# Executive Summary

Although the economy is improving, millions of Americans continue to struggle. The USDA estimates that 40 million people, including more than 12 million children, in the United States are food insecure as of 2017.[1] That means 1 in 8 individuals (13%) and 1 in 6 children (17%) live in households without consistent access to adequate food. The prevalence of food insecurity decreased slightly from 2016, but rates remain higher than before the Great Recession in 2007.

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.

Prevalence of Food Insecurity by County, 2017

- 30%+
- 25-29%
- 20-24%
- 15-19%
- 4-14%
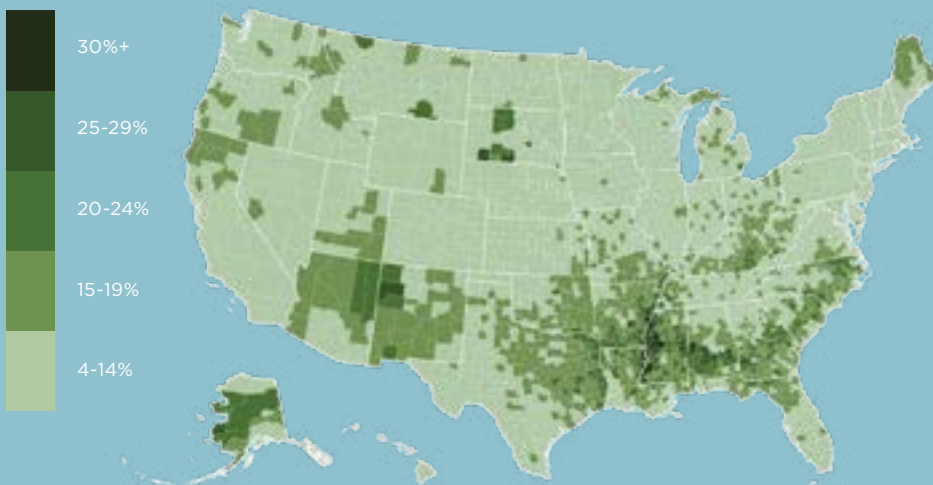
3-36%
range of population that is food insecure across US counties. Food insecurity exists everywhere.

3/10
people who are food insecure are unlikely to qualify for most federal nutrition programs.

$21 billion
needed by individuals at risk of hunger to purchase just enough food to meet their needs.

$3.02
is what a person who is food secure is likely to spend per meal. Meal costs are nearly twice this amount in some counties.
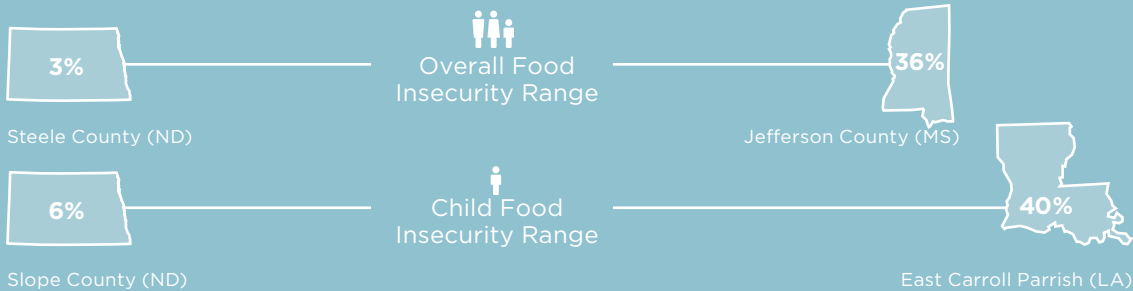
Key Findings

County and Congressional District Findings

Every U.S. county and congressional district is home to people who face hunger. Estimated rates of county food insecurity range from 3% to 36% for the overall population. Food insecurity among congressional districts spans a similar range, but children across both geographies are more likely to live in a food-insecure household. Mississippi is home to the highest county rate and Michigan is home to the highest district rate in the country, but no community is free of food insecurity.

Range of County Food Insecurity Rates

3%	Overall Food Insecurity Range	**36%**
Steele County (ND)		Jefferson County (MS)
6%	Child Food Insecurity Range	**40%**
Slope County (ND)		East Carroll Parrish (LA)

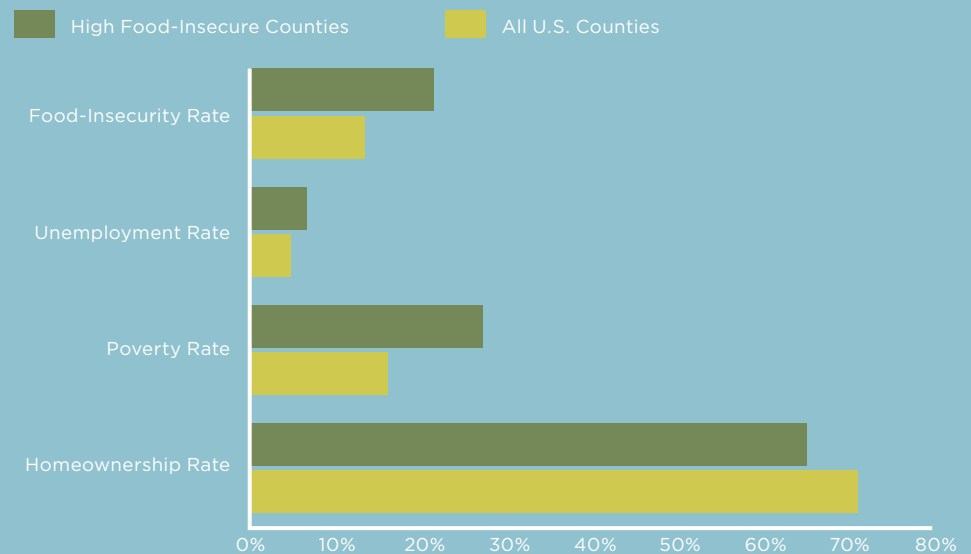## Highest Rates of Food Insecurity

Counties with the highest rates of food insecurity—those in the top 10% of all counties—tend to have similarly poor economic indicators: higher rates of unemployment[2] and poverty,[3] and lower homeownership[4] and median income[5] as compared with all counties.

High Food Insecurity counties are the counties with the top 10% of food–insecurity rates.

The majority (66%) of counties with the highest rates of food insecurity also experience persistent poverty, which the USDA defines as at least 20% of the population living in poverty for more than 30 years.[6] This confluence of complex challenges underscores the need for solutions that can effectively address both the immediate and long-term needs of food-insecure families living in these communities.

Average Economic Indicators by County Type

■ High Food-Insecure Counties   ■ All U.S. Counties
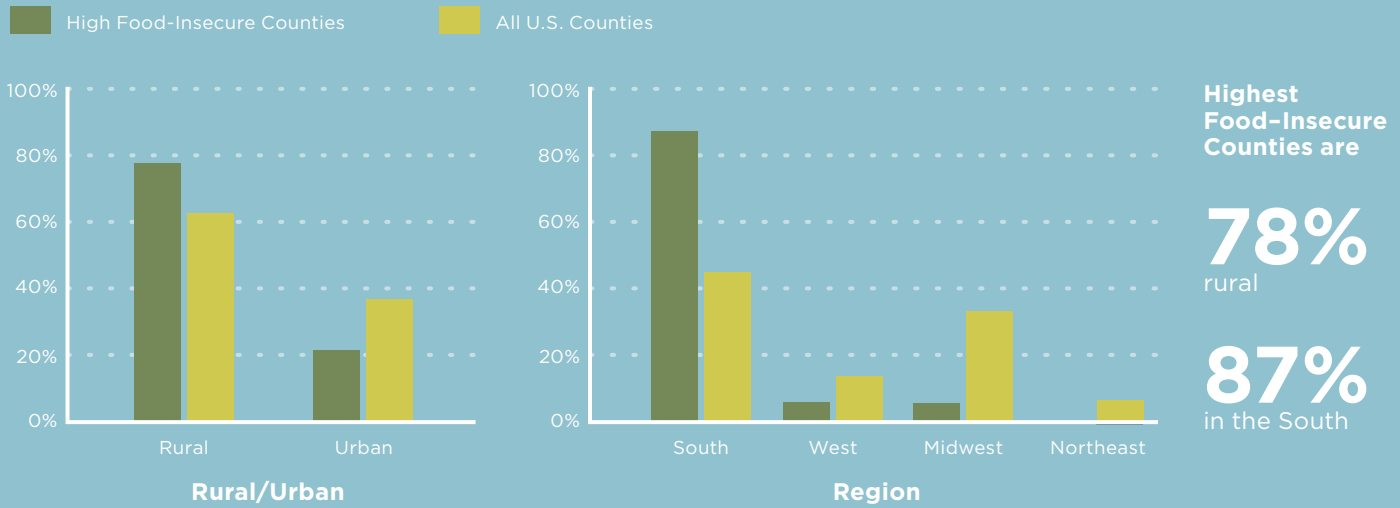

Largest Numbers of Food Insecure People

While the prevalence of food insecurity is an important indicator of need, **counties with large populations and comparatively low rates of food insecurity are home to some of the largest absolute numbers of food-insecure people.** For example, Los Angeles County, California has a relatively low rate of food insecurity (11%) but is home to an estimated 1.1 million food-insecure individuals, including greater than 410,000 children at risk of hunger. To effectively address food insecurity and end hunger in America, it is important to consider both the size of the population in need as well as how widespread that need may be.

Los Angeles county is home to more than

1 million
food-insecure individuals.

Rural and Regional Demographics of Food Insecurity

Rural (nonmetropolitan) counties make up 63% of all U.S. counties but 78% of counties with the highest rates of food insecurity. Regionally, the highest average rates of county food insecurity are found in the South, which includes 87% of counties with the highest rates of food insecurity and also has the widest variation in county food insecurity. The lowest average food insecurity rates are located in the Northeast.

■ High Food-Insecure Counties   ■ All U.S. Counties

Rural/Urban

Region

Highest Food–Insecure Counties are

78%
rural

87%
in the South

Many counties located outside major metropolitan areas and in the South are home to large communities of color living at elevated risk of food insecurity. These communities face persistently high rates of unemployment and poverty. The population of Jefferson County, Mississippi, for example, is 86% African American, faces an unemployment rate that is three times the national county average (15% versus 5%), and struggles with persistent poverty at a rate that is almost three times that among all counties (47% versus 16%). As a result, the local rate of food insecurity is the highest in the nation (36%). County-level analysis also helps illuminate the obstacles faced by reservation communities,[7,8] such as Apache County, Arizona, which includes parts of the Navajo Nation, Zuni and Fort Apache reservations. A persistent-poverty county with poverty (36%) more than twice the national county average and food insecurity (24%) close to twice the national county average, this example underscores the deep and pervasive nature of the systemic challenges that many minority communities face.

Food Budget Shortfall and Average Meal Costs

The total need for food among everyone estimated to be food insecure in 2017 stands at a staggering $20.6 billion. This resource gap or national food budget shortfall is an annualized approximation of need as reported on the Current Population Survey (CPS) by people who are food insecure. It reflects the average additional amount of money per week that a food-insecure person is likely to spend on just enough food to meet their needs. After accounting for inflation, the weekly shortfall ($16.99) decreased for the second year in a row in 2017 after rising for four consecutive years.

| 40 Million Food Insecure Persons (USDA) | ✕ | $16.99 Weekly Food Budget Shortfall (CPS) | ✕ | 52 Weeks | ✕ | 7 of 12 Months (USDA) | = | **$21 billion** Food Budget Shortfall |

However, with **average meal costs nearly twice as high as the national average** ($3.02) in some areas like New York County, the additional burden of high food prices can make it difficult for food-insecure households to make ends meet. This is especially true if they also struggle to afford housing, utilities, transportation, and other basic necessities.

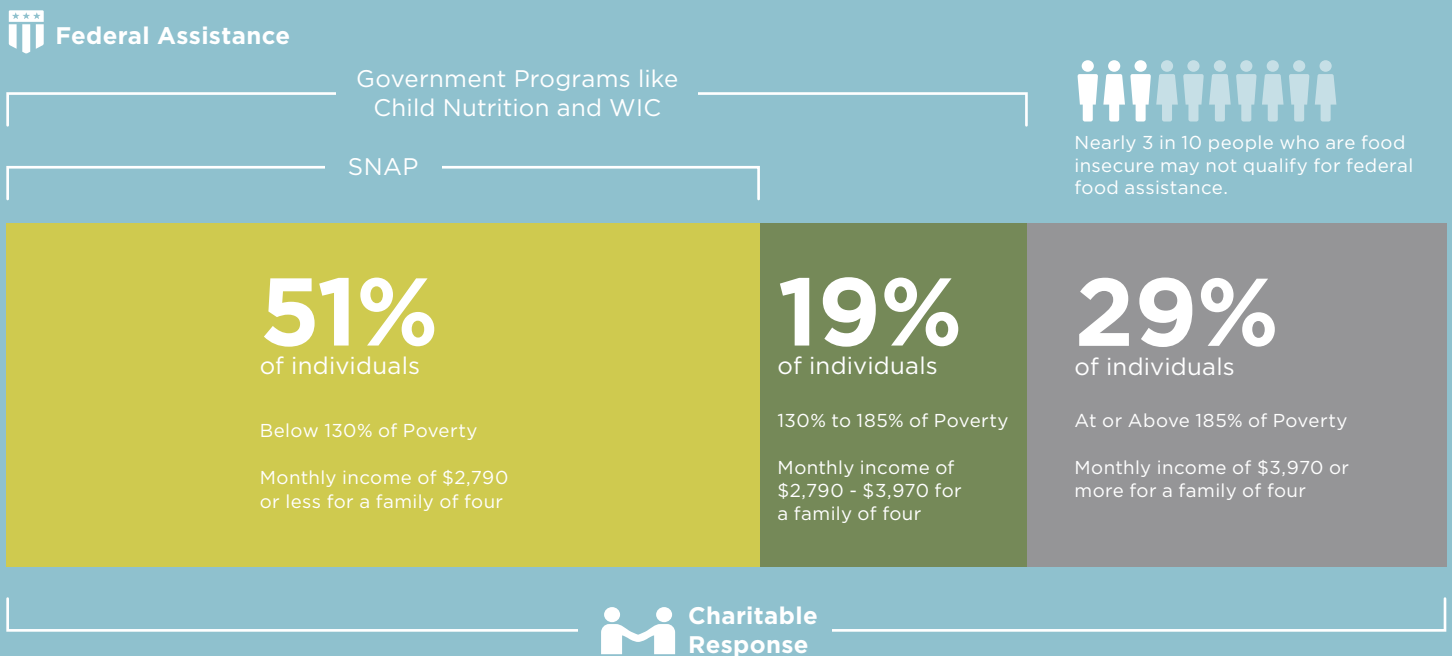| $63.42 Spent Per Week (CPS) | ÷ | 21 (3 Meals Per Day, 7 Days Per Week) | = | **$3.02** Average Cost Per Meal |

Implications

Map the Meal Gap focuses on equipping communities, service providers and policymakers with data and analytical tools to help them understand the prevalence and dynamics of food insecurity at the local level so they may better respond to the need.

Federal nutrition assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), serve as the first line of defense against hunger. However, **not everyone who is food insecure qualifies for these federal programs;** nationally, nearly three in 10 (29%) individuals estimated to be food insecure and whose incomes are known live in households unlikely to qualify for most federal assistance.[9] Given the variation in food insecurity and state income and asset limits for certain programs, data from *Map the Meal Gap* indicate that the share of food-insecure individuals not eligible for public food assistance may even be as high as 80% in some places, such as Daggett County, Utah. As a result, the charitable sector may be the primary source of food for many individuals and families at risk of hunger across the country. Given the scope and scale of the issue, however, it is important that policymakers protect and strengthen the existing safety net of public food programs as well as invest in public-private partnerships in order to reduce food insecurity and end hunger in America.

Share of Food-Insecure Individuals by Income Thresholds[9]

Federal Assistance

Government Programs like Child Nutrition and WIC

SNAP

Nearly 3 in 10 people who are food insecure may not qualify for federal food assistance.

51%
of individuals

Below 130% of Poverty

Monthly income of $2,790 or less for a family of four

19%
of individuals

130% to 185% of Poverty

Monthly income of $2,790 - $3,970 for a family of four

29%
of individuals

At or Above 185% of Poverty

Monthly income of $3,970 or more for a family of four

Charitable Response

Map the Meal Gap Methodology

To accurately estimate the number of people who may be food insecure in every U.S. county and congressional district, *Map the Meal Gap* uses publicly available state and local data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics on factors that research has shown to contribute to food insecurity. These factors include unemployment and poverty, as well as other demographic and household characteristics. In addition to measuring how pervasive the need is, the study also estimates the cost of a meal, and the amount of need among people who are food insecure, using local data from Nielsen and national survey data from the Census Bureau. More information is available online in our technical brief.

Findings from *Map the Meal Gap* are presented in a series of briefs that can be explored individually or in partnership. The series contains four modules, including this executive summary, child food insecurity, food price variation and health implications, to illustrate our findings and demonstrate how food insecurity adds context and relates to other challenges for families.

THE HOWARD G. BUFFETT FOUNDATION

nielsen

CONAGRA BRANDS FOUNDATION