

Executive Summary

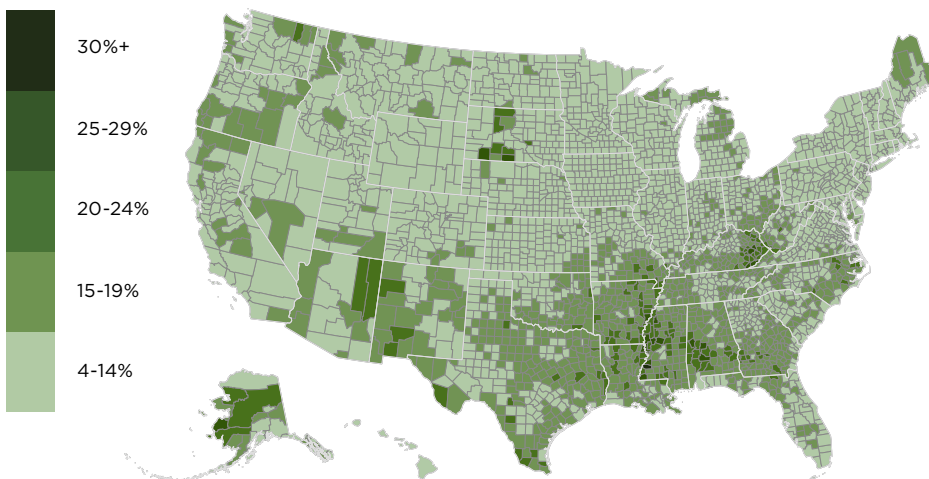


As of 2018, the prevalence of food insecurity in the United States finally declined to levels not seen since before the Great Recession began in 2007. However, millions of people continued to struggle. The USDA estimates that 37 million people, including more than 11 million children, in the United States were food insecure in 2018.¹ That means 1 in 9 individuals (11.5%) and 1 in 7 children (15.2%) lived in households without consistent access to adequate food.

In 2020, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic threatens the lives and livelihoods of people across the country. Closures and social distancing orders that limit the spread of the disease have impacted communities large and small. The economic ramifications are felt by individuals already at risk of hunger, such as those who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic. The pandemic will likely reverse the improvements to food insecurity that have occurred over the past decade.

For the tenth consecutive year, Feeding America conducted the *Map the Meal Gap* study to improve our understanding of how food insecurity and food costs vary at the local level. This year *Map the Meal Gap* uses an updated methodology and is released with a companion study on the potential impact of COVID-19 on food insecurity at the local level utilizing the underlying *Map the Meal Gap* model. To better assess the current and future state of local food insecurity, it is critical to understand the prevalence prior to the pandemic. By examining variations in local need as of 2018, communities can develop more targeted strategies to reach people at risk of hunger today.

Prevalence of Food Insecurity by County, 2018



4-30%

is the range of the population experiencing food insecurity across US counties. No county is free of food insecurity.

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people who are food insecure may not qualify for federal food assistance.

\$19.5B

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

\$3.09

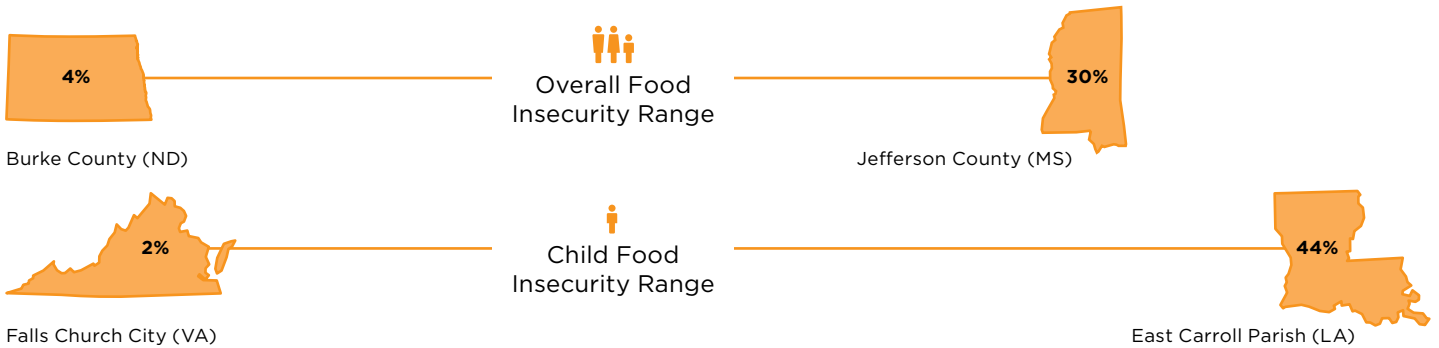
is what a person who is food secure is likely to spend per meal. Meal costs are nearly twice this amount in some counties.

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 4% to 30% for the overall population and 2% to 44% for households with children. Food insecurity among congressional districts spans a similar range. Mississippi is home to the highest overall county rate and Michigan is home to the highest overall district rate in the country, and no community is free of food insecurity.

Range of County Food Insecurity Rates



Highest Rates of Food Insecurity

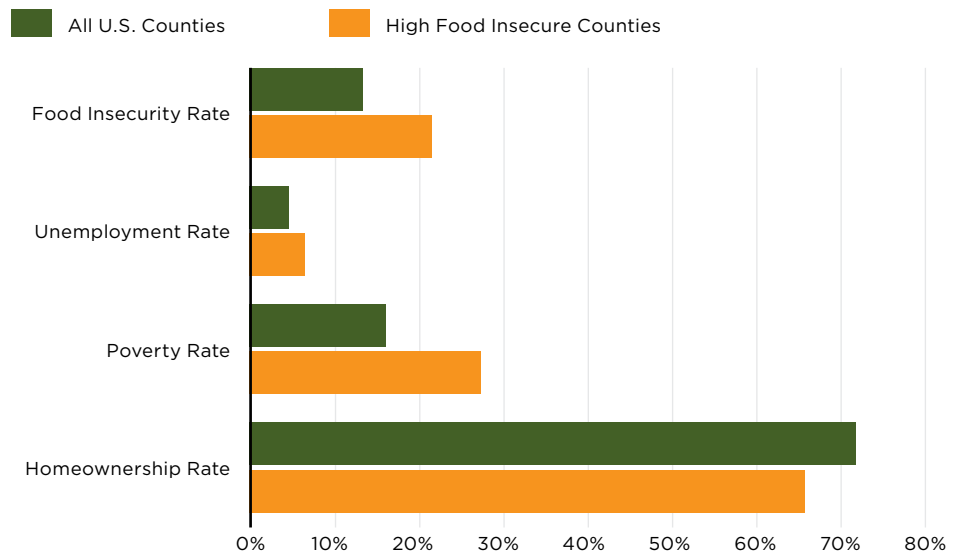
Counties with the highest rates of food insecurity—those in the top 10% of all counties—tend to have poor economic indicators: higher rates of unemployment² and poverty,³ and lower homeownership⁴ and median income⁵ compared to all counties in the country.



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

The majority (64%) 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



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 food insecurity rate (11%) close to the national average but is home to an estimated 1.1 million food-insecure individuals, including more than 340,000 children at risk of hunger. To effectively address food insecurity in America, it is important to consider both the number of food-insecure people as well as the rate of food insecurity.

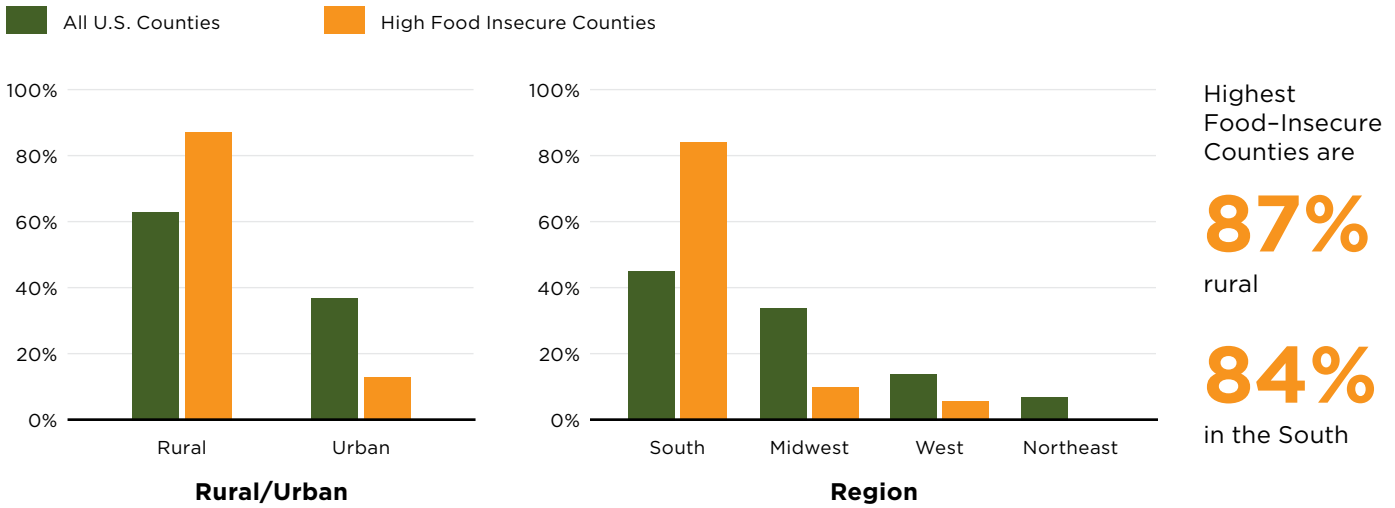
Los Angeles county is home to more than

1 million

food-insecure individuals

Rural and Regional Demographics of Food Insecurity

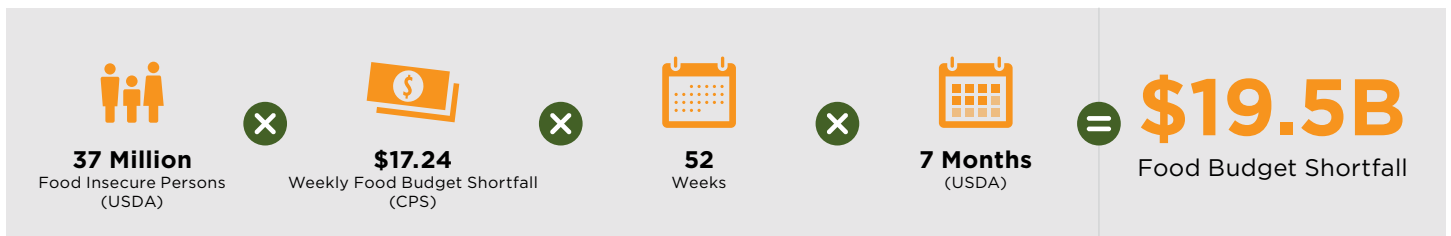
Rural (nonmetropolitan) counties make up 63% of all U.S. counties but 87% of counties with the highest rates of food insecurity. Regionally, the highest average rates of county food insecurity are found in the South, which represents 84% of counties with the highest rates of food insecurity and has the widest variation in county food insecurity. The lowest average food insecurity rates are in the Northeast.



Many Southern counties located outside major metropolitan areas are home to large communities of color living at elevated risk of food insecurity. These communities face persistently high rates of unemployment and poverty. For example, the population of Jefferson County, Mississippi, is 86% African American, faces an unemployment rate that is three times the national county average (13% versus 4%), and struggles with poverty at a rate that is almost three times that among all counties (50% versus 16%). As a result, the local rate of food insecurity is the highest in the nation (30%). 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 (35%) more than twice the national county average and food insecurity (23%) nearly twice the national county average. These examples underscore the deep and pervasive nature of the systemic challenges that many communities of color face.

Food Budget Shortfall and Average Meal Costs

In total, food-insecure individuals across the United States needed an additional \$19.5 billion (in 2018 dollars) to meet their food budget needs. 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 (\$17.24) decreased for the third year in a row in 2018 after rising for four consecutive years.



However, with average meal costs nearly twice as high as the national average (\$3.09) 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.

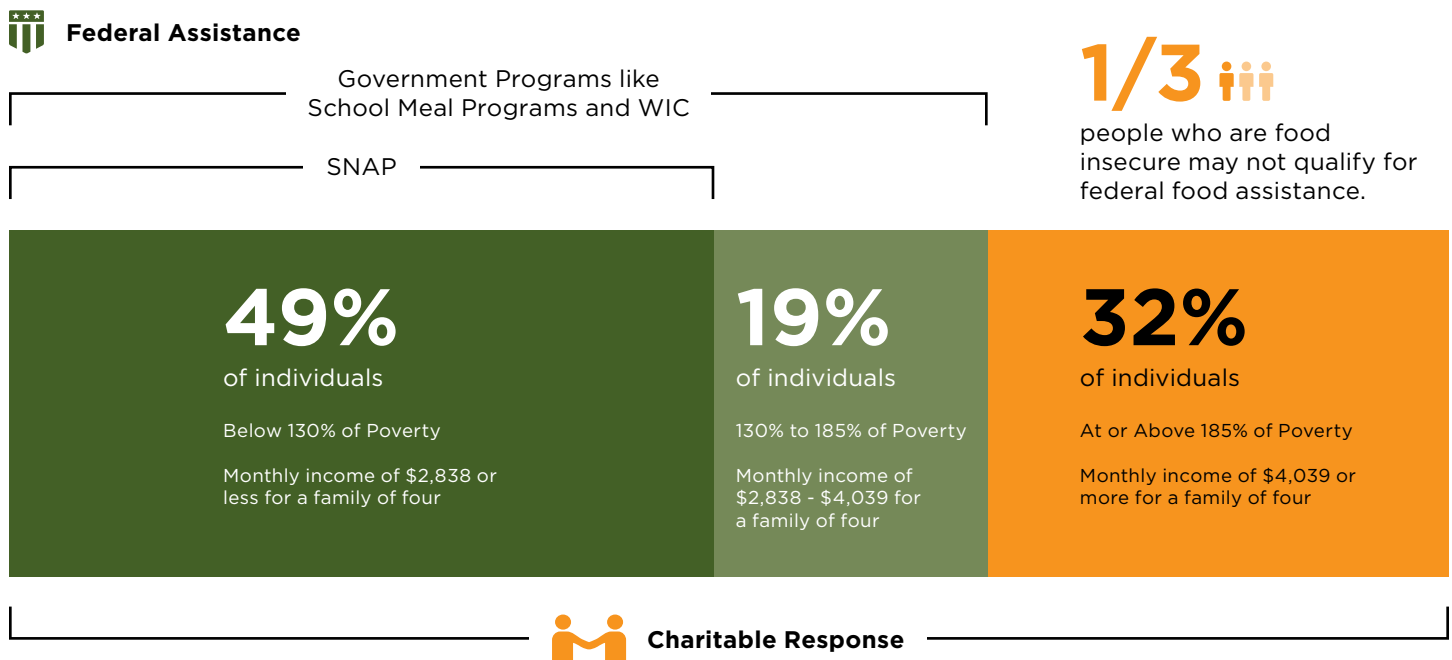


Implications

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. As of 2018, one in three (32%) food-insecure individuals who reported income lived in households unlikely to qualify for most federal food assistance.⁹ Given the variation in food insecurity and income and asset limits for certain programs across states, data from *Map the Meal Gap* indicate that the share of food-insecure individuals not eligible for public food assistance is as high as 76% in some places, such as Daggett County, Utah. As a result, the charitable sector may be a critical source of food for many individuals and families who are food insecure but ineligible for these programs. These findings underscore the importance of protecting and strengthening the existing safety net of public food assistance while also investing in the charitable programs that help to fill the gap for those not eligible.

Share of Food-Insecure Individuals by Income Thresholds¹⁰



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](#).

Findings from *Map the Meal Gap* are presented in a series of four standalone [briefs](#) including this executive summary, child food insecurity, food price variation, 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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