

# Child Food Insecurity



Food insecurity has the potential to be harmful to individuals of any age, but it can be especially devastating to children. The USDA estimates that more than 12 million children in the United States live in food-insecure households as of 2017.<sup>1</sup> That means that 1 in 6 children (17%) may not have consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.

For the ninth consecutive year, Feeding America has conducted the *Map the Meal Gap* study to improve our understanding of how food insecurity and food costs vary at the local level. By better understanding variations in local need, communities can develop more targeted strategies to reach people struggling with hunger. Included here are findings related to food insecurity among children, one of four related topics that make up the *Map the Meal Gap 2019* report briefs.

**12.5 million**

-or-

**1/6**

children are at risk of hunger.

**50**

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

**84%**

of counties with high child food insecurity are rural.

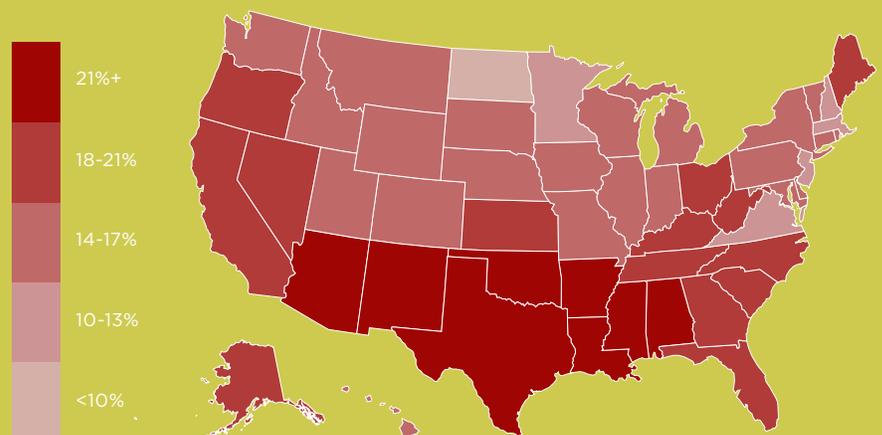
**750,000**

children may be food insecure in Los Angeles and New York City.

## Key Findings

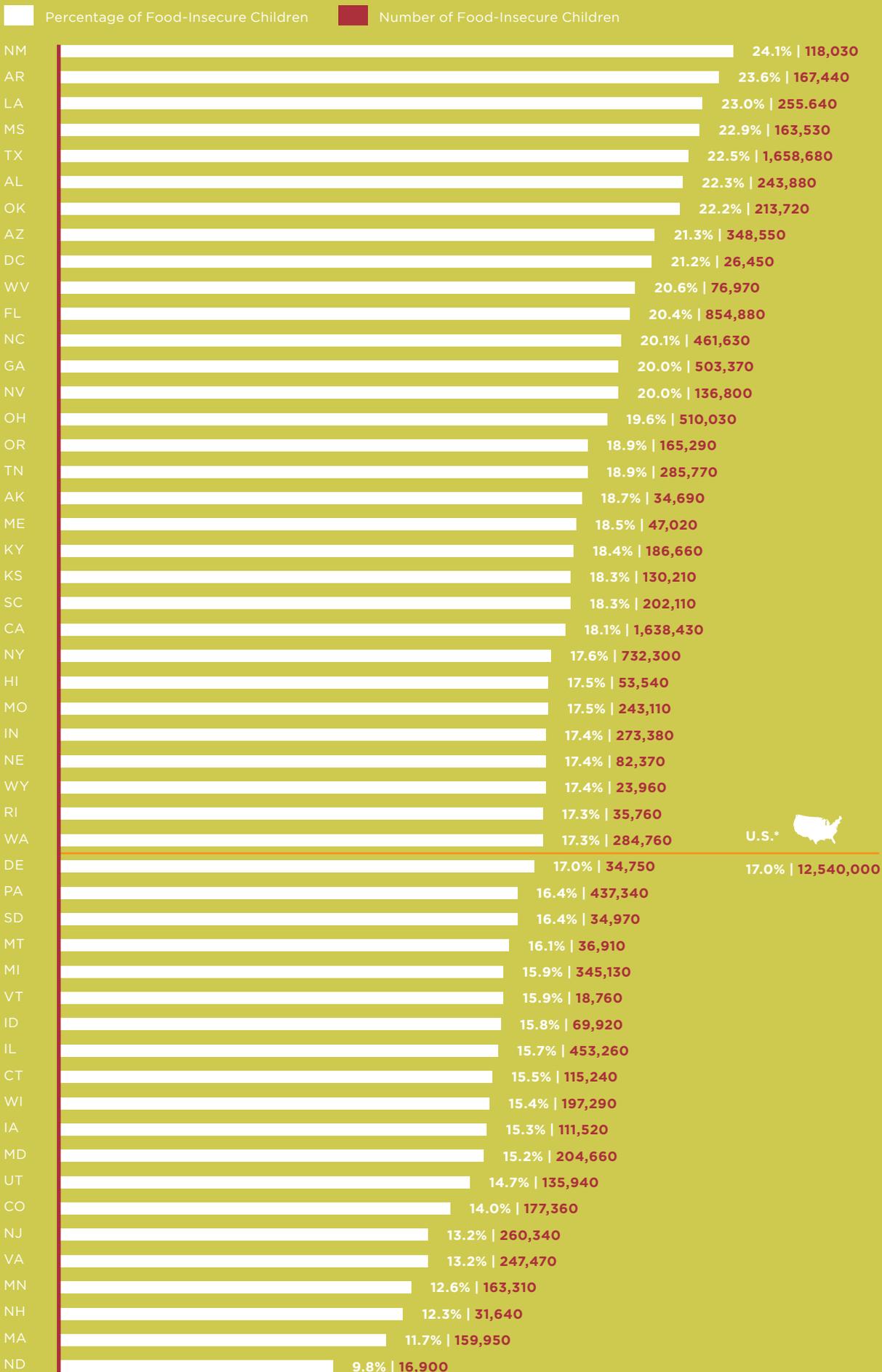
### Child Food Insecurity Among States and Congressional Districts

**In all 50 states and Washington, D.C., the estimated rate of child food insecurity is higher than the rate of overall food insecurity.** Although households with children have slightly larger median incomes on average, they may also experience greater budgetary constraints, due to larger household sizes and the fact that some household members are dependent on caregivers.<sup>2</sup> Whereas overall food insecurity at the state level ranges from 7% in North Dakota to 19% in Mississippi, rates among children range from 10% in North Dakota to 24% in New Mexico. Among congressional districts, rates of child food insecurity span a similar range—a low of 9% (nearly 20,000 children) in affluent districts like Virginia’s 10th, bordering Washington, D.C., to a high of 30% (nearly 63,000 children) in New York’s 15th, located entirely in the Bronx of New York City.



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# Child Food Insecurity Rates by State



\* USDA, 2018

## Child Food Insecurity Among Counties

**Just as every state is home to children at risk of hunger, no county is free of child food insecurity.** Rates range from 6% in Slope County, North Dakota to 40% in East Carroll Parish, Louisiana. The variation in rates of child food insecurity shows that need is more pervasive in specific communities. Among the 325 counties in the top 10% of counties with the highest rates of child food insecurity, an estimated 27% of children live in food-insecure homes, compared to 18% across all counties when weighted by population. Counties with the highest rates of child food insecurity have notably higher unemployment and poverty rates, and lower median incomes.



**High Child Food Insecurity counties are the counties with the top 10% of child food-insecurity rates.**



**27%**  
of children are food insecure



Higher poverty



Higher unemployment



Lower median income

**Although the child food-insecurity rate is one important indicator of need, even counties with more modest rates may still be home to large numbers of children whose families are food insecure.** For example, the counties encompassing Los Angeles and New York City have rates of child food insecurity (18% and 19%, respectively) close to the national county average (18%). However, there is high need in both areas: greater than 410,000 food-insecure children live in Los Angeles County and nearly 340,000 food-insecure children live in the counties encompassing the five boroughs of New York City. Because they are so densely populated, urban counties in major metropolitan areas may have elevated levels of need despite relatively low rates of child food insecurity. **Whether a county is urban or rural, each community faces unique challenges.** Effective solutions to child food insecurity require addressing the immediate food needs of individual households as well as the underlying economic factors contributing to local food insecurity.

### Counties with more than 100,000 Food-Insecure Children



# Implications of Child Food Insecurity

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

## Health, Behavior and Education

**There is a broad base of literature illustrating links between food insecurity and poor child health and behavioral outcomes at every age.** For example, food-insecure women are more likely to experience birth complications than food-secure women.<sup>3</sup> One indicator of child and maternal health is low birthweight among infants,<sup>4</sup> which is more common among counties with the highest rates of child food insecurity than across all counties (10% versus 8%). Furthermore, children struggling with food insecurity may be at greater risk for stunted development,<sup>5</sup> anemia and asthma,<sup>6,7</sup> oral health problems<sup>8</sup> and hospitalization.<sup>9</sup> Overall, food insecurity is linked with poorer physical quality of life, which may prevent children from fully engaging in daily activities.<sup>10</sup> At school, food-insecure children are at increased risk of falling behind their food-secure peers both academically and socially; food insecurity is linked to lower reading and mathematics<sup>11</sup> test scores, and they may be more likely to exhibit behavioral problems,<sup>12</sup> including hyperactivity, aggression<sup>13</sup> and anxiety.<sup>14</sup>



## Policy and Programs

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

### Federal Nutrition Programs



19 million children<sup>15</sup>  
SNAP



3.5 million children<sup>16</sup>  
Government Programs like  
Child Nutrition and WIC

### Federal School Nutrition Programs<sup>17</sup>



22 million children  
National School Lunch  
Program



12.5 million children  
School Breakfast Program



4 million children  
Summer Food Service Program +  
Seamless Summer Option

Free and reduced-price lunch

Some families in need of public support, however, face challenges maintaining consistent enrollment while others may not even qualify for federal assistance. **One in five food-insecure children lives in a home that is likely ineligible for these important programs, underscoring the critical role of both the public and private sector in addressing child food insecurity.**<sup>18</sup> Together, these programs weave a comprehensive nutritional safety net that reaches children where they live, learn and play. Through collaborative efforts between the Feeding America network of food banks and partner agencies, policymakers, business leaders, community activists, and concerned citizens, every child in America could receive the nutrition they need.

## Map the Meal Gap Methodology

To estimate local food insecurity among children, *Map the Meal Gap* uses methodology that mirrors the approach used for the overall population. First, Feeding America identifies the relationship between food insecurity and associated variables at the state level using data that is mostly restricted to households with children. Then, local data on these variables for every county and congressional district is analyzed to estimate the share of the child population living in food-insecure households. Finally, local income data is used to estimate the percentage of these children in households that are either eligible or ineligible to receive free or reduced-price meals and participate in other federal child nutrition programs. Full methodology details are available online in the [technical brief](#). *Map the Meal Gap 2019* also features [report briefs](#) on other topics, including an [executive summary](#), an overview of [food price variations](#), and an analysis of [health implications](#).

