

Food Price Variation



The USDA estimates that 37 million people, including more than 11 million children, in the United States were food insecure in 2018.¹ This means that 1 in 9 individuals (11.5%) and 1 in 7 children (15.2%) lived 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.**^{2,3}

For the tenth 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 2020 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.**

37 million

-or-

1/9

people are food insecure.

\$3.09

is the national average meal cost. In some counties, meal cost is more than twice this.

1,314

counties (42%) have meal costs higher than the national average.



Key Findings

County-Level Food Costs

In 2018, people who were food secure reported spending an average of \$3.09 per meal which, when accounting for inflation, is roughly equivalent to the average reported in 2017. **At the local level, meal costs range from \$2.14 in Llano County, Texas to more than twice the national average in places like New York County at \$6.19.** This means that \$1 in Llano County purchases 44% more food than the national average and 189% more than in New York County.

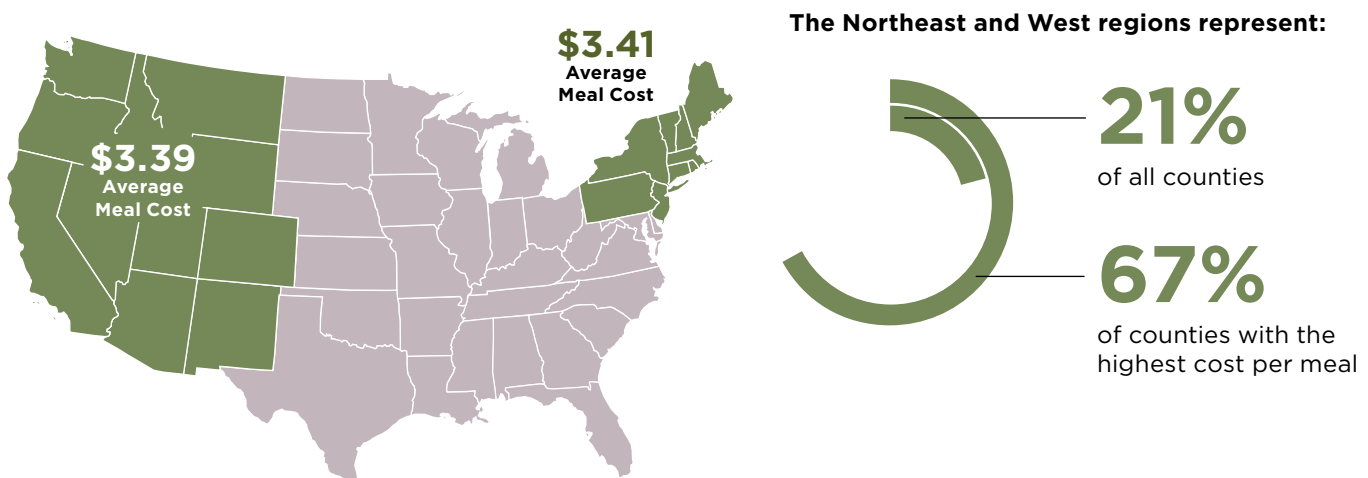
At \$3.09 per meal, a person who is food secure is estimated to spend \$281 on food per month. In New York County that person is likely to pay \$563 for the same amount of food, a grocery bill that would cover enough food for almost three months in Llano County. A family of four with two young children is estimated to spend \$1,122 per month in New York County to buy the minimum amount of food for a nutritious diet.⁴ This is considerably more than the national average (\$561) and what that same family would spend in Llano County (\$387).



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 the average cost of a meal is \$3.80. Aspen in Pitkin County, Colorado and Napa County, California also have a significant tourist presence and higher than average meal costs (\$3.66 and \$4.38, 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

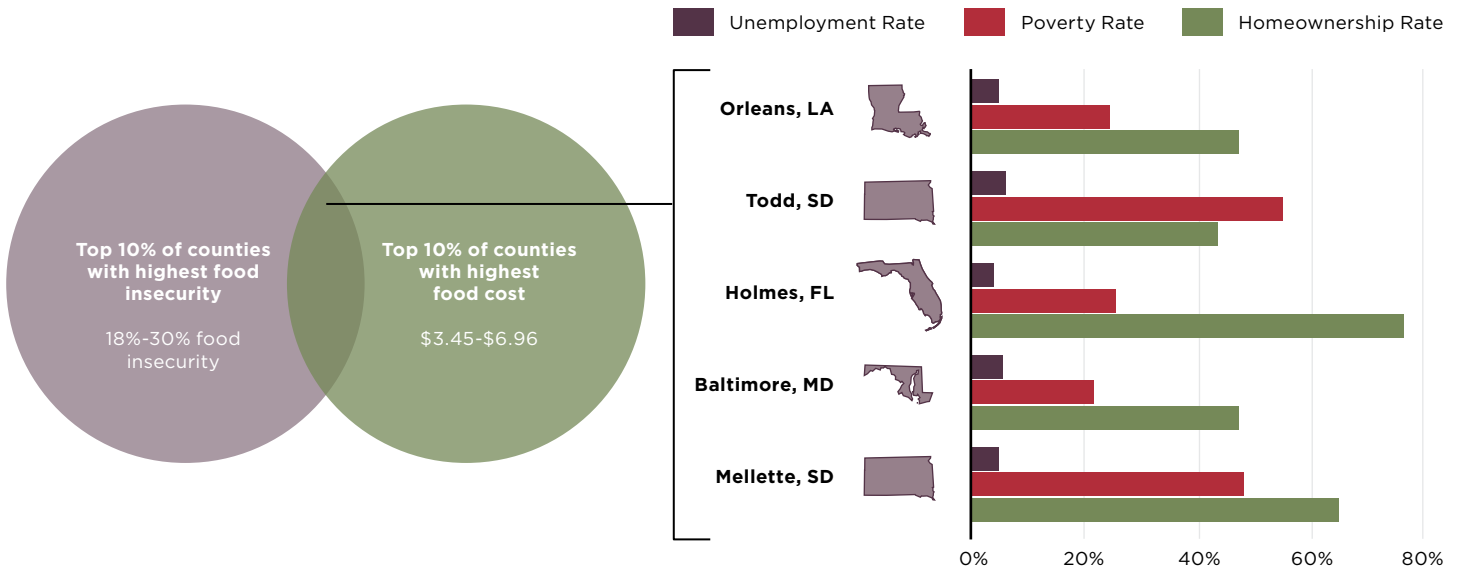
The top 10% of counties with the highest food prices have an average meal cost 22% higher than the national average (\$3.76 versus \$3.09). While there are pockets of communities across the country with high meal costs, counties with the highest estimated costs are regionally concentrated. The Northeast (\$3.41) and West (\$3.39) have a disproportionately high share of these high-cost counties. These two regions account for just 21% of all counties, but 67% of counties with the highest cost per meal. The South and Midwest have lower than average meal costs (\$3.02 and \$2.99, respectively) and relatively fewer counties in the top 10%.



Most counties with the highest meal costs (58%) are part of populous metropolitan areas. **Due in part to population density, urban counties with high meal costs are also home to large numbers of people who are food insecure.** An estimated 8.7 million people are at risk of hunger in these high-cost urban communities.

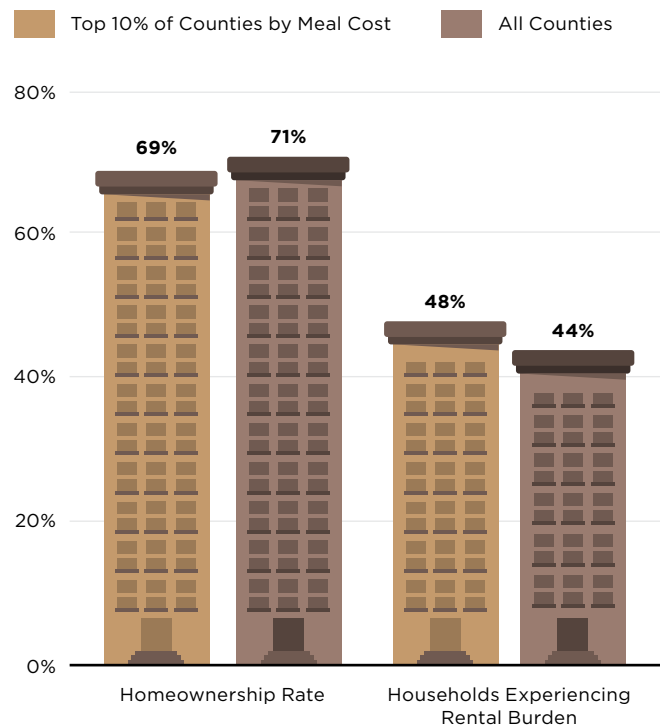
High Food Cost and High Food Insecurity

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. **Five 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 187,000 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 \$3.55 is still 15% higher than the national average. Three of the five counties are in the South and four have persistent poverty.⁵ Four of the five counties have higher-than-average unemployment rates⁶ and below average homeownership rates,⁷ and all five have higher-than-average poverty rates.⁸



High Food Cost and Housing

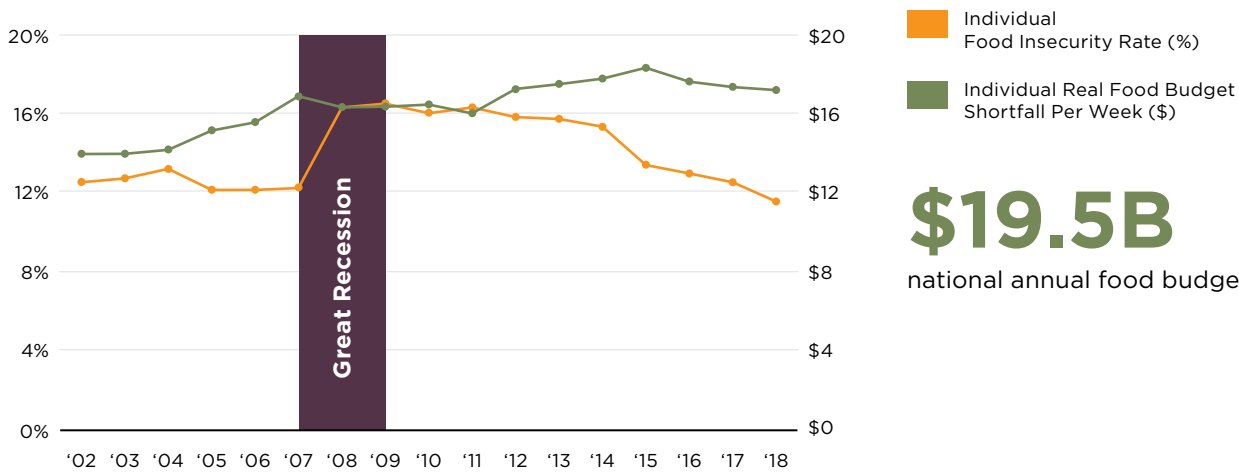
High meal costs can force food-insecure households to make tradeoffs that in turn make it difficult to invest in their long-term economic success. They may even force families to choose between buying food and paying for housing. **Compared to all counties, those with the highest meal costs tend to have lower rates of homeownership, higher rent, and a higher rental burden**—which occurs when a household pays 30% 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 2018 report needing an additional \$17.24 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 \$16.99 reported in 2017 (\$17.40 in 2018 dollars). **When annualized across the 37 million people estimated to be food insecure, however, the national shortfall stands at nearly \$19.5 billion as of 2018.**

Food Insecurity and Reported Need Since Great Recession



\$19.5B
national annual 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 who receive federal nutrition assistance benefits.**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which served nearly 36 million people in 2019, is a key federal program that helps low-income households bolster their food budget¹⁰ and helps children and adults transition out of food insecurity.¹¹ SNAP benefits, however, are not adjusted¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³

Map the Meal Gap Methodology

To accurately estimate the number of people experiencing food insecurity 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 socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Beginning in 2020, the estimates also account for disability status, one of the key risk factors for food insecurity. In addition to measuring how pervasive the need is, the study also estimates the cost of a meal and the additional amount of dollars needed among people who are food insecure using local data from Nielsen and national survey data from the Census Bureau. More information on methodology is available online in our [technical brief](#).

Map the Meal Gap 2020 also features [report briefs](#) on other topics, including an executive summary, an overview of child food insecurity, and an analysis of health, disability and food insecurity. Additionally, the [interactive map](#) allows for the exploration of food insecurity across geographies throughout the U.S.



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