

Child Food Insecurity



Food insecurity has the potential to be harmful to individuals of any age, but it can be especially devastating to children. The USDA estimates that nearly 13 million children in the United States live in food-insecure households as of 2016.¹ That means that 1 in 6 children (18%) may not have consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.

For the eighth consecutive year, Feeding America has conducted the *Map the Meal Gap* study to improve our understanding of how food insecurity and food costs vary at the local level. By better understanding variations in local need, communities can develop more targeted strategies to reach people struggling with hunger. Included here are findings related to food insecurity among children, one of four related topics that make up the *Map the Meal Gap 2018* report briefs.

13 million

-or-

1/6

children are food insecure.

50

states and D.C. are home to food-insecure children.

85%

of counties with high child food insecurity are rural.

800,000

food-insecure children live in Los Angeles and New York City.

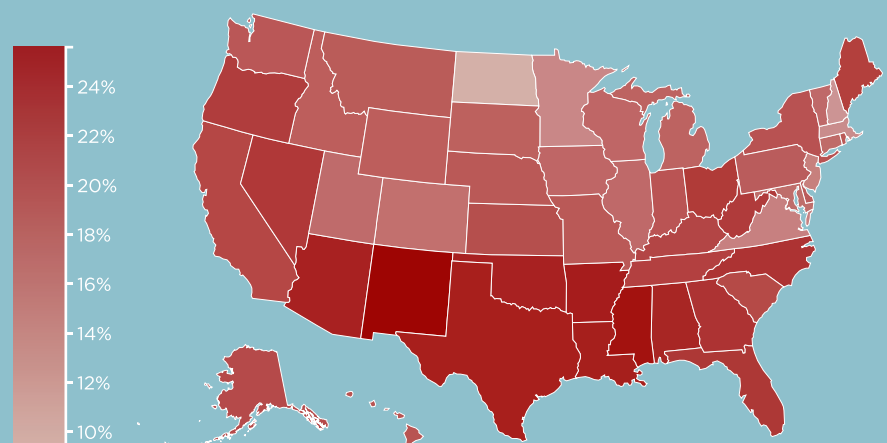
Key Findings

Child Food Insecurity Among States and Congressional Districts

In all 50 states and Washington, D.C., the estimated rate of child food insecurity is higher than the rate of overall food insecurity. Although households with children have slightly larger median incomes on average, they may also experience greater budgetary constraints, due to larger household sizes and the fact that some household members are dependent on caregivers.² Whereas overall food insecurity at the state level ranges from 7% in North Dakota to 20% in Mississippi, rates among children range from 9% in North Dakota to 26% in New Mexico. Among congressional districts, rates of child food insecurity span a similar range—a low of 9% (about 19,000 children) in affluent districts like Virginia’s 10th bordering Washington, D.C., to a high of 29% (more than 51,000 children) in Mississippi’s 2nd, home to the city of Jackson.



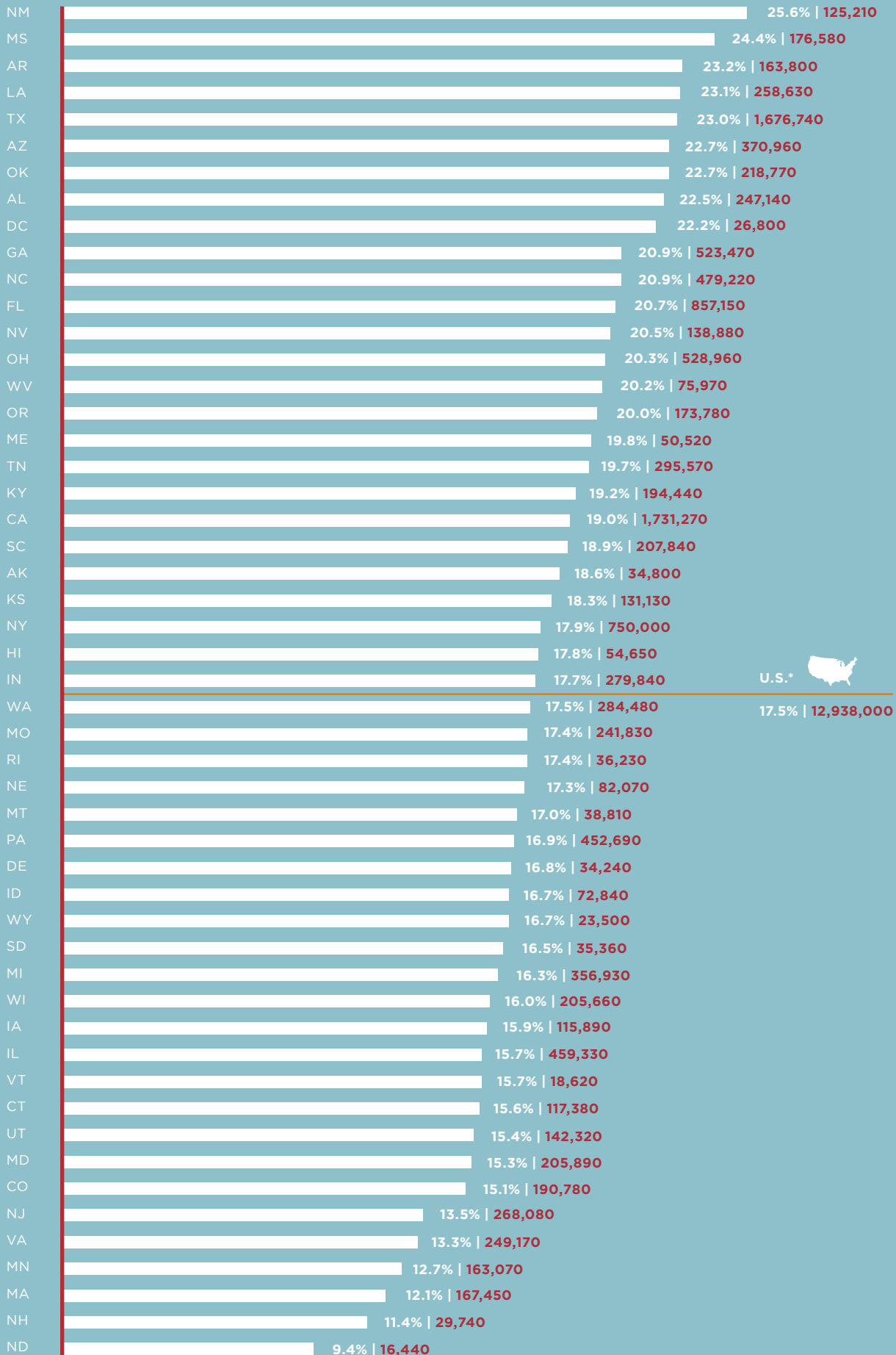
Made possible with the generous support of the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, Founding Sponsor of the *Map the Meal Gap* series



Child Food Insecurity Rates by State

Percentage of Food-Insecure Children

Number of Food-Insecure Children



* USDA, 2017

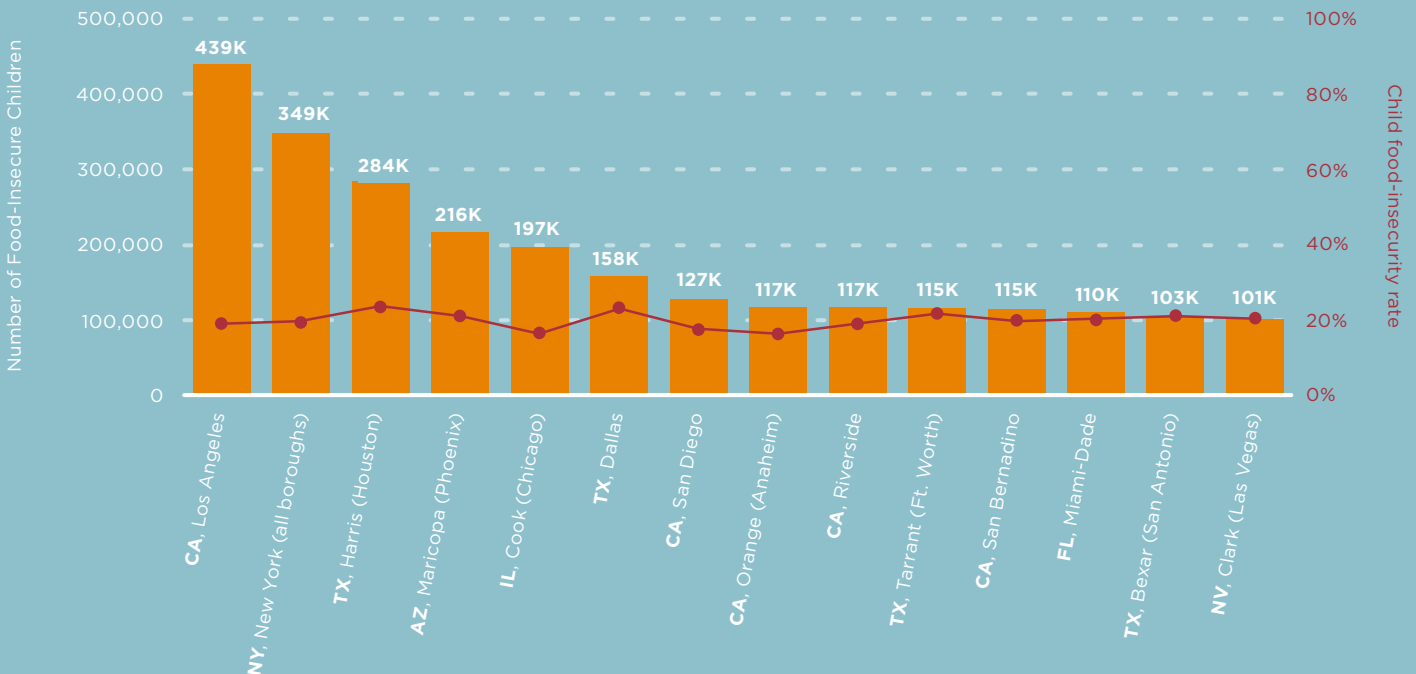
Child Food Insecurity Among Counties

Just as every state is home to children at risk of hunger, no county is free of child food insecurity. Rates range from 6% in Bowman County, North Dakota to 40% in Issaquena County, Mississippi. The variation in rates of child food insecurity shows that need is more pervasive in specific communities. Among the 324 counties in the top 10% of counties with the highest rates of child food insecurity, an estimated 28% of children live in food-insecure homes, compared to 20% across all counties. Counties with the highest rates of child food insecurity have notably higher unemployment and poverty rates, and lower median incomes.



Although the child food-insecurity rate is one important indicator of need, even counties with more modest rates may still be home to large numbers of children whose families are food insecure. For example, the counties encompassing Los Angeles and New York City have rates of child food insecurity (19%) close to the national county average (20%). However, there is high need in both areas: nearly 450,000 food-insecure children live in Los Angeles County and almost 350,000 food-insecure children live in the counties encompassing the five boroughs of New York City. Because they are so densely populated, urban counties in major metropolitan areas have elevated levels of need despite below-average rates of child food insecurity. **Whether a county is urban or rural, however, each community faces unique challenges.** Effective solutions to child food insecurity require addressing the immediate food needs of individual households as well as the underlying economic factors contributing to local food insecurity.

Counties with more than 100,000 Food-Insecure Children



Implications of Child Food Insecurity

The consequences and costs of food insecurity for all ages make addressing the issue an economic and social imperative. In particular, inadequate nutrition can permanently alter children's brain architecture and stunt their intellectual capacity, affecting children's learning, social interaction and productivity.

Health, Behavior and Education

There is a broad base of literature illustrating links between food insecurity and poor child health and behavioral outcomes at every age. For example, food-insecure women are more likely to experience birth complications than food-secure women.³ One indicator of child and maternal health is low birthweight among infants,⁴ which is more common among counties with the highest rates of child food insecurity than across all counties (10% versus 8%). Furthermore, children struggling with food insecurity may be at greater risk for stunted development,⁵ anemia and asthma,^{6,7} oral health problems⁸ and hospitalization.⁹ Overall, food insecurity is linked with poorer physical quality of life, which may prevent children from fully engaging in daily activities.¹⁰ At school, food-insecure children are at increased risk of falling behind their food-secure peers both academically and socially; food insecurity is linked to lower reading and mathematics¹¹ test scores, and they may be more likely to exhibit behavioral problems,¹² including hyperactivity, aggression¹³ and anxiety.¹⁴

↑ Food insecurity ↓ Birthweight ↓ Developmental milestones ↓ Academic and social performance

Policy and Programs

While charitable assistance plays a critical role in helping families meet their food needs, federal nutrition programs are the first line of defense against hunger.

Federal Nutrition Programs



19 million children^{16,17}
SNAP



4 million children¹⁸
Government Programs like
Child Nutrition and WIC

Federal School Nutrition Programs¹⁵



22 million children
National School Lunch Program



12 million children
School Breakfast Program



4 million children
Summer Food Service Program +
Seamless Summer Option

Free and reduced-price lunch

Some families in need of public support, however, face challenges maintaining consistent enrollment while others may not even qualify for federal assistance. **One in five food-insecure children lives in a home that is likely ineligible for these important programs, underscoring the critical role of both the public and private sector in addressing child food insecurity.**¹⁹ Together, these programs weave a comprehensive nutritional safety net that reaches children where they live, learn and play. Through collaborative efforts between the Feeding America network of food banks and partner agencies, policymakers, business leaders, community activists, and concerned citizens, every child in America could receive the nutrition they need.

Map the Meal Gap Methodology

To estimate local food insecurity among children, *Map the Meal Gap* uses methodology that mirrors the approach used for the overall population. First, Feeding America identifies the relationship between food insecurity and associated variables at the state level using data that is mostly restricted to households with children. Then, local data on these variables for every county and congressional district is analyzed to estimate the share of the child population living in food-insecure households. Finally, local income data is used to estimate the percentage of these children in households that are either eligible or ineligible to receive free or reduced-price meals and participate in other federal child nutrition programs. Full methodology details are available online in the [technical brief](#). *Map the Meal Gap 2018* also features report briefs on other topics, including an [executive summary](#), an overview of [food price variations](#), and an analysis of [health implications](#).

