

Effective Paths to Alleviating Food Insecurity Among Older Americans

Craig Gundersen
University of Illinois

Soybean Industry Endowed Professor of Agricultural Strategy,
Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics



Reasons for Looking at Food Insecurity

- Serious consequences
 - in own right
 - negative health outcomes
- Not completely characterized by income
- The central goal of USDA is to alleviate food insecurity

The Measurement of Food Insecurity in the United States

Definitions of Categories of Food Insecurity

- A household is placed into food security categories based on responses to 18 questions on the Core Food Security Module (CFSM)
- Examples of questions
 - “I worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more”
 - “Did you or the other adults in your household ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn’t enough money for food”
 - “Were you ever hungry but did not eat because you couldn’t afford enough food”
 - “In the last 12 months did you or other adults in your household ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn’t enough money for food?”

Definitions of Food Insecurity Categories

- Marginally food insecure (Facing threat of hunger)
 - 1 or more affirmative responses to CFSM
- Food insecure (At-risk of hunger)
 - 3 or more affirmative responses to CFSM
- Very low food secure (Hunger)
 - 8 or more affirmative responses to CFSM (households with children)
 - 6 or more affirmative responses to CFSM (households without children)

Extent of Senior Hunger

Figure 1. Trends in Threat of Senior Hunger

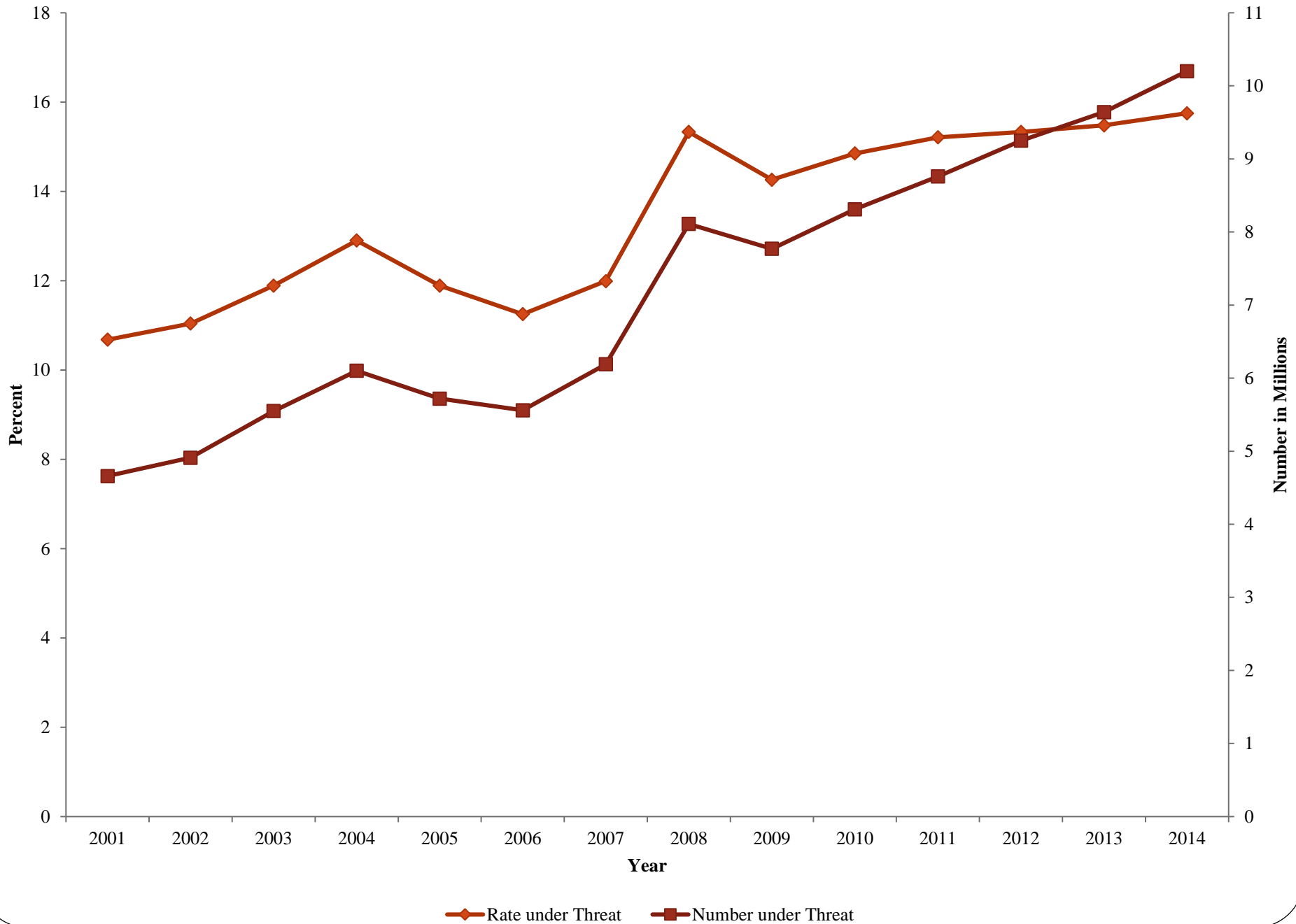


Figure 2. Trends in Threat of Senior Hunger by Metropolitan Status

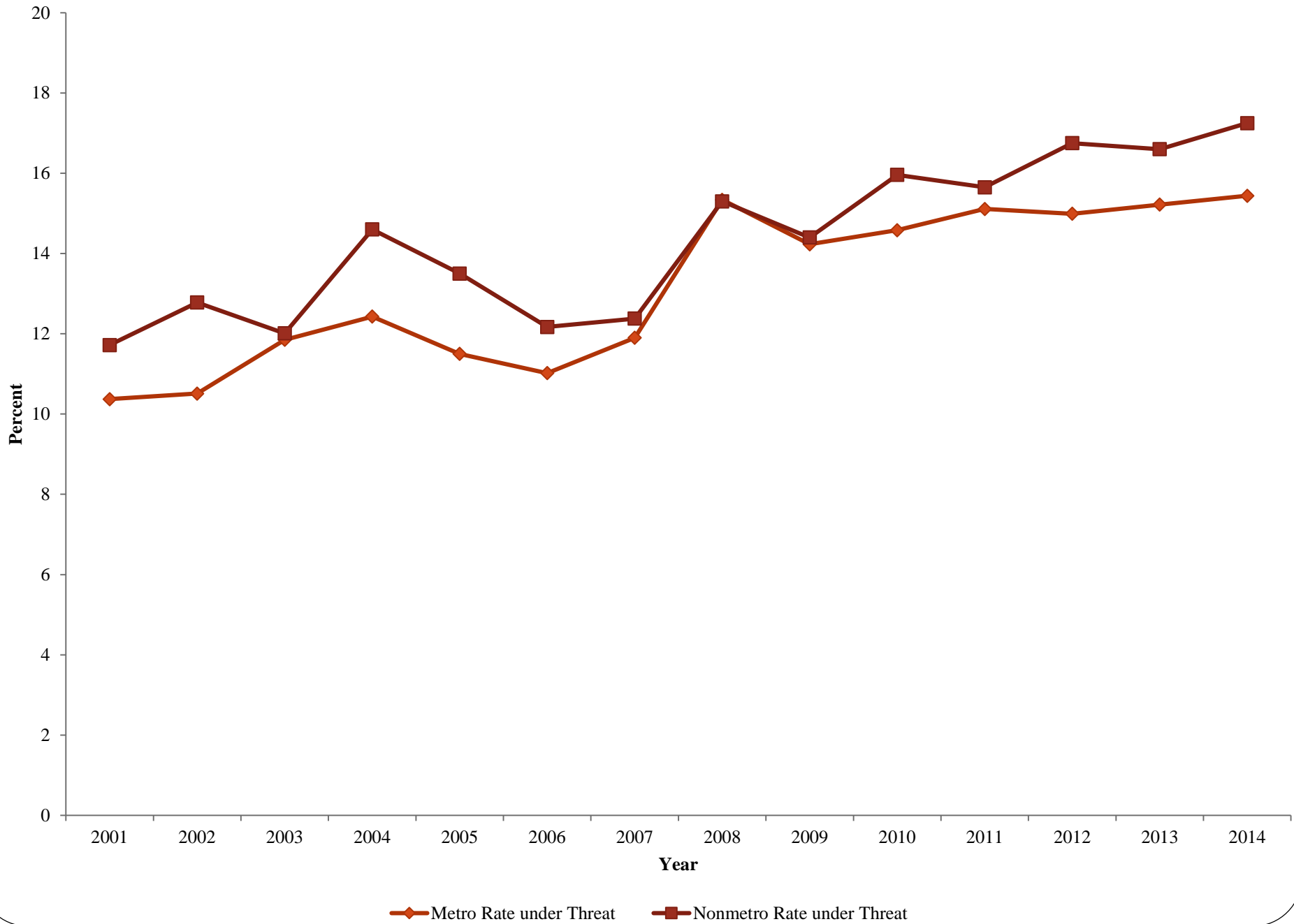


Figure 3. Trends in Threat of Senior Hunger by Race

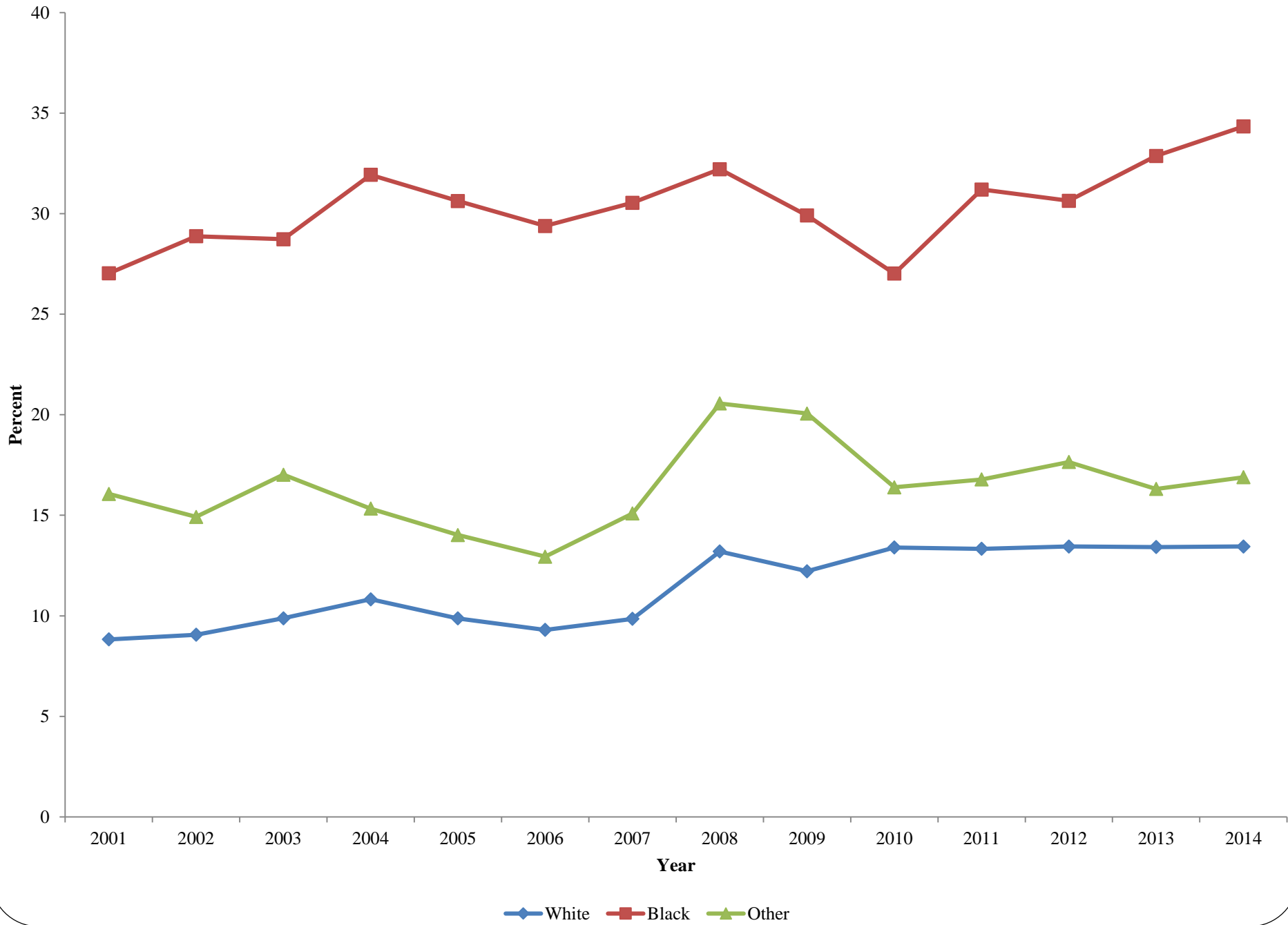


Figure 4. Trends in Threat of Senior Hunger by Hispanic Ethnicity

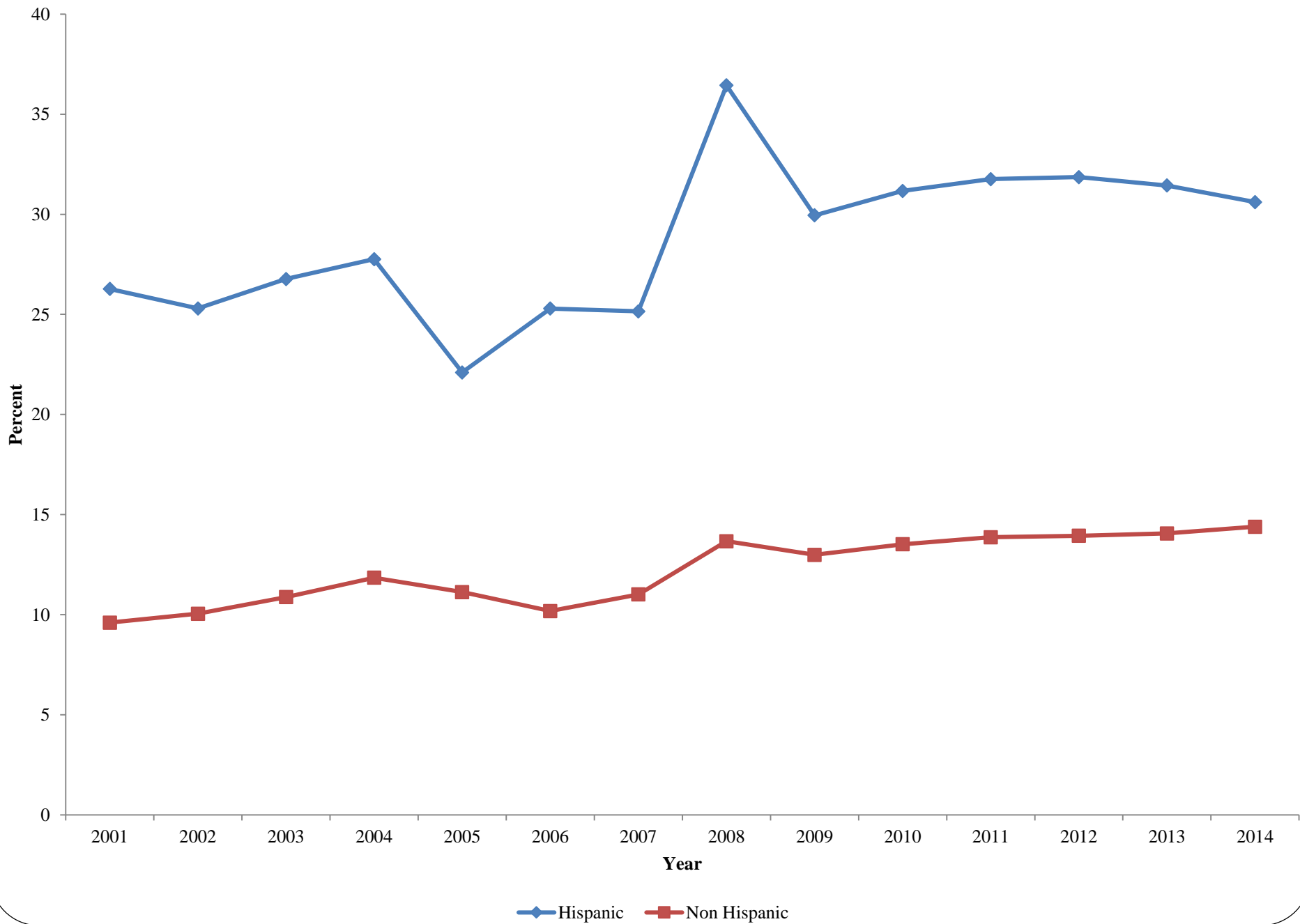


Figure 5. Trends in Threat of Senior Hunger by Age

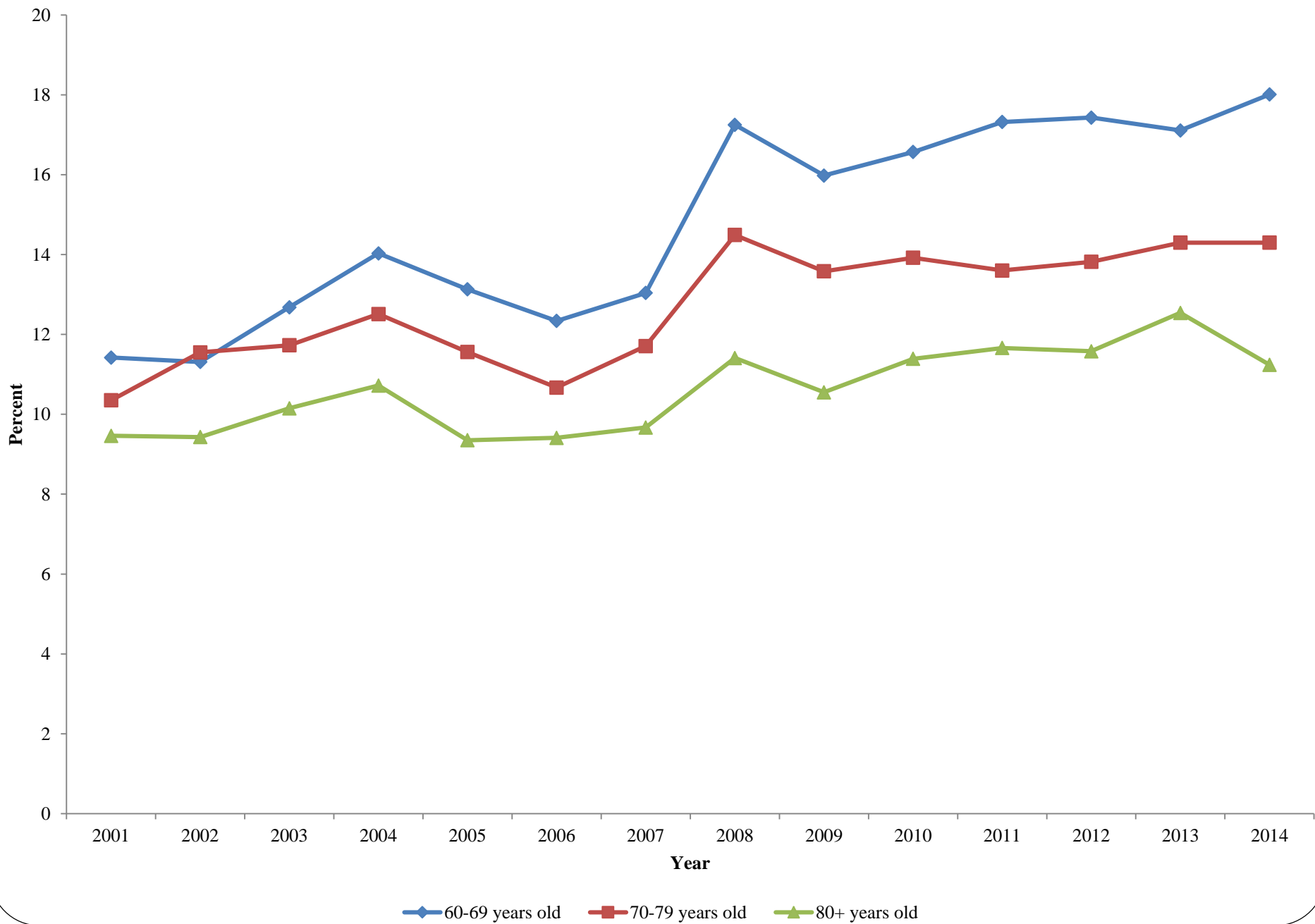
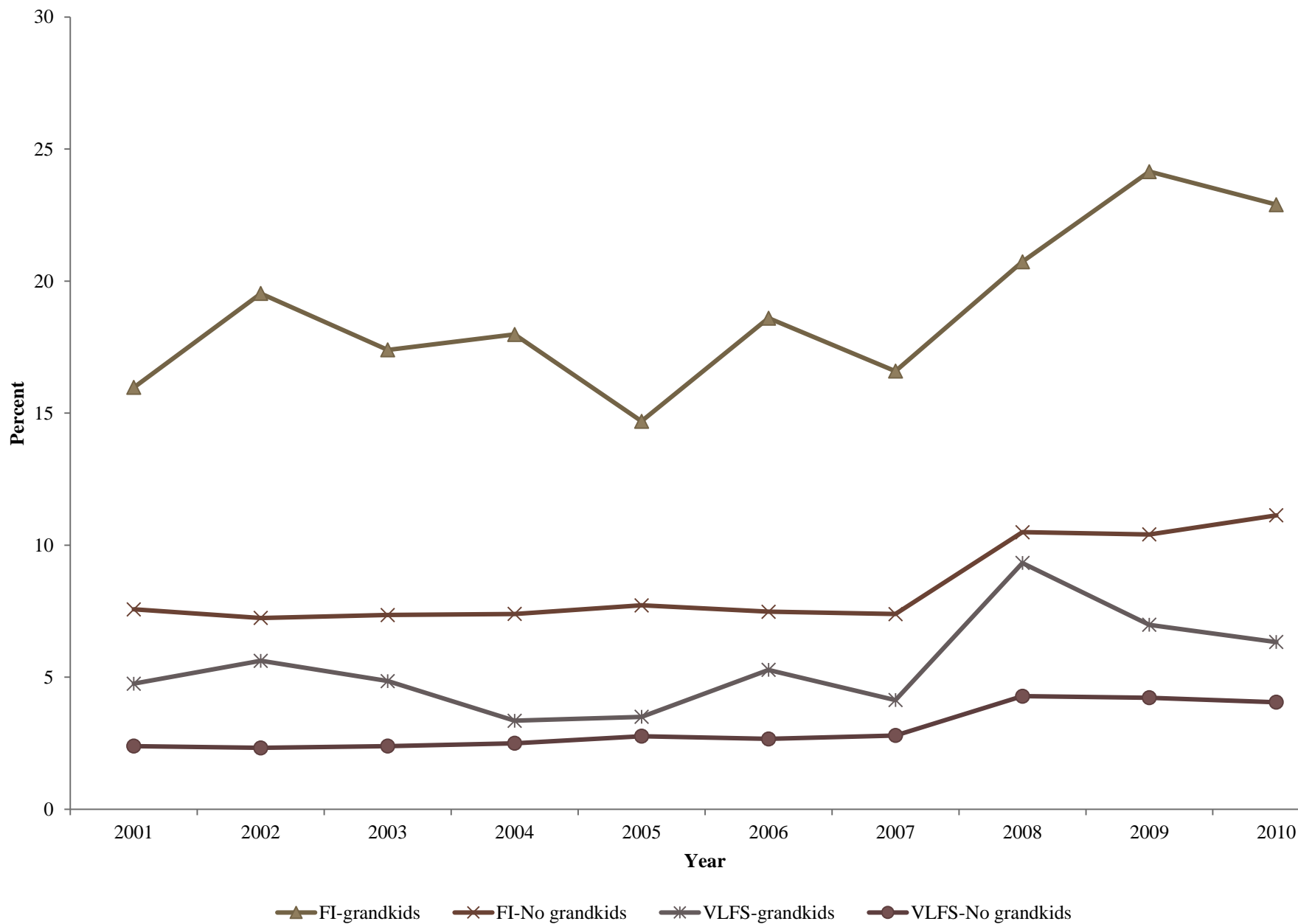
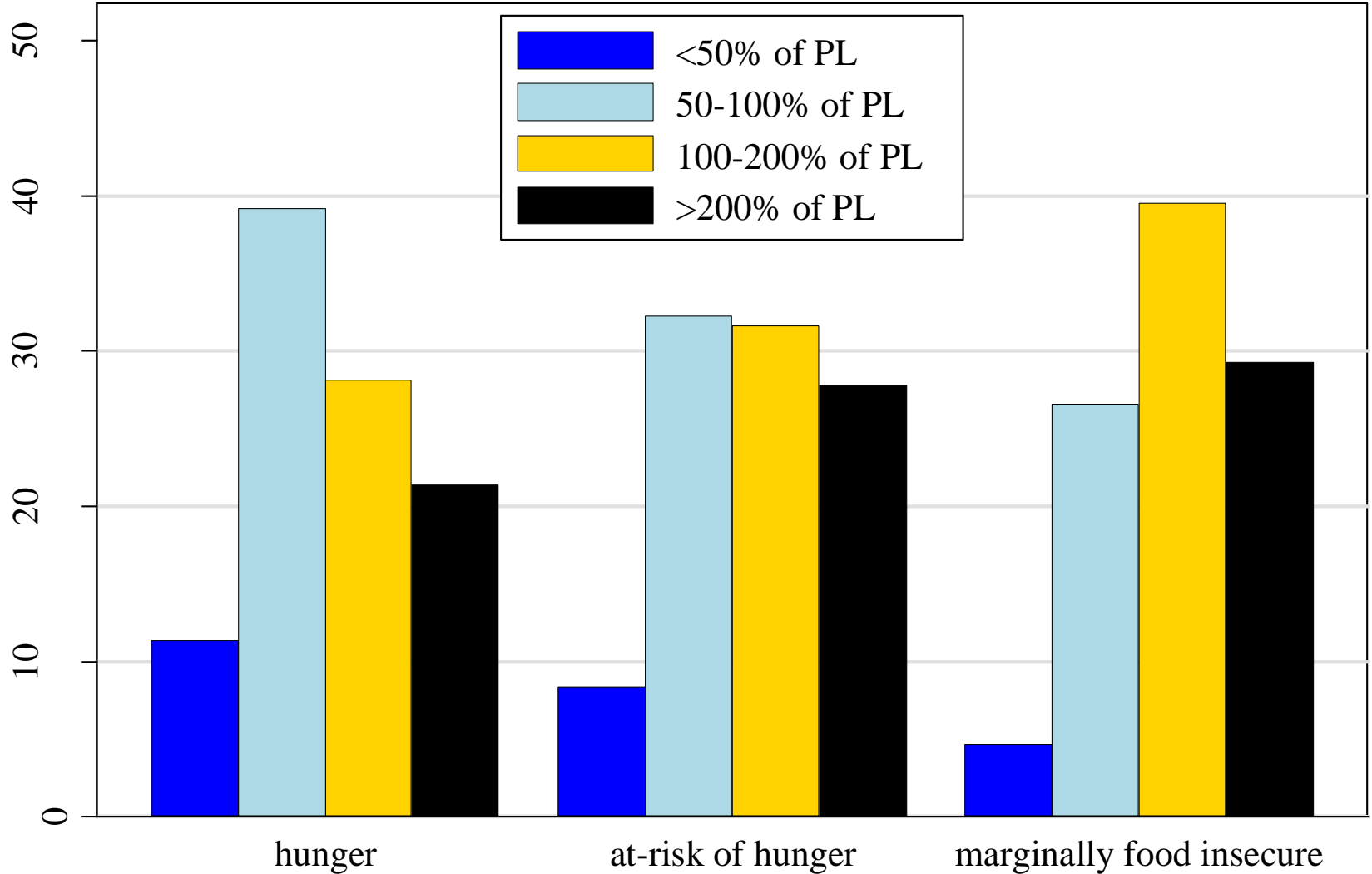


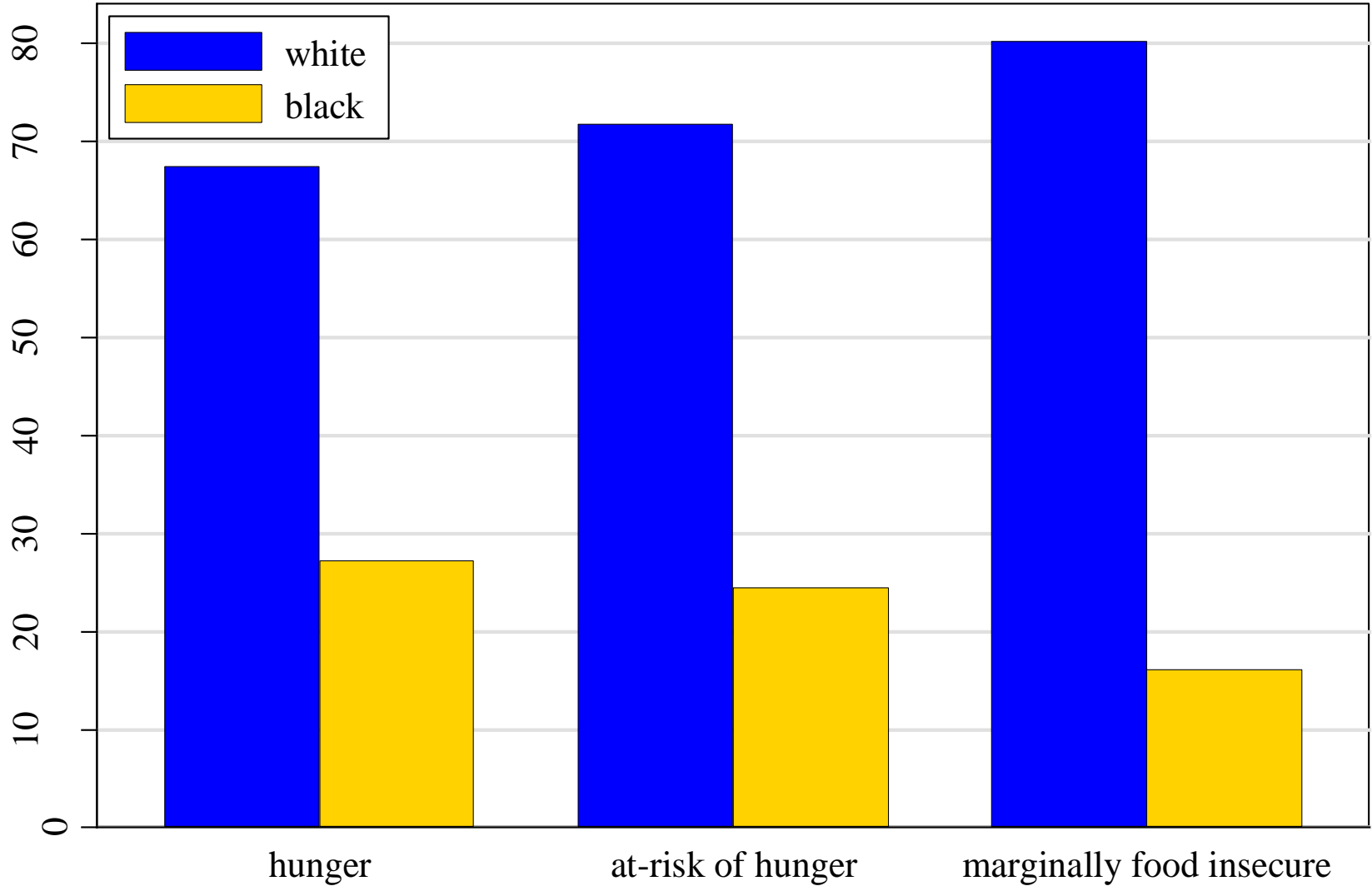
Figure 5. Food Insecurity among Householders Age 40+ with and without Grandchildren Present

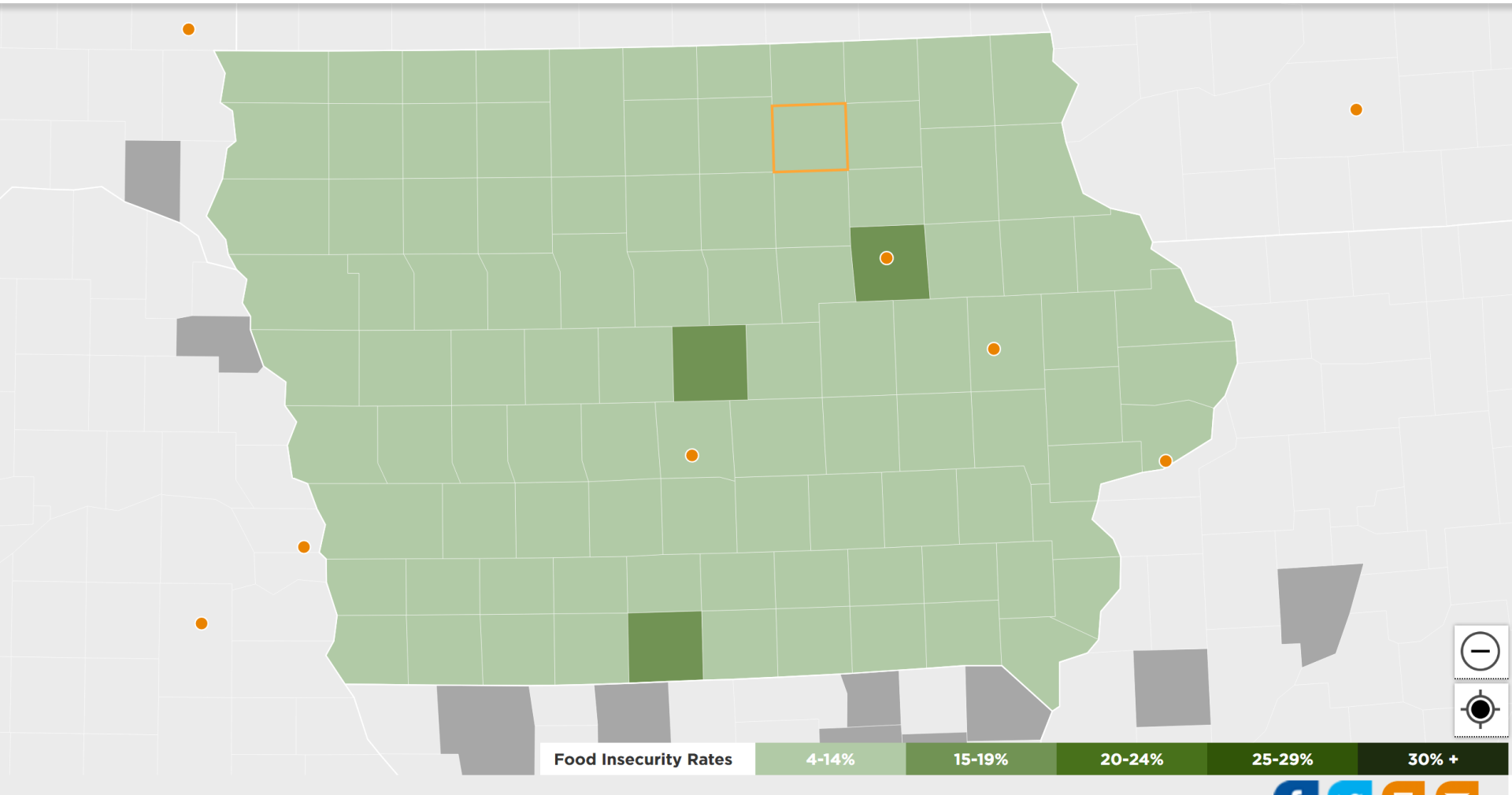


Distribution of Income Groups By Hunger Categories



Distribution of Race Categories By Hunger Categories





Determinants of Senior Hunger

Determinants of Food Insecurity

- Resources
 - Lower incomes
 - Low levels of education
 - Not a homeowner
 - Being unemployed
 - Not receiving child support
 - Lack of access to social capital
 - Declines in asset levels
 - Non-working teenagers
 - High food prices

Determinants of Food Insecurity

- Household structure
 - Having someone with a disability in the household
 - Being in a single-parent household
 - Immigrants in household
 - Having a non-custodial father who does not visit regularly
 - Older children
 - More children
 - Not having a grandparent in the household
 - Having a grandchild in the household
 - Changes in household composition

Determinants of Food Insecurity

- Race/ethnicity
 - Household head is non-Hispanic black
 - Household head is non-Hispanic
 - Household head is American Indian
- Other
 - Having a parent who was ever incarcerated
 - Lack of financial management skills
 - Being at high risk of homelessness
 - Summertime
 - Not speaking English in the home
 - Having a cigarette smoker in the home
 - Changes in residence
 - Declines in child health
 - Declines in mental health

Specifically for Seniors

- Controlling for other factors we find that food insecurity is more likely among older adults
 - Living at or below the poverty line
 - Without a high school degree
 - Who are African-American or Hispanic
 - Who are divorced or separated
 - Who have a grandchild living in the household
 - Who are younger
 - Who are socially isolated

Health

Consequences of

Food Insecurity

Health Consequences Associated with Food Insecurity

- **Adults**

- lower nutrient intakes
- mental health problems
- diabetes
- hypertension
- hyperlipidemia
- poor outcomes on health exams
- being in poor or fair health
- poor sleep outcomes
- depression
- having limitations in activities of daily living

In comparison to fully food secure households, very low food secure households have 121% higher health care costs

Figure 2. Regression-Adjusted Estimates of the Effect of Food Insecurity on Nutrient Intakes of Seniors 60+ (Percent Change Relative to Average of Food Secure Seniors)

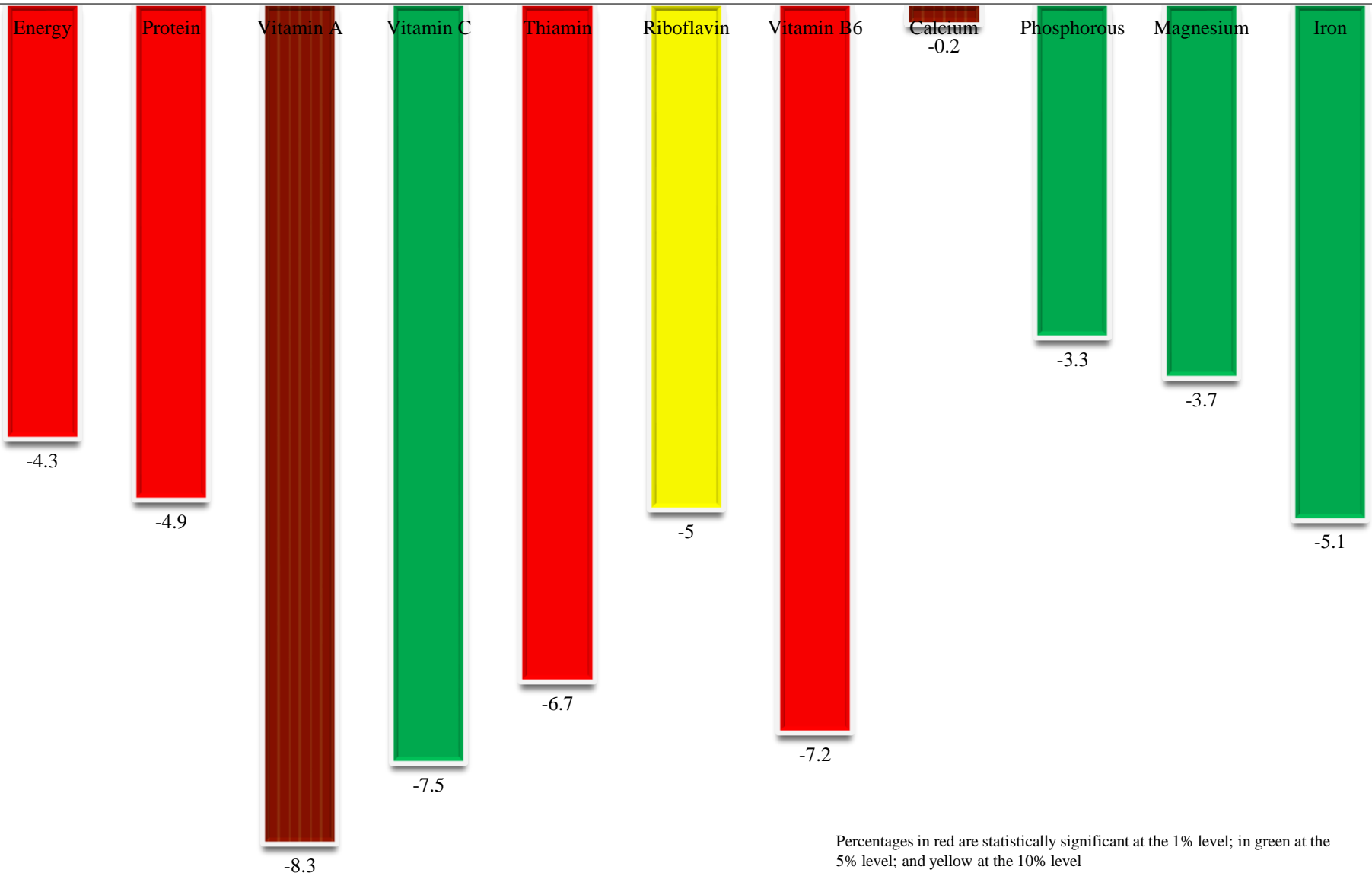
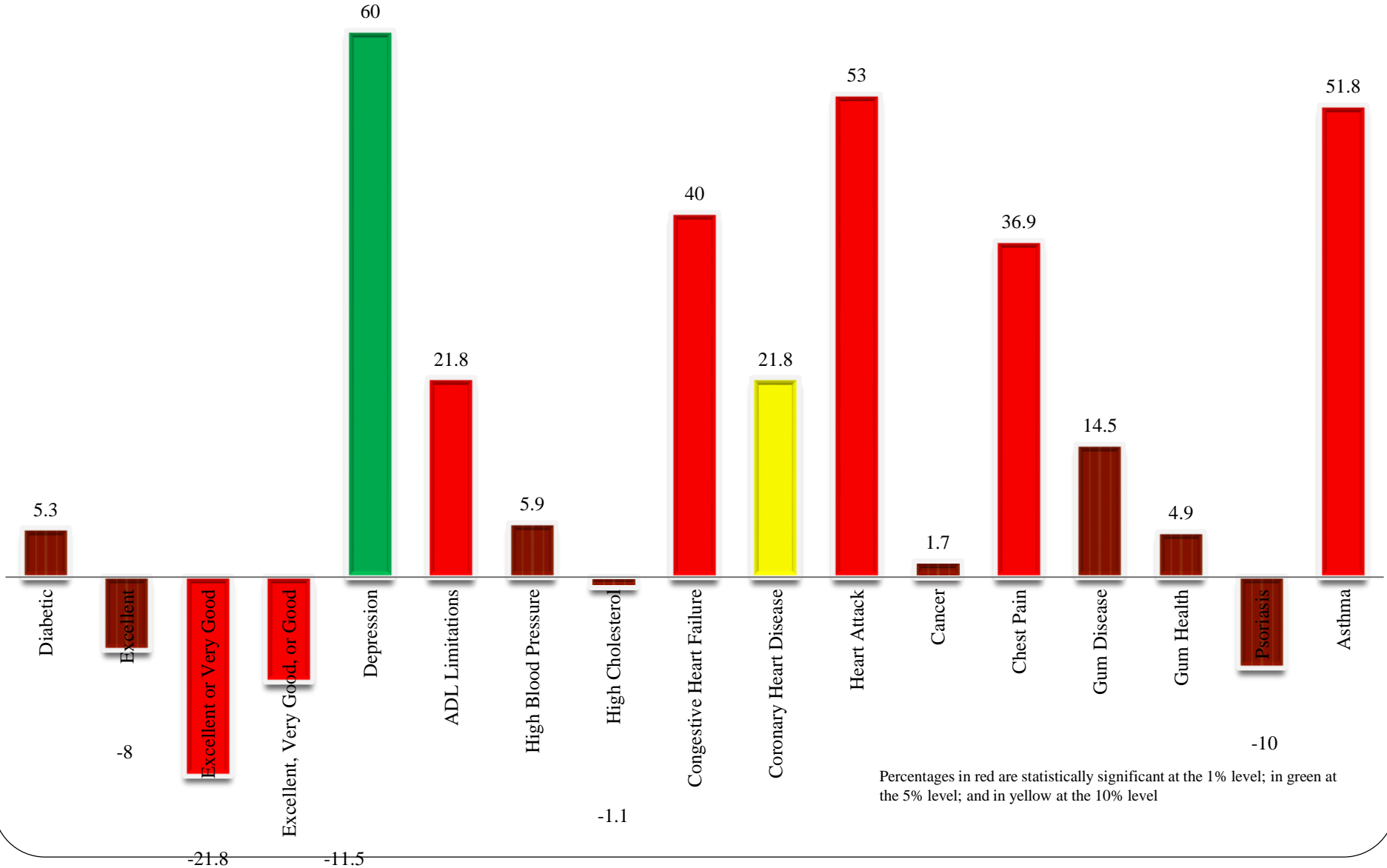


Figure 3. Regression-Adjusted Estimates of the Effect of Food Insecurity on Health Outcomes of Seniors 60+ (Percent Change Relative to Average of Food Secure Seniors)



Alleviating Food Insecurity

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

- Primary goal is to alleviate hunger
- Benefit levels
 - function of income and family size
 - maximum benefit level is \$642 for a family of four
 - average benefit level is about \$300 for a family of four
- Size of program
 - serves almost 42 million persons
 - total cost is about \$72 billion per year
- Eligibility criteria
 - gross income test
 - net income test
 - asset test
- Enormously successful
 - SNAP recipients are 20% less likely than eligible non-recipients to be food insecure

Importance of SNAP for Seniors

- SNAP is designed to help people across the age spectrum
 - For older Americans, only large scale nutrition program
- SNAP has a positive effect on nutrition and food security
 - Empirical evidence
 - Presumption of program
- Increased emphasis on SNAP as nutrition program for seniors
 - Phasing out of other programs
 - Increased outreach to elderly
 - Less strict eligibility criteria

Why are Participation Rates Lower?

- Possible explanations
 - Diminished need for SNAP
 - Stigma
 - Transactions costs
 - Low benefit levels
- Still, differences are largely unexplained
- Consider two other explanations
 - Reductions in income volatility among older Americans
 - Greater experience with SNAP over time

Ways to Improve SNAP for Seniors

- Encouraging participation may require different strategies by age
 - Over 60
 - Between 40 and 60
- Address barriers for grandparents raising grandchildren
 - Entering program
 - Benefit levels
- Reevaluate minimum benefit levels

Key Threats to SNAP

- Block grants
- Restrictions
 - who participates
 - drug testing
 - work requirements
 - purchases

Restrictions in Purchases

- Direct consequences
 - Increased stigma
 - Patronizing
 - Increased food prices
 - Reductions in SNAP outlets
- Indirect consequences
 - Increased food insecurity
 - No change in obesity – perhaps increase
- SNAP is not like WIC
 - Nor do we want it to be
- Beware of “experiments”

Other Interventions to Help Seniors

- Reach out to the socially isolated
- Help those with mobility issues
- Recognize importance of informal food assistance programs
 - As substitute for SNAP
 - Many seniors in need are ineligible
 - Some seniors in need decide to not receive SNAP
 - As complement to SNAP
 - Benefits received may not be sufficient to avoid food insecurity
 - Can be more innovative and responsive