

FEEDING AMERICA

MAP THE MEAL GAP

RELEASED JULY 2022

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A Report on County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2020

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FOREWORD

This year's release of Map the Meal Gap focuses on the extent and variation in local food insecurity levels in the U.S. in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic did not invent the food crisis in America, it has shined a spotlight on what has been an existing problem in the U.S. for decades. In the year before the pandemic began (2019), food insecurity was the lowest it had been since the USDA began measuring it, and even then, 10.9 percent of the population – more than 35 million people – lived in a food-insecure household. Thanks to the strong public and private response to the crisis, national food insecurity did not increase in 2020 in the United States overall as might have been predicted. That said, the economic downturn resulting from the pandemic exposed and exacerbated disparities in who experiences food insecurity, perhaps none more than those that fall along racial lines.

Feeding America has made the commitment to address these persistent racial inequities, and one piece of this broader effort includes the disaggregation of data by race and ethnicity. Consequently, for the first time in 2022, the study also includes local food insecurity data for several racial and ethnic identities. Recognizing that sample sizes are smaller and uncertainty is greater the further these data are disaggregated, we have included them as additional input into understanding the ways racism and structural oppression impact food insecurity in the U.S. Understanding historical variations within and across populations and places is critical to developing effective strategies to change the policies and practices that put people at risk of hunger.

The strength of Map the Meal Gap lies in its ability to initiate data-driven conversations, illuminate insights and drive actions across a broad spectrum of policymakers, hunger-relief partners, researchers and community organizations. Our hope is that this year's release and the new data highlighting disparities along racial and ethnic lines will continue to do that. The foundation these data create for evidence-based initiatives and strategies will be needed even more during this pivotal time – as the nation continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, and confront the challenges related to the war in Ukraine, inflation, supply chain disruptions, and political and social upheaval.

Feeding America is deeply grateful to the Conagra Brands Foundation and NielsenIQ for supporting this study. On behalf of our network, hunger-relief partners and, most importantly, the neighbors we serve, thank you for your transformative contributions.



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Recommended citation format for this report:

Hake, M., Engelhard, E., & Dewey, A. (2022). Map the Meal Gap 2022: An Analysis of County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2020. Feeding America.

Recommended citation format for the data analyzed in this report:

Gundersen, C., Strayer, M., Dewey, A., Hake, M., & Engelhard, E. (2022). Map the Meal Gap 2022: An Analysis of County and Congressional District Food Insecurity and County Food Cost in the United States in 2020. Feeding America.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Map the Meal Gap is made possible by funding from the Conagra Brands Foundation and by in-kind support in the form of local food price data from NielsenIQ. We are grateful for the continued partnership with Futureman Digital to design and continue developing the interactive map. We are also grateful for contributions from We All Count and the individuals named below (Feeding America staff unless otherwise noted). To learn more about the study, visit map.feedingamerica.org.

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INTRODUCTION



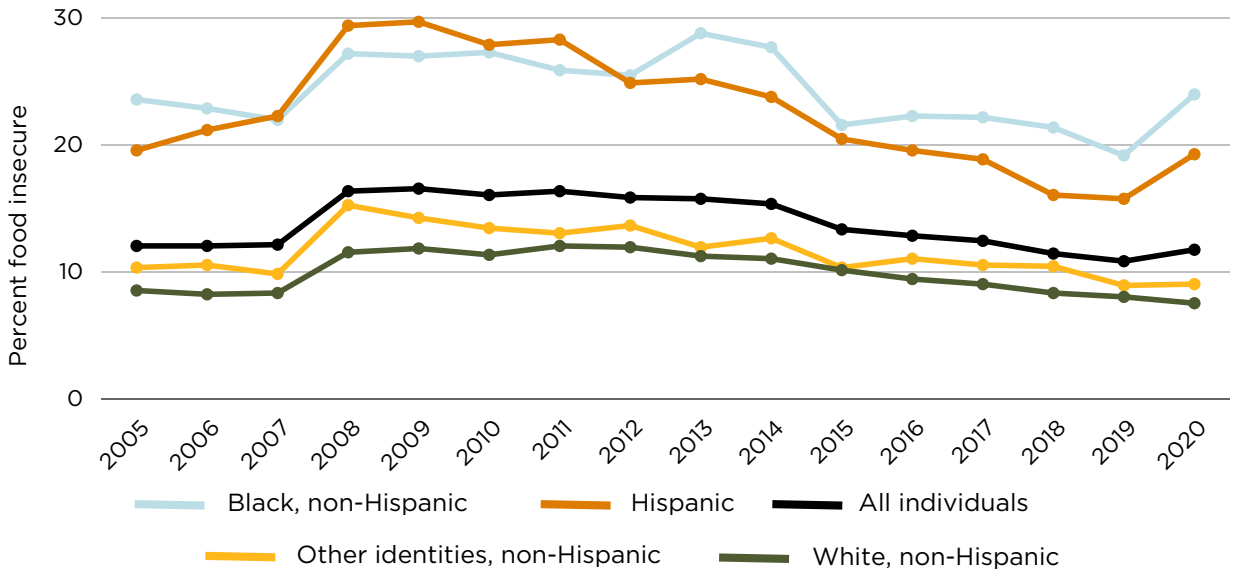
Food security is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture as the lack of access, at times, to enough food for an active, healthy life.[i] In 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic began, the national overall food insecurity rate (10.9%) was the lowest it had been in 20 years, after nearly a decade of declines following a Great Recession era peak. In 2020, 11.8% of individuals (38.3 million) lived in a food-insecure household, only slightly higher than the year before.[ii] The economic downturn brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic could have led to a more sizeable increase in overall food insecurity levels, suggesting that the significant public/private response helped to mitigate hardship for many.

Yet both before and since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity levels have differed substantially across the population, as evidenced by decades of national-level data available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's analysis of Current Population Survey data. For example, food insecurity is experienced at higher rates among households with children, and households in which there are members who have a disability, are veterans of a recent war, and/or have ever been incarcerated.[iii]

Additionally, food insecurity levels differ greatly according to race and ethnicity. Food insecurity is influenced by multiple factors including poverty, unemployment, and a lack of household assets, all of which are disproportionately experienced by communities of color. A long history of racism and structural oppression has been perpetuated through policies that have caused many communities of color to experience economic disparities that, in turn, increase the risk of food insecurity.[iv]

Figure 1 on the next page displays food insecurity levels for select racial and ethnic groups from 2005 through 2020. Throughout this time, food insecurity levels for Black and Latino individuals are notably higher than the national average. In 2019, food insecurity levels for these groups were lower than they had been in more than 15 years. However, in 2020 rates for both groups rose sharply, with food insecurity for Black individuals increasing to 24.0% (from 19.2% in 2019) and food insecurity for Latino individuals increasing to 19.3% (from 15.8% in 2019). At the same time, food insecurity for white individuals decreased to 7.6% (from 8.1% in 2019).

Figure 1. Food Insecurity Among Individuals by Race/Ethnicity, 2005-2020



Source: USDA Economic Research Service
Note: the category of "Other identities, non-Hispanic" includes individuals who identify as Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander, or multiple races (non-Hispanic).

Figure 1 only includes results for a few racial and ethnic identities and collapses results for individuals who identify as Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, or multiple races into the "other identities" category. While the food insecurity prevalence for this combined category has trended below the average for all individuals, underlying variation and distinct and disparate experiences faced by each group are masked.

The same is true for the national-level data that are provided. While these data can help tell a high-level story, experiences differ by location and community. For the twelfth 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. The study continues to be the most reliable source for overall and child food insecurity estimates for counties and congressional districts. For the first time, the study includes new local food insecurity data for several racial and ethnic groups. By examining variations in local need as of 2020, including how need varies by age and race/ethnicity, communities can develop more targeted strategies to reach people at risk of hunger today.

The following section highlights key findings from this year's study. Since, at this time, food insecurity estimates are not available at the local level for individuals who identify as Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, or multiple races, we include insights about food insecurity among these populations through other sources. The report concludes with a call to action and implications related to research and policy.



2020 KEY FINDINGS

Below are 10 key findings from this year's release of Map the Meal Gap.

1 100% of counties and congressional districts are home to people facing hunger

People in all 3,143 counties and 436 congressional districts in all 50 states and D.C. experience food insecurity. However, levels of food insecurity vary by population and place. The percentage of the overall population estimated to be food insecure ranges from a low of 3% in Bowman County, North Dakota to nearly 30% in places like Holmes County, Mississippi. These variations reflect differences in factors such as unemployment and poverty, and often reflect systems and policies that prevent certain households and communities from accessing the food they need. Alternatively, multiple interventions have been shown to reduce food insecurity. For example, national food insecurity would likely have been much higher in 2020 if not for the unprecedented collective response by the charitable and public sectors to the public health and economic crises caused by COVID-19.

2 Food insecurity among Black or Latino individuals is higher than white individuals in 99% of counties

Disparities by race and ethnicity existed before and continue to be stark during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. In nearly 99% of counties with comparable data (n=1,509), food insecurity among Black individuals is higher than among white, non-Hispanic individuals; these disparities range in magnitude and are as high as 43 percentage points in Cumberland County, TN (54% versus 11%, respectively). In 99% of counties with comparable data (n=1,773), food insecurity among Latino individuals is higher than among white, non-Hispanic individuals; these disparities also range in magnitude and are as high as 27 percentage points in Union County, PA (33% versus 7%, respectively). In nearly 74% of counties with comparable data (n=1,155), food insecurity among Black individuals is higher than among Latino individuals; these disparities range in magnitude as well and are as high as 34 percentage points in Marion County, AL (48% versus 13%, respectively).

3 County food insecurity varies by as much as 45 percentage points within some racial/ethnic groups

At the local level, food insecurity rates among Black individuals range from under 5% in places like Broomfield County, CO, Rockingham County, NH, and Pickens County, GA, to over 50% in places like Cumberland County, TN. Food insecurity rates among Latino individuals range from approximately 5% in Calvert County, MD to nearly 40% in Leake County, MS. Food insecurity rates among white (non-Hispanic) individuals range from less than 1% in the District of Columbia to nearly 30% in Wolfe County, KY.

4 Child food insecurity rates are higher than 40% in some counties

While 1 in 6 children across the U.S. may experience food insecurity, the rate reaches as high as 46% (1 in 2) in East Carroll Parish, Louisiana. Children in every state and nearly every county are more likely than the general population to live in a home facing hunger with rates as high as 22% (1 in 5) in Louisiana. The consequences and costs of food insecurity for children of all ages make addressing the issue an economic and social imperative as research demonstrates links between food insecurity and poor child health and behavioral outcomes at every age.

5 1 in 3 people facing hunger are unlikely to quality for SNAP

Federal programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), the nation's largest food assistance program, are the first line of defense against hunger. Unlike assistance provided by food banks and similar organizations, however, availability of government support typically varies based (in part) on household income. In the case of SNAP, state income thresholds range from 130% to 200% of the federal poverty line (between $36,075 to $55,500 for a family of four as of January 2022).

County estimates indicate that, on average, 1 in 3 individuals who live in food-insecure homes may not be eligible for SNAP, the nation's largest food assistance program. The fact that not everyone who qualifies for SNAP is enrolled and receiving benefits further underscores the importance of charitable food assistance and the need to not only protect and strengthen federal nutrition programs, but also increase enrollment.

6 People facing hunger report needing $44 more per month to meet their food needs

A person who is food insecure reports needing, on average, an additional $17.25 per week or $44 per month to buy just enough food to meet their needs. The total annual food budget shortfall across all individuals estimated to be food insecure stands at $20 billion, up from $18.8 billion in 2019 ($19.0 billion in 2020 dollars). The national annual shortfall had been decreasing since 2013 when it stood at more than $24 billion (nearly $27 billion in 2020 dollars) primarily due to fewer individuals experiencing food insecurity.

7 8 out of 10 high food insecurity counties are in the South

The South contains 45% all U.S. counties but was home to an estimated 82% of counties with the highest rates of food insecurity (top 10% of all 3,143 counties). An estimated 1 in 5 (19%) counties in the South had high food insecurity (with rates of 17.1% or greater), compared to 1 in 22 (4.5%) in the West and 1 in 29 (3.5%) in the Midwest. Only two counties (1 in 109 or fewer than 1%) in the Northeast appeared in the top 10%. These regional disparities at the local level are consistent with national data from the USDA, which also show that individual food insecurity rates are higher in the South (13.6% as compared to 11.0% in the West, 10.7% in the Midwest, and 10.1% in the Northeast).

8 9 out of 10 high food insecurity counties are rural

Rural counties (those outside of major metropolitan areas) make up 63% of all U.S counties but represent 87% of counties with food-insecurity rates in the top 10%. In other words, counties with the highest rates of food insecurity are disproportionately rural.

9 The national average cost per meal was $3.25

Individuals who are food secure reported spending an average of $3.25 per meal, an increase from $3.13 in 2019 ($3.17 in 2020 dollars) and the highest reported amount since 2005 ($3.26 in 2020 dollars). At $3.25 per meal, a person who was food secure spends an average of $296 on food per month ($332 in May 2022 dollars), nearly twice as much as the average individual cost of the Thrifty Food Plan as of December 2020, which the USDA uses as the basis for SNAP benefit allotments. The Thrifty Food Plan has since been updated to better reflect the actual cost of a meal in the U.S.

10 County meal costs are estimated to range from $2.19 to $10.61

After adjusting the national average meal cost of $3.25 based on local sales taxes and NielsenIQ data on food prices, county meal costs range from 67% of the national average in places like Llano County, Texas ($2.19) to more than twice the national average in places like New York County, New York ($6.31). Although the greatest number of people live in urban areas, not all urban areas have high food prices, and not every rural community is affordable. Rural Pacific County along the coast of Washington is home to the highest meal cost in the country at $10.61, more than three times the national average. For a household struggling to afford housing, utilities, transportation and other necessities, the additional burden of high food prices can have a significant impact on a household's budget.



FOOD INSECURITY AMONG

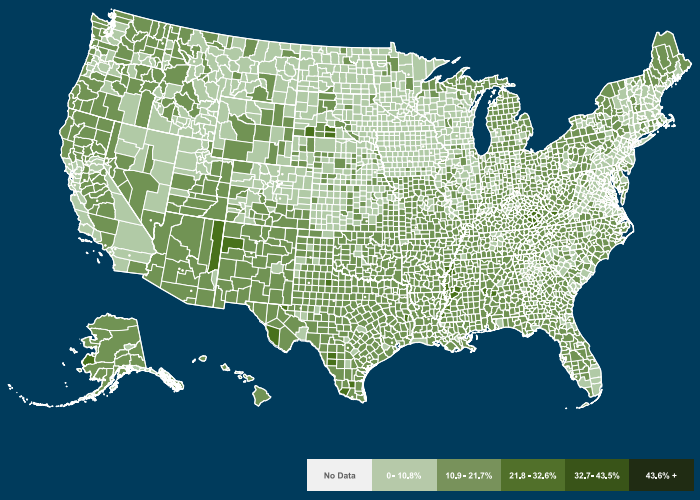
THE OVERALL POPULATION

Table 1 below presents the counties with the highest food insecurity rates and the highest number of people living in food-insecure households in 2020 for the overall population.

Table 1. Counties with the highest overall food insecurity in 2020

Highest food insecurity rates			Highest number of food insecure persons		
Rank	**County**	**Food Insecurity rate**	**Rank**	**County**	**Number of FI persons**
1	Presidio County, TX	46.4%	1	Los Angeles, CA	1,271,040
2	Holmes County, MS	27.6%	2	Harris County, TX	695,310
3	Kusilvak Census Area, AK	26.8%	3	Cook County, IL	566,030
4	Todd County, SD	26.4%	4	Maricopa County, AZ	487,340
5	Wolfe County, KY	25.9%	5	Kings County, NY	399,210
6	East Carroll Parish, LA	25.9%	6	Dallas County, TX	373,560
7	Oglala Lakota County, SD	25.8%	7	San Diego County, CA	336,190
8	Harlan County, KY	25.4%	8	Clark County, NV	333,140
9	Humphreys County, MS	25.4%	9	Wayne County, MI	308,080
10	Magoffin County, KY	25.1%	10	Orange County, CA	296,470

Figure 2. Map of county-level food insecurity among the overall population in 2020



To access the interactive map and additional information about data availability and suppression, visit map.feedingamerica.org.

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG

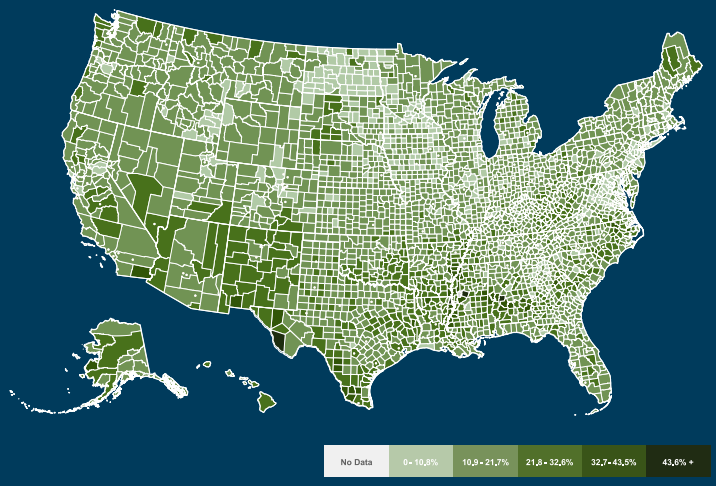
THE CHILD POPULATION

Table 2 below presents the counties with the highest child food insecurity rates and the highest number of children living in food-insecure households in 2020.

Table 2. Counties with the highest child food insecurity in 2020

Highest child food insecurity rates			Highest number of food insecure children		
Rank	**County**	**Food Insecurity rate**	**Rank**	**County**	**Number of FI children**
1	East Carroll Parish, LA	46.4%	1	Los Angeles County, CA	438,950
2	Perry County, AL	44.9%	2	Harris County, TX	295,900
3	Holmes County, MS	44.4%	3	Cook County, IL	206,590
4	Presidio County, TX	44.1%	4	Maricopa County, AZ	176,140
5	Humphreys County, MS	43.3%	5	Dallas County, TX	161,260
6	Jefferson County, MS	43.3%	6	Kings County, NY	152,960
7	Greene County, AL	42.3%	7	Bronx County, NY	128,740
8	Wilcox County, AL	42.3%	8	Clark County, NV	128,320
9	Philips County, AR	41.4%	9	Wayne County, MI	121,260
10	Zavala County, TX Clay County, GA	41.3%	10	Bexar County, TX	112,810

Figure 3. Map of county-level food insecurity among the child population in 2020



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FOOD INSECURITY BY

RACE & ETHNICITY



In the following pages, we provide additional insights about the intersection of food insecurity and race and ethnicity through brief summaries about Black, Latino, white, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and Native American communities. For the first time, Map the Meal Gap includes new local food insecurity data for Black, Latino and white individuals. Since, at this time, food insecurity estimates are not available at the local level for individuals who identify as Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, or multiple races, we include national-level insights about food insecurity among these populations through other sources.

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG

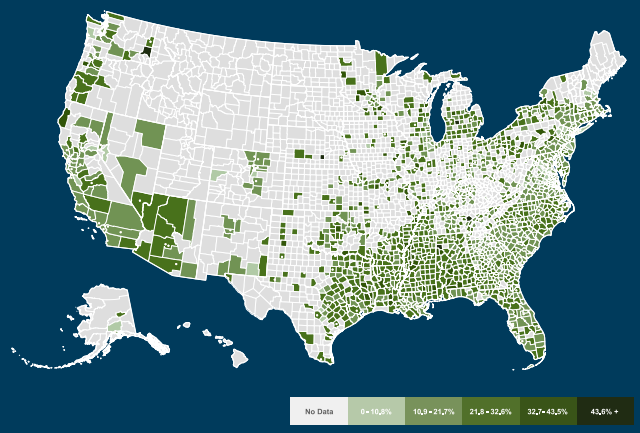
BLACK COMMUNITIES



In 2020, food insecurity among Black individuals was 24.0%, up from 19.2% in 2019, although Black populations have had substantially higher food insecurity rates than average since the USDA began measuring food insecurity. Map the Meal Gap reveals that in nearly 99% of counties with comparable data (n=1,509), food insecurity among Black individuals is higher than among white, non-Hispanic individuals; these disparities range in magnitude and are as high as 43 percentage points in Cumberland County, TN (54% versus 11%, respectively). For those counties with data available, three have food insecurity rates under 5%: Broomfield County, CO, Rockingham County, NH, and Pickens County, GA.

Within the past couple years, more attention has been given to the role of systems and policies that keep certain households and communities food insecure, including discriminatory policies and systems that result in racial and gender inequities in pay/earnings and wealth. For example, Black and Latino families have considerably less wealth than white families. According to the Federal Reserve Board, Black families' median wealth is less than 15 percent that of white families ($24,100 vs. $188,200) in 2019.[v] This is just one example of the stark and persistent racial disparities that that result from embedded racism in historical, political, cultural, socio-economic systems and institutions.

Figure 4. Map of county-level food insecurity among Black individuals in 2020



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FOOD INSECURITY AMONG

LATINO COMMUNITIES

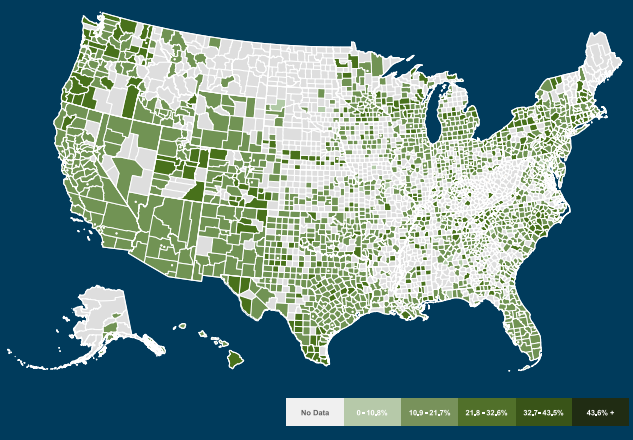


In 2020, food insecurity among Latino individuals was 19.3%, compared to 11.8% on average and 7.6% for white individuals, according to the USDA. Map the Meal Gap reveals that in 99% of counties with comparable data (n=1,773), these disparities remain and are as high as 27 percentage points in Union County, PA (33% among Latino versus 7% among white individuals). While disparities persist, food insecurity for Latino individuals varies by geography, ranging from approximately 5% in Calvert County, MD to nearly 40% in Leake County, MS.

Pre-pandemic evidence suggests that food insecurity within the Latino population tends to be more closely tied to the labor market and unemployment than food insecurity overall.[vi] Latino workers have been overrepresented within lower-wage service and hospitality-related roles which contributed to the unemployment rate among Latinos rising in April 2020 to the highest it had ever been, and higher than for all other racial and ethnic groups.[vii]

Though often considered as a single group, food insecurity among Latinos can vary by characteristics, including immigration status, length of time in the U.S., and country of origin. For Latino households that are undocumented or comprise members of mixed immigration status, program ineligibility, other barriers including related to language, or fear of discovery can hinder access to programs and services designed to improve food security.

Figure 5. Map of county-level food insecurity among Latino individuals in 2020



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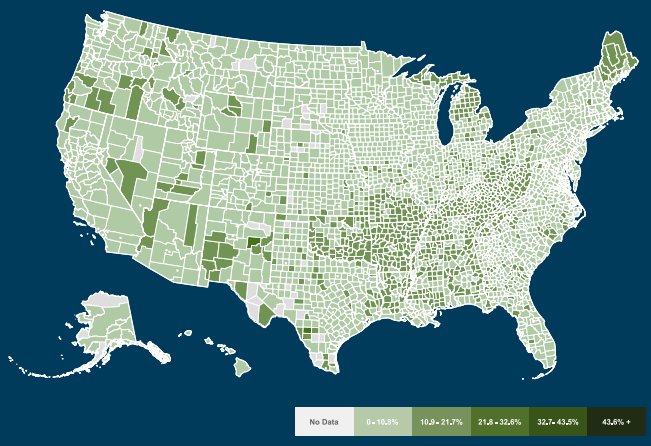
FOOD INSECURITY AMONG

WHITE COMMUNITIES



In 2020, food insecurity among white, non-Hispanic individuals was 7.6%, a rate significantly lower than those among most other racial and ethnic groups. This lower overall risk of food insecurity can be attributed to societal and economic privileges and historical advantages that help to benefit many white individuals and communities. Despite these privileges, there are still many white people facing hardships. Nationally, more than 15 million white individuals experienced food insecurity in 2020, which represents the highest number of individuals within a racial or ethnic group (due to the fact that the white population is the largest in the U.S.). New data from Map the Meal Gap shows that food insecurity among white individuals varies at the county level from less than 1% in the District of Columbia to nearly 30% in Wolfe County, KY, with higher rates more concentrated among rural counties and in the South.

Figure 6. Map of county-level food insecurity among white, non-Hispanic individuals in 2020



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FOOD INSECURITY AMONG

ASIAN & PACIFIC ISLANDER AMERICAN COMMUNITIES



Food insecurity varies greatly among Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities, with some households and individuals experiencing higher rates of food insecurity than others. Historically, food insecurity among Asian American individuals has been lower than other racial and ethnic groups. Based on a 5-year average (2016-2020), approximately 6% of Asian Americans (1 in 17) experienced food insecurity.[viii] Conversely, Pacific Islander individuals have been more likely to experience food insecurity (1 in 5, or approximately 19%).[ix]

When considered as a single group, Asian Americans have higher median income and lower levels of unemployment than individuals of other races, which has helped to fuel faulty assumptions about relative affluence among all Asian Americans (sometimes referred to as the "model minority" myth).[x] Perpetuation of these assumptions has contributed to the fact that the variation in experiences and outcomes of Asian Americans is often overlooked and under researched.[xi, xii]

Table 3 shows how food insecurity varies for some Asian groups at the national level.

Table 3. Food insecurity among Asian-American individuals by Asian group (2016-2020)

Asian Group	Food Insecurity
Asian Indian	3.6%
Chinese	2.3%
Filipino	8.9%
Japanese	3.5%
Korean	4.8%
Vietnamese	7.4%
Reporting other Asian identity	12.6%

Note: Individuals who identify as Asian (only) are asked to further self-identify from among the options shown in this table. Source: Calculations by Dr. Craig Gundersen for Feeding America, using a five-year average (2016-2020) from the Current Population Survey.

Disparities become more apparent through examination of food insecurity rates among recent immigrants from select Asian and Pacific Island nations, which are summarized in Table 4. Here, recent immigrant is defined as an individual born in or having one or more parents who were born in another country. Food insecurity rates among individuals from these countries range from approximately 3% among recent immigrants from China to 30% among recent immigrants from Bhutan.

Table 4. Food insecurity among recent immigrants from select Asian or Pacific Island countries (2016-2020)

Country	Food Insecurity	Country	Food Insecurity	Country	Food Insecurity
Bhutan	30%	Guam	10%	Iran	7%
Afghanistan	25%	Jordan	10%	Korea	5%
Nepal	25%	Saudi Arabia	10%	Syria	5%
Myanmar	21%	Thailand	10%	Japan	5%
Iraq	20%	Uzbekistan	9%	Lebanon	4%
Bangladesh	17%	Malaysia	8%	Hong Kong	4%
Cambodia	17%	Pakistan	8%	Taiwan	3%
Yemen	16%	Vietnam	8%	Indonesia	3%
Laos	13%	Philippines	7%	Israel	3%
India	12%	Turkey	7%	China	3%
				Asian country not specified	9%

Source: Calculations by Dr. Craig Gundersen for Feeding America, using a five-year average (2016-2020) from the Current Population Survey. Only countries with at least 75 persons (unweighted data) who were born in the country were included.

FOOD INSECURITY AMONG

NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES



According to Census data, approximately 22% of Native American individuals (1 in 5) were food insecure (based on five-year average, 2016-2020).[xiii] However, other work has indicated that the prevalence may be much higher. For example, a review of 25 different studies on food insecurity among Native American individuals found that the average food insecurity rate across studies was 46% while the range of results spanned from 16% to 80% depending on the specific Native American community, age group and other factors.[xiv,xv] These high rates can be attributed to a variety of factors including higher than average unemployment and poverty rates, geographic displacement, and damaging federal policies.[xvi,xvii,xviii]

While local food insecurity estimates for Native American individuals are not available through Map the Meal Gap, the data that are available can help illuminate the disparities that exist through examination of places with larger Native American populations. In 2020, only 28 of the 3,143 counties in the U.S. (fewer than 1%) have a population that is majority Native American. Yet, 61% of these counties (17 of 28) had among the highest food insecurity rates in the country (i.e., in the top 10% of all counties) and in nearly all (27 of 28 counties), the food insecurity rate is above the weighted average rate among all counties (11.5%).[xix]

For many Native American communities, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges. In a study conducted by the Native American Agriculture Fund in 2021, approximately half of respondents, who represent different Native and tribal communities and different states, experienced food insecurity since the start of the pandemic.[xx] Among the 28 counties with a majority Native American population, all are located in the West and Midwest regions of the country and nearly all (27 of 28) are defined as rural.[xxi] Additionally, only about 26% of Native American individuals live within a mile of a grocery store (compared to 59% of the U.S. population).[xxii]

CALL TO ACTION & 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. Since its inception, the study has helped illuminate how food insecurity levels vary across states and communities in the U.S. Now, with the addition of new data about the prevalence of food insecurity for select racial and ethnic identities, it can better reveal the extent to which disparities exist both within and across communities.

While the COVID-19 pandemic did not invent the food crisis in America, it has shined a spotlight on what has been an existing problem in the U.S. for decades. Since food insecurity began being measured in 1995, tens of millions of people have experienced food insecurity annually. As a result of policies that have reinforced historical racism and oppression, there were deep disparities in food insecurity levels for many communities of color long before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of which widened during the public health and economic crises of 2020.

The pandemic also brought to light the dearth of disaggregated data for communities of color. The lack of data on COVID patterns within these communities likely impacted timely vaccine distribution and the ability to tailor messaging to combat misinformation, which in turn contributed to these people and places being hardest hit.[xxiii] Similarly, lack of disaggregated data on food insecurity, barriers to food access and community food assets also affects the ability of nonprofits, government agencies and other partners from adequately and equitably getting food and other supports to people in need.

This absence of data is even more visible for smaller populations of color, such as Native Americans and Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). Often, food insecurity data for these populations are aggregated into a category labeled as “other”, a practice which can result in these populations being left out of the conversation altogether. Even disaggregation by racial/ethnic group at the national level shows substantial variation in food insecurity within these groups, as can be seen in earlier sections of this report.

Implications For Research

Disaggregate Data and Build Trust

To address these gaps, federal and state surveys must invest in adequately sampling and collecting food insecurity data that can be disaggregated in meaningful ways. This can only be done while addressing the fact that communities of color are often over researched.[xxiv,xxv] Consideration must be taken to protect identifiable information in areas with fewer people, balanced by efforts to ensure small populations are not overlooked or excluded from the data, and thus the solutions. Researchers, federal and state agencies, nonprofits and policymakers should prioritize building trust in these communities by utilizing inclusive approaches that recognize that community members are experts in both their experiences and in building solutions.

Examine the Impacts of Racism and Community Assets

Additionally, more rigorous assessments of the impact of historical and contemporary racism, including the forced displacement of Native Americans, housing segregation and devaluation of Black neighborhoods, the wealth gap and discriminatory public policies, are needed to effect meaningful change at the systems and policy level. Deeper understanding of and strong evidence around how historically racist systems and institutions continue to limit the opportunities of people of color are critical to implement the structural changes needed to evolve and correct disparities, such as those highlighted by Map the Meal Gap food insecurity data by race and ethnicity. Pairing this with research examining and highlighting how community assets have mediated the impact of these systems will provide much needed insights to inform solutions.

Implications For Policy

Beyond research solutions, there is much that can be done in the policy space to both meet the needs of people experiencing food insecurity in the short term and address root causes so we can end hunger permanently. Addressing food insecurity requires a robust safety net of federal nutrition programs and other policy solutions, some of which are outlined below.

Strengthen and Streamline Federal Commodities Programs

Many of the nation's food banks and programs rely on The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), a means-tested federal program that provides food at no cost to individuals in need through organizations such as food banks, faith-based and charitable food pantries, soup kitchens and emergency shelters. In 2020, an estimated 60 million people turned to the charitable food system, and while that number decreased to 53 million in 2021, that is still one in six people needing charitable food.[xxvi] To continue meeting this need, Congress must increase TEFAP funding for food purchases as well as storage and distribution costs and improve TEFAP administrative processes.

Strengthen and Modernize the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

SNAP is the nation's first line of defense against food insecurity and has shown to reduce food insecurity among participants. The Feeding America network is the largest collection of SNAP application assisters in the country and for every meal the network provides to neighbors in need, SNAP provides the equivalent of nine meals. SNAP supports around 40 million people each year in the U.S. with monthly food benefits via a grocery debit card. To provide increased access to food benefits, Congress must protect SNAP's funding and structure while addressing systemic barriers to benefits. Approaches could include:

- Strengthen SNAP Benefits: With the passage of the bipartisan 2018 Farm Bill, the legislation included language that resulted in the largest-ever permanent increase in SNAP since the inception of the program. This move that was enacted in 2021, will support more families facing food insecurity. That said, more can be done. SNAP benefits should be set at an adequate level, for example to move from the Thrifty Food Plan to the Low-Cost Food Plan, so families can purchase healthy foods. This would help seniors, people with disabilities, people working low-wage jobs and others who are likely to qualify for the minimum benefit. Further, it will decrease strain on food banks, which frequently serve people receiving SNAP benefits during the latter half of each month, after their SNAP dollars run out.

- Simplify and Streamline Eligibility & Enrollment Processes: Current eligibility rules and enrollment processes can be complicated and confusing, particularly for seniors, college students and immigrants. For households with seniors or people with disabilities, enrollment criteria vary widely based on where one lives and do not reflect mobility and transportation challenges. Congress should improve SNAP access for seniors, college students, immigrants and others who do not qualify for or are unable to participate in SNAP due to eligibility and enrollment barriers.

Ensure Sovereignty for Native Communities

As noted earlier in this report, Native Americans experience food insecurity at disproportionately higher rates than average. The administration and Congress should work with tribal stakeholders to strengthen food security in Native communities, which should include allowing tribal governments the flexibility to administer federal programs as decided by the tribe. Additionally, Congress should provide SNAP participants the option of also receiving Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) benefits.

Provide Equitable Access to Food Assistance Program

People residing in Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands are currently excluded from SNAP. The capped Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP) block grant available in those territories has highly restrictive eligibility requirements, lower monthly benefits and greater nutrition aid instability compared to SNAP. In consultation with the territories, Congress should provide a pathway to successfully transition from NAP to full participation in SNAP.

Strengthen Child Nutrition Programs, Especially During Summer

Child nutrition programs play a critical role in protecting millions of children from food insecurity — but the programs are only as effective as their ability to reach children in need. Congress must invest in improving program access and increasing participation, especially during summer and out-of-school times when children are hard to reach. This should include 1) implementing alternate models to reach kids, such as the critical and successful Summer Electronic Benefits Program (Summer EBT), which should be made permanent; 2) allowing community providers to operate the same program year-round and to expand to more communities, and 3) providing kids the flexibility to consume meals off-site, which would enable communities to adopt innovative program models to reach children who lack access to a summer feeding site.



METHODS

To estimate local food insecurity in every U.S. county and congressional district, we begin by analyzing the state-level relationships between food insecurity rates and select variables that research has shown to contribute to food insecurity and that are available for every state, county and congressional district (i.e., unemployment, poverty, disability, homeownership, and median income). We also analyze the relationship between food insecurity and the percentage of the population that is Black as well as the percentage of the population that is Hispanic; inclusion of these variables is meant to reflect the structural and institutional discrimination and disproportionately higher rates of food insecurity experienced by two groups for which there is adequate federal data to produce local estimates of food insecurity. We then use the strength of these state-level relationships combined with data on the same variables defined at the county and congressional district levels to generate estimated food insecurity rates for all individuals and for children for every county and congressional district in the country.

For the first time, our 2020 estimates include overall local food insecurity rates by race and ethnicity among the following populations: Black (all ethnicities), Latino (Hispanic), and white, non-Hispanic. The underlying variables used to produce estimates for these groups are consistent with those used to produce overall and child estimates described above and are specific to each population (e.g., unemployment rate among Black individuals instead of among the overall population). The models used to produce food insecurity estimates for these populations do not include variables reflecting the share of the population that is Black or the share that is Hispanic. Due to smaller sample sizes, estimates for these groups are not available for every state, county or congressional district.

Data sources for the variables used to produce 2020 estimates from Map the Meal Gap include the Current Population Survey (CPS), American Community Survey (ACS) and Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). State data are from the CPS and BLS (2009-20). County data for all variables except unemployment reflect five-year averages from the ACS (2016-20); unemployment data reflect one-year averages from the BLS (2020). Unlike in previous years, district data for all variables reflect five-year averages (2016-20) since the Census Bureau did not release one-year data for 2020.

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 NielsenIQ and national survey data from the Census Bureau. More information on methodology is available online in our technical brief.

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