



# BRINGING TEENS TO THE TABLE: A FOCUS ON FOOD INSECURITY IN AMERICA



A Qualitative Report Exploring the Experiences, Coping Strategies, and Viewpoints of Teenagers Dealing with Food Insecurity in 10 Communities in the United States.

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Feeding America is the nationwide network of 200 food banks that leads the fight against hunger in the United States. Together, we provide more than 3 billion meals to more than 46 million people through 60,000 food pantries and meal programs in communities across America.

For more than 35 years, the Feeding America network has been assisting food-insecure families. Feeding America also supports programs that improve food security among the people we serve; educates the public about the problem of hunger; and advocates for legislation that protects people from going hungry.

The Feeding America network serves nearly every metropolitan, suburban and rural community in all 50 states, DC and Puerto Rico. The Feeding America network serves people regardless of race, age, religion or status.



The nonprofit Urban Institute is dedicated to elevating the debate on social and economic policy. For nearly five decades, Urban scholars have conducted research and offered evidence-based solutions that improve lives and strengthen communities across a rapidly urbanizing world. Their objective research helps expand opportunities for all, reduce hardship among the most vulnerable, and strengthen the effectiveness of the public sector.

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## FOREWARD

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The Great Recession of 2008 was felt widely across America. Although our country's economy has been improving in recent years, its recovery is still leaving many behind. Millions of low-income families across the country continue to struggle against immense economic hardship. Diminishing incomes, underemployment and rising costs of living are leaving many people straining to meet their basic needs, including the need to provide food for their families.

In fact, food insecurity might be more prevalent than many Americans think. In 2014, 48 million people in the U.S. were food insecure, including 15 million children under age 18—a particularly vulnerable section of our population. While great attention is paid to addressing hunger among young children, less is known about teenagers, and many will argue that fewer resources have been targeted toward meeting their needs. This may be due to the unique space that teenagers can occupy; straddling the fine line between being children and adults. Teens are still growing, learning and developing, yet at the same time, they often have to fulfill responsibilities typically assigned to adults. People who work with teenagers know this “adultification” demonstrates a downward shift in the dynamics of family responsibility that may influence negatively teens’ behaviors by disrupting their life-stage development and omitting important experiences of childhood. Despite these consequences, there has been a shortage of formal research investigating teens’ experience of food insecurity and a corresponding lack of teen-targeted strategies to address this issue.

For this reason, I am proud that Feeding America has partnered with the Urban Institute in an effort to explore the experiences of teens who are food insecure. Generously supported by the ConAgra Foods Foundation, this research helps us understand the unique pressures food insecurity presents for teens, and reveals the coping strategies they use to secure food for themselves and their families. It also increases our collective awareness of food insecurity and explores solutions to this problem that impacts too many of our nation's youth. In the following pages, you'll find first-hand accounts of teens’ struggles with food insecurity. While they include sobering realities, they also include stories of resilience and courage. The teens in this study inspired us to keep reaching for a brighter future—a future where America is hunger free, and every child and teen has the nutritious food they need to thrive.

Diana Aviv  
*Chief Executive Officer*  
Feeding America

# THE TEENS AND HUNGER PROJECT

The Teens and Hunger Project is a research collaborative between the Urban Institute and Feeding America aimed at better understanding the ways in which teens experience and cope with food insecurity in the United States. It used qualitative methods—a series of focus group discussions with teens in low-income communities—to explore three key questions:

- (1) How do teens experience food insecurity in their families and communities?
- (2) What coping strategies, including risky behavior, do they use to survive?
- (3) What are barriers to teen participation in the current food assistance programs, and how could teens be better engaged?

Twenty focus groups were held in 10 communities across the country, from small towns to large, urban areas. A total of 193 youth participated in these discussions, with separate groups held for boys and girls in each site. The findings are presented in two reports. This report, *Bringing Teens to the Table: A Focus on Food Insecurity in America*, by Waxman, Popkin and Galvez, explores how teens view the food environment, their experiences with food insecurity in their households and communities, and the barriers to participating in food assistance programs. The second report, *Impossible Choices: Teens and Food Insecurity in America*, by Popkin and Scott, provides a deeper look at the coping strategies teens use when faced with food insecurity, including those that may put them at long-term risk.

The Teens and Hunger Project emerged from The Urban Institute's work on the Housing Opportunities and Services Together (HOST) Demonstration, a project that explores the potential for using housing as a platform for providing intensive, whole-family services to stabilize vulnerable families.<sup>1</sup> A survey conducted at three HOST sites (Washington, DC, Chicago, IL and Portland, OR) revealed that rates of food insecurity<sup>2</sup> were very high and rates of employment were very low (Scott et al. 2013), although all families at the sites received housing subsidies, and most also received SNAP. Through work at the DC HOST site to engage residents in co-designing a program to address adolescent sexual health and safety, the Urban Institute became aware of various kinds of risky behaviors teens might be resorting to in order to cope with food insecurity.

Interested in further exploring how teens were experiencing food insecurity, the Urban Institute research team connected with the research team at Feeding America, the nationwide network of food banks. As an organization, Feeding America has long had a focus on ending child hunger, but the child hunger programs operated throughout its network tend to reach younger children better than they reach youth and adolescents. Equally interested in better understanding teens' experiences, Feeding America agreed to partner with The Urban Institute team and secured donor support from the ConAgra Foods Foundation for the Urban Institute team to conduct the research.

The first phase of this research began in 2014, with six focus groups—separate groups for girls and boys at each of the three HOST sites. Although the project originated from the Urban Institute's adolescent sexual health and safety work in DC, this exploratory work was designed to gain a broad understanding of all the ways food insecurity might be affecting teens and undermining their well-being, with the goal of informing programs and strategies to better serve food-insecure teens. Findings from the first round of focus groups suggested that even these stably-housed teens were painfully familiar with what it meant to not have enough food for themselves and their families. The teens spoke poignantly about the stigma of being food insecure and feeling the weight of adult worries and responsibilities. They also talked about the ways that food insecurity can drive teens to make desperate choices—sometimes skipping meals, dealing drugs and leading some girls to “date” older men who could provide needed resources.

In the second stage of this project, the research went “beyond public housing” to include focus groups with teens in other types of low-income communities in order to capture the experiences of teens whose families did not receive housing subsidies. Additionally, it allowed time to explore potential solutions that would reflect teens' special needs (See Appendix, Addressing Teen Hunger in Portland). The partnership between the Urban Institute and Feeding America continued, and with additional funding from the ConAgra Foods Foundation and new funding from the Doris Duke Foundation, the research expanded in 2015 to seven other communities with strong service provider partnerships and capacity for organizing focus groups on teen food insecurity. The final mix of 10 communities reflected a substantial degree of diversity, spanning five states in the West, Midwest, and Southeast; public and market-rate housing; and large and small urban areas as well as urbanized clusters located in more rural parts of the country (see Appendix, Table 1). The youth participants themselves represented a wide range of racial/ethnic groups as well as personal experiences with food insecurity (see Appendix, Table 2).

<sup>1</sup> For information on the HOST Demonstration project see: <http://www.urban.org/policy-centers/metropolitan-housing-and-communities-policy-center/projects/host-housing-opportunity-and-services-together>.  
<sup>2</sup> Food insecurity is a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate food.





## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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In this report, we use teens' own words to share their stories and open up a much needed discussion about the impact of food insecurity on teens' lives. The insights shared through these focus groups are not necessarily representative of the views and experiences of the overall teen population or even all food-insecure teens. Yet, they help to deepen understanding of the challenges faced and coping strategies employed by some teens struggling with hunger.

The focus groups covered a wide range of topics related to teens' awareness of and experience with food insecurity including: how they perceive the food environments in their communities, their experiences with federal nutrition programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), their perceptions of school lunch, school breakfast, and summer meal programs, and their awareness and utilization of charitable feeding programs, like food pantries or meal programs. Their responses paint a vivid portrait of the economic pressures faced by families across a wide variety of communities, the ways in which teens participate in coping strategies and their feelings of embarrassment, stigma, and isolation. The focus groups also provided teens with a unique opportunity to share their own ideas on how food insecurity might be addressed and what changes they would like to see in their communities.

This report reflects findings from 20 focus groups across 10 communities. In diverse settings, we heard many of the same themes:

**Teens are active participants in family food acquisition and management strategies.** Getting the largest volume of food for the lowest price is the driving factor behind most food choices. Acquisition of healthier, higher quality foods is often sacrificed to stretch limited dollars. Fresh food, including produce, is often deemed both a luxury and a risky purchase, due to higher cost and risk of spoilage.

**Teen food insecurity is widespread.** Even in focus groups in which participants had little direct experience with food insecurity themselves, teens were aware of classmates and neighbors who regularly did not have enough to eat. These accounts are consistent with national data, which shows that approximately one in five children under the age of 18 lives in a food-insecure household.

**Teens fear stigma around hunger and actively hide it as much as they can.** Consequently, many teens avoid food assistance delivered in publicly visible settings or from people outside of a trusted circle of friends and family. They feel embarrassed if others know that their families receive charitable help and repeatedly emphasize that incorporating food into other programming and services is a desirable approach.

**Food-insecure teens strategize about how to mitigate their hunger and make food last longer for the whole family.** For example, they may go over to friends' or relatives' houses to eat, or they may save their school lunch for the weekend. They also look out for friends who may be struggling.

**Although parents try to protect teens from hunger and from bearing responsibility for providing for themselves or others, teens in food-insecure families also routinely take on this role.** They find ways to bring food into the household and sometimes go without food to protect younger siblings.

**Some teens facing serious deprivation resort to strategies to get food that involve personal risk and potential long-term negative consequences, such as exhibiting criminal behavior or engaging in transactional dating relationships.** While not at all representative of the behaviors of all food-insecure teens, these extreme examples, which are discussed in the companion brief by Popkin and Scott, signal the seriousness of teen hunger among some youth and the risks it poses.

**SNAP is an important source of support for many families, and benefits are valued because they allow households to acquire food by shopping in mainstream retail settings.** Although they see SNAP as beneficial, teens also talk about the inability of families to stretch the benefits over an entire month and the loss of benefits when incomes improve only marginally.

**Teens have a lot of opinions about school meal programs and ideas about how to strengthen them.** Many teens believe more resources should be devoted to improving the quality of the programs, but they also

recognize that they are very important for many food-insecure teens and express concerns about students who they perceive need the school meals just to get by, particularly access to free or reduced-price meals through the National School Lunch Program.

**Most teens in the focus groups seem unaware of summer feeding options, and some perceive them as largely programs for younger children.** The lack of engagement with summer feeding stands in stark contrast to teens' own reports that summer is a time when there is greater pressure on family food budgets.

**Teens frequently perceive that charitable feeding programs are not available to their age group.** In some cases, they perceive that only adults can access charitable feeding programs, although adolescents may be responsible for acquiring household food resources. In other cases, programs like weekend backpacks are viewed as available only to younger kids.

**Teens are very aware of the broader economic challenges that are connected to food insecurity.** They have a host of ideas about changes to the food system, public policy, school nutrition programs, and charitable responses that they believe would better meet the needs of food-insecure teens in their communities.

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT TEENS AND FOOD INSECURITY

In 2014, approximately one in five children under the age of 18 in the U.S. lived in a food-insecure household, representing 15.3 million children (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2014). While there is significant literature on food insecurity and children, the majority of this research has focused on the risks to and impact on younger children (Cook, et al., 2006; Gundersen and Ziliak, 2014; Kimbro and Denney, 2015). However, it is well documented that adolescence is also a critical period of development. The World Health Organization (2015) defines adolescence as period of development from ages 10 to 19, noting that “biological processes drive many aspects of this growth,” and that this stage constitutes “one of the critical transitions in the life span and is characterized by a tremendous pace in growth and change that is second only to that of infancy.”

Unfortunately, the annual USDA report on household food insecurity does not provide a breakdown on ages of children beyond the presence of children under the age of 6, so the full extent to which adolescents, including those in early and middle adolescence, are affected by food insecurity has not received a great deal of public attention. A recent analysis of the 2014 December Supplement from the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by Dr. Craig Gundersen indicates that in the U.S. there are approximately 6.8 million young people ages 10 through 17 living in food-insecure households, including 3 million with very low food security. In addition, there are nearly 4 million youth in that age group who are living in marginally food-secure households<sup>3</sup>, which suggests that there are many more children who may be particularly vulnerable to any economic shock or disruption to family structure (personal communication, Gundersen).

<sup>3</sup> The USDA classifies households as marginally food secure if they answer affirmatively to one or two reported indications on the Core Food Security Module. This condition is described as one that typically reflects anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house.

Feeding America also recently conducted additional analysis of client household data from its *Hunger in America 2014* study and found that there are approximately 6.7 million youth ages 10 through 19 among the 46.5 million individuals who use its national network of food banks. This count is likely a conservative estimate since youth who only receive services through child-only programs (such as the Backpack Program or after-school meal programs) are not included in these data. Clearly there are millions of adolescents who are affected by food insecurity, and yet there has been very little conversation about the potential impact on their health and well-being, how the persistent struggle of many families to afford an adequate diet may affect their everyday lives, and on tailoring strategies and programs specifically to this population.

While adolescence has received less attention in the food security literature, there is a growing body of evidence that links food insecurity with poorer health outcomes (Gundersen and Ziliak, 2015), and the available literature on associations between food insecurity and dimensions of health and development in adolescents suggests reasons why these issues should receive greater attention. For example, McLaughlin et al. (2012) examined a sample of 6,483 adolescent-parent pairs and found that food insecurity was associated with increased odds of mood, anxiety, behavior, and substance abuse disorders in adolescents in the prior year. Even after controlling for the presence of extreme poverty, food insecurity was associated with a 14 percent increase in mental disorders. Poole-Di Salvo and colleagues (2016) examined data on 8th graders in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten study (2007 wave) and found that

parent-reported rates of overall mental health problems, emotional problems, conduct problems, and problems with peers were significantly higher among children living in households with food insecurity. Using data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Study (NHANES), Alaimo et al. (2002) found that food-insufficient adolescents were more likely than their food-secure counterparts to report having had dysthymia (persistent depressive disorder) and three measures of suicidal ideation—having thoughts of death; having had a desire to die; and having attempted suicide. Fram and colleagues (2015) assessed self-reported food insecurity among early adolescents (fourth and fifth grades)<sup>4</sup> and found that higher levels of child food insecurity were associated with poorer diet and physical activity patterns, which may have significance for longer-term development. In a small qualitative study, Fram et al. (2011) found that children ages 9-16 in food-insecure households took on responsibility for helping to manage food resources, including participation in parental strategies, initiation of their own strategies, and generation of resources to provide food for the family. The authors also found that adults were not always aware of children's experiences. A recent study by Hamersma and Kim (2015) reports on one dimension of these coping strategies—adolescent participation in the labor force—and finds that teenage employment can reduce the risk of very low food insecurity by 50 percent. The authors noted, however, that it is difficult to determine whether work activities to help alleviate a family's material hardship interfere with the ability of teens to participate effectively in school, create additional stress or have other unintended consequences that may be less positive.

## TEENS, FAMILY FOOD BUDGETS, AND LOCAL FOOD ENVIRONMENTS

Research examining food environments and childhood obesity has documented that teens are often active participants in family food acquisition and management strategies (Gustafson et al., 2014; Larson et al., 2006) and has identified environmental factors that can influence healthier eating among adolescents, such as lower prices for fruits and vegetables, higher prices for fast food, and access to grocery stores (Powell, Han and Chaloupka, 2010). Existing literature rarely explores adolescent food environments through the lens of food insecurity, however, and does not typically draw on teens' own perceptions of the food options available to their families.

Teens in the focus groups have a lot to say about household strategies for food shopping. Over and over, we heard that getting the largest volume of food for the lowest price is the driving factor behind most food choices. Acquisition of healthier, higher quality foods is often sacrificed to stretch limited dollars and obtain the quantity families feel they need. Part of the value for money spent is calculated based on whether food will last—perishable foods can be seen as a risk for families on limited budgets. "Income has a lot to do with it. When you're on a budget for a certain amount of family members, you're only gonna get what's gonna last a while and feed all of you. If you have a lot of money, you can get whatever you want.

<sup>4</sup> Although there is not full agreement among researchers and practitioners on the exact age range for adolescence, the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2009) adopted ages 10-19 in their recent study of adolescent health. Thus, many children in these grades would be considered early adolescents according to that framework.



If you're low income, you need to get what's gonna benefit everyone," says one girl, in Champaign Metro (IL). Her peer echoes that sentiment, "Quantity over quality. People want stuff that will last longer and [is] cheaper versus what is better for them." A boy in eastern Oregon states, "If you're a family that's on food stamps, [quality is] not a factor."

Teens report that times when kids are out of school can increase pressure on family food budgets. A boy in eastern Illinois comments that "the holidays, whenever everybody stays in the house" is a period of greater need. A girl in Portland observes, "A lot of students struggle on the weekends, because they're not at school, and they don't have food to eat." The discussion turns to how those students behave. "And it's kind of sad, because there's some people that like basically live on the school lunches . . . Some people ask us every single day for food [at school]. And then on the weekends they'll just eat it all, because they have no food. And then, especially when that summer rolls around, and it's not okay at all." Indeed, summer is mentioned in multiple discussions as a time when there are more people at home to feed.

*"A lot of students struggle on the weekends, because they're not at school, and they don't have food to eat."*

- Teen girl, Portland

### Shopping Strategies and Barriers

Teens are quick to admit that they are often drawn to cheaper, processed food because of its appeal and convenience, but they are also quite vocal about what they perceive as a food environment that favors less healthy food for those shopping on a budget. "When you don't have enough money, you're going to go with the more processed food or junk food. That affects your health, if you don't have enough money to get the healthy stuff what you need, you're going to go to the other side, to the junk food" (girl, Champaign Metro). A girl in San Diego explains, "Sometimes the microwaveable food is 4 for \$1... And those soups. Those last you a while." A girl in eastern Oregon notes the connection between price of nutritious food and potential consequences of less healthy foods. "What I don't like the most is all the vegetables and fruit, all the healthy stuff is expensive while all the junk food is cheaper and that's why most Americans are overweight."

Teens describe a variety of shopping locations that families use and destinations are often driven by the household's economic resources. In Champaign Metro, a girl states, "It really depends on how much money you have, where you get food from depends on income." In Rural North Carolina, a boy observes that people with more resources go to Walmart, while "people with less go to Dollar Tree." Teens in more distressed neighborhoods, particularly those in the public housing communities in Chicago, Washington, DC, and Portland, were particularly negative about the condition of stores in their immediate neighborhoods, citing clutter, lesser quality, higher



prices, and shortages of needed items in the stores in closest proximity. But teens across all communities report that families typically do at least some shopping in larger grocery stores, where there is greater variety and maybe better prices, although traveling to better stores can add to cost.

In Washington, DC, teens describe an extra expense associated with shopping at stores with better selection due to transportation barriers that families have to overcome:

**Boy:** If you buy too many stuff, you can't ride the bus.

**Boy:** Yeah. You can't get on the bus and that. You have a lot of people care about how you get there and how you get the food back . . . you get a lot of groceries, and there be people standing outside asking do you want them to take you home.

**Boy:** You got to pay for it. . .

**Boy:** Yeah, it's like a taxi, but it's strangers you don't know.

**Moderator:** Is that safe?

**Boy:** They riding in their own car. For some people it's not, but, I mean, you want that food, and you're trying to get home, you've got to do what you've got to do.

Teen girls in Portland also discuss the challenges of traveling to large grocery chains or warehouse clubs with better prices or volume discounts:

**Girl:** They're really cheap. I wish they were closer with their—

**Girl:** They're far. And if you ain't got no car, whew . . .

**Girl:** Just to go down there you have to take like two buses, a . . . and another bus. I know, because I tried. . .

**Girl:** And then you have all your groceries.

**Girl:** But I feel bad for moms . . . since there's a couple moms that don't have dads or anything like that . . . and they bring all their kids here, and they actually like go 'big shopping' [in the neighborhood] . . . And that's sad, because they have to pay those prices, and they have a certain amount of money, so . . . for \$20, they can probably get a dinner for one week there. But if you go to Fred Meyers (a large chain grocery store in the area) you can just go there and just get like . . . for a whole month. And it's kind of messed up, because they don't have as much money or as much food in the boxes . . . as they could. I was like, this is sad."

The lack of full-service stores with better prices near homes may also be a particular problem when parents are working and need to rely on teens to acquire food for the family. A girl in Los Angeles relays how her parents' separation and her mother's work schedule affects access to food resources for her family, "around the time when my dad left, my mom started working, and we [participant and her sibling] spent a lot of time by ourselves. Me or my brother would go to stores by ourselves to get food for our family . . . We would have a lot of mini markets near us. But it depended on the day. Like they would close early or wouldn't be open at all. Then we would have to walk even further to another store."

Transportation also figures into access to and costs of acquiring food in semi-rural areas. In Greensboro Metro (NC), a teen boy reports that when planning for shopping, "Saving money is most important. Making sure you have enough money to get gas." In eastern Illinois, a girl echoes, "The stores are all far away. It's different from Chicago, where everything is around the corner. Here, the stores are miles away." A girl in Champaign reports that her family weighs the tradeoffs between travel distance and value, opting to shop once a month for items like meat in a large city a couple of hours away.

While access to affordable grocery shopping is a challenge for many households, fast food and snack



items appear to be an option regardless of whether the communities are more or less urban. Most teens cite relatively easy local access to fast food outlets and other places to get snacks, such as gas stations, drug stores, corner stores, and even informal sales among community members. A teen girl in eastern Oregon observes, “There are way too many fast food restaurants here.” Teens are quick to rattle off a variety of their favorite outlets and treats, but also often offer other explanations for choosing fast food. “When you’re broke, you get the dollar menu,” states a boy in San Diego. In Los Angeles, a girl notes “... As teenagers, sometimes parents aren’t home, and you have to rely on whatever you have. So for some, you have to go to a fast food restaurant because it’s the quickest option even though it’s not the healthiest.” A teen girl in rural North Carolina offers another explanation for why fast food is a choice for some families: “[It] reduces electric bill. Some people don’t have kitchen appliances or don’t use them, which saves money.”

Teens are also aware of other trends in the food environment, such as a growing preference for fresh and organic food, but often view this type of food as a luxury. In San Diego, girls relate that canned and frozen vegetables are the norm, and that fresh vegetables are a special purchase for when “someone’s coming over, never ... just to have it.” In response to a moderator’s question about what teens in Champaign

*“Fresh vegetables are a special purchase for when “someone’s coming over, never... just to have it.”*

- Teen girl, San Diego

Metro wish local stores would sell more of, a girl responds, “a healthier variety of food. There’s a tiny area for organic food, and the rest is processed food. So a higher variety of healthy food. And not so high priced.” A girl in Los Angeles reports, “we live a little bit by an affluent community. So you know they’re building Whole Foods there, and you know it should be more affordable.” But in the high poverty community neighborhood in Chicago, a girl seems resigned to limited options, “It’s not really too much you can do about it actually. Because it’s, I mean, what you going to do? Go to the front desk say, ‘oh, well, you all prices too high? You all need to lower this so I can buy it, and maybe you all have more customers’... So you can’t do nothing really but suck it up and plan. Plan out how you going to get the stuff, how much you need, and how you going to get it all to fit. How you going to get all the money to pay for it?”

## TEENS’ EXPERIENCE WITH FOOD INSECURITY IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

Teens in all the communities are aware of peers and families struggling to afford enough food, often citing concrete examples and sometimes talking about their own experiences. Participants cite certain behaviors and times of the month that reflect when families might be feeling greater stress on food budgets. A boy in Greensboro Metro observes, “It depends on when your parents get paid or get their food stamps. You can tell if a parent gets their food stamps at the beginning of the month, by the end of the month you can tell by how the kids act. The kids might be aggravated. You can tell they’re depressed. You just know. It’s hard to explain.” In San Diego, a female participant also describes the dynamics over the course of a month in detail, “I’ve noticed that usually happens towards the middle or end of the month. At the beginning of the month you pay your bills and buy groceries, but let’s say you don’t make enough money that month, you pay your bills but you probably have a certain amount to pay for food. Food will probably last you about a week depending on how many people you have in your house. You have only so much money to spend that month; towards the end of the month

it’s like ‘What do I do now? . . . I’ve seen a lot of people who I’ve known for years . . . who will have to go to their friends’ house and ask if they can have some frozen food or Top Ramen or something to get them through the next time they get paid.”

### **Hiding the Problem Because of Embarrassment and Stigma**

Teens report that they and their peers often go to some lengths to hide their level of need, for fear of embarrassment or stigma. A girl in Champaign Metro sums it up this way: “Teenagers want it to look like we have everything together. So no one will judge you.” Fear of others finding out is a central theme even in distressed communities where experience with food insecurity and material deprivation is common. A Portland boy reports: “And they don’t want people to know that their family, they might be struggling and then just call them poor and everything and make fun of them.” A girl in eastern Illinois reports that she had experiences with that kind of teasing as a younger child in a food-insecure household: “I got made fun of. It was terrible.”

In addition to the fear of other's opinions, teens sometimes talk about how a teen's own self-image was affected. In San Diego, a boy says that being food insecure makes a person feel "less than the average man." Boys in San Diego also suggest that parents may not always be aware of how food insecurity makes teens feel: "They're working so you can get food on your plate, but they don't notice how you feel. They're not home to see how you feel." Teens are aware that struggling to provide an adequate diet also affects parents' morale and feelings about their ability to be good parents. A boy in eastern Oregon observes, "It's demeaning for parents when they can't put food on the table." A San Diego boy states, "They think they're bad parents. Adults think they don't have food for their kids, and they think they [teens] hate them or something." A boy in Los Angeles notes that his mother tries to shield him when she feels ashamed because sometimes the food his family can afford is not the name brands that most families purchase. "I know for me, when I was in elementary school, the hard thing was brand of the food," he says. "I would get bullied because I had off-brand stuff. I didn't have the Oreos and Coke. So my mom saw that, would try to buy the other stuff." In Champaign Metro, a girl reports her mother tries to shield the rest of the family from food shortages at her own expense. "For a while, mom didn't have enough to eat. She was the only one who was suffering because she was making sure we had enough to eat." Another girl in the group feels that parents sometimes try to avoid asking for help because they are worried that others will conclude that they can't take care of their kids. "I don't think parents are always willing to accept help," she says. "Some people on the outside don't take the issue gently. I've heard some people can get their families taken away if they can't afford to care for them, so you have to be careful."

*"For a while, Mom didn't have enough to eat. She was the only one who was suffering because she was making sure we had enough to eat."*

- Teen girl, Champaign Metro

### Shielding Siblings and Friends

Teens, in turn, sometimes express a sense of responsibility for younger siblings or friends. In San Diego, a girl shares her own feelings: "especially if you have younger siblings. I feel like just knowing if food's



running low, it's pressure on me because I feel like they need to eat, they can't go without eating, they shouldn't be going through not having food on the table every day." In Chicago, a girl reports that when food runs low, she will "then try my friends or something, that live close by, see if I can get at least like two packs of noodles or something so we can all split it or something. Or I will go without a meal if that the case, as long as they, as long as my two young siblings is good, that's all that really matters to me." A girl in Champaign Metro also describes younger siblings as a higher priority when food runs short. "Younger kids are still growing, so they shouldn't have to worry about being hungry," she says. "They're higher in the order [of who should get to eat], so the older kids make sure they give to the younger kids first."

Teens also talk about ways they try to help friends when they are short on food or money for lunch. In Champaign Metro, a boy explains, "I go to lunch and I'll have extra money. I'll take a friend and he's the kind of person who's always brag about he has this and he has that. He's like 'Can you buy me something to eat?' And I'll just buy it. Because I know that he says stuff just to make himself feel good. But that's really not him." In eastern Illinois, a girl relates how she felt when a younger brother asked her to help out with a friend who didn't have enough food: "One time my little brother woke me up and asked me [to] fix something for his friend," she says. "I don't know how to feel about that. It made me feel really bad to have my brother tell me that the kid needed food."

## INFORMAL COPING STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING FOOD SCARCITY

Many teens provide detailed descriptions of how they and their families cope with limited resources. One strategy is to minimize the demand on lean resources from others outside of the household. “I think sometimes [parents] just won’t let anyone in. If their kids have friends, ‘oh, your friends aren’t allowed to come over,’ so that [friends] won’t tell their parents that they don’t have any food. ‘If they’re tell their parents that we don’t have anything they’re gonna think I’m a bad parent . . .’” said a girl in San Diego. Conversely, a common strategy reported for coping with food shortages is to try to eat at the home of a friend or relative when there are limited food supplies at home. In Greensboro Metro, a girl reports, “A lot of teens who can’t get [food] at home, they just go to a friend’s house to get food.” A Chicago boy relates that he sometimes creates situations that will let him eat at a friend’s house. “I’ll have an excuse,” he says. “‘It’s too late; I got to stay for the night.’ And she cooks, you know, makes you good food.” Another boy in the same group reports, “It gets so bad that some people that I know, they send their kids to live with they relative that they know that had . . . more. That’s how bad it gets sometimes.”

Teens in the more distressed households and neighborhoods describe detailed tactics that reflect experience managing chronic deprivation. In San Diego, girls discuss how some families get by relying on a very limited menu. “Well, I’m at my friend’s house a lot, and they always have beans and tortillas. That’s it . . . and it’s fine, I’m like, ‘that’s cool,’ but that’s all they can really have all the time.” A Chicago girl explains her family’s approach: “We pick days that we eat certain foods. And that’s how we keep our food in the

house longer. When you start just buying regular stuff and eating randomly, that food go fast.” Another Chicago girl explains that families in her neighborhood keep a supply of canned goods as a buffer for when food runs low. “Yeah, well, every, most families that I know, that live out here . . . keep a backup case . . . Every house, you will see a cabinet full of cans. No matter where you go, you going to see cans.”

A Chicago boy talks about his community’s long experience with making do with very limited resources: “because people been doing this for so long, you know what I’m saying? Trying to make they [food stamps] stretch. I’m pretty sure they know how to stretch it by now. If they’ve been doing it for a long time . . . I know what I need to grab, I know what I can and what I can’t get. I know what we need to slow down on,’ you know what I’m saying? They know what they got to do.” In some cases, those coping strategies may result in carefully managed tradeoffs with other resources. For example, a girl in rural North Carolina reports that her family’s strategy for affording food includes a regular rotation of going without other services. “We would have one thing off a week—cable, heat, power,” she says.

*“We pick days that we eat certain foods. And that’s how we keep our food in the house longer. When you start just buying regular stuff and eating randomly, that food go fast. . .”*

- Teen girl, Champaign Metro

## TEENS AND SNAP

During the period these focus groups were conducted, approximately one in seven people in the U.S. was receiving SNAP benefits (Ziliak 2013), reflecting the continuing slow pace of economic recovery and the struggle to find adequate employment and wages in many communities. Since teens in these focus groups were recruited from communities known to be struggling with food insecurity, it is perhaps not surprising that many teens are familiar with SNAP and its role in helping families afford food. A girl in Champaign Metro relates her own family’s experience: “It’s really helpful for a lot of families. We had a [SNAP

Electronic Benefits Transfer] card like that for a while. It takes stress off of a difficult situation because you know where your next meal will come from.” However, the extent to which teens in some communities report that SNAP is part of a normalized, widespread experience of food insecurity is striking. Teens in such diverse communities as Greensboro Metro, eastern Oregon, San Diego, Chicago, Portland, and Washington, DC, offer comments such as, “I would say everyone in my area has food stamps,” and, “yeah, everybody has [SNAP].” Although they see SNAP as beneficial, teens also talk about the inability of families to stretch the



benefits over an entire month. Although many families in these communities are currently receiving or have previously received SNAP, there are also instances where teens talk about families who are in need but can't qualify for SNAP due to slightly higher incomes or who lost benefits after their income increased by even a small amount. For example, the girls in Portland say:

**Girl:** Personally, I don't think that food stamps is available for everyone that actually needs them. Because like my mom, they won't give her them, because she makes over the amount. But it doesn't really seem like it, because her whole paycheck will go to rent and utilities.

**Girl:** That's the same with my mom . . . because my mom applied for it, and she put me and my brother and her on it, and we only got \$31 per [month] . . . because she makes too much. And then like two months later, they took it away.

In public policy parlance, the loss of benefits due to small incremental increases in income is known as a "benefit cliff," reflecting the point at which earning additional income triggers the loss of any assistance. For a girl in Portland, the impact on the family budget indeed feels like a penalty. "I heard that even if you [earn] maybe \$10, \$20 over a certain amount, that you don't get [SNAP]," she says. "I was like that's really not fair, because it's all going towards bills. It's all going towards the kids, so you don't have that much money left over."

Teens vary in the extent to which they report shopping on behalf of their families with SNAP benefits. In general, SNAP benefits are seen as the linchpin of family food budgets and largely the purview of adults.

But some teens report that they are allowed to use the family EBT card to get occasional snacks or to shop on behalf of the family. For example, a boy in Greensboro Metro reports, "Every now and then, I ask my mom if I can borrow the card, so I can run to the store and get me something quick. But not spend no \$100, more like just \$1. Sometimes she will send me to get groceries for my siblings." Regardless of who is responsible for the shopping, teens value the role of SNAP in allowing families to shop in stores for food, rather than having to seek food resources from charitable sources. A girl in eastern Illinois states, "It's less embarrassing than getting food at the church."

Teens express appreciation that SNAP is dedicated to food purchases but also occasional frustration that other important non-food purchases are not permitted. They point out that personal care needs like toilet paper, feminine hygiene products, and soap are very important and a challenge for some families to afford. A girl in Portland states, "Because sometimes you don't have cash, or you need . . . something from the store, but it's not food-related, and you can't get it. But it's something you really need." In fact, teens occasionally describe peers who are perceived as unable to maintain basic hygiene practices. A girl in San Diego relates a story of a friend: "It was four girls . . . and it was just the dad, he had to raise all of them on their own . . . I would go over, and there was never food, not even milk or cereal. There wasn't [toilet] paper. There was a time when they had to clean themselves with newspaper." Such situations of deprivation are consistent with research documenting the rise of extreme poverty among families in the U.S. in an era of limited cash assistance (Edin and Shaefer, 2015) and the struggle among low-income families to obtain non-food essentials (Waxman et al., 2013).



## TEENS AND SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMS

Teens recognize that school feeding programs, particularly access to free or reduced price meals through the National School Lunch Program, are very important for many food-insecure teens and express concerns about students who they perceive need the school meals just to get by. A Portland girl states that her family receives SNAP and so she doesn't feel that it is a problem for her, but worries that "some people don't have [a sufficient] amount, especially like on the weekends and stuff." Others mention that some teens will sometimes ask their peers for food or to use their lunch pass if they weren't going to use it because they are hungry. A girl in Chicago observes, "One girl—she take like five lunches every day . . . I don't think she got food at home." In DC, a boy reports that some kids "go to school just for breakfast, lunch." A second boy adds, "Yeah. They don't really be worrying about school, they just want the food."

Teens report looking out for others who seem to lack the resources to buy food or are hungry. A girl in Portland reports that she earns money from working and sometimes will eat food she bought on her own rather than get her meal through the free school lunch

program. "I'd rather not waste that lunch that I could give to somebody that wasn't eating whenever they ask me for it," she says. "Or sometimes I'll offer, you know, because a lot of people don't want to ask for it, so you offer it." A boy in Champaign Metro reports, "If I have a friend who wants lunch I'll share, because I'm in the school lunch program. A lot of kids ask me to get lunch for them because I get free lunch, but they don't get it." The sharing of food and occasionally using each other's IDs to get a lunch is mentioned in a number of sites as ways that hungry kids get by and help each other out.

School breakfast is mentioned less frequently, and the occasional comments suggest that there is less consistency across communities about the role it may play in meeting teen food needs. For example, one girl in eastern Oregon notes that school-based breakfast is not easy to access, reporting that it is served "at the back of the school—takes too long to get there, too inconvenient. Breakfast ends at 7:30, school starts at 8:15; too hard to get there that early." Some teens opt to eat at home, but a girl in Portland reports that she prioritizes food resources at home for evenings, rather than breakfast. "I'd rather save my food so . . . I can actually sleep, because I can't sleep when I'm hungry." She reports that she usually waits to eat until lunch at school and skips breakfast because she would rather not "waste my food in the morning."

Some teens report that schools have made extra efforts to encourage teens to access school breakfast. A boy in DC reports, "At my school, they run breakfast . . . 8:00 to like 10:00 for the people that come late, because they believe that in order to focus, you've got to be at work and eat your breakfast first." In Los Angeles, a boy reports that students have access to breakfast in the classroom, a strategy being pursued by some school districts to increase ease of access to the school breakfast program.

Teens have a lot of opinions about school food. The conversations were particularly animated about their perceptions of recent changes to the school lunch program and their views on meal portions and quality. Although there are occasional positive comments about the lunches available at their schools, most are very critical:

**Chicago girl:** But at my school, we eat cold lunch every day. We ain't had no hot lunch since the beginning of the school year.

• • •



**San Diego boy:** Tastes like it's frozen, it is all microwaveable.

• • •

**DC boy:** The stuff they give pre-K kids, they give to big kids, and they don't understand like big kids eat more than little kids eat. They need more.

While complaining about school food is a time-honored tradition, the complaints are particularly concerning when they indicate teens may avoid school meals even when they come from communities of high need. "It's nasty . . . so most people bring their own food," says a Chicago girl. Teens were vocal in their opinions that more resources should be devoted to improving school meals, observing that funds seem to be available for other priorities, like sports and technology. Boys are especially likely to make this point:

**San Diego boy:** They don't spend to get good food but they can afford them iPads and laptops.

• • •

**Eastern Oregon boy:** I would say 'hey, you have a million dollar football field. Let's have a million dollars for food.'

• • •

**Chicago boy:** They paid \$1 million just on windows. And they . . . still ain't got no food going on around here.

A few bright spots did emerge in the school food conversations, such as student engagement in choices about school food in Los Angeles, where a girl reports "I'm in middle school and during the summer they had all the students come to this little fair and they brought food companies and we got to try all of their foods. At the end of the day they had us vote which company we liked the best and which company would we want to serve lunch at our school. The company that won was called Revolution Foods and they'll be serving us this year." A boy in eastern Oregon states his appreciation of school lunch simply, "I love the lunch; it's lifesaving."

In a few cases, students talk about resources for accessing food at school beyond the meal programs. A girl in Portland reports, "Also at [school] they have like a resource . . . if you're hungry during class, the teacher will give you a pass so that way you can go downstairs and get food." Sometimes a resource may just be a trusted adult at the school. One boy describes the school security guard as a place kids can go if they need a snack or if they just want to talk, "One of the security monitors at my school, he'll . . . get you a granola bar if you need it. You're like, hey, [name] give me a granola bar. Give me a cup of noodles. I haven't . . . but I love just going up there and talking, because he'll listen."

*"I love the lunch; it's life-saving."*

- Teen boy, eastern Oregon

## TEENS AND SUMMER FEEDING PROGRAMS

In recent years, the USDA and many state and local governments, along with nonprofit organizations, have made expanding access to the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) a high priority, but with limited success. While 22 million school-age children participated in the free or reduced-price school lunch program in 2015, the number of children participating in federally funded summer feeding is dramatically lower—approximately 3.8 million in SFSP and through the Summer Seamless Option in 2015 (USDA, Child Nut. 2016).

Teens in the focus groups describe summer as a tough time for many families to afford food, but the use of summer feeding programs appears to be the exception rather than the rule for most. Boys in eastern Oregon and Los Angeles describe summer feeding locations in

their neighborhoods, but teens in the DC focus groups who live in a highly distressed neighborhood report that summer feeding wasn't available, although researchers are aware of program sites in the area. In Greensboro Metro, a girl recalls a summer program as being available only to elementary students. "I remember there was this thing at my elementary school. It's called something I don't remember," she says. "It was in the summer and you could go there, it was on a Wednesday I think and they would give you a meal." In Portland, a girl reports that she knows a lot of people who go to a summer feeding program in a park but it is not a comfortable experience for her, ". . . it makes me feel like I'm at like a homeless shelter or something sometimes, because once they run out of food at [name of park] . . . you can't get any," she says. "So everybody tries to hurry up."



## TEENS AND CHARITABLE FOOD ASSISTANCE

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Teens vary in their awareness of the availability of charitable feeding services, like food banks, food pantries, or meal programs in their communities. Some identify specific food pantry locations at well-known social service organizations in their communities, such as Goodwill or Salvation Army, while others seem less sure. “Not everyone knows there’s a pantry,” says a Champaign Metro girl. “I don’t know a food bank. Are there any around here? I see homeless people, and I don’t even know if they know about it. Food bank isn’t visible,” says a Greensboro Metro boy. “I think shelter is the only people giving out food, but I don’t know. . .” says a DC boy.

When teens are aware of options, they may not use terms like food pantry or meal program that are common in the social services sector. For example, teens in multiple locations reference churches as a source of assistance when food budgets are tight, and in these cases, the religious communities are viewed as a resource, rather than a charitable feeding system that may supply the resources distributed. In Greensboro Metro, a boy describes an informal arrangement in his community: “In the neighborhood, we find that one house in the neighborhood where everyone can bring canned food, and the lady distributes them without anyone knowing their

business.” In some communities, such as Los Angeles and Chicago, teens reference “food trucks,” which are likely mobile food pantries run by many food banks, that make periodic stops to give out food or other items. A girl in Los Angeles shares her experience:

“I’m going to share something I actually like about the community. As I was growing up I’ve seen there’s a lot of needy people, as well as a lot of people who are fortunate enough that they have a stable life. There are a lot of people and this organization who give back to the community. So it’s like a helping hand. I also attended this one program called [organization name]. So when I was small, we had a tight budget at times because you know my mom . . . you know we depended on my mom’s paycheck. So . . . they would actually bring trucks and people were able to come and get a bag of food. Even like for Christmas they would give toys to the kids. It’s really helpful.”

Teens often perceive that they cannot access charitable feeding programs on their own. For example, in Champaign Metro one boy comments, “I think at the pantries [you] need ID or [to be] head of the household.





So if you don't have your parents or guardian you basically can't go by yourself." Another group participant identifies that the rules of pantry services can be a potential barrier, "It depends on a certain age, and it's only one visit a month."

In San Diego, a girl expresses concern that setting 18 and up age restrictions on food pantries is a barrier for some low-income families, since teens sometimes have the primary responsibility for acquiring food for the family. "If both of our parents work, it makes it harder on us because we're not 18 and usually you have to be 18," she says. "But what if you're 16 or 17? And you have to go out and do the grocery shopping. How are we supposed to do that if we're not allowed to? Since you're not 18, you're not allowed to." In eastern Oregon, a boy expresses the opinion that if teens go to a food pantry, they are viewed with suspicion. "People don't trust teenagers. People might not believe teens actually need the help."

In a number of instances, teens report that they felt charitable services designed to address youth hunger are mostly targeted to younger children. A common example given was weekend backpack programs that provide a bag of food to elementary school children, but are not available to older students. One girl in Los Angeles reports, "They use to once a week give us a backpack full of food. Growing up that happened with a lot of the teenagers in our building. Because it was up to fifth grade so the middle schoolers would get it sometimes. So you use to see how it really helped their family." Likewise, some meal programs are seen as focused on younger children. In Champaign Metro, a boy observes, "Boys and Girls Club does summer meals. There's a program . . . kids in the summer program that goes on summer trips. Sometimes they'll help out. They'll make meals for the little elementary kids who qualify for the free meals." A Portland girl reports that she sometimes goes to summer meal programs in a neighborhood park, but that she is acutely aware that younger children may need the help even more than she does and sometimes gives away her meal to others. "I can get by, barely get by, but I can get by, so sometimes I give away my lunches to littler kids that need it," she says.

One of the biggest barriers teens report to accessing services, even when available, is a sense of stigma about needing help and feelings of embarrassment that others might know. Ironically, these feelings are pronounced even in some communities with a high level of need, like DC. One girl in the DC focus group comments, "Yeah, it's embarrassing to go. Like somebody seen you come up there, they always—'oh,



she ain't got no food.' Then they going to go tell their friends and they go on and tell their friends. Then somebody will come back and tell you, be like, 'oh, we heard you ain't got no food.'"

Teens may be acutely aware that accessing charitable feeding sets them apart from other kids who can shop at stores for food. One girl in Champaign Metro reports, "When I was younger, the only clothes my mom and I got were from a church, and food from churches . . . Going to the churches makes it feel like you're not worthy enough to go to the store."

Although not common, in a few locations, teens reference efforts to target young people specifically, and to do so in a way that minimizes feelings of embarrassment or stigma. In Greensboro Metro, a boy remarks, "I heard our community is number one for people not having food. So even my school is having a food bank, and they'll start to get food. But they do it on the weekends so when you go pick up the food, other kids won't see you and pick on you."

*"I can get by, barely get by, but I can get by, so sometimes I give away my lunches to littler kids that need it."*

- Teen girl, Portland



## WHAT TEENS WOULD LIKE TO SEE AND THINK WOULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The teens in the focus groups have a wide variety of ideas about how to address food insecurity and to improve the programs and services designed to help those in need. Four clear themes emerged in the discussion.

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**Combine food with other services.** Because teens are very sensitive to the stigma around asking for help, they believe food programs targeted to teens ideally should be combined with other types of activities so that attendance does not mean acknowledging food insecurity. Teens express the belief that more options for assisting people who are food insecure are needed and repeatedly emphasize that incorporating food into other programming and services is a desirable approach. A Chicago girl suggests offering “food trucks” [mobile food pantries] at sites teens can visit for other reasons, like a health clinic. She notes that food trucks occasionally come to her area “but they do it rare, so it’s not good enough. But when they do, I think that’s the best way. Because it’s anonymous. Anybody can go up there any time and not get caught getting food.”

Boys in Portland recommend expanding free community events, like concerts in a park, to offer food on a regular basis. A boy in Champaign Metro has a

similar suggestion: “They should just open a place and serve meals while people are playing basketball. There are a lot of people who go play basketball over the weekends or during the summer and they are hungry.” Boys in San Diego also say they would be more likely to go for food assistance if there were other incentives, such as games and other teens with whom they could socialize.

**Design programs with teen needs and sensitivity to stigma in mind.** Teens feel that food distribution should be handled discreetly when it is a standalone service and have ideas about how to improve its responsiveness to teens. Boys in Champaign Metro recommend that programs have home delivery for “different areas where you know that people struggle, especially during summer, Christmas time, holidays in general.” A boy in eastern Illinois, a semi-rural area, suggests that home delivery of charitable food could also improve access for some families. “There needs to be easier access to the food, especially for those who

don't have cars," he says. "There should be an organization to take boxes to you if you can't get to the pantry." A girl in Greensboro Metro echoes the idea of delivery, "I'd like to take it to them personally. I don't like it being done out in the open. I like to make it a private thing. I don't want to see people hurt." Girls in Champaign Metro also talk about the importance of protecting teen confidentiality when creating food distribution services. "Location is really important," one says. "Sometimes we don't want to be seen. So we want not to be seen, but also the pantry should be more accessible. Somewhere you can go without being looked at." Another girl adds, "They should be understanding of teenagers' pride and know they don't want to be seen so have a better location." A girl in DC suggests accessing charitable food could be less embarrassing if it was distributed in the same bags used by major grocery stores. "I could say I just came from grocery shopping. Don't try to give it to me in a little homeless . . . brown paper bag . . . Don't give me that bag," she says.

**Improve outreach to teens on food insecurity and assistance.** Teens feel that they need more information and encouragement to get help, and believe that charitable services should be directly available to teens. They talk about the need to increase awareness and education among teens about food insecurity and programs that could help. "Let it be known what they're trying to do, and where it is. And we're always on our phones, they should take it to social media," says a Champaign Metro girl. In Greensboro Metro, a boy suggests that schools should teach students about food banks. Another teen in the same group suggests offering a "bigger version of giving out pizza every other week or every month. Just a big place to

fellowship and eat for people to come to. Put it in newspapers, pass out flyers. Have signs." A girl in Champaign Metro recommends that schools "should have an assembly, tell kids to talk to a teacher they trust, so that others won't know."

A Portland boy suggests that leveraging teens' willingness to help younger children might be an opportunity to draw teens to feeding programs as volunteers, which could then also allow them to receive food for themselves. A boy in Champaign Metro reinforces the idea that teens want to give back to others. "I stopped going to the Boys and Girls Club, but later I started going to help out and make sandwiches to give back," he says.

Several teens feel that there needs to be greater access to feeding programs in their communities. A DC girl recommends that charitable distributions, like those at food pantries, need to be more frequent. "And it shouldn't be like a couple days out of the month. It should be weekly," she adds.

The need to keep teens in mind when choosing types of food for feeding programs was also a topic of discussion. In Champaign Metro, a girl advises, "It should be stuff that's accessible to adults and teenagers. For teenagers, it needs to be something you can eat on the move. We can't be chewing on meat while walking down the road." In eastern Oregon, boys suggest that a combination of food options would be appealing to teens, such as a box that includes both canned and perishable food, and the option for some cooked meals. They also suggest that making microwaves available would be valuable for some families. A boy in San Diego recommends that



food programs “have foods that you need, food that have protein.” A boy in DC feels that food pantry distributions he has seen recently do not meet the needs of hungry teens “because nowadays, food pantry, you’re talking about is potatoes and that’s all they give out, potatoes, onions. They don’t give out real food . . . They don’t give out no pizza . . .” A girl in Chicago also feels that teens need places where they can get personal care products like deodorant. Also reflecting concern about personal hygiene, a girl in Greensboro Metro mentions the value of offering a place where “kids can wash their clothes if they can’t do it at home.”

**Broader changes are needed.** Teens are outspoken about the need for a variety of changes that they believe can improve their food environments and also reduce the need for food assistance in the first place. There is a lot of discussion across groups on the need to make food more affordable for low-income families to purchase. To improve affordability, some teens suggest special discounts for people in need. In rural North Carolina, a girl suggests that food establishments and clothing stores should consider giving a discount to low-income youth and “kids in foster care.” A boy in Champaign Metro advocates for “a student discount at food stores, or a disability discount.” A boy in Greensboro Metro argues for a more universal approach: “There should be a Black Friday for food.”

Bringing stores in closer proximity to their neighborhoods is primarily a topic for teens living in high poverty urban areas, such as Chicago and DC. But the issue of needing stores closer to home is also raised in the teen girls group in Greensboro Metro.

In a few communities, teens also talk about the potential role for gardens and agriculture, not just as a source of food, but also as a potential source of teen employment. A boy in Los Angeles explains the benefits he has seen in his community. “In the middle school and high school, they started a gardening program,” he says. “Every couple month, people can come in and pick out whatever they want. More than 500 people come in a day and we help people throughout the day to pick out different items.” A boy in eastern Illinois remarks, “What would be great here would be community farms, where teens could work and then be able to eat or prepare what they grow.” A girl in eastern Oregon envisions training and job opportunities beyond gardening: “but if we had a bigger garden, like an acre of land, we could do forestry stuff. It could help a lot.”

Teens in some groups discuss the need for developing cooking skills among youth. In San Diego, girls discuss

the desirability of having cooking classes in school. A boy in eastern Illinois reports, “I want to learn how to cook, but I just don’t know how to.” A boy in Los Angeles states, “A lot of teenagers, we open the fridge and there’s food there and we don’t know how to cook it or use it so we say there’s nothing to eat . . . If kids knew how to cook they would save more money instead of going out.” A girl in Chicago is more confident about her skills, and advocates for using teens to help improve school lunch programs. “I say, like they should let some of the kids cook, because we know how to cook,” she says. “Because in my school, they should let me cook, because I’m going to make that good food . . .”

Occasionally, teens specifically refer to improvements in SNAP as a recommendation for improving food insecurity. But often the conversation turns to larger economic issues and policies that may address them. In a girls group in Champaign Metro and a boys group in Los Angeles, a higher minimum wage is part of the discussion. Many teens mention families with single mothers who struggle to afford basic needs during the course of their discussion. A boy in Los Angeles advocates for better pay for women as an important strategy. “Pay equality - in a lot of cases, one parent is usually a woman and they get paid less and how can they afford their kids?” he points out. Teens also talk about the need for more employment opportunities for themselves and their peers. In Greensboro Metro, a boy advocates for “more organizations to get people into jobs and off the streets,” while a girl in Chicago brings up the need for summer jobs.

Across the country, teens clearly communicate that, from their point of view, food insecurity is part of a broader set of economic challenges facing many low-income families. A boy in Greensboro Metro prefaces his recommendations for improving food insecurity with the need to address those underlying challenges: “Fix the economy first, because that’s what’s messed up. Help the people who don’t have homes out. And, more jobs, all these businesses going out and there are no jobs.” In eastern Oregon, a girl is very explicit about how she thinks national policy priorities should shift: “presidents should use money on hunger instead of prisons,” she says.

*“Presidents should use money on hunger instead of prisons.”*

- Teen girl, eastern Oregon





## IMPROVING POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO REACH TEENS

The stories teens share highlight many ways in which current strategies, both public and private, are insufficient to fully address food insecurity among teens and their families. Their insights can inform important improvements needed in federal nutrition and charitable feeding programs, as well as broader strategies to generate meaningful employment opportunities for youth. Their active engagement in household food management strategies also indicates that they can be an important audience for outreach into low-income communities, and efforts to connect with them must be crafted with sensitivity to the embarrassment and stigma they associate with being food insecure. What follows are our recommendations based on insights from teens.

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**Improve SNAP Benefit Adequacy.** Teens report that SNAP is an important resource in many households, highlighting its primary role in the food safety net. They talk in vivid detail about how SNAP benefits often do not last through the month and how family diets become constrained when benefits are exhausted. Their experiences reinforce the importance of examining benefit adequacy for households receiving SNAP. A recent report from the Institute of Medicine (Caswell and Yaktine, 2013) examines the issues of benefit adequacy in thoughtful detail.

**Develop Outreach and Education Strategies to Reach Teens.** Because teens participate in purchasing and

managing family household food resources and are well aware of the challenges of affording healthier food options, they can also be an important audience for outreach efforts in underserved communities. They may be particularly receptive to messaging about how SNAP benefits may help parents who are struggling to make ends meet and improve dietary options for siblings. Efforts to encourage healthier eating, through SNAP-ED initiatives and incentives to encourage the purchase of fruits and vegetables (e.g., through the USDA's Fruit and Vegetable Incentive or FINI grants) should consider teens as a unique audience and explore ways to engage them directly in designing outreach approaches that speak to teens.

**Provide Alternative Delivery Models to Reach Teens During Summer.** Teens report that fear of stigma and various logistical barriers keep some from accessing feeding assistance programs, especially during the summer. Expanding grocery benefits during the summer and providing flexibility from the requirement that participants must present at a program and consume their meal on site could decrease stigma and increase participation. Particularly promising are the results of USDA's Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children demonstration. The program delivers monthly food assistance benefits during the summer via electronic cards for SNAP or WIC. Evaluations of this approach demonstrated reductions in very low food insecurity and an increase in the consumption of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and dairy among participants (Collins et al., 2013). This break from the traditional model is a step forward in recognizing that summer food insecurity is a household phenomenon and supporting families eating meals together. There are also opportunities to utilize alternative direct service models, such as programs that provide meal delivery and allow program participants to take meals home to their family, which USDA demonstrations have shown can increase participation in the program and may be a more suitable model for engaging teenagers. Congress could strengthen the summer meals program for teens by providing options to expand both these program models in the federal program.

**Strengthen Summer Feeding Sites by Offering Complementary Programming.** The lack of engagement with summer feeding programs among many teens is in stark contrast to their consistent descriptions of summer—and other times out of school—as particularly stressful for household food budgets. The disconnection with summer feeding among the youth in the focus groups suggests a need to examine how the summer feeding programs can better meet teen needs. Two dimensions in particular are important to consider in program design. First, teens indicate that they do not want to be seen going to programs strictly for food. Combining summer feeding with teen-friendly programming and access to other resources that appeal to teens is likely to be critical for improving engagement. Second, teens are also anxious to find summer employment opportunities and the ability to participate in formal employment may provide an alternative to informal money-making activities that carry additional risks. Rethinking the role of employment and training for youth as an integral function of summer feeding programs may offer the opportunity to address multiple challenges facing low-income youth in a more holistic manner.

**Engage Teens in Summer Program Design and Outreach Efforts.** We recommend that summer programs assess the extent to which they are providing meaningful outreach directly to teens and whether their locations and/or services are viewed as accessible and welcoming by teens. USDA has taken a step in the right direction by developing new sample outreach material that reflects a greater awareness of the need to target teens: their fliers now show photographs of children of all ages and state, “Open to all children, 18 and younger.” (USDA SFSP, 2016). Similarly, Feeding America network members have created outreach materials intended to be more teen-friendly, offering hunger-free summer program banners and post cards that read “Kids and Teens Eat Free Here,” available in both English and Spanish. We also strongly suggest that summer food sites actively solicit teen input into summer program design—perhaps through the use of teen advisory groups. As mentioned, such a model is being tested in a community in Portland (see Appendix).

**Adapt Charitable Feeding Strategies To Meet Teens' Needs.** Across the communities we visited, we heard that charitable feeding programs are not designed with teens in mind. Teens view food pantries as targeted to adults, and cite rules about minimum age requirements and concerns about adult perceptions of teens as reasons that would keep them from going for food if they or their families needed help. They are aware of charitable feeding options targeted to younger kids, such as weekend backpack programs, and some had benefitted from those at an earlier age. But generally they do not perceive that charitable food programs respond to the needs of teens. There are a couple of notable exceptions in communities where local high schools have begun offering food pantries or where it has been made known that hungry teens can ask adults in the school for help. Teens are vocal about preferring discrete options that would allow them to avoid being seen by peers getting food or for food distributions that happen in the course of other programming or services that would be a destination for teens.

**Offer Programs That Leverage Locations Where Teens Typically Congregate.** Given the level of need teens describe, there is a clear opportunity for the food bank network, its local partners and other community organizations interacting with youth to experiment with collaborative strategies that can meet teens where they are—literally, by leveraging locations that teens already are or want to be, and programmatically, by co-locating food with programming and support services that are responsive

to teens' needs. In addition, efforts to offer teen-friendly food and to provide sampling of unfamiliar foods, along with simple prep ideas and cooking demonstrations, could enhance the likelihood that teens will access services and use the foods available. One such evolving collaboration is underway with teen guidance in Portland, Oregon (see Appendix).

**Adopt a Teen Lens in Food-Insecurity Research and Program Evaluation.** There is a lack of information specific to teens and food insecurity. Without a sharper focus on how food insecurity is experienced at this critical period of development, it is difficult to understand the full range of consequences that youth may face or what interventions might be effective in addressing the problem. We recommend that both nonprofit and public sector programs examine ways in which they can more consistently track and evaluate the experiences of teens. It is often a routine practice to report statistics separately for only two groups: younger children (e.g., 5 and under) and all other children (ages 6 through 18). This convention can mask wide variation in developmental experiences and the use of services. Program planners and policy makers will benefit from a more specific level of age detail in data that can ultimately inform practice and policy.

**Address Teen Food Insecurity in the Household Context.** Teens do not face hunger in a vacuum, and they repeatedly describe how food insecurity is experienced as a household and a community condition. They are aware of family challenges and the stresses food insecurity places on adults. They participate in household food management strategies, and in some cases, they shield siblings when resources are scarce. They are also aware of the struggles of other families and may act to help food-insecure peers, just as they also find themselves needing to

seek the help of friends from time to time.

These accounts raise questions of whether some public and private sector responses that focus exclusively on children outside of the context of their household are fully aligned with how children, especially teens, experience food insecurity. While a child-only focus is clearly appropriate in some settings (e.g., feeding during the school day), teen reports suggest it may be useful to re-examine when a child-only strategy is in fact the most responsive approach to the need. Interventions may ultimately be more effective by leveraging contact with children or teens in order to address household-level need. Examples of this type of multi-level approach have emerged in the last few years, and they are worthy of continued experimentation, further evaluation, and/or wider implementation. For example, the summer EBT program previously described provides resources to the entire household in recognition of the greater stress on family food budgets when children are out of school and the difficulty of accessing congregate sites for many households and communities. Some summer food sites have experimented with using charitable funds to offer low-cost or no-cost meals to adults who accompany children to SFSP meal sites. Food banks have modified the offerings included in children's weekend backpack programs in recognition that these resources may supplement meals for the entire family. School-based food pantries that serve the entire household have also become increasingly prevalent. However, despite the evolution in some summer, weekend, and school pantry programs, many interventions are still more likely to engage with younger children. Fortunately, teens are well-positioned and often eager to inform both public policy and charitable responses and should be viewed as a resource for shaping the next generation of food insecurity interventions.







## CHILD NUTRITION PROGRAMS

There exists a number of different government and charitable food programs aimed towards providing healthy food to children.

The **National School Lunch Program** (NSLP) is a federally assisted program that provides free or reduced price meals to low-income children while school is in session. It is operated by more than 100,000 schools across the country, and in FY15 participation was 22 million (USDA FNS, 2016).

The **School Breakfast Program** (SBP) operates in a similar manner to the NSLP. However, many schools that offer NSLP do not offer SBP, and as a result, participation levels are lower, with only 12 million children receiving free or reduced-price breakfast in FY15, just over half the number of children who receive lunch assistance. Fortunately, SBP has seen improvement in this regard thanks in large part to the implementation of alternative delivery models (USDA FNS, 2016).

During after-school hours, the **Kids Cafe Program** provides free meals and snacks to low-income children through a variety of existing community locations where children congregate such as Boys and Girls Clubs, churches or public schools. These types of congregate child nutrition programs receive much of their funding through the Child and Adult Care Program, administered by the USDA.

NSLP, SBP, and after-school meals provide critical resources to students during the academic year, but they are not available when school is out. There are two summer meals programs that were created to fill the gap when school is out. The **Summer Food Service Program** (SFSP) is designed to reach any child age 18 or younger that is eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch. Meals are provided at summer meals sites, usually operated in high-poverty areas, and meals are free of charge. SFSP is federally-funded, administered by a state agency, and operated by community organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs, churches, food banks, libraries, or schools. More recently, the **Summer Seamless Option** has become available to schools, essentially allowing them to extend the meal services provided during the school year into the summer months. Unfortunately, these two programs reach only a fraction of the need - 3.9 million children or less than 18 percent (USDA FNS, 2016).

The Feeding America network is working hard to bridge the summer meals gap, providing 9.5 million meals at congregate feeding sites during the summer of 2015 (Feeding America, 2016). Yet, there are still millions of children who rely on free-or-reduced-price meals during the school year, and when they do not have access to that food between June and August, household resources can become increasingly strained. There are many potential explanations for lower



participation in summer feeding programs. There are limited feeding sites available to families, the majority of low-income children are not participating in summer programming where meals might be offered, and there is limited transportation infrastructure, such as a bus system that can help children reach a feeding site. The requirement under the summer meals program that children must consume each meal on site can be especially hard for children in rural or hard-to-reach communities.

Though federal programs are the first line of defense against child hunger, the Feeding America network operates two programs to further address this issue. The **BackPack Program** provides children at risk of hunger with nutritious and easy to prepare food during the weekend and school breaks when school meals are not an option. Additionally, the **School Pantry Program** (described in detail below) provides a more readily accessible source of food assistance to low-income students and their families.

## THE FEEDING AMERICA SCHOOL PANTRY PROGRAM

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The Feeding America School Pantry Program was formalized in 2009 and is one of three national programs with a focus on alleviating child hunger that is operated throughout the Feeding America network. School pantries are typically located at schools, but also operate in locations like libraries, parks, and youth organization sites that are convenient, familiar, and safe locations for children and their families. Sites may have a permanent set-up, or may operate through a mobile distribution rotation where food meant for preparation and consumption at families' place of residence is brought to the site. Sites are consistently in the same location, have set distribution schedules, and offer ongoing food assistance services. The distribution of healthy, nutritional food is encouraged, and sites often provide some sort of nutrition education to participants.

The School Pantry Program is Feeding America's newest child program, and is experiencing the most dramatic growth of all national programs as food banks aim to meet the needs of families with children

in a holistic way. In FY2015, 110 food banks (out of approximately 200) distributed almost 42 million meals through the School Pantry program, a 62 percent increase from the previous year.

While Feeding America national programs and governmental assistance programs serve children aged 0 to 18, Feeding America member food banks have recognized that generally child programs tend to be underutilized by teenagers. However, food banks have had relatively greater success utilizing the School Pantry program to target underserved teen populations, as the adaptable program model helps reduce the stigma that prohibits some teenagers from accessing other programs. Some adaptations that food banks have made to better serve teens include providing food in discrete, unbranded bags; using "client choice" models that emulate grocery stores where participants can select which products they would like; and having a range of open hours in which teenagers can visit the pantry on a schedule that works for them.



## ADDRESSING TEEN HUNGER IN PORTLAND

While one set of researchers was conducting focus groups nationwide during 2015, another was working closely with teens and practitioners at one site—Portland, Oregon—to identify ways to improve food services for teens. North Portland’s New Columbia neighborhood is one of the three original HOST sites where we first became aware of the severity of teen food insecurity and of the ways teens meet their own and their families’ needs.

We started the New Columbia work with three main goals in mind. The first was to work directly with teens—talking to them about their community, the food landscape as they experienced it, and ways to provide food-related services in ways that would resonate with teens. The second was to include local service providers in these discussions, to translate information from teens into a practical program design that was grounded in teen feedback but also realistic as a service delivery model. Finally, we wanted to document the collaborative process, to demonstrate how teens, service providers, and researchers can work together to improve the local food delivery system.

A group of young people was recruited to serve as New Columbia’s Youth Community Advisory Board (YCAB) and participated in a series of facilitated discussions about different aspects of the local food environment for teens. Some of the discussions inevitably touched on the teens’ experiences with food insecurity, trauma, and risky behavior, but the sessions were designed to be action-oriented and focused on ways to position teens as resources and leaders in their community. Representatives from Home Forward (the local housing authority), Food Works (a youth leadership organization based at New Columbia), and the Oregon Food Bank came to the table as members

of the Portland Teen Food Collaborative, which helped design YCAB discussion guides and facilitate the sessions with Urban researchers. More importantly, the service provider collaborative was committed to using the teens’ feedback to design and then pilot new services in the community.

By the end of seven YCAB sessions, the teens and service providers had identified the key elements of a teen-focused pilot food program. Teens told us, for example, that food distributions should be coupled with services, activities, or events that are attractive to teens—a basketball game, movie nights, or cooking classes—in order to avoid the stigma of showing up exclusively to pick up food. The teens also wanted opportunities to develop leadership skills and to plan and lead these food-centered events in their community. Finally, teens asked for a designated space to gather and plan events and services. In sum, the teens hoped not only for increased access to emergency food, but also for a safe, supportive environment to develop the skills needed serve as leaders and change agents in their communities.

The pilot program that is emerging in Portland includes three main elements: monthly food distributions or “harvest shares” that will ultimately be planned and coordinated by teens; access to counseling, educational opportunities, and referrals to supportive services; and a 12-week teen leadership curriculum intended to develop cohorts of peer educators and youth community advocates. In early 2016, a part-time program coordinator was hired to manage the program and work directly with teens and the service provider collaborative. Home Forward has identified, at least for an interim period, a space that will be dedicated to the teen program.



PHOTO BY Matthew Johnson/Urban Institute

The first monthly harvest share was held in January 2016 and served 116 households from the New Columbia area - the majority of whom had not accessed charitable food support before. So far, dozens of teens have volunteered to help distribute food in their community—and received food in return. In the short term, the harvest shares and teen volunteers will be coordinated by the Food Bank and Home Forward staff, but ultimately the teens will take over. We are still in the very early stages of the program launch, but have already learned some important lessons for other communities interested in this work:

- Teens are eager to be tapped as change agents and to mobilize resources to help improve their communities.
- Trusted adults are key to reaching teens and creating a safe, protective environment where they can reveal their experiences and work together to find solutions.
- Teens need emergency and supplemental food even if their families receive other forms of assistance. But opportunities for employment, skills development, and leadership should also be central to programs intended to reduce teen hunger.
- Teens work hard to help or protect their family members when food is short. Reducing teen hunger also means supporting families.

For the remainder of 2016, Urban will continue to work with Feeding America and the New Columbia partners to develop the Teen Food Program and to document lessons for the field.



PHOTO BY Matthew Johnson/Urban Institute

## HOW THE FOCUS GROUPS WERE CONDUCTED

The first set of teen focus groups were conducted in 2014 at the three HOST sites in Portland, Chicago, and Washington, DC. In order to get a fuller picture of food insecurity dynamics outside of public and subsidized housing environments, in 2015, we conducted a new set of focus groups that encompassed a wider range of demographics and housing conditions. Feeding America and several of its partner food banks, as well as the Doris Duke Foundation, helped Urban identify seven other communities with strong partnerships with service providers serving teens and capacity for organizing focus groups.

In all 10 sites, we partnered with a housing authority/HOST service provider, clinic, community-based organization, or school to recruit participants ages 13-18 for two focus groups—one for girls and a separate one for boys. To ensure that participating youth would be able to speak to issues of food insecurity, they had to be currently receiving free or reduced-price lunch at their school, or living with a family that had received

SNAP or charitable food assistance from a pantry or feeding site sometime in the last year. Partner organizations carefully screened for these criteria during the recruitment process. Participants' parents had to provide informed consent in order for their teens to participate in the groups; each youth participant had to give oral assent and received a \$25 gift card to thank them for their time.

In all, 193 young people took part in the research team's conversations about teen food insecurity, across a total of 20 focus groups (Table 2). We administered brief questionnaires after each group to gather information on basic demographics and food insecurity. As Table 2 shows, our strategy resulted in a diverse set of teens participating in the groups; eight groups were majority African-American, five were majority Latino, four were majority white, and the remaining three were mixed. Although all participants met the basic screening for food assistance need in the past year, post-group questionnaires also indicated

**TABLE 1. OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITIES**

Community <sup>1</sup>	Public/ Subsidized Housing	Type	Child Food Insecurity Rate <sup>2</sup> (County)	Poverty Rate, Families with Children <sup>3</sup> (Zip)	SNAP Receipt, Households with Children (Zip)	Unemployment, 16+ <sup>4</sup> (Zip)
Chicago, IL	Yes	Large Urban	Medium	High	High	High
Eastern Illinois	No	Urban Cluster	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Champaign Metro (IL)	No	Small Urban	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low
Los Angeles, CA	No	Large Urban	High	High	Medium	Medium
Greensboro Metro (NC)	No	Small Urban	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Rural North Carolina	No	Urban Cluster	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Eastern Oregon	No	Urban Cluster	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium
Portland, OR	Yes	Large Urban	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
San Diego, CA	No	Large Urban	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Washington, DC	Yes	Large Urban	High	Medium	High	High

1. Note that we use stand-in names for some of the sites to minimize potential stigma for youth in smaller communities.

2. Based on county-level child food insecurity statistics from *Map the Meal Gap 2015*. Communities rated “High” have rates exceeding the national average by 2 percentage point or more; communities rated “Medium” have rates within (above or below) 2 percentage points of the national average. All data are estimated for 2013; in that year, the national child food insecurity rate was 21.4%.

3-4. Based on zip code level 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates. Communities rated “Low” have rates lower than the national average, “Medium” rates less than 2 times the national average, and “High” more than 2 times the national average. The national average for poverty among families with children was 18%, for SNAP receipt among households was 22 percent, and for unemployment (16+) was 9%.

significant variation in self-reported food insecurity using the six-item USDA household food security scale. Nearly half of the focus groups were conducted with mostly food-insecure teens, five included a minority of food-insecure teens, and six had a more mixed group of both food-secure and food-insecure participants.

Because of the sensitivity of the questions, the researchers tried to ensure the teens were in supportive environments that encouraged open discussion. For example, focus groups typically included at least one break to allow any emotions and tensions to settle; and, facilitators were prepared to provide access to support for teens if the discussions triggered any feelings of trauma. The research team either identified these resources before going on site, or had an established relationship with a practitioner who would assist in this regard.

Urban Institute researchers recorded all of the focus groups, and these recordings were professionally transcribed to provide the best quality record of the conversations. Urban staff then used NVivo, a qualitative database package, to code major themes in the transcripts and classify focus groups by prominence

of food security in the groups, gender, and location. These themes were then examined to identify sub-themes and analyzed by the characteristics of the focus groups themselves. The major themes constitute the chapters of the report and the sub-themes help structure each of the chapters.

Within the text, the authors relied heavily on the teen's own words, using quotes extensively to tell these stories as directly as possible. We employed standard conventions to edit the quotes in the most responsible way. Ellipsis were used to shorten quotes when intervening text was repetitive or went off topic. Brackets were used to clarify things that were said referencing earlier parts of the transcript (i.e. subjects of pronouns, times of day, unfamiliar local terms or slang), as well as to fix subject verb agreement and to indicate where we filled in our best guess where the audio recording was not understandable. These edits helped make all quotes easier to understand, while safeguarding the integrity of teens' words.

Table 1 provides an overview of the 10 communities where we held focus groups, including information on child food insecurity from Feeding America's *Map the Meal Gap* project.



The final mix of communities reflected a substantial degree of diversity, spanning five states, public and market-rate housing, large and small urban areas, as well as urbanized clusters located out in more rural parts of the country (Table 1). Half of the communities were located within counties with child food-insecurity rates at least two percentage points higher than the

national average, and half with rates within two percentage points (above or below) the national rate. Moreover, 9 out of 10 communities registered higher than average family poverty and unemployment rates. And all communities demonstrated relatively elevated rates of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) participation.

**TABLE 2. OVERVIEW OF TEEN FOCUS GROUPS AND PARTICIPANTS**

Community	Total Youth	Total Groups	Group Race/Ethnicity <sup>5</sup>				Group Food Insecurity <sup>6</sup>		
			Black	White	Latino	Mixed	Minority Currently Food Insecure	Mixed Food Security Status	Majority Currently Food Insecure
Chicago, IL	21	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
Eastern, IL	14	2	0	0	1	1	1	0	1
Champaign Metro (IL)	23	2	2	0	0	0	1	1	0
Los Angeles, CA	20	2	0	0	2	0	1	1	0
Greensboro Metro (NC)	23	2	2	0	0	0	1	1	0
Rural North Carolina	15	2	0	2	0	0	1	1	0
Eastern Oregon	17	2	0	2	0	0	0	1	1
Portland, OR	22	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
San Diego, CA	20	2	0	0	2	0	0	1	1
Washington, DC	18	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>

5. Groups were classified by what race/ethnicity constituted 50 percent or more of the focus group participants. Groups with no absolute majority were classified as "Mixed."

6. All focus group participants answered a six-item set of questions to measure their food security status. Groups classified as "Minority Currently Food Insecure" were ones where a third or less of participants were food insecure, "Mixed" a third to two-thirds, and "Majority Currently Food Insecure" more than two-thirds. Note that the original 3 HOST community focus groups in Washington, DC, Chicago and Portland did not administer the official scale, but were assigned "Majority" values due to the highly elevated levels of family food insecurity identified in the HOST baseline survey.

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