

Food Price Variation



The USDA estimates that 40 million people, including more than 12 million children, in the United States are food insecure as of 2017. This means that 1 in 8 individuals (13%) and 1 in 6 children (17%) live in households without consistent access to adequate food. The experience of food insecurity depends on individual circumstances, local economies, and broader social and economic forces. **Food prices in particular represent an important component of cost-of-living that affects households' ability to afford food.** In fact, the high relative price of food contributed to the persistently high rate of national food insecurity in the years following the Great Recession.¹ Food prices began edging upward again in 2017 and 2018, and are expected to continue rising in 2019.²

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. This brief focuses on the variation in local food prices and the average cost of a meal, one of four related topics that make up the *Map the Meal Gap 2019* [report briefs](#). **Through the lens of local meal costs, it is possible to see how people already struggling with hunger in communities across the country can find it difficult to afford enough food** to live active, healthy lives.

40 million

-or-

1/8

people are food insecure.

1,352

counties (43%) have meal costs higher than the national average.

\$3.02

is the national average meal cost. It is nearly twice this in some counties.

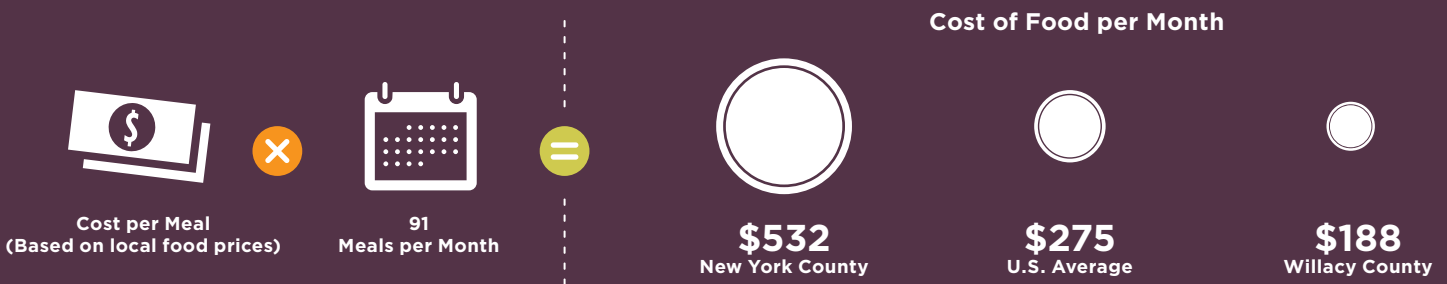


Key Findings

County-Level Food Costs

In 2017, people who were food secure reported spending an average of **\$3.02 per meal**. Although roughly the same as the amount reported in 2016 (\$3.00), after accounting for inflation, the 2017 meal cost is slightly lower than the amount reported in 2016 (\$3.06 in 2017 dollars). At the local level, meal costs range from \$2.07 in Willacy County, Texas to nearly twice the national average in places like New York County (Manhattan) at \$5.85. This means that \$1 in Willacy purchases 46% more food than the national average, and 183% more than in New York County.

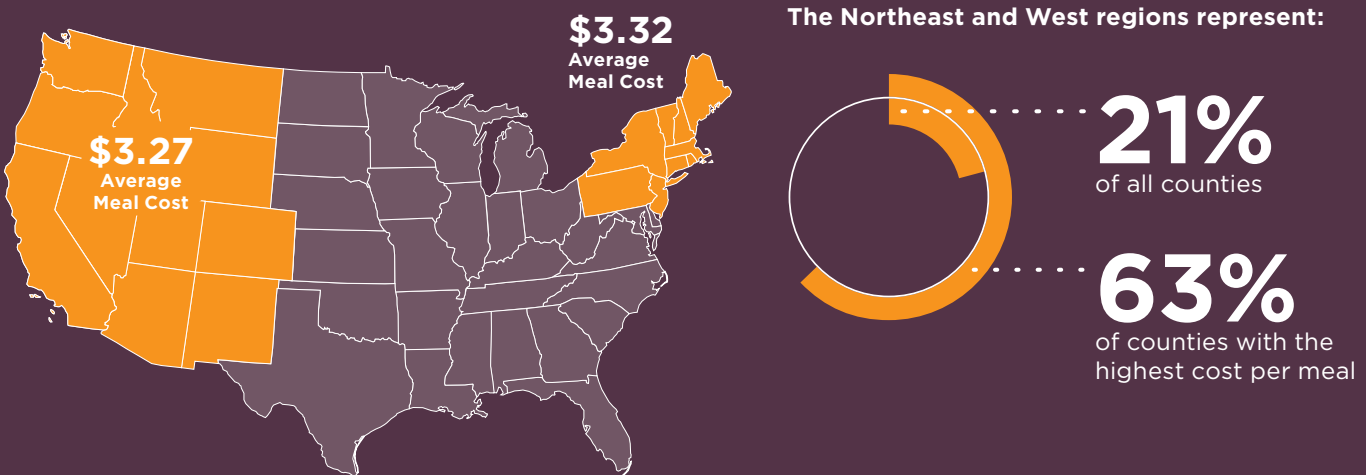
At \$3.02 per meal, a person who is food secure is estimated to spend \$275 on food per month. In New York County that person is likely to pay \$532 for the same amount of food, a grocery bill that would cover enough food for nearly three months in Willacy County. A family of four with two young children is estimated to spend \$1,083 per month in New York County to buy the minimum amount of food for a nutritious diet.³ This is considerably more than the national average (\$559) and what that same family would spend in Willacy County (\$383).



In some cases, the meal cost may be high due in part to the expense of transporting food to a resort area or an island. For example, Nantucket County, Massachusetts is a popular island vacation destination and has an average cost of a meal is \$3.70. Aspen in Pitkin County, Colorado and Napa County, California also have a significant tourist presence and higher than average meal costs (\$3.61 and \$4.19, respectively). While local families in such areas typically have higher-than-average median incomes, these communities are also home to households with lower incomes for whom higher food costs can be particularly challenging.

Counties with High Food Costs

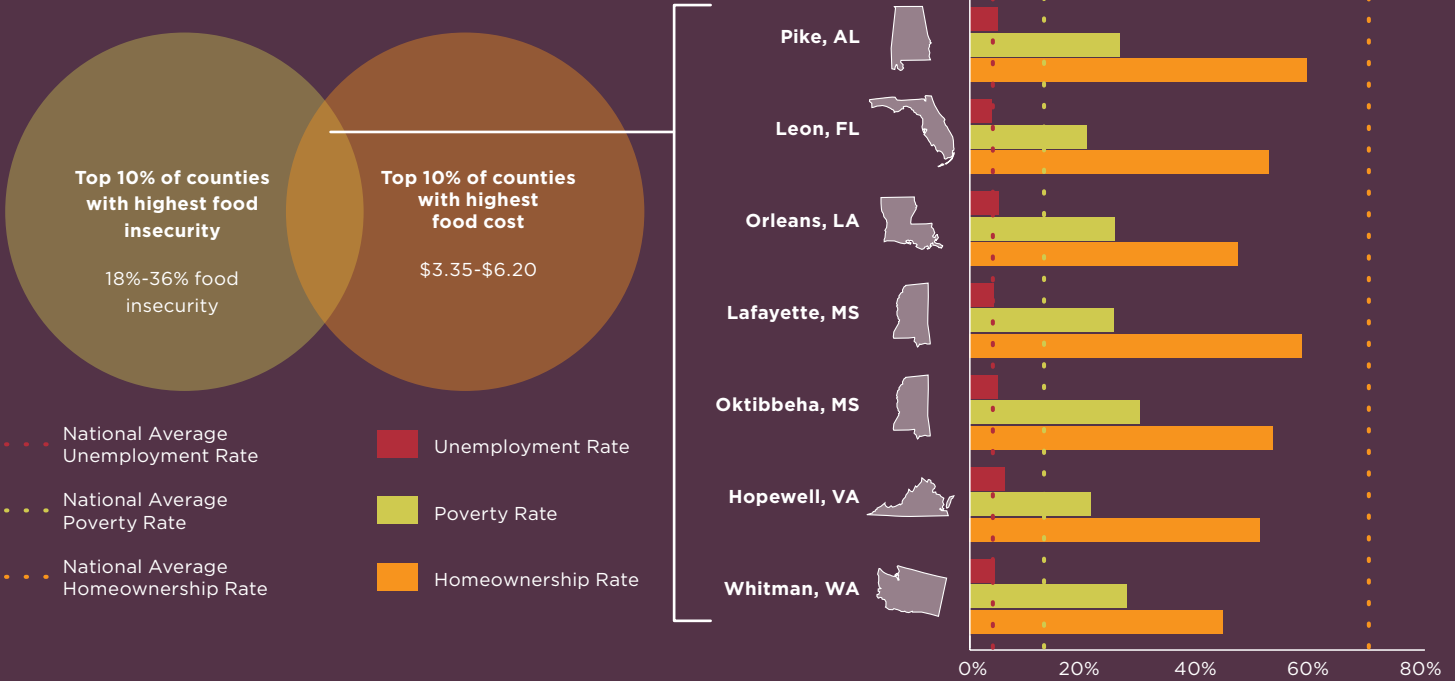
The top 10% of counties with the highest food prices have an average meal cost 20% higher than the national average (\$3.63 versus \$3.02). While there are pockets of communities across the country with high meal costs, counties with the highest estimated costs are regionally concentrated. The Northeast (\$3.32) and West (\$3.27) have a disproportionately high share of these high-cost counties. These two regions account for just 21% of all counties, but 63% of counties with the highest cost per meal. The South and Midwest have lower than average meal costs (\$2.97 and \$2.91, respectively) and relatively few counties in the top 10%.



Most counties with the highest meal costs (56%) are part of populous metropolitan areas. **While these urban counties with high meal costs tend to have lower rates of food insecurity, they are home to large numbers of people who are food insecure.** An estimated 9.2 million people are at risk of hunger in these high-cost urban communities.

High Food Cost and High Food Insecurity

For a family struggling to afford housing, utilities, transportation and other basic necessities, the additional burden of high food prices can have a significant impact on their household budget. **Seven counties fall into the top 10% for both food insecurity and meal cost.** An average of one in every five individuals in these counties is food insecure, totaling more than 181,000 food-insecure people who live in areas with some of the highest meal costs. Although, these counties may not face the highest food prices in the nation, the average cost per meal of \$3.49 is still 16% higher than the national average. Six of the seven counties are located in the South and four have persistent poverty.⁴ Four of the seven counties have higher-than-average unemployment rates,⁵ and all seven have higher-than-average poverty and low homeownership.⁶



High Food Cost and Housing

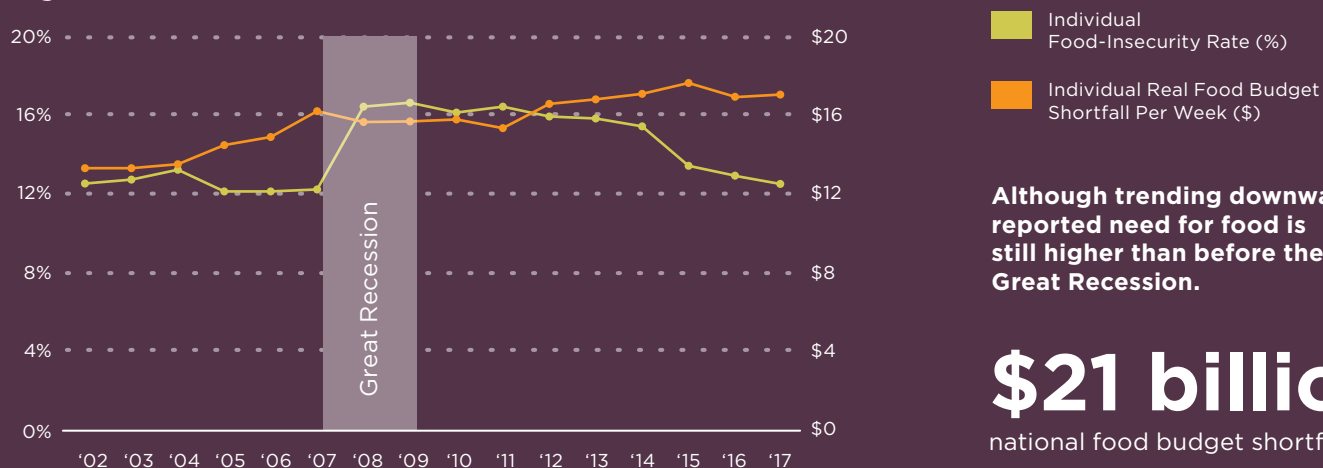
High meal costs can force food-insecure households to make tradeoffs that in turn make it difficult to invest in their long-term economic success. They may even force families to choose between buying food and paying for housing. **Compared to all counties, those with the highest meal costs tend to have lower rates of homeownership, higher rent, and a higher rental burden**—which occurs when a household pays 35% or more of their income on rent.⁷



Implications

Studying local food insecurity in the context of average meal costs illustrates just how much variation there is in both the prevalence of need and the price of food across the country. The cost per meal measure discussed here reflects the average amount of money that someone who is food secure is likely to spend on a single meal. It is also useful to consider reported need among people who are food insecure. An analysis of national survey data suggests that people at risk of hunger in 2017 report needing an additional \$16.99 per week on average to buy just enough food to meet their needs. After adjusting for inflation, this food budget shortfall is slightly lower than the \$16.90 reported in 2016 (\$17.26 in 2017 dollars). **When annualized across the 40 million people estimated to be food insecure, however, the national shortfall stands at nearly \$21 billion as of 2017.**

Food Insecurity and Reported Need Still Higher than Before Great Recession



Although trending downward, reported need for food is still higher than before the Great Recession.

\$21 billion
national food budget shortfall

When struggling to afford housing, utilities, transportation and other basic necessities, however, the additional burden of high food prices can have a significant impact on a family's budget. **For households at risk of hunger in certain parts of the country, high food prices can make it especially difficult to afford the food they need. This is a reality even for families that receive federal nutrition assistance benefits.**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which served 40 million people in 2018, is a key federal program that helps low-income households bolster their food budget⁸ and helps children and adults transition out of food insecurity.⁹ SNAP benefits, however, are not adjusted for higher cost of living except in Alaska and Hawaii, and even the maximum SNAP benefit falls short of covering the cost of a meal in 99% of U.S. counties.¹⁰ This resource gap can cause families in certain areas to experience higher rates of food insecurity. Recent research suggests that a weekly increase in SNAP benefits of \$42 per household would lead to a 62% decline in national food insecurity rates.¹¹

Map the Meal Gap Methodology

Map the Meal Gap uses data from the Current Population Survey to calculate a national average meal cost and food budget shortfall among people who are food insecure. These measures estimate the average amount of money that people who are food secure report spending on food, as well as how much more money, on average, a person who is food insecure reports needing to buy just enough food to meet their needs. National estimates are then adjusted for every county and state using local food price data provided by Nielsen and local sales tax data. The analysis is primarily limited to the cost of purchasing a food-secure diet as food-insecure households are assumed to underspend on food due to limited resources. More information about our methodology is available in the full [technical brief](#). *Map the Meal Gap 2019* also features [report briefs](#) on other topics, including an [executive summary](#), an overview of [child food insecurity](#), and an analysis of [health implications](#).

