverty, senior poverty rates provide some information about the relative burden across the state.

## Senior Poverty by County





# Fighting hunger together

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Government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and other groups across Arkansas are working to address the problem of senior hunger.

## **Older American Act Meal Program (OOAMP)**

The Division of Aging and Adult Services at DHS contracts with providers across the state to feed seniors aged 60+ in need. Meals are served at 180 sites across the state, administered by the Area Agencies on Aging (AAAs). In state fiscal year 2012, a total of 1,618,620 congregate meals were served to 44,905 individuals, and 2,214,795 home-delivered meals were served to 17,070 individuals. Over the past five years, more than 19 million meals have been served to Arkansas seniors.

“I know this helps a lot of folks that live alone with no help. It’s a peace of mind to be independent.”

-OOAMP meal recipient,  
Central Arkansas

## **Area Agencies on Aging fundraising**

Many AAAs work to raise additional funds to supplement the programs funded by the OOAMP. In 2012, the agencies raised more than \$2.2 million locally and \$110,000 in non-governmental grants to supplement other funding sources, including more than \$3.2 million from seniors themselves. These funds also allow AAAs to develop special programs, such as an initiative by the Eastern Arkansas AAA to place food pantries within senior centers in their 12-county service area. Officials with that AAA project that these pantries will serve 3,000 seniors an additional 30,000 meals yearly.<sup>16</sup>

## **Senior Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (SFMNP)**

The SFMNP is a USDA-funded initiative that is being provided through the Area Agency on Aging of Northwest Arkansas, with help from the DHS Division of Aging and Adult Services. The program provides low-income seniors aged 60+ with \$50 worth of coupons to spend on locally grown produce at farmers’ markets. In 2012, about 2,000 seniors participated in the program.

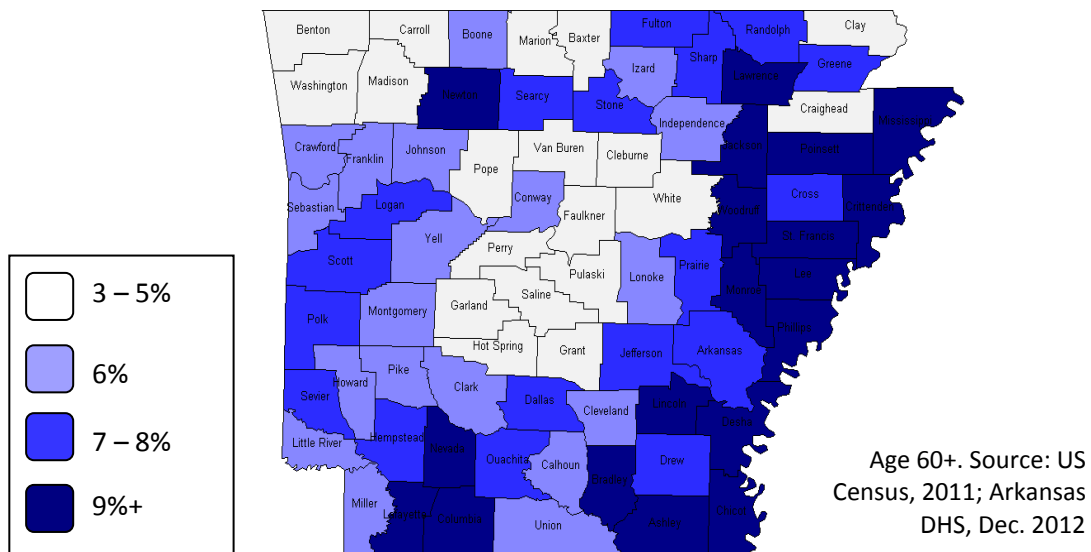
## **Local nonprofit organizations**

Organizations such as the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, the Arkansas Foodbank Network, and the Arkansas Rice Depot touch hundreds of lives every day. These organizations represent local charitable efforts to provide food to those most in need. Activities include providing food directly, advocating for local food producers, and raising awareness of the problems of hunger and food insecurity.

**Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**

This federally-funded program, previously known as “food stamps,” provides monthly funds to low-income people that allow them to purchase food. In Arkansas, it is estimated that fewer than half of all eligible seniors receive SNAP benefits. Statewide, about 5.6% of seniors aged 60+ receive SNAP; 13% of seniors aged 65+ live below the poverty line, and would likely be eligible for benefits. Possible causes of this underutilization include stigma and misconceptions about eligibility and the amount of aid that could be provided.

Seniors receiving SNAP



## Recommendations for action

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In the 2012 Silver Haired Legislative Session, senior hunger was a primary agenda topic. Despite the need, relatively few seniors receive SNAP assistance. **Increasing the number of seniors who participate in SNAP, and therefore have increased access to sufficient amounts of healthful foods, would have a significant effect on the rate of senior food insecurity in Arkansas.** To address this gap, the Division of Aging and Adult Services will convene a workgroup to identify the best methods to increase enrollment in SNAP among Arkansas seniors.

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## Appendix I: State-level data

The AARP and MOWAA studies used the same data source and were written by the same authors. Categories of FI were defined using the same methods. However, the dates of data differ (AARP considered more years in analysis, while MOWAA looked at the most recent two years) and the AARP study also examined subgroup trends. Data from the two studies are presented below.

### Senior Hunger in Arkansas (American Association of Retired Persons study)

	Marginal Food Insecurity (%)	Food Insecurity (%)	Very Low Food Secure (%)
Age 50 - 59	21.2	10.2	3.0
Age 50+	18.7	9.8	3.1
Age 60+	17.1	9.6	3.1
<b>Age 50 - 59 Below 200% Poverty</b>			
Age 50 - 59 Below 200% Poverty	48.8	23.5	8.2
<b>Age 50+ Below 200% Poverty</b>			
Age 50+ Below 200% Poverty	38.0	21.4	7.3
<b>Age 60+ Below 200% Poverty</b>			
Age 60+ Below 200% Poverty	32.8	20.3	6.9
<b>Age 50 - 59 Below 300% Poverty</b>			
Age 50 - 59 Below 300% Poverty	37.2	18.2	6.0
<b>Age 50+ Below 300% Poverty</b>			
Age 50+ Below 300% Poverty	29.6	16.2	5.6
<b>Age 60+ Below 300% Poverty</b>			
Age 60+ Below 300% Poverty	25.7	15.2	5.4

The AARP report may be downloaded online:

[[http://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/aarp\\_foundation/pdf\\_2011/AARPFoundation\\_HungerReport\\_2011.pdf](http://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/aarp_foundation/pdf_2011/AARPFoundation_HungerReport_2011.pdf)].

### Senior Hunger in Arkansas (Meals on Wheels Association of America study)

	Threat of Hunger / Marginal Food Insecurity (%)	Risk of Hunger / Food Insecurity (%)	Facing Hunger / Very Low Food Secure (%)
Seniors age 60+	19.4	12.7	3.6

The MOWAA report may be downloaded online:

[<http://www.nfesh.org/research/4570613631>].

## Appendix II: County-level data

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The following table contains county-level data relevant to senior food insecurity. As previously mentioned, no reliable data exist on food insecurity rates for seniors below the state level. However, senior poverty and overall food insecurity provide proxy measures to examine the relative burden across the state.

**The color coding in the table indicates how a county compares to other counties in the state, for a given indicator.** Green cells are in the lowest tertile of the state, yellow cells are in the middle tertile (closest to the midpoint) of the state, and red cells are in the highest tertile of the state.

Population characteristics come from the US Census's American Community Survey, food insecurity estimates come from an analysis conducted and published by Feeding America, and SNAP program numbers come from the Arkansas Department of Human Services.

County	Population Characteristics			Food Insecurity Estimates					Assistance Programs	
	Total, age 60+	% of population age 60+	% Age 65+ below poverty	% Food insecure (All Ages)	Number food insecure (All Ages)	% food insecure below SNAP threshold of 130% poverty (All Ages)	% food insecure below SNAP threshold, 130% to 185% poverty (All Ages)	% food insecure not eligible for federal nutrition assistance (All Ages)	Number receiving SNAP, age 60+	% receiving SNAP, age 60+
Arkansas	4,256	22%	17%	25%	4,750	54%	15%	31%	282	6.6%
Ashley	5,017	23%	13%	21%	4,780	53%	22%	25%	387	7.7%
Baxter	14,724	35%	8%	17%	7,220	43%	31%	26%	531	3.6%
Benton	35,453	16%	7%	14%	28,470	38%	27%	35%	1,046	3.0%
Boone	8,768	24%	13%	16%	5,930	41%	27%	32%	466	5.3%
Bradley	2,692	23%	19%	25%	2,970	71%	15%	15%	236	8.8%
Calhoun	1,269	23%	19%	18%	990	56%	22%	22%	75	5.9%
Carroll	7,145	26%	9%	16%	4,280	51%	28%	21%	257	3.6%
Chicot	2,833	24%	22%	29%	3,500	80%	18%	3%	363	12.8%
Clark	4,537	20%	13%	21%	4,920	58%	4%	39%	259	5.7%
Clay	4,310	27%	14%	20%	3,250	52%	29%	19%	226	5.2%
Cleburne	7,855	30%	11%	16%	4,120	43%	25%	33%	272	3.5%
Cleveland	1,972	23%	8%	18%	1,530	45%	28%	28%	114	5.8%
Columbia	5,139	21%	16%	21%	5,160	56%	10%	34%	401	7.8%
Conway	4,758	22%	14%	17%	3,570	48%	28%	24%	290	6.1%
Craighead	15,629	16%	10%	17%	15,430	46%	19%	35%	738	4.7%
Crawford	10,894	18%	12%	17%	10,190	47%	30%	23%	607	5.6%
Crittenden	7,718	15%	14%	25%	12,810	63%	10%	28%	854	11.1%
Cross	3,823	21%	21%	19%	3,480	51%	28%	22%	251	6.6%
Dallas	2,008	24%	20%	22%	1,830	63%	11%	26%	130	6.5%
Desha	2,769	21%	22%	26%	3,580	68%	13%	19%	295	10.7%

Senior Hunger in Arkansas

County	Total, age 60+	% of population age 60+	% Age 65+ below poverty	% Food insecure (All Ages)	Number food insecure (All Ages)	% food insecure below SNAP threshold of 130% poverty (All Ages)	% food insecure below SNAP threshold, 130% to 185% poverty (All Ages)	% food insecure not eligible for federal nutrition assistance (All Ages)	Number receiving SNAP, age 60+	% receiving SNAP, age 60+
Drew	3,674	20%	15%	23%	4,240	58%	10%	32%	249	6.8%
Faulkner	15,173	14%	7%	16%	16,910	43%	16%	42%	578	3.8%
Franklin	4,110	23%	11%	17%	3,100	53%	30%	18%	240	5.8%
Fulton	3,728	30%	14%	17%	2,040	45%	26%	29%	240	6.4%
Garland	25,916	27%	9%	17%	16,180	46%	25%	30%	970	3.7%
Grant	3,553	20%	8%	14%	2,470	33%	27%	40%	137	3.9%
Greene	8,138	19%	12%	19%	7,470	49%	23%	28%	511	6.3%
Hempstead	4,551	20%	10%	20%	4,690	56%	19%	25%	302	6.6%
Hot Spring	7,095	22%	9%	17%	5,480	44%	29%	27%	360	5.1%
Howard	2,883	21%	15%	19%	2,770	56%	19%	25%	169	5.9%
Independence	7,478	21%	15%	18%	6,160	47%	24%	29%	438	5.9%
Izard	4,204	31%	11%	19%	2,470	51%	25%	24%	243	5.8%
Jackson	3,958	22%	19%	24%	4,060	63%	9%	28%	352	8.9%
Jefferson	14,256	18%	13%	23%	18,290	61%	4%	35%	1,017	7.1%
Johnson	5,040	20%	12%	17%	4,220	47%	32%	21%	310	6.2%
Lafayette	1,898	25%	15%	22%	1,680	67%	23%	10%	194	10.2%
Lawrence	4,196	24%	13%	20%	3,360	53%	23%	24%	378	9.0%
Lee	2,263	21%	31%	25%	2,730	72%	18%	10%	341	15.1%
Lincoln	2,443	17%	20%	22%	3,080	62%	3%	35%	222	9.1%
Little River	3,073	23%	14%	17%	2,210	51%	26%	23%	192	6.2%
Logan	5,394	24%	11%	18%	4,040	46%	28%	26%	359	6.7%
Lonoke	10,217	15%	12%	14%	9,120	39%	19%	42%	537	5.3%



Senior Hunger in Arkansas

County	Total, age 60+	% of population age 60+	% Age 65+ below poverty	% Food insecure (All Ages)	Number food insecure (All Ages)	% food insecure below SNAP threshold of 130% poverty (All Ages)	% food insecure below SNAP threshold, 130% to 185% poverty (All Ages)	% food insecure not eligible for federal nutrition assistance (All Ages)	Number receiving SNAP, age 60+	% receiving SNAP, age 60+
Madison	3,110	20%	19%	16%	2,460	44%	29%	27%	163	5.2%
Marion	5,397	32%	7%	20%	3,360	44%	31%	25%	280	5.2%
Miller	8,331	19%	13%	17%	7,230	48%	20%	33%	499	6.0%
Mississippi	7,744	17%	16%	26%	12,020	60%	19%	22%	771	10.0%
Monroe	2,108	25%	24%	21%	1,830	64%	17%	19%	265	12.6%
Montgomery	2,762	29%	15%	16%	1,470	48%	30%	22%	146	5.3%
Nevada	2,034	22%	19%	21%	1,930	58%	12%	30%	165	8.1%
Newton	2,251	27%	24%	19%	1,540	59%	24%	17%	186	8.3%
Ouachita	5,904	23%	14%	21%	5,330	63%	16%	20%	406	6.9%
Perry	2,337	22%	14%	16%	1,630	43%	26%	31%	94	4.0%
Phillips	4,627	21%	17%	27%	5,930	80%	6%	14%	654	14.1%
Pike	2,630	23%	11%	17%	1,840	49%	29%	22%	147	5.6%
Poinsett	5,241	21%	18%	20%	4,980	54%	28%	18%	567	10.8%
Polk	5,307	26%	9%	17%	3,470	48%	29%	24%	337	6.4%
Pope	10,740	18%	8%	17%	9,960	47%	25%	28%	492	4.6%
Prairie	2,149	25%	15%	18%	1,600	48%	30%	22%	143	6.7%
Pulaski	63,829	17%	9%	17%	65,100	45%	15%	41%	2,989	4.7%
Randolph	4,629	26%	22%	19%	3,370	49%	23%	28%	353	7.6%
St. Francis	4,840	17%	24%	26%	6,870	70%	2%	29%	513	10.6%
Saline	21,284	20%	5%	14%	13,230	33%	22%	45%	545	2.6%
Scott	2,644	24%	16%	18%	2,050	53%	31%	16%	166	6.3%
Searcy	2,480	30%	15%	18%	1,410	58%	31%	12%	176	7.1%

Senior Hunger in Arkansas

County	Total, age 60+	% of population age 60+	% Age 65+ below poverty	% Food insecure (All Ages)	Number food insecure (All Ages)	% food insecure below SNAP threshold of 130% poverty (All Ages)	% food insecure below SNAP threshold, 130% to 185% poverty (All Ages)	% food insecure not eligible for federal nutrition assistance (All Ages)	Number receiving SNAP, age 60+	% receiving SNAP, age 60+
Sebastian	22,016	18%	11%	17%	20,290	46%	28%	27%	1,174	5.3%
Sevier	2,981	18%	11%	16%	2,590	63%	30%	7%	200	6.7%
Sharp	5,430	31%	15%	19%	3,360	52%	30%	18%	343	6.3%
Stone	3,698	30%	21%	20%	2,380	55%	31%	14%	260	7.0%
Union	8,958	21%	12%	22%	9,330	56%	16%	29%	554	6.2%
Van Buren	5,080	29%	14%	19%	3,170	46%	25%	29%	227	4.5%
Washington	26,227	13%	10%	15%	29,240	45%	24%	31%	1,164	4.4%
White	14,201	19%	11%	17%	12,600	46%	22%	32%	678	4.8%
Woodruff	1,817	25%	20%	24%	1,820	59%	25%	16%	254	14.0%
Yell	4,358	20%	17%	17%	3,680	51%	41%	9%	258	5.9%
<b>STATE</b>	<b>563,954</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>506,600</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>31,588</b>	<b>5.6%</b>