

HEALTHCARE

Food or rent? More RI families face impossible choices | Exclusive

No matter how you slice it, food insecurity is a growing reality for many Rhode Islanders



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Make rent or eat healthy? That is a choice many Rhode Islanders are having to make lately as [a perfect storm of inflation](#), supply shortages and [federal food aid cuts](#) is buffeting them, forcing them to decide between eating nutritious food and making ends meet.

No matter how you slice it, food insecurity – the inability to reliably access nutritious food – is a growing reality for many Rhode Islanders. Between 2020 and 2024, the number of Rhode Island households reporting food insecurity more than doubled, from 16% to 38%, according to the most recently available data from the [RI Life Index](#), a survey conducted by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Rhode Island and Brown University's School of Public Health.

[Melissa Cherney](#), CEO of the [Rhode Island Community Food Bank](#), has seen the number of people needing food assistance in the state swell. Last November, the food bank served more than 102,000 people – nearly one in 10 Rhode Islanders – a record high in the organization's history.

While the number of people seeking assistance from the food bank's network of pantries has slightly decreased since then, Cherney has noticed a change in frequency.

“Food pantries were really set up to be emergency help where people would only come a couple times a year. Now we’re seeing them month after month. They have deeper needs, more persistent needs,” Cherney said.

Cherney hesitated to use the word, but she said pantries are having to ration supplies to meet the surge in demand.

Food policy advocates and analysts attribute much of the rise in demand for food assistance to federal cuts to programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the imposition of work requirements to access food assistance. On June 1 alone, 5,000 more Rhode Islanders lost access to their SNAP benefits, [according to The Economic Progress Institute](#).

Unrelenting inflation and concerns over immigration go hand-in-hand

Another reason, often understated, keeping people from accessing food assistance from food pantries is fear of immigration enforcement, said Alison Tovar, an associate professor of behavioral and social sciences at Brown University.

But unrelenting inflation – driven by global conflicts, skyrocketing prices of oil and supply and demand forces – has had a compounding effect.

The price of food to be consumed at home in the Northeast has risen by more than 23% since 2020, according to the [Consumer Price Index](#). The price of fruits and vegetables rose by 7.2% in the last year alone.

The actual change may hit consumers’ wallets harder when they shop around a grocery store. The cost of the [USDA’s cheapest weekly food plan](#), a nutrient-dense menu of fruits, grains, vegetables and other edible goods set by dietary guidelines, for a family of four with two children has risen from \$156.70 in May 2020 to \$235 in May 2026 – a nearly 50% increase.

It's not just the groceries that are more expensive ...

Inflation does not stop at the grocery store. Consumers are feeling it at the gas pump, at health care appointments and when paying for housing and energy bills. The effect is a shrinking of economic freedom when people have to choose between paying bills and spending money on expensive groceries.

“It’s almost like they are playing Jenga,” Cherney said. “Like, ‘What can I do this month without making everything topple over?’”

A [companion survey](#) to the RI Life Index of about 500 people conducted in 2025 found that about one in four Rhode Islanders had to choose between paying for food or bills such as housing, utilities and transportation.

The food bank itself is also feeling the brunt of rising prices. About 60% of the food bank’s supplies came from donations, but that has nearly halved in recent years, while the share of food purchased has risen, according to Cherney.

“When we’re having to purchase more food and it costs more, we’re not getting the quantities we used to. We’re not getting the variety that we used to,” she said.

It's not just how *much* food you can afford; it's 'how good is it for you?'

Nutritious food is usually first on the chopping block, said Tovar.

“Produce and lean protein [are] the first thing to cut when the money is really tight,” Tovar said.

More than one-fourth of Rhode Islanders bought fewer healthy foods and vegetables due to rising prices, according to RI Life Index data. Half of those surveyed said higher prices have resulted in them altogether buying less food.

“It’s not that they don’t want to buy those foods. It’s just they’re really expensive right now,” Tovar said.

For families with young children who may not have developed a palate for healthier food choices, buying pricey produce can feel like a splurge.

“If you try introducing broccoli multiple times over time, they might learn to like it. But, of course, when you put that in the context of food insecurity, it’s very different. Parents are like, ‘I’m not going to waste food. I can barely make ends meet,’” Tovar said.

There are some ways people can still access nutritious food, even in the face of inflation and cuts to government assistance, said Maya Vadiveloo, an associate professor in the department of nutrition at the University of Rhode Island.

There are some practical steps people can take to save money and eat healthy foods. Buying freeze-dried vegetables and fruit, which are still packed with nutrients, is one example, said Vadiveloo. Opting for dried beans, a plant source of protein, instead of canned beans is another.

And there is, of course, bulk shopping – if you have the storage space – using coupons and taking advantage of incentive programs such as [Eat Well, Be Well](#), which gives SNAP users 50 cents back for every dollar spent on produce.

Some of it, however, may come down to recalibrating what someone considers to be healthy eating. In many cultures, meat is considered a nutritious choice, while cheaper plant-based protein alternatives may offer similar benefits.

“You can absolutely have a healthy diet that’s affordable, but it does require some planning and budgeting and really sort of making sure that what you consider healthy is more in alignment with the sort of plant sources which tend to be also more affordable,” Vadiveloo said.