



National
Clothing Insecurity
Awareness Day | SEPTEMBER 15

The missing basic need

What Clothing Insecurity Reveals About America's Affordability Crisis

National Virtual Forum | September 15, 2026 | 12 -1 pm ET

Moderated by **CNN's Erica Hill**



Thirty clothing banks. **Seventeen** states.

One message from the field.

More children need clothing.

The need is growing.

Programs are in place, and are trying to keep up

This is the first coast-to-coast field report from clothing banks doing the work every day. They are collecting donations, sorting and sizing them, setting up appointments or creating outfits into wardrobe sets. They are buying what is missing and helping more children every year whose families are struggling to keep up.

Demand has not inched up slowly.

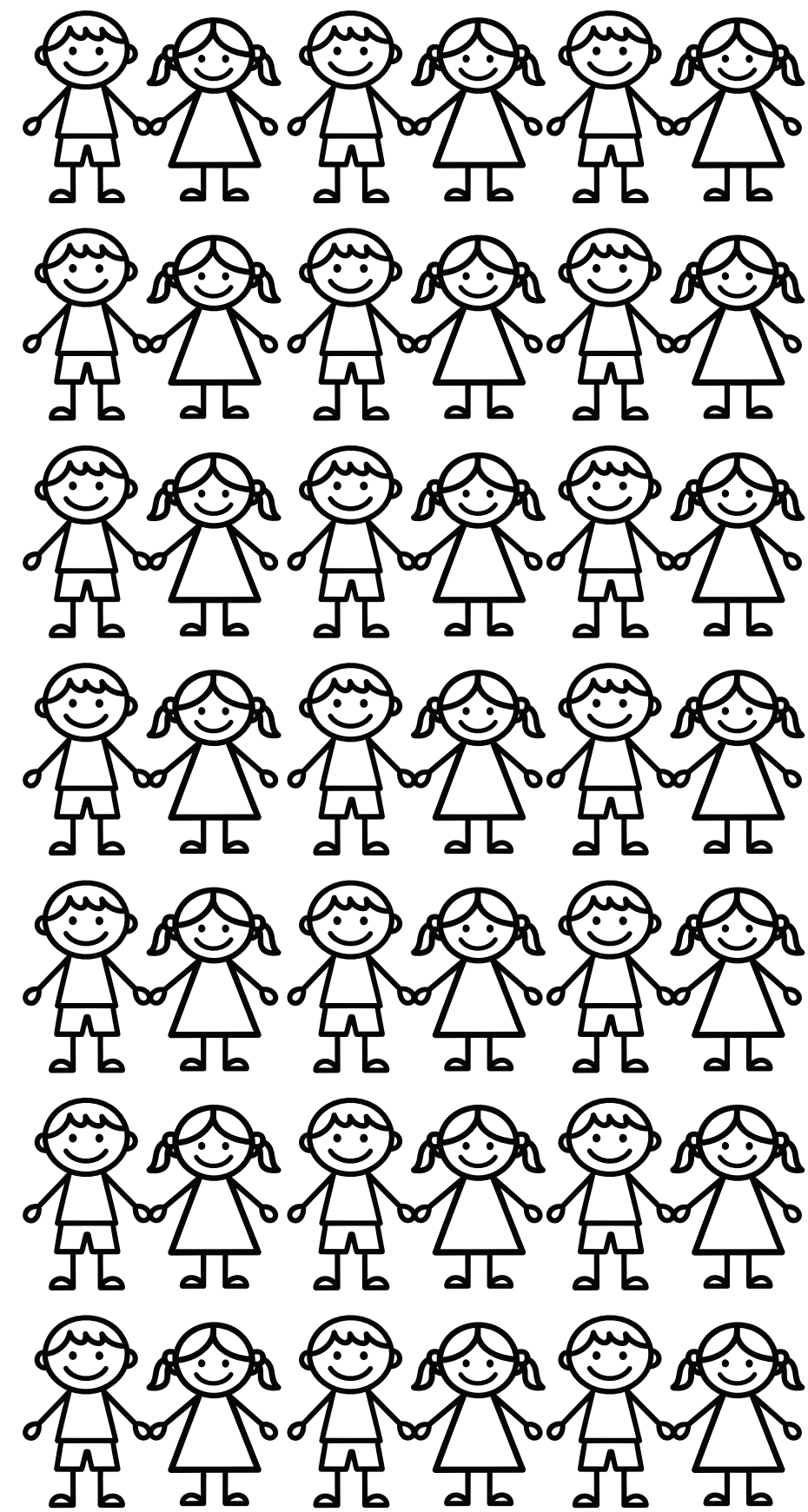
Over the last 5 years, it has surged.

We asked clothing banks across the country to let us know how many (combined) infants, children, teens and young adults they served or how many infants, children, teens or young adults requested clothing each year over five years, from 2021 through 2025. For those programs who track this information, the results were startling.

78%
Median increase
in the number
of children in need of clothing

144% - 574%
6 highest rates of increase
in the number of children
in need of clothing

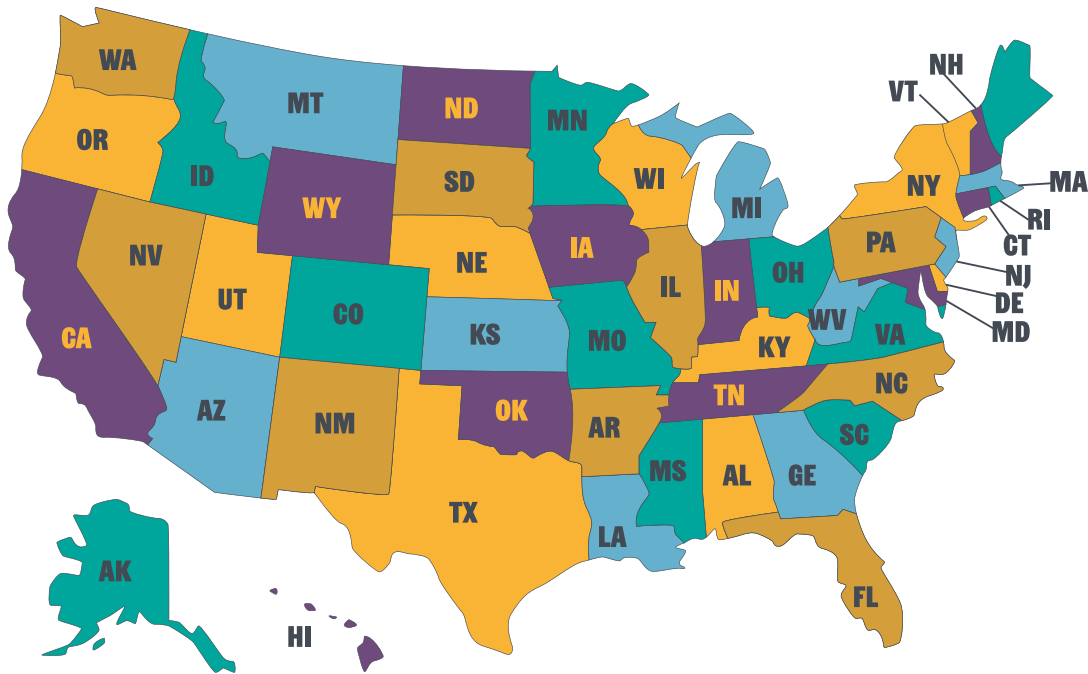
Every percentage is a child who may not have had a winter coat, whose pants were too small, with sneakers that were worn through, whose family is choosing which bill gets paid first.



The pattern of more children who need is in communities across the country.

The national pattern is clear. More children and more families are relying on clothing banks to meet this basic need.

Some programs measure their work by clothing appointments, where children and their families shop. Others by requests submitted by a community partner such as a school, social service, or government service provide. Some offer direct services where families can visit or apply directly.



574%

Increase in requests for
clothing in 5 years
Boxes of Basics
Manassas, VA

356%

Increase in requests for
clothing in 5 years
Sharia's Closet
San Diego, CA

235%

Increase in shopping
visits in 5 years
Community Clothes
Closet
Menasha, WI

178%

Increase in requests &
shopping
visits in 5 years
The Sharing Shelf
Westchester County, NY

144%

Increase in requests &
shopping
visits in 5 years
Give Like a Mother
Cincinnati, OH

While there are different ways of reaching children facing clothing insecurity, it's the same human reality: more children and teens showing up, more families asking for help, more clothing banks stretching past capacity.

Percentages do not tell the real story.

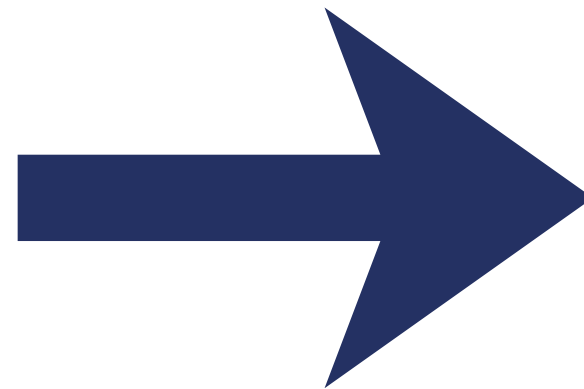
It's critical to look at the growth in the number of children who were in need of and received free clothing.

While not all programs surveyed had five years of data or had the capacity to track the number of children in need, the 15 programs with this information reveal a startling change.

2021

54,658

number of children
in need of clothing
across 15 programs



2025

140,612

number of children
in need of clothing
across 15 programs



For the 15 organizations who measured the number of children who needed clothing from 2021-2025, there was an increase of **89,964 children** over five years.

We are not seeing the true extent of the growth of children facing clothing insecurity.

The growth in the number of children in need of clothing is undercounted. Between 2021 and 2025, 14 programs in the survey reported that they had to reduce capacity and restrict requests or shopping visits because demand outstripped their ability to remain present.

The current size of our organization (staffing/volunteers and physical plant) can't accommodate a dramatic increase.

Jill Huynh, Give Like A Mother

We are continually challenged to ensure we have a supply of high-quality clothing in a full array of sizes

Kathy Ellis, The Sharing Shelf

We don't have the space to host all the things [we need] so we have to make choices on what to keep every single day.

Karissa Buck, Community Clothes Closet

We had to pause our request levels at end of 2024 in face of unrelenting need. Had we continued, we would be serving more than double the children in 2025 than in 2021.

Susan Elnicki, Note in the Pockett

Gently Used Inventory Drives Clothing Insecurity Response

We asked programs to estimate what percentage of their inventory comes from in-kind used items. All but one responding programs relies on gently used (in-kind) items to meet clothing needs. That single program uses solely new items.

90%

27 of the 30 programs who responded rely on gently used clothing to **meet at least 50%** of their clothing needs

60%

19 of the 30 programs who responded rely on gently used clothing to **meet at least 70%** of their clothing needs



Gently used donations aren't a supplement for most programs; they're the primary way clothing insecurity gets addressed.

Purchasing New Items Is Essential and Increasingly Necessary.

We asked programs whether they purchase new items and, if they do, did they had to increase those purchases in the last five years due to demand or gaps in donated inventory. These responses reveal that gently used donations alone can't meet demand, and most programs are buying more, not less.

90%

Purchasing is the norm, not the exception: 27 of 30 programs still need to purchase items to fully meet the needs of the children they serve.

67%

Increased their spending over the last 5 years as demand on their programs has grown.



Gently used inventory eases the burden, but it isn't a solution on its own. The rising demand is pushing programs to spend more just to keep up.

Programs are stretched thin and their supplies, space, and funding are not keeping pace with the number of children facing clothing insecurity

Programs were asked to describe their biggest challenges. They cited that they struggle to keep a full range of sizes and high-demand items in stock, especially core items like socks, underwear, coats, and shoes.



The challenges they cited most:

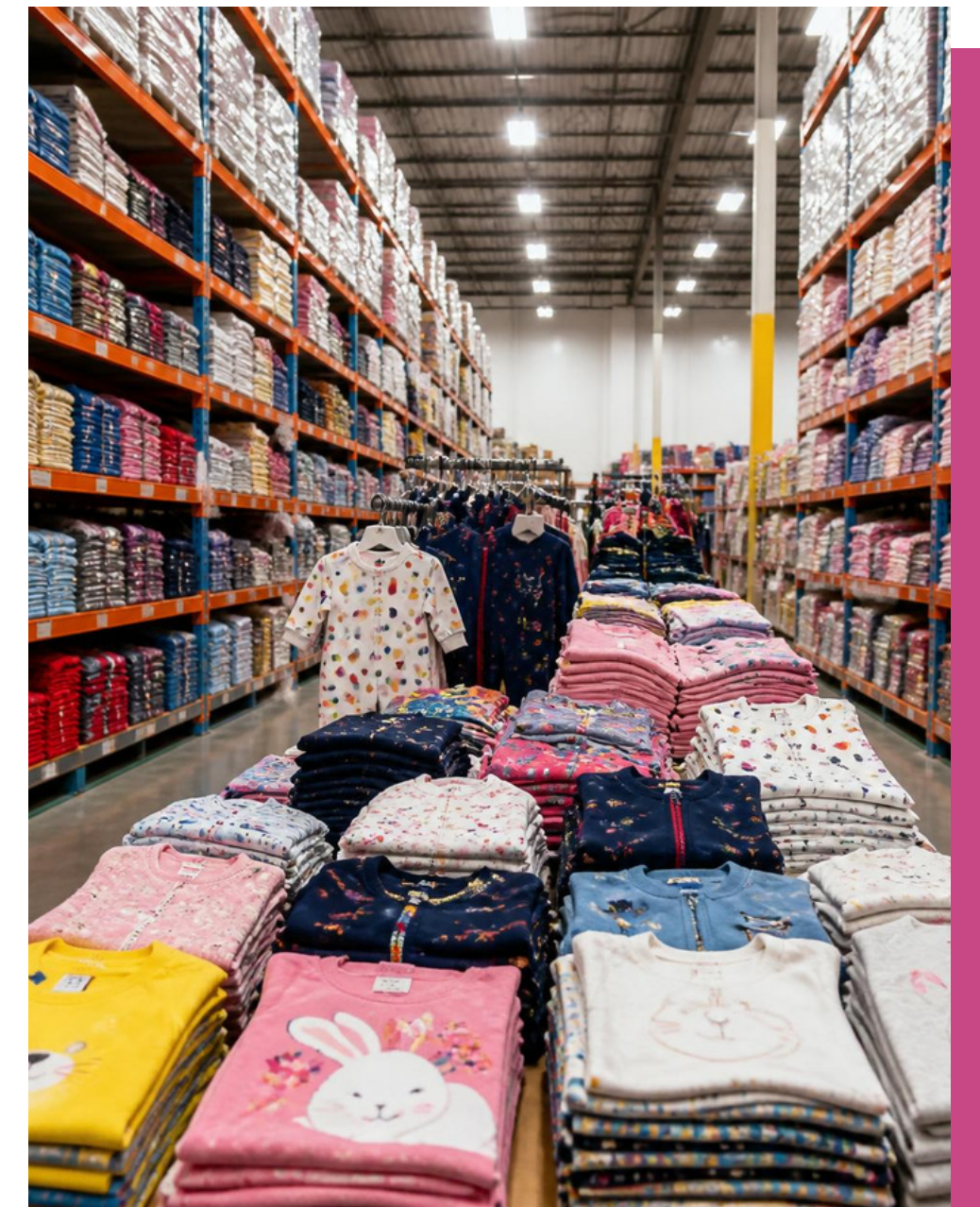
- **Maintaining a consistent, quality inventory** was reported by nearly half of the programs
- **Sufficient funding** to hire more staff and purchase more clothing, coupled with the increased cost of clothing. Multiple programs reported they scaled back purchasing frequency because of funding constraints.
- **Limited space and capacity.** Organizations lack the physical plant, storage, or affordable rent needed to grow to meet the need or to hold enough inventory.

Nearly half of all challenges cited trace back to inventory but funding, space, and staffing gaps compound the problem at every turn.

The hardest items for programs to find and stock are the ones children need most

Programs were asked which items are most difficult to keep in stock or consistently supply. Here are their responses.

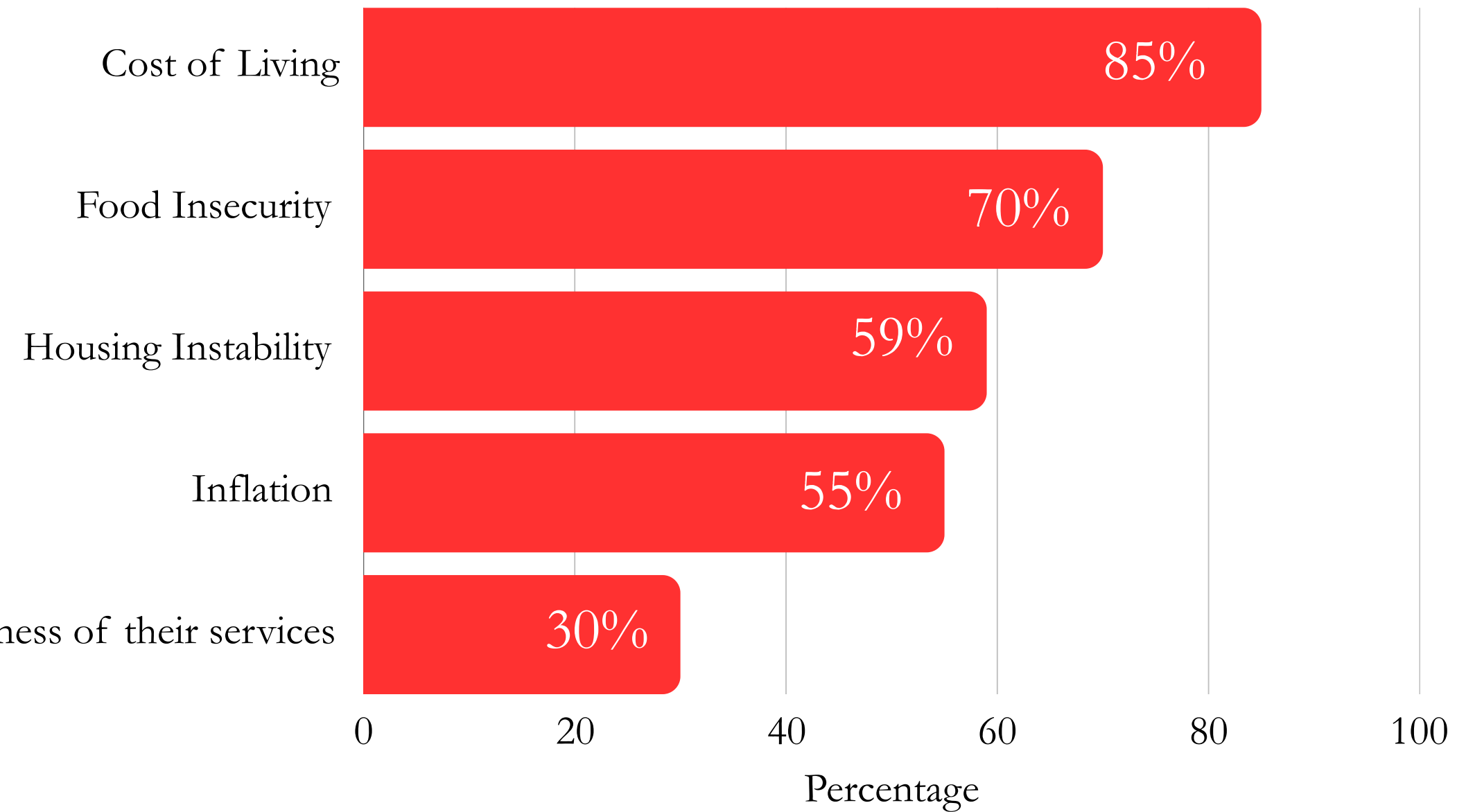
56%	Shoes/Sneakers
48%	Pants/J Jeans
48%	Underwear
30%	Teen clothing (adult sizes/teen styles)
26%	Coats/outerwear
22%	Socks



Children need shoes to walk in, sneakers for gym class and to play, clean underwear and socks, pants for every day, coats to protect them when temperatures drop. Yet clothing banks surveyed report that they do not have enough of these basics. Teens need clothing as much as younger children, yet clothing in their size and in suitable styles are some of the most difficult items to stock.

Affordability is the dominant reported driver of demand

Clothing-bank leaders connected the increase in number of children who need clothing to the same pressures families describe across the household budget - the cost of living. While some programs are reaching more families through better outreach, the data shows the rise in clothing insecurity is being driven primarily by economic hardship and not simply increased awareness of services.



Quality Matters as Much as Quantity.

Clothing Insecurity Isn't Solved by "Something"

We asked programs what they wished funders, policymakers, and the public understood about clothing insecurity. clothing banks consistently emphasized that not just any clothing works. Children need clothing that fits well, fits in, and recognizes and restores their dignity.

- **Fit and quality drive dignity and confidence:** Respondents were clear that clean, well-fitting, appropriately-sized clothing directly impacts a child's confidence, self-esteem, and sense of belonging and not just their physical comfort.
- **“Something is better than nothing” is false:** One program noted that in-kind donations can sometimes be little more than discards, and that children deserve the dignity of new or like-new items and not simply whatever is available.
- **Clothing shapes school participation and success:** Multiple respondents linked ill-fitting or worn clothing directly to lower school attendance, reduced classroom participation, and negative impacts on a child's self-image among peers.
- **Style and fit affect social belonging:** Beyond meeting a basic need, appropriate clothing helps children fit in with their classmates. It reduces stigma and supports their emotional wellbeing, and not just their physical needs.

For children, clothing isn't just about coverage - it's about confidence. The quality, fit, and style of clothing for children are essential to restoring dignity.

Clothing is not an optional extra.

Listen to their words. This is what they want you to know.

“When families are struggling to afford food, housing, transportation and other necessities, clothing is often one of the first needs pushed aside.”

Shamine Linton | Sharia's Closet | California

“This a very real situation right in our own communities. It's a hidden crisis not often spoken about.”

Kelly Hennessey | Seeds of Love Outreach | Florida

“Whenever someone goes to school, work, a food bank or an appointment with a caseworker, they have to wear clothing.

What we do is not cosmetic; it's critical.”

Marjie Siegfried-Stubber | Northland Clothing Center | Missouri

“Just as children cannot focus on school when they are hungry, they cannot actively participate when their clothing is worn, dirty, ill-fitting or inappropriate for the season.”

Kathy Ellis | The Sharing Shelf | New York

“When the community shows up with their hands, their hearts, and their resources, children get more than just clothing - they get confidence and hope.”

Susan Elnicki | Note in the Pocket | Note in the Pocket

“Clothing insecurity is about more than having something to wear—it directly affects a person's dignity, confidence, health, and ability to participate in everyday life. Access to clean, properly fitting, seasonally appropriate clothing and shoes can make the difference in whether someone feels prepared to attend school, go to work, interview for a job, or simply feel comfortable in their community.”

Beth Barker | Compassionate Sharing | Oklahoma

“Clothing is a basic need. You can't walk around naked, and when someone finds something that they feel confident and comfortable in - that can change everything.”

Karissa Buck | Community Clothes Closet | Wisconsin

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Amy's Armoire, Barre, VT
Another Chance of Ohio, Cleveland, OH
Boxes of Basics, Manassas, VA
Cherie Hoffman, St. Paul, MN
Clothes to Kids Denver, Denver, CO
Clothes To Kids of Fairfield County, Fairfield County, CT
Community Clothes Closet, Menasha, WI
Compassionate Sharing, Yukon, OK
Foggy's Closet, Winchester, VA
Give Like A Mother, Cincinnati, OH
Help Center Inc.- Sacks Thrift, Bozeman, MT
Kids In Crisis, Cos Cob, CT
Lilburn Coop, Lilliburn, GA
Little Hands Virginia, Richmond, VA
Loaves and Fishes New Haven, New Haven, CT

Nashville Dream Center, Nashville, TN
Neighbor to Neighbor, Greenwich, CT
Northland Clothing Center, Kansas City, MO
Note in the Pocket, Wake & Durham Counties, NC
Presbyterian Social Ministries, Jacksonville, FL
Project Ropa, Los Angeles, CA
Seeds of Love Outreach, Fleming Island, FL
Sharia's Closet, San Diego, CA
Somebody Loves Me, Bristol, TN
Teen & Kid Closet, Spokane, WA
The Clothesline for Arlington Kids, Arlington, VA
The Community Space, Whitewater, WI
The Dressing Room, Ashland, KY
The Sharing Shelf, Westchester County, NY
Threads & Treads, Bothell, WA

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