



Map the Meal Gap 2017

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

The USDA estimates that 42 million people, including 13 million children, in the United States were food insecure in 2015. That means 1 in 8 individuals (13.4%), and 1 in 6 children (17.9%), lived in households without consistent access to adequate food. Compared to the previous year, the estimated number of individuals who were food insecure in 2015 declined significantly from 48 million (15.4%), continuing a downward trend in food insecurity from a high of more than 50 million (16.6%) in 2009, the last year of the Great Recession.

Despite improvements in recent years, food insecurity and poverty remain higher than before the recession began in late 2007. And although food insecurity rates have fallen, the need among people who remain food insecure continues to rise. Given that food insecurity can negatively affect the health and well-being of individuals, especially children, the need for charitable and federal nutrition assistance remains substantial. How does that need vary among communities across the country?

ABOUT THE STUDY

For the seventh consecutive year, Feeding America has conducted *Map the Meal Gap* to continue to improve our understanding of how food insecurity and food costs can vary at the local level. We estimate how many people, including children, are food insecure in every county and congressional district in the country. We also estimate how many are likely to qualify for federal nutrition assistance programs based on their incomes, how much money they report needing to buy just enough food, and how food prices vary from county to county. By better understanding variations in local need, communities can develop more targeted strategies to reach people struggling with hunger.

To accurately estimate local food insecurity in every county and congressional district in the United States, we use publicly available local data that research has shown to be associated with food insecurity, including unemployment and poverty, as well as homeownership and median income. Taken together, these factors provide a more complete picture of a community's potential need for food assistance than any one variable can alone. For example, prior to *Map the Meal Gap*, local poverty rates were often used as a proxy for local food insecurity. However, national USDA data reveals that 57% of food-insecure people earn more than the federal poverty level, and 60% of people living in poor households are food secure. For additional information or methodological details, please see the [technical brief](#) and [full report](#) found on map.feedingamerica.org.



More than half of food-insecure people live above the poverty line.

WHAT DID THE STUDY FIND?

FOOD INSECURITY

The results show that every county and congressional district in the U.S. is home to people who struggle with hunger. The average food-insecurity rate across all counties in 2015 was 14% for the overall population, and 21% among children.

The percentage of the population estimated to be food insecure ranges from a high of 38% in Jefferson County, Mississippi to a low of 3% in Grant County, Kansas. Among children, the share estimated to be food insecure at the county level ranges from a high of 41% in Issaquena County, Mississippi to a low of 6% in Cavalier County, North Dakota.



Even in North Dakota, where child food insecurity is lowest, 1 in 11 children may be food insecure.

The prevalence of both overall and child food insecurity across congressional districts spans a similar range. Even in North Dakota, where child food insecurity is the lowest in the nation, an estimated 1 in 11 children (9%) live in food-insecure households.

HIGHEST RATES OF FOOD INSECURITY

Counties with the highest rates of food insecurity, those ranking in the top 10% of all counties, are located predominately in the South and are disproportionately rural. Most of these high-risk counties have experienced persistent poverty, which is defined by the USDA as a county where at least 20% of the population has lived in poverty over the last 30 years. Congressional districts with the highest rates of food insecurity share a similar profile.

LARGEST NUMBERS OF FOOD-INSECURE PEOPLE

As helpful as food-insecurity rates are when measuring the prevalence of need, the absolute number of individuals in need is just as important. In fact, **populous counties with low rates of food insecurity are home to some of the largest numbers of food-insecure people.** For example, Los Angeles County, California has a relatively low rate of food insecurity of 12%, but is home to an estimated 1.2 million food-insecure individuals, including more than 480,000 food-insecure children.

FOOD INSECURITY BY REGION AND RURALITY

The findings show that county food insecurity varies by geographic region and metropolitan status as well. Counties in the South have the highest average food-insecurity rate in the country (16.1%) relative to regional county averages in the West (13.7%), Midwest (12.1%), and Northeast (11.8%) regions. **Counties**

with the highest rates of food insecurity are also disproportionately rural. Rural counties make up 63% of all U.S. counties, but account for 76% of counties with food-insecurity rates that rank in the top 10% of all counties.

FOOD INSECURITY AND INCOME

Federal nutrition assistance programs, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), serve as the first line of defense against hunger. But these programs use income to determine eligibility and not everyone who is food insecure is income-eligible to receive assistance. Using 2015 data from the USDA, we estimate that **26% of food-insecure individuals earn too much to qualify for most federal nutrition assistance programs**, and 20% of food-insecure children live in ineligible households.

26% OF FOOD-INSECURE INDIVIDUALS EARN TOO MUCH TO QUALIFY FOR MOST FEDERAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE.

Even in counties and congressional districts with high rates of food insecurity, large percentages of individuals and children who likely struggle with hunger fall outside the public safety net, underscoring the profound need for both public and private food assistance in every part of the country.



FOOD BUDGET SHORTFALLS AND AVERAGE MEAL COSTS

In addition to estimating food insecurity by income across all counties and congressional districts, we also study how food prices vary across the country, and estimate the level of need among people struggling with hunger.

Using county food price data from Nielsen and national survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau, we estimate how much additional financial support food-insecure individuals report needing (food budget shortfall), and how much it's likely to cost in each county to buy the equivalent of a single meal (average meal cost). Together, this information can be used to approximate the meal equivalent of need among people who are food insecure, at both the national and local level. In 2015, the national "meal gap" was 7.6 billion meals. While not intended to be definitive measures, the concept and estimated cost of a meal provides communities with direction on the scope of need.

FOOD BUDGET SHORTFALL

In 2015, the average amount of money that food-insecure individuals report needing per week is **\$17.38**. When adjusting for inflation, this amount increased 3% between 2014 and 2015.

WHILE THE NUMBER OF FOOD-INSECURE PEOPLE HAS FALLEN, THE NEED AMONG PEOPLE WHO REMAIN FOOD INSECURE CONTINUES TO RISE.

This compares to a growth of 2% on average over the last decade (2006-2015). Because the total number of people estimated to be food insecure has decreased, the total annual food budget shortfall has fallen to \$22.3 billion in 2015.

What the growing individual weekly shortfall suggests, however, is that need among people who remain food insecure continues to rise.

AVERAGE MEAL COST

Food-secure individuals reported spending an average of \$61.74 per week on food in 2015. This amounts to an average cost per meal of **\$2.94**, a slight increase from \$2.89 in 2014. Adjusting the national average meal cost by the relative price of food and local sales taxes, we find that prices vary considerably across the nation, ranging from as little as **\$2.04** in **Maverick County, Texas** to as much as **\$5.61** in **Crook County, Oregon**. For a household struggling to afford housing, utilities, transportation and other basic necessities, the additional burden of high food prices can have a significant impact on a household's budget.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?



The findings from *Map the Meal Gap 2017* shed light on the fact that there are people struggling with hunger in every county and congressional district in the United States.

Although fewer people nationwide are food insecure, the growing food budget shortfall suggests that people in need may be falling further behind. The study also shows that not all food-insecure people qualify for federal nutrition assistance. The charitable sector has stepped in to serve millions of individuals, as well as families who participate in federal programs but whose benefits are inadequate. There are several key areas where these programs and the states that administer them can more effectively address food insecurity.

Improving participation rates among individuals eligible for federal programs like SNAP could help to further reduce food insecurity. Policymakers and administrators could expand the current reach of these programs, especially in rural and remote communities, by improving program access, streamlining requirements for providers and applications for

individuals, and supporting innovative delivery models. Summer food programs in particular could benefit from alternative models such as delivering meals to low-income neighborhoods rather than requiring families to find transportation to a summer site, or allowing families to pick up a week's worth of meals to eat at home rather than requiring children to travel to the site each day.

State governments can do more to ensure vulnerable populations have access to SNAP. Restrictive time limits on those willing to work but unable to find sufficient employment can prevent people in need from receiving SNAP benefits. States should provide able-bodied adults access to training, job placement and volunteer programs, so that they can avoid onerous time limits on the length of time they are allowed to receive SNAP. This will help states ensure that their programs are effectively reaching people in need.

Outside of the support provided through federal programs, Feeding America food banks across the country are also critical sources of food assistance for struggling families. Reducing barriers to donations can help provide excess food to families in need instead of letting it go to waste.

The *Map the Meal Gap* studies are intended to shed light on the issue of food insecurity as a problem facing communities across the country and our society as a whole. Ensuring that food-insecure people have access to adequate and nutritious food may help reduce their risk of developing associated physical and mental health issues, and also improve the strength of the broader community. When people are provided with the social support they need to thrive, everyone benefits. It is our hope that food banks, partner agencies, policymakers, business leaders, community activists and concerned citizens will use this data in their efforts towards ending hunger in America.



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